

## Edraak - Recognizing Liberty<sup>1</sup>

Research Brief No. 2

# Tunisia's Failed Democratic Transition What Went Wrong?

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### Introduction

Initially seen as the success story of the Arab Spring, Tunisia's democratic experiment has faced significant setbacks, raising questions about the factors that contributed to its democratic backsliding.

Tunisia's political trajectory, often lauded as a model for other nations in the region, has been fraught with challenges that reveal the complexities of democratization in post-authoritarian states. Despite early successes, including the adoption of a progressive constitution in 2014 that guaranteed civil liberties, gender equality, and the separation of powers (Stepan, 2012), Tunisia struggled to consolidate these gains due to persistent political, economic and social instability. This research brief seeks to analyze these factors behind Tunisia's faltering democratic transition, offering key lessons that can inform future democratization efforts in similar contexts, particularly in the Muslim world. By examining both the successes and the failures of Tunisia's transition, we can better understand the dynamics that enable or hinder democratization, with implications for policy and governance in other post-revolutionary settings.

### Context: Tunisia's Democratic Transition and the Arab Spring

On 17 December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a 48-year old Tunisian fruit and vegetable vendor set himself on fire in the town of Sidi Bouzid after the police confiscated his cart upon discovering he was operating without a permit. This act of desperation and protest became the symbol of what sparked the revolutionary spirit of Tunisians.

The fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011 marked the start of Tunisia's ambitious democratic reform, positioning it as the only successful revolution of the Arab Spring in establishing democratic institutions. Hopes for political freedom and socio-economic justice were fueled by mass protests against corruption, unemployment, and repression (Esposito, Sonn & Voll, 2015). Civil society, particularly the Tunisian Quartet played a critical role in mediating interests between secular and Islamist forces to develop a democracy with plural characteristics (The Nobel Prize, 2015). The 2014

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constitution, celebrated for its inclusivity, enshrined human rights and gender equality (Stepan, 2012), making Tunisia a beacon of hope for regional democratization.

However, persistent socio-economic issues such as high unemployment, inflation, and political gridlock eroded public confidence in democracy. Transitional governments struggled with corruption and lacked political consensus, deepening public disillusionment (Marks & Ounissi, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened economic conditions, leading to widespread protests demanding better governance. In response, President Kais Saied dissolved parliament in 2021, consolidating power under the claim that existing democratic structures had failed (Grewal, 2021). Tunisia's experience underscores the need to address socio-economic challenges alongside political reforms to sustain democratic transitions, highlighting that democracy must deliver tangible improvements to citizens' lives (Bellin, 2012).

### **Key Factors Contributing to Democratic Backsliding**

As elucidated by Radwan Masmoudi, a former member of the Ennahda Party, deduced that there are five reasons he believes that resulted in the failure of Tunisia's democratic transition: political disunity, resilience of the previous regime, corruption, economic troubles and the rise of authoritarian populism.

After the 2011 revolution, the unity that had toppled Ben Ali quickly unraveled as divisions emerged between secularists and Islamists, primarily represented by the Ennahda party. Ennahda's rise sparked fears among secularists of the imposition of religious law, creating legislative gridlock and paralyzing reforms (Marks & Ounissi, 2016). The ideological divide over popular sovereignty versus divine sovereignty deepened these tensions, with secularists fearing the erosion of personal freedoms and Ennahda asserting that their interpretation of Islam was compatible with democracy (March, 2019). This ideological conflict weakened political discourse and created a vacuum for authoritarian forces to re-emerge.

A significant issue in Tunisia's democratic transition was the inclusion of remnants of the Ben Ali regime. While some sought to exclude these figures, others opted for reconciliation to prevent institutional collapse. This allowed many former elites to retain influence, undermining the democratic process and enabling anti-democratic actors to destabilize the transition (Esposito, Sonn & Voll, 2015). The debate over temporary exclusions of the old guard raised questions about balancing inclusion and democratic integrity.

Corruption persisted during the transition, eroding public trust. Despite the revolution's aim to dismantle Ben Ali's corrupt practices, nepotism and embezzlement remained rampant, particularly in public contracts and political appointments (Yerkes & Muasher, 2017). Politicians focused on power struggles rather than addressing economic recovery, and the Ennahda-Nidaa Tounes coalition failed to implement meaningful reforms, contributing to widespread disillusionment with democracy.

Economic challenges were central to the public's growing dissatisfaction. High unemployment, inflation, and declining living standards created a sense of betrayal among Tunisians who had expected economic prosperity post-revolution. The World Bank reported that Tunisia's economy deteriorated shortly after 2011, contradicting claims that it merely stagnated (World Bank, 2019). Economic instability and a failure to attract foreign investment compounded the government's inability to meet public needs.

The election of President Kais Saied in 2019 marked a turning point. Saied's populist rhetoric promised to cleanse corruption, but his subsequent actions, including dissolving parliament and ruling by decree,

revealed authoritarian tendencies (Yerkes et al., 2022). His consolidation of power highlighted the fragility of Tunisia's democratic institutions, which struggled to resist populist overreach.

### **Analysis: Lessons Learned from Tunisia's Democratic Challenges**

Tunisia's democratic transition raises several critical questions that can deepen our understanding of post-authoritarian governance and the challenges of consolidating democracy in Muslim-majority countries.

One critical question is how post-authoritarian regimes can balance the inclusion of former elites with the need to safeguard democratic transitions. Tunisia's experience shows that remnants of the Ben Ali regime continued to wield considerable influence, raising the question of whether excluding these elites entirely would have strengthened the transition or exacerbated divisions. This issue underscores the delicate, contradictory balance between democratic progress and safeguarding liberties.

The ideological divide between secular and Islamist factions remains one of the most significant obstacles to democratic consolidation in Tunisia and other Muslim-majority countries. How can these factions collaborate to overcome their differences and strengthen democracy? Tunisia's political polarization between secularists and Islamists, particularly between the Ennahda Party and its rivals, contributed to the weakening of democratic institutions. A deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which these groups can work together is vital for addressing similar challenges in other transitioning democracies.

Another pressing question revolves around the role of international economic assistance. What strategies can be employed to ensure that foreign aid effectively supports democratic consolidation rather than merely propping up unstable regimes? Tunisia received international economic assistance, but it struggled to translate this into tangible improvements for its citizens. Future research should investigate the conditions under which international aid can play a more constructive role in stabilizing economies and reinforcing democratic institutions, rather than being co-opted by corrupt or ineffective governance structures.

Lastly, Tunisia's experience offers important lessons for other countries undergoing democratic transitions. How can political parties and civil society work together to overcome divisions and create a more inclusive democratic framework? The international community's role is also crucial; specific steps need to be identified that can provide meaningful support to Tunisia's fragile democracy while addressing its socio-economic challenges. Further investigation on these questions could provide valuable insights for improving democratic resilience in Tunisia and beyond.

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