

Two years on, is it still spring in Tunisia?

On 17 December 2010, Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to himself – and began the Arab spring. Despite Islamist pressures on free speech and women’s rights, Rory McCarthy sees continued cause for hope.



At first glance Tunisia’s transition to democracy seems fragile. More than 200 demonstrators were injured, some seriously, in a brutal police [crackdown](#) after recent protests in the town of Siliana. The elected government, a rare coalition between Islamists and secularists, has lost support: MPs have defected from the ruling parties and the president himself has called for an urgent cabinet [reshuffle](#). A new constitution was due to be completed two months ago, but is still not ready. Two years after Mohamed Bouazizi, the street seller from Sidi Bouzid, set fire to himself and unleashed a wave of uprisings across the region, has Tunisia’s transition to democracy begun to unravel?

It was economic pressure that played such an important role in setting off the Arab uprisings and it

is these challenges that still remain unanswered. [Unemployment](#) in Tunisia rose to 19 per cent last year and has not improved. Youth unemployment was even higher at 42 per cent. These severe job shortages and lack of economic recovery lay behind the Siliana demonstrations in late November and other street protests will almost certainly follow in the months ahead. None of the rival political parties have offered bold ideas for economic recovery. Moncef Marzouki, Tunisia's president, warned this month that poverty threatened the new Tunisia: "We will have a revolution within the revolution," he told [The World Today](#). "People do not fear the government now. They would take to the streets if we don't give them reason to hope that their condition will improve."

On other fronts the transition over the past two years in Tunisia has been more positive. Although an Islamist party, Ennahdha, won the first elections after the uprising, Tunisia has been spared the depth of polarisation and violence that has marked Egypt's transition to an elected Islamist-led government. In part that is because Ennahdha has been, so far at least, more moderate and pragmatic than most other Islamist movements in the region. In part too it is down to a more legalistic tradition which ensured the uprising was followed by an orderly and largely peaceful transition, leading to elections for a constitution-drafting assembly in October last year. There has been no interference from Tunisia's small and apolitical military.

Many Tunisian secularists were particularly worried that Ennahdha would impose an ideological dictatorship and censor freedom of expression. They feared that Tunisia would revert to the suffocating, authoritarian control that marked the 23-year rule of ousted president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. As one leading opposition politician, Nejjib Chebbi, [warned](#) last year: "Tunisians don't want to have an ideology restrain their freedoms."

There were incidents of genuine concern. In May, the head of the private Nessma television station was [convicted](#) of disrupting public order and violating moral values for broadcasting the animated film Persepolis, which some religious critics said insulted Islam by including a depiction of God. In other cases art exhibitions and film screenings deemed critical of Islam have been attacked by violent crowds.

Yet, the worst predictions of the secularists have not been realised. Although there has been a sharp debate between Islamists and secularists on Tunisia's identity, this has resulted in more compromise than violent division. Each time the Islamists have put forward a controversial proposal they have been forced to backpedal.

Ennahdha, emboldened by its election victory last year, hoped to introduce a reference to sharia law in the new constitution but then rapidly withdrew the proposal. Rachid Ghannouchi, Ennahdha's leader, conceded by saying sharia law was too divisive and a concept that remained ["unclear"](#) for most Tunisians. Ghannouchi also pledged to retain the well-regarded Personal Status Code, which guarantees rights for women – among the most progressive in the Arab world – and which secularists had feared was in jeopardy. When Ennahdha drafted a constitutional article ambiguously declaring that Tunisian women should play a ["complementary"](#)

role to men, the movement was forced to retreat in the face of strong criticism. Likewise, the Islamists eventually dropped a much-criticised article that would have banned, in dangerously ambiguous terms, “all attacks on the sacred.” Mention of religious values in the constitution is now expected to be relegated to the preamble, although the Islamists may yet try for a blasphemy law in the future.

Given its large weight in parliament, Ennahdha had hoped to install a parliamentary democracy, arguing this was the best way to prevent a return to authoritarian presidencies. However, most other political parties feared a sweeping Islamist majoritarianism and argued in favour of a mixed system in which parliament’s powers were balanced by the presidency. Again, Ennahdha was forced to concede: Tunisia’s president will in future be directly elected. Presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled for June next year.

Such cross-party pragmatism in Tunisia ought not be a surprise. Even during the Ben Ali years, several opposition groups from across the ideological spectrum - among them Islamists, secularists and communists - came together in a forum known as the October 18 Collectif and worked for several years to produce a joint vision of a future, free Tunisia. The parties agreed a platform embracing women’s rights, gender equality, a civil (not theocratic) state and freedom of opinion and conscience. Although this co-operation eventually evaporated before the uprising, it demonstrates that Tunisia’s political opponents have not always been as far apart as they sometimes seem.

Ennahdha’s compromises also have much to do with managing the realities of politics. A failure to introduce effective new economic policies has put the coalition government under intense popular pressure. As many as 20 MPs have defected from the two secularist parties who share power with Ennahdha, reducing the coalition majority in the Constitutional Assembly to just nine votes. A new opposition political party, Nidaa Tounes, has emerged in recent months to challenge Ennahdha and has rallied much support under an anti-Islamist platform.

Tunisia’s political freedoms are by no means secured and the escalating economic crisis could yet undermine what has been achieved on the political front. However, for now Tunisia remains the most hopeful transition towards democracy since the uprisings began.

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