

By Aaron Keck

TUNISIA - For Americans, July 4 is a day to celebrate independence, democracy, and self-rule—the day on which 'we' declared that from that moment forward, our government would be a government 'of the people.'

Nearly a quarter of a millennium later, that dream is still a dream in process—and not only in the U.S. Even now, nations and peoples around the world are fighting to make that vision a reality.

Congressman David Price (D-Chapel Hill) works with many of those peoples as co-chair of the House Democracy Partnership, a delegation of U.S. Representatives that works with--and offers support to--emerging democracies across the globe. Today, as the U.S. celebrates the Fourth of July, Congressman Price is in Tunisia, working with leaders there to draft the country's new constitution.

"We've already begun celebrating the Fourth," he said Tuesday. "We just came from a joint American-Tunisian celebration of the Fourth of July, with both national anthems being beautifully played..."

"It's incredible to be here, really, as we celebrate our own independence, (in) a country, the lead country in the Arab Spring, having gained independence from a dictator, now drawing up a constitution that will enable it to join the family of democracies."

Tunisia's currently in a state of political transition, with no parliament but a National Constituent Assembly charged with writing a constitution--one whose key tenets are quite similar to our own, from the separation of powers to the federal-state relationship to the protection of individual rights and liberties.

"There are some big (issues)" remaining, Price says, as the Assembly draws up the Tunisian constitution. "One is quite familiar to us, and that is the mixture and relationship of legislative

and executive powers. The other is pretty specific to Tunisia--we have our own church-state questions, of course, but in Tunisia and other Muslim countries there are going to be serious question about the role of religion and Sharia law in governance. That question is one that is very difficult for them. On the rest of the issues, 90 percent of their constitution, they've got pretty solid agreement, but these remaining issues are very tough."

But as in the U.S.--whose pivotal founding moments were driven as much by economics as anything else--Price says the economic situation in Tunisia is perhaps the greatest obstacle to success.

There's great hopefulness," he says. "(But) this is a very poor country (and) the unemployment rates are very high, especially among young people...people are impatient, and the members of the constituent assembly very much feel that. They need to rush this along and get a legitimate government in place...it's a delicate situation, I don't think anyone takes success for granted.

"On the other hand, when you look at the Arab Spring, this is the lead country, and this is the country where it seems to me that a parliamentary democracy probably has the best chance of emerging."

Price and fellow co-chair David Dreier (R-CA) have made several recent trips to Tunisia; they've also been in Egypt, where the path to democracy rests at a turning point. Egyptians recently held what was arguably their first-ever legitimate presidential election in May and June, electing Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi to the presidency--but just days before the June runoff, a panel of judges dissolved the country's parliament, potentially opening the door to a reassertion of military rule.

"The future of Egyptian democracy is pretty uncertain right now," Price says. "There is some hopefulness surrounding this new president"--Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood have both taken moderate stances in public, which Price says is necessary--"but there clearly have been some turns there that are worrisome."

But even as the situation in Egypt and Tunisia remains tense and uncertain, Price says the opportunity to witness the process first-hand gives him a greater respect for his own democracy--and for the celebration of independence that marks every July 4 in America.

"This of course is a very meaningful holiday for our country," he says. "I'd love to be at home, at Oval Park in Durham like I usually am, leading the Pledge of Allegiance...on the other hand, there's something very special about being in an emerging democracy, especially the lead country in the Arab Spring, here on the Fourth of July.

"I'm hopeful about it, and certainly being here today has increased that sense of anticipation."