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Nobel Peace Prize for Tunisia's civil society

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Bonn, 14 October 2015. Awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to four key civil society organisations that have played a significant role in shaping Tunisia's recent history sends out the right signal. The prizewinners are trade union federation *Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (UGTT), employers' union *Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat* (UTICA), human rights organisation *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme* (LTDH), which was hounded by the Ben Ali regime, and lawyers' association *Ordre National des Avocats de Tunisie*. Known collectively as the National Dialogue Quartet, they established national talks in 2013 that prevented the country descending into chaos. Together, they represent employment, prosperity, the rule of law, human rights, and, ultimately, Tunisian society as a whole, which has shown incredible strength, bravery and courage in keeping alive the democratic transition process to this day.

However, more recently, cooperation between the quartet's members has not been nearly as constructive and consensus-based as it was in 2013. In fact, you would think that two of the four prizewinners would have a sore conscience. Recent months have seen UGTT and UTICA spend more time trading insults and arguing with each other and with the government over particular interests than seeking to promote social peace. The development of Tunisia as a whole has often been forgotten in the process. Additionally, a series of long strikes in 2015 paralysed various sectors, some, such as the phosphate industry, in their entirety and others, such as the transport and education systems, partially. UGTT is also divided internally between the leadership at national and local level, who are more open to compromise, and grassroots members, who have a more 'revolutionary' outlook. For their part, entrepreneurs, represented by UTICA, blame UGTT and others for the current economic crisis. The protests are deterring foreign investors, exacerbating the existing shortage of these actors in Tunisia. But even UTICA cannot agree on a common and viable path of economic reform based on a dynamic economy that is committed to social dialogue.

Despite these tensions, the Nobel Prize is very well deserved, honouring the constructive role played by the quartet in overcoming the difficult political crisis of 2013. This was made possible by a renunciation of particular interests, political wrangling between parties and the polarisation of secularists and Islamists. Most of all, the prize symbolises the

strengthening of civil society itself. In light of the increasing repression of civil society actors globally and current developments in Egypt, where civil society organisations are again being subjected to mass restrictions and monitoring, the Nobel Peace Prize committee is very intentionally and explicitly recognising the key role played by civil society in the Tunisian transition process. Even in Tunisia, human rights organisations fear a potential return to repressive mechanisms or the renewed restriction of the freedoms won through the Tunisian revolution in 2011 (such as freedom of the media, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly). While the state of emergency declared in response to the Sousse attack in June 2015 was lifted in early October, supporters of the old regime are again entering the ranks of the political parties, especially ruling party Nidaa Tounes. This could revive the old security reflex in the face of the real threat from radical home-grown terrorism and IS fighters returning from Syria.

It is now essential to recognise the significant progress made to date in the democratic process (new constitution, free elections, party-political pluralism, national dialogue etc.) and to encourage the relevant actors to keep moving in this direction. This is necessary given the sense of resignation and pessimism about the future that is spreading within Tunisian society as a result of socio-economic difficulties, the two horrific terrorist attacks at the Bardo Museum in Tunis and in Sousse respectively, and the violent developments in Libya and in the Syrian conflict.

After years of authoritarian repression, a great number of societal, political and economic streams and powers have emerged, some of which are drifting far apart from one another. Consequently, one of the main challenges is to establish a new societal consensus and social peace out of this disparate mix. This will require strong and inclusive actors, as embodied by the quartet. The priority now is to take more leadership again and work together to develop a vision for the future of Tunisia's society and economy.

Ultimately, the prize also issues an unspoken call to Tunisia's civil society and government actors to not give up despite all the adversity they face. In order to achieve this, solidarity will be needed between the highly diverse members of the quartet, between citizens and the state, and between Tunisia and the international community, which will not leave Tunisia to bear this major responsibility alone.