

**Lecture of His Excellency Majid HAMLAOUI
Ambassador of Tunisia in Belgrade
at the International Institute for Political and Economic
Studies on the topic:**

Tunisia: the exception of the Arab spring

April 22, 2015

The honor allotted to my country to be the starting point of the Arab spring we claim it and assume fully today more than ever. We claim it because we managed, due to a spontaneous movement certainly, but above all thanks to the will and the determination of a whole people which managed at first the feat to rise, and this is not little, against a dictatorship which held as hostage an entire population during more than 23 years, then to remove from power a man who governed the country without sharing and despoiled his wealth through a corruption built in a system by a mafia gang, and finally to dismantle a regime of terror which has violated, during more than two decades, its rights to freedom, to democracy, to dignity, in a word, to the right to life, making of Tunisia an open-air prison where all human values are trampled.

We claim the Arab spring also as a result of this mixing of civilizations of the Phoenicians, the Punic, the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Vandals, the Byzantines, before the 7th century marked a decisive turning point in the route of a Tunisian population which Islamizes and Arabizes slowly under the reign of the Umayyads, with the foundation, by Okba Ibn Nafaa, of the city of Kairouan in 670 and of the foundation of the mosque Ezzitouna in 732, of the Aghlabids who founded their dynasty in 800 in Ifriqiya, who will thereafter give its name to Africa. Come after the dynasties of the Fatimids, the Almohads and the Hafsids who reigned in Tunisia more than six centuries (from 909 to 1574) following what Tunisia passed under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire from 1574 to 1881. The year 1881 marked the beginning of the French protectorate which ended on March 20, 1956, with the independence. On July 25, 1957, when the monarchy

was abolished, Tunisia proclaimed the Republic as its political regime before that late Habib Bourguiba was designated, on November 8, 1959, as its first President.

Upon his arrival to power, President Bourguiba has made the fight against poverty, or what he called « the second battle », after the one of the independence, the emancipation of women, the democratization of education and the fight against illiteracy, the first challenges of the new Tunisian regime at the beginning of the sixties. Taking up these challenges, the new regime sought to base the foundations of a modern Tunisia by endowing it with a competitive economy, involving the woman, as a full partner of the man, in any work carried out in the country and investing in knowledge and teaching, or, what Bourguiba called, the “gray matter” to designate the human brain.

We assume the paternity of the Arab spring because the Tunisian people is gone at the end of the uprising, which started on December 17, 2010, after the young and the less young Tunisians have mobilized and revolted in order to claim more dignity, freedom and justice, and decided to die as martyrs and sacrifice their lives to hunt a despotic regime as strong as repressive. We owe to all the victims of the revolution the freedom, the democracy, the dignity that we enjoy today, but we owe them also the respect and admiration acknowledged by the whole international community to such a small country which has done such a great human work which scope and extent have been beyond all our expectations and even our dreams. We are also assuming the Arab spring because it has inspired neighboring countries to break down the wall of fear and to rise up

against regimes as dictatorial and repressive as ours, although it must be recognized that the revolution in some of those countries and the fate of their populations have not experienced the same issue as the Tunisians and go through some difficulties that we wish to be surmountable. And finally, we assume the Arab spring because we have made, from the beginning, the difficult choice to change everything, particularly with the election of a National Constituent Assembly (NCA), to give the country a new constitution and a new political regime, with a real separation of powers and functional State institutions.

As you have probably noticed, I have avoided, in a conscious manner and with premeditation, to mention the period 1987 – 2010 in the history of Tunisia that I consider, of a purely personal point of view, as a black stage during which a single man led with an iron hand the country composed of young people, ignoring their most elementary social claims and political aspirations, and reduced the disadvantaged regions to poverty and unemployment. I leave to historians and future generations to judge this period and the person who took charge of it.

The transition in Tunisia

As in all periods of transition to democracy, which are normally punctuated by a boundless desire to change everything, that of Tunisia has not escaped to the rule in the sense that there was a need to tag a yet unknown path and which had to lead us toward pluralism, stability, alternation of power, free, democratic and transparent elections to ensure a definitive break with the past, in summary to allow the State to resume its rights, because without it nothing can be attempted and any attempt to

build something is doomed to failure. It is easy to see that what has saved Tunisia of the chaos is that there has not been, at any time, a vacancy of power because since the escape of the ousted President the presidential duties have been assumed in accordance with the existing constitutional order. The Tunisian State continued to operate more or less normally, the army and the forces of the police and the National Guard have maintained, somehow, the order and security and the administration has assured the continuity of the public service and responded to the vital needs of the citizens. The period of floating and uncertainty that followed immediately after the desertion of the former president has not greatly affected the course of events and has even allowed the establishment of the "High instance for the achievement of the goals of the revolution, the political reform and democratic transition" which was to become for a few months and until the election of the NCA, the real engine of the transition in Tunisia.

This transition has had its ups and downs and has been punctuated by events that marked the period post January 14 and determined the political future of Tunisia. Indeed, if the adoption, on April 12, 2011, of a new electoral law, and the holding, on October 23, 2011, of the first free and democratic elections held since independence, which have led to the establishment of the National Constituent Assembly, the election by the latter of President Mohamed Moncef Marzouki, and the vote of confidence given to the first Government of the troika chaired by Ennahdha, the assassination of the left activist Chokri Belaid, on February 06, 2013, brought the country into a political crisis and led to the resignation of the

Chairman of the Government Hamadi Jebali and his replacement by Ali Laarayedh who headed a Government composed by several technocrats placed particularly at the head of the Ministries of sovereignty. A few months later, a second murder, committed on July 25, 2013, of the Member of the NCA, Mohamed Brahimi, weakened even more the transition process and caused the most serious political crisis in the country with significant consequences which culminated with the resignation of the Government Laarayedh and its replacement by a Government of technocrats led by Mehdi Jomaa. With the appointment of Mr. Jomaa, yet from the Government Laarayedh, since he was its Minister of Industry, will begin the second period of our transition. The new President of the Government, supported by a large majority to the NCA, had the difficult task of leading the country to the presidential and legislative elections to set up permanent institutions, at least for the next five years, of the second Republic. The new Government will get the vote of confidence of the NCA and make begin the third and last step in our transition.

Meanwhile and almost simultaneously with the appointment of the Government of technocrats, another important event took place on January 27, 2014, with the adoption of a new Constitution, which is the third supreme legal norm of the country after those of 1861 and 1959. This Constitution, adopted in an extraordinary plenary session by a large majority (200 votes for, 12 against and 4 abstentions, on a total of 217 deputies) after two years of struggles, crisis, suspension of work and more weeks of marathon to reach consensus on a text which is the result of a compromise between the islamist party Ennahdha, at the head of the Government, and opposition forces in the frame of a national dialogue conducted during its last and crucial step under the aegis of a quartet

formed by the trade union federation, the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicraft (*UTICA*), the Tunisian Human Rights League and the order of lawyers. The real challenge of the national dialogue and this compromise was none other than the model of society for the post-revolutionary Tunisia and the political system to set up. Moreover, the great novelty of this Constitution is that for the first time in the legal history of the Arab world, the gender parity in elected assemblies is included in the fundamental law of the country.

The third and last stage of our transition lasted for almost nine months to arrive, after so many adventures and many crises, to the election, on October 26, 2014, in all freedom and total transparency, of an Assembly of the People's Representative (APR) for a term of five (05) years before to be crowned, on December 21, 2014, by the election, in second round of balloting by direct suffrage, of Mr. Beji Caid Essebsi, one of the disciples of Bourguiba, as the first President of the Second Republic and the appointment of Mr. Habib Essid to the post of President of the Government, to finish with this long, difficult, complicated, but quite beneficial, stage of democratic transition which has shown to the Tunisians themselves, first, and to the rest of the world then, that democracy and Islam are not incompatible, on the contrary, they can coexist and go well together in a Muslim Arab country provided that wisdom, tolerance, moderation, dialog, compromise and understanding are the rule of conduct, that the respect of the rights and freedoms of the other are the red lines not to exceed, that pluralism is the field of action of predilection of this human

work and that the will of the ordinary citizen is taken into account as the ultimate and unique way to change the established order.

In addition, it should be noted that all these successes would not have been possible without the active participation and often very noticed of the civil society, with all its components, and of the social networks to which we must make here a heartfelt tribute to the daily undermining and the sustained action that they conducted in standing as the last bulwark to the violation of rights of citizens, the fierce defenders of their freedom of speech and their free access to information to put them in condition to take the right decision at the right time. The Civil society and the social networks have played a not insignificant role in the success of the revolution in Tunisia, which made say the New York Times columnist, Thomas Friedman, that it has been a Facebook-Revolution. Professor Bichara Khader, Director of the Center of Studies and Research on the Contemporary Arab World at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium considers, on his side, that what has been remarkable in the Tunisian revolution is, and I quote, "The Arab spring has been a revenge of the civil society against the police State, predator and patrimonial. But it is also a revenge against the "Zaïms" or the "Rais" who have too long dominated the Arabic political scene ". End of quote.

Current situation in Tunisia

Tunisia managed after four years day for day, since the outbreak of its revolution, to establish the permanent institutions of the second Republic

with a separation of powers, which works rather well, between an Assembly of People's Representatives (APR), real holder of national sovereignty and of the popular will, a two-headed executive power materialized by the President of the Republic and the president of the Government, to avoid skidding and prevent the return to dictatorship, and an independent judiciary, at the service of the citizen and guarantor of the equality of all before the law. The recent legislative and presidential elections of 2014 have certainly given the majority to a secular party, Nida Tounes, to preside over the destiny of the country and begin a new stage of its history, stage supposed to be that of political stability, after a period of turbulences and uncertainties that have threatened to upset the whole process of democratic transition. But these elections have confirmed that Tunisia is the country "exception" among the countries of the Arab spring. Indeed, Tunisia has managed to overcome this difficult cap to its democratic transition, thanks, in large part, to this spirit of concession, of compromise and the choice of giving priority to the national interest and not to the parties, which was demonstrated, with brio, by the political class thus leading up to its term this transition to write a new page in the history of this small country, with 11 million inhabitants and only 163,610 square meters in area, which entered by a large door to the club of democratic countries. The passage from the dictatorship of a single man, who held in his hands all the powers and handled, by interposed mafia gangs, the resources of the country without any control, to a young democracy, admittedly imperfect, but who begins to take its first steps in a way that reminds us of the beginning of the democracies of the countries of Eastern Europe or even those of Latin America.

The main challenges of the Tunisian transition

Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia faces three major challenges that threaten its transition if we consider that political stability has been more or less achieved. It is the threat of jihadi groups that have murdered dozens of soldiers, policemen and gendarmes as well as two political figures, Chokri Belaid and hadj Mohamed Brahimi, killed in 2013. After four years and despite of laborious efforts by all parties involved in the democratic transition, the security situation remains a source of concern and the main destabilizing factor. In an international context and, in particular, regional, as unstable as complicated, Tunisia cannot cope alone with the terrorist threat which become, since a few years, a transnational phenomenon that has no more borders and exceeds all limits since the terrorists have taken as target all human values defended by the international community attacking freedom, justice and peace in the world. It is only with an unfailing solidarity and especially through the closest possible cooperation, particularly aiming the sources of financing of terrorism that the freedom, peace and justice-loving countries may overcome this scourge that continues to grow and branch out throughout the world. In addition, we believe that the fight against terrorism in Tunisia and everywhere in the world must, in a first stage, analyze and explain the reasons, other than religious of course, of this scourge to lead to a strategy that must not take into account only the security aspect but also the political, social, cultural, economic and educational dimension of this phenomenon.

I cannot talk about terrorism without mentioning what happened a little more than a month ago in my country when a group of jihadists,

blinded by their fanaticism and extremism, has attacked tourists whose only fault was to be that day in the Museum of Bardo, which houses one of the world's best collections of mosaics, to admire the cultural richness and diversity of Tunisia. By attacking innocent victims, friends of Tunisia, on last March 18, the terrorists obviously targeted the tourist sector, vital activity for the Tunisian economy which already faces real difficulties since January 14, 2011, or even the seat of the Assembly of People's Representatives, the symbolic place where is expressed the popular sovereignty, but above all it is the young Tunisian democracy which has been, that day, the subject of an assassination attempt with premeditation. The solidarity movement, and the feelings of sympathy and support expressed toward my country by the international community, which includes your countries, have been the best response to this horde of jihadists who have failed and will never succeed to destabilize us or to make us afraid because the Tunisian people has made its choice: that of order, of freedom, of justice, of democracy and tolerance and no force in the world can hinder this irreversible process.

The second challenge of the country is the economic situation which is far from being shiny especially with an unemployment rate high enough, (15.3 per cent of the active population) particularly among the young graduates who represent 31% of the unemployed. The investments are in free fall (-21% in 2014 compared to 2013) and the public deficit is multiplied by two and a half times since 2010.

To this table, already negative, of the Tunisian economy, are added as a third challenge the movements of protests and strikes that only

complicate the social situation especially because these movements affect the strategic economic sectors such as the phosphate or sensitive sectors such as education, transport and health.

To meet these major challenges, and so many others, Tunisia needs, more than ever, of all his friends, from the countries that have supported its democracy in its first steps, democracy which requires today a more sustained assistance, a more developed cooperation and an unfailing solidarity to avoid the Arab spring, triggered in December 2010 in Tunisia, to be transformed into an autumn which risks to put an end to such a beautiful dream of several generations, of which I am a part, to see a day the rights to freedom of expression, opinion, association, to vote in full freedom, to a better life, become a reality. I address myself to you here to urge you, and through you, I am asking to all your countries, to be on our side and accompany us in this wonderful adventure which must lead us inevitably toward a better destiny that the young and the less young Tunisians, who revolted four years ago, had chosen for themselves and for all the people of Tunisia.

In conclusion, and by recovering the optimism that has always marked the character of the Tunisian, which I am, I have to confess to you that the hope to see our young democracy reach port has never left me, despite the difficult situations and difficult moments Tunisia went through. Four years in the life of a revolution like ours are nothing compared to our hopes, to our expectations, to our wishes for the dream to give the opportunity to our children and grandchildren to live a real democracy,

express themselves freely, without fear, without concern, to see them flourish in all fields, it is at that moment that we can say that Tunisia was really the exception of the Arab spring and that thanks to its will, its love for life, the sacrifices of its youth, the Tunisian people will have responded, more than eighty years after his death, to the appeal of the most famous Tunisian poet Abou El Kacem Echebbi, who wrote in his poem the willingness of the life:

When one day the people wants to live,
Force is for the destiny, to respond,
Force is for the darkness to dissipate,
Force is for the strings to break.

I thank you for your attention and I sincerely apologize if I was a little long but I think that the theme was really worth it.