



The Rebirth: Tunisia's potential development pathways to 2040

Introduction

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Introduction

Tunisia is unique in the North African region. The country achieved independence primarily through political campaigns and not armed struggle, boasts a relatively diversified economy and has progressive reproductive health policies different from most of its neighbours. However, the progress made since independence on various indices, such as years of education and women's rights, and the generally positive macroeconomic indicators concealed a widespread sense of frustration.

The dearth of economic opportunities and unequal access to these opportunities manifested in high and rising youth unemployment and pervasive corruption. The interior regions of the country were the most affected and significant disparity has persisted between the coastal region and much of the hinterland.

The closed social, economic and political system that has stifled competition and continues to be dominated by a clique of insiders — with the presidency at its core — is perhaps the most important factor in understanding the events that culminated in the Freedom and Dignity Revolution that erupted at the end of December 2010.

Today, Tunisia is the only country in the region that has transitioned to a democracy as a result of these events, but it finds itself assailed by a range of domestic and regional challenges. Instead of a robust economy and improved livelihoods, the pervasive sense today is one of economic frustration and disaffection with the ability of democracy to deliver better governance.

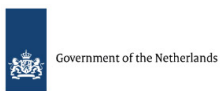
The demographic structure of the country, coupled with high levels of education, played an important role in the lead-up to the revolution, and will continue to shape Tunisia's future in important ways as the country's population ages more rapidly than that of its peers.

Tunisia has consistently had a larger urban population than the averages in the region and is about 20 percentage points more urban than the average for other lower middle-income countries (OLMICs) globally and in Africa. Contrary to the experience in the rest of North Africa and in OLMICs, these high levels of urbanisation have not contributed to more equitable income growth as much as would be expected. However, they have assisted in the provision of more education and delivery of better basic infrastructure services.

Tunisia has a range of impressive human development indicators and significant human capital. Rebalancing the economy — moving it away from past practices based on privilege and cronyism towards equal access and opportunity — is critical for its development and transformation.

Creating an open-opportunity economy, achieving oversight over all aspects of government spending and economic policy, cutting back on wasteful expenditure, reforming the subsidy policies, improving the business climate and the quality of education, ensuring domestic security and consolidating democratic institutions are among the difficult but necessary challenges with which Tunisia needs to grapple.

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About the authors

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director of the ISS. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the ISS. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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