

Science reborn in Tunisia

Academics are cautiously optimistic on anniversary of revolution.

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27 January 2012

An article from *Nature Middle East*.

One year since the popular revolution in Tunisia ended the 23-year-old rule of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisians are starting to enjoy newfound freedoms. Scientists and academics are cautiously hopeful science research and education will benefit in a new era.

"Since the early 2000's, research has really suffered from the lack of democracy and the police state in place," says Faouzia Charfi, a physics professor at the University of Tunis. "Seminars and conferences were rare and under surveillance by the repressive regime of Ben Ali. It led to a serious violation of academic freedom"

Organizers of science conferences or meetings were required to submit full details of the topics or research up for discussion and in advance to receive permission to hold events. "Motivated researchers had to fight to maintain international relations and collaborations, but many potentially good researchers were discouraged and gave up," says Rim Lahmandi, a professor of economy at the University of Carthage in Tunis.

Following the flight of Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, Charfi was appointed junior minister for higher education on 17 January 2011, and lasted just months until 2 March 2011. During that time, Charfi kickstarted reforms of how the top jobs in universities are filled. "For the first time in the history of higher education, elections were held for faculty directors and university presidents in June 2011," she says.

Lahmandi warns this will not be enough to fix the problems at Tunisian universities,. "[The elections] are the most unique thing that is changing, but competence does not necessarily follow."

In November 2011, the Tunisian Association of Doctors & PhD Students in Science (ATDocS), a non-governmental organization established on 4 March 2011 by PhD graduates and students to promote scientific research in Tunisia, held its first meeting. The association helps scientists in Tunisia network with each other and with scientists abroad.

Islamist influence

In early November 2011, Tunisians enjoyed their first truly democratic parliamentary elections since their country's independence in 1956. The Islamist Ennahda Party won a majority of seats and appointed its secretary general Hamadi Jebali as prime minister of the transitional government.

"The interim government is limited to a one year term so may have no time to put its ideology into effect," says Hamadi Reddissi, a professor of political science at the University of Carthage. "Nevertheless, there are some worrying signs."

During a meeting organized by the Tunisian University Forum, an NGO created after 14 January, professors complained about a strong rejection of the theory of evolution by religious students.

"The Islamists' political program focuses on technology but not science and knowledge," adds Charfi.

Lahmandi says it is too early to determine what effect an Islamists-dominated parliament or government will have on science and education in Tunisia's budding democracy. "To make things work, we need competent and honest policymakers, aware of the importance of higher education and scientific research, and courageous enough to undertake the necessary reforms. Anyone who can perform this deserves our encouragement and support."



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One year after Tunisia's revolution, researchers are starting to see improvements in the country's science base.

While some of the political parties running for parliament mentioned the importance of scientific and technological research in their programmes, science took a backseat to other, more pressing matters for a developing country. "Most attention was focused on freedoms, the separation of religion and politics, Islam and law, the status of women and the economy," says Charfi.

According to Reddissi, when science is talked about it's in the context of improving education. "None of the political parties have a detailed, genuine programme for science. This could be due to a lack of political experience."

A role in politics

Scientists should not shy away from these discussions, Charfi adds. They should help policymakers make strategic economic and social development decisions and outline the research priorities of Tunisia, such as biotechnology and renewable energy. "Scientists have to be more present on the political scene to define those priorities and the means to improve the economic situation."

"Professors are expected to play a prominent role if academic life is unburdened by bureaucracy," adds Reddissi.

Lahmandi is hopeful that any new government will be able to revamp education, from primary school to higher education and offer proper financing to researchers and PhD students.

"All I hope is that common sense prevails and that the interest of higher education as a whole is placed above electoral considerations, irrational fears, and that religion does not become an element of discord," she adds.

"It is too early to make conclusions one year after the revolution, but it is important to preserve science as vector of knowledge," says Charfi. "We have to be vigilant to avoid a confiscation of academic freedom. We have to defend the separation of religion from the scientific area like we defend the separation of religion and politics."

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2012.9927