

## **What Tunisia tells us**

**IN COMMON WITH MOST OF MY READERS** I don't know very much about Tunisia. This week I've been scanning the press and trying to learn fast, getting my tongue stuck on unfamiliar names, and attempting to fathom the meaning of strange initials of strange parties, and even stranger acronyms. Of course, I have known where the country is for some time, I can point to it on a map with confidence, and I know that before the Roman Peace, Carthage glittered on its coast close by what is now the city of Tunis. I also know that Tunisia is a busy tourist destination where the combination of good weather, wonderful beaches, and lots of ancient historical sites have proved unmissable for tens of thousands of Europeans who come swooping in on charter flights to soak up the atmosphere of an exotic land in the familiar comfort of resort hotels, holiday lets, and luxury apartments in well-guarded self-catering complexes.

This is one of the first things that events in Tunisia tells us, that TV News rooms are more interested in the scary bus and taxi rides which English tourists fleeing the country had to take to the airport than in what is actually happening. Of course doughty reporters were filmed against a backdrop of rubble-strewn streets, looters, state security men on the loose, and burning buildings, but we learn very little about why any of this is happening. You can be sure that lots of people know, but for some reason, known only to our broadcasters, time is always too short for us to be told.

We also learn that Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, the dictator, appears to have learned very little about the autocracy business during his 23 years in power. If he had, he wouldn't have allowed members of his family to have their hands so blatantly in the till, to keep pet lions as symbols of their limitless power and authority, or to build

showy palaces with infinity pools and enormous marble terraces. Very private luxury, surreptitious theft, and discretion, should have been the watchword. But, hey, that would have been no fun at all.

Despite running a police state, Ben Ali seems to have learnt nothing at all from the fall of the Shah of Iran, who in 1979 also hesitated in the final hours of his reign, fluctuating between shooting dead unarmed citizens in the streets - firing live ammunition into mass demonstrations - and rapidly backtracking on television, promising reform and justice, and ordering the police to be better behaved. Ben Ali and the Shah would have better advised to behave like today's Muslim zealots in Tehran. The moral being, if we can call it that, when you start shooting your citizens in the streets, then you should continue to do so until the crowds disperse and "calm returns" to your towns and cities. Introduce reform if you must, but not until you have restored your authority with your iron fist.

This bloody logic is all very well in theory, but, in practice, when a regime is seriously unstable, when economic development is disrupting social life without improving it, then even tyrants sway towards hesitations, which often prove fatal to their regimes. Generals, judges, police commanders, ministers, loyal politicians, and the business elite, begin to fear for their futures as doubt in the wisdom of orders to shoot are rapidly followed by promises of reform, and expression of respect for the people you were murdering just the day before. It is then that the well-heeled cabals at the heart of the state begin to suggest that you might be happier in France or Saudi Arabia or the States. Then you check your bank sort codes and account numbers, and flee as rapidly as can be arranged to an undisclosed destination.

Those left behind, put soldiers on the streets, and attempt to stick the police state back together, with promises of a better future all around. This is where Tunisia is at the moment of writing. The ruling party of the dictatorship is still in power as it struggles simultaneously to keep revolution at bay, and broaden the political foundation of the state, by opening talks with opposition

leaders of many stripes. However, it remains unclear whether the ruling elite will be able to overcome the flight of Ben Ali to Saudi Arabia. We will see.

One thing is clear: that Tunisia, which was considered an economic success in the Maghreb, and the Middle East, is a wretched failure when compared to Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Portugal, or Israel. The country's per capita income, either by gross domestic product, or by measuring the purchasing power of the US dollar, is worse than Iran, Libya, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. Tunisia is a little ahead of Algeria, twice as well off as Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Morocco, and Iraq, and more than three times richer than Yemen.

With the exception of the Gulf States and Israel, the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa, are, by and large, poor, and, by most measures of human social development the countries of the region are a story of abject failure. Only Israel has a world-class economy and living standards comparable with the middle ranks of European countries. Even Saudi Arabia, which is often thought of as fabulously rich because of its preponderance of princes and oil wells, has a per capita income nine or ten thousand dollars less than Israel, and some eleven or twelve thousand dollars less than the UK.

This has meant that dictatorships or autocracies of one kind or another have spent the last fifty years or so attempting to compensate for their lack of development by state interventions of one kind or another, and, most importantly, by attempting to control the prices of basic foodstuffs: bread, pasta, cooking oil, salt, and so on. Consequently, in a situation in which buying food can often take up most, if not all, of a household's budget, these regimes are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in world food prices. Things are not going to improve any time soon.

Grain prices are reaching an all time high. Food prices are generally rising throughout the world. Some of the pressure is coming from improving living standards in fast developing countries, where the consumption of wheat, meat, eggs, and dairy products is rising fast,

some is caused by the growth in the amount of grain swallowed up by ethanol production, some is attributable to environmental degradation in relation to the depletion of aquifers and reductions in soil quality, and the remainder to disastrous weather events or climate change more broadly. In any event food prices are unlikely to start declining in the foreseeable future.

So things are looking increasingly bleak for the Middle East and the Maghreb as great masses of poor people are driven into collision with spectacularly corrupt and irresponsible rulers whose only plan appears to be police repression and state control of food prices. These are strategies that will be undermined by out-and-out desperation among the poverty stricken masses, and by the inefficiency of corrupt states, incapable of preventing the growth of black markets, which will, in turn, reduce the food supplies available at controlled prices as bakers, merchants, dealers, and petty officials of all sorts, divert state supplies for sale at inflated prices on the open market.

Every state across this vast region has specific problems and, I'm sure, particular strengths and potential for growth and development. However, they all have one thing in common, dictatorship. Israel *proper* is, of course, the region's only democracy, though the territories over which it rules in Judea and Samaria (which it has neither annexed or evacuated) are not. Lebanon's mangled democracy lives under threat of permanent extinction by forces loyal to Damascus or Tehran. Iraq's political institutions offer little promise of even-handed government or the application of the rule of law. The rest of the region is ruled without ambiguity by the police, the military, or by coalitions of traditional potentates steeped in the narrow-minded patriarchy of yesteryear.

Most of the secular oppositions are almost as discredited as the rulers whom they oppose, offering little in the way of leadership to their stricken peoples. Everywhere, Islamists of one sort or another promise a mixture of fairness and salvation if only everybody would abandon politics in return for the strictures and guidance of the *Holy Qur'an*. Of course, this does mean removing

half the population from full participation in economic life, as women are forced into seclusion behind veils and shuttered houses; it also means subjecting everybody else to archaic notions of morality and propriety, and it seems to entail the widespread murder of Christians and Jews, and the slaughter of Muslims who, for one reason or another, practice a form of Islam which is not approved by other branches of the faith.

Now some people like to blame all this mess on the Americans or on a combination of the United States and Israel. Bizarrely, Zionists and Americans are often arraigned as the single most important source of the problems and underdevelopment in a region extending from Morocco to Syria, and from Syria to Iran, through the Gulf, around Oman and back up the Red Sea.

Of course, there can be little doubt that over the years Britain, France, and Italy, as the powers most responsible for the designation of modern frontiers and the formation of these states, must take a share of the blame for the historical failure of the region. It is also true that the United States has been bereft of any seriously creative policies apart from propping up feudal potentates and bankrolling dictators.

The White House's change of heart following 9/11, proved to be as disastrous as all previous policies had been, as America followed the welcome destruction of Saddam Hussein with the positively barmy idea of imposing free market capitalism, complete with an idealised market-state, pasted, Potemkin style, over the looted ruins of Baathism in Baghdad.

Yet, without seeking to minimise any of this, it remains abundantly clear that the problems of the region are not primarily American imperialism, or a Zionist conspiracy, but the failure of local elites to build effective states; it is their failure to develop the social and physical infrastructure that has deprived their people of the development they need in order to be able to flourish. This is what Tunisia tells us. France committed many crimes against the Tunisian people; it most certainly distorted its demographic and cultural development. However, France was also responsible for a significant

degree of economic modernisation over the years of its colonial domination. More importantly yet, France has been gone since 1956. France has been gone for fifty-five years, years that have seen the transformation of many a colonial backwater, and many a devastated nation, into thriving capitalist economies.

No doubt the reasons for the failure of the economies of the Maghreb and the Middle East to develop are vastly more complicated than those offered here, but the bread riots in Algeria, the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia, and the more than 33m Egyptians who live on less than \$2 a day, cannot be laid at the door of the White House, or at the feet of those dastardly Zionists in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The responsibility for this vast misery lies squarely with the region's rulers and only their removal by people committed to the struggle to modernise their economic life will create the conditions for the growth of the rule of law and the deepening of democracy.