

Tunisia's Quest for Democracy: Unfinished Domestic Revolution and Regional Geopolitical Entanglements

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

ABSTRACT

Tunisia is at a crossroads following President Kais Saïed's moves that risk endangering the country's decade-long trajectory towards democratisation. Tunisia's long, complex and still open-ended experience with popular mobilisation allows to capture several aspects related to the composition, claims and strategies of the protesters, on the one hand, and to the authorities' responses and the interferences and pressures of external players, on the other hand. Furthermore, when conceptually distinguishing between democratic transition and consolidation, the importance of addressing socio-economic issues early on during the democratic transition phase in order to prevent them from endangering democratic consolidation emerges forcefully from a policy perspective.

*Tunisia | Domestic policy | Political parties | Political movements |
Opposition*

keywords

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by Silvia Colombo*

Introduction

Tunisia is at a historical juncture following the moves by President Kaïs Saïed on 25 July 2021 that suspended the Parliament, stripped lawmakers of their immunity and fired Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi.

While shocking, these actions have not been totally unexpected. The past decade has seen the completion of the political and institutional democratic transition marked by the elections for the Constitutional Assembly (October 2011), the vote for the new Constitution (January 2014), parliamentary and presidential elections (October and November 2014, respectively), the Carthage Agreement (July 2016) that led to the national unity government led by Youssef Chahed, and the latest presidential and parliamentary elections that ran between 15 September and 13 October 2019.

Tunisia has had to withstand many challenges. On the domestic front, dire socio-economic conditions, augmented by austerity measures adopted by the government, have fuelled the frustration and anger of the population – particularly of the new generations. In parallel, security concerns related to violent extremism and instability spilling over from Libya have risked jeopardising the political and institutional gains starting from 2015. Finally, the virulent spread of covid-19, particularly during the first months of 2021, dramatically unmasked the ruling authorities' inefficient management of the state.

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· Paper prepared in the framework of the IAI-ECFR-CeSPI project "Ten Years into the Protests in the Middle East and North Africa. Dynamics of Mobilisation in a Complex (Geo)Political Environment and the Role of the European Union". This publication has benefited from the financial support of the Policy Planning Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation pursuant to art. 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967 and of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation.

All of this has caused recurrent cycles of popular protests and mobilisations to become a constant feature of Tunisia's recent history. While cycles of protests have tended to show similar features in terms of people's participation, forms of mobilisation as well as the broad response by the ruling authorities, it would be a mistake to consider them as instances of the same pattern. There are indeed profound differences between the 2011 protests that sparked the Tunisian revolution against the despotic regime of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, on the one hand, and the protest iterations between 2016 and 2021, on the other. Although they are part of the same process of democratic transition and consolidation, they have contributed to it in different forms and have, on their part, been affected by it differently.

The two most striking differences with the 2011 protests concern, first, the significant place of socio-economic claims and their impact on political and institutional dynamics and, second, the growing role of external players. Understanding such differences is crucial to shed light onto Tunisia's quest for democracy, its potential future trajectory and the stumbling blocks it has been facing.

1. Tunisia's protest movements: A decade-long learning experience

Despite its much-touted supply-side economic reforms, by the end of the 2000s the Ben Ali regime had proven incapable of solving Tunisia's developmental problems. A sustained per capita growth in GDP of about 5 per cent was recorded annually from the mid-1990s to 2008 and the World Bank Doing Business Report unsurprisingly acknowledged the economic success of Tunisia and called it a "top reformer".¹ Nevertheless, GDP growth had not trickled down to the bulk of the population, mainly due to the predatory behaviours of a crony capitalist elite centred on the president's extended family and entourage, poor macroeconomic management, a highly centralised and inefficient bureaucracy, excessive state presence in the economy and a large informal sector providing low-skill, low-paid employment for the high number of Tunisian graduate students swelling the ranks of the so-called *diplômés chômeurs* (unemployed graduates). Factors such as unemployment, governance deficits and unfair contracting had indeed inspired the protests that broke out in Gafsa in early 2008.² Prior to this, Tunisia had experienced several other protests, for example the January 1978 unrest and the Bread Riots of 1984.³

¹ World Bank, *Doing Business 2009. Comparing Regulation in 181 Economies*, Washington, World Bank and Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 79, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/6313>.

² John Chalcraft, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2016; Laryssa Chomiak, "The Making of a Revolution in Tunisia", in *Middle East Law and Governance*, Vol. 3, No. 1-2 (March 2011), p. 72.

³ David Seddon, "Riot and Rebellion: Political Responses to Economic Crisis in North Africa, Tunisia,

In the “delicate authoritarian bargain” between the regime and society in Tunisia “everything seemed to be in place as long as the former succeeded in providing economic and social gains”, thus cultivating its legitimacy and political stability in return.⁴ However, economic grievances, rising economic inequalities and regional disparities pushed social discontent up at the end of the 2000s. At that time, the global financial crisis experienced by European countries – Tunisia’s main trading partners – jolted the Tunisian economy.⁵ Honwana and Mnasri estimate that 31 per cent of the youth with an engineering degree, 50 per cent with a technical and master’s degree, and 68 per cent with a master’s degree in legal studies were unemployed at the end of the first decade of the 21st century.⁶ The self-immolation of the young street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid in December 2010 triggered mass demonstrations, which quickly turned into a full-scale revolution. Ben Ali made a last-ditch attempt to calm youth’s anger by announcing a package of urgent measures, including the pledge to create new 300,000 jobs in two years – but to no avail.⁷ This was followed by a fierce reaction: Ben Ali placed snipers on roofs as he saw his fortunes dwindle. He eventually fled to Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011, a move that contributed to igniting the fire of revolutions across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The fact that the uprising started in the peripheries was not a surprise. Since Tunisia gained independence in 1956, an historical concentration of investments (mainly in tourism and infrastructures) in coastal areas (such as Tunis, Monastir, Mahdia and Sousse) had resulted in the continuing marginalisation of internal regions (such as Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Medinine and Gafsa), creating an explosive cleavage between the centre and the periphery of the country. The marginalisation of interior regions had only worsened under Ben Ali’s regime which, over two decades, took deliberate decisions that progressively reduced Tunisia’s interior regions to reservoirs of cheap labour, agrarian products and raw materials for the more developed industries and service sectors operating in the coastal areas.⁸ Tribal and family affiliations were at the core of the clientelist resource distribution system meant to maintain fragile stability. However, people excluded from patronage networks started to accumulate rage and frustration. On the eve of the

Morocco and Sudan”, in Berch Berberoglu (ed.), *Power and Stability in the Middle East*, London, Zed Books, 1989, p. 114-135.

⁴ Mohammad Dawood Sofi, “Rethinking the Root Causes of the Tunisian Revolution and Its Implications”, in *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (September 2019), p. 41-64.

⁵ Lahcen Achy, “Tunisia’s Economic Challenges”, in *Carnegie Papers*, December 2011, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/46304>.

⁶ Chamseddine Mnasri, “Tunisia: The People’s Revolution”, in *International Socialism*, No. 130 (Spring 2011), p. 19-26, <http://isj.org.uk/?p=720>; Alcinda Honwana, *Youth and Revolution in Tunisia*, London/New York, Zed Books, 2013, p. 26.

⁷ See Bilal Randeree, “Tunisian Leader Promises New Jobs”, in *Al Jazeera*, 10 January 2011, <https://aje.io/h7sqe>.

⁸ Silvia Colombo and Hamza Meddeb, “Fostering Inclusiveness: A New Roadmap for EU-Tunisia Relations and the Engagement with Civil Society”, in Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria (ed.), “The EU-Tunisia Privileged Partnership – What Next?”, in *EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Studies*, No. 10 (April 2018), p. 36, <https://www.iemed.org/?p=16266>.

fall of Ben Ali, poverty was estimated at 42 per cent in the Centre-West and at 36 per cent in the North-West, whereas it was at the much lower rate of 11 per cent in Tunis and the Centre-East of the country.⁹

The factors that prompted the January 2011 Tunisian revolution were not confined to the devastating socio-economic situation. On the political front, there were equally important reasons for discontent and frustration. Following Ben Ali's coming to power in 1987, an early phase of political liberalisation opened, during which the new president released hundreds of political prisoners, including Islamists, admitted new political parties and negotiated a National Pact with the country's main opposition forces, abolished state security courts, put a ceiling on the number of presidential terms and relaxed controls over television and radio.¹⁰

However, soon thereafter, the true face of the president and his regime started to reveal itself when he ordered the systematic repression of any forms of opposition and dissent and curtailed basic rights and liberties. The main victims of these measures were human rights activists, journalists and members of the opposition, particularly the Islamist-leaning ones.¹¹ These practices contrasted with the image of Tunisia as a liberalising, moderate country, cultivated both by Tunisian authorities and its external partners, international financial institutions such as the World Bank, and the European Union. This is in line with what Perkins calls "*démocratie à la tunisienne*", namely Tunisia's ability to keep up appearances by pursuing democratic governance selectively.¹² Citizens were given the opportunity to discuss and endorse the work of their government but not to set its agenda.¹³ This appearance of participation was particularly painful for the youth, who represented a great chunk of Tunisia's population and thus the bulk of the marginalised.

The significance of the events of 2010–2011 for Tunisian youth cannot be underestimated, as after all the Tunisian revolution was unanimously hailed as a "youth revolution".¹⁴ The mobilisation of Tunisian youth went beyond the purely generational struggle. Youth demands and strategies in 2011 were illustrative of the full array of challenges resulting from the exclusion of the Tunisian population at large from economic, political and socio-cultural arenas and caused by the failure of the post-independence development models.¹⁵

⁹ Ibid.; Hamza Meddeb, "Peripheral Vision: How Europe Can Help Preserve Tunisia's Fragile Democracy", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, January 2017, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=3752>.

¹⁰ Silvia Colombo, *Political and Institutional Transition in North Africa. Egypt and Tunisia in Comparative Perspective*, London/New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 38.

¹¹ Kristina Kausch, "Tunisia: The Life of Others. Project on Freedom of Association in the Middle East and North Africa", in *FRIDE Working Papers*, No. 85 (June 2009), http://web.archive.org/web/20100621183853/http://www.fride.org/descarga/FRIDE_WP85_INGLES_FINAL.pdf.

¹² Kenneth Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

¹³ Ibid., p. 208.

¹⁴ Vanessa Szakal, "Regards croisés sur le mal-être de la jeunesse tunisienne", in *Nawaat*, 11 May 2017, <https://nawaat.org/2017/05/11/regards-croises-sur-le-mal-etre-de-la-jeunesse-tunisienne>.

¹⁵ M. Chloe Mulderig, "Adulthood Denied: Youth Dissatisfaction and the Arab Spring", in *BU Pardee*

The intensity with which the Tunisian youth experienced the protests stems from the fact that they had developed a particular consciousness about being "young".¹⁶ As Herrera and Bayat have argued with regard to the Mediterranean countries in general, schooling, mass media, iconic urban spaces (such as public parks, squares and shopping malls), as well as new information communication technologies, all played a crucial role in fostering a particular consciousness about being young, facilitating mutual exchanges and peer interaction also across national borders.¹⁷ During the multiple demonstrations of early 2011, the courage of Tunisia's younger generations, who challenged the ruthlessness of the regime, contributed to drawing other people into the protest fray. This was the story, for instance, of some civil society organisations (CSOs), the powerful Trade Unions movement broadly represented by the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT), lawyers and opposition political figures who joined the protest at a later stage.¹⁸ It also pushed the armed forces to give up their role as guardians of a dying regime and to side with the demonstrators.¹⁹

In addition to the centrality of youth, the gender dimension is also worth underscoring as a key element both during the revolution and in its aftermath. While institutionally Tunisian women have enjoyed significantly more progressive rights in comparison to the situation of women in other Arab countries since the passing of the *Code de statut personnel* in 1956, gender-based discrimination has reinforced other dimensions of domestic marginalisation (generational factors, regional disparities) as demonstrated by the fact that young women had lower employment rates than young men (13.3 per cent versus 30.3 per cent in 2011) and much lower ones compared to male adults (44.3 per cent).²⁰

In light of these features, the Tunisian revolution has been hailed as a "populist, youthful, and technological [...] uprising".²¹ Internet, media and social networking sites were very effective tools in organising the protests, catalysing the revolution

Issues in Brief, No. 21 (October 2011), <https://www.bu.edu/pardee/?p=10776>.

¹⁶ Maria Cristina Paciello and Daniela Pioppi, "Youth Empowerment as a Collective, Bottom-Up and Long-Term Process", in *IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook 2014*, p. 68, <https://www.iemed.org/?p=29081>.

¹⁷ Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat (eds), *Being Young and Muslim. New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.

¹⁸ To be more precise the base of the syndicate at the regional and provincial levels did join the demonstrations spontaneously from the beginning – as it had done during the 2008 Gafsa protests. On the contrary, initial immobilism applied to the cadres of the syndicate who were closer to the Ben Ali regime. See Joel Beinin, *Workers and Thieves. Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt*, Stanford, Stanford Briefs, 2015.

¹⁹ Author's phone interview with Tunisian activist, May 2021.

²⁰ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Investing in Youth: Tunisia. Strengthening the Employability of Youth during the Transition to a Green Economy*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2015, p. 20, <https://read.oecd.org/10.1787/9789264226470-en>.

²¹ Kenneth Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia*, cit., p. 225.

that otherwise would have evolved at a much slower pace.²² According to Masri, social media gave substantive, symbolic and organisational force to the revolution.²³ More importantly, social media acted as the most important tool in transforming a large number of people from mere observers of activism to activists themselves.²⁴

Tunisian youth in particular were masters when it came to the use of the latest communication technologies. Tunisia was the first Arab country to provisionally install the Internet in 1991. From the mid-1990s on, the Ben Ali regime invested heavily in promoting the telecommunications sector, endowing Tunisia with one of the most developed telecommunications infrastructures (including the Internet) in the region. Some reports suggest that in 2001, out of a population of 10.5 million, the number of Internet users reached almost 4 million.²⁵ On the other hand, the regime closely monitored Internet use and frequently resorted to one of the world's most repressive control of communication, at different levels. Censorship included shutting down Internet service for any amount of time and banning various websites and blogs.

Even before Bouazizi's self-immolation sparked nationwide protests, tech-savvy activists had been at the forefront of confronting the regime. A good example in this regard is that of the 2008 Gafsa protests. As expected, the Tunisian press hardly bothered to cover these incidents, whereas the international media reported on them frequently. The authorities then censored foreign broadcasting. Activists used an alternative yet dynamic platform to transmit the information about the Gafsa incident to a wider audience, primarily through emails and Facebook. Another important Facebook campaign became popular in the country under the name of "Tunisia in White" (*Tunisie en Blanc*), in which young activists tried to break Internet censorship.²⁶

It was in 2011 that social media really became the main tool in the hands of a tech-savvy generation actively engaged in breaking the national media blackout in Tunisia. The widespread use of cell phones, the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channels and blogs represented an electronic alternative platform for social and political activism. Tunisian authorities found extremely difficult to exercise control on. Digital media also provided an element of emotional mobilisation: beyond enabling filming and sharing the protests, more importantly electronic communication served as a powerful means to expose the authoritarian face of Ben Ali's regime and its propaganda, including by revealing regime abuses and disclosing government corruption to a wider audience within and beyond

²² Anita Breuer, Todd Landman and Dorothea Farquhar, "Social Media and Protest Mobilization: Evidence from the Tunisian Revolution", in *Democratization*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2015), p. 764-792.

²³ Safwan M. Masri, *Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2017, p. 32.

²⁴ Jon B. Alterman, "The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted", in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Fall 2011), p. 103-116, <https://www.csis.org/node/28318>.

²⁵ Amira Aleya-Sghaier, "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity", in *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2012), p. 37.

²⁶ Laryssa Chomiak, "The Making of a Revolution in Tunisia", cit., p. 72-75.

Tunisia. This role was compounded by that of international media networks, such as Al Jazeera, El Hiwar, Al Arabiya, the BBC and CNN, covering the revolution.

With Ben Ali's flight to Saudi Arabia in January 2011, the main goal of the brave, short-term Tunisian popular mobilisation had been accomplished. However, throughout the following decade protests and demonstrations never stopped. They actually acquired even more importance in keeping the bar high in terms of people's demands vis-à-vis the unfolding democratic transition and consolidation process. They effectively became part of a learning experience at the grassroots level. Most of them have originated from the southern part of the country, thus reinforcing the idea of two-speed Tunisia in development terms, and have been mainly motivated by the pressing issues of (youth) unemployment and underdevelopment.

In January 2016, a wave of social unrest and violent demonstrations began in Kasserine, after the death of a young man who had contested the results of a hiring procedure, and spread through sixteen other governorates. The protesters complained about unemployment and denounced the corruption plaguing the regional administration.²⁷ In September 2016, in the mining region of Gafsa and in the Jendouba governorate (close to the Algerian border), demonstrators protested against economic marginalisation and local corruption for several weeks.²⁸ In March 2017, strikes and demonstrations in Tataouine completely blocked all economic activity in the region. According to reports of the event, "protesters proclaimed their right to employment and the development of their marginalised region, where many oil companies operate without accepting any social or environmental responsibility for the development of the area".²⁹

Indeed, environmental rights have gradually climbed the ladder of the priorities of popular mobilisation in Tunisia with the setting up of coalitions across CSOs working on overarching issues also in cooperation with external partners.³⁰ Demonstrators in Tataouine called for concrete measures to foster economic development and people's participation in the legal economy, for example by setting up a free trade zone with neighbouring Libya, and to strip national and international investors, which have access to natural resources, of exploitation rights.³¹ New protests broke

²⁷ Silvia Colombo and Hamza Meddeb, "Fostering Inclusiveness", cit., p. 42; Vanessa Szakal, "After Kasserine, Protests Break Out in 16 Governorates", in *Nawaat*, 22 January 2016, <https://nawaat.org/portail/2016/01/22/after-kasserine-protests-break-out-in-16-governorates>.

²⁸ Hamza Meddeb, "Peripheral Vision", cit.; Maha Yahya, "Great Expectations in Tunisia", in *Carnegie Papers*, March 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/63138>.

²⁹ Hamza Meddeb, "Precarious Resilience: Tunisia's Libyan Predicament", in *MENARA Future Notes*, No. 5 (April 2017), p. 7, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/7722>.

³⁰ For more insights on environmental rights in the context of the Tunisian mobilisation, see Eric Goldstein, "Tunisia's Legacy of Pollution Confronts Democratic Politics", in *Open Democracy*, 23 May 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/tunisias-legacy-of-pollution-confronts-democratic-politics>.

³¹ Youssef Cherif, "The Kamour Movement and Civic Protests in Tunisia", in *Carnegie Articles*, 8 August 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/72774>; Alessandra Bajec, "Tunisia: In Tataouine, Socio-Economic Marginalization Is a Time Bomb", in *Bawader*, 24 July 2020, <https://>

out in January 2018 after the passing of the new economic and financial law and following the announcement of new rounds of austerity measures.³² A national strike to demand pay increases for public employees in January 2019 brought the country to a halt.³³

The army and the security apparatuses in general have tended to adopt a harsher response vis-à-vis these more recent protests compared to the 2011 ones due to the general over-securitisation of popular mobilisation and activism by Tunisian authorities influenced by changing regional and international circumstances. This response – which has involved the use of water cannons, police barricades and indiscriminate arrests – has triggered further unrest and has led to violent clashes between officers and protesters.³⁴

The high rate of covid-19 infections registered in the country particularly in the first half of 2021, together with the governing authorities' mismanagement of the prevention and vaccination campaigns, led to the multiplication of protests, which took place in spite of the restrictions. It is not by coincidence that President Kaïs Saïed's decisions on 25 July 2021 were taken during the peak of the covid-19 wave with average rates of infections at more than 7,000 daily cases.

All in all, Tunisia's decade-long mobilisation has been characterised by the emergence of new claims framed along previously dormant or hidden collective identities. As argued elsewhere, while before 2011 identity-related issues were generally regarded as taboo – to protect the seemingly homogeneous Arab-Muslim nature of Tunisian identity and the peaceful character of the country – the revolution provided the space and opportunity for a new discourse around the role of minorities to emerge. This discourse has been powerfully framed within the "right to diversity" language (*droit à la différence*) thanks to the relentless work of Tunisian civil society.³⁵ For example, sectarian, ethnic and even tribal fault lines have started to emerge at the societal level, thus leading to fissures within society and to political competition.

For example, moderate/pragmatic Islamists, such as supporters of the moderate Islamist Ennahda party, and more radical ones (e.g., those supporting the Salafists) started to compete for visibility and power, drawing political lines of demarcation

www.arab-reform.net/?p=11217.

³² Lilia Blaise, "Nearly 800 Arrested in Economic Protests in Tunisia", in *The New York Times*, 12 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/world/africa/tunisia-tunis-protests-arrests.html>; International Crisis Group, Interview with Michaël Béchir Ayari, *Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift* (video), 11 January 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/5916>.

³³ "Tunisia's Powerful UGTT Workers Union Holds Nationwide Strike", in *Al Jazeera*, 17 January 2019, <https://aje.io/j5edj>.

³⁴ Yasmina Abouzouhour, "Caught in Transition: Tunisia's Protests and the Threat of Repression", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 23 February 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=68181>.

³⁵ Silvia Colombo et al., "New Trends in Identity Politics in the Middle East and North Africa and Their Impact on State-Society Relations", in *MENARA Working Papers*, No. 14 (October 2018), p. 12-13, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9573>.

between secularists and Islamists and within the Islamist camp itself.³⁶ Another fault line that has been projected onto Tunisian society for the first time is that between Arab and Amazigh, often inspired by the experience of Moroccan ethnic struggles.³⁷ Finally, regional and local collective identities have been sharpened vis-à-vis the central powers through the manipulation of previously hidden tribal identities (e.g., for example in the Sfax region), leading to a partial reappearance of tribalism as a way to affirm local identities that are not sufficiently taken into account at the national level.³⁸

All these new identity-based claims have had an impact on the two biggest and most important groups in the demonstrations, the youth and the women. Like in other Arab countries, the Tunisian youth have quickly divided along ideological, religious and mainly socio-economic fault lines. This was demonstrated already during the January 2011 revolution when the youth in the cities mainly protested for civil rights while the youth in the countryside took to the streets chanting slogans for better economic conditions, equality and social justice.³⁹ This applies also to women's activism. The Tunisian mobilisation around women's issues after 2011 has been deeply divided particularly between the conservative/Islamist-leaning groups, on the one hand, and the progressive/secular ones, on the other.⁴⁰

2. Political and institutional transition in Tunisia: From the streets to the ballots and back?

When Ben Ali fled the country, many young Tunisians found themselves at the forefront of a historic political transition. Youth-led associations flourished (around 11,400 new organisations in the wake of the revolution⁴¹), all trying to push for the government to adopt an agenda of change centred on youth's problems. Strengthening civil society and youth participation thus became the main objectives of the domestic and global agenda on Tunisia, mainly through the work of charities, grassroots CSOs and international cooperation.⁴² However, it soon

³⁶ Silvia Colombo and Benedetta Voltolini, "The EU's Engagement with 'Moderate' Political Islam: The Case of Ennahda", in *LSE Middle East Centre Papers*, No. 19 (July 2017), <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/84065>.

³⁷ Silvia Colombo et al., "New Trends in Identity Politics in the Middle East and North Africa...", cit., p. 14.

³⁸ Author's interview with a Tunisian intellectual, Tunis, February 2018.

³⁹ Author's interview with a Tunisian representative of the youth movement, Tunis, February 2018.

⁴⁰ Author's interview with a Tunisian representative of the women's movement, Tunis, February 2018.

⁴¹ Wafa Ben-Hassine, "Tunisian Civil Society's Unmistakable Role in Keeping the Peace", in *MENASource*, 19 January 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=107659>.

⁴² International Labour Office, *Transition vers le marché du travail des jeunes femmes et hommes en Tunisie: Résultats de l'enquête auprès des entreprises*, Geneva, International Labour Organisation, 2015, https://www.ilo.org/employment/areas/youth-employment/WCMS_444913/lang--en; European External Action Service (EEAS), *The European Union and Tunisia launch the EU-Tunisia Youth Partnership*, 1 December 2016, <https://europa.eu/!9CTjuQ>.

became clear that satisfying young Tunisians' demands for more opportunities both in the political and in the economic realms was not easy.

At the institutional level, after two years of intense bargaining, in January 2014 Tunisia was presented with a new Constitution. The renewed focus on youth was illustrated by Article 8 stating that: "[y]outh are an active force in building the nation. The state seeks to provide the necessary conditions for developing the capacities of youth and realising their potential, supports them to assume responsibility, and strives to extend and generalise their participation in social, economic, cultural and political development".⁴³ Other constitutions of the region do not mention young generations and their role within society so explicitly. However, the policies adopted by successive governments were either in full continuity with the past as they proposed to reinforce supply-side approaches or only able to come up with palliative measures or temporary concessions at best.⁴⁴

The 2012-launched National Strategy for Employment 2013-2017 achieved only meagre results. Since 2011, the main employer for the youth in Tunisia has continued to be the informal sector: the share of young people finding a job in the informal sector increased from 28 per cent in 2010 to 32 per cent in 2015, and reached 54 per cent in 2017.⁴⁵ Some of them have also become involved in cross-border smuggling and trafficking with nearby countries such as war-torn Libya and Algeria.⁴⁶ In addition, irregular migration, radicalisation and violent extremism have tarnished the image of "revolutionary heroes" that had been previously attributed to the youth.⁴⁷ Indeed young Tunisians have represented the largest group of foreign fighters who have joined the Islamic State to be trained and fight in Syria and Iraq or elsewhere.⁴⁸ The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence has estimated that Tunisia has fuelled ISIS with young Tunisian fighters at a constant pace, reaching a total of three

⁴³ Silvia Colombo and Hamza Meddeb, "Fostering Inclusiveness", cit., p. 45.

⁴⁴ Pietro Marzo, "Why Youth Empowerment Can Sustain Tunisia's Democratic Consolidation", in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 16|09 (April 2016), p. 7, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/6215>.

⁴⁵ Silvia Colombo and Hamza Meddeb, "Fostering Inclusiveness", cit., p. 44-45; "Tunisie: L'emploi des jeunes doit être une priorité nationale", in *Directinfo*, 4 October 2017, <https://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/?p=331189>.

⁴⁶ Max Gallien, "Informal Institutions and the Regulation of Smuggling in North Africa", in *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (June 2020), p. 492-508, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719001026>.

⁴⁷ Author's interview with a civil society activist working on youth de-radicalisation, Tunis, February 2018; World Bank, "Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion", in *World Bank Reports*, No. 89233-TN (2014), p. xiii-xiv, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/20693>; Isabel Schäfer, "Fostering a Youth-Sensitive Approach in the EU's Policies towards the South and East Mediterranean Countries – The Case of Tunisia", in Silvia Colombo (ed.), "Youth Activism in the South and East Mediterranean Countries since the Arab Uprisings: Challenges and Policy Options", in *EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Studies*, No. 2 (February 2016), p. 66-67, <https://www.iemed.org/?p=17077>.

⁴⁸ Dario Cristiani, "The Geography of Discontent: Tunisia's Syrian Fighter Dilemma", in *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, No. 20 (24 October 2014), <https://jamestown.org/?p=14493>; Georges Fahmi and Hamza Meddeb, "Market for Jihad. Radicalization in Tunisia", in *Carnegie Papers*, October 2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/61629>.

thousand.⁴⁹

Moving from security challenges to domestic politics, from an institutional and procedural point of view Tunisia has ticked all the boxes towards accomplishing the democratic transition mainly thanks to the prevailing moderation and consensus-driven attitudes as well as the search for peaceful coexistence and compromise among the different domestic political and social forces.⁵⁰ This is not to say that the Tunisian political transition to democracy has been devoid of conflicts, some of which have even escalated into criminal actions such as the assassination of prominent secular leader Chokri Belaid on 6 February 2013 and the murder of leftist leader Mohamed Brahmi in late July 2013. The years between 2011 and 2015 were particularly tense. Some have claimed it to be a period of "national cold war", while others have defined it as the "golden age" of civil society activism – in an interesting but complementary conflict of perceptions.⁵¹

In spite of their proliferation after 2011, political parties have remained extremely weak. More than two hundred parties exist today but only around fifty among them can be regarded as viable organisations and only fifteen have made it into the Parliament during the latest round of parliamentary elections.⁵² Some of these parties are empty shells unable to channel new ideas into the policy-making process. The reform agenda has stalled and the revolutionary spirit of the protests has been diluted.⁵³ Successive coalition governments have failed to reform the justice system, which remains only partially independent and characterised by laws dating back to the beginning of the 1900s, and the security sector, which continues to be undemocratic, inefficient and coercive.

What is more troublesome, successive political executives have failed to address socio-economic problems and regional disparities, leading to growing internal mobilisation, which in turn has negatively impacted the legitimacy of both national and local authorities, undermining societal resilience. The economy has been stagnating in the past decade and suffered a heavy blow in 2020 in terms of GDP growth (-8.6 per cent), with unemployment reaching 16.3 per cent and

⁴⁹ Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Tunisian-Libyan Jihadi Connection", in *ICSR Insights*, 6 July 2015, <https://icsr.info/?p=9368>.

⁵⁰ Leonardo Morlino, *Changes for Democracy. Actors, Structures, Processes*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2012; Amel Boubekour, "Islamists, Secularists and Old Regime Elites in Tunisia: Bargained Competition", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2016), p. 107-127, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1081449>; Alfred Stepan, "Tunisia's Transition and the Twin Tolerations", in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (April 2012), p. 89-103, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/tunisias-transition-and-the-twin-tolerations>.

⁵¹ Author's phone interviews with Tunisian activists, May–June 2021.

⁵² Author's phone interview with a Tunisian CSO representative, October 2020.

⁵³ Luigi Narbone, "The EU-Tunisian Relationship After 2011: Resilience, Contestation and the Return of the Neglected Socio-Economic Question", in *Middle East Directions Research Project Reports*, No. 2020/18 (December 2018), p. 5, <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/69264>; Sharan Grewal and Shadi Hamid, "The Dark Side of Consensus in Tunisia: Lessons from 2015-2019", in *Brookings Reports*, January 2020, <https://brook.gs/2S3brbd>.

rampant inflation.⁵⁴ Expectations for a better economic future have plummeted. In 2019, only a third of Tunisians believed that the situation would improve in the coming years, compared to 78 per cent in 2011.⁵⁵

This has led to the subsuming of some of the claims voiced by the protesters under political and institutional, mainly bureaucratic, processes without real change, to conflicts between the key institutions (the President and the Parliament first and foremost) that fuel governance problems, and lastly to the return of political figures from the days of Ben Ali. During the 2018 municipal elections participation was low and traditional parties (of both Islamist and secular leanings) performed badly compared to independent candidates. Similarly, in the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections new political figures, espousing populist slogans and agendas, gained traction. It is in this context that traditional political forces have suffered an even heavier blow due to the existing uncertainty linked to the 25 July presidential moves.

The President's decisions to concentrate powers in his hands, suspend parts of the 2014 constitution and create a new, hybrid constitutional order that could pave the way to authoritarian restoration came at a delicate moment. Tunisia was moving towards the initial stage of consolidating its democracy, but it was still far from achieving the goal. According to Linz, in a consolidated democracy "none of the major political actors, parties, or organized interests, forces, or institutions consider that there is any alternative to democratic processes to gain power, and [...] no political institution or group has a claim to veto the action of democratically elected decision makers. [...] To put it simply, democracy must be seen as the 'only game in town'".⁵⁶ Clearly this is not the case in Tunisia today. As demonstrated by the 25 July moves and subsequent presidential decrees, the risk of regression to a crisis situation remains around the corner.

All this notwithstanding, Tunisia has managed to remain afloat and has displayed a significant degree of resilience in trailing the complex consolidation path mainly thanks to a vibrant and engaged civil society that has taken upon itself the role of watchdog and custodian of the political processes, from electoral politics to political governance and transparency. The birth of several micro-movements and associations – something that was completely new in light of the previous decades of authoritarianism and repression – has led to a sense of empowerment. In spite of all the existing challenges, Tunisian civil society has acted as the real engine of change and as a barrier to the vagaries of the politicians and the formal political actors.

⁵⁴ Yasmina Abouzohour, "Caught in Transition", cit.

⁵⁵ Arab Barometer, *Arab Barometer V: Tunisia Country Report*, 2019, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABV_Tunisia_Report_Public-Opinion_2018-2019.pdf.

⁵⁶ Juan J. Linz, "Transitions to Democracy", in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Summer 1990), p. 158.

It has mainly been thanks to the civil society's continuous mobilisation following 2011 that some progress has been made in making the Tunisian state more democratic, accountable and responsive.⁵⁷ For example, on gender issues, the concept of "equality" has made its way into the final text of the Constitution with Article 20 stating that: "all the citizens have the same rights and the same duties. They are equal in front of the law without any discrimination". In addition, Article 45 defines the role of the state as the guarantor of women's protection.⁵⁸ Furthermore, it was thanks to the mobilisation of more than a hundred women's associations that a new law introducing the concepts of "violence against women", of "moral and sexual violence", and of "economic exploitation" was finally adopted in July 2017 after having stalled in the legislative process for more than twenty years.⁵⁹ Similarly, it was thanks to the growing societal salience acquired by regional and local collective, identity-based claims that the issue of the inequalities between the centre and the peripheries entered the public debate forcefully, to the extent that the "Code des collectivités locales", namely the organic law regulating regional and local governance was adopted by the Parliament only ten days before the Tunisian municipal elections held on 6 May 2018.⁶⁰

3. Regional turmoil and the need to protect Tunisia's democratisation process: The role of the EU

If the years between 2011 and 2015 were characterised by intense domestic political conflicts as a result of institutional disagreements and popular struggles over civic and political rights, since 2015 socio-economic issues have taken precedence amongst the factors around which popular activism has coalesced. This has been compounded by external interferences, which have made Tunisia's path towards democracy increasingly fragile.

The democratisation literature insists on the importance of considering external factors particularly during the democratic consolidation phase.⁶¹ In this sense, Tunisia's experience represents a textbook case. At the regional level, external variables range from the impact of the Libyan conflict on Tunisia's material insecurity, particularly in the south,⁶² to the increasingly visible actions taken

⁵⁷ Silvia Colombo, *Political and Institutional Transition in North Africa*, cit.

⁵⁸ Silvia Colombo and Hamza Meddeb, "Fostering Inclusiveness", cit., p. 46.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 34-56.

⁶⁰ The previous local elections in Tunisia had been held in 2010. See Silvia Colombo et al., "New Trends in Identity Politics in the Middle East and North Africa...", cit., p. 23.

⁶¹ See, for example, Laurence Whitehead (ed.), *The International Dimensions of Democratization. Europe and the Americas*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996; Amichai Magen and Leonardo Morlino (eds), *International Actors, Democratization and the Rule of Law. Anchoring Democracy?*, New York/London, Routledge, 2009.

⁶² Robbie Gramer and Humza Jilani, "Libya an Obstacle on Tunisia's Path to Stability", in *Foreign Policy*, 6 August 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/06/libya-an-obstacle-on-tunisias-path-to-stability>.

by some Arab Gulf countries. At the international level, such variables concern the evolution of Europe-Tunisia relations, both at the EU level and at member states level, and the role of other external players such as the United States and the international financial institutions (for example the International Monetary Fund, with which Tunisia negotiated a 2.9 billion US dollars bailout in April 2016) in supporting or endangering Tunisian democratisation. The negative influence exerted by the neighbouring Libyan conflict and by Gulf-driven propaganda and political/economic pressures on Tunisia's democratisation has not been offset by a positive engagement by the EU and other external players.

Tunisia was the first country to sign an Association Agreement with Europe in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in the mid-1990s. At the time of the 2011 revolution and during the initial phase of the democratic transition, the EU was among the most forthcoming supporters of Tunisia's desire to break with the past. In the framework of its own soul-searching exercise, the EU realised that it had underestimated the needs and power of the society. The spectrum of initiatives and funds channelled through civil society in Tunisia therefore increased. They were systematised with the launch of the *Programme d'Appui à la Société Civile* (amongst others), which mobilised 7 million euro in support of more than seventy civil society-focused projects between 2012 and 2016. The EU also co-funded the creation of the *Jamaity.org* platform in 2014, bringing together more than 1,600 Tunisian CSOs that had been active during the 2011 revolution.⁶³

In spite of this positive record, the EU's engagement with civil society in Tunisia remains fraught with problems. First, the EU's support to CSOs has been fragmented along different policy lines (such as development cooperation, the promotion of human rights and democracy) and funding instruments, each of which has its own logic and little coordination. Second, the agenda that informs the EU's support for civil society has largely been driven by the EU itself or at best has been worked out in cooperation with the government authorities, with no significant involvement of the CSOs in the planning and designing of activities. Third, the EU tends to promote civil society based on its own liberal-democratic model, which has meant that some CSOs have had access to funds, training and engagement opportunities because they are more in line with Western rhetoric and procedures, while others have been overlooked irrespective of their links to and ability to foster political and social change.⁶⁴

An attempt to overcome these flaws was made with the so-called Tripartite Dialogue. This flagship initiative, 80 per cent of which is funded by the EU, was implemented by EuroMed Rights between 2013 and 2019 with the aim to create a space for dialogue and consultation between CSOs, government authorities and the EU on issues such as migration, social and economic rights, justice and gender

⁶³ Silvia Colombo and Hamza Meddeb, "Fostering Inclusiveness", cit., p. 39. For more information, see the official website: <https://jamaity.org>.

⁶⁴ Author's interview with the director of a prominent Tunisian CSO, Tunis, January 2018.

equality. Its ultimate goal was to set up a regular, consultative and decision-oriented mechanism to involve Tunisian CSOs in the decision-making process and increase transparency and accountability.⁶⁵

The end of the Tripartite Dialogue is illustrative of the broader trend of EU-Tunisia relations.⁶⁶ After the initial support to the Tunisian revolution and the protest movement, since 2015 EU-Tunisia relations have undergone a process of over-securitisation, parallel to the process that has gone on at the domestic level with the adoption of the much-debated counter-terrorism law in that year.⁶⁷ While rhetorically insisting on the need to foster resilience at the state and the societal level in the framework of the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, the EU has in practice pursued an agenda of transition without transformation, which is what most people in Tunisia complain about.⁶⁸ This agenda has been characterised by a focus on anti-terrorism, anti-radicalisation and control of irregular migration, on the one hand, and on the *mise à niveau* of the Tunisian economy as a means to facilitate trade cooperation and lay the groundwork for the negotiation of a deeply imbalanced Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), which has not yet seen the light – according to EU policy makers – due to the limited absorption capacity of Tunisia.⁶⁹ Social aspects standing at the core of Tunisia's struggles for inclusive and democratic development have been disregarded.⁷⁰

Other external players have exploited the gap left by the EU to meddle in Tunisian domestic affairs. Changing patterns of conflict in the broader MENA region, influenced by growing geo-political and geo-economic competition, have posed severe challenges to Tunisia's internal stability, democratic consolidation and pro-European course. Not only has this course been severely tested by the impact of the Libyan conflict, which has caused among other things an increase in the military budget from 0.57 billion US dollars (1.3 per cent of GDP) in 2010 to 1 billion (2.56 per cent of GDP) in 2019,⁷¹ but other regional players, *in primis* Turkey and some of

⁶⁵ Silvia Colombo and Hamza Meddeb, "Fostering Inclusiveness", cit., p. 40; Author's interview with an advocacy officer at EuroMed Rights working on the Tripartite Dialogue, Tunis, February 2018.

⁶⁶ Author's phone interviews with Tunisian activists, May-June 2021.

⁶⁷ Youssef Cherif and Kristina Kausch, "Reluctant Pioneers. Towards a New Framework for EU-Tunisia Relations", in Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria (ed.), "The EU-Tunisia Privileged Partnership – What Next?", in *EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Studies*, No. 10 (April 2018), p. 12-32, <https://www.iemed.org/?p=16266>.

⁶⁸ Silvia Colombo, "'Principled Pragmatism' Reset: For a Recalibration of the EU's Diplomatic Engagement with the MENA Region", in *IAI Papers*, No. 21|39 (September 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/13972>.

⁶⁹ For a more critical assessment of the DCFTA and the Tunisian point of view, see Elyes Ghanmi and Guillaume Van der Loo, "What Kind of Future for the EU-Tunisia DCFTA?", in Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria (ed.), "The EU-Tunisia Privileged Partnership – What Next?", in *EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Studies*, No. 10 (April 2018), p. 58-83, <https://www.iemed.org/?p=16266>.

⁷⁰ Tarek Megerisi, "Back from the Brink: A Better Way for Europe to Support Tunisia's Democratic Transition", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, June 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=74706>.

⁷¹ See MacroTrends website: *Tunisia Military Spending/Defense Budget 1960-2021*, <https://www.>

the Arab Gulf states, have all stepped up their political, economic and ideological outreach to Tunisia in ways that have been extremely damaging.

Tunisia has suffered from the polarisation and intra-Sunni rivalry between the Arab Gulf states linked to the Qatar boycott in place between 2017 and early 2021.⁷² On the one hand, Qatar positioned itself as Tunisia's most important and reliable Gulf-based economic partner by offering a stimulus package worth 1 billion US dollars in loans as well as employment opportunities for up to 20,000 Tunisian university graduates in 2012. In doing so, Qatar capitalised on its long-lasting relation to Ennahda. A similar role has been played by Turkey, which has acquired growing centrality in Tunisian affairs mainly thanks to its intervention in the Libyan conflict.⁷³

On the other hand, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has increased its outreach towards and clout over political opponents of Ennahda and other Tunisian Islamist movements. This anti-Islamist focus is in line with the counter-revolutionary, status-quo oriented policies the UAE has adopted in the broader MENA region since 2011. In the Tunisian case, it has poisoned the political landscape and contributed to raising the tone of confrontation between key domestic political and institutional figures. The tensions between President Kaïs Saïed and the Speaker of the Parliament, and Ennahda leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, are part of this picture.⁷⁴ While they largely stem from endogenous political dynamics and the competition for power between two very different political leaders, the UAE's pressures and interferences have been instrumental in turning this personalities-based conflict into a fully-fledged institutional and political crisis with evident pro/anti-Islamist overtones following 25 July 2021.

Conclusion

In 2011 Tunisia presented a paradox. Many were surprised at how it was possible that a politically stable, educationally progressive and economically prosperous country could explode into country-wide protests that caused the downfall of one of the strongest police states in the MENA region.⁷⁵ Although the 2011 revolution was sudden and rapid, its genesis had begun much earlier, with its roots in an acute social, political and economic crisis.

macrorends.net/countries/TUN/tunisia/military-spending-defense-budget.

⁷² Youssef Cherif, "The Gulf Crisis Threatens Tunisia's Stability", in *MENASource*, 8 November 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=106822>.

⁷³ Sarra Hlaoui, "Pour Ghannouchi, la priorité est au Qatar et à la Turquie", in *Business News*, 28 April 2020, <https://www.businessnews.com.tn/pour-ghannoui-la-priorite-est-au-qatar-et-a-la-turquie,519,97956,3>.

⁷⁴ Frida Dahmani, "Tunisie : guerre froide entre Kaïs Saïed et Rached Ghannouchi", in *Jeune Afrique*, 2 July 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/1007068>.

⁷⁵ Safwan M. Masri, *Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly*, cit.

The demands of the Tunisian demonstrators in the initial phase of the revolution were simple and similar to those that would eventually be heard in other countries – from Egypt to Syria and from Yemen to Libya. They called for political freedoms, decent economic opportunities and self-dignity.⁷⁶ Significantly, Tunisia kicked off the unfolding of the “politics of resistance” and the end of the “politics of fear”.⁷⁷ But this was just the beginning of a decade-long mobilisation process that has continued until today.

Delving into the demands and claims of the demonstrators from 2011 onwards, it is possible to observe a change of focus from civic and political rights (legitimacy, accountability, participation, freedom of expression, representation, effectiveness, gender-based demands) to socio-economic rights with a focus on sustainability (fair employment, environmental rights, end to corruption and to abusive contracts and practices embodied by resource exploitation). This shift signals the transition from the democratic transition phase to the democratic consolidation one and underscores the sense of urgency felt by the Tunisian people at large to undertake veritable socio-economic reforms to consolidate the political-institutional gains. Having a constitution that nominally protects fundamental socio-economic rights is not enough, if these rights cannot be acted upon by the population. Furthermore, regional and international dynamics penetrating into Tunisia's politics and society have proven poisonous for the country's democratic consolidation and have led to a change of discourse at the people's level: from “Tunisia opening up to the world” to “Tunisia protecting itself from the world”.⁷⁸

In conclusion, Tunisia's long, complex and still open-ended experience with popular mobilisation allows us to appreciate two aspects. The first concerns the reason why Tunisia has been, and still is, important in the context of broader popular mobilisation dynamics in the MENA region. First, Tunisia is the place where it all started in December 2010 and as such it has dramatically influenced revolutionary, political and institutional experiences elsewhere in the MENA while at the same time significantly diverging from them particularly in the short-term period (2011–2014).⁷⁹ Second, the Tunisian revolution has manifested the power of collective, rather than individual, eruptions of popular frustration and anger, their active creative potential and their political implications amidst institutional opportunities and obstacles. Third, it is the only country that has achieved substantial progress in terms of democratic transition; at the same time, it is the country with the longest record of protests in the MENA, which has become a constitutive part of its political life and a sign of societal dynamism and of political dialectic. Last but not least, it has seen growing domestic tensions and instability

⁷⁶ Peter J. Schraeder and Hamadi Redissi, “Ben Ali's Fall,” in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (July 2011), p. 5-19.

⁷⁷ Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People. Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 4.

⁷⁸ Author's phone interview with a Tunisian intellectual, May 2021.

⁷⁹ Silvia Colombo, *Political and Institutional Transition in North Africa*, cit.

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deriving from regional insecurity spill-overs, pressures and interferences, which have not spared other countries in the region as well.

The second aspect is what Tunisia has taught us throughout this decade from the policy perspective. Among the key factors here, it is possible to recall the difference between democratic transition and democratic consolidation – the latter being a much longer and complex process; the importance of addressing socio-economic issues early on during the democratic transition phase in order to prevent them from endangering democratic consolidation; and the need to shield Tunisia from external pressures and interferences and to strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations with those players that are ready to engage with Tunisian society on the basis of an agenda centred on veritable democracy, inclusive rights and social justice. It remains to be seen whether the EU will be up to the challenge.

Updated 19 October 2021

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