



# Socio-economic challenges to Tunisia's democratic transition

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## Abstract

Among those countries that faced the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, Tunisia is the last one for which hope for a successful democratic transition remains justified. However, the country's comparatively favourable institutional evolution has led to a dangerous complacency not only in Europe but across the West. While important reforms have been implemented, democracy has so far failed to fulfil the high expectations it has raised within the population. Tunisians' discontent with their living conditions and the new system's perceived inability to deliver are fundamental threats to the country's transition. This article argues that the EU has a major interest in making Tunisia a democratic and socio-economic success story, as failure would not only constitute a lost opportunity to create a role model in the region but would also jeopardise European security interests. The EU should therefore provide more substantial support with the aim of realising socio-economic improvements in Tunisia.

## Keywords

Tunisia, EU, Mediterranean, Socio-economic challenges, Resilience, Democratisation

## Introduction

More than half a decade after the so-called Arab Spring, the series of popular uprisings that sent shockwaves across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, Tunisia remains the only country for which hope for a sustainable democratic transition remains justified. A range of factors have helped the northern African state avoid following the disastrous paths of Egypt, Syria and Yemen. Its security services were far-sighted enough to accept that long-time dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's time was over. In contrast to Egypt, where an almighty military controls not only the country's politics but also its economy

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and large parts of its media, no actor was sufficiently powerful to shape post-2011 developments in Tunisia without compromising with others. More importantly, all the political forces were actually willing to compromise.

Notably, the Islamist Ennahda or Renaissance Party (*Hizbu Ḥarakatu n-Nahḍah*) worked peacefully and fairly productively with the same political forces that had violently persecuted its members for decades. In July 2015, I spoke to Abdelkarim Harouni, who was one of their ministers from 2011 to 2014. Harouni was imprisoned for 16 years, several of which he spent in solitary confinement. He was tortured, and continued to be harassed after he was released in 2007 (Human Rights Watch 2010, 11). I asked him how he felt about working with those political forces that had been responsible for his ordeals. 'Before the revolution, there was always a police car behind me. When I became a minister, there was always a police car in front of me,' he joked. 'What is the point of seeking revenge? It doesn't help anyone. The best way to annoy them is by being part of the political process.'<sup>1</sup> If one compares this attitude with how senior members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood spoke about their political opponents, one begins to understand why Tunisia's path has been so different.

This is not to say that post-2011 Tunisia did not and does not face major obstacles. Shortly after the armed forces ousted President Mohamed Morsi and ended Egypt's democratic experiment, the second political assassination within months and major public disenchantment with the Ennahda-led government brought Tunisia to the brink as well. However, the country's strong civil society saved the day. The *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (Tunisian General Labour Union) joined forces with the *Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat* (Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts); the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme* (Tunisian Human Rights League); and the *Ordre National des Avocats de Tunisie* (Tunisian Order of Lawyers) to establish and moderate a 'national dialogue' that brought all of the different political factions together (Kéfi 2015). This quartet's mediation led to the creation of a technocratic government, paved the way for the adoption of a remarkably progressive constitution and was rewarded with the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts.

However, although post-2011 Tunisia has the most democratic and liberal political system in the region (Economist Intelligence Unit 2017; Freedom House 2018), the political transition remains a highly fragile process. Notably, crucial parts of the new constitution, such as the creation of a constitutional court, have not yet been implemented. Although police violence was a major factor behind the Tunisian uprising, abusive behaviour from the security services, ranging from harassment to torture, is making a comeback. The rise of insufficiently regulated police unions that are able to pressure judges and politicians is preventing officials' misdemeanours and felonies from being sanctioned, and obstructing more serious security sector reform (Grewal 2018). Meanwhile, the political spectrum is fragmented: parties are not yet highly institutionalised and are facing questions about their internal democratic processes.

Most crucially, however, major social and economic grievances remain. The end of the Ben Ali era and the transition to democracy have created high expectations among the population. But the new democratic system has so far failed to satisfy peoples' hopes for improved living standards. In fact, it has presided over their deterioration.

This article argues that Tunisians' discontent with their living conditions and the new system's perceived inability to deliver are the most fundamental threats to the democratic transition. It contends that the EU should further increase its efforts to support socio-economic development in Tunisia. The failure of or even a further delay to the transition would not only represent a lost opportunity: in light of the North African nation's proximity to the EU's southern borders, the consequences of such a failure would also jeopardise European security interests.

The 2016 EU Global Strategy identified state and societal resilience in the EU's neighbourhood as a key strategic objective of its external action. Tunisia's democratisation offers a major opportunity for the EU to help achieve its ambition of changing its southern neighbourhood accordingly. Helping the country's democratic and socio-economic transition to succeed would ensure Tunisia's stability and transform it into a role model that citizens and elites across the region might seek to emulate in their states. In contrast, the failure of the Tunisian socio-economic transition could result in further increases in irregular migration and create a breeding ground for radicalisation and violent extremism less than 70 kilometres away from the EU's external border.

## **Tunisia's socio-economic woes**

On 14 January 2018, on the seventh anniversary of Ben Ali's fall, major protests and riots erupted in various Tunisian cities and villages. They were triggered by new austerity measures introduced in order to obtain a \$2.9 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which had demanded a reduction of the budgetary deficit to below 5%. To meet these conditions, the Tunisian government introduced a package of fiscal measures that included various tax increases, cuts in subsidies and a freeze in public-sector hiring (Gallien 2018).

For Tunisia's lower and middle classes things were tough enough before these new austerity measures came into effect. Economic growth is slow, and in 2017 unemployment was at 15% nationwide and as high as 28% in some regions. Across the country, a third of university graduates are without a job (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018, 3). While both the minimum wage and average public-sector salaries have risen in recent years, the increases remain substantially below the increases in basic food prices. Inflation is projected to reach 7% in 2018, drastically decreasing people's purchasing power (Statista 2018a). Today's minimum wage buys 20% less food than it did in 2010. As a result of the latest austerity measures, Tunisians will now have to cope with frozen or reduced salaries and social welfare services as well as rising prices for basic goods including food, energy and fuel.

The demonstrations and riots in January were not the first of their kind. In recent years, Tunisia has seen a range of protests reminiscent of those that brought down Ben Ali. And while the situation is unsatisfactory across the country, it is disastrous in those parts of Tunisia where the 2010–11 uprisings originated. While some parts of Tunisia’s northern coastal regions are reminiscent of southern Europe, the country’s southern and interior regions fare poorly on almost all socio-economic indicators. Overall poverty is 10 times higher in the cities of Kairouan (34.9%) and Kef (34.2%) than in the city of Tunis (3.5%). On average, 88% of the Tunisian population has access to drinkable tap water. While this covers almost 100% of the population in the affluent parts of the country, it only includes half of the citizens of Sidi Bouzid, where the self-immolation of fruit-seller Mohammed Bouazizi in December 2010 sparked the Tunisian uprising. Less than 20% of households in Sidi Bouzid are connected to the sewage system, compared to a national average of 58% and between 80% and 90% in Greater Tunis. While there are 84 medical specialists per 100,000 inhabitants in Tunis, there are just 11 in Sidi Bouzid (Magouri et al. 2018). These disparities are deeply enshrined and strengthen each other. The lack of infrastructure combined with a deteriorating security situation make it hard to attract investment or tourists to the interior regions. And while recent efforts to politically decentralise the country are trying to reverse these trends, it will take a long time to make up for decades of neglect.

A second major division runs between the generations. Large parts of Tunisia’s youth feel excluded from the country’s political and economic opportunities. In 2017, youth unemployment stood at 35.4% (Statista 2018b). While the situation was bad before the Tunisian uprising, it has deteriorated since. Moreover, with formal politics dominated by the older generation, those who were crucial in initiating the uprising—and thus in enabling the changes we have seen since—have been shut out of shaping their country’s future. This has led to major disenchantment with politics among young people, which is reflected in their very low electoral participation: only a third of 18–34 year-olds voted in the 2014 parliamentary elections (Yerkes 2017, 11).

## **Socio-economic threats to the democratic transition**

The dire socio-economic situation, regional inequality and exclusion of the youth pose major risks to the democratic transition. Contrary to what many Western observers believed at the time, the 2011 Arab uprisings were not primarily, let alone exclusively, about replacing an autocratic system of government with liberal democracy. When Tunisians started to take to the streets in late 2010, protestors were calling for ‘bread, freedom and dignity’ (*The Economist* 2018). They were fed up with the Ben Ali regime, which had failed to deliver these while simultaneously shamelessly plundering the state coffers. Their anger was not primarily directed against autocracy. It was first and foremost directed against one particular autocrat and his clique, as well as their audacious greed and corruption.

This is not to say that there is no support for democratic forms of government. According to a 2014 poll by the ArabTrans project, 77.7% of Tunisian respondents

deemed democracy preferable to its alternatives (Teti 2017). However, the respondents' idea of democracy is closely linked to socio-economic rights. The risk of Tunisian democracy not delivering on those rights is illustrated by a 2017 poll conducted for the International Republican Institute (2017). According to this poll, 68% of respondents described the current economic situation in Tunisia as very bad, and a further 21% described it as somewhat bad. Sixty-one per cent felt that the incumbent government was bad or very bad at creating jobs. Strikingly, 83% felt that the country was heading in the wrong direction. And while there is widespread support for democracy in principle, 41% said that economic prosperity was 'definitely more important' to them and a further 21% deemed it 'somewhat more important'. Hence, if the new democratic system does not deliver, this could be exploited by political forces pushing for a more authoritarian form of government.

The dire socio-economic conditions and the lack of prospects for young Tunisians could have even more immediate and sinister consequences, as they seem to be making some youths receptive to the simplistic messages of radical Islamism. This helps to explain one of the most puzzling developments in the country. Despite Tunisia being one of the most liberal countries in the Arab world and the region's only democratic success story, it has become one of the most fertile recruiting grounds for the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Tunisia has not only been a major exporter of jihadists but has also itself been the target of terrorist attacks committed by local radicalised youths (Fahmi and Meddeb 2015). The student who killed 38 tourists in Sousse in 2015 was reported to have had a girlfriend and have been a local breakdancing celebrity. He drank alcohol and was a passionate Real Madrid football club supporter (Mendick 2016). Young Tunisians like him are not becoming Islamist terrorists by default.

## **Addressing Tunisia's challenges**

The Tunisian government urgently needs to tackle the dire socio-economic situation and work towards overcoming the country's major inequalities. This will require both deregulation as well as major economic interventions by the state. Structural economic reforms are necessary to reduce the bureaucracy that primarily serves to uphold the old ruling clique's grip on business and provides the basis for the country's endemic corruption. The government needs to create a level playing field to give new Tunisian businesses a chance to thrive and to attract foreign investors. Moreover, Tunisia will have to gradually slim down its bloated public sector, which currently constitutes an unsustainable system of political patronage. Public-sector employment provides every fifth job and swallows almost half of the country's budget (IMF 2018), and thus uses financial means that are urgently needed elsewhere.

Having said that, the trimming of the public sector must be gradual and should take regional and demographic differences into account. Moreover, it has to be accompanied by major investment, particularly in the country's marginalised regions. Creating a level playing field is a precondition for economic growth. However, it is far from sufficient to overcome the regional disparities between the affluent coastal north and the interior

regions—disparities that date back to colonial times and were reproduced after independence. Structural reforms cannot make up for the lack of infrastructure, education or security that the interior regions will need to attract investment and to produce competitive local businesses. Creating a genuinely level playing field and ending the interior regions' downward spiral will require substantial positive discrimination. It will necessitate major state investment in infrastructure and the improvement of basic public health, education and welfare services. The recent efforts directed at political decentralisation may help in this regard, but local government will only be able to address fundamental local needs if it is equipped with the necessary financial means.

Facing budgetary constraints and IMF conditions, the Tunisian government currently lacks the necessary room for manoeuvre for such investments. Hence, external assistance will be crucial. Having the biggest stake in the success of the Tunisian transition, it will largely fall to the EU's institutions and member states to enable these efforts. Brussels should push the Tunisian government to invest in the interior regions' infrastructure and further increase financial assistance for such efforts. National development banks as well as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development should provide further favourably conditioned loans for Tunisian public and private investment. At the same time, the EU should unilaterally liberalise trade with Tunisia, particularly for agricultural products. Rather than waiting for completion of the EU–Tunisia Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement that is currently being negotiated, Tunisia should be offered a more limited deal that asymmetrically liberalises trade, with Tunisian companies getting immediate access to the EU market and Tunisia opening its own market only gradually. Such a move could create jobs and alleviate the temporary negative effects caused by carefully and gradually implemented structural reforms.

Furthermore, the EU—or rather its member states—should provide more legal ways for Tunisians to pursue opportunities in Europe. The current anti-immigration sentiments make facilitating Tunisian citizens' access to visas and work permits a tough sell. But giving young Tunisians the chance to work in Europe would reduce pressure on the domestic labour market and increase remittance flows to Tunisia. It would also result in Europe finally fulfilling its promise, made in the immediate aftermath of the Tunisian uprising, to increase mobility.

## Conclusions

Many Tunisians do not understand why Europe is not doing more to support them. Some feel that they should be rewarded for their struggle for democracy. Others think that Europe should make up for having propped up the Ben Ali regime for so long or for having created serious security challenges for Tunisia by destabilising neighbouring Libya. But most importantly, there is a general sentiment that providing more substantial support is very much in the EU's own interest. With only 70 kilometres separating Italy from Tunisia, Tunisian problems could quickly become the EU's problems should the country's transition fail.

Tunisia may not have the natural resources that neighbouring Libya and Algeria have in abundance. But it has a modern and fairly well-educated population. It could be transformed into a well-governed and fairly affluent country in the medium term. A lot has already been achieved since 2011, but Tunisia's new institutional order should not be taken for granted yet. The country could do with and deserves more substantial external support—particularly from the northern shores of the Mediterranean. And it is in the EU's interest to provide such support.

## Note

1. Author's semi-structured interview with Abdelkarim Harouni, conducted on 1 July 2015 in Tunis.

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