

# Tunisia's Moment of Opportunity

by Amine Ghali

## SUMMARY

The unseating of former Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali is a potential watershed moment in Arab politics.

Traditional forces for reform, such as civil society, political parties, and independent media, were completely decimated by Ben Ali's ruthless repression and are therefore unprepared to play a strong role in the short term.

As the interim government seeks to build a new political order, it struggles to make a clean break from the past while harnessing the expertise of the old guard.

The most important institutions leading Tunisia's reform efforts will be not the interim government but the three newly created national commissions with decision-making authority to oversee political reform and investigate corruption and human rights abuses.

The United States and the international community have an important role to play in supporting Tunisia's transition to democracy and should immediately provide technical and financial aid to various stakeholders in the new system.

The collapse of a seemingly impregnable Arab dictatorship on January 14 sent shockwaves throughout the region, dispelling the notion that autocrats can forever ignore the demands of their people through harsh repression. While the overthrow of former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali could be a watershed moment in Arab politics, the transition to democracy remains a daunting challenge.

Throughout the nearly two and a half decades of his reign, Ben Ali implemented a variety of authoritarian tactics to ruthlessly clamp down on any political opposition. Devoid of an opposition movement with any political experience, the interim government now faces the dilemma of making a clean break from the past while relying on the expertise of regime loyalists to build a new political order. To gain credibility, the government has created three independent national commissions, headed by respected scholars and leaders of civil society organizations, to oversee political reform and to investigate corruption and security abuses during Ben Ali's reign. These commissions, rather than the interim government, wield the real power in steering the country towards democracy. Yet in the precarious political environment, these bodies will face great difficulties, which should not be underestimated. The United States has voiced its support for the democratic aspirations of the Tunisian people, and it should now, in cooperation with the international community, translate those statements into large-scale technical and financial assistance to Tunisia's fragile institutions.

## BEN ALI'S AUTOCRATIC PLAYBOOK

Until his ignominious fall from power, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was one of the most ruthless dictators in the region. Faced with the threat of a popular Islamist movement early in his rule, Ben Ali initially targeted Islamists, but soon expanded this repression to crush any forms of dissent. He consolidated his ironclad grip on power through a combination of coercion — supported by brutal security forces — and corruption — supported by a coterie of family members and personal advisors. These tactics, of course, are not unique to Ben Ali, but the scale of oppression in Tunisia went beyond that of other autocrats in the region who at least feign liberalization.

Given his military career and experience as Interior Minister, Ben Ali was able to create an expansive security apparatus that could intimidate citizens — inside and outside the country alike — into submission. Equipped with major financial resources and state of the art technology, the approximately

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130,000 man police force was a constant presence in both the public and private spheres, infiltrating independent groups and controlling all aspects of Tunisian lives.

The government was also able to co-opt large segments of the population by creating a labyrinth of interlinked corrupt government officials, businessmen, politicians, and members of civil society, whose closeness with the President’s inner circle (extended family, ruling party members, the security apparatus, and local government representatives) gave them unfettered access to state coffers.

The combination of these two approaches resulted in a sterile political environment characterized by feudal political elite, corrupt local government representatives, a non-independent judicial system, and weak political parties, opposition leaders, civil society organizations, and media. After more than two decades of autocratic rule, these traditional forces of reform have been so eviscerated that they are now unable to offer viable recommendations for a democratic transition.

### **A DIFFICULT BALANCING ACT**

The interim government that was established after the overthrow of the *ancien régime* has been beset with challenges from the outset. Headed by former Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, the body has been discredited by many for maintaining its links to Ben Ali’s regime. Five ministers defected from the interim government soon after it was formed. More recently, Ghannouchi replaced 12 ministers, including interior, foreign, and defense Cabinet posts to appease protestors demanding a purge of Ben Ali’s allies. With this shuffle, the interim government now includes only three with roots in the Constitutional Democracy Rally (RCD) party— compared to 10 in the previous one— and several independent figures and opposition leaders. Protesters are also calling for the ouster of Ghannouchi. Indeed, Ghannouchi is a holdover from the old government, but he is a technocrat who was among the few politicians not tainted by corruption, and he, along with other RCD ministers, has now resigned from that party. The interim government must now try to build the confidence of the population by removing corrupt elements from the old system while also harnessing the expertise of former officials in order to hold credible presidential and legislative elections, foster a multi-party system, and begin to reform the constitution. This is a difficult balancing act and will require circumspection on the part of the government lest an Iraqi-style de-Baathification purge ensue.

### **THE TRANSITION TOWARD DEMOCRACY**

In the face of such daunting challenges, the interim government has created three national commissions with specific mandates:

- National Commission to investigate violence during the riots, headed by Tawfik Bouderbala, the former president of the independent civil society organization Tunisian Human Rights League

- National Commission to investigate corruption, headed by Abdelfattah Amor, a Special Rapporteur for the former UN Human Rights Committee and a distinguished political science professor
- National Commission for political reform, headed by Iyadh Ben Achour, a prominent scholar of constitutional law

The immediate findings of the commissions on violence and corruption will help the government identify members of the old regime that should be removed from the system, namely, the officials responsible for the 78 dead and 94 injured in the revolt, and the officials that allowed various forms of corruption to penetrate and ultimately weaken the economy. Over the long term, there is a hope that the mandate of the first commission will be expanded to investigate the legacy of gross human rights violations in Tunisia. The mandate of the political reform commission is broader in scope and, thus, longer term. These experts will draft new legislation on associations, political parties, elections, and media, as well as begin the process of writing a new constitution. All three commissions enjoy full independence and credible leadership, and will play a crucial role in advising the government as it lays the groundwork for a democratic system.

### SHIFTING THE FOCUS

Since the forced exile of President Ben Ali, both domestic and international attention has focused exclusively on the make up of the interim government, with little interest shown to the national commissions. Various domestic players, including political parties (loyalist, genuine opposition, and newly legalized), labor unions, and media, are critical of the government, albeit for different reasons, and protests against this body continue almost daily. International players are trying to navigate the political system and lend support through an understanding of the different political parties involved as well as the government's relationship with the General Tunisian Workers' Union. The rank and file members of this labor union took a lead role in the protests, but its leadership was co-opted by the regime and is opposed to a stable transition that could implicate them in corruption scandals.

The focus on the interim government, however, is misguided. As indicated by its name, the body is temporary and will only oversee day-to-day management until elections take place in six months. Prime Minister Ghannouchi has already agreed to step down after elections. Moreover, the government is more of an executing body than a decision-making one. The real power lies in the national commissions, which will lead the reform efforts and provide directives to the interim government for implementing their recommendations. Given the fragility of the government, ministers are happy to diffuse any tension by ceding authority to these commissions. Attention and external support should therefore be directed toward these commissions.

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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The mass uprising in Tunisia was fueled exclusively by indigenous forces, empowering Tunisians with a sense of ownership over their country that they had been denied for years. While the transition to democracy should also be Tunisian-led, the United States has an important role to play in supporting these efforts. After remaining silent during the protests, the U.S. can redeem its image by helping the Tunisian people build the necessary institutions for a democratic state. This would also send a powerful message to the entire region that the U.S. is supportive of the democratic rights of Arab citizens. More specifically, the U.S. should:

- ***Demonstrate clearly its support for democratic efforts in Tunisia without endorsing specific political parties or ideologies.*** President Obama’s statement on Tunisia in the State of the Union address sent a strong, clear message; similar statements should be delivered frequently by high-level U.S. government officials to dissuade undemocratic forces from destabilizing the fragile system.
- ***Provide technical support to the new government, especially the national commissions.*** Although the commissions are primarily composed of technocrats, the challenges they face are of an entirely new nature and will require the help of international experts, as well as financial resources and tools, to successfully carry out their mandates.
- ***Encourage European allies, particularly those with close ties to Tunisia (Italy, France, Germany, and Spain) to help foster democratic reforms in the country through economic incentives.*** Partly because of its history, and partly because of its geographic proximity, Europe wields more influence in Tunisia than the United States. As such, the European Union should take the lead in encouraging reform by increasing access to European markets for Tunisian exports and increasing access to financing. The Partnership Agreement signed between Tunisia and the European Union could be the legal framework for such incentives.
- ***Support different actors in the country (political parties, civil society, media, unions, and professional associations) in order to create a vibrant pluralistic system.*** After years of dominating the political space, Ben Ali’s regime succeeded in crushing the traditional agents of reform in the country. The U.S. should offer technical support in the form of trainings to equip each of these players with the skills necessary to contribute to the new political order, and it should support efforts to foster strong relationships between all of these institutions and their counterparts in the West and in other Arab countries.

The next few months represent a critical period in Tunisia’s transition to democracy. The U.S. and the international community cannot squander this opportunity. They should act quickly to provide immediate assistance. Insufficient support at this time could have disastrous repercussions.

## CONCLUSION

In overthrowing a brutal despot through nonviolent protests, the Tunisian uprising has empowered citizens and inspired similar actions across the Arab world. While it would be premature to assume that this revolt will trigger a domino effect in the region, a psychological barrier has certainly been lifted.

Tunisia now has a historic opportunity to be the first Arab nation to successfully usher in a stable, democratic government. All eyes in the region will watch closely as the country seeks to build a new political order. However, the transition from authoritarian collapse to democracy is not inevitable and could easily spiral into chaos. The United States, together with the broader international community, should act immediately to provide extensive technical and financial assistance to buttress Tunisia's fragile political system. This support should not be directed toward specific actors, but should instead focus on fostering transparent, accountable institutions. If Tunisia succeeds in this democratic experiment, it will provide a powerful example of the benefits of reform to other countries in the region. International support should be commensurate with the historical significance of this moment.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, and advocacy, we work to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support democratic reform in the Middle East.

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