



# NYON PROCESS

## **Nyon Process Report: Visit to Tunisia of Professor John Esposito and Julian Weinberg, January 10-15 2012**

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The food cart of Mohammad Bou'azizi. The cart was being taken through the streets on January 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, as Tunisians celebrated the anniversary of the revolution.

This report is based on the visit by Professor John Esposito, and Julian Weinberg, to Tunisia, 11-15 January where they met with many of the country's key political actors from across the political spectrum, youth activists and civil society. A list is provided at the end of this report.

## **Overview:**

*"People thought: you get democracy, you get jobs,"* explained President Marzouki as he described the fragility and urgency of the situation facing the government and the dependency of achieving political reform on securing economic growth. If job creation is not forthcoming, the public's patience to achieve democratic institutions and process is threatened.

Improving the economy remains the prime challenge facing Tunisia's new coalition government. Failure to address the economic needs and the creation of jobs could derail the political project of democratisation including the building of strong institutions. Substantial and growing polarisation in the political arena risks slower economic recovery, and could be a strategy of the counter-revolutionary forces, or those forces that were unsuccessful in the recent elections who wish to see the project of the current coalition fail. The government (President and elected members of National Constitutional Assembly) and Ennahdha leaders consistently outline the urgency of the country's economic situation. They stress their openness to international assistance and request international support from the EU, Gulf, the US, as well as having broader links with Asia, Africa and South America.

Achieving pluralism in the political arena is crucial to the success of the institution of a strong democratic system and national unity. Tunisia's current coalition, (of secular, leftist and Islamic faith-based parties) appears well aware of the weight upon its shoulders. Political parties and diverse sectors of society respond differently when asked their opinion of the challenges facing the country. Those parties and organisations commonly referred to as 'secular', but in some instances may be more accurately referred to as 'hard line' secular, (due to their uncompromising rejection of Muslim political actors, in contrast to the governing coalition liberal secular parties,) state that the biggest challenge will be the writing of the constitution. They argue that Ennahdha are an unchanged political force from the late 1980s when the party contested elections, and assert that the four key challenges in the constitution writing process will be: gender equality (personal status law), relation of religion and state in the democratic system, introduction of capital punishment, and enshrining freedom of belief in law.

Members of the coalition government, including Ennahdha, respond that on all four issues or criticisms outlined by hard line secularists, they have already indicated their position and that there will not be any controversy regarding those articles of the constitution. As one advisor to the Ennahdha leadership stated, *"It will be a secular constitution but it won't be called secular. It will have a civil government, pluralistic, neutrality of religion and it will equal secularism, gender equality?"* Ennahdha has also repeatedly stated that it has no intention of changing the personal status code in which Tunisia's laws on gender equality are maintained. Moreover, party leaders emphasize that the main challenges facing Tunisia are economic and that despite social and political divisions, they believe success in the economy is fundamental to the continuation of the democratisation process.

Tunisia's coalition government, with support from the international community, has the opportunity to deliver an example, a working model, for the transition from dictatorship to democracy in the Arab world. Such a model would enable parties rooted in Islam not to be seen as potential spoilers or oppressors of rights and freedoms, but rather an integral part of a

new economic and political era in the Middle East and North Africa, bringing prosperity and opportunity to their citizens after decades of political suppression.

### **Economic Challenges:**

#### Short-term and long-term support:

As noted, Tunisia's economic situation is fragile. Job creation is the primary focus of the government with unemployment currently higher than it was before the revolution. Before the revolution, around 70% of the country's economic exchanges, imports and exports, were with European countries. Foreign direct investment is channelled through some 3,000 companies who employ around 450,000 Tunisians. The tourist industry is worth in the region of US\$3 billion and employs one million people. The potential for Europe and the US to become partners in the rebuilding and successful transition to democracy is clear. Advisors to Ennahdha argue that the opportunity for western nations, through substantial, consistent and honest cooperation with the new transitional government, will lead to the formulation of a working model that is Arab and Muslim, democratic, prosperous and modern. Such a model supports western national security objectives better than previous policies of cooperation with autocratic regimes, they argue, by aligning western policies with the popular legitimacy of the new elected government. *"The Ennahdha model can be a partner and key for the west for the Muslim world"* a senior member of Ennahdha urged. There are signs, according to Ennahdha officials, that the US has changed its initial perspective (that over the summer was distracted by events in Cairo) to view Tunisia as the example in the Arab world, as the first country to achieve a constitution and government.

Tunisia requires both short-term financial aid in terms of hard cash, and long-term foreign direct investment to support economic growth over the coming years. Financial assistance from the Gulf is crucial in this endeavour, particularly considering the financial crisis in which western nations still find themselves, Ennahdha officials recognise. Ennahdha officials suggest that practical steps western nations can undertake should be to encourage investment and immediate financial aid from the Gulf to Tunisia; to enhance facilities such as loan guarantees for the Tunisian government to meet the short term needs of developing their administration, paying salaries and supporting job creation; and to hold a donors conference to encourage trade and investment, as several sectors such as the Agribusiness are in fact growing, these officials told us, emphasising the strengths within the economy as well as the challenges.

#### Integrated approach to North Africa, Tunisia and Libya:

The links between Tunisia and Libya should also be factored into the policies of western nations. Apart from the influence as a thinker that Rachid Al Ghannouchi President of Ennahdha, has in Libya, (indeed, many of his former students are well-placed political actors in Libya), the economic and political destinies of the two countries are to a certain extent interlinked, Tunisians repeated told us in our meetings. An integrated economic and political approach should be a field of conversation between western officials, Tunisian officials and Libyan officials in addition to bilateral conversations. *"Political success in Tunisia feeds political success in Libya. Political success in Libya feeds economic success in Tunisia,"* an Ennahdha advisor stressed. A successful Tunisia would be a potential model which other North African transitioning countries could draw from and incorporate into their own organically grown processes and systems. Real fears of the potential for Libya to implode were heard throughout all political sectors of Tunisia. Tunisia has a number of factors that could be utilised to support

Libya: Tunisian and Libyan families are deeply interconnected; Tunisia housed some 1.5 million refugees during the Libyan revolution, many of whom have or are now returning; 300,000 Libyans are residents in Tunisia; and Libya has the ability to provide hundreds of thousands of jobs to Tunisians, officials say.

In addition to meeting Tunisia's short-term cash-flow problem and long-term investment needs, the country would also benefit from development and humanitarian assistance in terms of medical, health and other such assistance that would ease the burden on Tunisia's limited government revenue.

## **Political Challenges:**

### Political Pluralism

The challenge of achieving political pluralism and maintaining national unity in Tunisia is central to the success of the democratisation process and will support the establishment of strong independent institutions that all citizens have faith in. Creating a space where there is agreement to disagree upon disagreement is crucial, and arguably the coalition government has formed the first steps of such a space as it has found accommodation and agreement between secular parties and parties rooted in Islam. In this joint space there is room for the non-religious and religious to practice their values and feel that their identities are secure. This political and social centre ground is broader than just those parties in the coalition, and is shared by other leaders from the commonly referred to 'secular' trend. As one senior official commented, the government needs to support and promote political pluralism while opposition forces need to appreciate the meaning of dissent and opposition to a specific government from within the context of a loyal opposition that also operates within the democratic process and national unity.

There is a strong challenge posed by hard line secularist political groups who are far more uncompromising in their acceptance of Ennahdha as a political force. Hard line secularists we spoke to argued that they needed a year to organise themselves into a successful political alternative to Ennahdha having failed in the recent elections. They see their role as being an opposition to the coalition. Loyal opposition is crucial for democratic process, no doubt. As Tunisia's new government tackles the vast economic and political challenges the country faces, so is national consensus. Some hard line secular political forces suggested they could not see Ennahdha succeeding to meet the economic demands. Despite the fact that failure to do so would be very grave for Tunisia, these very political groups themselves had decided to be the opposition to the government. This is a political calculation aimed at capitalising on the failure of the government. However, it risks accusations from the population that they did not lend their assistance at a crucial time of need, choosing to watch from the sidelines as the country deteriorates politically and economically. Such a failure would have devastating consequences for democratisation in Tunisia.

The divisions between Ennahdha and its centre-secular political partners, and the more hard line secularists often evoke accusations of 'double speak' from each about the other: *do they really mean what they say?* Such suspicions are also heard from western nations as they pledge to support Tunisia's transition, but are hesitant to believe wholly in Ennahdha's statements. These same accusations are heard from those in Ennahdha, from the youth leaders we spoke to, and more senior members of the organisation, *'does the west really mean what it says; will the west really treat us as equal partners...'* Only action will prove or disprove such sentiment.

Across the board, Ennahdha's political discourse was praised, but 'will they deliver' is the key concern, and challenge from Ennahdha's position. In our meetings with Ennahdha from the youth leadership to the senior leadership and elected members of the National Assembly, there is a clear determination to deliver on both the economic and political challenges facing the country, and carry out their assurances that the constitution will not be an obstacle for the National Constitutional Assembly.

### Elections:

Hard-line secular parties also state that considering 50% of the population did not vote in the 2011 elections, this means there is a silent majority that support their political programme. Such analysis is misleading. Apart from the fact that free and fair democratic rarely reach voter turn out of anything close to 100% of the electorate, to assume that an unvoiced vote is yours is a mistake. The onus is on the parties to organise and convince those individuals who did not vote to participate in the next election, not to assume they speak on their behalf. Election analysts from Ennahdha argue, based on their analysis of months of opinion polls, that those who did not vote are likely to vote in accordance with the spread of votes in the election.

Tunisia's next elections, scheduled for 2013, will be under a different electoral system. It is estimated that around 30% of votes, in the election last year, in effect '*counted for nothing*' as the sheer number of lists and candidates meant 30% of the votes did not strengthen any of the leading parties. Ennahdha officials also complained that some constituencies required tens of thousands of votes to win a seat, whilst others only a couple of thousand. This system clearly benefited smaller parties in the elections. Electoral reform is likely ahead of the next elections in order to even out such disparities. We were told that it is unlikely that the 50-50 male-female candidates ratio which was introduced for the 2011 elections will be changed. A challenge remains, however, in bringing into the elections an estimated 20% of those eligible to vote who couldn't due to their illiteracy.

### Experience:

In addition to economic and political challenges, political actors from the broad centre ground who are commonly referred to as 'secular opposition' and not part of the governing Ennahdha-secular coalition, brought up the challenge facing the government of its own lack of experience. Coupled with a lack of experience for many of the country's new leaders, is an ongoing struggle against remnants of the 'deep state' that remains a tool of the counter-revolutionary forces that have sustained much of their power since the fall of Ben Ali just over one year ago. The new government, therefore, faces a mechanical challenge in terms of its inexperience with governing in addition to the broader challenges of economy and political pluralism.

Though often questioned in some Tunisian political circles, the strength of the coalition should not be doubted too readily either. Rachid Gannouchi, the President of Ennahdha, and Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki formed a strong relationship whilst both were in exile.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the enormous tasks ahead, Tunisia's coalition government, backed up by cooperation from the international community, has the opportunity to deliver an example, a working model, for the transition from dictatorship to democracy in the Arab world. Such a model would enable parties rooted in Islam are not seen as potential spoilers or oppressors of rights and freedoms, but rather an integral part of a new economic and political era in the Middle East and North Africa, bringing prosperity and opportunity to their citizens after decades of political suppression.

## **Recommendations:**

- Western governments should ensure that projects they support to strengthen democratic institutions and process are inclusive of Tunisia's diverse political trends, and are not seen to be strengthening certain groups over others.
- The political dynamic in Tunisia as in Egypt should not simply be seen through the lens of an Islamist vs secularist polarity for both Islamists and secularists are diverse rather than monolithic and in many cases their interests and values overlap.
- To assure the development of a sustainable democracy with strong institutions, the international community must work with Tunisia's government to meet the country's short-term and long-term economic needs, a first step could be the planning of a donors conference for Tunisia.
- Exchange programmes and projects that foster dialogue and joint-action should be facilitated between Tunisian youth, political parties, government officials and Members of the Constituent Assembly, including Ennahdha, and western countries to support the forging of new relationships and the exposure of each to the other.
- Meetings should be organised in Tunisia that bring together hard-line secular parties and groups with those rooted in Islam and other centre-secularist groups to discuss in a trusted environment their political visions in order to achieve broad consensus on the 'rules of the game' in which the multiple identities of the new Tunisia are secured.

**This report is based on meetings with:**

- **Moncef Marzouki**, President of Tunisia
- **Sheikh Rashid Al Ghannouchi**, President of the Ennahdha Movement
- **Dr Rafik Abdessalem**, Foreign Minister, Member of Ennahdha
- **Ayad Ben Ashour**, Former President of the Higher Political Reform Commission of Tunisia charged with overseeing legal and constitutional reform in post-Ben Ali Tunisia
- **Amel Ghouil**, Member of National Constituent Assembly for Ennahdha and one of the party's 42 women MPs
- **Zied Ladhari**, Member of National Constituent Assembly for Ennahdha
- **Souad Abderrahim Landa**, Member of the National Constituent Assembly for Ennahdha
- **Mondher Benayed**, Ennahdha economic and political advisor, including US relations
- **Said Ferjani**, Ennahdha Communications Bureau
- **Mokhtar Yahyiaoui**, 2011 Constituent Assembly candidate, important political individual, secular human rights activist, and the first person to publicly criticise the former President Ben Ali
- **Najib Chebbi**, Leader of PDP Party
- **Political Office**, British Embassy Tunis
- **Chema Gargouri**, President of Tunisian Association of Management and Social Stability, working on economic and social issues like micro funding.
- **Adel Al Da'daa**, Ennahdha, senior member of the party, and business relations
- **Allani Alaya**, Professor Contemporary History Manouba University, Tunisia – Research in Islamism of the Maghreb and International Relations
- **Kamal Ben Younes**, Reporter and journalist, BBC World Service and others
- **Radwan Masmoudi**, Director of Centre For the Study of Islam and Democracy, and Constituent Assembly candidate

In addition to the above, we held meetings with:

- Ennahdha political bureau members
- Ennahdha communications team
- Ennahdha parliamentarians, including women. In contrast to Egypt where only five women were elected to parliament, in Tunisia 25% of those elected to the Constitutional Assembly were women, 85% of whom were members of Ennahdha
- Ennahdha youth members
- Civil Society workers and members of the secular opposition to the government
- Member of the Presidents protocol and civil servant

**Authors:** *The views expressed are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Nyon Process, or other participants in the Process.*

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**About the Nyon Process:**

The Nyon Process is a dynamic and expanding group of secular and religious political leaders from the US, EU and Middle East who meet regularly in an effort to bridge the growing gap in understanding that exists between religious and secular worldviews; this gap in understanding often leads to misguided or ill-informed policy-making and potential conflict at a national or global level.