



Nobel Lecture

Nobel Lecture, December 10, 2015

by Hassine Abassi, Mohamed Fadhel Mahfoudh, Abdessatar Ben Moussa and Ouided Bouchamaoui, Tunisia.

*His Majesty,
Your Highnesses,
Respected members of the Nobel Committee,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

We, the National Dialogue Quartet—consisting of the Tunisian General Labour Union, the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts, the Tunisian National Bar Association and the Tunisian League for the Defence of Human Rights—are greatly honoured to be awarded the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize, which is the culmination of a long relentless struggle on the path of national liberation, construction of democracy and promoting universal values and principles. We are pleased to extend our sincere thanks and gratitude to the Nobel Peace Prize Committee and the Norwegian Parliament who, by giving us this award, have highlighted the Tunisian experience to the whole world. This will certainly give us more impetus to carry on our work for the benefit of our country.

This tribute is not only to us. It is indeed a tribute to all Tunisian political players who adopted an approach of collective agreement, and succeeded in putting the interests of their homeland and their people above their narrow partisan interests. It is a tribute to Tunisian women and Tunisian young people who revolted against discrimination and exclusion, and even challenged death in defending their civil rights and their right to freedom, dignity and a decent life. It is a tribute to thinkers, intellectuals, trade unionists, law professionals, civil society activists and our brave soldiers and security forces whose vigilance, sacrifices and contributions have shaped the exceptional Tunisian experience.

They were the safety valve against all attempts to blow up our modernist societal gains, and attempts to damage our civil State and the real merits targeted by our revolution.

*Your Majesties,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Before talking about the National Dialogue experience, let us emphasise that our euphoria and pride in this historic occasion should not veil our grief, sorrow and outrage about what has happened in many parts of the world. A few days ago, our capital Tunis and before that, Sousse, the Bardo Museum, Beirut, Paris, Sharm el-Sheikh and Bamako have witnessed barbaric and atrocious terrorist incidents in which hundreds of innocent people were killed. The feelings of compassion and sympathy cannot prevent the grief and agony of the families of victims and others who fell in other cities around the world.

The tribute paid by the international community to the Tunisian national dialogue process confirms indeed that we share the same universal values of human rights which underpin human rights and reject all forms of intellectual and ideological isolationism. Progress in confronting all threats and risks to us around the world requires more solidarity, the build-up of a lasting and fair partnership among the peoples of the world and a search for serious solutions to the problems which many countries are facing because of poverty. We are today in urgent need of a dialogue between civilisations and peaceful coexistence within the context of diversity and variation. We are today in urgent need to make the fight against terrorism an absolute priority, which means constant coordination and cooperation among all nations to drain out its resources and disconnect it from its incubator environment. Today, we need to accelerate the elimination of hot spots all over the world, and particularly to find a solution for the Palestinian cause and enable the Palestinian people to exercise self-determination on their own land and build their independent state.

This occasion is a tribute to a country with a long history and a civilisational legacy spanning more than 3,000 years, a country shaped over time by successive civilisations and characterised by an inherent belief in peace and moderation.

This historic occasion, which coincides with the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is a tribute to the spirit of an inspiring revolution that the Tunisians led five years ago to protect their legitimate rights, to defend their freedom and dignity, a revolution in which all Tunisians shouted with one voice, “The people want” . . . “The people want the right to liberty” . . . “The people want the right to dignity” . . . “The people want the right to work.”

These slogans did have a magical impact. They inspired various peoples to rise up and claim their legitimate rights, and express their rejection of autocracy, injustice and oppression.

*Your Majesties,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

On the 17th of December 2010, the Tunisian Revolution erupted against poverty and marginalisation, and against development options that established exclusion and injustice between different regions and different communities. Its slogans were to claim economic and social rights outlined in three main demands: Job Opportunity, Liberty and Social Justice. It was demonstrated in social movements and young people's sit-ins, which all demanded a solution to the problem of unemployment, and an elimination of marginalisation. They demanded the right to proper development, fair distribution of wealth and equality.

However, this uprising took an express and direct political turn after the escape of the hierarchy of power. It demanded the dissolution of all structures of the ruling party, suspension of the old Constitution of 1959 and the departure of the whole existing government. This situation left a great power vacuum that led the country into a serious crisis which could have had dire consequences. However, the established civil society—due to its deep roots in the community, its historic roles in the struggle for national independence and its unwavering support of the causes of its people—moved from the very first days to secure the fulfilment of the aims of the revolution. In order to steer the transitional process in a democratic and constitutional direction, the High Commission for Achieving the Goals of the Revolution was established. The High Commission brought together all political, civil and social views and the most prominent independent national leaders. This helped fill the vacuum successfully and paved the way for the Constituent Assembly Elections of 23 October 2011.

The start was rather frustrating, as the almost consensual political scene that the country witnessed before the Constituent Assembly Elections changed into a new reality overwhelmed by dangerous violations and practices that deepened the trend of political polarisation and created a lot of confusion and concern about the future of governance in the country. This resulted in intensified polarisation between political factions and the emergence of tension and alienation in the Community. So chaos and lawlessness dominated the scene, which encouraged undermining the prestige of the State and spurred the predominance of smuggling gangs, parallel trading barons, terrorist groups and religious extremism. This resulted in the assassination of human rights activist and political

martyr Mr Chokri Belaid on 6 February 2013, followed by the assassination of the National Constituent Assembly Member, the martyr Mr Mohammed Brahmi on 25 July of the same year, and resulted in the fall of many martyrs among the security forces and army soldiers. The Tunisian Citizen became confused because of the lack of security, the deterioration of social and economic conditions, and the dominance of chaos in several aspects of Tunisian life.

Because of this tense situation and the escalation of the people's uprising in Tunis and many Tunisian cities, and after disruption of the role of the Constituent Assembly when some opposition deputies suspended their participation, the National Dialogue Initiative was launched after our four institutions unanimously agreed to sponsor it. The political stakeholders agreed that they needed to move ahead, and accepted the invitation to sit at the dialogue table in order to achieve the necessary consensuses that would ensure the completion of the transitional process which already exceeded its deadlines. This is what actually happened when all groups and factions agreed to sign our Road Map.

Your Majesties,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Road Map included a series of consensual solutions for the contentious points. It stated the following:

1. Acceptance to form a technocratic government of professional experts headed by an independent national figure. The members of the government were not to run in the upcoming elections. Moreover, the existing government had to pledge to step down as soon as the new technocratic government was appointed.
2. The National Constituent Assembly was to resume its functions and determine its mandate and the ending of its proceeding.
3. Commencement of consultations on the independent figure who would be entrusted to form the government.
4. Agreement on a road map for completion of the transitional process that would set the timetable for the presidential and legislative elections. This timetable was to be announced to the general public after being signed by all parties. The road map agreement was to be issued under an act adopted by the National Constituent Assembly in a special meeting. Besides, there should be a provisional organisation and review of the public authorities.

The National Dialogue was not an easy process. Indeed, some of its rounds were so difficult that we were forced to suspend it for nearly one month, after it was not possible to reach consensus on some points mentioned in the Road Map. However, we did not give up and kept on working as a quartet. We contacted the political parties and managed to get them together at the dialogue table. Thanks to this consensual approach that we adopted and sponsored with the support of all elements of the civil society, the transition path was successfully completed. Eventually, a provisional government of independent professional experts was formed, and a new constitution for the country was drafted and approved with a high level of consensus. The Independent High Electoral Commission was elected, and the electoral law was issued which led to the holding of legislative and presidential elections, thus producing a new Parliament, a new President and a Government that won the confidence of the majority of the people's deputies.

Thanks to this spirit, we, the sponsoring quartet, realised that the special characteristics of the transitional period cannot be dealt with in accordance with the process of elections only, as these remain fragile and exposed to various setbacks. Instead, the transitional period should be backed by a consensual legitimacy. Hence, we sought to convince everyone that the majority approach in the transitional period, in a community that is still taking its first steps towards democracy, may involve disagreement, tension and aggravation. It should presumably be backed by a political approach which provides the most possible consensus, thus ensuring the country's unity and solidarity. It is an approach of consensus based on constructive dialogue. Such an approach in transitional periods is characterised in exceptional cases with a mutual alignment of the people's consensual legitimacy and the electoral legitimacy which could be weakened or corroded, so that each legitimacy would not cancel the other. However, such an approach to the transitional process requires minimum prerequisites which are available in Tunisia, but unfortunately did not exist in other Arab Spring countries.

Consensus requires well-planned preparation, genuine willingness for dialogue, pre-agreed controls of the work process and a framework in which ideas and viewpoints are shared by various political factions. In particular, a sponsor trusted and appreciated by all parties concerned should undertake the task of running and deepening the dialogue until it achieves its objectives.

*Your Majesties,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

We are proud that the Tunisian National Dialogue experience has received such unprecedented international sympathy and appreciation. This prompts us to

persevere in this approach and adopt it as a strategic option for the management of our political, economic, social and cultural affairs. This is why we look forward to setting this experience, after its completion, as a role model for other peoples that are today facing difficult transitional processes, so that lessons could be learned to help solving their challenges in a similar way.

The successes achieved along the consensual transition path still need us to make tremendous efforts to fortify and consolidate them, so that they become a basis for new successes. We recognise that there are many challenges ahead of us, and there are still huge risks surrounding us. At the political level, we are looking forward to completing the constituent path and organising power and authority on a democratic basis, by finalising the establishment of the remaining constitutional institutions necessary to consolidate liberties and resist the return of autocracy.

On the economic level, we have to create the conditions that ensure the return of the Tunisian economy to its normal state, and improve the overall climate for investment, and embark on approving the necessary repairs, with extensive consultation between the Government and the economic and social players, to preserve the interests of all groups and factions. This will contribute significantly to improving the stability of the country.

On the social level, we should work altogether to provide the elements of dignity and decent livelihood for all Tunisians wherever they are, and to eliminate poverty, deprivation and inequality between various groups. This requires that we address the problem of unemployment, and particularly the unemployment of university graduates.

On the security level, even if security conditions get improved in general, and Tunisia makes progress in confronting terrorism and protecting our borders from smuggling, a huge effort must be made in order to make a quantum leap in the fight against terrorism and in dealing with the terrorist phenomenon. This will require extending the fight in various directions and disconnecting this phenomenon from its resources, wherever they may be.

*Your Majesties,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

We recognise that the key to achieving stability in Tunisia lies in the creation of more job opportunities for our youth and in looking more after our inland regions, especially the border areas which have suffered for decades from marginalisation and in which our people are expecting after the Revolution to achieve better living conditions. This target requires the development of infrastructures and the improvement of basic life facilities such as health, transport

and education, and requires putting heavy investments and exploring the possibilities of promoting minor projects, especially because these areas have a big civilisational and traditional legacy that could be a springboard for the creation of many projects, whether in agriculture or in traditional industries, if only there is proper funding and an appropriate business environment.

We are well aware of all these difficulties, and fully aware of the challenges that lie ahead. We are determined to rely on ourselves in overcoming the difficulties, and we look forward to having the support of our friends all over the world. To everyone who believes in Tunisia, we say that we will continue working for our country and will keep our bet on dialogue and consensus as a suitable approach to overcome the difficulties, regardless of their size.

Thank you, and may you always be a supporter of freedom and peace.