



AS/Pol/Inf (2017) 10

5 April 2017

Apdocinf10_17

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

Statement by

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**Rapporteur of the Committee on:
*The political transition in Tunisia***

**on the occasion of his fact-finding visit to Tunis, Tunisia
27-30 March 2017**

Tunis, 30 March 2017

During my fact-finding mission in Tunisia as Rapporteur of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I have been told on several occasions that Tunisians do not need another trophy for democracy. Why? Because foreign officials or politicians offer one more trophy each time they visit Tunisia, stating how well the Tunisians managed to transform their Revolution into a successful democratic process. I believe that Tunisian people deserve something more concrete, even though I also think that Tunisia is a rare and exemplary success story, not only for Northern African countries, not only for the Arab world, but for every country that wants to develop democratic institutions in a passionate and peaceful manner.

It is a success story. Democracy is essential but it does not feed your belly. All the persons I met, parliamentarians, ministers, representatives from civil society, representatives of the international community, all said the same thing: economic and social conditions have to improve. This is a necessity. Without achieving economic growth and social justice, I fear that political transition towards democracy will become erratic. On this issue, the Council of Europe can do little. The European Union can and should do much more. Why? In the name of solidarity, of course. But also for its own interest: if it does not do more, the cost of a possible Tunisian setback for European member States will be much higher than the investment they should pay today. In terms of democratic disenchantment for the region and the Arab countries, the cost linked to security and immigration will be huge.

Tunisia is not only a neighbouring country to Europe. Tunisia is the neighbour next door who is on the front line, struggling against terrorism and resisting temptations to go back to previous practices. Security forces seem to be effective in fighting terrorism, but human rights should remain an integral part of the picture.

I have been impressed by the commitment of the ministers and parliamentarians I have met to remain fully engaged in the dynamic reform process. Defending democracy, establishing the rule of law and promoting human rights is, however, work in progress, put to the test on a daily basis. This means that everything cannot be delivered immediately. But at the same time it is normal to be impatient and, maybe, a little tired to see that all expectations are not met right away.

Being impatient may even be a good thing, as it maintains high on the governmental agenda the main economic, social and human rights challenges. I met with representatives from civil society and independent authorities. I have heard them. I have heard their satisfaction on several issues. I have heard their concerns too. But above all, I have heard them say that they feel the need to be vigilant. That is very reassuring because however deep the commitment of the political institutions to the establishment of the rule of law is, democracy is about checks and balances. It is part of the process that civil society and Independent Authorities blow the whistle when red lines are about to be crossed. It is part of the process that they hold their ground. Democracy is also about firm debate and making the others hear your voice.

On this specific issue, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council could be of help, if Tunisian people want it. At the intergovernmental level, co-operation between the Council of Europe and Tunisia is more than satisfactory: Tunisia is using the GRECO methodology to fight corruption, the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) is taking part in the training of magistrates, the Venice Commission gives its opinion on draft laws each time it is asked to do so by Tunisian authorities, the protection of children is high on the agenda thanks to the interest shown by Tunisia for the Lanzarote Convention. My wish is to put parliamentary co-operation at the same level through the partnership for democracy. This status would allow Tunisian parliamentarians to be heard, within the Committees of the Assembly and during our plenary sessions, not only on Tunisian matters but on all the topics 47 national delegations are discussing. What better way is there to have your voice heard by others, to have your voice heard by European neighbours? The choice is in the hands of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People and I think they have now a genuine picture of what this partnership is about.

To conclude, I would say that achieving democracy is a very hard, but at the same time a very promising task. It is the same for all of the member States of the Council of Europe. Whatever obstacles you may encounter, whatever disappointments you may have, it is a task that you should never give up.