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Research Report

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Briefing Paper, No. 6/2021

Provided in Cooperation with:

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

Suggested Citation: Chomiak, Laryssa (2021) : Tunisian democracy 10 years after the revolution: A tale of two experiences, Briefing Paper, No. 6/2021, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), Bonn, <https://doi.org/10.23661/bp6.2021>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/242622>

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Tunisian Democracy 10 Years after the Revolution: A Tale of Two Experiences

Summary

At the 10-year anniversary of the Tunisian Revolution, which toppled decades of dictatorship and repositioned discussions about democracy across the Middle East and North Africa, the democratic transition in Tunisia is in flux, or rather at an impasse. On the one hand, Tunisia is celebrated as the lone democratic success story of the 2011 Arab Uprisings, based on multiple cycles of free and fair elections. On the other hand, serious domestic political agitation over the last decade, coupled with deep structural inequalities and a rise in public perceptions of corruption in government, has nearly derailed its course towards democratic consolidation and stability.

Democratisation in Tunisia has hinged on the widely celebrated mechanism of consensus among political adversaries in parliament, and among key political and civil society actors. Yet, instead of achieving consensus on critical political and economic-structural reforms, compromise-based arrangements have fallen apart due to intense party infighting, regular resignations of governments, and enormous public pressure resulting from a stagnating economy and lack of vision for comprehensive and equitable economic reform. The effect has been sustained infighting over economic and social policy, which in turn has resulted in diminishing public trust in political parties and new demo-

cratic institutions, an all-time low level of satisfaction with the government's performance and a significant rise in contentious politics, particularly between 2019 and 2021. The proliferation of micro-parties (209 registered political parties for a population of 11.8 million) has resulted in confusion among the electorate, while the economic reality of a suffocating international debt crisis, which has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has rendered levels of public trust in government to an all-time low.

At this pivotal moment, Tunisia needs a clear political plan that encompasses a framework for productive political competition and a sound economic vision. To enter into the phase of democratic consolidation – defined as the moment of political, economic and societal stability when authoritarian rule begins to diminish – Tunisian elected authorities and the international community must address rising public demands, which emanate from across all socio-economic classes, for wealth redistribution and sound fiscal policy reform. More effective and transparent public spending will alleviate issues of public trust in all aspects of governance. Reconstructing trust in new democratic institutions is key and also requires a concerted effort to build democracy from the bottom up, particularly in marginal and impoverished areas where socio-economic ills are deeply entrenched, and where political contention is rampant and highest.

Following weeks of sustained protests, on 14 January 2011, Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011) fled into exile, igniting region-wide anti-government protests and profoundly transforming Tunisia's political landscape. The former single-party authoritarian system has been replaced by a multiparty democracy, and yet Tunisia's democratic transition is a tale of two experiences. Some experts have called for a second revolution to overcome the current stasis as a result of political consensus. Frequent reconfigurations of government have slowed legislative procedures, resulting in asymmetrical reform proposals that confuse the public. Others have warned of a precarious "transitions gap" or status quo: an ailing economy with low growth coupled with a divided legislature stalling critical decision-making. Economically, the country is ensnared in deep structural challenges, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The International Monetary Fund projects that economic growth will contract by 4.3 per cent in 2021 – the worst economic slowdown since the country's independence – as an imminent result of the global health crisis. If Tunisia's economy is not redirected to address the deficit, both entrenched and pandemic-related, in tandem with quelling discontent and fulfilling the government's social justice promises, levels of public trust in democratic institutions will continue to diminish.

Rule by consensus and low levels of trust in parties

Since 2011, nine successive governments have weathered a series of security challenges, intense political polarisation, as well as fragmentation and worsening unemployment. Close to 200 registered political parties have competed in four cycles of competitive legislative (2011, 2014, 2019), executive (2014, 2019) and municipal (2018) elections, with relatively high voter turnout and within the framework of a progressive constitution ratified in 2014.

Despite this procedural democratic success, political fragmentation in parliament and low levels of trust in political parties are rooted in a proliferation of micro-parties as well as coalition-building strategies that have spanned across all election cycles. Since its first elections in 2011 for the National Constituent Assembly, Tunisia has been largely governed by cross-ideological coalitions through the mechanism of building political consensus. The 2011 three-party coalition government led to the first wave of splintering of political parties as elected members angrily broke off in reaction to the agreement, forming their own schism parties and eroding large support bases. Much analysis has since pitted a political conflict along ideological lines, especially between religious and secular parties, for which consensus seemed crucial in overcoming fault lines and pushing through reforms.

To overcome parliamentary paralysis over the last decade, consensual pacts have become the leading bargaining strategy used to form governments. The result, however, has been a precarious picture for parliament and diminished

public trust in the institution of the political party as a vehicle to act in the interest of – as well as negotiate on behalf of – voters. Fragmentation hit its peak with the 2015 Nidaa Tounes–Ennahda coalition, resulting in the former splintering and undermining its recently formed support base (Chomiak & Parks, 2019). Since then, international and domestic surveys continue to register declining trust in political parties, with an all-time low reached in 2019.

In October 2019, Tunisians elected a divided parliament and, in a surprise landslide vote, a new president, Kais Saied, an independent university law instructor with no prior experience in political office. His programme was premised on a radical restructuring of the top-down political system to introduce bottom-up direct democracy. Early detractors saw him as a dangerous populist who took advantage of a negative political and economic situation and ran on a distinctly anti-political party campaign.

Recent survey findings moreover report increased trust in the executive and security institutions, indicating that Tunisian citizens are opting for a strong presidential system over a balanced parliamentary-executive power structure. According to an August 2020 poll, 88 per cent of Tunisians had moderate or great confidence in the presidency, but only 23 per cent claimed to have moderate to high levels of trust in the parliament or political parties. Saied's popularity and the public's perceived preference for a strong executive are indicative that Tunisians overall are supportive of a new political configuration.

Prospects for democratic consolidation

The state of Tunisia's democracy has been evaluated from two formal perspectives, and according to both, Tunisia is indeed a democratic success. The first is comparative and focuses on the MENA region. Tunisia has neither fallen into civil war, nor returned to robust autocratic rule. Accordingly, Tunisia stands out as a glimmer of hope as well as an exemplary model from which lessons can be drawn and adjusted for other cases.

The second perspective is domestic and procedural. Here, a register of democratic institutions is employed as a barometer to gauge democracy: regular cycles of free and fair elections, including municipal elections; a progressive constitution; national dialogues and pacts to overcome political stalemates; proliferation of regulatory institutions; robust civil society and a free press. Yet, influential scholars of democratisation insist that domestic structural and economic conditions are equally essential for predicting consolidation: that is, regular rounds of competitive elections, but also relative wealth, low levels of income inequality and a balanced role of the state in the economy.

Tunisia has fulfilled the minimal electoral requirements and established some of the requisite democratic institutions, however a Constitutional Court – the third pillar in Tunisia's system of checks and balances – has yet to be named.

In this sense, Tunisia's economic outlook remains precarious: Neither economic growth nor a reduction in income inequalities have met the substantive criteria for the country to enter into consolidation. Debt servicing of high levels of external and internal debt has decreased levels of public spending that might be used to boost the formal sector, while informal economic activity has increased dramatically – estimates place the informal economy at 54 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), accounting for 45 per cent of employed Tunisians. The nation-wide lockdown in spring 2020 to manage the COVID-19 crisis seriously exacerbated the already deeply entrenched economic crisis.

Only recently has the progressive Tunisian Observatory for the Economy (Rouine, 2020) reported a positive trend towards the reduction of income inequalities, in which Tunisia has moved to second place in North Africa, following Algeria and surpassing Egypt and Libya. Moreover, Tunisia is ranked fifth in Africa in the percentage of its budget dedicated to social welfare: 6.2 per cent.

Persistent inequalities

Despite this positive trend, Tunisia's entrenched class and income inequalities have posed serious challenges to the government's ability to meet promises for social justice by increasing public spending while addressing the national debt balance. Inequalities in Tunisia are rooted in deep structural issues – the principle causes that contributed to the 2010-2011 nation-wide uprising. These cleavages are exacerbated by long-standing geographic inequalities, with the highest levels of poverty concentrated in the interior and southern regions, and increasingly in urban peripheries. By the time of Ben Ali's fall, Tunisia's post-independence social contract (Loewe, Zintl, & Houdret, 2020), based on decades of promised development, wealth generation and political inclusion, was broken. Often-referenced "goals of the revolution" relate directly to a reformulation of that social contract by building inclusive political institutions, but also embarking on economic reform that would allow for equitable public spending to be redirected to impoverished regions and allow political elites to fulfil social justice promises.

However, political elites and citizens (who vote) have radically different notions and expectations of how the demands of the revolution should be translated into reform initiatives. This tension explains the steadfast rise in protests, sit-ins and strikes, especially in hinterland regions, and reveals how demands have not been addressed, despite significant liberal economic reforms. Anger is growing among those populations, who see local wealth being concentrated among the few while minimal opportunities are made available for socio-economic improvements to alleviate entrenched structural inequalities. Thousands of annual social protests – concentrated in Tataouine for jobs and social benefits from the petrol and natural gas industry (the four-year-long Kamour sit-in), and in the Gafsa phosphate mining region around hiring procedures, access to health services and environmental protections – have blocked production. This past autumn, the Tunisian Forum

for Economic and Social Rights reported almost 800 protests per month, with the highest levels concentrated in the south and the centre.

This status quo reminds Tunisians of Ben Ali's phony promise of a successful, equitable welfare state. For Tunisians who have not seen a qualitative improvement in their quotidian lives – from finding gainful employment to economic security – the Ben Ali social contract failure mirrors the current disconnect between state-led economic reforms and making ends meet. This also explains the decline in trust in new democratic institutions.

Exacerbated economic downturn

Tunisia is already at a complicated political, economic and social juncture, exacerbated by the Coronavirus pandemic. Experts are warning of a sharp fall in economic growth as the economic impacts of the pandemic unfold: second trimester reports calculated a GDP contraction of 20.4 per cent between 2019 and 2020. During the lockdown (which ended in May 2020), Tunisians who rely on daily incomes from the many informal sectors protested and called for a reopening strategy to be able to survive. Some estimates claim that informal economic activity dropped by up to 60 per cent due to closed borders and markets. The International Monetary Fund has called Tunisia's current economic contraction the worst since independence in 1956.

In the last six months, Tunisia has accumulated more than \$2 billion dollars in additional external debt. Between 2010 and 2019, external debt in Tunisia has already more than doubled, from 49 to 85 per cent of GDP. Public expenditures are thus displaced by debt-servicing payments.

In 2020, Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi cited a negative growth rate of 6.5 per cent, public debt of 86 per cent of GDP and an official unemployment rate that rose from 15 to above 19 per cent.

Distribution of wealth, regulatory financial institutions and economic growth all abet democratic consolidation. Imbalances between debt servicing and meeting the demands of public expenditures not only result in both qualitative and quantitative declines in standards of living, but also affect currency devaluation and inflation. The effects of long-standing structural inequalities, exacerbated by the burden of debt management, are the main threat to public support for democracy and its consolidation.

Conclusion

Tunisia's democracy success story is premised on a decade of consensus-making within the legislature, and also between the executive, the main parties and civil society organisations. Sceptics of compromise politics in Tunisia have criticised this strategy from various standpoints: For one, consensus via political pacts has resulted in a thin democratic veneer incapable of addressing Tunisia's deep structural economic issues – both on equitable wealth distribution and financial policy. For others, political consensus is the principle cause for policy inaction, as political infighting within

compromise coalitions has halted progress towards long-term and sustainable reform, while producing diminishing trust in democratic institutions. This effect has led to a stark rise in protests nation-wide calling for fair social policies.

Tunisia's restructuring of its economic strategy and fiscal policy – its new social contract – must equally encompass political and economic reforms. Political elites have to balance obligations to international finance institutions with the social justice promises made to the public.

The trifecta of low levels of trust in political parties, a contracted economy and public support of the executive is a dangerous political knot for those who want to see a stable democracy in Tunisia. For Tunisian voters, the lines of where power and responsibility lie are blurred. Citizens perceive the power game (including elections) to be one of securing space in a constantly shifting political landscape, rather than equitably solving Tunisia's deep structural issues.

Public grievances – mirroring experts' call for a second revolution to overcome the consensus model – are thus voiced against a "governing totality" and a "broken social contract" rather than a specific set of political actors or parties.

Recommendations

Foreign assistance is critical in helping Tunisia cope with these overlapping challenges, both in signalling to Tunisian decision-makers that the international community supports

democratic consolidation, as well as to Tunisian citizens that promises for reform concerning equity and social justice can be met. To continue supporting democracy in Tunisia in the long term and help build public trust in democracy, donors can strengthen existing approaches and focus on integrated approaches that target marginal regions and volatile populations, where trust in democracy is lowest and protests are rampant.

Building trust in democracy at the municipal level: Tunisia has made great advances in local democracy, having passed a decentralisation law and having held local elections in May 2018. Continued donor assistance, both technical and financial, is imperative to improving trust among citizens vis-à-vis local representatives and political parties. Participatory budgets and regular citizen town halls have been especially effective in rendering local administrations more accountable and transparent.

Recognising the geography of inequalities: A geographic focus on marginalised and impoverished areas has been a priority for donors, but more concentrated efforts in the most impoverished areas can assist the Tunisian government in its effort to fulfil social justice promises (because demands and disruptions are highest in these areas). A strategy that takes the specificities of regional inequalities and their variations into account (extractive sectors, highly saturated production/transformation sites, urban poverty) is especially needed.

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Published by DIE's project on "Stabilisation and development in the Middle East and North Africa" (MENA) with financial support from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

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DOI: 10.23661/bp6.2021



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