



# Tunisia's Geography of Anger: Regional Inequalities and the Rise of Populism

HAMZA MEDDEB

Tunisia's interior regions were an important wellspring of the discontent that toppled the regime of then president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 2010–2011. In the ensuing years, this marginalized part of the country has continued to be a magnet for protesters, underscoring how readily regional wealth disparities can foment nation-altering unrest. These regions have remained beacons of social protest, hosting demonstrations on employment access, service provision, land and water access, and pollution.

Once Ben Ali stepped down, bitter disputes arose among various groups vying for power, prompting the need for a new national social contract. When the constitution was being written in 2014, Islamists and secularists, including representatives of the former regime, forged a political consensus to settle their main points of discord over the nature of the state, freedom of belief, and the nature of the political system. Four civil society

organizations known collectively as the Quartet—the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT); the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA); the Tunisian Order of Lawyers; and the Tunisian Human Rights League—were instrumental in mediating among the various players.

This fragile political accord is now fraying. Tunisia's post-2014 governments have failed to address the country's deep-set, long-standing economic problems and regional inequalities, confirming the perception that even the new political elites are detached from ordinary people's social and economic concerns. Low- and middle-class citizens believe that [political compromise](#) has propped up the socioeconomic status quo, exacerbating their disenchantment with the country's new class of elites and fueling populism. Meanwhile, long-standing socioeconomic inequalities are still unaddressed.



## THE LEGACY OF REGIONAL INEQUALITIES

It should be no surprise that the interior regions were beacons of the revolution. A string of Tunisian governments has insisted on privileging the interests of the country's more affluent coastal areas while overlooking the interior and border areas. This has been an enduring pattern since the country secured its independence in 1956. Since the 1970s under president Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia doubled down on tourism and low-cost manufacturing to boost economic growth, an approach that kept the majority of [infrastructure investment](#) cordoned off in coastal regions rather than fostering growth in outlying agricultural communities. This disparity in economic empowerment eventually left more remote parts of Tunisia as little more than sources of inexpensive workers, agricultural goods, and raw materials for the coastal regions to exploit. And the interior regions' meager economic prospects sowed the seeds for the patronage system of the Bourguiba regime, local elites, and security forces to flourish.

This pattern of marginalization only worsened under Ben Ali, who took power in 1987. His regime made political and investment decisions that stratified wealth even more along geographic lines, as two-thirds of [public investment](#) came to be allocated to the coastal regions. Like under Bourguiba, clientelist networks were instrumental in Ben Ali's regime, regulating access to employment in state-owned companies in the interior regions—like the [Phosphate Company](#) in Gafsa or the [Chemical Company](#) in Gabes. The security services, the police force, and customs officials kept a tight hold on the border economy, distributing jobs, public aid, business licenses, and border rents at their discretion to preserve a delicate equilibrium in the Tunisian hinterland. However, patronage also exacerbated competition in the interior regions [among tribal networks](#), further fueling rivalries among social groups to secure positions and benefits.

This economic exclusion was intertwined with a political divide: extreme centralization of decisionmaking alienated the interior regions. The near absence of a private sector prevented the emergence of an economic elite that would have been able to voice the claims of the periphery. Furthermore, internal migration of skilled people to the coast aggravated interior and border regions' marginalization, further weakening the periphery's clout in national political processes.

Today, [inland provinces](#) hold 50 percent of the country's oil, gas, and water resources; 70 percent of wheat production; and 50 percent of olive oil and fruit production. Yet these regions are disadvantaged. According to [2014 World Bank data](#), more than half of Tunisia's population and 85 percent of its gross domestic product are concentrated near the country's three most populous cities—Tunis, Sfax, and Sousse—as are the headquarters of upward of 90 percent of domestic companies in the industrial sector. Barely one-tenth of the foreign firms that operate in Tunisia have a presence in the country's interior regions. On account of these economic divides, poverty is far more prevalent in outlying areas. [According to the World Bank](#), just before Ben Ali lost his hold on power, 32.3 percent of citizens in central western Tunisia, 21.5 percent in southwestern Tunisia, and 25.7 percent in northwestern Tunisia were living in poverty, whereas only 9.1 percent of inhabitants in Tunis and 8 percent in central eastern Tunisia were in poverty. In 2015, some communities, particularly in central western Tunisia, had poverty rates twice as high as the country as a whole on average: in 2015, the average national poverty rate was 15.2 percent whereas Kef (North West), Kasserine (Center West), and Beja (North West) had poverty rates of 34.2 percent, 32.8 percent, and 32.0 percent, respectively. Meanwhile in places like Tataouine, Jendouba, and Kasserine, [unemployment](#) was two times the national average. From Bourguiba to Ben Ali to today, the interior and border regions have not been included as central to Tunisia's economy, at great human cost.

## DASHED HOPES AFTER THE 2011 UPRISING

When the end of the Ben Ali regime promised a fresh start, long-marginalized Tunisians yearned for the central state to actually work to improve their lives and reverse inequality. Instead, government officials repeatedly and shortsightedly turned to short-term, large-scale, cash-based employment programs like *Les Chantiers*. About twice as many unskilled workers were hired through such programs in 2011 compared to 2010. Revealingly, 77 percent of the nationwide program's laborers hailed from interior parts of the country. Enrollment in mass employment programs reopened the door to corruption and patronage. For example, local notables and influential bureaucrats diverted and misappropriated these temporary programs to create fake jobs or to distribute jobs unfairly, benefiting their personal constituencies and networks. Because private sector jobs tend to be so sparse in these regions, government jobs can often be a lifeline for local inhabitants.

Tunisia's post-2011 political elites seem inclined to reinvent the very social coalition that once sustained the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes at the expense of the hinterland population, perpetuating exclusion of these regions even within the trappings of a democracy. Once centralized and tightly controlled under Ben Ali's regime, corruption has spread, hindering much-needed investment in the interior regions as key officials use discretionary powers to hold off investment projects, banking credits, or licenses until they receive personal benefits. Since the fall of Ben Ali's regime, more and more Tunisians have come to believe that endemic corruption has infected all levels of Tunisia's economy, security apparatus, and political system.

The post-2014 political settlement reflected the willingness of Tunisia's well-established political, economic, and social elites to rebuild the old coalition that sustained the authoritarian regimes and governed

the country since 1956. Concessions made by representatives of the old regime and Islamists since the national dialogue in 2013–2014 guaranteed and consolidated their mutual participation in Tunisian democracy. Through their active role in bringing parties together and mediating among them, the historical labor and business unions, namely UGTT and UTICA, have become central actors in the post-2014 political settlement. This state of affairs has given them veto power over key socioeconomic decisions that could disadvantage their respective constituencies. The business union is mainly interested in protecting business interests while the UGTT is prioritizing the social benefits of the state-dependent middle classes—meaning people working in the public sector—at the expense of unemployed young people, marginal regions, and the nonunionized population active in the informal economy.

Though depicted as a champion of socioeconomic reform, the Islamist Ennahda Party failed to use the sway of political office to push through meaningful change when citizens entrusted it with positions of power. Although the party wielded influence in the 2014 parliament, Ennahda failed to enact substantive land or fiscal reforms because it proved unable or unwilling to antagonize well-entrenched interest groups and economic elites or draw public attention to towering economic and regional inequalities. Instead, the party downplayed confrontation and tried to have it both ways. While this approach secured Ennahda's inclusion and protected the fledgling democracy in the most rudimentary sense, transactional politics between Islamists represented by Ennahda and elites from the former regime represented by the secularist Nidaa Tounes party came with a cost: a political settlement that neutralized tangible and substantive socioeconomic reforms.

By overvaluing political expediency for the sake of access, Ennahda allowed old regime hands to continue to pillage the state and enrich themselves. Also, the



UGTT has become all the more focused on negotiating salary increases and social benefits for its constituents. The neutralization of socioeconomic change has fueled disenchantment among marginalized citizens, disenfranchised youth, and lent credence to the notion that all politicians are cut from the same greed-driven cloth. This disappointing reversion to the status quo has unleashed radical and populist political forces.

## THE RISE OF POPULISM

Perpetually unkept promises of economic progress eventually gave way to renewed public frustration and protests, especially among Tunisia's young people. In January 2016, the city of Kasserine was flooded with sometimes violent protests against unemployment and corruption—demonstrations that eventually spread through several other governorates. In 2015, there were more than 4,416 instances of social protests, including demonstrations, sit-ins, and occupations of land or state buildings; most of them took place in the interior regions. This number doubled to 8,713 in 2016, and in 2017, the number of protests increased again to 10,452 before decreasing slightly to 9,356 in 2018 and 9,091 in 2019.

The proliferation of protests in Tunisia's interior regions (occupying land, blocking roads, staging sit-ins, and shutting down phosphate or oil production) reflect how structural problems of marginalization can translate into political pressure over the central powers in Tunis. The inhabitants of these regions increasingly denounce the state for relegating them to second-class citizens, especially young people who were promised a yet-to-arrive middle-class future. Additional factors like the state's retreat from service provision, high levels of poverty, minimal access to employment, and the absence of concrete and real prospects of development have exacerbated tensions.

In the spring 2018 municipal elections, voters conveyed their widespread lack of satisfaction with the leading parties, the state's austerity platform, and an ineffectual

anticorruption campaign. Turnout was anemic at only about 35 percent (as opposed to nearly 70 percent in the 2014 legislative elections). And the breakthrough of independent lists, which together accumulated 32.9 percent of votes and gained the highest number of seats, reflected the national discontent toward partisan candidates and seriously tested the political class. Hopes of transparent and efficient local governance had been again dashed because of opportunistic and changing local alliances and municipal councils' ineffectual attempts to meet the population's urgent needs.

This municipal disenchantment paved the way for many citizens to cast antiparty and antisystem ballots in the 2019 presidential and general elections. In the first round of presidential elections, these protest votes benefited Kais Saied and Nabil Karoui, who came in first and second place respectively with 18.4 percent and 15.6 percent of the votes. Saied, who was later elected president in the second round with 72.7 percent of the vote, is a sixty-one-year-old constitutional law professor without any political experience or partisan affiliation who ran a very modest campaign with few resources. His platform focused on opposing corruption, railing against party politics, moralizing political life, and decentralizing the political system. Saied's slogan, "the people want," resonated perfectly with citizens' perception that opportunistic political elites were hijacking Tunisian democracy. Unsurprisingly, Saied scored best among disenchanted young people: 37 percent of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds voted for him.

Similarly, Karoui claimed to speak for the poor, establishing himself as an outsider and antiestablishment politician, even though he was one of the founding members of Nidaa Tounes led by former president Beji Caid Essebsi. Most interestingly, Karoui had the best electoral results in poor regions of the northwest, where his television station and charity organization targeted poor and illiterate voters. Both Saied and Karoui finished far ahead of both the Islamist party representative Abdel-Fattah Mourou and representatives of the old regime Youssef Chahed and Abdel-Karim Zbidi.



The election unearthed many [varieties of populism](#). In the mining region of Gafsa, Safi Saïd, a prominent Arab nationalist orator, came first with [52 percent](#) of the vote. In Tataouine, in southern Tunisia, Seifeddine Makhlouf—a young lawyer, leader of the Karama Alliance ([Alliance of Dignity](#)), and a radical right wing candidate—came first with [24.16 percent](#) of the vote. Populism extended to the [parliamentary elections](#) too: Karoui’s party, Qalb Tounes (Heart of Tounes), finished second with [thirty-eight seats](#) out of 217, and the Karama Alliance, a hybrid and radical platform, finished fourth with twenty-one seats.

Beyond the post-2011 trajectory, the protest votes of 2019 should be understood in light of Tunisia’s longer history of development. These massive protest movements rejecting partisan politics reflect the incapacity of the country’s post-2011 political elites to effectively address regional socioeconomic grievances or even put them on the top of the agenda. Far from reversing the old patterns of regional subordination, post-2011 political elites have reproduced the same mechanisms of, and rationales for, government that shaped center-periphery relations since Tunisia’s independence in 1956.

## CONCLUSION

The political consensus in place since 2014 has stabilized Tunisian politics for a while, but it has reached its limits. The rise of populist and radical movements in the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections reminded Tunisia’s political and economic elites that the country suffered from deep regional socioeconomic inequalities as well as corruption and clientelism that threaten the country’s democratic experiment. Both Ennahda and

old regime representatives were pragmatic enough to agree on a transactional power-sharing agreement, but Tunisia’s democracy needs more.

The country requires genuine compromises to facilitate wealth sharing. New ruling elites need to make hard economic choices and promote deep structural changes, like levying more taxes on privileged social groups, implementing a genuine land reform that could unleash developmental forces in the hinterlands, and curbing rent-seeking to ensure financial and economic resources are deployed to develop the country’s interior regions. Furthermore, new elites should build a larger and more inclusive social coalition, an indispensable ingredient for establishing a more legitimate political and economic order. Unless the country’s leaders address these deep inequalities, public dissatisfaction with partisan politics will increase and the people’s sense of social injustice will deepen. If that happens, populists could pose an even graver threat to Tunisia’s nascent democracy over the medium to long term.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Hamza Meddeb** is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center, where his research focuses on economic reform, political economy of conflicts, and border insecurity across the Middle East and North Africa.

## NOTES

*For your convenience, this document contains hyperlinked source notes indicated by [teal-colored text](#).*

