

## Tunisia, a rare light in the Arab night

By Miguel de Corral

In the first weeks of the year, we have better seen the different possibilities of the uprisings in the Arab world. We have the example of countries that have fallen again into a nuanced form of authoritarianism, while others have been engaged in all-out warfare or have faced a breakdown in political order. The only country thus far that has fulfilled the promise of the “Arab Spring” has been Tunisia. Recently, Tunisia, ratified a new constitution that broke radically with the country’s authoritarian past, guaranteed equality before the law for all citizens, and, most importantly, enjoyed broad popular support.

What is particularly promising about Tunisia is not its liberal and forward-looking constitution, the dynamism of its civil society, or the constructive energy of its youth. While these factors are all significant in consolidating democracy, what allows us to believe that Tunisia will become the vanguard of democratic reform in the Middle East is the pragmatism and willingness to compromise that its political leaders have exhibited. These are crucial in any democratic transition.

In most transitions from one model of governance to another, society can often become polarized and divided among ideologically divergent political groups. While the push to freedom or democracy can often serve as a unifying factor, the zero-sum politics that often accompanies the political transition afterward can bring down governments and ignite social unrest.

Egypt is a prime example. While the common aspirations of those who gathered in Tahrir Square bound society together for an awe-inspiring 18 days, the reality of institutionalizing those ideals proved far more difficult. Groups that were politically opposed, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists, the military, and liberals (who themselves were divided among many different parties), struggled against one another, and instead of compromising, entered into confrontations.

Both former President Mohammad Morsi’s Brotherhood government and the subsequent military-backed government passed their own constitutions, instead of a single constitution that took into account the views of the multitude of political parties represented in Egypt’s diverse society. The transition thus veered into a form of authoritarianism and became an example of how political exclusion in times of transition can undermine social cohesion.

In Tunisia, lawmakers – perhaps fearing the worrying trends in Egypt – decided to heed the call of restraint, pragmatism and compromise. In the 2011 elections for a constituent assembly, the Islamist Ennahda Party gained 37 percent of the vote, handily defeating its secular and leftist opponents. It controlled a large part of the assembly, formed a government, and held

popular legitimacy.

Last year, however, the assassinations of two secular leftist politicians threatened to derail progress and plunge the country into chaos. Sporadic violence broke out and street protests took place calling for Ennahda to give up power. Ennahda's leadership, though at first defiant, finally complied and handed over power to a nonpartisan, technocratic government until new elections later this year.

In the end, this "democratic spirit" is what mattered. Constitutions and elections are important in laying out basic foundations for democracy and popular legitimacy. However, if leaders act in an authoritarian manner, constitutions can be abused and elections tampered with.

The 1971 Egyptian constitution is a good example. While many constitutional scholars agree that this document in theory promised civil liberties and the separation of powers, in practice the executive branch and the military held all power and abused its freedoms through the enactment of emergency laws.

Translating this "democratic spirit" into strong institutions has further distinguished Tunisia from the rest of the Middle East. Tunisian lawmakers have approved, through a broad consensus, a constitution that will serve as the basis for rule of law in their country; workers have organized into powerful trade unions; and students have joined or formed civil society groups.

This represents a stark contrast with Libya, for example, which is currently embroiled in the challenging process of building the very institutions that are most needed in a modern state, such as a unified national security force, civil society groups, the rule of law, and effective governance bodies. This evident institutional vacuum has resulted in a Sisyphean transition process in Libya, while in Tunisia the existence of inclusive institutions will greatly facilitate the process of democratic consolidation in the future.

Though the transition process is still very much ongoing in Tunisia, it is off to a promising start. It is indeed a success story and evidence that the ideals of the Arab Spring may be enshrined in lasting institutions. Furthermore, the fact that politicians have voluntarily surrendered power to stave off social unrest and political deadlock represents an enormous step in the long and arduous journey toward democracy.

Other countries in the region, particularly Egypt, should take note that democracy can only be achieved if leaders put society's basic demands before their own narrow political interests, and work collectively to build inclusive political, economic and social institutions.

It is important to remember that history has shown us that the alternative to political pragmatism and compromise in times of transition is often violence, unrest, and extreme polarization. So, while we may celebrate Tunisia's decisive march toward democracy, we can regret that it is the only country in the region to do so.

Miguel de Corral is an independent policy analyst who focuses on Middle Eastern political and security developments. He wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR.