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Tunisia: 'Arab Spring Success Story' or 'Ongoing Revolutionary Experiment' – the Jury is Still Out



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Tunisia is sometimes described in the international media as the 'success story of the Arab Spring'. Compared with other countries in the region whose populations overthrew their leaders in the 2011 uprisings, the description seems fair. Unlike Libya, Yemen or Syria, all suffering instability and violent conflict, Tunisia has remained stable. Unlike Egypt, which has gone full circle back to autocracy, Tunisia's post-revolution freedoms have endured.

But Tunisians do not compare their country's fortunes with those of their near-neighbours. Their reference point is the series of demands which fuelled their own revolution. On those, the jury is out.

Tunisians rose up in January 2011 to oust a regime which had been in place for 24 years because they were angry. For the elite, that anger was mostly about the absence of political freedoms: real elections, freedom of speech and the right to hold government to account. For the majority, their revolutionary demands were economic: more jobs, better living standards and an end to the economic stagnation of the country's interior and southern regions.

Seven years after Tunisia's revolution, what does the scorecard look like?

After three initial years of transitional government, free elections in 2014 resulted in an elected president and a coalition government bringing together two large political parties, Nidaa Tounis and Ennahda, along with some smaller political groupings. In May 2018, the country's first free municipal elections installed democratically accountable decision-makers also at local level. Tunisians can fairly say they have chosen their political leaders and will have further opportunities at the ballot box to hold them to account.

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Freedom of speech has also gone from night to day. Before 2011, Tunisians were fearful to offer opinions on the performance of their government or their preferred political ideology. Their media was controlled by the Ministry of Information. Today a politically aware public criticize whomever they please as loudly as they like. And they gleefully watch their politicians being grilled in nightly television debates or sparring with their opposition counterparts.

Non-governmental groups are now vibrant. Many see their mission as organising protests, at which they have become adept and which periodically force ministerial resignations. The more sophisticated groups educate the public on issues of concern or suggest policy options to government.

So why do so few Tunisians express pride in these astonishing achievements? The answer is on the economic scorecard, where there is almost unanimous agreement that things have gone from bad to worse.

Before the revolution, unemployment stood at 13%, rising to 29% for Tunisians under 24 years old. Following the global economic slowdown, investment, tourism and remittances had all diminished. In a country where government has strong control over much of the economy, running a number of nationalised industries and setting wage rates for the public and private sector alike, anger was directed squarely at the regime. A small spark in the form of the self-immolation of a vegetable seller in a town in the country's marginalised interior was enough to ignite the keg.

In the months after the revolution, the economic indicators went through the floor. Some investors left. No new ones arrived. Tourists stayed clear. And strikes and blockades stifled even routine economic activity. Seven years later, most Tunisians expect things should be better. The reality is that economic conditions have not yet returned to the (intolerable) levels of pre-2011.

Security has also deteriorated. From being a police state before 2011, the security apparatus struggles to provide law and order under its new democratic constraints. Anger and boredom among the young unemployed fuels criminality.

More seriously, extremists took advantage of the incapacity of the post-revolution security apparatus to establish a strong foothold in Tunisia. Jihadi recruiters found thousands of willing recruits for ISIS. A series of terrorist attacks, including one on a beach in Sousse in 2015 which killed 38 tourists, rocked the country. The combined rejection of extremism by all political parties and wider society has pushed the radicals back for now. But there remains a risk that jihadist groups will once again step up their recruitment of vulnerable Tunisian volunteers.

Meanwhile the country has not found a Transitional Justice process that works. Tunisians continue to waver between an inclination to hold fully to account all those responsible for human rights abuses or corruption prior to the revolution and an approach to reconciliation which would enable the country to move forward. A Truth and Dignity Commission has led the charge on accountability but has tussled with decision-makers.

More fundamentally, Tunisians are divided over whether a re-assertion of state authority is needed or whether the newfound freedoms to hold government to account by the power of street protest should be defended at all costs. As one activist recently pointed out, it all depends what you fear most – a return to dictatorship or stagnation and disorder.

There are some brave and commendable Tunisians who remain determined to prove that progress can be made on economic regeneration without the need for a heavy-handed government. If they succeed, the “success story” moniker will be well earned. International donors, multilateral development banks and impact investors have rightly stepped up. They need to continue to play their part. Only once Tunisians see a democracy dividend will they be able to call their revolution a success.

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