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After Sparking the Arab Spring, Is Tunisia Still a Success Story?

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Brief Analysis

Gridlock and economic stagnation are testing the Arab world's only functioning democracy.

On January 14, 2021, Tunisia celebrated the 10th anniversary of the end of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's authoritarian regime, the result of a revolution that led to a firm commitment to a process of democratization in the country. And while the revolution has meant significant change and positive development for Tunisian democracy, the Tunisian people are currently losing faith in the direction of their government as Tunisia's democratic institutions are struggling to endure parliamentary gridlock and economic malaise—as evidenced by the recent street protests over the past few days. Consecutive Riots and demonstrations in the Capital and in several cities across the country came to defy the government's nationwide lockdown and curfew due to Covid-19 and to symbolize the youth's overall disenchantment. While the Prime Minister assured that this anger was “legitimate”, protests were faced by police violence and led to more than 600 arrests of protestors aged between 14 and 25.

Beyond recent events, however, Tunisia has made meaningful steps towards democratic rule in the decade since the revolution. Several national and local elections have been marked by a peaceful transfer of power and judged free and fair at the national and international level. Over the last ten years, the rise of a vibrant and functioning civil

society has played a significant role in strengthening the transparency and functionality of nascent political institutions and processes. Tunisian civil society has been so effective that in 2015, a group of civil society groups known as the National Dialogue Quartet won the Nobel Peace Prize for helping to establish a roadmap for peaceful political transition at the time when the country was on the brink of civil war. Furthermore, Freedom House indicated in its [2020 “Freedom in the World” report](#) that Tunisia is the only “free” country in the Arab world.

The new Tunisian government has made some steps to rectify and ameliorate the abuses of the Ben Ali regime, calling for the execution of a transitional justice process in 2013 to address past political repression, human rights violations, and abuse of public funds. In 2016, the Truth and Dignity Commission completed its work on the transitional justice process: with 62 thousand complaints for reparation and national reconciliation, it documented and archived numerous cases, and, according to the Commission’s own reports, has secured TND 700 million for the state budget and referred 72 cases to the judiciary. While the country still needs to find the best approach to implement a comprehensive national reconciliation strategy while ensuring accountability, the [completion of this process](#) marks a milestone in Tunisia’s transition to a new system of governance .

In addition, the international community has been enthusiastic about steps Tunisia has taken for the protection and promotion of women’s rights over the last decade. Tunisia has always stood out from other Arab countries in its official support for women’s rights, and the [2014 constitution](#) maintained the country’s regional status in that regard. [The electoral law framing legislative elections has ensured vertical parity on candidates lists, meaning that men and women alternate on election lists.](#) Later, the 2018 local elections went forward under a yet more [progressive election law](#) that included a provision for horizontal party, [ensuring that equal numbers of women and men appear on the election lists.](#)

These laws have led to nearly half of elected local officials being women. In addition, Tunisia adopted a holistic law on the eradication of all forms of violence against women in 2017, furthering the constitution’s progressive spirit. And while the [proper implementation](#) of all the mechanisms presented by the law, especially the provision of state support survivors of violence, remains a challenge, moral, psychological, economic and even political gender-based violence has been criminalized for the first time in the country’s history.

Unfortunately, however, the notable progress achieved in strengthening Tunisian democracy and human rights over the last decade is neither a source of content nor optimism among most Tunisians. According to the International Republican Institute’s [nation-wide survey](#) conducted in the last 2020 trimester, 87 percent of Tunisians believe that the country is heading in the wrong direction.

Economic woes and faltering growth since 2011 are likely the root of these concerns. The combination of a high youth unemployment rate, regional socio-economic disparities, the erosion of the welfare state, and rampant corruption have generated a bleak economic reality. Persistent labor strikes and terrorist attacks have affected the [production and exportation of gas, oil and phosphates.](#) Such attacks have also damaged Tunisia’s tourism sector and fueled the rise in military and security spending. The civil war in Libya, Tunisia’s second largest trading partner after the European Union, has also become a major contributor to the slowdown of Tunisia’s economic activity.

While there is broad agreement on the need for reforms to surpass this stagnation and instability, [political fragmentation](#) has left the Tunisian parliament practically deadlocked and led to more than twelve cabinet reshuffles, making the adoption and the proper implementation of reforms a real challenge. Furthermore, the formation of loose coalition and national unity governments has negatively impacted bold social and economic reforms and the rise of a strong opposition.

While many Tunisians and observers consider consensus built on “Islamist-secularist rapprochement” as the main force behind Tunisia’s democratic success, the current government consensus reached through a host of small

parties—made possible by the proportional list electoral system—has prevented the emergence of a [consistent and harmonious majority](#) able to support and pass reforms. As a product of such gridlock, the constitutionally mandated creation of a Constitutional Court, a pillar of a healthy democratic system meant to be instated in 2015, has yet to take place because legislators are still blocking the four court members the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) is supposed to appoint.

Moreover, this political deadlock continues to periodically fuel [anti-government protests](#) and has particularly deepened the gap in confidence between citizens and institutions. It is therefore no surprise that IRI's [survey](#) shows that 85 percent of Tunisians believe the government is doing little or nothing to address the needs of ordinary citizens, while 88 percent believe the same of parliament.

In turn, the governmental failure to respond to socio-economic demands that served as the “raison d'être” for the revolution has fostered nostalgia for the old regime. Political parties who defend the legacy of the past, whether under Ben Ali or his predecessor Habib Ben Ali Bourguiba, have accrued more political and electoral weight at the expense of pre-revolution era opposition parties.

The most extreme of these parties is the Free Destourian Party (PDL), an anti-revolution party that openly praises the old regime and proposes to replace the parliamentary system with a presidential one. The PDL has become a force for stagnation and conflict in the parliament as open debates between Moussi and the other members of parliament continue to cast the legislature as a body for argument rather than a body for action. Together with economic woes, this government infighting has begun to weigh heavily on the prospects of Tunisia's democracy.

In the short-term, these challenges seem difficult to overcome. The aggravating economic situation due to the Covid-19 pandemic will certainly make reforms even more challenging, fueling more disillusionment with the Tunisian government. Greater national unity and international support will be required for the government to work.

Political and economic transitions require generations to become sustainable and strong. Currently, European fear over the presence of Islamism in the MENA-region governments along with fear in Gulf countries of similar revolutions inside their regimes has left the Tunisian transition largely unsupported and susceptible to the challenges that have invariably arisen. [Tunisia's relatively successful model still challenges and defies theories and skepticism around democracy and Islam, it continues to be under the loop](#) not only for its democratic exceptional trajectory but also because of its proximity and the role it could play in Libya and other countries, even of the Sahel, with the future youth bulge that calls for more Arab Springs and new African Springs. ❖



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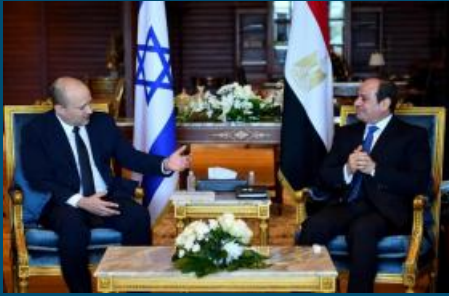


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