



## The Arab Spring Broken in Tunisia

It was exactly 5 years ago in December 2010 that Mohammed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor set himself alight outside the local municipal building, in an act of protest, after being humiliated by local police officers for not having a permit to run a stall<sup>1</sup>. This one act became the catalyst for the Arab Spring, bringing with it waves of protests against the decades long rule of oppressive dictatorships across the Middle East and North Africa. Sweeping the likes of Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, Gaddafi in Libya and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen.

After decades of dictatorial rule there was much hope for real change in Tunisia, but 5 years on nothing much has changed, despite superficial changes in government. In 2015 multiple terrorist attacks show that stability and security remain a major problem, something successive governments just continue to fail in solving. The Tunisian economy is also in a deep crisis since the overthrow of Ben Ali, as successive government continue with the failed policy of relying upon foreign tourists and where much of the economy remains with Ben Ali's cronies.

There was much hope when Ennahda won the first election in the post Ben Ali era. Although deemed as Islamists by western mainstream media, they were very far from Islamic rule and maintained much of the secular baggage of Ben Ali. It is evident that they lacked vision and were politically naïve just as their cousins were in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood. Winning the election of the back of being on the opposite side of the spectrum to the previous secular, French backed dictatorship and being "Islamic" in nature, Ennahda denied any possibility of implementing the Sharia, keeping the first clause of the Tunisian constitution the same. "We are not going to impose religion," Ennahda party leader Rached Ghannouchi told journalists. "The first article of the constitution is the object of consensus among all sectors of society: preserving Tunisia's Arab-Muslim identity while also guaranteeing the principles of a democratic and secular state."<sup>2</sup> Islamic rule would hardly be a fitting description of Ennahda, not only did they keep secularism at the heart of their policies but they refused to categorically forbid usury or Alcohol nor even make the Hijab mandatory, as Islam demands. All this was done to please western nations and reassure western tourists that Tunisia will still be a viable tourist destination.

Even as Ennahda tried desperately to promote Tunisia as a safe, free and tolerant country to western audiences, the tourism industry still declined. It was later in 2015 that two massacres completely crippled the tourism industry and those dependent upon it for their livelihood. Not only did Ennahda fail in revitalizing tourism, they also failed in resolving the country's unemployment crisis with graduates like Mohammed Bouazizi, who under Ben Ali could not find work, failing to still find jobs, let alone jobs suitable to their qualifications. Unemployment rose from 10% in 2010 to 17% in 2014.<sup>3</sup> As for the youth of Tunisia, the government implemented a new policy to tackle this through the creation of public sector jobs prompting a steady decline in youth unemployment in the years to follow. Ennahda proposed increased fiscal expenditure financed mainly via borrowing from foreign institutions. They aimed to create more public sector jobs at the cost of increasing public debt, which by 2013 had increased to 46% of GDP compared to the 40% under Ben Ali.<sup>4</sup> A short term "solution" with painful long-term consequences for the Tunisian people.

After just over two years in charge over the affairs of Tunisia, on January 9<sup>th</sup> 2014 Ennahda stepped down, amid popular anti-government protests with protestors numbering in their tens of thousands.<sup>5</sup> By December that year, Beji Caid Essebsi a former crony of the old Ben Ali regime had taken power through the country's first free presidential elections backed by his secular Nidaa Touness party,<sup>6</sup> by January another one of Ben Ali's chums was reappointed, this time it was Habib Essid appointed to the role of prime minister. So it is hardly surprising that after the two massacres committed in 2015 in Tunisia the government

has passed a law that enables law enforcement and the judiciary to sentence all “terrorists” to death, the term terrorist is loosely defined and the law itself is recipe for disaster.<sup>7</sup> Not only have draconian laws returned to Tunisia but the favouritism shown by Ben Ali to the corporate elite has also returned with the government in talks to pass a controversial new law that would enable those businessmen with criminal convictions to be spared jail upon payment of a fine. There are still widespread reports that torture is still used and unlawful detentions are still undertaken. Secular democracy is in full swing.

As the situation in Tunisia worsens, with three high profile massacres of civilians and tourists carried out in 2015 and a state of emergency being declared in November 2015, the future only looks bleaker under the rule of the old chums of Ben Ali. Had Ennahda truly been an “Islamic” party then it would have removed the constitution of Tunisia completely and replaced it with a constitution derived solely through Islamic texts such as the Quran and Sunnah. This one change would have removed usury, which has plagued the Tunisian economy in the form of debt repayments, that Tunisia annually pays \$2.5 billion in debt servicing, rejecting interest completely would free up hundreds of millions of dollars that were initially used to repay debt. Not only this but Tunisia could re-evaluate the loan agreements in place and determine which loans had already been paid to the principle amount borrowed, thus reducing the cost to service their debt and freeing up yet more capital. This capital freed could have been used to finance the spending on creating jobs, it could have also been used to tackle the second issue Tunisia faced, that of foreign dependency.

Tunisia suffered greatly as Europe, its biggest exporting market, feebly traversed through the post-recession climate. It further suffered due to the multiple massacres of 2015 bringing its tourism industry to an abrupt decline. Ennahda and its successors failed to see the flawed nature of growing too dependent upon other countries for survival, external shocks crippled Tunisia’s economy in the post Ben Ali era. Tunisia should have spent money building up the agricultural sector and invested in becoming an industrial country, it already has a labour force that is highly skilled yet not enough jobs to suit those skills. An industrial sector that utilised its skilled labour force would have been able to resolve the unemployment crisis, whilst also removing foreign dependency.

If there is any lesson to be taken from Tunisia, it is the fact that secular democracy has failed the people time and time again. Under Ben Ali he made sure he aggressively imposed secularism, upon the masses. Under Ennahda, they maintained secular rule, and tries to use Islam to justify their failure. Under the new Nidah Tounis party, we are once again saw a complete failure in solving any of the country’s problems. Secular democracy has institutionalised the countries problems.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by  
Tanish Chaudhry**

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2013/12/timeline-arab-spring-20131217114018534352.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.france24.com/en/20120328-tunisia-islamists-rule-out-sharia-constitution-ennahda>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cetri.be/Tunisia-Ennahda-s-post-election?lang=fr>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/business/2012/04/tunisian-economy-weak-performanc.html#>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/tunisia-islamist-led-government-steps-down>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/12/essebsi-declared-tunisia-presidential-winner-2014122212464610622.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/tunisia-official-promises-economy-security-reforms.html#>