Democratization and Authoritarianism in the Arab World

Edited by Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner

Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore
BEN ALI’S FALL

Peter J. Schraeder and Hamadi Redissi

Peter J. Schraeder is professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at Loyola University in Chicago. He has been a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Tunis, teaches every January at the University of Carthage, and each May leads U.S. students to Tunisia. Hamadi Redissi is professor of political science at the Tunisian Faculty of Law, Tunis, and has been a visiting scholar at Yale University. This essay originally appeared in the July 2011 issue of the Journal of Democracy.

On 14 January 2011, what has become known as the Jasmine Revolution forced Tunisia’s dictator of 23 years, President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, to give up power and leave the country. After just 28 days of protests that even lethal police repression could not quell, senior Tunisian military officers resolved that Ben Ali would have to go because they found themselves asked to turn their guns on the Tunisian people—which they refused to do. As the winter evening fell, he found himself boarding a plane bound for exile in Saudi Arabia.

A spontaneous and secular popular uprising, driven by young Tunisians using social media such as Facebook and Twitter, had revealed a civil society intent on securing the Arab world’s first democracy. The uprising also prompted a regionwide domino effect, as prodemocracy demonstrators began to confront dictators across the Middle East and North Africa. In the “Arab Spring” of 2011, Tunisia is “case zero.” Understanding how that case unfolded—and where it might lead—should be of interest to all students and friends of democracy in this so far most democracy-resistant of all world regions.

To say that Ben Ali’s sudden fall caught specialists by surprise would be an understatement. His mukhabarat (intelligence-based) police state had turned back an outbreak of popular unrest as recently as 2008, and at age 74 he remained, if not youthful, at least aware and seemingly in charge. Ben Ali was only the second president that Tunisia has had since
it won independence from France in the mid-1950s. He gained that office by means of a 1987 constitutional coup against 84-year-old Habib Bourguiba, whose erratic behavior during his later years had damaged his revered status as one of the founding fathers of modern Tunisia.

Defying early hopes that he would prove a liberalizer after packing Bourguiba off into involuntary retirement, Ben Ali had instead built an authoritarian regime that some considered impervious to change owing to the creation of a “strong neo-corporatist state” or the “force of obedience” or an “authoritarian syndrome” in Tunisian society. The new regime adopted “le changement” (change) as its mantra, and marked the November 7 anniversary of Ben Ali’s putsch every year with much fanfare celebrating Tunisia’s “democratic transition.” As Mark Gasiorowski concluded in these pages just five years after Ben Ali seized power, the “failure of reform” in Tunisia meant that the “opportunity” to establish a democratic regime there had been missed, and would “not appear again for quite some time.”

Aside from a military establishment totaling 35,000 troops, the key to the state’s control was a set of security forces commonly assumed to number as high as 130,000—enough to saddle Tunisia and its 10.5 million people with a police presence as large as that of France, a country with almost six times Tunisia’s population. Security formations included the Presidential Guard (roughly 8,000 members) with its headquarters in Carthage, the National Guard (roughly 20,000) with its main base next to Tunis-Carthage International Airport, and a variety of other forces such as the political police, the tourism police, and the university police.

Reinforcing this mukhabarat state was a neopatrimonial form of governance that exalted Ben Ali’s personal rule. The key to personal success was not achievement in a given field, but links to the extended family of the ubiquitously photographed president. Regional specialists like to joke that you can tell how bad a dictatorship is by the number of presidential portraits on display everywhere. Ben Ali was known for posting large and ostentatious images of himself—sporting suspiciously jet-black hair for a man in his seventies—on countless billboards and buildings. One multistory portrait loomed over the busy port of La Goulette, where the smiling strongman seemed to be reminding cruise-ship passengers and other travelers that he and his mukhabarat were always watching and listening. Another consisted of a massive and supremely tacky mosaic that Ben Ali had positioned within the ruins of the magnificent Roman amphitheater at El Djem.

Before December 2010, the last major manifestation of discontent amid the dictatorial kitsch had come in 2008 in the southwestern region of Gafsa. The immediate target had been the state-owned Gafsa Phosphate Company, the main employer in a poverty-stricken area with few jobs. After two decades of shedding posts, the company had announced
plans to add 350 workers. When results of the formal employment competition became public, the vast bulk of the new hires turned out to be people with no ties to the region but strong political links to Ben Ali and his regime. Infuriated locals launched demonstrations in a string of mining towns. Massive police cordons, including riot squads brought in from Tunis, surrounded the towns, and the protests were quashed. Hundreds were arrested and prosecuted, with some receiving prison sentences of up to eight years. Although in retrospect it seems clear that the Gafsa protests were a harbinger of deepening socioeconomic crisis, at the time the regime was able to portray them as the isolated problem of a single region and industry.

The event that undid the ability of Ben Ali’s mukhabarat to maintain control happened in the small and impoverished central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid. It was there, on Friday, 17 December 2010, that a 26-year-old fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire in order to protest the harassment he was suffering at the hands of local officials. This act of desperation touched off demonstrations in Sidi Bouzid that focused at first on deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, the lack of jobs, and unfair treatment at the hands of local administrators and police. Unlike the Gafsa protests of two years earlier, however, the unrest soon began to spread throughout the country and gave rise to demands for Ben Ali’s departure and the creation of a government more responsive to the people.

The endgame for Ben Ali began as demonstrators filled the streets of Tunis, the capital. On December 28, he gave a nationally televised speech in which he charged the protesters with hurting the economy and threatened to deal with them severely. When this did not work, he gave a second address on January 10 in which he tried to paint the demonstrators as “terrorists” serving foreign masters, but also vowed to create 300,000 new jobs. As protestors scoffed, Ben Ali made a third and final television appearance on January 13, assuring demonstrators that he had “heard” and “understood” them, and promising not to run for a sixth term in October 2014. This was too little, too late, as swelling numbers of emboldened Tunisians carried signs reading “Game Over!” and chanting “Ben Ali, dégage!” (“Get out!”). Confronted two days later with the largest antigovernment demonstration that Tunis had ever seen, Ben Ali fled.

Sowing the Wind

Although the speed with which the Ben Ali regime folded was stunning, several socioeconomic and political-military indicators suggested that Tunisia was ripe for change. Unemployment had risen to 14 percent in 2010, with the figure for those aged 15 to 24 years—a huge chunk of the populace in a typically “youth-predominant” developing-world
society—exceeding 30 percent. Strikingly, the well-educated were especially affected. More than 45 percent of college graduates could not find work in a country that offered its citizens higher learning but no job prospects to go with it.

Another sign of socioeconomic stress could be read in rising food costs. As of 2008, the average Tunisian household was devoting nearly 36 percent of its domestic budget to the purchase of basic foodstuffs for home consumption. A comparable figure for the United States at that time would be less than 7 percent. Between 2008 and 2010, not surprisingly, the proportion of Tunisians who rated themselves as “thriving” dropped from 24 to 14 percent, meaning that at least a million citizens had witnessed a reversal in their economic fortunes. Tom DeGeorges, director of the Tunis-based Center for Maghreb Studies (CEMAT), argues that this was due at least in part to the global economic crisis that began in 2008. Austerity measures in Europe, he notes, caused a drop in remittances from Tunisians working abroad and thereby pinched a major source of national income.5

A second factor was the intensifying authoritarianism of the Ben Ali regime.6 Since taking power in 1987, Ben Ali had “won” five consecutive presidential elections, most recently in October 2009 with 99.6 percent of the vote. In a 2002 bid to make himself president for life, Ben Ali arranged a constitutional referendum to remove the three-term limit on incumbency in his post. His ruling party, the Democratic Constitutional Assembly (RCD), and the rubber-stamp Chamber of Deputies that it dominated were increasingly brought under presidential control. With each passing term, the regime became more authoritarian and less in touch with local socioeconomic and political realities.

Tunisia’s annual Freedom House (FH) ratings capture the trend. The New York–based nonprofit assigns countries scores for Political Rights and Civil Liberties that range from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free), with the worst-possible combined score being 14. Tunisia had been an 11 during Bourguiba’s last year in power, but improved to an 8 within two years of Ben Ali’s takeover. This reflected Ben Ali’s early decisions to grant amnesty to Bourguiba-era political prisoners and to open up civil liberties generally. No improvement was seen beyond this point, however, and by 1994 Tunisia was back to being an 11, on its way to a 12 and an abysmal Not Free rating in more recent FH surveys.

As Ben Ali hung on to power year after year, his regime began to arouse special resentment by dint of its worsening capriciousness. One typical example involved a young graduate student named Ali Khifi. His “crime” was having a friend who, unbeknownst to Ali himself, was also friendly with two young men who had mentioned within earshot of the wrong person their desire to see an Islamist regime replace Ben Ali. Anything that smacked of an Islamist threat had long been a “red-line” matter for the president,7 especially after al-Qaeda bombed the el-Ghri-
ba synagogue on the island of Djerba in 2002. When an informant went to the authorities claiming knowledge of the problematic discussion, Ali found himself caught up in the resulting police sweep and sentenced to a year in prison—all for an incident of which he had never even heard. During his first nights behind bars, he cried out to his jailers that he was not guilty and should be set free. After several nights of this, one of the guards told Ali that they of course knew he was innocent, which was why he had received such a short sentence. When Ali asked why he was in jail at all, he was told: "Because you should know who the friends of your friends are." The effect of policing like this on the climate surrounding political discussions can easily be imagined. "If I don't know you, I don't speak freely," explained Ali after his release. After he left prison, Ali found himself ostracized even by friends and family. "Why should someone run the risk of losing a job, not getting a place at the university, or worst of all, being sent to prison, simply because of their association with me?"

A third cause making Tunisia ripe for upheaval was public disenchchantment with the growing corruption of the president's extended family of more than 140 persons. This trend shows up in the annual Corruption Perception Index maintained by Transparency International, in which Tunisia's ranking declined from 43rd in 2005 to 59th in 2010, out of a total of 178 countries monitored. Tunisians reserved special disdain for Leila Trabelsi, Ben Ali's second wife. A former hair stylist more than two decades younger than her husband, she became known as the "regent of Carthage," a reference to her growing assertiveness in matters political. She was particularly despised for having enabled her ten rapacious siblings to sink their teeth into businesses throughout Tunisia. Her brother Belhassen, called le parrain (the godfather), illegally assumed control over an array of enterprises that the U.S. embassy in Tunis listed as including "an airline, several hotels, one of Tunisia's two private radio stations, car assembly plants, Ford distribution, a real estate development company, and [more]." According to the Central Bank of Tunisia, relatives of the former president and his wife owned at least 180 major companies.

Nor did the presidential kinfolk limit their avidity to major corporations and business initiatives. In 2009, a Tunis-area clock repairman named Moncef Ben Rhouma found himself in a land-ownership dispute with Slim Ben Mansour and Habib Mzabi, the presidentially connected owners of a development company called La Renaissance (Mzabi is married to Leila Trabelsi's niece). The real estate in question was a walled garden, attached to an existing residence, that the Trabelsis coveted for a planned housing complex in the Tunis suburb of La Marsa. In a case typical of hundreds, members of the powerful family sent bulldozers to breach the wall and start construction, ignoring all prior claims by current residents. Moncef and fourteen other inhabitants (all of them
women), bravely but futilely confronted the "land developers"—with Moncef physically blocking the bulldozer's path—while the first lady's niece looked on. Police made arrests, a local court declared La Renaissance the lawful owner, and the expropriation went forward under cover of this legal fig leaf.

From Tinderbox to Funeral Pyre

Declining socioeconomic conditions and rising authoritarian caprice provided ample fuel for the conflagration that consumed Ben Ali's rule, but the combustion was not spontaneous. Several other factors were important. First was the literal and figurative spark of Bouazizi's fatal self-immolation (he would succumb to his severe burns on 4 January 2011). The desperation implicit in this horrifying act caught Tunisians' imagination, in no small part because Bouazizi's story was so typical. With his fruit cart, he had been eking out a living not only for himself but for his mother, uncle, and five siblings. Harassed and hit up for bribes for years by brutal police, he had snapped when they overturned his cart, confiscated the scale without which he could not work, and subjected him to a final humiliation in the form of a public slap in the face from a 45-year-old female officer.10

When Bouazizi followed the well-worn path of approaching the local governor's office for redress, he was refused an audience even after vowing to set himself alight. Incredibly, Ben Ali sought political gain from this situation by visiting Bouazizi in the burn unit at a hospital outside Tunis on December 28, after reportedly having greeted news of the self-immolation with the words "Let him die." The hospital visit backfired badly, further enraged Bouazizi's supporters and spurring intensified calls for Ben Ali's ouster.

A still more costly presidential blunder came in the form of Ben Ali's decision to authorize deadly force against the protesters. The mukhabarat had in the past used tear gas, clubs, rubber bullets, and torture to cow protestors and political prisoners. On December 24, it fired real bullets at protestors in Manzel Bouzayane, killing 18-year-old Mohamed Ammari and 44-year-old Chaouki Belhoussine El Hadri, according to a report published by Amnesty International.11 In Talat from the last week of December through the first two weeks of January, hundreds of security officers repeatedly and brutally assaulted demonstrators. The French magazine Paris Match carried poignant coverage, with a picture of Samhi Wajhi, 28 years old, who was shot in the back on January 10.12 Kasserine, known as the site of a major tank battle between Allied and Axis forces in early 1943, saw a particularly gruesome attack on protestors. One eyewitness saw snipers, firing from rooftops, kill as many as fifty citizens. Yet instead of retreating when faced with deadly force, protestors became more willing to confront the regime in the streets.
According to the transitional government’s most recent estimate, at least three hundred were killed and more than seven hundred were wounded between December 17 and the end of January.

The widespread use of cellphones and social media, most notably Facebook and Twitter, was critical to the protests’ rapid spread throughout the country. The initial protests in Sidi Bouzid following Bouazizi’s self-immolation were recorded on cellphone video cameras, posted on the Internet, and shared on Facebook, capturing the attention of Al Jazeera, which became the first international news outlet to run the story. As protests spread and the regime responded with deadly force, clinic and hospital staffers as well as family members and activists began going online to share cellphone pictures and videos of protesters killed by the government. Since about one out of every three Tunisians is an Internet user, awareness of what was happening was soon pervasive in what has been widely called “the first Facebook revolution” (about one of every five Tunisians maintains a profile on the social-networking site). According to a March 2011 survey that Peter Schraeder conducted in Tunis, 91 percent of university students visit Facebook at least once a day, and on average spend 105 minutes there daily. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of student respondents said that Facebook had been their primary source of information about demonstrations between December 17 and January 14. Almost a third (32 percent) of all students indicated that they had first learned of Bouazizi’s self-immolation via Facebook.

Grasping the importance of the Internet, the Ben Ali regime employed a virtual army of censors to block or filter YouTube, DailyMotion, and other sites. Joe Sullivan, Facebook’s chief security officer, confirmed that in December 2010 the Tunisian government tried to hack into Facebook and steal user passwords, but was stopped from doing so. On the antiregime side, Web-savvy young Tunisians downloaded proxy software for use in evading government controls. Among those from the Internet generation who rose to prominence during the protests are Azyy Amami and Slim Amamou, the latter of whom joined the transitional government for a time as its youth minister. They networked not only with each other, having met in 2010, but with external groups, such as Anonymous (the confederation of hackers), that coordinated attacks against Tunisian-government websites. As protestor Habib Redissi explains:

The sheer volume of shared information across a network of more than three-million Internet-connected Tunisians reached a tipping point where it became virtually impossible for the Tunisian government to suppress information short of completely shutting down the Internet, which was not an option because the Tunisian economy—[which promotes] tourism and [welcomes] the annual arrival of five-million tourists—depends on it.
In January 2011, Hicham Abdallah El Alaoui reflected in these pages on the political and media culture of the Arab world, asking “Is the Web a Game Changer?” Looking at how events unfolded in Tunisia, we would answer his question with a resounding yes. Social media are mightier than the sword.

In what now appears an ironic twist, Ben Ali had declared 2010 to be the “Year of Youth,” little dreaming that so many of those whom he “honored” would take to the streets to topple his regime. A few statistics tell the story of youth and its impact: Slightly more than two of every five Tunisians are under 25 years old; almost 35 percent of those between 19 and 24 are students; and one of three young people is unemployed. It is thus no surprise that a large portion of the Tunisian protesters were under 30, with students or jobless recent graduates swelling their ranks.

“History Was on Our Side”

One of the most fascinating developments was the emergence of a generational split between the younger protesters and older, more established opponents of Ben Ali. When the president went on television on January 13 to vow that he would step down at the end of his term in 2014, many of his old foes welcomed the move as an amazing victory for prodemocracy forces. Young people, meanwhile, scoffed and wondered what was to be gained by giving Ben Ali and his family four more years to pillage and work on arranging an authoritarian succession. Students and other under-30 Tunisians embraced the giant protests planned for January 14 in downtown Tunis as their generation’s “moment.” Despite their fear of regime violence, they set out to demonstrate that day with resolution and a hope that, as protester Sinda Redissi said, “history was on our side.”

As important as their drive and uncompromising attitude proved to be, the young people were but one part of a larger civil society coalition that filled the streets. According to a recent report by Syrine Ayadi, a Tunisian lawyer working with NGOs, the number of civil society organizations had increased nearly fivefold from 1,976 in 1988 to 9,592 at the beginning of 2011. A legacy of the Bourguiba era is that women’s organizations such as the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women are strong and well organized, ensuring that women were amply represented in demonstrations throughout the country. One of the classic pictures from the January 14 demonstration that provoked Ben Ali’s departure shows attorney Leila Ben Debbas holding the Tunisian flag above her head and exhorting her compatriots to stand firm. Uncowed by government persecution, human rights organizations such as the Tunisian League for Human Rights were equally vocal in their denunciations of the Ben Ali regime. Tunisia also has a highly organized labor
movement, represented by the nationwide General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), which includes thousands of affiliates, 24 regional unions, 19 labor federations, and 21 general unions. It is unsurprising that regional unions, which are closer to conditions on the ground, were earlier and more intense critics of the Ben Ali regime.

What was surprising was that Islamist parties and organizations were left largely on the sidelines by the success of the essentially secular antiregime movement. It is true that Ben Ali had long repressed the Islamists, forcing a number of their leaders into exile. Yet one should not underestimate the strength of secular beliefs—especially the need to keep mosque and state separate—within a general populace that in many ways is tied more closely to Europe than to the wider regional environment of the Middle East and North Africa. While religious Muslims could certainly be found among the demonstrators, the larger scene was more notable for its diversity of faces: secular folk as well as the old and young, men and women, urbanites and rural dwellers, and professionals along with blue-collar workers.

As events moved toward a climax, the Tunisian army and its chief of staff, General Rachid Ammar, became critical players. Tunisians now hail the army as the “hero” of the revolution because Ammar refused to follow Ben Ali’s order to have the Tunisian military fire on the demonstrators. Had the general decided differently, the outcome would have been much bloodier, and might have included an outright military coup. According to one widely believed account, Ali Seriati, the head of Ben Ali’s Presidential Guard, persuaded the president to leave by convincing him that Seriati—who was actually planning to seize power for himself—would set the stage for the dictator’s return “to restore calm and stability.” Upon learning of this plot, Ammar reportedly ordered the arrest of Seriati and his associates, while at the same time securing the airport so that Ben Ali could have safe passage out of the country.

The general subsequently ordered troops to secure the major cities and crossroads, but made it clear that neither he nor the military had any intention of playing any political role beyond protecting the demonstrators and the Tunisian public more generally and ensuring the formation of a civilian-led democracy. Peter Schraeder looked on as tanks and their crews stood post at the main “round point” (intersection) in downtown La Marsa in front of the Zephyr shopping complex. Throughout the day, in a tableau played out again and again all over the country, smiling civilian families would walk up and eagerly pose for cellphone photos in front of the tanks, with beaming soldiers joining them. The young troopers’ pride over the role that they had played in defending the Tunisian people was obvious.

A final element in the Jasmine Revolution was the role of foreign powers, most notably France and the United States. Revolutions are always driven from within, with outside powers at best playing a facilitat-
ing role. In the case of the United States, statements by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama, who mentioned Tunisia in his State of the Union Address on January 25, ensured that Washington was on the right side of history. The current U.S. ambassador to Tunis, Gordon Gray, is credited with informing Ben Ali that he had to leave power, and that he could not count on exile in the United States. The French government of Nicolas Sarkozy cannot claim to have been on the right side of history. Michèle Alliot-Marie, the French foreign minister, not only vacationed in Tunisia during the week after Christmas 2010, as demonstrations were intensifying, but flew there on the private jet of a Tunisian businessman tied to Ben Ali. Even worse, two days before Ben Ali fled the country and more than two weeks after the Tunisian police started using live ammunition against the protesters, Alliot-Marie offered to send French police to help the Tunisian police “restore calm,” because the French were skilled in “security situations of this type.”

On February 27, Alliot-Marie was forced to resign as a result of her actions regarding Tunisia.

The United States had been inadvertently involved in setting the stage for Ben Ali’s ouster via the November 2010 WikiLeaks release of a trove of U.S. State Department cables. Particularly damaging to the dictator were those written by Robert F. Godec, the U.S. ambassador from 2007 to 2009. In damaging detail, Godec described Ben Ali’s authoritarianism and the rampant corruption of his in-laws and extended family. Ironically, both the U.S. and Tunisian governments had sought to prevent these cables from appearing, each for its own reasons: Washington wanted to avoid diplomatic embarrassment, whereas Ben Ali sought to stifle revelations that might fuel antiregime sentiment. Tunisian bloggers rendered such calculations moot by creating an alternate “TuniLeaks” site that tens of thousands of Tunisians visited. The WikiLeaks cables undoubtedly fueled the events of December and January. “It was one thing to hear rumors about the extensive corruption of the Ben Ali regime,” Syrine Ayadi told us. “It was quite another to actually see a great amount of detail in print, written by the U.S. ambassador, which everyone was talking about.”

**Toward a Democratic Second Republic**

The first few days after Ben Ali left were a time of heightened danger, as remnants of the Presidential Guard and other state-security forces tried to sow terror. It took the army to blunt these threats—whether by arresting Seriati’s confederates as they fled toward the Libyan border or by fighting pitched battles at the presidential mansion in Carthage and the Interior Ministry headquarters in downtown Tunis. The army also called on citizens to form neighborhood-watch groups that could take responsibility for keeping order as the once-formidable police presence melted away.
There was political instability too, as the first transitional government headed by interim president Fouad Mebazaa (former president of the Chamber of Deputies) and Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi (who had been premier under Ben Ali) confronted demonstrators who opposed continuing leadership roles for Ben Ali holdovers. Asserting that Tunisians had not braved police bullets so that Ben Ali’s henchmen could keep running things, foes of the interim government organized themselves into a Council for the Protection of the Revolution comprising no fewer than 28 organizations from civil society, most notably the UGTT, the Islamist party known as Ennahda (Renaissance), and several leftist groups. They mounted a “caravan of liberation” to bring protesters to Tunis from the rural areas, organized a sit-in at Kasbah Square (the seat of government), and precipitated bloody clashes with riot police who were now serving the interim government.

The demonstrations finally ended on February 27, when Ghannouchi and all other former ministers of the Ben Ali regime resigned their posts, and a new interim government took power under the leadership of Prime Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi. The 84-year-old Essebsi was a brilliant choice, in that he both hailed from and had been a critic of the Bourguiba era, had been a prominent critic of the Ben Ali regime (despite having served as the president of the Chamber of Deputies between 1990 and 1992), and remained a charismatic leader with strong interpersonal and diplomatic skills. Among his first acts were publicly embracing the court ruling that banned Ben Ali’s RCD party, ordering the public arrest and arraignment of high-ranking regime hard-liners, and dismantling the political police—all steps that the vast majority of Tunisians greeted with enthusiasm. Essebsi’s government also confiscated the properties, assets and businesses of 110 members of Ben Ali’s family, including the ex-president and his wife.

Several early signs suggest that Tunisia’s Second Republic will be marked by strong prospects for democratic transition and consolidation. First, the scope of political debate has increased as prominent exiles have returned home. These include the Islamist Rachid Ghannouchi, and also human-rights activists Kamel Jendoubi and Moncef Marzouki. Second, in preparation for the elections (scheduled for October 23) that will choose the members of a constituent assembly, political parties are forming at a quick pace. As of this writing in early June 2011, 63 parties have been legalized, and that number is sure to grow before the October elections. Equally impressive is the complete freedom of speech that is now evident throughout Tunisian media, including newspapers, radio, television, and social media. Tunisians today can and do freely voice their political beliefs and opinions, regardless of who is listening. This stands in stark contrast to both the government-imposed censorship and the self-censorship that were the hallmarks of the Ben Ali era.

It is also heartening to see that the interim government has creat-
ed three commissions of experts to expose past wrongs and move the country forward. The National Fact-Finding Commission on Abuse is dedicated to uncovering and documenting physical violations such as the killings of protesters that took place in December and January. The Fact-Finding Commission on Corruption and Embezzlement is focusing on the financial misdeeds of the Ben Ali era, including the Trabelsi family’s land grabs. The High Commission for the Realization of Revolutionary Goals, Political Reforms, and Democratic Transition (known as the Commission for Political Reform or the Ben Achrour Commission for short) is a broadly consultative body that brings together most political forces for the purpose of fostering a democratic transition, most notably via the electoral code and a new set of core constitutional principles. The drafting of this document will be a primary responsibility of the new constituent assembly to be popularly elected in July. Once ratified by that body and perhaps submitted to a popular referendum, the new constitution will pave the way for either presidential or parliamentary elections (depending on the choices that the assembly makes). It is striking to note that more than five-thousand dossiers have been submitted to the three commissions, with 762 seeking redress for past abuses, 42 dealing with political reform, and the vast majority (4,239) focusing on specific acts of embezzlement and corruption.23

Several recent institutional developments are also important for understanding Tunisia’s transition. First, the interim government issued a legal decree on March 23 dissolving institutions strongly influenced by the old regime, including the Chamber of Deputies, the upper house, and the Constitutional Court, while maintaining other institutions needed for the state to function. Second, interim-government leaders have repeatedly noted that they have two main tasks: resuscitating an economy damaged by strikes and revolutionary turmoil, and reestablishing security throughout the country. This latter end was greatly served by replacing Interior Minister Farhat Rajhi with Habib Essid, who is well regarded by the police. The police, smarting under public obloquy and eager to stress that they were not all brutal Ben Ali enforcers, have undertaken the extraordinary action of creating a police officers’ union. On April 19, it called on its members to wear red armbands in protest against what the union called a “campaign of unjustified denunciations.” In an attempt to meet public demands for justice, the interim government continues to arrest former RCD members and to publicly confiscate the property of individuals associated with Ben Ali-era corruption.

With the return of calm, the army—traditionally a small and professional body—has mostly returned to base while maintaining a discreet presence at key urban intersections. Once again, the police are doing the main work of keeping order. Although the army has welcomed the interim government’s plan to create several thousand new officer billets, it remains sensitive to criticism. Defense Minister Abdelkarim Zebidi,
a civilian, has reminded critics that the army “refuses to enter into the political game” and remains “vigilant to protect the achievements of the revolution.” General Ammar, who has stayed out of the public eye since Essebsi became premier, has been promoted to armed-forces chief of staff and remains the ground forces’ commander, which would give him extra authority in a crisis.

Whither the Electoral System?

The real issue remains the electoral system. In April, the Commission for Political Reform approved two important legal decrees regarding it. The first mandates proportional representation (PR), which is typical of parliamentary systems. The PR method favors smaller parties while by the same token risking splits and fractiousness. Two provisions of this decree have sparked controversy. Article 16, which was approved by a large show of hands (including the Islamists) on April 17, seeks to guarantee female representation in parliament by requiring that all electoral lists must consist of male and female candidates ranked alternately (that is, with a man heading the list and a female in the second spot and so on, or vice-versa). The even more controversial Article 15 excludes from participation in the upcoming elections all former leading members of the RCD, of the late government, and “all people having assumed any responsibilities during the last 23 years.” This ban will have the effect of penalizing both the Watan (Homeland) and the Wifaq (Concord) parties, each of which is the creation of a former Ben Ali cabinet official. Former RCD members, not surprisingly, have strongly protested Article 15.

A second decree concerns the election of the Electoral Commission. This body is to comprise fifteen members who are to be independent of both the state (including the interim government) and any political party, and who are to be elected by the Commission for Political Reform. The Electoral Commission is to bear responsibility for all operations relating to elections, ranging from voter registration to vote counting. Despite these decrees, the exact contours of Tunisia’s electoral system remain somewhat indefinite, and there is a chance that the elections set for July may be delayed.

Finally, although the Jasmine Revolution was a largely secular affair, Islamists are not remaining on the political sidelines. On the contrary, Islamist forces and especially Ennahda have been speaking out frequently in the media and the newly free public square. The veil is no longer illegal, and may be worn even in the photographs on national identity cards. Seemingly contradictory declarations by Islamist leaders have aroused their middle-class critics. For example, Ennahda says that it accepts the Personal Status Code (which forbids polygamy), but also calls for “traditional” values—and many wonder what this means. Islamists’
statements on the applicability of shari'a, and their avowals of a desire
to ban alcohol and tourism (a major source of national income) have led
to turbulent countercampaigns by secular groups. In coming months, the
debate between Islamists and secularists will attract much attention both
foreign and domestic. That said, the signs as of this writing—including
the vigorous response that the Islamists have aroused—suggest that
Tunisia is on the right path, and will emerge as the Arab world’s first
democracy.

—9 June 2011

NOTES

The authors wish to thank Jessica Meckler, doctoral candidate in the Department of Po-
litical Science at Loyola University of Chicago, for her research assistance.

1. See Hamadi Redissi, “État fort, société faible en Tunisie,” Maghreb-Machrek, Sum-
mer 2007, 89–117; Beatrice Hibou, La force de l’obéissance: Economie politique de la répres-
sion en tunisie (Paris: La Decouverte, 2006); and Michael Camau and Stephen Geis-
zer, Syndrome autoritaire: Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali (Paris: Presses de
Sciences Po, 2003).


3. John P. Entelis, “The Democratic Imperative vs. the Authoritarian Impulse: The Maghreb State Between Transition and Terrorism,” Middle East Journal 59 (Autumn 2005): 537–58. According to Farih Tajji, a judge who was appointed minister of in-
terior in the interim government, the police force under Ben Ali did not number more than
50,000.

4. Amin Allal, “Réformes néolibérales, clientélismes et protestations en situation au-
toritaire: Les mouvements contestaires dans le bassin minier de Gafsa en Tunisie (2008),”

5. Personal correspondence, undated.

6. Nicolas Beau and Jean-Pierre Tuquoi, Notre ami Ben Ali (Paris: La Decouverte,
1999).


8. Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, La régente de Carthage: Main basse sur la
Tunisie (Paris: La Decouverte, 2009).


10. The officer has denied slapping Bouazizi, but few believe her. “She humiliated
him,” the vendor’s half-sister Samia Bouazizi told a reporter. “Everyone was watching.”
See Kareem Fahim, “Slap to a Man’s Pride Set Off Tumult in Tunisia,” New York Times,
21 January 2011.

11. Amnesty International, “Tunisia in Revolt: State Violence during Anti-Govern-


16. See the cover of Paris Match, 20–26 January 2011.


