



# The Tunisian Revolution: An Opportunity for Democratic Transition

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## Abstract

Owing to its macroeconomic achievements, for decades Tunisia projected an image of stability to the world and distinguished itself from other Arab countries for its progress in the areas of economic growth, health, education and women's rights. This widely held view of apparent stability was shattered on January 14, when President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country after high levels of unemployment and inequalities resulted in widespread chaos and social unrest. Events in Tunisia raise sharp questions regarding the country's current situation and its future prospects and, more generally, the often taken-for-granted sustainability of many regimes of the Middle East and the policies of the European Union towards the region.

**Keywords:** *Tunisia / Government / Authoritarianism / Social conditions / Economic conditions / Democracy*

## The Tunisian Revolution: An Opportunity for Democratic Transition

by Rym Ayadi, Silvia Colombo, Maria Cristina Paciello and Nathalie Tocci\*

Owing to its macroeconomic achievements, for decades Tunisia projected an image of stability to the world and distinguished itself from other Arab countries for its progress in the areas of economic growth, health, education and women's rights. This widely held view of apparent stability was shattered on January 14, when President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country after high levels of unemployment and inequalities resulted in widespread chaos and social unrest. Events in Tunisia raise sharp questions regarding the country's current situation and its future prospects and, more generally, the often taken-for-granted sustainability of many regimes of the Middle East and the policies of the European Union towards the region.

Since Ben Ali's rise to power in 1987, Tunisia's counterfeit stability has been ensured at the cost of deep political regression. Over the years, the country became home to one of the most repressive and authoritarian regimes in the region. The regime's systematic and total civil and political repression through intimidation hampered any expression of dissent and encouraged the spread of endemic corruption at various levels. In spite of the widespread violation of human rights, the lack of political freedoms, and widespread corruption, Ben Ali and his inner circle succeeded in securing the support of the population through the distribution of social benefits. The European Union and external actors supported Ben Ali's regime almost unconditionally, swayed by the former president's pursuit of neo-liberal economic liberalization, as well as his cooperation in securing other EU objectives, notably the fight against terrorism and illegal migration.

The events in Tunisia of the last few weeks have brought to the fore the fundamental difference between apparent stability and long-term sustainability, revealing how the point at which an unsustainable *status quo* tips towards political and social instability is often closer than expected. While apparently stable, Tunisia's political system has suddenly revealed itself unsustainable. Taking a closer look, it becomes clear that this is due to the regime's increasing inability over the last decade to address the most prominent socioeconomic challenges facing the country: youth unemployment and growing regional disparities amid rising corruption. Unemployment among the youth

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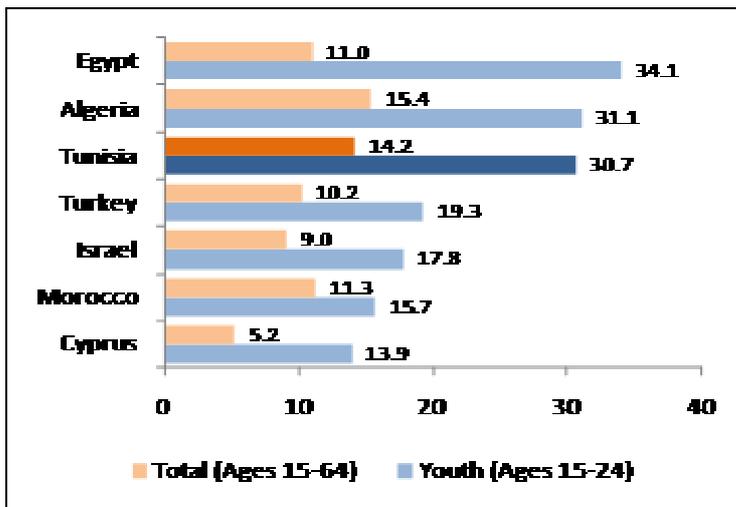
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with secondary and higher education has been on the rise since 2006, with over 30 percent of the working age population between 15 and 24 unemployed, a figure comparable to that in neighbouring Egypt (34 percent) and Algeria (31 percent), but much higher than in Morocco (15 percent), Israel (18 percent), and Turkey (19 percent) (See Figure 1).

Moreover, the global financial crisis has intensified Tunisia's labour market challenges, given its high economic dependency on the EU: unemployment, particularly among graduates, has continued to increase since 2006 (to 18.2 percent in 2007 and 21.9 percent in 2009), while job creation has slowed down (from 80,000 jobs created in 2007 to only 57,000 in 2009).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, although the overall economic situation in Tunisia has improved in the last decades, regional disparities have widened, with the south and centre/west of the country excluded from the benefits of sustained growth. This context has been exacerbated by a severe deficiency in citizens' political rights, freedoms of expression, association, and access to free media<sup>2</sup>, and rising levels of corruption.<sup>3</sup> Over the last decade, the unwritten social contract between Ben Ali and the Tunisian people, resting upon political repression in "exchange" for social benefits, has rapidly fractured.

Fig. 1. Youth unemployment in Tunisia as compared to other countries in the region (2005-2006)



Source: UN and World Bank

As socioeconomic problems became unbearable, particularly for the youth and the educated, a large protest movement arose in December 2010, for the first time since the establishment of Ben Ali's regime. The protests spread rapidly from Sidi Bouzid to

<sup>1</sup> Banque Centrale Tunisienne (2010), *Rapport annuel 2009*, <http://www.bct.gov.tn/bct/siteprod/documents/fiche11.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI)* in 2009, Tunisia lags significantly behind regional averages in "Voice and Accountability", remaining among the bottom 15 percent of over 200 countries surveyed.

<sup>3</sup> Tunisia has moved down several places since the 1998 survey.

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the capital Tunis and other towns. On January 14, 2011 protesters succeeded in overthrowing the president. Although the protests began in reaction to socioeconomic problems, they rapidly became fundamentally political in nature as the roots of these socioeconomic problems are, in fact, quintessentially political. Economic reforms have been used primarily as a tool to redistribute privileges to the families of the president and his wife, who have come to dominate the country's economy, while the spread of corruption, vehemently denounced by the protesters, has caused inefficiencies in the economy, hindering its potential for job creation.<sup>4</sup>

The case of Tunisia highlights how a social contract based on political repression and lack of participation contains the seeds of its own demise. Economic growth and the delivery of social benefits to the population hinges upon a political system of checks and balances that can keep the dangers of widespread corruption and spiralling inequalities at bay. The recent, dramatic events in Tunisia also draw attention to the fact that although many Arab regimes have proven particularly resilient to crises in the past, political and social stability cannot be taken for granted. This holds true for the other regimes in the region that to some extent share the same conditions of fragility and illusionary stability that Tunisia displayed before these recent events.

Socioeconomic problems in the Arab world require, above all, credible and sustainable political solutions. Hence, unless far-reaching and genuine – not cosmetic – political reforms are put in place, the further deterioration of socioeconomic conditions is all but inevitable and, with it, the likelihood of political destabilization. Political repression, coupled with the worsening of living conditions, tends to increase people's alienation, resentment and frustration, particularly among the youth and the educated. Arab regimes and external actors such as the EU would be well advised to factor this increasingly evident reality into their policies. This would call for a radical rethinking of EU policies towards the region. The bottom line is to halt lenient EU policies towards countries that are not showing serious political reforms, despite their proven willingness to cooperate in the fight against terrorism, illegal migration and broader geostrategic objectives.

As for Tunisia, while the large and spontaneous mobilization of Tunisians has achieved a critical historical success: the end of the Ben Ali rule, it remains unclear whether the near future holds in store the genuine political reforms essential for stability or, on the contrary, greater instability that will ultimately spread to other countries in the region. In its hasty effort to contain the violent riots, it is still uncertain whether the unity government, which for the first time includes members of the opposition, will deliver on its promises to the public to make radical reforms towards democratisation. The "Rassemblement Democratique Constitutionnel (RCD)" party, which has dominated Tunisia's political scene, has lost the people's confidence and there are loud calls for its dissolution. However, opposition forces remain weak, poorly organized and divided, and the country lacks a legal framework that is conducive to a vibrant political and civil society. The army, which so far has limited itself to containing social unrest, may

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<sup>4</sup> The problem of corruption and excesses was also denounced in a WikiLeaks cable from the U.S. Embassy in Tunis dated 2009. In light of the recent events, the cable was prescient in warning that oppression, corruption and economic mismanagement were "increasing risks to the regime's long-term stability".

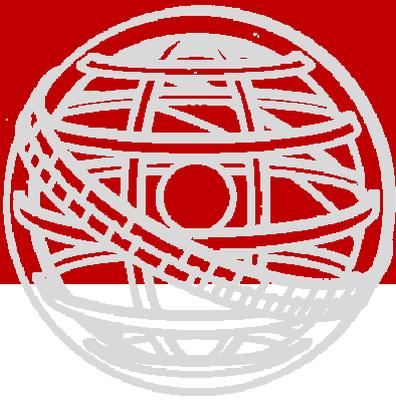
overstep its mark and enter directly onto the political stage. The challenge is to organise promptly credible electoral platforms and campaigns that reflect the will of the population.

To contribute to this democratic transition, the EU, abandoning its unconditional support for the previous Tunisian regime (and hence the related party), ought to act quickly upon its declaration of support “to a genuine democratic transition”<sup>5</sup> and consult with the political parties both within the transition government and beyond it to prepare for the running of the next elections. All efforts must be made to ensure that these elections are free and fair, pursuing, *inter alia*, the constitutional changes that are necessary to make this happen. The likelihood of a positive resolution can only be maximized if internal and external players rapidly act upon the lessons of successful democratic transitions elsewhere.

*Updated: 19 January 2011*

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<sup>5</sup> *Joint statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle on the situation in Tunisia*, Brussels, January 17, 2011, [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118873.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118873.pdf).



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