



Transcript

After the Revolution: Prospects for Tunisia

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Sections of this transcript contain translations from remarks originally delivered in Arabic. The provided translation may differ from the live translation found in the audio recording.

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Robin Niblett:

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Chatham House. I'm Robin Niblett, director of the institute. It's our very great pleasure to welcome here today Dr Moncef Marzouki, president of Tunisia, and Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of the Tunisian Ennahdha movement, and to welcome them both here to Chatham House.

They're visiting London as joint recipients of the 2012 Chatham House Prize, which will be formally awarded to them later this evening at the prize ceremony and dinner. President Marzouki and Sheikh Ghannouchi were chosen to win the 2012 Chatham House Prize earlier this year by a majority of Chatham House members in recognition of the important steps that they took in 2011 to enable Tunisia's political transition. They were in the vanguard – I think it's fair to say – of the historical steps towards democracy that are transforming much of the Arab world and in particular in North Africa. We are very grateful, therefore, that they would take the time to come and join us today at Chatham House to discuss some of the challenges that Tunisia is facing today and looking to the future into 2013.

Let me turn now to Dr Claire Spencer who is the head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House. She will be moderating this discussion and taking you through some of the practical aspects of the meeting as well. Claire?

Claire Spencer:

Thank you very much Robin. Welcome everybody to a very momentous event, I have to say. This is the annual prize-giving this evening of a prize that is annually awarded, but I should stress the meeting today is really to give you, the members, who voted for our prize winners the chance to discuss the ongoing challenges facing Tunisia today. It's the prospects for Tunisia this year rather than a retrospective look at last year.

Without further ado, it gives me great pleasure to introduce our speakers. President Dr Moncef Marzouki, first of all, is the current and I think chronologically the fifth president of Tunisia, but only the fourth if you don't count the 24-hour presidency of Mohamed Ghannouchi in January 2011. He is also the founder of the centre-left secularist party Congress for the Republic. During the 1990s, Dr Marzouki became known as one of Tunisia's leading campaigners for human rights, founding the African Network for the Prevention [and Protection Against] Child Abuse and heading the Tunisian League of Human Rights among many other related activities. In 1994, after

narrowly failing to challenge the former president, [Zine El Abidine] Ben Ali in a presidential election, Dr Marzouki was held as a political prisoner and then forced to live in exile in France. It was on his return to Tunisia in 2011 that he was elected interim president for the transition period by Tunisia's first democratically-elected constituent assembly in October 2011.

Our second speaker is Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi, who is an Islamic scholar and leader of the Islamist Ennahdha renaissance movement, now a political party. And it is indeed Tunisia's largest political party. After spending much of the 1980s as a political prisoner, under Ben Ali's regime, Sheikh Ghannouchi sought political asylum in the UK in 1991, where he lived until his return to Tunisia last year. Under his leadership, Ennahdha made the choice of forming a coalition government with other secular parties, viewing this as essential to a successful democratic transition. Despite not seeking or holding an official position of state beyond his continuing leadership of Ennahdha, Sheikh Ghannouchi remains an influential voice in Tunisian politics.

So first to speak, please, Mr President.

Moncef Marzouki:

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank you first for granting me the opportunity to share with you a short presentation of the ongoing process of democratization in my country.

Tunisia today is an exceptional experimentation lab in the Arab world where the democratic commitment of all political actors, the issues of economic reform, peace and stability, the possibility of trans-ideological alliances are tested in unique ways. Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, the challenge we are facing is the following: given that contemporary Arab societies are both very attached to their Arab and Islamic heritage and very modern and globalized, given that former political regimes have one after another tried to get rid of the conservative part or of the modernist part of societies, often resorting to tremendous degrees of state violence, how then can we go beyond this fatal dichotomy, where a faction of the population is against the other, and where society is torn apart?

Our strategy in Tunisia has been to seek consensus, based on a coalition of moderate Islamists and moderate secularists, so that we can govern in the centre. This was meant to show to conservatives that identity will not be sacrificed in the name of modernity, and to show modernists that modernity will not be sacrificed in the name of identity. If this experiment fails, another

cycle of violence will undoubtedly take place. But if it succeeds, it can become an example for the rest of the Arab and Muslim countries. I want to believe that it *will* succeed, and we are confident about the outcome. Having said this, we are fully aware of the huge challenges we are facing.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, as you know, transitional periods are never easy to manage, due to the proliferation of political, social and economic demands. These numerous challenges require immediate solutions to meet people's need and expectation, lest non-democratic forces might be tempted to exploit the disillusionment and discontent of a segment of the population in order to cause instability and introduce drastic ideologies, denying fundamental freedom and jeopardizing modernist society and social achievement made since the independence. This historic democratic transition in Tunisia is still fragile and needs an important support in order to alleviate sources of economic and social tensions that might jeopardize the democratic process or result in disillusionment with democratic values. The problems of unemployment of university graduate and intolerable disparities between coastal and inland regions are particularly the source of utmost concern and serious threats to Tunisia's stability and democratic process.

The country's priorities are basically job creation, investment attraction, trade development through more regional integration, democratic consolidation, accountability, rule of law, consolidation undertaking necessary measures to introduce good governance reforms. However, Tunisia succeeded despite some internal and external difficulties to underscore some significant results. This connection – mention should be made of the measure taken with regard to the political reforms. They are related to the organization of the election of the members of the constituent assembly that took place in a democratic atmosphere, in all transparency and in the presence of local and international observers, the designation of a coalition government that was the fruit of long consultation and discussion with all the political stakeholders; the creation of a ministerial department in charge of human rights, and what is known as the transitional justice, considered as the cornerstone of any long-term successful, smooth and pacific political transition; the election of the various committees within the constituent assembly entrusted with drafting a new constitution which is currently putting the fundament of genuine democratic and republican regime; the consolidation and the pursuit of democratic reforms tending towards reinforcing freedom of the press, setting up a truly pluralistic political life and a vibrant civil society; the continuous endeavours to consolidate the pillars of an independent justice as well as a functionary judiciary apparatus as a prerequisite for good governance, democratic

government and a political system based on the separation of powers and the rule of law.

It should be noted in this respect that these accomplishments made possible thanks to the revolutionary spirit still guiding our action and by our belief in the shared noble values of freedom, dignity and respect for people's aspirations. Hence, the organization in Tunis of the International Conference of the Friends of the Syrian People, which was attended by more than 70 delegations from various brotherly and friendly countries because we believe that our freedom cannot be achieved if other brotherly people are still denied their fundamental rights. Tunisia should also provide the conditions for safe and sound economic pillars in order to attract foreign direct investment.

Ladies and gentlemen, thanks to its manageable size, its small population and the many assets of potential it has developed such as quality of human resources and delegations, women's emancipation, large middle-class open and modernist tradition, relatively sound economic fundamentals, Tunisia is well poised with the leading support of freedom-loving nations to succeed in its transition and to graduate at an affordable cost as a model for democratic enlightenment and an inspiration for the region. No doubt the challenges that Tunisia has to meet are numerous and difficult, especially that our region is going through some drastic changes, and that the overall economic situation is not encouraging.

But democracy – as you know – and prosperity are tightly linked. Freedom begets opportunity. Tunisia's experience in matters of democratization has been focused on the imperative to free the press to pave the way for a genuine pluralistic society where all political trends are allowed to voice their concern and defend their views. Despite the difficulties of this defining moment of our history and the shortage of financial means, the strategy of the Tunisian government for the immediate future revolves around fighting poverty, especially in inland areas, creating job opportunities, reducing regional development disparities by setting forth long-term development plans with the prospective of rebuilding the general infrastructure of the country. This we hope will serve as a kind of protection against marginalization and social exclusion at the root of all evil.

Yes, we might observe, it would be wrong to pretend that these challenges will be addressed through relying exclusively on our own resources. The change our people are yearning for is not only political but it is equally of an economic and social nature. The outburst of the Tunisian revolution, it should not be forgotten, was triggered following the self-immolation of a fruit vendor

in a protesting act against unlawful and corrupt practices, against social and economic deprivation and marginalization.

In a nutshell, the origins of the problem are clearly identified and the remedies are known. We are persuaded that in spite of the precarious situation we are facing today, thanks to our efforts we shall overcome the current difficulties and make the Tunisian revolution a success story and a source of emulation for other nations. Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, as I stand here in front of you, I feel that two worlds are brought together. East and West are bridged by shared universal values that pave the way to what I have cherished all my life long, the simple fact of living in peace on the grounds of mutual understanding and respect. These are the ingredients of an everlasting 'East-West spring'. Thank you.

Rached Ghannouchi (translation from Arabic):

First of all, I would like to thank the organizers of this event and express my gratitude for the appreciation rewarded to me. In turn, I would like to dedicate this prize and honour to the youth of revolution who provided me the chance to get back to my country after 20 years of exile. I would like to salute them, their families, martyrs and all those people who sacrificed for a free democratic Tunisia. I would also thank the United Kingdom for providing me and dozens of my brothers and friends with protection, decent living and educational opportunities for our children, till they got the highest degrees from British universities.

I remember that this is not the first time I stand here talking to this respectful organization. I have been here once before, in 1994. At this time, I was not a famous person. Instead I was a wanted, exiled person, but this organization, with intelligence and consistency of principles, provided me a chance to give a lecture on the relations between Islam and the West, the inability of connecting between them under the circumstances in the Arab world at that time and the inevitability of democratic transformation. I would like also to salute President Marzouki, my partner in the long fight for freedom against tyranny and one of the main pillars of achieving a wide alliance between the elite parties and consensus about the agreed model for Tunisia.

At the theoretical level, this agreement has been based on the 18 October documents – agreed in 2005 – which combined the main and most important intellectual and political trends in Tunisia. In these documents, an agreement was reached about the Arabic and Islamic identity of the Tunisian people, as well as democracy and essential liberties including freedom of women, freedom of expression and freedom to form civil society organizations and political parties. So, 18 October has been the theoretical ground from which we moved after elections in

Tunisia to form and constitute an alliance that combines the moderate Islamists and liberals in an unprecedented way, considered to be the first time in the Arab world there has been such alliance between two trends that have always fought each other all through the last 50 years. This in turn provided the chance to build the first democratic path in the Arab world and represented a unique historical chance for a break with the past, opening a new page of democracy, wide enough for all parties.

In fact, this is not the first time Tunisia has such prominence. In the 19th century, Tunisia presented the first constitution in the Arabic world, and the first parliament. In the 1950s, tens of thousands of Tunisian people erupted for a Tunisian parliament while a French occupation was taking their lives. Moreover, it is Tunisia which passed, in 1864, a law that prohibited slavery, the first in the Arab world. So Tunisia has a prominent role in democracy. We have a clear idea and strict belief that democracy and Islam work together. So, being democratic does not entail giving up our Islam. But for us, we believe that democracy without religion can turn into uncivilized conflict, controlled by interest lobbies.

Our success in building democracy in Tunisia, building a democratic regime and a state that protects the rights of its citizens while achieving development and justice shall not benefit only Tunisia. It will encourage democracy in the whole area. At the same time, it shall be a benefit and interest for our neighbours in the northern Mediterranean, bonded with us geographically and historically. Settlement and stability in our area is a great interest for our neighbours, especially the issues of fighting terrorism and resisting illegal migration. So we want to build a strong partnership with our traditional associates in the northern Mediterranean based on mutual respect, common interests and non-interference in others' internal affairs.

The world has become a small village so we must live, safely, in it together, respect each other and cooperate for the peace and development of the world. We cannot ignore the prediction of some that the rise of Islamic-led governments would destroy relations with European neighbours and the West in general. This comes from Islamophobia. Contrary to this claim, no war has broken out between the north and south of the Mediterranean. In fact, relations have witnessed unprecedented development. Last week, the partnership between Europe and Tunisia was promoted to a *privileged* partnership.

Islam has a great civilized record of recognition and acceptance of religious and ethnic pluralism and diversity. So the Troika government has included the moderate Islamists and liberals together as a step and indication of our attempt to achieve success in our democratic transformation, our seriousness about consensus and our common human ideals. For the success of this alliance, Ennahdha chose to put aside disputes. For settling the constitution as soon as possible, Ennahdha chose to

bypass a number of contentious issues, like clear commitment to Sharia, in the constitution. Moreover, Ennahdha also agreed to abandon its main choice for the type of government and agree to an adjusted parliament similar to that of the Portuguese model. Such choices of endorsing common agreement and alliance are based on our belief that constitutions are set up on common and clear ideals, even if they are not written down on paper. So it is important to set and base the ideals of justice, freedom and human dignity in the general culture, heart and minds. Much like in the United Kingdom, where there is no written constitution.

The second republic shall come into existence in the atmosphere of dialogue and common agreement, away from the national fighting and rivalry of the first Tunisian republic, which witnessed a half-century of tyranny. Arab Spring countries in which polls and elections elevated Islamists to authority are very interested and careful to form partnerships and cooperate with all civilizations and countries of the world, calling for world peace. Extremism, especially if it resorts to arms to impose its views on others and to violate the rights of others, is the most dangerous threat to peace in in the whole world and to religions themselves.

The main rule in Islamic thought is based on a deep belief of consistency and harmony between the religion, thought and the general interest. So there is a need to pursue such harmony and overcome contradictions. This is the same ideal asserted by Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rashed in his famous letter 'The statement and opinion of the relation between wisdom and religion'. So we have built on this deep idea and are convinced that democratic rule is the best human choice to fight and counter political tyranny and achieve the consensus that is the main pillar of an Islamic regime.

Democracy is not only a political rule, allowing peaceful alternation of authority between different parties; it is also an educational path to tame and limit violence and get people with violent views to talk peacefully. This is exactly what happened with established European democracy in its fight against extremist groups in the 1970s. Those who adopted or defended violent methods in these past times are now sitting in the European Parliament. Similarly, this is what we will do in our country with extremist religious groups, as we encourage them to leave the violent path, be part of legitimate government, treat the developmental problems and troubles in the poor communities where they originated and to refute their extremist views. But those who shall refuse such dialogue and insist on adopting violence to impose their views shall be confronted strictly with law.

The second Tunisian republic deals with the injustice of a half-century of tyranny with transitional justice that seeks compromise and conciliation through revealing truths, purifying the hearts of victims who would pursue vendettas, healing their souls

instead of seeking revenge. The new-born Tunisian democracy shall fight against a past full of tyranny and corruption. According to an Italian philosopher, this past did not pass away. Instead such a past insists on proving its existence by spreading chaos. In the meantime, this second republic fights for a democratic future in its transformational stage. A future that is not born yet. But there is a Tunisian will and determination to achieve this democratic transformation, paying for it by will, hope and determination, and on being a model to be followed. We are seeking a model that lives up to Tunisia and the Tunisian people who, as I have mentioned, raised demands for a Tunisian parliament for half a century. Tunisia, with its important pioneering contributions to modernism, is entitled to a just regime that fights corruption, advanced development and a flourishing democracy that benefits Tunisia, the area and the whole world.

Thank you all. Peace be upon you.