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## 9 years after revolution, what is required from Tunisia?

Anwar al-Gharbi

Nine years have passed since the January 2011 revolution, where the Tunisian experience has achieved many successes despite numerous external and internal obstacles.

As a young and sophisticated experiment, the Tunisian democratic experience is considered to be a model for coexistence and non-stop interaction between various partisan and societal components, despite the difficult social conditions and the heavy legacy left by the old regime that ruled the country over 60 years and is still waiting for opportunities to return to the front lines again, with support from the economically influential groups.

Many research, scientific and specialized centers believe that the ongoing controversy, debate, and even exchange of accusations among the political, intellectual and societal components is a significant progress in the political transition up to an open, democratic and modern system of government – which is unique in the region to the extent that many prestigious universities and academies teach the unique Tunisian model despite the fragmentation and the break-up of political parties and the failure of various fronts and coalitions to communicate and establish a specific identity for them.

This great political development has not been accompanied by similar economic transformation measures for several considerations, most notably: difficulties in reaching consensus on major economic reforms, the interests of some trade unions and organizations that seek to cling to their gains and privileges, and the continued domination and even monopolization by well-known families of a wide variety of economic sectors, as well as the slowdown and delay in retrieving the looted funds of the State, whether at home or abroad. Corruption has also greatly affected the Tunisian economy, despite various attempts to address them and face those involved in corruption at all levels.

In addition, the international and regional situations affected by the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the suffering of the Tunisian citizen, including unemployment and lack of job opportunities due to the conditions in Libya, the lack of foreign investment and the high cost of living.

These conditions have made foreign direct investment inflows weak. The state is still not sufficiently able to collect revenues of value-added tax and customs duties in a transparent and fair manner, nor to recover the money smuggled abroad, which the World Bank estimated in one of its reports at over \$10 billion.

In addition to the troubled economic situation, the political class is still searching for a clear work ground and projects that may distinguish it, in addition to the fact that a number of party components are still mired in the identity struggle that has been settled by the Constitution. Moreover, the agendas of some parties identify with dictatorial and bloody regimes that do not believe in coexistence and mutual respect.

The results of the 2019 elections have shown the extent of divergence among parties, amid an electoral mechanism that does not help establish clear systems, resulting in a parliamentary composition that is unable to agree on major reforms demanded by the Tunisian people. Also, the president of the republic who has been elected by the majority of the people believes that the powers granted to him by virtue of the Constitution, do not allow him to lead and rule in the manner he deems appropriate.

The Constitution defines certain powers for the president, most prominently the foreign relations, national security, protection of freedoms and the law, on the basis of which he was elected by a comfortable majority that allows him to deal with everyone from a position of strength and to present legislative initiatives to improve conditions.

However, a few months after assuming power, many actors on the political and association arenas see that the head of state has become part of the problem, no longer part of the solution. The grassroots of the president's supporters have changed dramatically, shifting from the revolutionary youth that voted for him massively to part of the old system in addition to a mixture that is difficult to identify, especially that it is mobile and unstable.

For many observers, the President has become a symbol of lack of clarity and convulsive speeches that disseminate suspicion and apprehension instead of reassurance and tranquility among the general population.

It was noteworthy that the President was absent from a number of major national occasions, including the Republic Day and Eid al-Adha, which would have allowed him to bring together all actors and remind them of their obligations, and perhaps define the major orientations of foreign policy and priorities.

It was also surprising to many observers that he (President) described the French colonialism as 'protection' (rather than 'occupation'), in addition to various protocol errors during his visit to Paris.

It was also remarkable that the Tunisian President did not take any diplomatic action against the countries that openly seek to sabotage the Tunisian democratic path. Some observers even see that his rapprochement with the regional axis that is hostile to the freedom of Arab peoples as extremely harmful to the country's interests, especially in relation to Tunisia's direct neighbors, i.e. Libya and Algeria.

What is also striking about the President is absence of his support to the Palestinian cause – which had won him a significant part of the votes due to his positive talk about the rights of the Palestinian people and national constants during his election campaign. Such support was expected to be based on principled positions and diplomatic activity for mobilizing more support for the cause, whether at the Arab or international level, despite the great ongoing changes, most notably the settlement in Palestinian occupied territories and the far-rightist policies in Israel, backed by the Trump administration.

However, what is more dangerous is that some many thinkers and politicians have come to believe that the President does not believe in electoral legitimacy, but rather wants to rule alone. This has been clear from his choice of the Minister of Interior, who had been his advisor, to be the Prime Minister, in indication that he wants a coordinator between ministers that he (President) chooses, not a real prime minister as required by the Constitution.

In view of the mechanism that the President used for preservation of his eligibility of naming a prime minister, it has become clear that he sought to expand his powers and include the cabinet in the presidency. Rather, it has been promoted that ministers are even chosen by some of the president's advisers, which is unprecedented and unhealthy for the democratic process, especially that the present Constitution states that the executive authority has two heads:

- The President of the Republic, who has specific tasks, that the current president accepted and on the basis of which he ran for elections and has accordingly been elected.
- The prime minister who should be named according to the representative weights of parties and coalitions under the supervision of Parliament and civil society.

Therefore, it is in everyone's interest that the prime minister should enjoy all the powers granted to him by the Constitution, most prominently the formation of a government capable of facing economic challenges, establishing the rule of law for all, and building balanced relationships that preserve the sovereignty and dignity of the people and do not compromise the history and wealth of generations.

I do not think that the President is looking for an advisor to manage the government in the circumstances the country is going through, given the fact that these are not among the President's powers or even his morals, as I think.

In the event that Mr. Al-Meshishi gains the Parliament's confidence, then it becomes the duty of everyone to deal with him as a head of government with full powers and not as a member of the presidential office as it is now being promoted.

It is not in anyone's interest to underestimate the man's role if he succeeds to win the confidence of the Parliament, especially that he will have important milestones and great challenges and will face many difficulties, which requires strong support from parties, organizations and civil society.

I believe that if the obstacle of granting confidence to Al-Meshishi is overcome – after setting the priorities of his government and members of his team – then he should act on the following points:

### First: At the level of the presidency

- 1- Changing the rhetoric in order to reassure the people and keep away from everything that would strain the atmosphere and widen the gap between key players.
- 2- Working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to expedite appointment of diplomats in important capitals and obligate everyone to predetermined goals, most prominently restoration of looted funds, reviewing suspicious appointments that occurred in diplomatic missions and representations, and making sure people's money is spent properly.

3- Adopting an approach of governance that obliges all foreign governments to respect the choices of the Tunisian people and not to interfere in their internal affairs.

4- Distancing the military and security institutions from all partisan conflicts.

### Second: At the level of the legislative power

1- Urgently revising the electoral law and setting a minimum threshold for political stability, to avoid uncertainty and external interference

2- Settlement of the position of the Constitutional Court to be the sovereign reference authority in interpreting the Constitution and defining the powers of all parties, including the three presidencies - the Presidency, Parliament and Government.

3- Reviewing the partisan and association laws and subjecting everyone to new measures to rid the political arena of illusionary parties and associations, and highlight transparency in work and financing.

4- Urgently reviewing and approving the international agreements that have been postponed in order to bring in investments, employment and development for regions.

I believe that everyone is aware of the sensitivity of the situation, and none of the Tunisian patriots has any interest in sticking to his opinion while the country and the people are crying out for help.