



Interview: Former Foreign Minister of Tunisia Rafik Abdessalem

In this issue we have interviewed Dr. Rafik Abdessalem Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tunisia. Dr. Abdessalem has been a leading figure in Tunisian politics, as he has taken important positions in the post-revolutionary period. He was appointed as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in December 2011, following the first free election in the country after the revolution. Dr. Abdessalem served in this position until 2013. In 2014, Dr. Abdessalem founded Center for Strategic and Diplomatic Studies, London-based think-tank that focuses on political, social and economical issues as well as international security. Dr. Abdessalem shared his opinions about the political and social developments in the Middle East, particularly political change in Tunisia and the Arab revolutions.

Tuncay Kardaş: I have couple of basic questions to start with. As far as I know Tunisian revolution in Arab spring is the most successful one as everybody speaks about it and so on. Can we start with your definition of revolution and how Tunisian dignity revolution is different than others?

Refik Abdessalem: Well, I think it is different, the Tunisian context itself. Of course the Tunisian revolution was not violent in the sense of previous revolutions in the world, like France revolution, Jacobean revolution which was based on the norm of rapture from the old regime. Of course we tried to build a new political system and dismantle the foundation of previous regime in a peaceful way. There are three reasons behind Tunisian exceptionalism. First one is the homogeneity of Tunisian society; it has sectarian and religious divisions. Tunisia is a very homogenous society.

I used the term in a positive way of connotation. We have anti-religious and sectarian conflict. In other countries if you have a political conflict, it will transform into sectarian, religious and tribe conflicts, such as Syria, Libya and Iraq. It is not the case in Tunisia. If you have political problems, it will remain in political parties and political forces. The second element that we do not have is the legacy of military intervention in the public sphere of the political life. We have neutral military institutions since the beginning of 1956. The third element is that (which I call) the rationality of political place in Tunisia. Maybe Nahda Party is the vanguard political party in process of the democratization which is based on norm of making consensus. Even when there were political crises, Nahda Party had chosen to leave the government in favor of technocrat government to facilitate the democratic process. So, the norm of consensus between different political places to sort it out the political crisis is also the one of element to help Tunisia to create its exceptional model revolution in the region.

Tuncay Kardaş: You emphasized the word of compromise. How do we understand this process of compromise? Is it something that the entire revolutionary actor should go through? And second part of question is that is it something inherently good for your movement or for the Tunisian people?

Refik Abdessalem: I think it is good for Tunisian society as well. As far as I understand, the principle of consensus between the components of the conflict means that the different parties who are participating in conflict sit together to reach the peaceful solution. This is exactly what happened. Of course we made some consensus to the member of previous regime. The simple reason is that we do not see an experience in the region like in Libya. They have a law which is based on the isolation of the members of the previous regime. It complicated the situation. So we chose to make a concession and consensus even with the component of the previous regime. Let's say that we have a certain rational balance of power in the countries. And we managed to conflict based on the ballot box in a peaceful way instead of managing the conflict based on the voluntary means like what happened in other countries in the region. So this process sometimes it is risky one but I think it is the best solution within the regional context that we have. Of course Tunisia is not an immune, one hundred percentages from the effect of the regional environment like we have political crisis

in Libya in Syria in Yemen, in Egypt everywhere of course we have been affected by this crisis. But we try to manage the situation in very difficult time. And I think we have managed the situation in a rational way that has created Tunisian exceptionalism.

Tuncay Kardaş: Many pundits foreign domestic pointed the importance of compromise and consensus. The reason why brought up this issue with the movement is that too much of a consensus or too much of a compromise with or it is possible it may lead to internal dissatisfaction within the parties and within the groups of people who supported. I will come to my next question but let me ask here and in this opportunity, how do you manage your own internal request coming from the groups who would say enough this amount of compromise we are sacrificing our own values and so on. How do you manage this difficult balance?

Refik Abdessalem: It is a difficult choice. We find sometimes difficulties within grand of the parties. They said what are the reasons behind these concessionary old guards of the previous regime when they had controlled the government at the beginning of the independence in 1956. What are the reasons behind the compromise or consensus? Of course sometimes we faced an angry people but we managed the situation based on the communications. That is why communication with the members of parties is very crucial. The other element is that majority of this people when they make comparison between Tunisia and other countries; they say at the end of the day politic is reality. When they compare Tunisian situation with the other conditions of the revolution in Libya, Syria, Iraq, they said things are in the right way whatever we faced or we face today. Today it is better to manage political crisis based on peaceful means than going into civil war by using military means or whatever. This is exactly in the case in Tunisia. At least we have protected country from civil war like what happened Libya.

Tuncay Kardaş: The constitution writing process. I would like to ask a couple of questions. There are many interpreter or pundits have also underline this three points. First one is the role of Islam in Tunisian, and the role of woman and the role of the issue of curving the executive power. Let us start with the first one. I know that Nahda deliberately removed the word of Sharia from discussion. And I know this part of the consensus seeking behavior. How do you feel about this decision? Do you feel that this is the best way to deal with a coming political crisis? And what will be the future

repercussion?

Refik Abdessalem: The simple reason is that there is no need to deepen the ideological polarization based on secularism and Islamism or sharia. The term of sharia is very ambiguous. It is not an accurate. What is clear is the Islamic principle and values which is already embodied in our constitution. So as Tunisian we are not differentiating in the principle of Islam and Arabic language as the basic element of our constitution. This is the general framework, there is no need for making details about the sharia which is a religious interpretation or just text. And there are the righteous of interpretations. So what we agree is the general principle itself, which is Islam as a whole as body of values, principles, as legitimacy for the safe and that, is enough. There is no need to go for sharia or secularity. We are not the secular country. And we are not a country which is based on the concept of sharia.

Tuncay Kardas: One of the values of Islamic tradition is the social justice. We all know in Tunisian economic variables are sometimes going up in positive direction and sometimes going down in negative direction. How will your party or how do you think a group of people within Islamic convictions should address this problem social justice within a global economy market?

Refik Abdessalem: It is very crucial and very important. I think Islam is not abstract values and principles. Islam is based on the law of sharia and based on justice even the Fukaha says long time the sense of Islam is el-Adl. Justice is the main principles in the body of Islam or Islamic tradition in the legacy. We have to revive these principles. Within this huge gap in the distribution of wealth there is a need to insist about principle of justice not only locally but also international order. The international order is not based on the justice, it is based on monopoly when you have big place that control international scene and wealth, and there is more need to have justice in international order. As well in the local environment, there is no social justice due to the process of globalization which led to the gap between the riches and the poor.

Tuncay Kardaş: Just to help you make a comparison with the kind of experience we lived through, in Turkey, similar based similar Islamic sensitive government in power now. And the same issue of social justice applies. As far as domestic politics and domestic economy is concerned

there is, you know, there is more or less, how can I say, a good reaction coming from the government towards social justice and so on so forth. But we cannot say the same with regard of international level of social justice. Do you think this lack of interest in international level is a downside of political or moderate Islamic ideas?

Rafik Abdessalem: I think this is due to the balance of power in international order. That's why the certain governments are facing or try to do remedy the social gap between rich and poor and to be more inclined towards social justice locally. But the international order, you know, Turkey is not player among the others. And there is a need for cooperation between the countries of region to have a more justice in international order and insist on the norm of justice within the international order.

Tuncay Kardas: About the other issue, the role of women in the constitution, we know from the newspapers and from, you know, TV, news coverage that the women of Tunisia reacted very strongly when the word came out in the constitution proposal as complementary right or equal rights. How do you feel, and I know the words that changed has been towards equal rights, how do you feel that process, do you think that was necessary?

Rafik Abdessalem: I think it is informal or let's say artificial difference. We don't differentiate about the process of preserving good achievements of women in Tunisia, which we have since the beginning of independence. Nobody could criticize or put these good achievements under question. If you already have good achievements about the interest of women in public life and in public sphere, it means that quality between men and women, I think, is already achieved. This principle achieved as political party, Nahda party as part of our religious principles. This segregation between men and women is not based on Islamic principles. It more based on a deformed legacy and tradition in the most of societies.

Tuncay Kardas: Okay, the last point in the constitution, the point of disagreement in the constitution, how to curb the power executive. I am asking this question this question because there is, you know, a continuing trend to criticize security forces, abuses, some actions coming from security forces and so on and so forth. Do you think curbing this problem would help to solve this question of the feel of returning back to dictatorial type of government? Is it enough, you know, to get rid of some problems, associated with security sector?

Rafik Abdessalem: It's not enough, that's why we need the check and balance of powers. The essence of democracy is based on the balance of power and I think Tunisia still looking for a delicate balance between the norm of freedom and security and political stability and we still are in that process. Even all democracies are facing this dilemma. But what is positive in Tunisia is that we have a strong parliament which is good to scrutinize any abuse of power. The parliament institution is very crucial in the check and balance of powers to control the abuses within security forces. Another element is that we have an active civil society also, in addition to other, you know, politically active political parties which is good to criticize the abuses of security forces. So, things are not based on intention of security forces themselves. It's based on the presence of social actors on the ground. What is positive in Tunisia is that now there is no control of power. Power is distributed, we have an active society, we have active political players that could control and restrict any abuses that coming from the security forces. We have suffered from heavy security machine and the regime of Bin Ali was a police regime.

Tuncay Kardas: We also know that youth unemployment is huge in Tunisia and in different part of the world of course. You know, 20 percent around in Spain but 40 percent, as far as I know in Tunisia, the latest figure say that. Don't you think this is a big threat as well in addition to be in economic trouble? I am saying this because we all know that Tunisia is the top country which send foreign fighter to other country and bulk of the foreign investor are youth. How would you like to answer the question that as far as you don't understand this question of youth unemployment and youth disaffection with regime, with politic, with state, what will be the future of the revolution.

Rafik Abdessalem: This is the real challenge if not effect to the country when we have a great number of unemployed people. We have roughly 50 percent of unemployed and majority of them are roughly not the majority, 40 percent are young people and a great number of educated people that left the universities and their aspiration are very high and this is the reason of the Tunisia revolution itself when you have such a gap between the aspiration of the people and they look complete reality. This gap between the aspiration and the complete reality this is what created the Tunisian revolution. And this is the real challenge for the country, we reduce a little

bit, you know, the level of unemployment from 87 percent to 50 percent but it is still high. Well to say that there is a great number of people we export, you know, fighters to across the zone crisis of the region, we have to look at the figures but I think this related to the weakness of the state institution in the post revolution situation. One dismantles the regime of Ben Ali which is based on the security forces of course it created a political and security problem and this people benefited from disability. The majority of the people are in the 20s and in the beginning of their 30s; they are product of the regime of Ben Ali who suffered from the religious, irreligious and the political vacuum. That is why there is need to build and to consolidate the religious institutions of the country to fill the gap and to provide a modern Islamic culture and education to the young generation and to proclaim to conclude them to go toward you know extremism and terrorism.

Tuncay Kardas: How do you do exactly that when you are in the coalition with the secularist bloc?

Rafik Abdessalem: Well we try to do this and basically we are part of this government. We are the part of the social and political life in Tunisia. We do our best. We provide a modern Islamic culture to the young generation. We try to fill the gap, basic in our capacity and ability in the country. The coalition between modern Islamist and modern secularist is very crucial for the country to create a certain balance. Because we have An-Nahda but we also have secular political party and there is the need for a modern chance mainly in political party to work together to consolidate democratic process.

Tuncay Kardas: We all know that the institutions such as the World Bank, which I just gave it as an example, wants to deliver aid to a certain manner, certain part, and the so called post conflict reconstruction scheme of economic aid. We know from other examples in the world might backfire because of their lack of attention to the real source, the real needs of the people, youth you know, women and elderly. Is the government, coalition government in Tunisia, aware of this kind of problem, post conflict issues?

Rafik Abdessalem: We are fully aware about this but we are mileage to this kind of stage to receive financial help that coming from the international institutions for certain reason. I think we have to rely on ourselves and the cooperation. That's why the revival of a common market between the North African countries and the Maghreb country is very crucial. The cooperation

between the South and North African continent is very important also. Tunisia might be a small country but it could be a hub, a bridge between the east and the west, between Europe and Africa. At least this is what we are trying to do. But we are in a positive period to solve this problem we need some time. I think that we are in the process.

Tuncay Kardaş: What would be your suggestion and recommendation to other actor in the Arab world who are going through, unfortunately darkness or one of the most difficult in maybe in the history? Because you are often presented as a success story, what would you, be as an experienced statesman, and how would you recommend other actor in the Arab world about how to achieve successfully transition?

Rafik Abdessalem: I think one of the recommendations is for the difference conflict; this is to sit together and to reach a consensus because there is no a military solution. When you have a civil war in different country in Libya, in Syria, in Iraq, in Yemen. There is a need to reach consensus based on compromise between different political and social forces and to get the rid of sectarian and religious division within our countries. This is the main dilemma and there is need for the local forces to make compromise in themselves and no to provide a state for external and foreign intervention in the region that could complicate the situation even more. Like we see in Iraq or other country

Tuncay Kardas: Thank you very much for your time. I am too much appreciated.