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DEMOCRACY IN TUNISIA COULD REWRITE THE HISTORY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

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Within five days of the flight abroad of former President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, whose nickname was *Benavie*, Tunisia's interim President and Prime Minister, Fouad Mebazza and Mohammed Ghannouchi had appointed three men of the highest competence and integrity to posts which are key to the successful transition of North Africa's smallest country to a more democratic and less corrupt form of governance. Taoufik Bouderballah, a lawyer and former President of the Tunisian League of Human Rights will head a commission inquiring into human rights violations; Yadh Ben Achour, an eminent scholar whose father and grand father were Grand Muftis of Tunisia and who hails from one of the country's most distinguished family of scholars will draft the constitution of the Second Republic and the rules which will govern future elections; meanwhile, Mustafa Nabli, a former professor of Economics and Minister of Planning who has spent the last decade as Senior Middle East economist at the World Bank was appointed to the Central Bank. These men are the *fine fleur* of the Tunisian elite – all have dared to confront or refused to serve the former dictator. The interim rulers had also freed all political prisoners and decreed three days of national mourning for those who lost their life during the rioting which brought down was is now nicknamed Tunisia's First Republic

On Tunisian television, where freedom to debate has invaded the screen, one presenter apologised on Monday night for her choice of words, explaining to her audience that she still "had a policeman" in her head. *La 7* as the state channel was called in honour of the date in November 1987 when General Ben Ali wrestled power from his ailing predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, was tightly controlled by one of the most hated members of Ben Ali's entourage, his *âme damnée*, Abdelwahab Abdallah. The conformism of *La 7* (a figure which became, with the colour purple one of the fetishist emblems of Ben Ali's rule) was worthy of the Soviet Union in its heyday. It jarred with the aspirations of a country where 80% of the population can read and write and women were granted equal rights in 1957. Live free debates and call ins on different radio stations and on the rebaptised television *Chaine Tunisienne* are attracting millions as people recover their capacity to speak. Fear in Tunisia had reached such levels that even in the privacy of their homes, parents would send their children to bed before daring to utter any home truths.

Many observers abroad have been struck by the very muted presence of radical Islamists during the four weeks of rioting which ushered in the Jasmine Revolution. Supporters of the since banned *An Nahda* movement were repressed as fiercely as were other political opponents. The police brutality and corruption which led to the death of a street vendor one month ago is common to all southern rim Mediterranean countries; where Tunisia differs from its immediate neighbours is that it boasts a large middle class which is not simply living off the wealth generated by the exports of oil and gas as in many Arab countries and was finding its capacity to work and produce wealth increasingly constrained by the ruthless economic extortion practised by the families of the former president's first wife, Naïma Kefi and even more, his second one, Leila Trabulsi whose entourage was truly *Mafiosi*. With a week of the first riots in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine the middle class took to the streets. Much depends on how matters play out in the next few weeks: will the new government be able to contain violent demonstrations from the poorer classes and some former opponents whose firebrand rhetoric would be a godsend to those who, especially in the Arab world, would like nothing more than to stop the Jasmine revolution in its tracks?

The Libyan head of state Colonel Gaddafi has been the only Arab head of state so far to regret publicly the fall of General Ben Ali and insult Tunisian bloggers for their role in recent events. He has opened the doors of Libya to many members of the militias that were the key elements of former dictator's security; he has put the region of Djebbel Lahkdar near Benghazi under curfew since last week, something which major international channels are not reporting. The Jasmine Revolution has fascinated Arabs across the Middle East and North Africa and made their leaders very uncomfortable. Jokes abound such as "the plane in which Ben Ali fled Tunis stopped at Sharm el Sheik, in Egypt to pick up a second passenger." Crude domino theories are much in vogue since Mr Ben Ali's downfall but the Arab world is diverse and predicting where trouble might flare up next is hazardous.

A second factor allowed the Jasmine Revolution to achieve its aims with relative speed and few casualties – the behaviour of the Tunisian Army whose chief of staff of the Territorial Army. General Rachid Ammar and senior officers never showed great liking for the former president. It maybe that the Tunisian army is an exception in the Arab world which suggests that copycat reproductions of recent events in Tunisia are unlikely. For their part, the European Union, Switzerland and the United States can help Tunisia by tracking down the Ben Ali clan's ill begotten wealth in bank accounts and property ruthlessly and helping ensure that whatever economic losses were incurred in recent weeks do not weaken the much diversified economy in any lasting way. The EU in particular which has been turning a blind eye to Article 2 of its own association agreement with Tunisia, which stipulates relations between the two parties be based on respect for human rights and democratic principles, could redeem its past behaviour by a strong show of support for the country.

Tunisia certainly needs to get back to work as quickly as possible despite the calls for all those ministers who served the former president to leave the scene. Regardless of the growing corruption of the *Ancien Régime*, the cadre of civil servants and serious private companies remains one of the country's great assets. It maybe hard to believe that the likes of Mohammed Ghannouchi tried to preserve the state – they were after all responsible for the steady growth rate of around 5 % which Tunisia has known since 2000, and which despite the ever encroaching corruption, has offered many jobs and attracted a fair amount of foreign investment. Of course private capital was fleeing the country in ever larger amounts and it is estimated the one quarter of the \$150bn of private money held abroad by residents of the Maghreb comes from Tunisia.

Tracking down all the stolen property and money of the Kefi and the Trabulsi sci-

ons will take time but justice needs to be done and *seen* to be done: the state has been defrauded of thousands of hectares, state banks and companies privatised or sold to foreign investors with massive fraud – the full extent of which can only be described as the rape of Tunisia, vividly described in *La Véritable Nature du Régime Ben Ali*, published last week by the writer and publisher Abdelaziz Belkhoja, whose father, Hassan Belkhoja was one of the late Habib Bourguiba's most trusted companions. The new regime will want such claims as exist from private Tunisians and the state to be pursued through the courts. Its leaders are also entitled to expect that their western partners will track down ill begotten bank accounts and property.

Despite Moody's rather cynical downgrading of the country from Baa3 to Baa2, the economic losses incurred so far are manageable. Predicting the consequences for the region of recent events in Tunisia is less important today than ensuring this unforeseen change of regime is consolidated. The European Union's Mediterranean policy has suffered from three structural faults since its inception in 1995: (1) The EU is a political dwarf; (2) it faces autocratic regimes in southern rim Mediterranean countries and (3) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is pure poison. Two features of the events of the past few weeks are quite new: this is the first democratic revolution in the Arab world and the Islamists were not in the forefront. This suggests we are at a turning point in the history of the Mediterranean and the Arab world. Arab leaders will have to draw the consequences of the Jasmine Revolution but so will European policy makers who will no longer be able to treat Arab despots as nicely as they have until now.