

Rached Ghannouchi on Tunisia's Democratic Transition

I am delighted to talk to you about the Tunisian experience and the Tunisian model which has proven to the whole world that democracy is a dream that can be realised in the Muslim world and around the whole world, as we are seeing in various regions, despite the significant regression in the Arab Spring countries over the last few months.

The Tunisian experience has proven to those fearful of the Arab Spring turning into a fundamentalist winter that encouraging military coups is not the solution and that it only leads to chaos and destruction, in contrast to the freedom enjoyed by the Tunisian people who have bravely defended their revolution and their democratic transition, standing against terrorists and those who plotted to bring about political chaos in order to abort the revolution.

The Tunisian experience has proven that the cost of encouraging coups and giving up on the Arab Spring is much greater than showing patience while nations find their own solutions for their internal crises and disputes, which are often caused by a lack of experience on the part of the political elite and a need for more time to be accustomed to democratic practice after decades of despotism.

The Tunisian experience has proven, to those doubting the intentions of Islamists, that Islam and democracy are compatible and that victims of decades of repression, marginalization and exclusion are not carrying hatred or the desire for revenge, but rather an enlightened modernist civil project, as embodied in the new Tunisian Constitution which has guaranteed the widest possible consensus, as it has been adopted by 200 out of 217 members of the National Constituent Assembly.

Despotic regimes deposed by the revolution justified their repression of Islamists as a necessity of the war on obscurantists, for the protection of democracy in the face of theocracy, and of global security against terrorism and extremism, and similar slogans used to justify violations, the killing of hundreds under torture, the imprisonment of tens of thousands and the banning of all freedoms.

Tunisia has now demonstrated the false nature of those claims, and that the real danger threatening democracy, security and stability, is dictatorship, corruption and the monopolization of power.

Today, Tunisia is saying to the world, to freedom-lovers, that there is no dichotomy between Islam and democracy, and that Islamists stand at the forefront of those defending the right to difference, cultural diversity, political pluralism, freedom of conscience, women's rights, and all values establishing a free, just, prosperous society.

The success of the Tunisian experience, ladies and gentlemen, was not spontaneous, nor did it come as a surprise to those observing the Tunisian process from its early moments, the path we had chosen before the elections of 23 October 2011 and afterwards

Once we won the elections, our Party was the first to call for national unity and avoiding monopolization of power, calling for co-existence and cooperation between secularists and islamists. The Troika coalition between Ennahdha and two secular parties was a clear proof of our conviction that Tunisia can only be governed through consensus, and that transitions cannot be managed by the logic of majority versus minority.

Whether in government or the Assembly, ladies and gentlemen, Ennahdha committed itself to the same consensual approach, putting the national interest above partisan interests, happily giving concessions in order to accelerate the writing of the Constitution and protect social cohesion and national unity, until we reached the greatest sacrifice, which is conceding the government in order to end a political crisis which threatened the revolution or rather the country as a whole.

Many had repeatedly insisted that Ennahdha would never concede power, even if it were to lose the coming elections, and that democracy for islamists only means reaching power, monopolizing it and clinging to it.

Such claims pained us, but at the same time encouraged us to prove to our partners, to our people and to the world, that they were all unfounded fears in Tunisia, and that Ennahdha Party is a mature political party that is profoundly committed to democracy, which has learnt from the errors of other governing parties, secular and islamist, around the world.

Today, no one can doubt our democratic conviction, our political realism or our civil commitments.

No one can claim that Ennahdha was forced out of power, or as a tactical maneuver, for a number of reasons, most importantly:

First, the fact that our departure from government was part of a complete process in which we were committed to national consensus, both in governance and the writing of the Constitution. Our vision was clear, namely that the aim of being in power in the second transitional phase was the adoption of the Constitution and leading the country to the second elections, both of which require broad consensus and providing a climate of national unity. We refused that the Tunisian Constitution be the Constitution of a majority imposed on a minority, and we appreciated the demands of the opposition that the elections be held under an independent government. We dealt with all political crises following the same logic. Following the assassination of martyr Belaid, we accepted the “neutralization” of key ministries and Ennahdha conceded a number of other ministries to be taken over by technocrats. Our aim was the maintenance of the Constituent Assembly in order for it to continue its work on the Constitution, and not remaining in power for the sake of power.

Secondly, we have rejected ideological polarisation, and attempts at solving political differences in the street eventough our street we believe is the bigger. We refused to divide Tunisians, and I was keen to open communication channels with opposition leaders, to prevent rupture, and I signed the Quartet road map, because we were fully

aware that the logic of conflict and confrontation will not resolve problems, and that Ennahdha, as the largest party in the country, is required to give the greater concessions to protect the revolution and the democratic transition process.

Thirdly, that Ennahdha's departure from the government followed the success of the national dialogue, and not was the result of pressure or failure to address the crisis. We agreed to implement the road map in the framework of concurrence of the three processes of the roadmap – that is the resignation of Laaraedh's government following agreement on the new Prime Minister, the adoption of the Constitution and the election of the Election Commission. Thus the day of the adoption of the Constitution was a national celebration and a historic moment that cannot be erased from Tunisia's history. Likewise, Laarayedh's resignation was a lesson of peaceful alternation of power and of Islamist respect of democratic rules.

Tunisians went out on 23 October 2011 to elect a Constituent Assembly whose principal task is writing a new constitution, and that is the historic task for which the people can hold us accountable. They will hold us accountable for the completion of the Constitution, as well as its content: was it a constitution setting the foundations for a modern democratic state that respects the identity of the Tunisian people, or a constitution imposing the majority's vision on the minority?

To the right of Ennahdha, many pushed to make the Constitution more conservative; and to the left of moderate secular forces, radical secularists pushed for a constitution that contradicts the Tunisian people's identity. The result, however, was the victory of the middle, which we consider to be the fruit of an important, but difficult, co-existence between islamists and secularists in power.

The victory of the middle path is what will make of the constitution the link that unites all Tunisians and will protect our country from being pushed to the right or left, which is what Tunisia needs over the coming decades.

Thus, the Tunisian Constitution is based on a vision focused on Tunisia's future, because we do not want a text that establishes monopolization and exclusion, and the culture of revenge and retribution by putting in place a political system tilted in favour of one side at the expense of another, because today's victor is tomorrow's loser, and such is the problem of short-sighted politics. We wanted a constitution for all Tunisians where their fundamental freedoms and rights are protected on the basis of equality and citizenship.

Our constitution represents the dream of the great reformers of the 19th century, who tried to combine the values of Islam and the values of modernity, and who believed that Islam and the universal values and Islam and democracy are compatible.

These, ladies and gentlemen, are the characteristics of the Tunisian experience, which can be summarized in two words: national consensus. This phrase gave Tunisia the constitution of the revolution, took the country out of a stifling crisis, and is leading it, God-willing, towards elections. consensus means that everyone is a winner, there are no losers.

We have achieved this national consensus with the help of four civil society organisations which presented an initiative for national dialogue when politicians failed to find agreements. During six long months of the political crisis, 22 different parties were involved in the national dialogue where everyone contributed with ideas and with concessions to find a way out of the crisis. The Businessmen association united with the Labour Union, in an unprecedented and unusual way, in order to lead the national consensus. And I met the president of Nidaa Tounes movement, Mr Beji Kaied-Essebsi, despite the profound differences between our two parties; Ennahdha Assembly bloc and other blocs overcame their differences which could have held up the Constitution. All that means that consensus is possible and that it is the only solution for overcoming disputes and establishing a stable democracy that benefits from one of Tunisia's most important characteristics, that is the neutrality of the military institution and its refusal to play any political role that contravenes its national duty.

Consensus has triumphed in Tunisia, and I believe that the political elite is committed to a great extent to supporting the government of Mr Mehdi Ben Jemaa, which enjoys the support of the Tunisian people. However, the path ahead is still long, and forces wishing to undermine the revolution and the democratic transition in our country have not despaired of trying to derail the process.

Ladies and gentlemen, our country is united in the face of terrorism, and the political elite is conscious, to a great extent, that there is no justification for a return to the state of tension and confrontation. All the sides are aware of the importance of contributing to support the atmosphere of cooperation and calm in order to facilitate holding elections in the best possible conditions.

Of course the economic situation is very important for ensuring stability in the country, and we hope that the national consensus achieved in Tunisia will encourage Tunisia's friends around the world to support the government economically and financially and encourage international institutions and business-people to support our new democracy which remains the only shining candle of the Arab Spring.

Tunisia has turned over a difficult page of its political history, praise be to God. It has been placed on the path of democracy, and has given the world the gift of the first constitution of the Arab Spring revolutions, this stressing the end of the era of "the Arab exception" in the field of democracy. Arabs and Muslims are able to build free democratic systems, able to practice peaceful alternation of power, and able to write constitutions that guarantee freedom of conscience and freedom of difference, guarantee women's rights, the rights of minorities, protection of the environment, sustainable development, and guarantee justice.

We believe that this spirit of national consensus is still needed after the next elections. we believe that the main trends and parties in the country should contribute to the shaping of the Tunisia of tomorrow. Tunisia's ship should set sail with all its people on board.

We believe that our party has very good chances in the next elections. however, we also believe that the country cannot be ruled by one party or one trend only. During

transitional periods, 51% majority is not enough to have a stable government and a stable democracy. We believe that the country will need a coalition government that brings together the main parties in the country in order to achieve stability and strengthen democracy and its institutions.

That is the Tunisian lesson, a lesson by a country that is small in its geographic size, modest in its natural resources, but great in its people enamoured with freedom, democracy and peace.