Tunesia Is The Way

In preparation for a panel discussion 'Tunisia is the way' commemorating the five -year anniversary of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, co-sponsored by the Embassy of Tunisia in the Hague, I have been desperately looking for the 'how to come successfully through a democratic transition period' manual. I didn't succeed. Bol.com couldn't help me, unfortunately. I wished I had finished my political science study.

Relying on my own resources and rethinking the big and fundamental questions Leiden University has put on the agenda, I found myself confronted with fundamental questions. The title for example suggests an option, a choice between several ways, but for the majority of the people, Tunisia is the only way. For them, international comparisons are highly irrelevant. Moreover, the question arises; 'the way to what?'

The introduction makes it clear that we are talking about a democratic transition, thus defining the uprisings as political in the first place. But is this so? To what extent is the outcome as the activists have striven towards?

The introduction seems to correspond with the dominant view in the beginning, especially in 'our part of the world', that the Arab region was entering a period of democratic transitions, which would take weeks or months in each country and remain relatively peaceful, ushering in a new regional era of electoral democracy. From this still very popular perspective, the revolts were the result of a cultural and political mutation born of a new generation connected to global culture, thanks to the new information and communication technologies. According to this view, the uprisings were essentially, if not exclusively, a struggle for political freedom and democracy.

This vision is not completely off the mark, off course. But, I would like to add an other point of view to the discussion. I will try to show that the upheavals were social and economic rather than political. The uprisings and the aftermath have brought underlying social developments to a surface. I will emphasize that these

developments are to a large extent similar to those in other parts of the world.

Since the start of the great financial crisis in 2007, western Europe seems to be in a continuing crisis. Apart from the financial crisis we were facing consecutively: a bank crisis, a Euro crisis, the Greek crisis, a sustainability crisis, an institutional crisis, a migrant crisis and nowadays people are talking about a refugee crisis.

I don't want suggest that the current challenges are fully comparable or underestimate the major issues Tunisia has to deal with. Not at all. But I do believe that the long term developments have a common undertow, which I would define as the occurrence of new dividing lines in combination with a massive conflict of old powers.
This is not a historical exception. Worldwide there are, for example, many similarities in the feminist struggles during the 20 s of the previous century. The so called first feminist period.
On this point, I feel the need to make a strong disclaimer. I am not a sociologist nor a political scientist. Today I am sharing my personal observations.

I participated (February 2016) in a 'redesigning democracy' workshop, together with people from all over Europe. In a discussion we examined topics such as the inabilities of political parties to respond to citizens' needs, institutional bureaucracy and barriers for participation and new initiatives, transparency and corruption. At the same time, the Dutch parliament is preparing a state commission to reconsider the parliamentary system with the aim of finding ways to overcome the growing political alienation among citizens. Given these facts I wondered to what extend can we evaluate the success of the French revolution? Why didn't I study history?

The irony is that supporting democratization, "especially fair and free elections" is one of the main objectives of Dutch foreign policy.
This shows there is no such thing as a 'democratic transition'. We can at best speak about developments in a more democratic transition, but even then, a lot of questions remain open. Democracy is never finished and the quality depends of current standards and societies' challenges.

Taking the common undertow as a starting point, one can identify clashes in the following five areas, which are challenging many current societies. I will examine: Citizenship, declining institutional legitimacy and new forms of social action,

social inheritance, victimization and heroes and economy. Some of these have become political, others are causing debates in the media and in society. These clashes need to be crystalized and redefined in order to find new power balances.

Citizenship

With 'dignity' as one of the central catchphrases during the Tunisian uprisings, the demonstrations have generated new debates and a revaluation of the concept of citizenship. The burst of civic energy in 2010 and 2011 have left a legacy: the possibility for citizens to engage more openly in public debates about their conceptions of citizenship and what kind of rights they aspire to. Citizens believe their right vis a vis the state to be insufficiently robust. Despite being deeply divided between secularism and Islam, Tunisia's different parties and social movements were able to reach compromises to underpin agreement over a new constitution. They had an obvious intention to ensure that the constitutional process was inclusive and participatory.

For many people the constitution represents a huge step forwards for Tunisian Society.

Paradoxically enough, none of the political parties involved managed to win the 2014 elections. Considering the current political tensions in Tunisia, and the internal problems within Nidaa Tounes, the constitution did not at all bridge the profound diversions in society.

One of the many possible factors is that political parties don't gain credibility by their words and intentions, but by their deeds and results (actions speak louder than words).

Secondly, the process was just not inclusive enough. It remained a project of the old institutional powers and did not defeat the deep fundamental distrust towards institutions and structures. Thirdly, and most relevant for now, it's incredibly hard to translate civil rights into binding and accepted laws and a common notion of citizenship.

In other words; rights to freedom are negotiable, although they are claimed to be universal.

The concept of citizenship is not only based on civil rights, but on moral values as well.

And it is not only an emancipatory mechanism, but also a strategy, for both, citizens and governments. In Europe, scholars are nowadays speaking about an

age of citizenship.

Politicians, policy makers and the public in both Europe and the Arab region, have reinvented the concept of citizenship and put it high on the agenda. Increasing global inequality combined with visibly reinforced value for communities and local identity, shrinking institutional legitimacy, migration movements and decreasing public resources has led to this revaluation.

Already in 2004, the PvdA has redefined the parties' mission statement as 'A decent life'.
So in a way one could say the Arab spring started in Amsterdam.
The Dutch government has introduced the participation society and the 'do democracy' to motivate citizens to take local initiatives and responsibility for their environment.

In Tunisia the government is using different terms but tries the same, with the aim of creating another narrative to counter violent extremism or finding a way to improve the quality of school accommodation in poor neighbourhoods.
For social movements, citizenship is a strategy to claim civil rights as freedom of religion or freedom of speech. Muslim women, for example are basing their right to wear a hijab on the freedom of religion.

Citizenship as a moral value or common identity occurs in sociological research, programs of political parties and local welfare institutions.
The challenge here is to find a new definition in which the different dimensions are integrated.
This might be one of the biggest tasks in the current polarized societies with different interests. In order to overcome the obstacles, governments in both Tunisia and the Netherlands have to ensure the equality of people before the state as a basic condition.

Declining institutional legitimacy and new forms of social action social
The second clash is about strategies to build societies. Almost all over the world we are witnessing a decreasing faith in formal 'old' institutions and political figures.

Recently in both Spain and Taiwan totally new parties and social coalitions have been able to win the elections and gain trust. In Tunisia, during the very recent protest in Kasserine, some political parties tried to exploit the situation, but the

results were limited. The 2011 events have brought new forms of social action to the forefront, with many crediting social media with facilitating the revolts that have taken place. The protests are characterized as spontaneous, without hierarchical structures and open to all, in contrast with the well-organized and prepared demonstrations of labour or civil rights movements we were familiar with.

In September and October 2011 the Occupy movement, starting in New York, was partly inspired by the protests of the Arab spring. To a certain extent, these forms cannot be seen in isolation from current developments in present day globalizing societies, in which the importance of 'old' institutional structures is declining and contested. Traditional movements like the labour movement all over the world are struggling with legitimacy, credibility and appeal.

Despite playing a major role and sometimes even being the leaders of protests and uprisings, youth generally hold less power in any political system than adults or elders. Moreover- the way in which these movements emerged was through widespread, decentralized grassroots participation. Thus, while the old institutions are struggling to survive, new social actors are facing barriers to gain the influence they aspire.

Victimization and heroes

Thirdly, I turn to the notion of victimization and heroism. My favourite subject although it's pretty vague and most of the time hard to explain. But I am a strong believer in a revaluation of victimization and take every change I can get.

In contemporary societies, where the belief in predetermination is replaced by a value of autonomy and free choice, the way heroism and victimisation defined in public opinion, media and policy has become extremely important. When one can't fall back on destiny, victimisation is very easily associated with individual failure. Recognized (legitimate) victimisation has become scarce, but even more important. Something which can be illustrated by political tensions between left wing parties in Tunisia and the controversies about the reconciliation law. The law was proposed by the Tunisian government to boost the national economy. In practise, the law would require former state employees to pay back money they embezzled from public funds or obtained through questionable loans. In return, the law would grant them an amnesty for their crimes. Well, this proposal achieved a lot, but one can hardly call it reconciliation.

On September 12, opposition politicians, activists, and citizens took to the streets of downtown Tunis to protest the draft law.
In exactly the same period, the Netherlands was absorbed by a debate about 'Zwarte Piet'. A debate I never manage to explain to foreigners. And one of Donald Trumps biggest mistakes was his attack on John McCain for being shot down while serving as a navy pilot during the Vietnam war. I can make a more of less endless list of examples, but I guess I have made my point. The question is what's needed to share our compassion and recognition more equally?

Social inheritance
On this point, there is a strong link to the fourth clash I analysed still overshadowing societies: namely social inheritance or just colonialism.

In spite of years of bloody wars, the consequences of which should not be underestimated, the inheritance of the colonial past is still very present. In Morocco and Tunisia for example, basic institutional systems like the law- and education systems are still based on French structures and French is the second language, sometimes even the first language. For the previous generations, being a part of France brought substantial advantages such as the possibility to study and work in French, while later generations with the ambition to study abroad are having a lot of obstacles such as incredibly complicated visa procedures. They lack the opportunities their parents had. For them, the French inheritance is a barrier to develop English skills and to access the Anglo Saxon education system and labour market.

The former colonialists themselves are seeking a comprehensive relationship with their former colonies, meaning a balance between maintaining their economical and geopolitical interests and respecting the independence and the will of the people. This struggle is at least partly an explanation for the difficulties in finding 'the right' united approach within the European Union during the uprisings.

Economy
I will end with the topic that draws the most attention at the moment: the economy. The year 2015, even if it marked the official crowning of democracy in Tunisia and the end of the political transition, was also that of Tunisia's harshest economic crisis. The country's economy is linked to that of the European Union and Libya. As the crisis in Europe is exacerbating, and as Libya is collapsing and its oil production decreasing, Tunisia suffocated. Moreover, due to insecurity and

regional instability, local and foreign investors preferred to look elsewhere, mainly Morocco and the United Arab Emirates. The economies have been unable to create jobs matching the demographic growth, leading to massive unemployment, especially young and female unemployment. Creating economic growth won't be enough to bury the economic problems. Ensuring equal sharing of the benefits is even more important. The situation in marginalized areas due to years of neglect is very worrying. It's not a coincidence the uprisings in 2010 and 2016 started outside Tunis. On this point, a new parallel comes in.

The changing political landscape in Europe as seen in the rise of populist political parties is attributed to the same contrasts between affluent and impoverished areas.

Time for a conclusion. But how? I know I have raised more questions than I have answered. Tunisia is not the way nor an exception and therefore it's very worthwhile to focus on a common future.

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