Democratic transition in Tunisia: A rewarding path

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Tunisia now stands at the crossroads with great assets and large opportunities but also facing numerous challenges. Tunisia indeed has several assets to make the democratic transition a success: a high literacy rate, a developed middle class, the very advanced status of women and a high level of education and hard workers.

The political challenge which Tunisia is now facing is that the democratic transition has to succeed. The economic challenge is to avoid the vicious circle of poverty and rising unemployment which would fuel discontent and disappointment. Ultimately, the transition will only be successful if economic progress occurs.

Tunisia has started its difficult journey towards democracy. The road looks long and the process sometimes painful as transitions are never perfect and are difficult and often disappointingly slow processes.

Security has been restored and efforts are being deployed in order to keep a balance between the management of social expectations, on the one hand, and macro-economic and budget stability, on the other, not to mention the steps to solve unemployment, re-energize the economy, narrow regional disparities and reduce poverty.

While striving to manage a score of internal economic and social difficulties, last year we had to confront another problem coming from our South. From the outset, the Government of Tunisia adopted an open-door policy and allowed all those fleeing death in Libya to enter the country. Since the start of the uprising, Tunisia has hosted more than 900,000 refugees and thousands of Libyan brothers were, and some still are, being hosted by Tunisians who share their homes. In addition, many Tunisians who went to Libya to make a modest living were forced to flee leaving everything behind, thus adding to some 700,000 unemployed persons in my country.

In this context, I should like to mention the exemplary role played by the Tunisian Republican Armed Forces in ensuring the continuity of the State and its institutions, the protection of citizens, the efficient management of the massive flow of refugees over our southern borders, the stability and integrity of the country, and the success of the electoral process within the framework of the basic rules governing the democratic control of the armed forces.

Since January, there have been advances in areas related to freedom of expression and freedom of association, accountability and political reform,

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including the establishment of an Independent Higher Authority for Elections which organized, supervised and monitored the entire electoral process of the election of the Constituent Assembly held on 23 October. Those elections were the crowning glory of the Tunisian Revolution process which opened up wider prospects for the different political trends to enter the political race.

In this regard, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly deployed throughout the country its observation teams consisting of 90 parliamentarians, and was part of an instrumental solidarity move by the international community at a particularly important moment in the history of Tunisia.

The first transparent and democratic election in Tunisia brought about the first freely elected coalition Government.

The National Constituent Assembly (NCA) started drafting the new Constitution in consultation with political trends and components of civil society. Democracy, fundamental freedom and human rights are the main pillars of the Government action. In this regard, during her visit to Tunisia last July, Ms Navi Pillay, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, signed a "host country agreement", and opened, at the request of the Government, the first UN human rights office in a North African country bordering the Mediterranean. The UNHCHR deployed international human rights officers to Tunisia to follow up the recommendations made by senior experts after their assessment mission in early February 2011.

The UNHCHR is also providing advice on the reform of the national Human Rights Institution, in conformity with the international standards known as the Paris Principles. It is also working with the Ministry of Justice and holding a series of consultations with judges to strengthen judicial independence and has concluded an agreement with the Ministry of the Interior on a programme of human rights capacity-building in the security sector, including the training of police officers.

Moreover, in order to confirm its commitment that no future serious violations of human rights will take place with impunity, Tunisia has ratified four important treaties: the first Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances. Tunisia also became the 116th state to ratify the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court.

The Government has also extended a standing invitation to all special procedures of the Human Rights Council. The Special Rapporteur on torture and the Special Rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism have already conducted missions during last May.

Recently, Tunisia hosted the meetings of the Initiative of the Community of Democracies Group, which aims to support the democratic transition in my country. The meetings were attended by senior officials representing many friendly countries, including the Netherlands and the Slovak Republic, which chaired the working group, the United States of...