

## **Marzouki at Oasis: Christians, Muslims, Jews and atheists, all brothers in Tunisia**

by **Bernardo Cervellera**, *AsiaNews*, 20 June 2012, <http://www.asianews.it/>

*The Tunisian president reiterates the point that freedom of conscience is the basis of the Jasmine Revolution in his country. This means the right to change religion or have none at all. The transition is difficult in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Arabian Peninsula and Morocco. In such places, conversion and baptism are prevented by fear of what consequences they might entail. However, the Arab revolution has changed people's mindset, carving greater space for the individual rather than the 'Ummah'. The West has failed to understand what is taking place.*



Tunis (AsiaNews) - The "destiny" of the Arab Tunisian revolution is to welcome "Muslims, Christians, Jews and atheists" as "brothers", everyone with full citizenship. This is the pledge Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki made at the meeting of the Scientific Committee of Oasis currently underway in the Tunisian capital. Marzouki, who was himself a prisoner and an exile because of his activism in the field of human rights, returned home from France at the time the Jasmine Revolution. Last December, he was elected president with a huge majority. Upon hearing about the Oasis meeting, he decided to meet the representatives of the Committee to reassure them that the Arab revolution is not driven by Islamic fanaticism, but by democracy and a desire to integrate the religious rights of communities and the rights of individuals. "Freedom of conscience" would be protected, including the right to change religion or have no religion at all.

### ***Towards freedom of conscience***

What the Tunisian president said challenges a (pessimistic) view that is widespread in the West, namely that the Arab revolution is inevitably moving towards the Islamisation of North Africa and the Middle East. Marzouki was critical of this (Islamophobic and neo-colonialist) stereotype that is prevalent in Western media.

Still, some months ago the president did defend the conviction of two men who had been accused of "insulting the sacred" by posting images deemed offensive of Muhammad online. At the same time, he slammed the conviction on "blasphemy" charges of the makers and actors of the movie *Persepolis* in which God is shown reciting like any other actor.

For Marzouki, such dithering is inevitable in a country negotiating a path towards a certain "balance". From this point of view, Tunisia's journey is no different than that of other countries, torn by conflict over the place to be given to the sacred in society.

To illustrate his point, he mentioned the debate in the United States about Article 1 of the constitution (which mentions God the Creator that some would like to remove), abortion and homosexuality, a demonstration by French Catholics against an offensive show, and tensions in Italy over the presence of crucifixes in public places.

As he received a round of applause from those present at the meeting, the president reiterated that the foundations of his country must be freedom of conscience and that religious affiliation is no business of the state.

### ***Social problems in Egypt and Libya***

The situation is more contradictory in other countries stirred by the Arab revolution, Egypt above all. Here, a political majority constituted by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists is engaged in a power struggle with the military and economic power of the Armed Forces.

Various witness who spoke at the conference, including the spokesman of the Egyptian Catholic Church Fr Rafic Greiche and Dominican Fr Jean-Jacques Perennes, noted that many of the promises that came out of Tahrir Square (full citizenship for Christians and Muslims, freedom to build places of worship, an end to discrimination) did not materialise.

Fr Samir Khalil pointed out that in Egypt people voted for Islamic parties because they have no point of reference to decide other than their religious affiliation. What is more, 40 per cent of the population is illiterate.

Nevertheless, speakers said that among Egyptians, people are increasingly wary of "religious" discussions (on what is lawful or unlawful, on anti-Christian bias or morality). A majority of them would like to see political leaders, Muslim included, work to solve problems like unemployment, housing, public transit and education.

Unlike Tunisia, the revolution in Egypt has not moved forward by much. The country is in a stalemate with the military and the Muslim Brotherhood involved in a power struggle.

The same is true about Libya. After the fall of Gaddafi, the country has been affected by low-intensity chaos. Promises of freedom by the National Transitional Council have not yet brought security and peace to Christian communities, constituted mostly by foreign workers, often exploited and without union protection.

### ***The Arabian Peninsula and Morocco***

The sorest situation is in the Arabian Peninsula. In places like Saudi Arabia, the revolution was stopped in its track by sticks (repression) and carrots (financial handouts to the population). In the United Arab Emirates, the secret services engaged in "discrete but effective" controls, nipping in the bud any potential demonstration.

The situation of the area's Christians, all foreigners from India, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, etc, is well known. In Saudi Arabia, they are denied freedom of worship. In the Emirates, they can celebrate Mass, but are denied any public expression of their Christian faith.

Out of fear that even this modest right might be taken away, Christian communities dare not baptise Muslims who might want to join the Catholic Church.

The same is true in Morocco where the Arab Revolution was pre-empted by King Mohammed VI's attempt at reforms. Under the new constitution, Christians are guaranteed freedom of worship, but here too it would be unthinkable to have Muslims baptised and

become Christian. Conversely, in the words of Mgr Vincent Landed, bishop of Rabat, Catholics in the North African country do try to be close to every initiative coming from youth, women and men in search of "peace, justice and reconciliation" in society.

No Syrian representative came to this year's Oasis meeting, perhaps due to that country's tense political and humanitarian situation.

For Mgr Philippe Brizard, a former director of *Oeuvre d'Orient*, the revolution in that country was hijacked by the Gulf States and the West, whose goal is to remove Syria from the Iranian and (Shia) sphere of influence. This has turned the region into an arena for "big power" politics.

### *Some shared features*

The 'Jasmine Revolution' has unfolded differently according to the countries it has affected. Results have thus been different, yet they share some features.

Prof Olivier Roy, from the European University in Florence, tried to list a few, noting their stable nature, from which "it is impossible to go back".

- 1) First of all, the Arab revolts represent the end of politics centred on a charismatic leader, the saviour of the fatherland;
- 2) They mark the end of Islamist and pan-Arabist ideologies;
- 3) Although Islamic groups do exist, the demands for justice, jobs and a good economy have put to an end the slogan 'Islam is the solution to everything';
- 4) A certain patriotism (but not nationalism) has been encouraged and the rhetoric about the Ummah (the world's Muslim community as a single entity) has been waning;
- 5) The Palestinian cause has taken a backseat, almost disappearing from slogans;
- 6) Democracy is seen as "possible";
- 7) Islamic societies are undergoing secularisation and there is a growing awareness of the individual (Salafism is a perturbed reaction to this discovery).

For Olivier Roy, the West has failed to understand the Arab revolution. It did not expect it, even though it was entirely predictable in light of the underlying conditions developing in those societies (better educated youth without jobs, better-educated women without rights, a desire for justice against corruption, and more).

Fr Samir Khalil noted that the Arab world also rejects the West, for its alleged irreligiosity and immorality and its "atheistic" separation of religion and state.

Nevertheless, for the Jesuit clergyman, the future of these countries lies in a model of society based on the values of equality (gender, race, social conditions, and religion), solidarity among all citizens, openness to the contributions of all cultures, and a capacity to guarantee tolerance and mutual respect for differences.