

Moncef Marzouki's balancing act

PROFILE OF MONCEF MARZOUKI

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TUNISIA

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Elected by Tunisia's Parliament in October 2011 as interim President, Moucef Marzouki is seen as providing balance to a political system dominated by the Islamic Ennahda Party: his election came about as a result of power-sharing agreement between Ennahda and two smaller, secular parties.

A lightning rod for opposition to the former regime of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, Mr Marzouki has won respect internationally and at home for his defence of human rights over the last two decades, which saw him imprisoned and forced into exile. The 67-year-old only returned home after Ben Ali was toppled in January 2011 by a popular uprising that ushered in the Arab Spring.

Born in Grombalia, a small town some 25 miles southwest of Tunis, Mr Marzouki studied medicine, neurology, and public health at the University of Strasbourg. After graduating, he returned home to teach medicine at the University of Sousse, and soon became involved in defending civil liberties. In 1980, he joined the Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights and was unanimously elected its head nine years later.

This soon brought him into conflict with Ben Ali: in the early 1990s, the regime staged several show trials, executing leaders of the growing Islamist movement. Mr Marzouki confronted the president, arguing that he should adhere to the rule of law.

In 1994, he applied to contest presidential elections – a largely symbolic gesture – and was jailed and stripped of his passport. He then went into exile in France, from where he carried on his fight for democracy.

While a student, Mr Marzouki visited India to study Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent protest methods, which have influenced his approach to bringing about political change.

He has written that particularly after the September 11th attacks, Arab dissidents in exile, and those working underground at home soon realised that they

couldn't overthrow dictatorships through guns, "because you will be treated as terrorists. All that was left for us was civil resistance." He outlined his arguments in *Dictators on Watch: A Democratic Path for the Arab World*.

During his exile in France Mr Marzouki and other secular Arab dissidents discussed how to apply civil disobedience against the dictatorships in their home countries. He says that he grew frustrated with the approach of US and European leaders of trying to persuade Arab authoritarians to voluntarily reform their police states. Mr Marzouki says he stopped believing in gradual reform in the 1980s, saying: "A dictatorship is a dictatorship, and it is not something you can reform."

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Mr Marzouki insists that the revolutions across the Arab world are not about establishing Shariah law, but are about social justice and democracy.

He points out that extremists advocating violence are a very small minority in Tunisia and are extremely unpopular among the religious as well as the secular, saying: "The democratisation of Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries has definitively refuted the myth that democracy and Islam are incompatible." What matters most to Tunisians, he says, is "building new democratic institutions; creating jobs, and halting the exodus of Tunisians to Europe."

Describing his mandate as interim President as a "dangerous year", Mr Marzouki says that expectations are high and jobs are scarce following the revolution. He has also been focused on getting Tunisia onto a democratic path. Presidential and Parliamentary elections are to be held in 2013; meanwhile work continues to complete a new Constitution by January 14, in time to celebrate the country's second year of transition to democracy. **F**

