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In Tunisia's War on Corruption, Local Government is on the Front Line

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Brief Analysis



October 2, 2017

Seven years after the Jasmine Revolution toppled the graft-ridden dictatorship of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, corruption remains one of the top concerns of average Tunisians.

With the launch of Prime Minister Youssef Chahed's "war on corruption" in May 2017, many Tunisians hope that they may finally see a turning point. Dozens of high-profile businessmen, mafia bosses, and customs officials have been arrested on corruption-related charges—steps that were welcomed with public praise. This elevated the national conversation on corruption and recast the issue as a threat to the country's flagging economy and national security.

However, the recent introduction of what is essentially an amnesty for corrupt officials during the autocratic rule of Ben Ali provoked a public outcry and met with protests from opposition parties and civil society organizations.

As the economy struggles to recover from the political uncertainty unleashed by the 2011 revolution, corruption and graft are intimately linked with Tunisians' perceptions of democratic progress. Tunisia has not significantly improved its score in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index since the revolution.

This poor performance is reinforced by recent polling by the International Republican Institute (IRI) highlighting the high levels of frustration that Tunisians continue to feel on the issue. An alarming 89 percent believe that corruption in Tunisia is higher today than before the revolution, and a combined 87 percent characterize the country's economic situation as either "somewhat" or "very bad." In addition to the socioeconomic instability caused by endemic corruption, IRI's research even suggests a linkage between corruption and violent extremism—with

corruption robbing young people of their sense of agency and dignity and leaving them vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist groups like the Islamic State.

It's not enough to simply arrest high profile crooks and make sure that those convicted serve their sentences. Any sustainable attempt to address corruption must include substantive institutional reforms that address the systemic corruption that plagues both the public and private sectors.

Before these reforms can truly take root, it is first vital to understand where and how corruption occurs. In order to better understand citizens' daily experience with corruption and determine the best ways to support anti-corruption champions, in July 2017 IRI conducted an assessment in the municipality of Manouba to identify vulnerabilities to corruption in municipal government processes. Our Vulnerabilities to Corruption Approach (VCA) methodology revealed a series of municipal-level procedures susceptible to corruption and helped to identify potential priorities for decision-makers as they build out a comprehensive anti-corruption agenda.

In Manouba, we found that key administrative services provided by the municipality—most notably the notarization of public documents and the issuing of construction permits—are critically vulnerable to corruption. In interviews with a broad spectrum of city stakeholders, this was repeatedly attributed to the poor quality of public service delivery. Faced with limited access to information, arbitrary requisites, and long wait times, many citizens find it simpler to bypass the established legal and bureaucratic channels and offer small bribes to secure what they need.

The vulnerabilities identified in Manouba are likely present in many other municipalities across Tunisia. Tunisian cities have limited tax authority and local sources of income, creating incentives to raise revenue through in-person transactions that can easily cross the line into corruption, such as collecting more in fees for services than required. The centralized, top-down governance framework and lack of legal autonomy also constrains municipal governments from implementing innovative solutions to these challenges. Weak communications mechanisms between city officials and the public fosters distrust and indifference, adding an additional incentive for both sides to resort to irregular alternatives in their interactions.

Although Manouba faces challenges, the city can also serve as a model for other municipalities. Among our findings, we observed that municipal officials—despite the political and fiscal limitations election officials face—they are taking important steps to improve transparency and provide better customer service—for example, by deploying mobile administrative units and hosting public hearings that improve citizens' confidence in local government.

With local elections scheduled for December 2017, these types of cost-efficient initiatives should be rolled out across Tunisia as part of an integrated anti-corruption, open government, and decentralization agenda. The evidence suggests that Tunisians would be highly amenable to such measures: according to IRI's poll, more than 70 percent think local governments need to address corruption in order to improve the economy.

The Tunisian government deserves credit for raising the issue of corruption—but much work remains to be done. Greater transparency in government practices, improving service delivery, and strengthening the citizen feedback loop, especially at the local level, will go a long way toward strengthening Tunisian democracy and promoting stability and prosperity. ❖



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