



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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TUNISIAN SUMMER 2013: A SEASON OF POLITICAL TURMOIL

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Introduction

Tunisia, over the summer of 2013, witnessed an intensity of political activity not seen for decades. This activity, two and a half years after the uprisings that led to the fall of the Ben Ali regime on 14 January 2011, involves the classical opposition parties, the new political party *Nida Tounis* (Tunisia Call), the emergence of the *Tamarrod* (Revolt) movement, and relations between *Nahdha* (Renaissance)—the main political party in the ruling coalition—and the other political actors.

The current context is radically different from previous decades when the political system was dominated by a unique ruling party—the PSD (Parti Socialiste Destourien) under Bourguiba and the RCD (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique) under Ben Ali. Since January 2011 this has been replaced by a political pluralism that expressed Tunisians' renewed taste for political involvement.

My presentation here is based on my observations of the political scene in Tunisia and interviews and discussions I had there in March and July 2013.

I. The anger of youth, and the political situation following the uprising

The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010, in the southern Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, sparked the uprisings in Tunisia, giving great visibility to the discontent of youth. The main actors at the outset of this revolution were youth deeply affected by poverty and by an unemployment rate estimated at 44% for those between the ages of 15 to 29 in regions like Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Le Kef, Siliana, and Jendouba, Gafsa.¹ Even those with university degrees had been unable to escape from unemployment and women were twice as affected as men by unemployment.

Youth, using their portable telephones, became photo-journalists, reporting the anger and protests of their generation, promoting the moral values of dignity, freedom, and work, and the images of demonstrations, relayed in an uninterrupted loop by satellite television channels like al-Jazeera and France 24, returned the voice to women, artists, lawyers, trade union activists, Islamists, and others who, for decades, had been marginalized or even imprisoned, tortured, or condemned to exile.

These forces, along with a broad section of the population, contributed to the fall of the Ben Ali regime on 14 January 2011, forcing Ben Ali to flee the country. For weeks

following the regime's fall, there was some instability in the governments set up immediately afterwards but finally, in February 2011, Fouad Mebazaa, President of the transitional governments set up after Ben Ali's fall, named a new head of government, Béji Caid Essebsi, a former Minister of the Interior and ambassador under Habib Bourguiba's rule, and he led the country for the subsequent nine months, until a new elected government was installed following Tunisia's first free and independent elections, held in October 2011.

In April 2011 the courts dissolved the RCD (the ruling party under Ben Ali) and the High Commission on Political Reform, under the direction of Yadh Ben Achour, adopted electoral laws that mandated political parity between the sexes—obliging political parties to have 50% of their electoral lists composed of women—and that excluded RCD members who had occupied positions of responsibility over the previous decade. These two laws generated much controversy and debate before the elections were held and the exclusion of RCD members from elections continued to be a source of tension within the National Constituent Assembly (ANC, *Assemblée Nationale Constituante*) elected in October 2011. In addition, the debate over article 28 of the proposed constitution which saw women as the “complement” of men within the family led to public demonstrations that raged especially during the summer of 2012, leading to replacing the term “complementarity” by “equality.” During the summer of 2013, the law “immunizing” the revolution, that is, excluding RCD members from political activity, was once again hotly debated.

In addition to the profusion of new newspapers and political publications and the appearance of new radio and television channels, many new political parties were founded after 14 January 2011, occupying an arena that had been dominated by the RCD and by some 10 political parties, recognized and unrecognized, that had constituted the historic opposition to the Ben Ali regime. Also prominent in the new constellation of political parties were two which were made legal only in 2011 and whose leaders had been in exile—the Nahdha party (led by Rashid Ghannouchi) and the Congress for the Republic (CPR, led by Moncef Marzouki).

Following the revolution there was a tectonic shift in the political checkerboard: 115 political parties were made legal after the fall of Ben Ali and another 162 applied for but were refused an official permit. For the October 2011 elections 97 parties put forward their own list of candidates or joined with others in a coalition; of these only 19 parties gained representation in the ANC. With almost two years having now elapsed since the elections, only some 50 political parties are still active, and a number of these have united to form new groups.

II. The October 2011 elections and its aftermath: the Troika, the historic opposition, and a new political party

The Nahdha party emerged victorious from the October 2011 elections, owing much of its success to Tunisians' exasperation with the corruption of the Ben Ali/Trabelsi/ElMatri clans. Having won the largest number of seats in the Assembly (some 40%) but not enough to govern by itself, Nahdha formed a coalition with two secularist parties—the CPR (Congress for the Revolution) and Ettakatol (Democratic Forum of Labor and Liberties)—what has come to be called the Troika. This provisional government, along with provisional president Moncef Marzouki of the CPR, was supposed to write a new constitution and organize new elections within one year of the October 2011 elections, neither of which has yet been achieved.

The historic opposition parties which had, since the 1960s, opposed authoritarian rule from a liberal, secular, Arab nationalist, democratic socialist, and/or leftist orientation,

included parties such as the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) whose Secretary-General was a woman (Maya Jribi), the Ettajdid party (formerly the Communist Party) and Ettakatol (the Democratic Forum of Labor and Liberties).² With the exception of Ettakatol, these forces did very poorly in the October 2011 elections. For several months following the elections the historic opposition behaved as though in a state of shock, with their ANC members often absent from sessions or opposing measures in a knee-jerk reaction.³

The Troika gave little weight to the historic opposition (again, with the exception of Ettakatol), which found themselves treated by the victors as they had been treated by the previous regimes, that is, as representing an infinitesimal minority. Familiar opposition figures like Néjib Chebbi (who was long-time leader of PDP) and Hama Hammami (long-time spokesperson for the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party, who became Secretary-General of its successor, the Workers' Party) found themselves marginalized and the Troika appears to have seen "democracy" as reduced to election results and numbers of voters, repeating the Ben Ali regime's practices in disregarding the complexity of social groups and the historical context.

It was in this context, in April 2012, several months after the Troika had formed their government, that Béji Caid Essebsi, who had been prime minister in the February-December 2011 transitional government, founded the *Nida Tounis* (Tunisia Call) party. Contributing to the momentum of this new party was a phenomenon that came to be called "political nomadism" where a significant number of ANC members switched party affiliation or formed new parties and coalitions. *Nidaa Tounis*, which did not even exist at the time of the October 2011 elections, benefitted strongly from this and now counts 11 ANC members among its adherents. Other indications of the practice of "political nomadism" include the fact that the number of independent candidates swelled from 8 in 2011 to 31 in July 2013. Ben Jaafar pointed out how dearly his Ettakatol party had paid for its participation in the Troika—at the outset Ettakatol had 20 ANC members but, following some changes of party affiliation, it now counts only 12. And the CPR—the party founded by Marzouki—saw 17 of its ANC members practice "political nomadism" after the elections of October 2011, radically reducing the CPR's original number from 29 and no longer giving the party nor the Troika the same weight in the ANC, and consequently pushing *Nahdha* to seek new supporters.

Nida Tounis, at its formation, also seized the opportunity to position itself as a defender of women's rights, knowing well the important role played by women in the struggle against colonialism and for the rule of law, and this helps explain why a significant number of women, including women's rights activists, and entrepreneurs joined it. Many women had good grounds for fearing that the achievements of the PSC and other related legal provisions were in jeopardy in the new context. This was mainly because many events had occurred since the formation of the ANC following the October 2011 elections that attacked women's rights directly or indirectly. Among these events were: preachers mostly from the *Mashreq* but also from Tunisia, speaking in ways that were in glaring contradiction to Tunisian culture and its reformist and progressive Islamic orientation. They were calling for the excision of young girls. Public discussions arose dealing with *orfi* marriage, early marriages for girls, and sending girls to Syria to satisfy the sexual needs of *jihadis* (known as *jihad al-nikah*). Additionally, it was suggested to forbid women under the age of 35 to travel without authorization of father or husband, a measure ostensibly aimed at stopping women from engaging in the *jihad al-nikah* in Syria. Artists were accused of disturbing public order for having exhibited works in an art gallery. Further, discussions challenged the athletic outfit of Habiba Ghribi, the first Tunisian woman Olympic medalist and article 28 in the proposed constitution that saw women as the "complement" of men.

To add to that, the Saida Manoubia⁴ mausoleum was destroyed by fire and Amina Souib of the Femen movement, who had put a topless photo of herself on her Facebook page generating much controversy, was months later arrested for writing “Femen” on a cemetery wall in Kairouan. Moreover, it was suggested that young girls in kindergartens should wear a *hijab* and rapists of women should be released on presidential pardons. As examples of how rape and sexual abuse are dealt with the following cases need to be highlighted. A young woman was raped by two policemen and then accused of offending morals when she brought a complaint against them. Another prominent case was the rape of a three-year-old girl by the watchman of her kindergarten which generated a great outcry. Tunisia’s lifting of its reservations to the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the Béji Caid Essebsi government in 2011, was not sent to the UN Secretary-General by the governments installed after the October 2011 elections—a step that is required for the measure to be recognized internationally. Several female journalists, bloggers, lawyers, writers, and university professors like Bochra Ben Hadj Hmida, Lina Ben Mhenni, Rajaa Ben Slama, Amel Chahed, Nejiba Hamrouni, Neziha Rejiba alias Om Zied, Olfa Riahi, Amina Sassi, Olfa Youssef, Meherzia Laabidi (or Labidi), Radhia Nasraoui, etc. finding their names on assassination lists and with some of them provided protection by the Ministry of Interior. These facts, among others, contributed to the suspicions many women had regarding the sincerity of Nahdha’s pre-election discourse on women’s rights and pushed many Tunisians toward a party like Nida Tounis which stated it would defend such rights.

III. Growing political tension

With the Troika paying little attention to its opposition, and with various elements of the opposition jockeying for position and seeking to maximize their force, many of the political parties in opposition and much of civil society voiced criticisms of the Troika. They were often mounting demonstrations against it—and the Troika was criticized on many levels as the following listing will show. There was criticism for repeating the disdain that the previous regime showed towards its opposition and for awarding compensation to former political prisoners. There was disapproval of raising ANC members’ salaries and also of Nahdha’s hostility towards the new opposition group, *Nida Tounis*. It was disapproved of Qatar’s support for Nahdha and also of the harm done to state finances by new recruitments to the national bureaucracy. Criticism was additionally raised for the naming of Nahdha members as regional and local administrators (provincial governors and their deputies), which would supposedly enable the party to win the next elections. The poor management of the ministries, the stalled or inactive development projects in poor sections of the country, and the expanding unemployment as well as a declining tourist sector was part of the criticism raised against the Troika.

Béji Caid Essebsi, along with building the Nida Tounis party, argued that the ANC’s legitimacy should end one year from the 23 October 2011 elections, but this did not generate wide support. Together with a number of opposition parties he continued to denounce the Troika for being unwilling to leave power, repeatedly reminding the country that the government he led as prime minister following the revolution had held free and independent elections, had accepted the principle of giving up power, and that the Troika, that is to say Nahdha, was rejecting fundamental democratic principles.

Nida Tounis was sharply attacked by members of the League for the Protection of the Revolution.⁵ The LPR prevented several Nida Tounis meetings from being held in cities across the country and the Ministry of the Interior had to intervene on many occasions to protect the party and its members.

In this situation of high political tension, there were serious national problems on other levels that made the Troika, and mainly Nahdha, a target for sharp criticism: poor management of the local and national economies,⁶ rising prices, de facto devaluation of the Tunisian currency, exporting of Tunisian wealth either legally or illegally, contributed to making life in Tunisia more difficult, including for the middle class which, although viewing itself and being viewed as the guarantor of the modern state, had seen its buying power erode from day to day, with 40% of middle-class households approaching the poverty threshold.⁷ With frustration increasing, responsibility for these difficulties was attributed to the government and to the prolongation of the transition period, which was supposed to have ended with a new constitution and new elections within one year of the October 2011 elections—a period that is now approaching two years.

As the months passed and ANC proceedings continued, disputes arose over issues such as:

- “immunizing” the revolution, that is, prohibiting former members of the political party identified with the Ben Ali regime and that had been disbanded in March 2011 from participating in political life. Estimates put their numbers anywhere from 30,000 to 60,000, and Nida Tounis opposed this immunization.
- eliminating the 75-year age limit for president that had been fixed under Ben Ali. This measure was supported by Nida Tounis since its leader, Béji Caid Essebsi (b. 1926), was over that age and would be able to run for the presidency.
- whether the future Tunisian political system should be parliamentary, presidential, semi-presidential.

In June 2013 Nejjib Chebbi (an ANC member and head of the *al-Jamhuri*-republican-coalition of centrist political parties) and Ben Jaafar each stated that the proposed Constitution was acceptable to their parties and was the best that could be hoped for in the current context. However, both were harshly criticized by members of their parties who rejected a constitution that, for them, had serious defects and who saw in Chebbi’s and Ben Jaafar’s acceptance of it both a helping hand offered to Nahdha and a sign of Chebbi’s and Ben Jaafar’s own presidential ambitions. Many members of each party left their party as a consequence,

With the assassination of opposition figures of Chokri BelAid⁸ in February 2013, and five months later of Muhammad Brahmi,⁹ political killings entered a new phase. This has been shocking Tunisians who had only seen such images on television related to events in Palestine, Lebanon, Algeria, Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan. BelAid’s assassination led to the fall of the Hamadi Jebali government in March 2013 and a new government under Nahdha member Ali Laarayedh, which contained several independent cabinet ministers, replaced it. Then, the assassination of Muhammad Brahmi, a member of the ANC, generated widespread anger. Contributing to this anger was the fact that the assassination took place on the symbolically significant date of 25 July, when the *Fête de la République* is celebrated and when much of civil society was calling for all Tunisians to hang the Tunisian flag from windows—a celebration with political overtones since, according to the opposition, the Troika never celebrated national holidays with fanfare.

According to the opposition, Nahdha shared much of the blame for these political assassinations. Nahdha denied it had any role in the assassinations. Rashid Ghannouchi, Nahdha’s head, declared these to be crimes against the democratic transition and Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki saw both assassinations as efforts to destabilize Tunisia and to halt its democratic transition. Others suspected allies of the former regime wanting to sow disorder. For Mooman Fehri, a member of the *Jomhuri* (Republican) party, the attack

aimed at disrupting an election process that was likely to lead to a strong victory, something the losers feared.¹⁰

Several hours after Brahmi's assassination the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior announced that the suspect in the two assassinations was a Tunisian salafist born in France and that the same method had been used in both BelAid's and Brahmi's killings—armed individuals on motorbikes, organized as a commando operation. The speed with which this announcement came, may have been a response to demonstrations and public pressure but it was also very surprising and caused some to suspect that there was a story behind this that was not being fully revealed.

The Ministry of Interior later revealed that it suspected Boubaker Hakim, who was born in France in 1983 and lived in the north of Paris until the age of 18 before turning to terrorism, of being in charge of the two assassinations. He was said to be a member of the Tunisian Islamist Combattant Group, founded by Afghanistan veterans Tarek Maaroufi and Saifallah Ben Hassine.¹¹ Boubaker was said to have used Europe-based fundraising and smuggling networks to move fighters to Iraq. His brother Radhouane was the first French jihadist to have been killed in Iraq. Arrested in Syria, Boubaker Hakim received a prison sentence there of several years for associating with criminals planning terrorist acts. After his return to France he was arrested in 2008 for recruiting jihadists and was deported to Tunisia in 2012. Since then, his name appeared with reference to smuggling arms from Libya and to the anti-personnel mines that showed up at Mont Chaambi on the Tunisian-Algerian border.¹²

Nahdha was also criticized for not reacting to unrest in the Mont Chaambi border area with Algeria, a neglect that was said to have led to the events in July 2013, when eight Tunisian soldiers in Mont Chaambi were killed and had their throats cut, supposedly by members of the Soliman group (an armed group of youths who had been arrested in 2006 for planning assassinations and who were freed following the revolution) and by Tunisians who had returned from fighting for *jihad* in Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere. According to recent testimony reported by the police, also involved in the Mont Chaambi events were individuals from Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Libya, and from the group called Okba Ibn Nafaa that is tied to AQMI (Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb), although AQMI has denied involvement in the Mont Chaambi events.

The Mont Chaambi events on the Algerian border pointed to problems the Tunisian state has in ensuring its own defense. With its army having a limited capacity for defending the country throughout its post-independence history, the country chose to prioritize other societal aspects, meaning, Tunisia decided to appeal for aid from abroad and, in particular, from Algeria, whose army deployed in significant numbers along the two countries' common border in order to block passage for terrorists and smugglers. The two countries also began sharing intelligence and, with the shock provoked in Tunisia by the killings at Mont Chaambi, to stop the circulation of armaments. The fact that Abou Iyad, the head of the Salafi group *al-Ansar al-Shari'a*, which is believed to have been behind the September 2012 attack on the US Embassy in Tunisia, has still not been located or arrested by the police is being interpreted by the opposition as a sign of tolerance, protection, and even complicity on the part of Nahdha for the Salafists. Finally, at the end of August 2013, under internal and external pressure, the government declared *al-Ansar al-Shari'a* to be a terrorist organization.

IV. The Tamarrod Movement, the National Salvation Front, and calls for the government's resignation

The Tamarrod movement in Tunisia emerged in July 2013, subsequent to the birth

of the Tamarrod movement in Egypt. It defines itself as peaceful, as led by youth, and has among its general aims correcting the revolutionary process and rectifying errors committed out of partisan considerations, and more specifically demanding that the current government and ANC resign and that steps toward a new constitution be suspended, with its replacement by an updated 1959 Constitution. It echoes the Egyptian Tamarrod movement not only in name but in many of its objectives—in particular it sees Tamarrod's role in Egypt in overthrowing the Morsi government as offering a possible precedent for Tunisia and it seeks the resignation of the current government as a way out of the Tunisian political impasse.

The Tunisian Tamarrod movement called for the population to sign a petition to disband the ANC and to dismiss the government—a petition that they claimed gathered 1.7 million signatures by 1 September 2013—and this was supported by some 60 ANC members, who walked out of the ANC to hold a sit-in in front of the ANC chambers at the Bardo palace. Allying themselves with Tamarrod were a number of political groups, such as the Popular Front (composed of 12 opposition political parties and associations) and the Union for Tunisia (composed of five opposition parties), together often called the National Salvation Front (*Front du Salut National*).

On 31 July 2013 the National Salvation Front published a statement explaining the reasons leading to its formation and its aims. These included Muhammad Brahmī's assassination; popular protests in a number of the country's regions; attempting to rectify the current path of the revolution; rendering the Troika, led by Nahdha, responsible for propagating and inciting violence and the political crimes that had claimed Lotfi Nached (a Nida Tounis regional representative who died following a violent attack aiming to stop him from leading a meeting), Choukri Belaïd, Muhammad Brahmī and others as victims. The National Salvation Front called for continuing the demonstrations and peaceful sit-ins at local and regional administration buildings and at the seat of the ANC, to demand the ANC's dissolution and the dissolution of other state institutions, claiming it would attribute to Nahdha responsibility for any provocative actions committed by the militia against popular movements.¹³ The National Salvation Front is demanding the establishment of a committee of experts to draw up the constitution and a government of qualified and competent figures similar to the transitional government that was in office from March to December 2011, or a government of "national salvation," or a government of "national unity."

The National Salvation Front was also involved in two major demonstrations that took place on August 6th and 13th, 2013, with the second having the strong presence of the national labor union (UGTT, that has some half a million members) and taking place on a date with particular symbolic significance—marking the anniversary of the 1956 promulgation of the Personal Status Code which gave women significant rights and protections and which is an occasion for Tunisian women and men to show their commitment to this achievement. In addition, the demonstrations on 13 August 2013 built upon those of the same date a year earlier, when women and civil society successfully protested against the term "complementarity" contained in the proposed constitution, and had it replaced by "equality." Also on 13 August Nahdha held a demonstration on a main avenue but this didn't have the high turnout that the opposition's demonstration had, and the only important Nahdha figure who spoke to the public was Meherzia Laabidi. The demonstrations in August 2013 were a big success, but divisions within the opposition prevented a strong unified front from emerging. Finally, on August 30th, the Tamarrod movement withdrew from the National Salvation Front when the parties involved dropped their demand that the ANC be dissolved.

V. Nahdha's policies and the turmoil of summer 2013

During the election campaign and afterwards Nahdha named two high positions individuals who were meant to represent a cosmopolitan and consensus orientation. To head one of their election lists the party chose Souad Abderrahim, a pharmacist, business woman, and former member of the UGTE (a student union of Islamist orientation) who no longer wears a *hijab*, as one of the only of Nahdha's woman list heads, and she attracted many votes to Nahdha, helping the party to emerge as the most powerful. It also put forward Meherzia Laabidi, a Tunisian from France who had studied English literature and theater, was a member of the UN-recognized international NGO *Religions for Peace* and president of the *Global Women of Faith Network* since 2006, for election as Vice-President of the ANC. Hamadi Jebali, a moderate and consensus-oriented Nahdha member, was chosen by his party to be prime minister and thus head of the government. Yet Nahdha does not seem to have learned that its success in the 2011 elections did not place it, and the Troika it headed, beyond reproach, and the three individuals cited above faced severe criticism both from the opposition and from civil society.

Responding to the many criticisms it faced, the Nahdha party on a number of occasions repeated its commitment to ending the transitional period and to holding elections before the end of 2013. Nahdha criticized the opposition for pushing for the government's fall since the elections, arguing that it was doing this in the hope of setting up a new government without having to win elections. At the same time the opposition appears to have been attempting to disrupt the coalition, with criticism and reproaches directed sometimes at President Moncef Marzouki of the CPR, in terms such as "his powers allow him to dismiss the government and entrust to an independent national figure the responsibility of proposing a government on national salvation, even more so because the de facto suspension of the ANC's deliberations turned it into a mere façade and had given the president some elbow room to maneuver. A pity then, that Marzouki lacked courage and didn't attempt anything of the sort. A pity for the country. A pity for all of us. And a pity, especially, for him because, had he done something of the sort, he would have entered history by the main door and entered the courtyard of great figures."¹⁴ On other occasions criticism was aimed at the ANC president Mustafa Ben Jaafar of Ettakatol. Finally, during the first week of August Ben Jaafar decided to suspend the ANC's work, providing space for the opposition and organizations like the national labor union (UGTT), UTICA (an organization of employers in industry, commerce, and artisanry), the Tunisian Human Rights League, the Bar Association, and civil society to discuss with the Troika a plan for the future. This was seen as providing support for the opposition, in a situation where Nahdha was weakened and where he needed to figure out how to best situate his party for the coming elections.

As events continued apace during the summer of 2013, the Tunisian political checkerboard appeared dominated by two leaders who frequently opposed one another—Béji Caid Essebsi, the founder of Nida Tounis, and Nahdha leader Rashid Ghannouchi. In the middle of August 2013, the two leaders met in Paris—a meeting that, until then, had been inconceivable. Afterwards Ghannouchi said that obstacles had been lifted and that the law on immunizing the revolution would be postponed to a later date, although some Nahdha party members disagreed (perhaps in order not to shock their supporters) and the CPR also rejected this view. In addition, the law to abrogate the age limit on the presidency would not be brought to a vote, which benefited Essebsi, who is in his mid-80s.

Following the Béji Caid Essebsi-Ghannouchi meeting in Paris in August 2013, rumors circulated concerning possible deals between the two politicians. A few days later Ghannouchi, appearing on the Nessma television channel—a channel supporting Béji Caid

Essebsi–stated that it would be a good idea for Marzouki to resign. This was interpreted as the result of a deal between Ghannouchi and Béji Caid Essebsi, in which Nahdha would support Béji Caid Essebsi as president in return for some concessions from the latter. Béji Caid Essebsi’s wish to become president is an open secret.

In response, the president’s spokesperson declared that Moncef Marzouki would not give up the presidency before elections took place—which provides the title to the cartoon by Imed Ben Hamida reproduced below. The cartoon shows Ghannouchi in a role similar to that of the authoritarian *Tahhar* (circumcisor) who, when preparing to circumcise the child, orders him, as he does here, to look up towards the sky—a look that Marzouki often has in reality, in photographs taken since he became president, and that has frequently been a target of humor in the media. While saying this to Marzouki, who is now standing up and looking at the sky, Ghannouchi also says to Béji Caid Essebsi, who has his hands on Marzouki’s presidential chair, “Béji, pull it away.”¹⁵



Courtesy of the artist Imed Ben Hamida

After Ghannouchi’s statements and Marzouki’s categorical negative response, a petition insulting Marzouki has been circulating calling for him to submit to a medical and psychological examination.¹⁶

Nahdha, which would not like its period at the head of government to end in failure, has expressed its willingness to accept the government’s resignation and replacement, but on the condition that some of the party’s requirements regarding the constitution be met. Many important matters have not yet been decided: a large number of the constitution’s articles have been written but they still have not been discussed by the full Assembly; the full membership of the Higher Independent Instance for Elections (ISIE, Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Elections) has not yet been elected; the political system has to be defined (should it be presidential, parliamentary, semi-parliamentary); and other issues remain. However, the opposition—itsself very divided and in a state of continuous mobilization since the beginning of July—fearing that it might lose momentum and no longer be able to maintain its pressure, continued to demand that the government resign.

Conclusion: The Democratic Transition

Almost three years after the 14 January 2011 revolution and 11 months after the expiration of the one-year mandate for which the ANC was elected in October 2011, we can see how the first free elections in Tunisia's history and the turmoil that followed have created a rich experience, full of conflict, negotiation, and shifting terrain, giving to this phenomenon of a democratic transition a particularly complex character. What lessons can we draw from the Tunisian summer of 2013 and the events that preceded it—a period of democratic transition with many of the characteristics of a liminal stage?

Three aspects emerge as particularly important: 1) developments concerning political parties and national organizations; 2) the development of civil society, especially with regard to youth, women, and journalists exercising their rights to freedom of expression; 3) the relationship between democracy and culture.

1. Political parties and national organizations.

The Troika paid the price for its lack of experience and for the perilous economic situation. The value of salaries in the central administration increased 47% in three years while, at the same time, productivity was sharply down.¹⁷ All this seriously and negatively affected the national budget.¹⁸ And, with the tourist sector in crisis, agricultural returns low because of poor weather conditions, general productivity and foreign investment decreasing, institutional stagnation—social discontent was at a high level. However, the Troika denied that the economic situation was catastrophic and some even spoke of economic terrorist. Other factors contributing to discontent include: an increase in the rate of celibacy for those over the age of thirty,¹⁹ many of whom are unable to support themselves and are forced to live at home with parents who are themselves in a weakened state, or pushed toward clandestine emigration; an ineffective system of transitional justice to deal with those accused of committing crimes under the previous regimes and those who had suffered injury or death in opposing the previous regimes and/or during the revolutionary period, etc.; a continuation of regional inequalities between the relatively better off coastal areas and the country's interior. Furthermore, the figures put forward by specialists and by the government are not in agreement, recalling the manipulations and cosmetic discourse that characterized the Ben Ali regime.

All this contributed to raising the population's distrust and discontent, reflected in the most recent poll carried out in September 2013, showing a polarization between Nahdha and Nida Tounis for the next legislative elections, with 33.9% intending to vote for Nida Tounis, 30% for Nahdha, and 9.7% for the Popular Front.²⁰ Béji Caid Essebsi leads the field in voting for the presidency, whereas Hamadi Jebali was leading in April 2013.²¹ Clearly, the assassinations and terrorist actions seriously weakened Nahdha, even though its leader, Rashid Ghannouchi, showed much negotiating skill, such as taking out of his party's program the aim of making Shari'a a basis for Tunisian law and withdrawing the notion of "complementarity" and replacing it with "equality" in the proposed constitution.²² At the same time the historic opposition parties have not significantly improved their popularity. Ettakatol and the CPR (members of the Troika coalition) and other opposition parties like Jomhuri, continue to perform weakly. Polls indicate that the rate of abstentions in coming elections would be relatively high.

Table: Party heads and political figures in whom Tunisians place their confidence/Voting intentions by the Sigma agency.

Names of party heads or political figures.	Poll of 18-21 Dec. 2012 ²³ 1,892 people questioned regarding who they trust. Undecided: not indicated.	Poll of 27-28 Feb. 2013 ²⁴ 1,616 people questioned regarding who they trust, by telephone, after the assassination of Chokri BelAid) Undecided: 59.3%.	20 August 2013 ²⁵ (après l'assassinat de M. Brahmi) Total not indicated of people questioned regarding who they trust. Undecided: 65%.
Béji Caid Essebsi	24.2%	31.5%	40.5%
Hamadi Jebali	13.9%	15.6%	8.6%
Nejib Chebbi	1.2%	2%	-
Moncef Marzouki	12.1%	2%	-
Moustapha Ben Jaafar	5.6%	-	-
Hamma. Hammemi	9.2%	11.9%	7.3%
Rached Ghannouchi	5%	5.4%	-
Ali Laareydh	4%	18.2%	-
Samir Dilou	5.3%	1.08%	-
Meherzia Laâbidi	1.5%	2.2%	
Kais Said (Professor of Constitutional Law, became a public figure July 2013 with Brahmi's assassination.)	-	-	4%
Others	-	11.5%	-

National organizations led by the national labor union UGTT and including UTICA (an organization of employers in industry, commerce, and artisanry), the Tunisian Human

Rights League, the Bar Association endorsed the dialogue between the Troika and the opposition. The Troika, especially Nahdha and the CPR, claimed electoral legitimacy based on the October 2011 election results, saying it had the support of the Tunisian people as well as international organizations. Nahdha reproached UTICA for limiting economic production (480 businessmen, suspected of corruption under the Ben Ali regime, are not authorized to travel abroad) and also criticized the national labor union UGTT's partisan behavior, suggesting that the opposition had never fully accepted the election results and that, on many occasions since then and with the participation of the UGTT—a uniquely powerful political force in Tunisia—the opposition had not only expressed its dissatisfaction with the government but had attempted to bring about the government's downfall. However, on 20 September the Troika accepted entering into a national dialogue with the national organizations and the opposition, with the aim of leading the country towards elections and a new government.

2. Youth, women, journalists and the exercise of free expression

Youth, women, and journalists played and continue to play a very important role in the construction of democracy. The Tamarrod movement, primarily a youth movement, initiated the protests of July 2013 and gained much popularity, but was not able to succeed as its Egyptian namesake did in bringing down the reigning government. Nonetheless, the movement greatly contributed to the turmoil of the summer of 2013, but withdrew from the National Salvation Front when certain groups no longer demanded the ANC's dissolution.

Women also emerged as significant political actors and confirmed their importance with actions during the summer of 2012 against the use of the term “complementarity” and their support for the demonstration of 13 August 2013 (a date that commemorates the Personal Status Code's promulgation—a law that gave women many rights). This last demonstration brought together a number of civil society and political actors as well as the UGTT in front of the Bardo palace (the seat of the ANC).

Journalists and media owners, under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes, often paid a high price for exercising freedom of expression and this continued to be a problem after the revolution. For example, after the revolution political cartoonists were sentenced to heavy prison terms for having posted caricatures of the Prophet on the internet (Jabeur Mejri was one of these, another was Ghazi Béji who fled the country before the court came to its decision and obtained political exile in France); others suffered from censorship, both before and after the 14 January 2011 revolution. Strikes undertaken by individual journalists or by the journalists' trade union were widely followed, making the media into a fourth locus of power—what some have argued is the only real benefit secured by the “Arab Spring.” After all, it was only under strong media pressure that Minister of Interior Lotfi Ben Jeddou, a judge by profession, publicly admitted that the ministry had received, several days prior to the killing of Muhammad Brahmi, information warning of this imminent assassination, revealing the dysfunction or sabotage within his ministry.

3. Democracy and Culture

Let me recount here an anecdote that was told to me sometime in the early 2000s by one of my younger daughter's friends, a student in a management university and himself the son of a regional administrative official and entrepreneur. An anecdote that comments on Tunisian political and economic culture and the role of relationships in limiting power.

The anecdote is told as follows: a company opens a competition to recruit a manager, several graduates present themselves, and the question posed by the examiner

asks them to conjugate the verb “to eat” in the present tense. The candidates, outraged by the easy nature of the question, answer, “I eat, you eat, he eats, we eat,” etc. and appear very discontented as they leave the room. The applicants are rejected, one after the other, until one who is waiting to be examined asks those who have finished the exam what questions they have been asked. Upon hearing that they have all been asked the same single question, this candidate answers, when he is examined, “I eat, you eat, we eat,” and he is offered the position for he shows his understanding of sharing power and benefits. In a similar tone, a number of Lawrence Rosen’s Moroccan informants corroborate this anecdote, saying that “corruption is our form of democracy,” which Rosen glosses as “mean[ing] one can undercut an autocrat by bribing a person below him to disregard the superior’s orders ... imply[ing] a limitation on power.”²⁶

Evidence of the extent of corruption in the Ben Ali regime is clear from the disclosures of the Confiscation Commission set up to dispose of the illegally-obtained possessions of Ben Ali and his family. On 18 September 2013, the commission stated that these possessions amounted to 664 real estate properties, 600 companies with 250 others still being examined, 188 vehicles, 11 yachts including 4 sailboats, 120 million dinars (US \$73 million), and so on.²⁷ Some businessmen towards the end of the 2000s had begun to express their discontent at the greed of the Ben Ali clan, which was not sharing and redistributing its wealth, thus not allowing itself to be subject to the controlling processes that Rosen’s informants spoke about. In the same vein many criticize the Troika for speaking about corruption but doing little in the form of action, and criticize Nahdha for negotiating with businessmen who had benefited under the Ben Ali regime.

While the coalition Nahdha formed with two secularist parties reassured Western countries of its “moderate” Islam, the Troika, in seeing democracy as exclusively based on the ballot box, did not take into account the cultural context or the role played by the internal historic opposition, nor did it give sufficient weight to the role played by the Béji Caid Essebsi-led government that oversaw a democratic transition and held the country’s first free and independent elections. There are other examples of the government’s insensitivity to the socio-cultural context in its misplaced priorities that are not in tune with the daily needs of the population, such as President Moncef Marzouki’s wish to have official history rewritten and to rehabilitate the role of the Youssefists, of which his father was a member. Additionally, there was the Nahdha party’s proposal to provide compensation for those who had been political prisoners under the Bourguiba or Ben Ali regimes, or who had been involved in the 1962 Youssefist plot to assassinate Bourguiba and overthrow his regime, or who had fought against colonialism. However justified in theory, such statements are even more surprising in that they don’t correspond to the slogans of the revolution.

The first provisional government issuing from Tunisia’s first independent elections, composed of a coalition between the Nahdha party and two secularist parties, took into account the results of the ballot-box but did not take into account the historical context. The Troika itself did not behave inclusively and the historic opposition again found itself marginalized while hoping for a participative democracy. Among the phenomena that surprised many observers was “political nomadism”—a dynamic that revealed tensions and contributed to splintering the historic opposition and to strengthening other parties, among them Nida Tounis which attracted defectors from other parties and then went ahead of Nahdha in polls concerning future presidential elections.

This democratic transition displays some of the characteristics of the liminal stage described by Arnold Van Gennep²⁸ and V. Turner,²⁹ which occurs in the passage between what are called the pre-liminal and post-liminal stages. The dynamics Tunisia is

experiencing–social tensions, political nomadism, among others–is like the in-between stage a woman passes through while giving birth when, as it is described in Tunisian tradition, for 40 days she is between life and death, with the risk of maternal mortality very high. She reaches the post-liminal stage once she has survived the 40-day period. Tunisia, in this liminal period, remains in a state of high risk where Nahdha has not been able to satisfy its constituents without angering the opposition, nor has it been able to satisfy the opposition without angering its own constituents, and where the opposition, splintered and conflicted as it is, has focused on harsh criticism and denunciation and has not attempted to present a positive alternative program.

As I write this shortly after the 21 September 2013, the summer has ended but not the turmoil.

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¹ According to numbers provided by the OECD Investment Policy Reviews: Tunisia 2012.

² A number of other parties in opposition under Ben Ali's rule were little more than empty shells.

³ According to data collected by *al-Bawsala*, a Tunisian NGO founded in 2012 and aiming to make Tunisian citizens more politically active and to assess the performance of national political institutions, the rate of attendance by members of the ANC was not greater than 62%, with Nahdha members having the highest rate of 79%, followed by the Bloc de l'Alliance Démocratique (grouping several secularist parties including Ettakatol, the PDP, PDM, etc.) with 52% and Ettakatol with 46%.

⁴ She was a 13th century religious scholar, born in the Tunisian town of Manouba

⁵ LPR, an organization formed in 2012, supported by both Nahdha and the CPR, and accused by some opposition parties of being responsible for the first physically violent political attack of the revolutionary period, in October 2012, against Lotfi Nagedh, a member of Nida Tounis, who died shortly after the attack.

⁶ Fadhel Kaboub. "The making of the Tunisian revolution". Middle East Development Journal. Vol 5, N 1 (2013). <http://www.worldscientific.com/doi/abs/10.1142/S179381201350003X?journalCode=medj>

⁷ L'Observatoire national ILEF pour la défense du consommateur. "La classe moyenne tunisienne se rapproche rapidement du seuil de pauvreté." Mosaique fm. 20/4/2013.

⁸ Born in 1964, he was a lawyer and poet, identified with pan-Arabism, was part of the defense team for Saddam Hussein in his trial for crimes against humanity, criticized the Ben Ali regime and then criticized the Troika, and was the leader of the left-secularist Democratic Patriots Movement.

⁹ Born in 1955 and founder of the People's Movement party which won two ANC seats in the October 2011 elections.

¹⁰ Carlotta Gall. Second Opposition Leader Assassinated in Tunisia. The New York Times. 25/7/2013.

¹¹ Aka Abou Iyadh al-Tounsi, who is supposed to have worked closely with Osama Bin Laden, helping supply the suicide bombers who killed Afghan mujaheddin leader Ahmed Shah Massoud, and to have called for attacking the American Embassy in Tunis in September 2011.

¹² This material is based on details published by Marie Simon with AFP. Tunisie: qui est Boubaker Hakim, l'islamiste recherché après le meurtre de Brahmi? 27/7/2013.

http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/tunisie_qui_est_boubaker_hakim_l_islamiste_recherche_apres_le_meurtre_de_brahmi_1269593.html;

Andrew Lebovich. Alleged Brahmi Killer: Tracing Ties Between Aboubaker el_Hakim, Ansar al-Sharia, and Al-Qaeda. 26/7/2013

http://www.tunisia_live.net/2013/07/26/brahmi_bealid_and_militantism_in_tunisia/#sthash.hDv7d8Ad.dpuf

¹³ "Proclamation de la fondation du Front de salut national à Tunis" 31 July 2013

<http://www.noodls.com/view/59622C7012BFA88D7697B4E7F8466B50C597227D>

¹⁴ Ramsis. Marzouki : Et dire qu'il pouvait entrer "par la grande porte" dans l'histoire !

Dossiers, News, Politique. 18/9/2013

http://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie_marzouki_et_dire_quil_pouvait_entrer_par_la_grande_porte_dans_lhistoire/192955

¹⁵ Imed Ben Hamida. "Marzouki ne cèdera pas la présidence avant les élections." 29/8/2013.

<http://www.businessnews.com.tn/caricatures.php?id=40442>

¹⁶ "Exigeons la publication du bilan médical de Moncef Marzouki" 30 August 2013,

http://www.petitions24.net/exigeons_la_publication_du_bilan_medical_de_moncef_marzouki

¹⁷ A statement by Moustapha Kamel Nabli, governor of the Central Bank of Tunisia from 2011 to 2012, at the ATUGE Forum, September 2013.

¹⁸ In an effort to reduce the budget deficit, the government announced in its 2013 budget a tax of 1% on salaries 1,700 dinars per month, and is proposing for 2014 an increase of 25% in the tax on road vehicles, and the creation of a tax on all automobiles with more than four cylinders.

¹⁹ N.B., Le célibat en Tunisie, des hauts et des bas. According to a study carried out by the Office National de la Famille et de la Population (ONFP) on 8,700 families and approximately 5,200 femmes, it appears that the percentage of women who are over 50 and have never married is 3.3 %; the percentage of unmarried women over 30 is 29 % of all celibate women over 20. The average age at marriage in 2001 was 33 for men and 29 for women.

http://www.espacemanager.com/actualites/le_celibat_en_tunisie_des_hauts_et_des_bas.html (5/7/2013).

²⁰ "3C Etudes: BCE 1er dans les intentions de vote pour les présidentielles" Mosaïque, 18 September 2013

<http://www.mosaïquefm.net/fr/index/a/ActuDetail/Element/26042-3c-etudes-bce-1er-dans-les-intentions-de-vote-pour-les-presidentielles>

²¹ Ibid.

²² R.B.H. It appears that the CIA informed the Ministry of the Interior, prior to the murder, that there was going to be an attempt on Muhammad Brahmi's life (Businessnews.com.tn/cest-la-cia-qui-a-averti-le-ministre-de) (14/9/2013).

²³ "Ennahdha (41,4%) et Caïd Essebsi (24,2%) occupent les premières places des derniers sondages" Business News, 22 December 2012.

http://www.businessnews.com.tn/Ennahdha_%2841,4%29_et_Ca%3%AFd_Essebsi_%2824,2%29_occupent_les_premi%C3%A8res_places_des_derniers_sondages.520,35280,3

²⁴ "Tunisie- Sondage Sigma : 31,1 % de la population ont confiance Béji Caid Essebsi et 29,1% voteront pour lui aux prochaines élections" Business News, 1 March 2013.

http://www.businessnews.com.tn/Tunisie__Sondage_Sigma__31,1_de_la_population_ont_confiance_B%3%A9ji_Caid_Essebsi_et_29,1_voteront_pour_lui_aux_prochaines_%C3%A9lections.520,36630,3

²⁵ "Sondage: 40,5% des électeurs voteront pour BCE", Business News, 20 August 2013.

http://www.businessnews.com.tn/sondage_405_des_electeurs_voteront_pour_bce.520,40237,3

²⁶ Lawrence Rosen. "Expecting the unexpected : Cultural components of Arab Governance." Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. Vol. 603, Law, Society, and Democracy: Comparative Perspectives (Jan. 2006), p.171.

²⁷ Sihem Badi, Minister of Women's Affairs in the provisional government following the October 2011 elections, was strongly criticized by the media for being photographed at an exhibit and sale of Ben Ali's possessions, organized by the government, while holding one of Leila Ben Ali's shoes and laughing, whereas the objects these objects repelled many, which explains perhaps why the sale had little success.

28. Van Gennep, Arnold. *Les rites de passage*. France. 1909.

29. Victor W. Turner. *Le phénomène rituel : structure et contre-structure : le rituel et le symbole : une clé pour comprendre la structure sociale et les phénomènes sociaux*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1990.