



# Tunisia

## Tunisia: Introduction

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Last updated 13 June 2025 using IFs v8.34

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Chart 1: Political map of Tunisia



Chart 1 is a political map of Tunisia.

Tunisia is located in North Africa, bordered by Algeria to the west and south-west, Libya to the south-east, and the Mediterranean Sea to the north and east. The country spans an area of 163 610 km<sup>2</sup>, with Tunis, situated along the north-eastern coastline, serving as the capital and largest city. The predominant languages are Tunisian Arabic, Berber and French, reflecting its historical and cultural diversity.

Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956 under the leadership of Habib Bourguiba, who later became the country's first president. Bourguiba implemented an ambitious, state-led development strategy, emphasising social progress, secularism and gender equity, distinguishing Tunisia from many of its regional peers in North Africa and the Middle East. These early reforms contributed to positive education, healthcare and women's rights outcomes.

However, despite these advances, Tunisia's macroeconomic stability and improvements in human development masked deep-rooted structural issues. By the late 2000s, growing youth unemployment, regional inequality and entrenched corruption exacerbated a pervasive sense of exclusion and discontent, particularly among the educated but underemployed youth.

These underlying grievances culminated in the Freedom and Dignity Revolution of December 2010, which led to the ousting of long-time President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. Tunisia's uprising catalysed for the broader Arab Spring, but it remains the only country in the region to have undergone a sustained, albeit turbulent, transition to democracy.

In the years following the revolution, Tunisia adopted a progressive constitution (2014) and held multiple rounds of competitive elections. Nevertheless, the post-revolutionary period has been marred by economic stagnation, political fragmentation and social unrest, with successive governments struggling to deliver on the promise of improved governance and living standards.

Since 2021, Tunisia has experienced a significant democratic regression. President Kaïs Saïed suspended parliament, dismissed the government and subsequently introduced a new constitution that significantly expanded presidential powers. These actions have drawn criticism from civil society, opposition groups and international observers, raising concerns about autocratic consolidation and the erosion of democratic institutions.

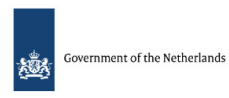
Economic conditions have also deteriorated. Public debt is rising, unemployment remains high, especially among the youth, and inflation has eroded household purchasing power. Talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial support have stalled over disagreements concerning subsidy reform and fiscal austerity. These challenges are compounded by the spillover effects of regional instability and the impacts of climate change on agriculture and water security.

Although Tunisia possesses the foundations of an upper-middle-income country, including a relatively skilled labour force and a history of institutional reform, it continues to underperform economically. The persistent disconnect between human capital potential and economic output reflects structural weaknesses, limited investment and an underdeveloped private sector.

While Tunisia's demographic and institutional profile positions it for long-term progress under stable conditions, current political and economic headwinds pose substantial risks. Without meaningful reforms to improve governance, unlock economic opportunity and rebuild public trust, the country's development prospects may remain constrained in the decades ahead.



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Marvellous Ngundu (2025) Tunisia. Published online at [futures.issafrica.org](https://futures.issafrica.org). Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/geographic/countries/tunisia/> [Online Resource] Updated 13 June 2025.

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Dr Marvellous Ngundu is a Research Consultant at AFI. He holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Johannesburg in South Africa. He is the recipient of the 2024 Megatrends Afrika Research Fellowship at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (ifw) in Germany, as well as the 2020/2021 fellowship program of the China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in the United States. His research interests lie in the fields of international, political, and development economics, with a particular emphasis on Africa-China economic relations.

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