

Putting human lives first

INTERVIEW WITH HE MONCEF MARZOUKI

PRESIDENT OF THE TUNISIAN REPUBLIC



MONCEF MARZOUKI was the founder and leader of the centre-left party CPR (Congress For the Republic) until he became the fifth Tunisian President on December 12, 2011. He studied at the University of Strasbourg in France, after which he returned to Tunisia to teach medicine. He has occupied several key positions such as head of the Tunisian League of Human Rights and head of the National Committee for the Defence of Prisoners of Conscience.

What would you highlight as the main developments and accomplishments in Tunisia since the Revolution?

I have discovered that it is easy to have a revolution but the most difficult things begin in the days following it. We had to deal with the many problems of the past. We discovered that our political, judicial, security and educational systems were very badly damaged. And people expect you to work miracles. I would tell people 'no, we are not gods, we cannot do miracles, we need time; you cannot resolve the problems of more than half a century in just a one year term'. But I can say that in this one year term we have achieved a lot. We have had free elections for the first time in the history of Tunisia. Now we are writing a constitution. It will be a very good constitution which will set the roadmap for the next fair elections in June and develop a new framework for the entire state. We, of course, have a lot of social and economic problems; but who hasn't? I think all countries worldwide have their own problems. However, we are fortunate enough to have friends all over the world. Tunisia has no enemy. We have a good relationship with our neighbours, but also with Europe, the United States and the Gulf countries. Everybody

knows that if we do succeed with our democracy it will be a very good example for other countries. So we are well supported by many friends and we will do our best not to let them down.

What lessons can be learnt from the Tunisian experience for subsequent revolutions and other unstable environments in the region?

I believe that our choice to remain a relatively peaceful movement was important. I deeply regret that in Syria the revolution has turned into a civil war; but in Tunisia we demonstrated that we can change the system through peaceful means – and this is the first lesson. Secondly, our society is divided into two parts: one being deeply rooted in Islamic Arab heritage and the other being very westernised. Under dictatorship, the two parts were, I would say, in a sort of 'cold civil war'. But what we have proved in Tunisia is that we can have a coalition between moderate secularists and moderate Islamists and we can work together to unite our society and avoid confrontation. We have succeeded with this new combination, which is not very common in the Arab world. Elsewhere the secularists in charge oppress the other groups of society, who then revolt and, when in power, deny the rights of the



President Moncef Marzouki at the 5+5 Summit in Malta together with nine other Heads of State and various international observers

other groups of the society. This is what we are trying to avoid in Tunisia.

You have been awarded the Chatham House Prize for these achievements. What does this mean to you, and what does it represent for Tunisia?

It is a great honour, not only for me but for Tunisia. But also it is encouragement I believe the reason we got this prize – Sheikh Ghannouchi and myself – is that we are trying to avoid this, what I call the ‘cold civil war’, between the two groups of our society. So I think it is an encouragement, not only for us as leaders, but for this kind of policy and I hope it will encourage other countries to adopt similar policies. Otherwise it will be a continuing dictatorship of one part of the society against the other. We have to accept that we are both Muslim Arabs and we are also a modern population that honours the values of democracy and human rights in addition to our traditional values.

How has the Tunisian economy been faring since the Revolution in 2011?


After the revolution our economy suffered very badly, but now it is recovering because we have had change and tourism is growing again. The main problem we have is the Salafist groups, who are a very tiny minority but are very harmful to the image of Tunisia. This causes people outside of Tunisia to think of it as an unstable society, which is certainly not true. Tunisia is very stable. But this minority is extremely harmful because of the way the media projects it, so we were afraid that tourism would go down. But in fact last year we did have a good season, and now we are hopeful that as soon as we implement this new political framework, through the constitution and the elections, the country will be properly stabilised, after which we hope to have more investment from areas such as Europe and the Gulf region. Aside from tourism, we will be focusing on the energy sector, where we can provide Europe with electricity. We will develop a particular focus on solar energy.

What is your position on the current Syrian crisis?

I am not optimistic about the fate of the current regime, nor about the immediate repercussions for the Syrian people. In Tunisia we had just 300 fatalities and only 2,000 wounded, and even with this we are facing huge problems. For example, it is extremely costly to provide healthcare for the wounded and compensation for the families of the deceased. So imagine the

situation for the Syrian government, who have more than 30,000 people killed and more than 100,000 people wounded. Just imagine the cost of that. So I am thinking about the situation of the next government because I am in this position now, and I think it will be terrible for them. To add to this, militia groups will emerge due to resentment against the army and its violence against the civilian population. So this is why I’m thinking about keeping peace forces from Arab states, because they would be accepted more than western countries. Then I think the country would need a special fund. Very soon we will have to tackle the issue through international meetings on how to revive Syria. I’m afraid that they will have to face tough times after the end of this tragedy.

You recently attended the 5+5 Dialogue in Malta with other Western Mediterranean states. What was achieved at this summit?

Let us not forget that I am a human rights activist and so one of my main concerns is the refugee problem in the region, particularly in the area of illegal immigration. We have had so many young people dying in this area, and the problem has been exacerbated since the revolutions in the region. This was my first concern and when I went to the summit, I really wanted to stress this point. Yes, it is important to talk about political issues and economic issues; but I think human lives are also very important. So I asked for the setting up of a task force dealing specifically with this problem, and I got a positive answer from all of my counterparts. We hope to follow this up with a meeting in Tunis very soon. 

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Waqās Ahmed, Head of Special Projects at FIRST with Moncef Marzouki, President of the Tunisian Republic

