

OPINION

Tunisia's democratic dream

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BY BARAH MIKAIL

After weeks of demonstrations, riots, and killings culminating in the overthrow of Ben Ali, a national unity government has been announced in Tunisia, a caretaker regime to manage a transition period towards elections. But is a fully-fledged democracy feasible in a country for so many years deprived of political debate?

At this point, nobody can talk of Tunisia as the example of a country that will be able to achieve what some other countries have failed to promote in Iraq and Afghanistan. It seems that the 'Jasmine Revolution' still has to prove its own success. Indeed, moving from an authoritative regime to a democratic one needs prerequisites that can barely be found in Tunisia at the time being.

The new political process is being carried out by elements of the ousted president's regime – both primer minister Mohammed Ghannouchi and interim president Fouad Mebazaa have for long enjoyed good relations with Ben Ali – generating continuous waves of popular demonstrations.

The Tunisian opposition is still laminated, making exiled and mostly Islamic parties the only serious challengers for the actual regime. Intellectuals lack political and practical experience, which makes it harder for them to outvote traditional leaders and movements. Tunisians can still not see who will be able to meet their basic demands and carry out the much-needed political, social and economic reforms.

It is difficult to say what will happen next, but two opposing scenarios could be banked on.

A failure of the Tunisian democratisation process seems most likely in the short run; here, events could lead rather to a consolidation of the old guard or the national unity government's incapacity to agree on a common programme.

Disagreements would give way to a situation similar to the one prevailing in Iraq and Lebanon, where democracy often rhymes with deadlock. Things would play into the outbound regime's hands, who would pretend to be the only one able to guarantee security and stability. Such an attitude would only prolong frustration among the population and the political opposition, paving the way for a long period of uncertainty and instability.

On the other hand, the Tunisian process could succeed, on the basis of fair and transparent elections, with results being recognised by the population and all parties involved.

This hopeful scenario would not only contribute to creating a confident atmosphere among the Tunisian population regarding their future; it would also send a message to neighbouring governments.

The international community, and the EU in particular, could insist again on democracy and a transparent electoral process as a condition to maintaining good bilateral relations,

substantial floods of money in the form of aid and investments, and quality projects.

This could increase the chances of reaching a peaceful and progressive transition towards freedom, further respect for human rights, and wider political, economic and social reforms in the MENA (Middle East and north Africa) region.

But the Tunisian population's hopes are also regional Arab leaders worst nightmare. Can we expect new examples of regimes collapsing in the region, from Morocco to Egypt, from Algeria to Libya?

Although almost all Arab countries have overbearing regimes in common, it might be risky, to put it mildly, to lump all these people in the same group. Otherwise, Egyptians, Lebanese, Moroccans and even Iranians, Algerians and Jordanians, who have also demonstrated in the past, would have succeeded before into paving the way for a consolidation of their own 'democratic experience'.

But as many aging leaders seek to perpetuate their regimes beyond their own lifetimes, nobody could categorically exclude the possibility for the Tunisian example to generate similar events in the region in the long run.

Western governments in general and the European Union in particular are far from being in a position that allows them to impact positively on Tunisia's events. Their support of the Ben Ali regime, based on the conviction that he was an efficient rampart to any extremist and Islamic rising, played against them. Tunisians don't feel as if they owed their own and actual victory to EU's official speeches that insist on good governance, political reforms and freedom. From their perspective, these only represent the EU's duplicity.

Whatever happens next, what is clear is that Tunisians hold economic demands that the European Union could eventually meet, enabling it to kill two birds with one stone. By contributing to improving living standards in the country, the EU would both satisfy some of the average citizens' needs and prepare the ground for a bigger political role in the long run.

It is important, however, to bear in mind that, in even then, several other considerations will continue to prevail, such as the need for deep political and economic restructuring and the impossibility of suddenly filling the current political vacuum, not to forget that democracy, as a whole, is the result of a process that needs deep maturation first.

Barah Mikail is senior researcher at the European think-tank FRIDE in Madrid.

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