

Interview

TUNISIA EMERGENCY: THE BOOMERANG EFFECT

In the light of the recent events which have rocked Tunisia, Antonio Manganella, Head of ASF's mission in Tunis, calls the transitional justice process to deal with social injustices as quickly as possible. He predicts that, if this fails to happen, the country's democratic transition will remain fragile.

Question: Would it have been possible to predict the demonstrations which have troubled the region of Kasserine and spread to other marginalised regions such as Siliana and Sidi Bouzid as well as the suburbs of Tunis?

A. Manganella: In January 2011, the citizens of these regions were the first to go out into the streets to demand - and obtain - an end to the corrupt and predatory regime that was in place. But the promises of the Revolution have not always been kept. In Kasserine, for example, unemployment is at 26%, that is almost 10% more than the national average. This is having an effect on graduated young people and women in particular. Basic amenities, such as drinking water or education, remain precarious. The current life expectancy of someone from Kasserine is seven years less than the national average.

Q.: How do you explain that nothing has been done to reduce these socio-economic inequalities?

A.M.: It is a very complex thing to correct such regional disparities, they are the result of decades of public policies sullied by corruption, cronyism and nepotism. Tunisia is still a country that is deeply in debt and its economic choices are highly dependent on European countries and the international donors. For five years, the poorest social classes have been hoping for a strong signal from the authorities, that they would show a serious willingness to break with the bad practices of the past. The events in Kasserine show that old ways are still present.



Q.: The Instance Vérité et Dignité (Truth and Dignity Commission - IVD) was created in 2013. What is this body?

Antonio Manganella, Head of ASF's mission in Tunis ©ASF

A.M.: It is the commission which steers the transitional justice process. Its aim is to provide an access to truth and reparation for victims of serious human rights violations under the dictatorship as well as martyrs to the Revolution. The IVD's mandate from the Constituent National Assembly also includes the possibility of issuing recommendations for the reform of the justice system and the cleaning up of institutions to avoid any further repetitions of the past.

Q.: In June 2015, the *Forum tunisien pour les droits économiques et sociaux* (Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights - FTDES) filed a "Region as a victim" submission to the IVD on behalf of the Kasserine governorate. In what way has ASF supported the submission of this case?

A.M.: The objective is for the Kasserine region to be recognised as the victim of a systematic policy of marginalisation by the regime. On a broader scale, ASF and the FTDES wanted to point out the necessity for the transitional justice process to make a priority of dealing with the phenomena and factors that caused the Revolution: socio-economic inequalities and regional disparities. This is the only way that they will be able to work towards avoiding the repetition of the past and resolving conflicts. The IVD has deemed the case admissible. This is a first for the Tunisian transitional justice process. The IVD now needs to speed up the examination of the case, along with those of other marginalised regions. The population needs to know that it has been heard. The questions from the past which are still influencing the current situation need to be dealt with urgently and publicly, especially by the IVD.

Q.: How do you explain the IVD's inactivity?

A.M.: There are a number of factors. The most serious are probably the government's barely concealed opposition and the increasing lack of interest for the transitional justice system on the part of civil society and the population in general. But it's not a lost cause. The IVD needs to start to judge the "region as a victim" cases as soon as possible and show some accountability and openness in its work. ASF and its partners are ready to set up a constructive dialogue with the Commission, in the hope of encouraging a transitional justice process which will play a serious role in revealing the truth and avoiding any risk of a return to the past.