

Report

Tunisia and The Arab Spring

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**THE INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES,
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The Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, in collaboration with the Embassy of the Republic of Tunisia organized a public talk titled, “Tunisia and the Arab Spring”. The distinguished speaker was H.E. Hedi Ben Abbes, who is the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Republic of Tunisia. He is well known for his academic contributions and had also lectured in various universities around the world. Mr. Hedi was in Pakistan for the 8th Session of the Pakistan-Tunisia Joint Ministerial Commission and Second Session of Pakistan-Tunisia Bilateral Political Consultations. The Director General of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Ambassador Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, in his welcome address stated that the subject, “Tunisia and the Arab Spring”, is of huge contemporary importance and has left a mark on the world as a whole. It is the result of a single development that in 27 days, Tunisia was able to free itself from dictatorship and as a result of the developments in Tunisia, the movement of freedom spread to various other countries in the region. He also said that happenings in the Arab world are an inspiration for the rest of the world.

Mr. Hedi Ben Abbes enlightened the audience about the revolution in Tunisia and the dynamics behind the present transition and the challenges it faces in the coming days. The speaker stated that the Tunisians are a unique people as they are Arab, African and Muslim. He went on to explain that, prior to the events leading to the revolution , there was a dictatorship in

Tunisia and despite the presence of political parties, there was no democratic culture prevalent in Tunisia. The political parties in Tunisia were just there for the decorum and fully supported the dictator and the elections held under the dictatorship were a farce. The economic policies were a failure and there was widespread frustration, in the absence of any welfare for the common man. As a result, there was false prosperity and the economic policies were of make belief. Mainly seven powerful families of Tunisia held 60% of the country's wealth and their interference in every sphere became unbearable for the common man. Those in the corridors of power were the President's relatives and their privileges began to be questioned. Under the dictatorial rule, private economy was encouraged which was meant to prevent the state from being responsible. Apart from this, corruption was rampant and therefore, the situation was politically, socially and economically ripe for a showdown. Mr. Ben Abbas also stated that the essence of democracy is that it has to spring from the people; it has to be for the people and is by the people.

Gradually the situation became explosive and the dictatorship had to surrender and gradually a transition followed. In the post revolution period, the country faces numerous challenges and that in a situation like this, where a country shifts from a totalitarian culture to a democratic culture, there are many excesses involved. Democracy makes you responsible and answerable for your doings. All the negative elements had to be dealt with in Tunisia and the lack of discipline in the country can be attributed to be a part of the culture of excess. Moreover, present day Tunisia faces many

problems of democracy and requires that we strike a balance. Tunisia is a modern and open country and looks at the Islamic religious movements cautiously and this is why Tunisians do not want an extremist model imported from anywhere. He also said that there are 147 political parties in Tunisia, which have evolved as an aftermath of the revolution.

Democracy, he explained has several stages and first and foremost is the creation of institutions which helps build the foundation of democracy and then comes the responsibility to chart a future course. Moreover, it may be seen that the evolution of the democratic culture, leading to this transition has been indigenous and very much by the people of Tunisia. The talk was followed by an enlightening question and answer session. The distinguished speaker, while addressing one of the questions regarding the role of the Tunisian armed forces during the revolution stated that the Armed forces of Tunisia have always remained neutral and have never participated in politics, but have only maintained law and order during such uprisings. The speaker was of the view that the Tunisians are moderate people and a very homogenous society with no ethnic divisions; therefore they are always united in striking a balance in every sphere. However, in the end he also said that many challenges also lie ahead as Tunisia struggles with the new democratic order.

Prepared by
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