

## BOOK REVIEW

5 **La promesse du printemps: Tunisie, 2011-2017**, by Aziz Krichen, preface  
by Pierre Vermeren, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2018, 400 pages, €19  
(softcover), ISBN 979-10-351-0059-9

10 Aziz Krichen served as President Moncef Marzouki's presidential adviser with min-  
isterial rank from January 2012 to April 2014, when he resigned in disagreement  
with the president's politics. Krichen presents a highly readable insider's account  
of these tumultuous years of Tunisia's transition to democracy, but also with an  
outsider's perspective, as a political economist and analyst. He views Tunisia not  
15 as a sort of island disconnected from the Arab world but as an integral part of  
it, with its progressive microcosm destined to inspire the rest – the real *promesse  
du printemps* – as failure is not an option. If '*rien ne va plus*' (nothing works) today,  
the response of civil society must be to form new leadership to replace the incum-  
bent political class (301–329).

20 Krichen, as a good Marxist, avid reader of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, and  
himself jailed and then exiled under both the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes,  
understands the futility of debates between Islamism and modernism distracting  
attention from the real social problems expressed by the revolution of 14 January  
2011. In his view, Islamists and Tunisian modernists (including the 'human-rightist'  
variety) are both elitist, with neither having a social vision or veritable mass  
support (69–78). When Krichen was called upon, as an icon of Tunisia's leftist  
25 opposition, to be Moncef Marzouki's presidential adviser, he insisted on a nego-  
tiation between equals that would elaborate strategies and policies placing the  
president above the contending forces in the newly elected National Constituent  
Assembly (NCA). He wanted Marzouki, elected by the NCA, to be president of all  
Tunisians and resign from his party, the Congrès pour la République, which was  
30 part of the 'troika' in a government dominated by the Islamist Ennahda party.

Earlier, while in opposition, he had helped to craft the 18 October 2005 alliance  
between Islamist and other opposition groups, which he hoped would transcend  
the 'Islamist-modernist' binary in opposition to Ben Ali's rogue regime (192). It  
broke down in less than three years, although the 'troika' formed after the elec-  
35 tions of October 2011 salvaged part of it (195). Balance between Islamist and mod-  
ernist forces was still possible because Ennahda, while far stronger and more  
organised than any of Tunisia's other fledgling parties, did not command the  
large majorities won by Egypt's comparable formations. Ennahda's first govern-  
ment thus rapidly overextended itself and lost momentum to the resurgent mod-  
ernist forces of Béji Caïd Essebsi's Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia) party.

40 In his official capacity, Krichen sponsored efforts to reach compromises on con-  
stitutional issues between the Islamists and other smaller, more secular parties.  
Marzouki, however, only gave him lip service. And after Béji Caïd Essebsi and  
Rached Ghannouchi reached understandings in August 2013 to defuse the  
serious crisis sparked by the murder of leftist deputy Mohamed Brahmi – the

second political assassination of the year – Marzouki worked behind the scenes with Ennahda leaders who opposed Ghannouchi's compromises (252). In Krichen's view, Marzouki was more interested in gaining Ennahda support in forthcoming presidential elections than in encouraging compromises in his capacity as president for all Tunisians. From the inside, Krichen even exposes the source in the presidency of fake news about a military putsch. The rumours were designed to demonstrate the president's brave defense of Ennahda (255–267). The same source also published a Black Book indiscriminately attacking journalists practicing prior to 2011.

Krichen confidentially informed key leaders of the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet – which consisted of the country's principal employers association, trade union federation, human rights league, and lawyers syndicate – in late August 2013 that he wished to resign, but they encouraged him to stay on to do damage control (261). He assembled a ten-person liaison committee consisting of himself and three members from each party of the governing 'troika' to meet regularly in the evening three or four times a week in the presidential palace (237). The committee met from late July to October 2013, when the Quartet opened the decisive national dialogue and the Ennahda government gave way to one comprised of technocrats. Krichen's thoughtful composition of the crisis committee had evidently contributed to the successful outcome.

Krichen finally resigned, effective 1 May 2014, with Tunisia's Second Republic up and running after the passage of the constitution and the installation of a new technocratic government. Tunisia made the Arab world's first and only transition to democracy, apparently transcending the 'Islamist-modernist' debate. But Krichen then observed Marzouki's efforts, after losing the presidential elections of November 2014, to sabotage the new alliance between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda and slide back into the 'political and cultural regression' (166) associated with identity politics. Marzouki attacked Nidaa so as to encourage discontent within Ennahda against its leadership, just as dissidents in Nidaa targeted Ennahda as the enemy (320). Worse, neither party offered any solution or new ways of thinking about Tunisia's economic and social problems. While Caïd Essebsi and Ghannouchi effected a successful democratic transition, they suppressed the necessary process of transitional justice, leaving much of a corrupted business community in place and enabling it to further infiltrate the Tunisian civil service. Corruption only worsened with the advent of Tunisia's Second Republic.

What then is to be done? Far from reverting to any Leninist or other tired old statist ideas of development, Krichen suggests reforms that many mainstream economists, in international financial institutions and elsewhere, might applaud (342–359). First, get prices right and clean up wholesaler cartels. Stop keeping food prices low and discouraging marginal agriculture, especially in Tunisia's peripheral interior, while subsidising expensive imports. Second, bring the vast informal sector into the formal economy by eliminating red tape. Tunisia has a record 500,000 small enterprises and could have many more if the society's entrepreneurial talents were unleashed. Legalise informal housing so as to open up credit facilities for their owners. Third, rather than multiplying jobs for surplus state functionaries (some 800,000 in 2015), pay better salaries to real service

providers, such as schoolteachers, and liberate the private sector, formal as well as informal, to expand employment opportunities. Fourth, reform the tax system to lessen the burden on small businesses and plug the many loopholes favouring wealthy regime clients. Krichen does not claim to have an integrated programme but insists on strengthening civil society in the face of a 'falsely liberal orientation' of 'a thin layer of rent-seekers [*affairistes*] organically tied to the regime', as opposed to 'a vast mass of small business owners condemned to evolve in a climate of permanent adversity' (360; all translations are by the reviewer).

Who is to lead the way? Elections have apparently so far simply perpetuated a corrupt political class. Krichen argues, against the conventional wisdom about transitional elections, that those of October 2011 should have been in single member constituencies, so as to enable young revolutionaries to rise to power, rather than proportional representation based on party lists fabricated by the political class (99). Yet he retains faith in the emergence of young leadership in civil society 'to recover the revolution's first wind, its social aspirations, and to achieve it' (369). He expresses a secular faith in Tunisia's mission to transform Arab politics:

The community of destiny is based not on fantasy but on objective necessity. Tunisia is not an island. We will not save ourselves alone. We will not continue to swim if the other Arabs continue to drown. We are required to continue to advance. (369)

His final thought, inserted in the back cover of this 2018 edition, perhaps with Egypt and other Arab countries also in mind, is that 'revolutions, like classic theatre pieces, are never played out in a single act'.<sup>1</sup>

### Note

1. The first edition of Aziz Krichen's book was published in 2016 by Éditions Script in Tunis. The present edition is published in Éditions de la Sorbonne's 'Aux quatre vents' collection.

Clement M. Henry  
 University of Texas at Austin, Emeritus  
 ✉ cheny1509@gmail.com

© 2018 Clement M. Henry  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2018.1522749>

