

Why comparisons between Tunisia and Egypt aren't helpful

by *Maria Glenna*



The suspension of Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly on 7 August once again prompted comparisons between Tunisia and Egypt by political analysts and the media, asking if Tunisia will devolve into the violence we have recently seen in Egypt.

It is true that there are similarities between Egypt and Tunisia. Both countries are experiencing political unrest. The dominant political parties that won elections in the two countries have little experience governing. And both countries are struggling to balance the influence of Islam within their fledgling democratic systems.

However, a closer look at the two countries reveals some key differences that suggest comparisons between them might be misleading.

If we view the transitioning countries in the Middle East and North Africa region as monolithic, the international community risks creating a self-fulfilling prophecy based on worst case scenarios that miss the nuances in each country. Instead, we should recognise the unique situation of each country and promote solutions adapted to the local context.

In Egypt, the military has maintained a position of power in the country for decades. Although a civilian government took power in Egypt, the army has continued to play a major political and economic role in Egyptian society as demonstrated by their arrest of former President Mohamed Morsi.

In Tunisia, the army didn't assume power during the revolution. Fearing a coup d'état, the first Tunisian president, Habib Bourguiba, prohibited military participation in politics by law. Instead, Bourguiba, and later President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, built their power base around the police and internal security forces. After the 2011 revolution a civilian government replaced the Ben Ali government in Tunisia and the army continues to play a minimal role in Tunisian politics.

The differences between the security sectors in Tunisia and Egypt are of key importance; the Tunisian army is subordinate to a democratically elected leadership while the Egyptian military has the power to intervene.

The difference in political dynamics at work in Tunisia and Egypt is also crucial. Egypt's post-revolution regime was characterised by a single party with strong ties to the Muslim

Brotherhood, while Tunisia has been governed by a coalition between the Islamic Ennahda party and two secular parties, Ettakatol and Congress for the Republic.

Why Comparisons Tunisia-Egypt aren't helpful

The Tunisian government faces increasing opposition because of frustration over the lack of political progress. The assassinations of two prominent opposition politicians this year triggered demonstrations and the government's failure to bring the perpetrators to justice fuelled the anger of the Tunisian people. But, at the same time, the government has managed to resolve disputes through political concessions and compromises. Ennahda has, for example, ceded key ministries to secular parties and independents, and limited the references to Islam in the draft of the constitutional.

In the latest protests in Tunisia there has been very limited violence between protesters and security forces, or between pro-government and anti-government protesters. Only one protester has died since the protests started on 25 July, and the cause of death was head trauma after being hit by a tear gas canister.

The protests show that Tunisians are still unhappy with the progress of political change and critics may be very pessimistic about democratic development in Tunisia. However, the largely peaceful nature of the demonstrations and the measured response from security forces indicate a positive development toward more democratic practices and respect for human rights that we should appreciate and encourage.

We should remember that the transition to democracy is a difficult and complex process that takes time – decades at best. And successful democratic transitions depend on a whole array of different factors including history, culture, economic development, political leadership and civil society.

Despite their cultural similarities and geographical proximity, the transitioning countries in the Middle East and North Africa face different challenges and their transitions will depend on the particular nuances in each country.