



Tunisians' Revolutionary Goals Remain Unfulfilled

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Tunisia is held up as the sole success story of the Arab Spring. But nearly eight years after the 2010–2011 revolution, public anger with the government and overall hopelessness is [high and growing](#).¹ It is becoming increasingly clear that political freedom is not enough to bolster Tunisia's fledgling democracy. And should the transition fail, the consequences could be devastating for both the country's progress and the region's stability.

Some early warning signs are already evident. Tunisia recently [overtook Eritrea](#) as the country with the largest number of [migrants entering Italy](#) by sea.² And since 2011, close to [100,000 highly educated and skilled workers](#) have left the country.³ Equally concerning, Tunisia remains one of the [largest](#) contributors of [foreign fighters](#) to the self-proclaimed Islamic State, and its [suicide rate](#) has nearly doubled.⁴ On October 29, 2018, a 30-year-old, unemployed [graduate blew herself up](#) in central Tunis, marking the city's first terror attack in several years.⁵

These statistics stand in stark contrast to tremendous political change, including a new constitution that is on par with those of long-standing democracies, more transparent political institutions, the start of decentralization, a free

media, and a vibrant and vocal civil society. So why are the freest people in the Arab world also some of the most frustrated? Put simply, their priorities have not changed. But fully understanding them requires revisiting the goals of the revolution—work, freedom, and national dignity.

While, today, the revolution is most closely associated with political upheaval and the ousting of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, it was primarily socioeconomic marginalization and corruption that sparked the revolution. In Tunisia's interior and south, most people place more importance on the anniversary of Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation than on the fall of Ben Ali. For them and many others, the political progress has not translated into improved livelihoods and a renewed sense of dignity. Issues such as social justice, corruption, and employment have either [failed to improve or gotten worse](#).⁶

In 2019, the country will hold its second direct democratic presidential and parliamentary elections, an important benchmark. As Tunisia embarks on this next phase of its democratic transition, the government, civil society, and the international community must have a strong grasp



on where the country is and what it needs to keep the transition on track. Working together, they should pay particular attention to economic and social needs.

Among the priorities should be leveling the playing field for people in the country's south and interior, improving the education system to produce graduates with skills that match employers' demands, creating incentives to encourage the large number of informal workers to enter the formal economy, and lifting currency control to improve access to international markets and help entrepreneurs get off the ground. But measures must also be taken to protect the democratic gains made since 2011—for example, by urging more political party outreach and decreasing the trust gap between the public and government.

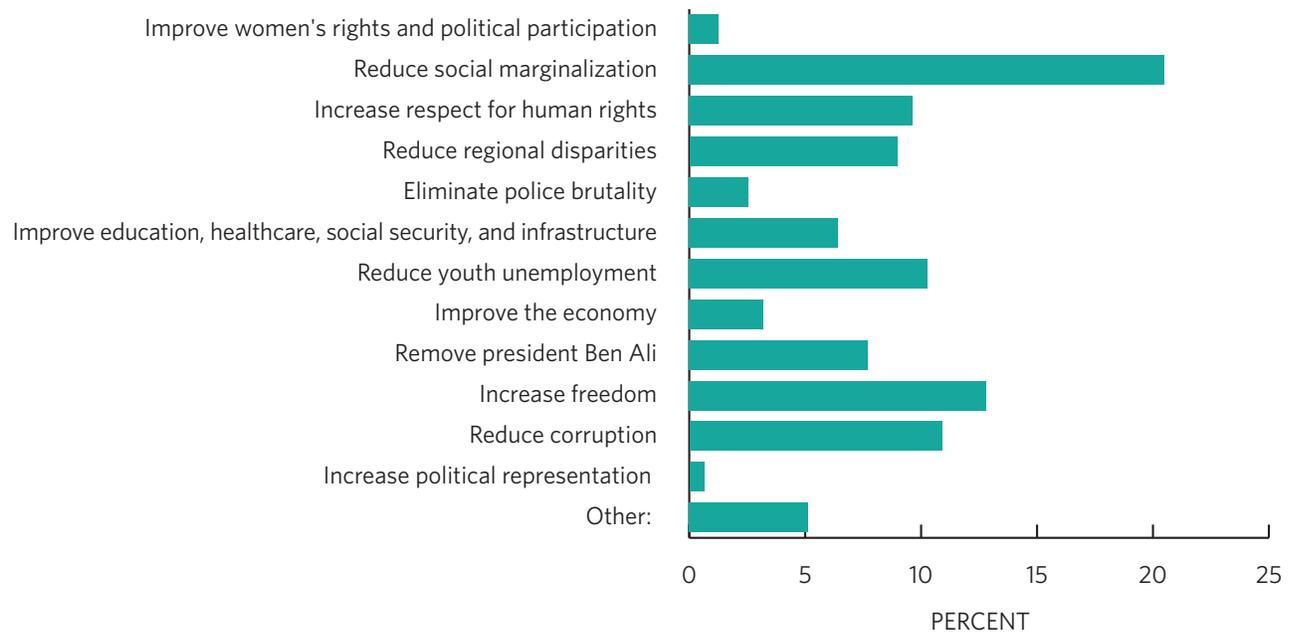
THE REVOLUTION'S GOALS

Many motivations drove people into the street in 2011, but the protesters' demands can be best characterized by one of the most popular chants—“*shughl, hurriyya, karama wataniyya*” (work, freedom, and national dignity). The slogan originated from the motto of the Union for Unemployed Graduates, whose members began protesting in 2006 and are still active.⁷ It represents the principal demands of the revolutionaries who first rose up in the city of Sidi Bouzid, in the country's interior, and then later throughout the country.

Political change only became a demand when the protests escalated and reached the capital and when civil society groups, trade unions, lawyers, journalists, and opposition parties joined the movement. As one

FIGURE 1. GOALS OF THE REVOLUTION

Which is of these was the most important goal of the revolution?



Note: 156 answered, 2 skipped.

civil society actor put it in a recent survey conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Those who started the revolution were those fighting and protesting against poverty and economic marginalization, mainly from the interior regions. Once these protests reached the capital and the south, the political and civil elites captured the protest and it became a full-scale uprising.”⁸

After Ben Ali’s departure, many young revolutionaries and civil society activists felt as if the political elites had stolen the revolution. As another civil society activist noted, the phrase “this is an objective of the revolution” became a catchall for whatever issue a particular actor wanted to push through the transitional government—from closing mosques to raising public sector salaries. The revolutionaries’ original goals quickly became diluted and enmeshed in the contentious political debate that characterized the early years of the transition.

Work

The concept of work was really at the heart of the revolution. The majority of those who initiated the uprising were unemployed or underemployed youth, many of whom were university graduates from the interior region who had become disillusioned with the government. While scholars and journalists chiefly focused on the demands for civil and political liberty, most protestors were calling for **better socioeconomic conditions**.⁹ In Carnegie’s recent survey, the majority of respondents cited the reduction of social marginalization as the most important goal of the revolution, while increased political representation received only one vote.

The **economic demands** stemmed from three primary factors: massive youth unemployment, the proliferation of marginal jobs in the informal sector, and increasing income inequality.¹⁰ Since the 1990s, Tunisia has been dealing with an unemployment rate consistently above 14 percent. **Unemployment** and underemployment have been particularly prevalent among the young and the educated.¹¹ In 2010, the unemployment rate among graduates was high at **23 percent**.¹² Not enough skilled

jobs were being created to accommodate their entry into the labor market, with, on average, **a deficit of 18,000 jobs** a year between 2007 and 2010.¹³

Furthermore, **rampant corruption** and a highly centralized bureaucracy made it difficult for those without connections to find jobs, making the informal sector more appealing.¹⁴ Things were even worse in the interior and south where socioeconomic conditions were considerably poorer than in the coastal areas. Therefore, it is not surprising that many youth, with no jobs and no real prospects, became the main actors of the revolution.

Freedom

The Ben Ali regime was one of the most oppressive regimes in the Arab world, exerting strong control over the entire political apparatus as well as the citizenry.¹⁵ Tunisians could not criticize the regime, and the government suppressed any type of political opposition. Thus, although protesters’ socioeconomic demands took precedence over civil and political liberties, once it became clear that the demonstrations were gaining wide national and international support, more attention was given to issues such as a transfer of power, the drafting of a constitution, the holding of free and fair elections, and a successful democratic transition. While the initial protesters did not set out to remove Ben Ali from power, the protests quickly grew in size and scope, and political opposition figures seized the opportunity to accomplish real political change.

Dignity

The revolutionaries’ calls for dignity, understood here as social justice, were a response to pervasive corruption and police brutality, as well as systemic regional marginalization. The latter resulted in vast economic disparities due to a lack of resources and limited access to job opportunities and basic infrastructure in the noncoastal regions. The regime’s neoliberal economic policies, praised by international institutions—and a privileged network of heavyweights and crony capitalists close to Ben Ali and his family—exacerbated the



disparities. This all led to a complete marginalization of these regions and concentrated wealth in the coastal cities. For instance, in December 2010, [poverty rates](#) in the interior and western regions were nearly four times higher than those in the rest of the country.¹⁶

It is not a coincidence that the revolution began in the long-ignored provincial city of Sidi Bouzid, where Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest the socioeconomic conditions and marginalization. While his act was quite personal, it resonated with many, especially those in the country's interior.

THE CURRENT REALITIES

Since 2011, Tunisia has experienced remarkable political gains and significant improvement in freedom of the press and civil society. However, the

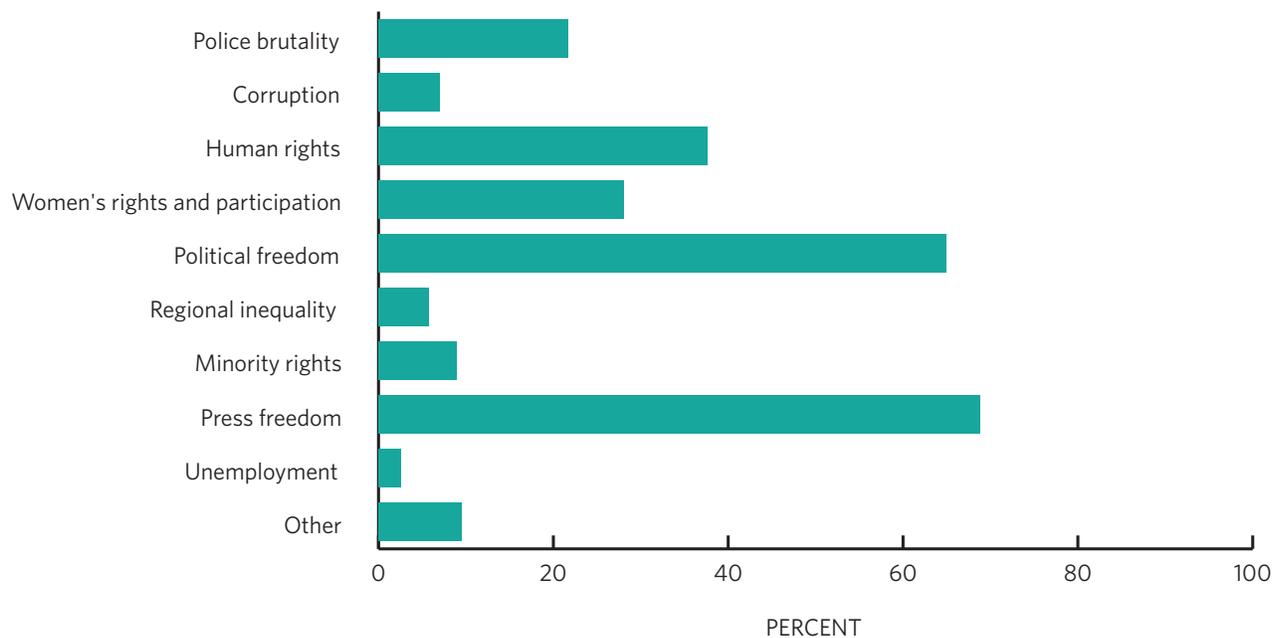
original goals of the revolution remain unfulfilled, leaving many Tunisians in despair. According to an [Afro Barometer](#) survey, 72 percent of Tunisians believe the current economic situation is “fairly bad” or “very bad,” and nearly 80 percent think Tunisia is headed in the wrong direction.¹⁷ Affirming these views, only about 2 percent of Carnegie’s survey respondents believe the unemployment situation has improved since the uprising, and nearly 40 percent believe that the revolution did not bring any improvement.

Work Is Hard to Come By

Eight years following the revolution, the protesters’ economic demands remain unaddressed and many economic indicators have gotten worse. Countries going through a democratic transition typically suffer a brief economic downturn; however, Tunisia has failed to make tangible economic progress in nearly

FIGURE 2. IMPROVEMENTS SINCE THE REVOLUTION

The revolution has led to an improvement in which of the following areas?



Note: 157 answered, 1 skipped.

a decade. Since 2011, Tunisia has been hit by major socioeconomic challenges: persistent unemployment, slow economic growth, soaring food prices, deepening poverty, widening regional disparities, and an expanding informal economy.

In 2018, the [unemployment rate](#) remains high at 15.5 percent.¹⁸ And young university graduates now face an even greater level of unemployment ([29 percent](#)), which continues to be the principal driver of social discontent.¹⁹ One problem is the long-standing mismatch between Tunisia's educated labor force and the relatively low number of qualified job openings. In 2015, it was estimated that, on average, it takes graduates [six years](#) to find a stable job, and half are still unemployed by age thirty-five.²⁰ Unwisely, the government has responded by further increasing public sector hiring and wages. At about 14 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP), spending on [public sector salaries](#) in Tunisia is now higher than anywhere else in the world.²¹ Not only is this costly, it also does not adequately address the underlying employment problem and leaves little room in the budget for investment.

While worsening socioeconomic conditions can be partly attributed to remnants of Ben Ali's policies and external factors—such as the decline in tourism in the wake of terrorist attacks, spillover from the war in Libya, and an economic downturn in Europe—the transitional government's efforts to improve conditions have been lacking. The government has failed to enact much-needed reforms—including streamlining the bureaucracy, fighting corruption and nepotism, reforming customs, and establishing comprehensive tax regimes—and has instead prioritized political change. Economic challenges were deferred while political leaders focused on their own internal disputes, and few actors were willing or able to stand up to the powerful trade unions who have consistently blocked the implementation of key reforms. While it would be nearly impossible to tackle all the political and economic reforms simultaneously, the decision to postpone necessary economic reforms created the challenging economic situation the country is now in.

As a result, an increasing number of Tunisians are joining the [informal economy](#), which now accounts for about half of the country's GDP.²² Moreover, following the guidance of international lenders, including the European Union and International Monetary Fund (IMF), Tunisia has adopted painful austerity measures at the expense of meeting a high demand for jobs, leading to increased taxes and prices. In October 2018, Tunisia's [annual inflation](#) rate rose to 7.4 percent, the highest in twenty years.²³

Dignity Is Only for Some

Measuring dignity is extremely difficult. Unlike work and freedom, dignity is almost entirely a qualitative concept. However, several aspects related to dignity, or social justice, can serve as a proxy, including levels of corruption, regional disparity (such as in healthcare, education, and infrastructure), and poverty. And in these areas, progress has been mixed at best.

According to Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index](#), Tunisia only improved by one point between 2012 and 2017, suggesting a failure to eradicate the rampant corruption that helped spark the revolution.²⁴

Also persisting are the [vast disparities](#) in socioeconomic conditions between regions.²⁵ For example, the [number of public hospitals](#) per 10,000 inhabitants ranges from none in the northwestern city of Kef to ten in Tunis.²⁶ According to one [report](#), the private health system has 72 percent of the advanced diagnostic equipment but only serves 20 percent of the population, largely in the coastal areas.²⁷ Unemployment rates also vary from 6.6 percent in the central city of Monastir to 32 percent in the southern city of Tataouine. Even the phosphate-rich region of [Gafsa](#) “remains underdeveloped compared to northern and coastal regions. The populations of the mining basin still lack access to basic infrastructure and social services like adequate access to drinking water and healthcare, as well as economic opportunities.”²⁸

Regarding poverty writ large, a [survey](#) by the International Republican Institute revealed that in

November 2017, 26 percent of Tunisians indicated that they “have trouble feeding [themselves] and [their] family and buying even the most essential things for survival”—a figure that has fluctuated from 32 percent in March 2011 down to 15 percent in May 2016 and back up in recent years.²⁹

Equally troubling are the consequences of the enduring lack of social justice—from brain drain to irregular migration to protest to suicide to violent extremism. Thirteen percent of [university graduates left](#) Tunisia in 2014, with only Lebanon and Morocco experiencing higher rates in the region.³⁰ And Tunisians now make up the [largest contingent of irregular migrants](#) by sea to Italy.³¹ Most of them are [young men](#), seeking to improve their economic situation in Europe.³²

The number of hanging and self-immolation incidents increased by [1.8 and 3 times](#), respectively, between 2011 and 2016.³³ And while Tunisia is no longer the top contributor of foreign fighters to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, it is still one of the largest. Furthermore, an [increasing number](#) of Tunisians now agree to a great or medium extent that the lack of respect for human rights for security purposes is “justified” (from 21 percent in 2012 to 39 percent in 2016), which suggests that the issue of dignity is having a negative effect on the final goal: freedom.³⁴

Freedom Is Largely on Paper

Progress toward achieving the goal of freedom has inarguably eclipsed the other two goals. The most obvious political outcome of the revolution was the removal of Ben Ali, who fled for Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011. In a clear sign of a changing political climate, between 2011 and 2013, Ben Ali and his wife Leila Trabelsi were found guilty in absentia on multiple charges, including inciting violence and murder and corruption.

Tunisia has also held multiple free, fair, and competitive elections, including the country’s first-ever democratic local elections in May 2018. The 2014 constitution, which replaced the 1959 constitution, is the most

progressive in the Arab world. It enshrines freedoms of expression, of assembly, and of the press; protects the right to access information; and states that men and women are “equal before the law.” Furthermore, in April 2017, President Beji Caid Essebsi created the [Committee on Individual Freedoms and Equality](#) to ensure that the country’s laws align with the constitution and international norms.³⁵

But public perception of the political reform process is mixed. In Carnegie’s survey, 65 percent and 69 percent of respondents said the revolution had contributed to an increase in political freedom and press freedom, respectively. But there is still work to be done. As one respondent said, meeting the goals of the revolution requires “the removal of mechanisms that lead to a political blockage, facilitating decisionmaking, and reinforcing the idea of accountability of politicians and civil servants to the citizens.”

In other words, rights on paper do not necessarily translate to rights in practice. For example, while there is a clear legal framework for establishing an independent judiciary to protect the constitutional freedoms, its implementation is lagging behind that of the executive and legislative branches. Formation of a constitutional court remains in limbo, with parliament unable to agree on the appointment of the final three judges in a highly opaque and politicized process. Additionally, the specialized bodies, such as the National Anti-Corruption Authority and the High Elections Commission, suffer from a [lack of financial and human resources](#).³⁶ The Transitional Justice Commission has also suffered significant setbacks; parliament attempted to prevent the extension of its mandate, and the commission accused the government of obstruction when it refused to hand over archives that might contain evidence. Furthermore, the Economic Reconciliation Law, passed in September 2017, provides amnesty for civil servants who committed acts of corruption and is seen by many people as subverting the official transitional justice process.

While voters are afforded full rights and freedoms, many Tunisians, [particularly youth](#), choose not to participate in elections.³⁷ Overall, voter turnout has steadily

declined since 2011—dropping from 86 percent in the 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections to 36 percent in the 2018 municipal elections—and freedom of association is under threat by the Enterprise Registration Law and a potential amendment to the law on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).³⁸ Trust in government has also decreased. According to the *Afro Barometer*, in 2018, only 46 percent of Tunisians surveyed said that “democracy is preferable to any other kind of government” compared to 71 percent in 2013.³⁹ And only 64 percent said Tunisia should choose its leaders through “regular, open and honest elections,” compared to 94 percent in 2013.

Perhaps even more worrying is the growing nostalgia among the Tunisian public. As a civil society actor noted in Carnegie’s survey, “people regret the departure of Ben Ali and wish he would return.” Combatting this legacy does not require “radical change,” but rather “some level of change that would satisfy the people.” In a postauthoritarian society, where mistrust was common (and warranted), national and local governments should work to assuage the public’s fears. Increased transparency and communication is central to building trust. Here, civil society can play a key role in bridging the gap between the government and the people by translating government policy for the public and, in turn, translating public demands for the government.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

To keep Tunisia’s transition on track, the government must acknowledge Tunisians’ frustration and despair and address the outstanding socioeconomic demands of the revolution. It should immediately put forward a new, clear vision for the economy that will achieve the goals of work and dignity. As one civil society activist interviewed by Carnegie said, changing political rights is “neither sufficient nor sustainable to improve people’s lives.” Tunisians, particularly youth and those in marginalized areas, are still seeking changes that will make their economic situations better. However,

prioritizing reforms that are likely to have both wide and immediate effects will require support from the international community. The IMF, World Bank, and Western donors, such as the United States and EU member states, set the constraints under which reform can occur. Regardless of this support, though, the Tunisian government cannot hold back on necessary reforms. As another civil society actor stated, “revolutions take time, but people are in a hurry.”

Broadly speaking, in addition to a new framework for macroeconomic stability, the government should introduce incentives to encourage private sector investment, implement a clearer and coordinated country development strategy, and introduce a new social contract that engages the populations of the border regions. This requires strong political will at both the local and national levels to carry out painful reforms and push back against spoilers, including the political elite, as well as the powerful labor unions who held the country together during the early phases of the revolution and national dialogue but have since gone to battle with the government over IMF reforms that they perceive as harmful to their interests.

Most recently, after the government seemed poised to accept the IMF’s recommendation that Tunisia freeze public sector wages and reform state companies to address the ballooning deficit, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) **threatened to hold two strikes**—the first at all government agencies and state-owned enterprises and the second at all public service and state institutions.⁴⁰ The UGTT canceled the first strike just three days before it was scheduled (after receiving a guarantee of wage hikes) but held the second strike on November 22, 2018—the **largest strike** in five years.⁴¹ The union has planned a **third strike** for January 17, 2019, should the government fail to increase public sector wages.⁴² Representing more than **670,000 people** (or six percent of the country’s population), the UGTT has the power to both influence policy and prevent the government from implementing the international community’s reforms.⁴³

Economic and Social Reform Recommendations

To meet the economic and social demands of the revolution, the government, private sector, and international donors must enact reforms that will bring both long-term economic growth and a tangible impact on the lives of Tunisians, particularly those in noncoastal areas. They should:

- **Better target resources and assistance to those most in need.** Along with implementing the constitutionally mandated, positive discrimination program that is a hallmark of the [decentralization process](#), the state should review public spending and identify more effective social policies to reduce the gap in social welfare.⁴⁴ One step is to lower costly and regressive universal subsidies and better target assistance programs to those in need.

The central government should also fast-track the decree laws needed to fully implement the Local Authorities Code. Passed just ten days before the May 2018 municipal elections, the law describes the roles and responsibilities of the local councils. In a September 2018 discussion with several local officials, it became clear that the newly elected mayors and municipal councillors are passionate about the opportunity to improve their communities, but they lack the necessary financial and human resources.⁴⁵ The international community—through programs like the U.S. Agency for International Development’s [TADAEEM](#) project, which works with the Ministry of Local Affairs and Environment to improve public service delivery—can help build the capacity of local government to help reduce socioeconomic disparities among the regions.⁴⁶

- **Fully implement the [Tunisia Digital 2020 initiative](#).**⁴⁷ Created by former minister of communication technologies and the digital economy Noomane Fehri, the initiative lays out a clear and feasible plan to help Tunisia ride the digital tsunami he saw coming. The plan focuses

on connecting all Tunisians to the internet, digitizing education, implementing e-government initiatives, and changing the country’s laws to respond to twenty-first-century challenges.

When Fehri left the government, implementation of the initiative slowed, particularly in the education and e-government spheres. While Prime Minister Youssef Chahed’s government supports the initiative, they have not prioritized it and there is no clear champion for it. But there is also no active resistance to it. Thus, as members of parliament and other political actors look toward the 2019 elections, there is an opportunity for government and civil society actors at the local and national levels to push for more measures that would help improve service delivery and better connect the people with government. For example, electronic systems could be developed to reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies and improve transparency and accuracy and to facilitate the sharing of information both within the government and between the government and people. As one Tunisian analyst noted, since the revolution, there has been more than 300 reforms to laws and institutions, but the public administration remains unchanged.⁴⁸

- **Improve the education system to produce graduates with skills that match private sector demands.** University and vocational training curricula should be adjusted to better align graduates’ skills with the needs of the economy. One direct way to do this would be to develop a partnership among universities, training schools, and private sector companies. With a particular focus on high-skilled jobs, students’ regular university curriculum could be supplemented by an employer-developed program that offers apprenticeships and guarantees employment upon its successful completion. In parallel, the international community and private sector could support incentives to promote more high-value-added and knowledge-intensive jobs within the Tunisian economy. The Ministry of Education should also work with the Ministry of

Communication Technologies to foster a digital culture by integrating technology and tech skills into the classroom from the primary to university level.

- **Undertake tax reform and provide incentives to participate in the formal economy.** Because of the lack of trust in government, many people do not pay their taxes. Along with efforts to fight corruption, a carrot-and-stick approach that provides amnesty for past failures to pay taxes but mandates penalties for future failures could help the government increase its income. To positively encourage compliance, the national and local governments should first and foremost improve service delivery, but they should also reform regulations to ensure that all taxpayers contribute to the tax burden equitably and according to their capacity. In particular, they should eliminate unjustified tax breaks and develop a low tolerance for tax evaders by increasing and publicizing penalties. At the same time, civil society actors could create a communications strategy to explain the importance of paying taxes.

To recapture lost income from the vast informal economy, the government could grant fiscal amnesty to smugglers and devise concrete measures to promote economic development in the border regions and provide formal employment opportunities. The international community and civil society could also support skills training in the interior regions to help workers prepare for and enter the formal economy. In the short term, the government should consider providing [social security coverage](#) to those in the informal sector to help address the issue of dignity within this large community.⁴⁹

- **Liberalize the transport and logistics sectors.** The government can create additional job opportunities by implementing [open skies agreements](#) with the United States and the European Union to facilitate efficient air service.⁵⁰ Not only would this generate many new jobs but it could also lead to improved airport services and tourism infrastructure—

thereby increasing the attractiveness of Tunisian resort towns as tourist destinations.

- **Lift the currency control.** The government should gradually switch to full convertibility of the Tunisian dinar. As one Tunisian economist said, having a convertible currency could create opportunities for Tunisian entrepreneurs to open bank accounts abroad and “interact with the world.”⁵¹ Additionally, easing business regulations and entry and exit barriers for firms could help build a more transparent, accountable, and efficient system that could attract foreign direct investment and foster an entrepreneurship culture. The Startup Act, passed by parliament in 2018, offers some ways to ease entry for new, smaller companies, but the decree laws required to enact the legislation have not been passed.

Political Reform Recommendations

- **Protect and enhance freedoms enjoyed by civil society and the media.** To prevent democratic backsliding, the international community should continue to support civil society both financially and diplomatically and encourage the Tunisian government to refrain from any action that would be detrimental to the freedoms of expression and of the press, such as enacting a new, more restrictive NGO law.
- **Enable meaningful political participation.** To move forward, Tunisia needs “real political parties” as well as a strong civil society, according to one Tunisian analyst.⁵² Most parties are just “electoral machines,” lacking grassroots support. As the country prepares for the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections, political parties should develop clear platforms and increase their citizen outreach. While the youth vote has been declining at the national level, in the May 2018 municipal elections, 75 percent of the candidates were under age forty-five. Parties should harness this new local enthusiasm for politics through

empowering younger members and encouraging youth to meaningfully participate—for example, by providing them with leadership roles.

- **Prioritize establishment of the constitutional court.** Without the constitutional court, there is a dangerous gap in the country’s system of democratic checks and balances, as there is no effective guarantor of human rights, the balance of power, and constitutional supremacy. Tunisian authorities must establish the court and appoint its members in a way that is compliant with the new constitution and international standards on the independence of the judiciary. The current process for selecting justices is opaque and subject to political manipulation. Partnerships could be formed with leading law schools in the United States and Europe to train the next generation of Tunisian lawyers and judges. The law faculties in Tunisia should become an authoritative source of teaching and research on the legal practice of democracy.

CONCLUSION

Tunisia is at a critical inflection point, particularly as the country approaches the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections. All actors—from civil society activists to politicians to international donors to the private sector—have an opportunity to address the economic and social challenges that inspired the 2010–2011 revolution and persist eight years later. As one Tunisian civil society actor noted, “we cannot go back or retreat.” But failure to create substantial new jobs, particularly for the educated youth, and to narrow the gap between the coastal and interior regions has the potential to undo the country’s positive political progress.

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