



Klaus D. Loetzer is Resident Representative of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Tunisia.

TUNISIA AND THE FIRST ISLAMIST-LED GOVERNMENT IN NORTH AFRICA

Klaus D. Loetzer

On 14 January 2012, the first anniversary of the Tunisian revolution, they were back: the demonstrators once again crowded the Avenue Habib Bourguiba. This was where the Arab Spring had begun, with far-reaching consequences for the whole of North Africa. This time, the protests went off peacefully, but it was evidence that the demonstrators feel their calls for "freedom", "dignity" and "justice" have not yet been fully met. Many of this year's demonstrators were the same faces as last year, including human rights activists such as the journalist Sihem Bensedrine, the lawyer Radhia Nasraoui and the blogger Lina Ben Mhenni, who became famous around the world when she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The latter complained on social networks that she was once again being watched by the security forces, just as she had been when Ben Ali was in power, and as far as she could tell these forces had not changed.

When interviewed shortly before the anniversary of the revolution, young people had differing opinions about the level of freedom of expression in the country. Mohamed, 23, said: "I feel that there is definitely more freedom of expression than before, but it is mostly centred on the capital Tunis." Amir, 19: "Nothing has really changed, because Ben Ali's people still hold the same positions. Our freedom of expression is fake." Akram, 20: "There is definitely more freedom of expression, but it's misunderstood. It's a freedom that people have still not got used to." Yassine, 22: "There's no freedom of expression here,

at least not yet; and it's possible there won't ever be any in the future either."¹

However, it can be said that the first stages of the political transformation process have been successfully implemented in an exemplary fashion: an interim government was set up at the third attempt in early March 2011, under 84-year-old Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi, bringing some much-needed internal stability. This was followed in mid-March by the establishment of a reform commission² and an independent electoral commission.³ On 23 October democratic elections were held to elect a Constituent Assembly (CA), and at the end of December, a coalition government was installed, the so-called Troika, led by the Islamist party Ennahdha (Renaissance), together with the more centre-left and social democratic parties CPR (Congrès pour la République) and Ettakatol (Front Démocratique pour le Travail et les Libertés, FDTL).

CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

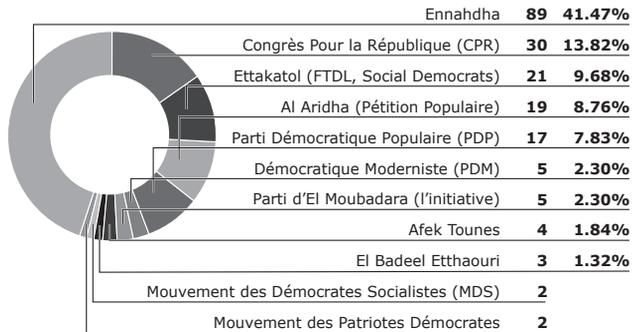
The real surprises were provided by the strong performance of the Islamists, who came across as very moderate under their leader, Rachid al-Ghanouchi, returning after 20 years in exile, and the poor performance by the Parti Démocrate Progressiste (PDP) under Ahmed Néjib Chebbi. While Ennahdha greatly exceeded expectations with 42 per cent of the vote (89 of the 217 seats in the CA), the PDP managed only a disappointing 8 per cent (17 seats) and ended up as the fifth-strongest party in the CA. In between came the CPR under human rights activist Moncef Marzouki with 14 per cent (30 seats), Ettakatol under Mustapha Ben Jaafar with nine per cent (21 seats) and the hitherto-unknown Al Aridha (Pétition Populaire), led by millionaire and media mogul Hechimi Hamidi, currently living in exile in London, also with around nine per cent (19 seats).

While Ennahdha greatly exceeded expectations with 42 per cent of the vote, the PDP managed only a disappointing 8 per cent and ended up as the fifth-strongest party in the Constituent Assembly.

- 1 | Cf. "A Free Press? A Year After Tunisia's Revolution, Youth Weigh In – Tunisians speak out", *PBS Newshour*, 13 Jan 2012, <http://pbs.org/newshour/multimedia/tunisiayouth/index.html> (accessed 15 Feb 2012).
- 2 | Haute instance pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution, de la réforme politique et de la transition démocratique.
- 3 | Instance supérieure indépendante pour les élections (ISIE).

Fig. 1

Results of the Elections for the Constituent Assembly 2011 in Tunisia (seats and share of votes)



Source: ISIE (ed.), Report on the Elections for the Constituent Assembly 2011, <http://www.isie.tn/image.php?id=760> (accessed 14 Mar 2012).

There was great surprise once it became clear on Election Day that the Islamist Ennahdha party had won between 40 and 60 per cent of the vote, as it had been achieving at best 25 to 30 per cent in the polls. And tension increased dramatically when the election results were given out, not on Monday evening, as expected, nor on Tuesday afternoon, as the independent electoral commission had announced, but on the following Thursday evening. The fact that the announcement of the election results was repeatedly postponed suggested that something unusual was happening, especially as the share of seats in the Constituent Assembly, at least for the bigger parties, was no longer a secret.

Ennahdha's unexpectedly strong showing was not the only topic of heated political debate after the election. Many people wanted to know what Al-Aridha Al-Chaabia (Popular Petition for Freedom, Justice and Development) actually stood for, as it was now the third largest party with 28 seats. And who was its leader, Hechimi Hamidi? Al-Aridha had largely come from nowhere to achieve this result. The PDP's poor showing was also a surprise, as party leader Ahmed Néjib Chebbi had seen his so-called 'old party' as the only real challenger to Ennahdha, and many political observers had been of the same opinion. To be fair, the Islamists had always been in the lead in the polls in the

run-up to the election and the PDP had always been a clear second, with a gap of only around 8 per cent.

Before the official results of the election had been announced, it was already clear that a number of smaller parties and independents had also won a seat in the Constituent Assembly, thanks to the proportional representation system. This was precisely what had been intended by the choice of a proportional representation system for the elections. Based on previous election results, Ennahdha would have won more than 90 per cent of the seats in a first-past-the-post system.

ELECTION ORGANISATION RATED AS 'EXCELLENT' – WITH CERTAIN QUALIFICATIONS'

From the very beginning, the organisation and running of the elections attracted a high degree of praise and was viewed as a benchmark for future elections in the region.⁴ This was all the more remarkable in view of the fact that the Electoral Commission had no real experience or structures to call upon, as elections in the past had always been organised by the Ministry of the Interior, even if the results had been falsified. The Electoral Commission was established as an independent institution in the form of an Instance supérieure indépendante pour les élections (ISIE), together with the Haute instance pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution, de la réforme politique et de la transition démocratique, in mid-March 2011 and was made up of representatives from civil society. It was headed up by Kamel Jendoubi, an expert in constitutional law. Its mandate ended with the announcement of the official election results.

The Electoral Commission was established as an independent institution in mid-March 2011 and was made up of representatives from civil society.

However, upon closer inspection, not everything about the elections was perfect, and this was reflected in postings on social networks on Election Day itself. The most common

4 | "No matter what the results, Tunisia's landmark election was a monumental achievement in democracy that will be a tough act to follow in elections next month in Egypt and Morocco – and later, in Libya." Paul Schemm, "Tunisia's election sets high bar for Arab Spring", *Real Clear Politics*, 26 Oct 2011, http://realclearpolitics.com/news/ap/politics/2011/Oct/26/tunisia_s_election_sets_high_bar_for_arab_spring.html (accessed 1 Feb 2012).

complaints were that only representatives of Ennahdha were present in many polling stations, which was due to the other parties' inability to provide representatives of their own, and that many women had been pressured into voting for Ennahdha. Another common observation was that Ennahdha representatives had in some cases used force to divide men and women into separate queues. The non-governmental organisation Association Tunisienne pour l'Intégrité et la Démocratie des Elections (ATIDE) had around 2,000 election observers in polling stations across the country and, in contrast to the EU Election Observations Commission⁵ and the American Carter Center, quickly published a detailed report on apparent elections violations. Like the international observers, overall they had a positive impression of the elections, but still published details of around 6,000 individual irregularities.⁶ In their report they stated that: "We observed irregularities in one-quarter of the polling stations. Around one-fifth of these related to a lack of seals or improper sealing of the ballot boxes and half of them to disturbances in the polling stations. In more

There were also complaints about irregularities in polling stations in other countries, where it was also possible to vote. Ballot boxes were not sealed or simply secured with a rubber band.

than 5 per cent of the polling stations there was no systematic use of special ink [to stop voters voting more than once]. [...] In a fifth of polling stations, deliberate attempts were made to influence how people voted. In a tenth of polling stations, there was no screening erected to guarantee secret voting." There were also complaints about irregularities in polling stations in other countries, where it was also possible to vote. Here again, ballot boxes were apparently either not sealed or simply secured with a rubber band.

Another problem was caused by the long waiting times at the polling stations, but the voters seemed to deal with this stoically and even enthusiastically, to the point that there was almost a holiday atmosphere. However, waiting times of four-to-six hours do not reflect international standards, and these were not isolated incidents. The main reason was that the catchment areas for the polling stations were

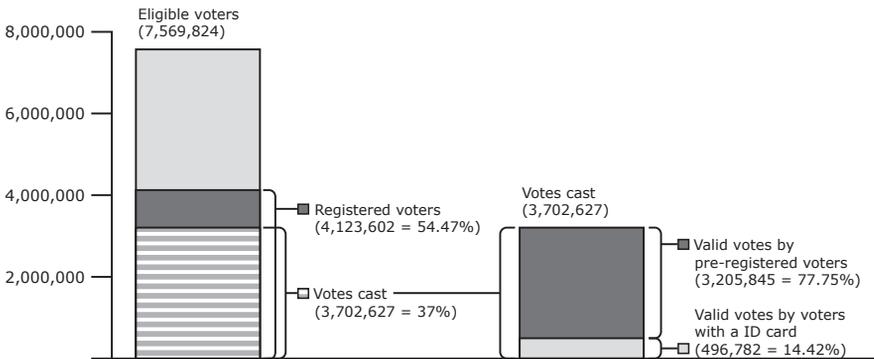
5 | The final EU Election Observation Commission report was issued at a press conference on 6 Jan 2012. <http://bit.ly/wednO5> (accessed 14 Jan 2012).

6 | Cf. "Observateurs de l'ATIDE: 6000 irrégularités relevées", *Le Temps*, 29 Oct 2011, <http://www.letemps.com.tn/article-60203.html> (accessed 14 Jan 2012).

too large, covering 800,000 voters on average. The international standard is a catchment area of 600,000 voters per polling station.

The ISIE split the election results between registered and non-registered voters. The time period for registering to vote came to an end at the beginning of August after an initial extension⁷, but had only resulted in 53 per cent of voters being registered. In order to encourage a higher turnout, and because of some confusion surrounding the registration itself, people were offered the opportunity to vote even if they had not already registered. The only stipulations were that they should have a valid identity card and vote at the polling station corresponding to their place of residence. If we compare the total number of Tunisians eligible to vote (7,569,824) with the number of votes cast (3,702,627), we can see that the effective turnout was around 49 per cent, much lower than the figure given out by the ISIE, let alone the figure of 90 per cent that was initially being bandied about.

Fig. 2
Eligible voters and number of votes cast at the Elections for the Constituent Assembly 2011



Source: Instance supérieure indépendante pour les élections, loc. cit.

Tunisia is no exception to the rule that as one election finishes, another begins, and in this case it is the parliamentary and presidential elections to be held in a year's time after the new constitution has been passed into law.

7 | Only around 40 per cent of those eligible to vote had registered by the original deadline.

This means that the outlook for those who did less well in the elections is not so bleak, provided that they draw the right conclusions from the results. To put it another way, Ennahdha needs to make sure that it repeats its results at the next election. This will be made more difficult by the fact that, for the first time, it will be judged on its actual performance. The Constituent Assembly election played out along ideological lines. Ennahdha was able to take advantage of its – deserved – reputation for being authentic, especially as many members had gone to prison for their beliefs under Ben Ali and had never entered into any form of collaboration with his regime. Even if the CPR, Ettakatol and PDP had also not allowed themselves to be in the pocket of the Ben Ali regime, they still bore the

Because of a lack of campaign funds, the PDP was not really able to do much effective campaigning during the key election weeks in October.

stigma of collaboration. The PDP suffered the most in this respect, especially after its party leader suggested in an interview on French radio in January 2011, shortly before the fall of Ben Ali, that he would be prepared to enter into a government of national unity with the quasi-state party RCD.⁸ The PDP was punished by the voters for having made this offer, as well as for a poor election campaign. It had worked on the assumption that the election would be earlier, in June, and had started an effective media campaign much earlier, but then it ran out of steam. Because of a lack of campaign funds, it was not really able to do much effective campaigning during the key election weeks in October. Another party that was punished by the voters was the centrist coalition party Pôle démocratique moderniste (PDM), which only won five seats (2.3 per cent). There were suspicions that it had recruited many of its members from the ranks of the RCD.

Ennahdha's election victory can be put down to the party's authenticity, but also to the fact that it offered a clear break with the past, something that many Tunisians were really looking for and which only the Islamists could genuinely claim to represent. All the more so because, after the revolution, the more centre-right interim government had failed to make any significant changes to the security

8 | Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique, former quasi state party of the Ben Ali regime, founded in 1988, dissolved after 14 Jan 2011.

forces or the justice system, let alone to the public radio and TV broadcasters.⁹

The fact that there were over 110 registered political parties, of which only 77 stood for election, probably also contributed to many voters seeing Ennahdha as a safe bet, not least because of the religious aspect. This is not just limited to the southern part of the country – on Fridays, the mosques in Tunis are also full of believers parking their mid-size and luxury sedans next to the smaller cars of the less well-off.

Another important aspect was the fact that Ennahdha was the only party that had candidates standing for election across the whole country, and especially in the south. However, this also raised the question of where they had found the necessary money. There was speculation in political circles in the capital that Arab states had used business people to illegally smuggle funds for Ennahdha into the country, but this had no real impact on the outcome of the election. It was up to the ISIE and the judicial authorities to look into this kind of speculation, but this apparently didn't happen in Ennahdha's case, unlike with Al-Aridha Al-Chaabia, who had come from nowhere to enjoy electoral success.

Speculation in political circles that Arab states had used business people to illegally smuggle funds for Ennahdha into the country had no real impact on the outcome of the election.

During the election campaign, there was a generally-held suspicion that, as an Islamist party, Ennahdha would want to put an end to the liberal civil rights – especially those laws defining civil status – that had been introduced under the country's founder, Habib Bourguiba. For this reason, the party tried to present itself in a liberal light. Party leader Ghanouchi never got tired of pointing to the Turkish model of separation between religion and state. He also tried to allay people's concerns that his party wanted to introduce Sharia law as society's frame of reference in the future. At the moment, it looks as though this strategy has been rewarded with a landslide victory.

9 | Cf. Klaus D. Loetzer, "Tunesien vor den Wahlen zur Verfassungsgebenden Versammlung – Verhaltener Optimismus", *KAS-Länderbericht*, 2 Sep 2011, <http://kas.de/tunesien/de/publications/28675> (accessed 10 Feb 2012).

Annulment of Al-Aridha Al-Chaabia Party Lists

Al-Aridha Al-Chaabia, a hitherto unknown new party, managed to become the third-largest political party in the Constituent Assembly by winning 28 seats across the country. Five of these were in the central Tunisian problem region around the city of Sidi Bouzid, where the spark that ignited the revolution came from the self-immolation of the vegetable seller Mohamed Bouazizi. On closer inspection, the party's leader, the media mogul Hechimi Hamidi, who hails from Sidi Bouzid and who has lived in exile in London for decades, turned out to be not so unknown.¹⁰ Press reports about him tend to be somewhat contradictory. What is clear is that he used to have close links to Ennahdha, but was thrown out – unjustifiably, in Hamidi's

Hamidi's electoral success can be traced not least to some unusual election promises, including a gratification for women who decide to stay at home rather than work.

opinion. He had tried to rejoin them but his approach was rejected. There were rumours that he had had links to the Ben Ali regime, which resulted in him being accused of being a *rénegat* (turncoat). His electoral success can be traced not least to some unusual election promises, including a promise to allow people to use public transport for free and a gratification for women who decide to stay at home rather than work. He was also able to make good use of his own TV station in support of his campaign, as this station was also available in Tunisia.

The annulment of the votes in 5 Tunisian constituencies and one overseas constituency (France II) resulted in Al-Aridha losing almost 12 per cent of the vote, the equivalent of nine seats. The annulments in Tunisia were justified by the ISIE on the basis of Article 80 of the electoral law, which states that no party is allowed to make use of private foreign funding. The striking of the result in France was because the frontrunner was on a list of banned former RDC politicians¹¹ (Article 1089).

The annulment of the Al-Aridha party lists raised a number of questions. If it were true that the party had been illegally

10 | Cf. Farah Samti, "How the Press Perceives Hachmi Hamdi", *Tunisia Live*, 30 Oct 2011, <http://tunisia-live.net/2011/10/30/how-the-press-perceives-hachmi-hamdi> (accessed 1 Feb 2012).

11 | In the run-up to the election, around 14,000 people associated with the former quasi-state party RCD had their passive or active right to be involved in the election revoked.

funded, then all their lists should have been annulled, not just those particular five. All their votes should have been annulled, but the results for 19 seats remained unchanged. The question was also raised as to whether Ennahdha had also benefited from illegal foreign funding. As far as the Al-Aridha candidate in France was concerned, he should never have been allowed to stand as a candidate in the first place, as his RCD past was well known. The decisions made by the Electoral Commission made some people question its independence.

Unrest in Sidi Bouzid

On the night the election results were announced there was unrest in Sidi Bouzid, where Al-Aridha enjoyed its greatest electoral success and actually finished in front of Ennahdha. Cars were torched, and local authority and judicial buildings, as well as the local Ennahdha office, were all set on fire. According to reports on social networks, the police made no attempt to intervene. Only an attack on a police building was met with tear gas. The riots were clearly not just the result of the rivalry between Ennahdha and Al-Aridha, even if it was this rivalry that sparked them off. Another key reason was the fact that Hamidi originally came from Sidi Bouzid, and this provided clear evidence that local loyalties played an important role in deciding who to vote for. However, the real reason for the riots was “the deep-seated feeling amongst people in the poor regions of the country’s interior that they were being neglected, and that the revolution hadn’t changed anything in this respect”¹², as *Spiegel* author Mathieu von Rohr claimed. His analysis suggested that there hadn’t really been a revolution at all. While the serious problems facing Tunisia are well-known to the people and are regularly addressed by the media, nothing has really been done about them in the seven months since the overthrow of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and his greedy family. Von Rohr adds: “The decision may well have been correct from a legal perspective, but the retrospective disqualification of one party is a very serious

The reason for the riots after the announcement of the election results was “the feeling amongst people in the poor regions that they were being neglected, and that the revolution hadn’t changed anything”.

12 | Mathieu von Rohr, “Revolutionsverlierer proben den Aufstand“, *Der Spiegel*, 28 Oct 2012, <http://spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,794665,00.html> (accessed 14 Jan 2012).

decision to make, especially in a country that is holding free elections for the first time. And it was the poorest of the poor in the most backward areas of the country who voted for Al-Aridha Chaabia. That it was the votes of these people in particular that were annulled sent out a disastrous message. The impression in Sidi Bouzid and elsewhere was that, once again, the north and the establishment had robbed them of their rights.

The feeling of having been cheated simply added to the sense of frustration and hopelessness that pervades the interior of the country. While in Tunis elections were being planned and the political future was being considered, there was a growing impression in cities like Sidi Bouzid, Thala and Kasserine that they were being denied the fruits of the revolution.¹³ Even on the anniversary of the revolution, nothing had really changed in this respect. The demonstrators, especially in the interior, have made it clear that if their expectations in terms of jobs and better standards of living are not met, there could well be a second revolution.

THE KEY ISSUE: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The first stage of the economic transformation process, the success of which is essential for the development of the country itself, is not going quite so smoothly as the first stage of the political transformation process. The tourism sector is struggling (33 per cent down on the same period last year), economic growth is stagnating, foreign investment is lacking, unemployment is rising and the socio-economic situation in the more neglected rural areas is getting worse. This is not a good basis for

The tourism sector is struggling, economic growth is stagnating, foreign investment is lacking, unemployment is rising and the socio-economic situation in the more neglected rural areas is getting worse.

removing the social dislocation that was the original cause of the revolution, especially the gap between north and south. It remains to be seen whether the political success achieved so far will be nullified as a result, especially as the new government lacks experienced people, and appointments to key political positions as well as rank and file jobs seem to be largely influenced by individual ambitions and power struggles within the Troika. None of the coalition partners has any experience in government and all three need to learn to be more proactive than reactive in this

13 | Ibid.

crisis situation and, more particularly, to be more pragmatic than ideological.

The Religious Identity Crisis Diverts Attention from Economic Problems

It is the disputes over Tunisia's religious identity that are currently diverting people's attention away from the country's pressing economic needs, a problem that also plagued the first, non-elected transitional government. A case in point is the dispute over the wearing of the 'niqab', the full veil, at the country's universities. Not long after Ennahdha's election victory was announced, the first fully-covered female students started appearing at universities, including the University of Manuba in Tunis. The university administration offered to allow the wearing of the niqab on campus, but not in classrooms or during exams. On 28 November 2011 around 100 Salafists forced the university to close by forcibly occupying university buildings. After the new interim government, like the one before it, refused the repeated requests by the dean to use the security forces to end the teaching blockade, students, parents, union representatives and faculty staff staged a peaceful demonstration on 4 January 2012 outside the Ministry for Higher Education to try to encourage the Education Minister to come to a decision. The minister, Moncef Ben Salem (Ennahdha), who is strictly religious, had previously declined to enter into discussions.

Not long after Ennahdha's election victory was announced, the first fully-covered female students started appearing at universities.

The protests continued and the security forces moved in when the demonstrators tried to gain entry to the Ministry building. And here is the paradox: the security forces were prepared to use force against peaceful students, teachers and the media, but were not prepared to use it against Salafists on the university campus who were happy to use violence to achieve their ends. On the evening of January 5, a long-overdue compromise was achieved, whereby the Salafists had to leave the campus, but were allowed to maintain a presence outside the university grounds. This quickly proved to be a somewhat shaky compromise when a female student turned up to classes a few days later wearing a niqab. She ignored a request by the university lecturer to remove the niqab, at which point he stopped the

class and wanted to leave the classroom. Salafists rushed over and forcibly stopped him from doing so.¹⁴

Another interesting phenomenon can be observed in terms of the Islamising of Tunisian society. There have been many complaints that the Islamists did little to help the revolution, but they are now the ones reaping the most benefit. But there is also a growing number of young Tunisians who were out on the streets a year ago looking like western students, but who have now adopted radical Islamist positions, right down to their outward appearance. The men are sporting full beards and the women are wearing headscarves, if not the full niqab. The explanation for this conversion to radical religion by some demonstrators goes something like this: "He wasn't always so radical" one of them is quoted in the German weekly *Die Zeit*.¹⁵ "That didn't happen until after the revolution, when he realised that the ruling caste, who were profiting from their positions, simply sacrificed the dictator in order to remain in power."

TUNISIA UNDER AN ISLAMIST GOVERNMENT: QUO VADIS?

One much-discussed question is just how moderate, or capable of delivering democracy, is the Islamist party, Ennahdha? Another question is just how capable it is of controlling the Salafists, or, indeed, if it actually wants to. The Salafists are a very small minority, but one that is not afraid to use intimidation and violence to achieve its aims. As the University of Manuba incident clearly shows, the new interim government has so far not been prepared to use its monopoly on force to defend personal freedoms, despite the fact that it has repeatedly tried to reassure people that it will guarantee these freedoms. This is almost certainly down to the fact that there are

The new interim government has so far not been prepared to defend personal freedoms. This is almost certainly down to the fact that there are different movements within Ennahdha.

14 | For a detailed analysis cf. Klaus D. Loetzer and Philipp Trösser, "Die Universität im Zentrum der religiösen Identitätskrise Tunesiens", <http://kas.de/tunesien/de/publications/29887> (accessed 10 Feb 2012).

15 | Gero von Randow, "Jung, cool und Salafist – Plötzlich sind diese Revolutionäre so fromm. Ein Wiedersehen in Tunis", *Zeit Online*, 6 Jan 2012, <http://zeit.de/2012/02/Dschihad-Demokratie>, (accessed 10 Feb 2012).

different movements within Ennahdha. And it is on this particular issue that opinions are divided. Are the more moderate voices within Ennahdha strong enough to prevail over the more fundamentalist? The dispute over the niqab offers a revealing insight on this issue. While the Minister of the Interior, Ali Laârayedh, (Ennahdha), who is considered a moderate, claimed on 26 December 2011 that he wanted to see "zero tolerance" towards anybody "who threatened the safety of the people [...] or who stopped people from entering administration buildings or other similar institutions", it was not until January 5 that a long-overdue decision was made that actually appeared to enforce this zero tolerance. And then only a few days later this compromise was basically changed to be more in line with the wishes of the strictly-religious Minister for Higher Education, Moncef Ben Salem.

The direction the Tunisian government takes is particularly important in terms of the support it will receive from abroad, especially from the Gulf States and from the West. In terms of its relations with the Gulf States, it was a political feather in the cap for Ennahdha that it was not a social democratic or secular party that ended up as the strongest party in the government, but an Islamist one. While this fact might create a serious identity crisis within the country itself, it also ensures that it will enjoy support from the Gulf States, especially from Qatar, which is prepared to offer massive financial support.

Tunisia has symbolic importance for the West too, because it was the cradle of the Arab Spring, even though it is of less significance in strategic and economic terms. This is evidenced by the fact that not only Qatar is supporting Tunisia financially, but also the United States. However, the latter are not advertising this fact, especially as Ennahdha is one of the indirect beneficiaries. It is against this background that we can understand some of the slogans directed against interference by Qatar and the USA that were chanted by demonstrators on the anniversary of the revolution.

Not only Qatar is supporting Tunisia financially, but also the United States. However, the latter are not advertising this fact, especially as Ennahdha is one of the indirect beneficiaries.

The current political situation is highly complex and can be interpreted in different ways, which makes it even harder to predict what is likely to happen in the future. However, it is possible to influence events, and everything needs to be done, especially in economic terms, to ensure that the experiment of a democratically-elected Islamist government is a successful one. This is important not just

for the sake of Tunisia and its people, but also as a symbol for the rest of the Arab world. It is also important for Europe, which could be directly affected by a fundamentalist, Islamist system that proves incapable of delivering true democracy. It is no distance at all from Tunisia to Europe via Sicily. This was the route taken by the rules of mathematics and by many ideas that gave impetus to the Renaissance in Europe. It would be a disaster if fundamentalist Islam were also to use this route to find its way into Europe. But even the symbolic power of this and its impact on the other North African states would be tantamount to a disaster, not least for the people who want to finally escape their plight. This has been demonstrated all too clearly by the upheavals of the Tunisian revolution.