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*Tunisia's tortuous path towards political stability
and economic recovery*

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More than ten years have passed since [Mohamed Bouazizi](#), a young itinerant greengrocer, set himself on fire on the 17th of December 2010, in front of the headquarters of the Governorate of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, to protest against Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's authoritarian regime in place for 23 years (1987-2011).

Following [Bouazizi's suicide](#), thousands of Tunisians identified themselves with the young vendor and his highly symbolic gesture led quickly to an unprecedented wave of protests across the country calling for dignity, better job's opportunities and termination of police brutality and rampant corruption. After 23 years of repressive dictatorship, with no decent salaries and no future prospects for educated or relatively educated Tunisians, the tragic act put a human face to the people's frustration and marginalization.

Peaceful protests were brutally repressed by the police, the most feared Tunisian institution, turning quickly into violent clashes. Riots continued and spread to the capital where the government deployed troops to contain the popular unrest. Despite the brutal intervention of the police, protests lasted for 4 weeks rising international criticism and allegations of use of excessive violence against protesters.

After one month since the dramatic gesture of Mohammed Bouazizi, President Ben Ali appeared on the national television, promising political concessions that, however, did not fully satisfy Tunisians. On the 14th of January, the Tunisian president was forced to leave the country after 23 years of domination.

The fall of a very repressive regime of the Arab world inspired a wave of similar protests, triggering a domino effect in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, which came to be known in the Media as [Al-Rabi' al-'Arabi](#) (The Arab Spring). Following the Tunisian uprising, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Libya experienced significant mass protests demanding change. Unfortunately, unlike the relatively positive results achieved by the so called *Thawrat al-Karama* (The Dignity Revolution), other Arab regimes remained in place, leading often to disruptive civil wars and humanitarian catastrophes while some other countries experienced the risk of an authoritarian regime's return, like Egypt.

Although international media have been linking the beginning of the Tunisian uprising with the tragic act of the young vendor, many observers pointed out that this was certainly not the first self-immolation committed by a frustrated citizen, highlighting that calls for employment and condemnations of corrupt institutions have fuelled protests in peripheral regions since the mid 2000s, with unemployed mobilizations in the Gafsa mining basin, protesting against the manipulation of the phosphate mining company's recruitment procedures.

In 2008, spontaneous and organized unrests claiming for employment, lasted for more than six months, attracting nation-wide attention and prompting the intervention of the security forces. Years before the Dignity Revolution, Tunisians took the streets of the poorest areas of the country, chanting the slogans created by the Union for Unemployed Graduates, whose members began protesting in 2006: "*shughul, hurriyya, karama wataniyya*"- "employment, freedom and national dignity". The same motto will echo in the streets of Tunisia's major cities at the beginning of 2011. Despite the 2008 popular unrests calling for a change, the political class failed to produce economic reform programmes and unemployment rates remained extremely high, especially in Tunisia's remote interior regions and among university graduates.

Unemployment was indeed a major pressing factor, especially among university graduates, as a result of a mismanaged economic reform adopted by President Habib Bourguiba after Tunisia's independence from France in 1956. After independence, the Tunisian government allocated large investments in higher education, followed by the promise of hiring educated students and young graduates into the public sector. However, the social contract between young graduates and the regime started to shrink when public sector companies could neither guarantee anymore economic benefits to its employees nor new job opportunities for university graduates, due to budgetary cutbacks.

Since 1990 Tunisia's unemployment rate has been constantly above 14% and, in 2010, the unemployment rate among graduates reached the 23% with a significant deficit of 18.000 jobs per year between 2007 and 2010. Meanwhile, university graduates increased from 121.000 in 1997 to 336.000 in 2007. Frustration among educated Tunisians, incapable to position themselves on the labour market and to earn a decent salary, dangerously grew and, since then, protests by the jobless have been recurring. Among the protesters, groups of intellectuals, human rights activists and leftists

strongly denounced police brutality and the state's rampant corruption, hence the calls for dignity and equality.

While some countries experienced a dramatic return to dictatorship, like Egypt, and many others fell into unprecedented civil wars, Tunisia has indeed made meaningful steps towards, showing to the Arab world that dictators can be overthrown and, most significantly, that a democratic transition with free and fair elections can be achieved. [On the 26th of January 2014](#), Tunisia's new constitution, considered by many observers the most progressive in the Arab world, came into force after two years of drafting process, replacing the 1959 constitution. Freedom of expression, of assembly and religion were guaranteed along with women's rights and equality for men and women before the law.

Few years later Tunisians experienced their first-ever democratic elections. Civil society groups played in this process a significant role in strengthening the transparency of nascent political institutions, [winning in 2015 the Nobel Peace Prize](#) for supporting a peaceful political transition in the country. More recently, Freedom House, a non-profit organisation that carries out research on democracy, political freedoms and human rights, mentioned in its [“Freedom in the World 2020”](#) report that Tunisia is the “only free country in the Arab world”.

However, although the country is the only democracy to emerge from the Arab uprising, [witnessing the freest and longest democratic period in Tunisia's contemporary history](#), risks are just around the corner and challenges remain. If it is true that the country achieved significant political goals with important gains in terms of political liberties and freedom of expression, several revolution's demands, however, like the economic recovery, remain unfulfilled a decade later. On the other hand, 60 years of Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali's repressive regimes and state corruption are hardly to be brushed away and democratic institutions can be built only over time with the support of a strong political establishment and a strong well organized civil society.

When the popular uprising overthrew the *ancien régime*, the democratic landscape was immature and an [unexpected political debate emerged](#). The youth who led to the fall of the regime has never known anything but single-party dictatorship and suddenly it became exposed to an unforeseen political pluralism. Straight after the Tunisian revolution, many opposition's parties and Islamist parties, previously banned by the regime, were legalised and finally allowed to take part in the new

political discourse. Rachid Gannouchi, leader of the Islamist party, [Ennahda](#), returned from exile in London shortly after president Ben Ali's departure, to resettle in the fresh-new political debate. Islamists after being absent from the political scene for more than 40 years took over the public spaces, confiscating quickly the revolution.

Although Tunisians were sceptical about parties based on religion, Ennahda, formerly accused of terrorist activities and extremism, became quickly the most influential party in the political arena. The ascent of Islamists along with the risk that this represents for democratic values and individual freedoms, raised anger among leftists and secularists, leading to an ideological polarization. Therefore, the political debate mainly focussed on the dispute between Islamism and secularism instead of concentrating on the revolution's economic demands. The debate weakened Tunisia's fragile democratic landscape and the economic stagnation did not bring any improvement, increasing people's mistrust in politicians and democracy.

In this context, between 2013 and 2015, with the rising of ISIS ideology, violent extremism hit the country deteriorating even further tourism, one of the main sources of income for the country. Tunisia became the [top contributor of foreign fighters](#) to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria with roughly 6.000 of Tunisians leaving home to join the ranks of ISIS. According to several researches, unemployment has played a bigger role than religion.

The country's political and economic instability as well as the Tunisian foreign fighters' involvement in terrorist activities, had severely impacted on foreign investments further exacerbating the main drivers of the Revolution and of present discontent: unemployment's rates, poor living standards and regional inequalities.

Furthermore, we should also take into account external factors like the slow economic growth in the EU, Tunisia's main export market, the civil war in Libya, the country's second largest trading partner and the COVID-19 pandemic, that has paralysed the global market and prevented any possibility of economic growth. Paradoxically, in this context, the lack of an official strong propaganda machine, used by regimes to embellish the real picture, has also partially hampered the country's external image. Since 2011, unlike any other Arab nation, [Tunisia doesn't have a government-owned propaganda machine](#) and citizens are free to express their political positions in public spaces without

fear. Being free to express any opinion (usually negative) about the country in the streets, but most importantly, on the web, and the absence of the government's narrative, certainly make Tunisia the only democracy in the Arab world but, has penalised vis-à-vis other governments that, on the contrary, can project outside the country an image of stability and growth.

Unfortunately, unemployment protests and strikes have proliferated, affecting the country's production. Workers' strikes and sit-ins have significantly reduced production and revenues of the phosphate industry, affecting the output of oil and gas and, most importantly, limiting the opportunities for economic recovery.

The remnants of Ben Ali's mismanaged government, external factors and the failure of the transitional government in addressing the revolution's demands, have been gradually worsening the socioeconomic conditions with popular discontent set to persist in the medium term.

Ten years on, unemployment rates continue to rise over time with no signs of improvement. The political class failed in providing new job opportunities and the low number of qualified job openings could not absorb the country's educated labour force, fuelling, even further, the illegal migration to Europe and provoking an unprecedented brain drain of highly qualified professionals.

Today the average [unemployment](#) is at 16% against 14% in 2010. In marginalized regions, unemployment rises to over 30% and over 40% among university graduates. Inflation and the depreciation of the dinar have reduced per head incomes by 30% since 2011, worsening living standards. As a result, the infrastructures for education and health has deteriorated, and regional inequalities have deepened.

In this context regional socioeconomic disparities persist and certainly the dignity that Tunisian called for has not been achieved yet. Southern cities remain underdeveloped compared to northern and coastal cities. In the phosphate-rich region of Gafsa Tunisians still do not have access to a decent healthcare system or simply to drinking water. In this context we also need to take in consideration that Tunisia, like other North African countries, has a fast-growing youth population, a factor that, according to economists and sociologists, will progressively expand the [youth bulge](#) and worsen the country's instability.

Meanwhile, the consensus built around the Islamist and secular rapprochement, considered by many observers Tunisia's democratic success, has prevented the emergence of a consistent majority in the government and led to political fragmentation and deadlocks with more than twelve cabinet reshuffles, making almost impossible the implementation of any economic reform.

The failure of the political establishment in producing real economic change and in addressing the needs of ordinary citizens have fuelled the Tunisians' mistrust in the institutions and a sense of nostalgia for the old regime. Unsurprisingly, parties who defended the legacy of the past and anti-revolution parties, like the Free Destourian Party, gained more political and electoral weight, creating stagnation within the parliament and undermining any political progress.

With a persistent political instability that led to a renewed wave of social unrest in 2019 and in 2020, the only chance for Tunisia to achieve a real improvement is consolidating democratic institutions and rebalancing the economy, moving it away from old practices based on privileges, towards equal access and opportunity. Only a strong national leadership with popular consensus can guarantee political stability and, therefore, an economic recovery.

Not to forget that the [economic growth](#) currently depends on the unpredictable waves of COVID-19 infections and its variants. The GDP growth relies now mainly on consumption while investments and exports remain below pre-revolution levels. However, according to the World Bank, by 2023, as the effects of the pandemic ease, the tourism industry, foreign investments and the manufactured exports should be able to partially boost an economic regeneration. With the lift of restrictions, employment and private consumption are also expected to slowly recover.

To lead an economic growth and a social development the national dialogue should also address structural reforms capable of ending wasteful spending, boosting the public spending and the reallocation of resources necessary to public investments and public employment. Reforming and lowering the administrative burden for enterprise set up, reducing trade barriers and improving port infrastructures, should also be on the agenda to boost foreign investment and job creation.

So far, the future of the nation [remain uncertain](#) and the continuous political instability put a major strain on the Tunisian democratic transition. Although the country had successfully started a democratic transition with meaningful gains in terms of personal freedom, the political scene is still chaotic and highly unstable, with negative repercussions on the economic sector. The recent political crisis represents indeed the most critical moment in the democratic transition and the most significant test since 2013.

[On the 25th of July](#), after days of anti-governments protests across the country, denouncing a [collapsed healthcare system](#), the Tunisian President Kais Saied took an unexpected decision by dismissing the elected Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and freezing the parliament. Claiming that the country was under “*exceptional circumstances*” and invoking Article 80 of the Tunisian constitution, President Saied assumed all executive powers, raising fears, both domestically and internationally of a possible dramatic authoritarian shift and an [irretrievable step back](#) for Tunisia’s fragile democratic transition.

The day after, military forces were deployed across the capital and at the entrance of the Parliament blocking the access to Parliament’s members. Rachid Gannouchi, leader of the main Islamist party, Ennahda, described the recent developments as a [power-grab](#) announcing his rejection of Saied’s political decision.

Many politicians and business figures have been detained under corruption allegations while journalists have been arrested for criticising the authorities on the media. Security forces also closed the Tunis office of Al-Jazeera in a clear attack against the freedom of expression, one of the major gains of the 2011’s revolution.

Although the Tunisian President has recently appointed as Prime Minister, Najila Bouden Romdhane, Tunisians are questioning Saied’s decision. Many Tunisians, frustrated by the political and economic crisis, believe that the President had the right to proceed on this path while many others are questioning if this will represent a drift from Tunisia’s road to democracy or if it will make democracy even stronger.

On the other hand, even though appointing a woman as Prime Minister (the first woman in the Arab world to hold this position) is indeed “*a victory for Tunisia and a tribute to Tunisian women*”, as the President stressed, according to many experts, the move could be a palliative to instability.

Najila Bouden Romdhane, a university geology professor, with limited political experience, could become the symbol of women’s progress and empowerment, not only in Tunisia but in the entire Arab region. Yet it remains to be seen if giving the responsibility of forming the Tunisian government to a woman from outside the political scene will end up being a strategic [symbolic move](#) by Sayed to appease the public opinion while acquiring more control.

What is certain is that, after the 2011 Dignity Revolution, Tunisians have witnessed an unprecedented democratic transition and the young generations will be a considerable obstacle for authoritarian drifts.

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