

The countries that make up the Maghreb region of North Africa – Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya – are defined as much by the broad desert expanses of the Sahara and the Atlas Mountains as they are by the waters of the Mediterranean. Wedged between the coastline of the southern Mediterranean and an ocean of sand, the populations of the Maghreb have a long history of interaction with Southern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and the broader Middle East. Current challenges to political stability, regional militancy, changes in energy production and in the economy – given their proximity to Europe and to former European colonial holdings in Africa, and the continued economic and security relationships between these regions, makes events in the Maghreb resonate in regional and Western capitals, says Ambassador García Muñoz. “Six years after the ‘Liberty and Dignity Revolution’ in Tunisia, the threats to the country are: first, to improve the economy to meet the expectations of the population regarding development, jobs, healthcare, transportation, education and so on, because the government has still not improved the welfare and the standard of living of a great mass of its citizens. And second, corruption that is corroding Tunisia’s democratic achievements. Of the claims of the population during the revolution, one ‘liberty’ was achieved through the political transition and the constitution. Yet the other ‘dignity’ is the biggest challenge it is encountering because in many ways the Government is acting as if nothing has happened after 2011. This situation makes that the fraught economic and political environment is in danger. At the root of all this is the corruption that is pervading the whole Tunisian system of governance.

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It can be said that corruption is a destabilizing force in Tunisia, infecting all levels of its economy, security, and political system. Once tightly controlled under former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, corruption has now become endemic, with everyday citizens engaging in and benefitting from corrupt practices.

The impact of corruption in the economy, according to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, is that it has become a major obstacle to achieve sustainable economic growth and equitable development and is hindering social development in the interior and south and deterring investment by foreign and domestic investors.

It also has political implications since there is an erosion of trust between citizens and their government, besides a decline of public services. Among young Tunisians this lack of confidence in the proper authorities is the reason of disappointment of university graduates less than 35 years, who find that their efforts to graduate are useless when they realize that jobs go to less qualified persons through bribery. Their demonstrations and protests, if they continue, are the perfect fuel for extremist recruitment and they might destabilize the Tunisian democratic transition. Extremist groups are growing with youths disenchanted with the political system and the bad economic situation.

Another damaging effect of corruption is its security implications. Bribery is allowing a flow of weapons, drugs, and persons in the Tunisian frontiers due to lax border control and lack of authority of the central government mainly along the Tunisian border with Libya, where smugglers are expanding their business taking advantage of the underdevelopment of that region. The porous frontier with Libya allows Tunisians to cross over for training with the IS or travel to Syria and Iraq. The outcome is a spread of terrorism, not only on Tunisian soil but also in neighbouring countries.

Despite that Prime Minister Chahed came to power in August 2016 with the goal of fighting corruption, and the President of the Republic, Essebsi, has also declared that it is also one of his priorities, this is not happening, due to the fact that up to now government mechanisms to address corruption are failing. This has led to a mistrust and lack of confidence in the will of the executive to enforce the existing legislation to fight corruption.

The growing feeling that the political parties and the authorities are not fulfilling the hopes of the Tunisian people of improving the present situation has received a new blow with the postponement of local elections that is considered as a lack of democracy at high levels of the republic. They were expected to divert power away from the central government and hand it over to regional authorities and local councils with the aim of bringing greater local development and therefore to address the dire economic conditions of Tunisia restive interior. The outcome is that Tunisians, once again, are disappointed and angry at the lack of response of all political parties to find solutions to the daily problems they are encountering.

The main worry of President Essebsi is to reinforce his and his party position in the government and in the administration. He considers that the Presidency has too "limited" a role in the Tunisian semi-parliamentarian system and he has indicated it is time to amend the constitution to give more power to the executive. But Essebsi is being accused by the civil society of nepotism and of trying to re-establish the old regime by appointing ministers in the last cabinet reshuffle of September 11th who served under the dictatorship of the ousted Ben Ali. This move could mean that the President of the Republic is attempting to increase the power of his party, Nidaa Tunis, to keep its influence after the loss of the parliamentary majority, because as an aftermath of its internal divisions it only has now 58 seats instead the 85 they had in 2014. These figures make the Islamist Ennahda party the leading one in parliament with 68 seats. Ennahda is allowing the functioning of the secular government issued from the compromise of 2014 between the two parties. But if they form a government, given their majority in Parliament, it could be the return of Islamism to the economic and political scenario. It can be said that Tunisians have become sceptical "not to say fed up - with democracy and the ability of the political establishment to rescue the country after the fall of dictatorship.

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