

An education in leadership from post-revolution Tunisia

Former minister Tawfik Jelassi tells Andrew Hill how his experience helps him to shape strategies for managers under stress

Tawfik Jelassi took the fateful call on Christmas Day 2013. The Tunisian academic was waiting with his family for a flight to Florida and a 10-day holiday from his role as dean of a French management school, when a Tunisian number flashed on his mobile.

A voice said: "I am Mehdi Jomaa, the new prime minister, and you are the first I'm contacting to become a minister in my cabinet."

Prof Jelassi, then 56, had never met Mr Jomaa. Indeed, he had not lived or worked full time in his homeland for 35 years, as he built an academic career in the US and France, specialising in the strategic use of information technology.

In 2010, though, the "Jasmine Revolution" had unseated Tunisia's longstanding president and ushered in a period of turmoil, culminating with Mr Jomaa's appointment to run a one-year technocratic government. "I used to be a spectator, watching the [Tunisian] news on TV out of Paris. And overnight, I was asked to become an actor," Prof Jelassi says in an interview. "The switch was that sudden."

He accepted the offer. His year juggling three ministries — higher education, scientific research, and information and communication technologies — saw him taken hostage in his office, subjected to blackmail and threats, and heavily criticised for the controversial educational reforms he pioneered. It did, however, provide abundant lessons for a course on "leading in turbulent times" that he teaches to executives at Lausanne's IMD business school on the banks of Lake Geneva.

Consider all opportunities, however daunting. When Prof Jelassi puts his 2013 dilemma to his IMD class of executives, "a handful" usually agree that they would have taken the "unique opportunity to pay [their] dues" and serve their country. But when he tells them that his wife, a radiologist in Paris, and three children initially opposed the move, they change their minds.

If the call had never come through, though, or if he had declined, he says he would probably still be dean of the School of International Management at the Ecole des Ponts ParisTech. The shock offer forced him to reconsider his future and opened up experiences and opportunities.

Set clear short-term goals — within a long-range strategy. The terms of Mr Jomaa's invitation were stark: a mountain of challenges, physical peril, a salary of "peanuts" and no resignations or complaints — "We start the mission together, and we finish together," the premier declared.

Initially, the limited mandate created a useful sense of urgency. But as the group "got close to the finishing line, that [deadline] became a major hurdle". Civil servants and others who opposed change could block it just by delaying decisions.



Tawfik Jelassi: he says that sometimes it is as important just to get through difficult situations as it is to make progress
Darrin Vanselow

Prof Jelassi picked higher education as his priority, because he saw that tens of thousands of well-qualified Tunisian graduates were unable to get jobs. Focusing on how to encourage skills for self-employment and entrepreneurship, he told sceptics: "We need to do something to reform higher education now. If it cannot be completed by the end of my term, it's OK, but at least I will have initiated something."

Since he left, though, he says some of the reforms have lost momentum under a political coalition. The one-year mandate spurred the technocrats into action but "three years would have given us time to reap the fruit".

Bind your team together and get all parties to buy in to the strategy. A picture of the cabinet just after it was sworn in shows a group of stony-faced strangers, burdened with the heavy responsibility of office. Most of the men have their hands crossed in front of their groins. Prof Jelassi says: "A friend of mine who is a psychologist, said to me: 'Look at the position of the hands of the men. For me, that's a defensive attitude.'" To break down those defences, the prime minister organised informal meetings at ministers' homes.

Men and women in the government played football every Sunday. The cabinet took part in team-building games in the woods.

Meanwhile, Prof Jelassi brought together 150 people with an interest in education — university presidents, senior officials, student union and business representatives — to discuss his plan,

'The call of duty is stronger than all other considerations'

facilitating workshops, even during Ramadan, to thrash out the changes. The message: this was their reform not Prof Jelassi's.

Over-communicate. Asked what he regrets, Prof Jelassi says he did not communicate enough, particularly through informal channels: "The youth and students are on social media — they're not reading my press communiqué, issued through the national newswire. So I under-communicated." Partly as a result, the second half of Prof Jelassi's tenure was overshadowed by demonstrations.

Reframe the problem and learn to be resilient. A vicious row about how often students would be allowed to retake their exams almost triggered the fall of the government. Shortly before the cabinet's year-long mandate ended, students erected gallows on top of university buildings and threatened suicide. "For me, this was really a moment of truth," says Prof Jelassi. "Shall I stick to my principles, or shall I give in and try to end on a positive note?"

In the end, he compromised. It was a test of his emotional resilience that he now uses to help executives on the IMD programme put their own problems into context. "They look at each other and say: 'We thought our job was too complex, too hard and too demanding, while, with perspective, it's not at all.'"

Survive. Prof Jelassi says sometimes it is as important just to get through difficult situations as it is to make progress: "Every day I survived, politically and physically, was a good day for me. Having survived high turbulence is, by itself, some sort of achievement."

As Prof Jelassi's wife predicted on that Christmas Day in 2013, the Florida holiday was ruined by discussion of the Tunisian prime minister's offer. Yet she supported her husband "because she didn't want me, down the road, to blame her for not letting me serve my country".

Mr Jomaa recently announced his plan to form a political party as Tunisia continues to struggle with the political aftermath of the revolution. Lausanne, by contrast, seems tranquil. Prof Jelassi's family is well established in Switzerland. If he got the same phone call, would he again accept the invitation to lead in turbulent times? "For me, the call of duty is stronger than all other considerations," he says. "I would seriously consider it."

Start-ups

From revolution to jobs

The key slogan of the Tunisian revolution was "freedom, jobs, and dignity," says Tawfik Jelassi. "The freedom, we have. The jobs, we couldn't create them. And where is the dignity for young men or women if, after many years of higher education, they don't have a job — no income, no place to live, [dependence] on their family?"

By creating a system that encouraged self-employment, Prof Jelassi hoped to inspire a more entrepreneurial spirit among young, highly qualified citizens. The ministry introduced new courses on

entrepreneurship and related subjects, to be taught alongside academic disciplines. It sought to establish business incubators at universities. Coaches and tutors were on hand to answer questions and the state bank was prompted to offer small loans to fund start-ups.

"If you visit Tunisian cities . . . you see cafés filled with unemployed youth," says Prof Jelassi. The offer of free working space and technology for budding entrepreneurs created a viable alternative: "Instead of going to a café, why don't you spend some time at the incubator?"