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### **Fech Nestannev and Tunisia's unfinished revolution**

Since the beginning of the year, social tensions increased swiftly in Tunisia, renewing concerns for the stability of the country. Protests against austerity measures included in the 2018 state budget (taking effect on the 1<sup>st</sup> January), erupted in Tunisia's interior regions as well as in the Sahel area, including the capital Tunis. Disruptions and clashes between demonstrators and security forces were recorded, among others, in Béja, Ben Arous, Bizerte, Gafsa, Jilma, Korba, Kelibia, Kebili, Menzel Bourguiba, Nabeul, Sidi Bouzid, Siliana, Sfax, Sousse and Zarzouna [*Les affrontements reprennent entre manifestants and force de l'ordre dans plusieurs régions pour la deuxième nuit consecutive*, Huffington Post Tunisie, 9 January 2018]. In Tebourba, 40km west of Tunis, one man died and five others were injured during demonstrations, while a Jewish school was attacked in the island of Djerba, with some damage but no injuries.

The demonstrations raised doubts about the new democratic institutions' resilience to the new wave of unrest. By 12<sup>th</sup> January about 800 people were arrested and the harsh reaction of the government reminded demonstrators of the old bad habits of Ben Ali's regime. The protests, which can also be considered evidence of the successful democratic transition, had already occurred in the country in recent years: last May unrest in the Tataouine governorate forced President Beji Caid Essebsi to deploy the army in order to protect Tunisia's critical infrastructures and industries [<http://www.natofoundation.org/maghreb/maghreb-may-2017/>]; while protests against unemployment and lack of economic opportunities in Kasserine in January 2016 represented the first strong warning to authorities, urging them to address the economic and financial crisis affecting the country.

### **What are the Tunisians waiting for?**

However, the *Fech Nestannev?* (What are we waiting for?) campaign represents a new element in this tumultuous phase of Tunisia's history. Describing itself as a horizontal movement without leadership, the campaign is neither a party nor an association and includes activists, bloggers, members of opposition

parties and unionists [Perrine Massy, *Manifestations en Tunisie: qui est derrière la campagne "Fech Nestannen"?*, Radio France Internationale, 12 January 2018]. Most of the militants were part of the *Manich Msameh* (I will not forgive) movement that opposed the economic reconciliation law approved last September. Both movements confirm Tunisia's vibrant and participative social fabric and highlight the social movements' relevant role in the political dynamics of the country.

The fact that *Fech Nestannen* was established on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2018, the anniversary of Tunisia's bread riots in 1984, is also indicative of the movement's specific aims and aspirations: the abrogation of the 2018 budget law and the end of the austerity measures in Tunisia. In this context, drawing a parallel between the 2011 revolution and the current phase of unrest could be misleading. The demonstrations that took place in January in Tunisia are not aiming at overthrowing the current regime, but are a sign of the lack of economic opportunities for the Tunisian people, of which the unrest in Kasserine in 2016 and the protests in Tataouine in 2017 were manifest symptoms.

### **The urgency of an economic transition**

Despite having been praised as the sole success story of the Arab Spring, Tunisia is still at crossroads. The political transition from Ben Ali to the new democratic institutions has not been associated with an economic transition, which would have provided Tunisian with job opportunities and well-being. The 2018 budget law, approved by the *Assemblée des Représentants du peuple* (ARP, the Tunisian parliament) last December with a wide majority of votes, raised the price of fuel and of other items, such as cars, phone calls, Internet usage and economic accommodations [Sylvain Vidzraku, *Tunisie: malgré des réticences, les parlementaires adoptent la loi de finances 2018*, La Tribune Afrique, 11 December 2017].

The austerity measures were the result of the critical state of most of the country's macroeconomic indicators: according to a statement issued by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) last December, public debt reached 70% of the GDP by, while the current deficit already reached double digits, the international reserves of the Central Bank of Tunisia fell considerably and the inflation rate was over 6% [IMF concludes the 2017 Article IV consultation and announces staff-level agreement for the completion of second review of Tunisia's extended fund facility, IMF, 13 December 2017]. The IMF mission considered the government's target of 5% GDP growth in 2018 as an ambitious goal, encouraging the Tunisian government to take advantage of the window of opportunity offered by the weak economic recovery (+2% in 2017).

### **A delicate balance between competing views**

IMF's role in Tunisia's current economic conjuncture must not be underestimated. In 2016 the economic institution approved a four-year US\$2,9 billion loan for Tunisia, but froze the second tranche in February 2017 after the government failed to implement the agreed reforms, such as reducing the public sector wage bill (which represents 14% of the GDP, among the highest percentages in the world).

While some observers consider relevant Tunisian stakeholders (such as the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* – UGTT) as responsible for slowing down the much needed reforms [*Tunisia's Nobel prize-winning trade unions are holding the country back*, The Economist, 14 December 2017], others believe that the austerity measures included in the state budget and promoted by international organisations brought Tunisia to the brink [Jihen Chandoul, *The IMF has choked Tunisia. No wonder the people are protesting*, The Guardian, 17 January 2018]. The delicate balance between these two competing and compelling views will not only influence the current political game approaching the municipal, general and presidential elections, but will also determine on Tunisia's political trajectory after the revolution.

**Umberto Profazio** – *Holds a PhD in History of International Relations from the University of Rome Sapienza. He is ACD Analyst for the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London and a Security Analyst for a consultancy firm based in the United Kingdom.*