



The Rebirth: Tunisia's potential development pathways to 2040

From independence to the Freedom and Dignity Revolution and its aftermath

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After gaining independence from France in 1956, Tunisia was ruled by Prime Minister and later President Habib Bourguiba, who embarked on an expansive social and state-led development model. For example, the Code of personal status adopted after independence in 1956 granted women full legal status, outlawed polygamy and repudiated the right of a husband to unilaterally divorce his wife, enabling the development of a more gender-equitable society. [1]

In 1965 the country became the first Muslim majority country to liberalise abortion laws. In 1958 Tunisia introduced free education and in 1990 the government passed new education legislation that, among other things, introduced free compulsory basic education from ages 6–16 and modernised the education system. As a result, the country has achieved high enrolment and literacy rates that resemble upper-middle rather than lower middle-income country characteristics. [2]

After standing unopposed for re-election on four occasions, Bourguiba was constitutionally designated 'president for life' in 1974, only to be overthrown in a bloodless coup in 1987 by then prime minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. [3]

Ben Ali promised democracy and other socio-economic reforms but failed to deliver on inclusive growth, in spite of the fact that average gross domestic product (GDP) per capita between 1960 and 2010 improved at a rate of 3% per year, representing a more than fourfold increase. These improvements were facilitated by an expansive state-led development paradigm that expanded cronyism.

After three rigged elections that he won with nearly 100% support, [4] Ben Ali was ousted by events now known as the Freedom and Dignity (or Jasmine) Revolution starting on 18 December 2010.

People took to the streets after a 26-year-old Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, self-immolated in a desperate protest against a system that had denied him the most basic opportunity to earn a living. After a month-long period of intense riots and protests across the country, Ben Ali was forced to flee to Saudi Arabia and sentenced in absentia to 35 years in prison for embezzlement and later to life imprisonment for the killing of protesters. [5] He eventually died while in self-imposed exile.

Meanwhile, the popular uprising had spread to North Africa and the Middle East in what eventually became known as the Arab Spring. In its wake, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi were both ousted from power, irrevocably altering the region's future.

The robust macroeconomic indicators generally quoted by the African Development Bank (AfDB) [6] and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) [7] during the years leading up to the revolution obscured many frustrations around economic opportunity. Pervasive corruption and inequalities, high youth unemployment, slow economic liberalisation and low levels of private investment are some of the issues commonly highlighted.

Ben Ali and his inner circle dominated the economy from banking to tourism, manufacturing and oil. State instruments like tax auditing, licencing control and inspections were used to stifle competition and control investment, limiting opportunities to those provided by the state and in lowly paid jobs. [8] Many Tunisians were forced to earn a living in the informal sector, since only those with the right connections or enough resources to buy access could enter the formal sector.

In the aftermath of the revolution, Tunisia has sought to implement an ambitious social and economic reform agenda, but because of low growth its macroeconomic indicators have weakened and its ability to implement redistributive policies has

lessened. Whereas the GDP expanded by an average of nearly 4.5% between 2000 and 2010, the rate was only 2% between 2010 and 2018.

Government spending and the size of the public sector have increased while reform aimed at reducing inefficient subsidies and the large public sector has gained little traction. Insecurity is spilling over its porous borders with Libya and Algeria, while the quality of its education system is deteriorating.

Continued frustration among Tunisians was brought to the fore in the October 2019 elections when Kais Saied, a conservative law professor and generally considered a political outsider, was elected as president. The fragmented political establishment and subsequent contestation to form a new government is testament to the political and developmental uncertainties ahead.

The goals and promise of the Freedom and Dignity Revolution remain unfulfilled for Tunisians. It is increasingly clear that without deep and structural economic reforms, regular elections will not translate into better opportunities.

Endnotes

1. R Khedher, Tracing the Development of the Tunisian 1956 Code of Personal Status, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18:4, 2017, 30–37.
2. Oxford Business Group, [Tunisia's education system to be overhauled](#)
3. The PSD was the only legal party until 1981 when the ban on opposition parties was lifted. *Global Security*, Tunisia: politics. By then, Habib Bourguiba was reported to be senile.
4. R Prince, Tunisia elections: [the real thing this time](#), Institute for Policy Studies, 2 November 2011
5. R Hamilton, Ben Ali: Tunisia's ousted ex-president dies in exile aged 83, BBC, 19 September 2019.
6. African Development Bank (AfDB), [The revolution in Tunisia: economic challenges and prospects](#), Economic Brief, 11 March 2011,
7. Murilo Portugal at the conclusion of his visit to Tunisia, April 6, 2007, Press Release 07/65; IMF, [Statement by the IMF Mission on the 2007 Article IV consultation with Tunisia](#), 6 June 2007, Press Release 07/121. International Monetary Fund (IMF), [Statement by IMF Deputy Managing Director](#)
8. E Tran, [Tunisian success: an economic analysis](#), *International Review*, 28 September 2018

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