

Democratization in Tunisia: Negotiating the Interplay of Policy and Economic Development


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This study examines the implications of the Tunisian revolution in 2011 and its subsequent democratic evolution within the context of prerequisites for democratic transition during the Arab Spring. The inquiry delves into two primary dimensions: firstly, an exploration of the objective rationales and contributing factors leading to the impediments in Tunisia's democratic metamorphosis. This involves identifying the elements of foreign intervention and the political and social forces that have played a role in the setback, with specific emphasis on entities such as the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), media outlets, civil society organizations, and influential entities within the bureaucratic administration. Secondly, the study seeks to assess the economic advancements that have fallen short of anticipated outcomes, evident in the decline across various economic indicators and the deteriorating socioeconomic landscape, foreshadowing an imminent economic crisis with profound social and security implications. The research contends that attributing the developmental setbacks, economic downturn, and insufficient economic progress alone cannot be solely accountable for impeding the trajectory of democratic transformation in Tunisia. It is imperative to also comprehend the pivotal role played by ideological conflicts and the inadequate consolidation of democratic culture.

Key Words: democratization, economic development, Middle East, North Africa, Arab spring, Tunisia

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars have extensively examined the pivotal role of democratic transitions in reshaping societies (Wang and Lo 2021). The dissolution of authoritarian regimes presents formidable challenges (Lachapelle and

[260] Hellmeier 2024). However, the attainment of democracy mirrors societal aspirations and facilitates more inclusive governance structures (Yerkes 2023). Furthermore, scholarly discourse continues to underscore the intricate relationship between democratic transitions and a nation's economic well-being and income levels (Epstein et al. 2006; Acemoglu et al. 2019). This relationship was established, in 1959 by Lipset, who proposed a link between democracy and economic development. Despite recent empirical studies, from post-Arab Spring contexts to experiences in South Africa, Pakistan, Poland, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Latin America, Indonesia, Malaysia, and beyond, which underscore the importance of economic dynamics in democratic transitions (Holmes 2023; Yerkes 2023; Langston 2023; Oztig 2023; Papadogiannis and Ramos Pinto 2023; Ufen 2023; Saidin and Storm 2024), this domain warrants further scholarly inquiry. Additional research is needed to elucidate nuanced aspects.

This article seeks to bridge existing research gaps by scrutinizing the nexus between democratic transition and economic development (Kabir and Alam 2021). Theoretically, it aims to elucidate the catalytic role of economic achievements in facilitating successful democratic transitions. Empirically, it examines the determinants underlying the democratic regression in Tunisia, with a particular emphasis on economic factors. Through a meticulous examination of Tunisia's post-revolutionary landscape, this study enhances our comprehension of democratization processes and their multifaceted nature. Additionally, this research, alongside its scrutiny of internal determinants, explores the impact of external actors in shaping a nation's political (Krüger and Stahl 2016; Maryon 2023), economic, and social trajectories during democratic transitions (Fentahun 2023). According to House (2020), Tunisia is the only free country in the Arab world. Thus, the Tunisian case study offers valuable insights into promoting democratic governance and fostering economic development, especially within the Arab world and other developing regions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Determinants of Successful Democratization

Researchers have identified several essential conditions necessary for successful democratic transitions (Marzo 2020). The extensive literature on this topic categorizes these factors into three main groups: social and economic factors, political and institutional factors, and demo-



graphic, cultural, and international factors (Rød, Knutsen, and Hegre 2020). Key elements in driving democratization include grassroots mobilization, effective interactions among political parties and figures, and the socio-economic structure (Langston 2023; Teorell 2010).

In addition to this general classification, long-term autocratic regimes are less likely to be overthrown, which affects democratic transition (Rød, Knutsen, and Hegre 2020). Successful democratization often requires exploiting divisions within the authoritarian regime, as confronting a strong, unified autocratic regime is more difficult (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 2013). Moreover, exploiting divisions within the incumbent regime is considered one of the conditions for establishing democracy (Teorell 2010), and democratic forces must carefully understand these divisions (Lowenthal and Bitar 2016) and interact accordingly.

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Opposition political elites and civil society must identify and collaborate with regime insiders who support change (Henneberg 2024). Building bridges with these individuals is crucial for developing a shared vision for transition (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 2013). However, this collaboration requires assurances that the rights and possessions of regime supporters will be protected under the rule of law (Lowenthal and Bitar 2016). Effective negotiation skills are essential for democratic elites (Hassan, Lorch, and Ranko 2020), who must also resist public demands for radical measures against former regime members (Teorell 2010; Lowenthal and Bitar 2016). Managing relationships with security services and armed forces is another critical task for reformers. Successful democratization hinges on placing the armed forces under democratic civilian control, which requires consensus among civilian elites and effective oversight mechanisms (Hassan, Lorch, and Ranko 2020; McCarthy 2023; Mietzner 2014). Reformers should respect military leaders, protect them, and provide necessary resources to ensure their roles are fulfilled effectively (Lowenthal and Bitar 2016).

The political environment during the transition is a significant determinant of democratization success (Holmes 2023; Langston 2023). Political parties and elites must be willing and able to engage effectively with the autocratic regime. Pro-democracy forces should remain united and pragmatic, avoiding internal conflicts and building coalitions to focus on governance fundamentals (Lachapelle and Hellmeier 2024; Lowenthal and Bitar 2016; Mietzner 2014). Post-transition, po-

[262] litical and civil society actors must assess the performance of new officials while considering inherited corruption and inefficiencies (Yom 2005). Disruptive behavior and negative attitudes from these groups can pose threats to democracy (Holmes 2023; Lowenthal and Bitar 2016; Albrecht et al. 2021). The form of government adopted post-democratization, whether presidential or parliamentary, can significantly influence the success of the transition (Cheibub 2007). The effectiveness of a democratic government hinges on its capacity to deliver top-notch public services, gather political backing, and demonstrate robust public sector capabilities (Fukuyama 2014). Well-organized democratic political parties that represent the needs of all social classes are essential for effective mobilization and support (Lowenthal and Bitar 2016).

The media play a crucial role in democratization (Rennick 2023). Establishing press freedom is vital, as the media serve as a guardian of democracy and can mobilize peaceful demonstrations (Teorell 2010). However, violent opposition can undermine democratization efforts by legitimizing regime suppression. International factors, including the support of democratic countries and organizations, are crucial for successful transitions (Teorell 2010). The breakdown of autocratic regimes often leads to new autocracies rather than democracies, making the interplay of these factors vital (Narayan, Narayan, and Smyth 2011; Lachapelle and Hellmeier, 2024). Economic factors also significantly influence democratic transitions. The availability of natural resources can reduce society's inclination toward political change, even under authoritarian regimes (Rød, Knutsen, and Hegre 2020). Economic growth and inflation can adversely affect democracies (Kennedy 2010).

Democratization and Economic Development

Empirical studies exploring the link between economic development and democracy offer diverse viewpoints but fail to establish a consensus (Pelke 2023; Mohammadi, Boccia, and Tohidi 2023). Despite extensive theoretical and empirical literature, results cannot be universally applied to all situations worldwide (Doucouliagos and Ulubaşoğlu 2008). The main viewpoints on this relationship include the compatibility view, conflict view, skeptical view (Carbone, Memoli, and Quartapelle 2016), and curvilinear view (Mohammadi, Boccia, and Tohidi 2023). The compatibility view suggests mutual reinforcement between democracy and economic development. Studies indicate that democra-



tization episodes can result in up to 15 per cent higher GDP per capita (Pelke 2023). The transition to permanent democracy has the potential to yield a significant 31 percent rise in income per capita (Acemoglu et al. 2019). However, the impact varies across different stages of democratic transition (Colagrossi, Rossignoli, and Maggioni 2020; Krieger 2022). [263]

The conflict view sees a negative relationship between democracy and economic performance. For example, strengthening democracy has been found to negatively influence real incomes in Gabon and Sierra Leone (Narayan, Narayan, and Smyth 2011). The skeptical view acknowledges that while democracy and economic development can be compatible, this is not universally applicable. The curvilinear view posits that democracy initially harms economic development in low-income countries but benefits it in high-income ones. Arguments supporting the positive impact of democracy on economic development are numerous. Democracy is associated with political and social benefits as well as economic gains, with slower economic development observed in the absence of democratic governance (Papaioannou and Siourounis 2008). Democracy establishes reliable accountability mechanisms, motivating governments to maintain high levels of economic performance (Carbone, Memoli, and Quartapelle 2016). It also fosters political stability and the rule of law, which are crucial for attracting investors and enhancing economic growth rates. The least-developed countries are advised to improve democratic practices to spur economic development (Kabir and Alam 2021).

However, some studies argue that democracy does not directly affect economic development, as various factors influence economic performance regardless of regime type, including cultural, social, political, and structural factors (Knutsen 2012; Imai, Kim, and Wang 2023; Murtin and Wacziarg 2014). Early studies found no significant relationship between democracy and growth (Helliwell 1994). The relationship, if it exists, is often non-linear (Barro 1996; Minier 1998). Research from the 2000s generally supports the idea that democracy promotes economic development (Baum and Lake 2003). Giavazzi and Tabellini (2005) acknowledge the fragility of this relationship. Cross-national studies find no significant differences in development associated with democracy but note decreases in economic volatility (Rodrik and Wacziarg 2005). Doucouliagos and Ulubaşoğlu (2008) infer that democracy influences economic growth indirectly via elevated hu-

man capital, reduced inflation, diminished political instability, and increased economic freedom.

[264] Democracy's indirect effects on economic development are explored through various channels. It can establish crucial institutions and structures that enhance economic progress (Govantes and Hernando de Larramendi 2023; Mohammadi, Boccia, and Tohidi 2023) and create environments conducive to collaborative economic efforts (Nosier and El-Karamani 2018). Wealthier nations are more likely to sustain democratic regimes (Przeworski et al. 2000), and economic growth reduces poverty and inequality, fostering a more favorable environment for democracy (Boix and Stokes 2003). These indirect effects include higher political stability, reduced inflation, increased human capital, and greater economic freedom (Doucouliagos and Ulubaşoğlu 2008).

Several determinants influence democracy's effects on economic development. One determinant is the stage of democracy. Initially, growth might proceed at a sluggish pace, yet it stabilizes at elevated rates over the medium and long term (Papaioannou and Siourounis 2008; Densumite 2022). Another determinant is the quality of democracy; high-quality democracies are more stable and less economically volatile than fragile democracies (Epstein et al. 2006). Country characteristics also play a role, with regional, cultural, and social structures affecting how democracy influences growth. In poor countries, democracy affects economic growth negatively, while in rich ones, the effect is positive (Elsässer and Schäfer 2023; Nosier and El-Karamani 2018).

Literature discusses democratization's effects on economic development from two viewpoints: beneficial and detrimental. Some scholars argue that democratization in poor developing countries might lead to political instability and poor economic performance (Rodrik and Wacziarg 2005). However, successful democratic transitions typically result in resumed economic growth (Papaioannou and Siourounis 2008), enhancing democratic consolidation and moving away from autocracies (Epstein et al. 2006). The economic costs and benefits of democratization vary according to the stage of democratic transformation, with short-term costs potentially giving way to long-term growth (Papaioannou and Siourounis 2008; Densumite 2022). Studies show mixed results, with some countries experiencing economic growth after democratization, while others face initial economic decline (Knutson 2012; Acemoglu et al. 2019).



Achieving successful democratization involves navigating a complex interplay of structural and institutional factors (Marzo 2020; Rød, Knutsen, and Hegre 2020; Govantes and Hernando de Larramendi 2023). Managing these dynamics effectively is pivotal for supporting democratic transitions (Holmes 2023; Pelke 2023; Lachapelle and Hellmeier 2024). A recurring inquiry in this realm, particularly post-Arab Spring, concerns the nature of the relationship between democracy and economic growth (Densumite 2022; Krieger 2022). Scholars continue to debate whether this connection is robust and direct, and whether its impact is short or long term (Hayek 1960; Helliwell 1994; Barro 1996; Minier 1998; Baum and Lake 2003; Giavazzi and Tabellini 2005; Rodrik and Wacziarg 2005; Doucouliagos and Ulubaşoğlu 2008; Tang and Yung 2008; Imai, Kim, and Wang 2023). Some studies suggest that sustained economic growth hinges on the enduring protection of civil and political liberties (Papaioannou and Siourounis 2008; Rachdi and Saidi 2015). Clearly, the relationship between democratization and economic development is intricate and multifaceted, shaped by diverse factors and developmental stages. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is essential for policymakers and scholars alike, striving to foster both democratic governance and economic prosperity. [265]

These questions are more pertinent to the case of Tunisia than to other countries for several reasons. First, it was the Tunisian people who initiated the Arab Spring at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011. Additionally, Tunisia has the most successful democratization experience among all the Arab Spring countries. Recently, however, the Tunisian case has resurfaced with questions about the failure of its transition following the coup d'état by Kais Saied.

Tunisia is an Arab Muslim country, as well as a North African one. Its location in the Mediterranean, very close to Europe, gives it a strategic position despite its small size compared to its North African neighbors, Algeria and Libya. The Tunisian people are known for their openness, culture, and level of education. Political life in Tunisia was dynamic even during Ben Ali's dictatorship, characterized by active political parties and a vibrant civil society (Khakee and Weilandt 2021; Weilandt 2021). Despite difficulties, the Tunisian economy was diverse and took advantage of the country's geographical location to strengthen cooperation with foreign countries, particularly Europe (Mouhib 2014; Krüger and Stahl, 2016; Khakee and Weilandt, 2021). It developed sectors of high added value and foreign exchange earners, such as the export of

agricultural products (olive oil, dates, citrus fruits), services (IT, consulting), and tourism.

[266] In the few years following the 2011 revolution, there was almost a consensus that Tunisia would succeed in its democratic transition; with all signs indicating it could overcome obstacles. However, the current political, economic, and social situation is alarming. Some observers say Tunisia has returned to the conditions present at the end of Ben Ali's era, 20 years ago. This invites us to focus on the case of Tunisia to better understand the process of democratization and the dialectic between politics and economics in its experience.

METHODOLOGY

Our research methodology rested on three key foundations. The first pillar involved participant observation conducted by the researcher, who is a Tunisian politician with substantial experience in various Tunisian governments following the 2011 revolution. With roles extending from governmental positions to board memberships in financial institutions, the researcher's tenure from 2012 to 2020 provided unique insights for both participant observation and a detailed case study. This research adopted a participant observation methodology (Kurz 1983; Philip and Lambelet 2014) alongside a case study approach (Yin 2014) to address our research inquiries.

The second pillar consisted of a secondary study that relied on reports and official publications from national institutions such as the Tunisian Central Bank and the National Institute of Statistics, as well as international organizations including the World Bank, IMF, and OECD.

The third pillar involved semi-structured interviews conducted with a select group of high-ranking government officials, many of whom had served as ministers in various post-revolutionary governments. These interviews, totaling nine, were conducted in person between March and May 2024, including six former ministers, one deputy minister, and two governors. Most participants were directly engaged in economic and developmental issues across multiple ministries. These interviews were essential for providing nuanced insights into our study.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face with five participants (three in Paris and two in Doha), while the remaining four were conducted remotely. Interview durations varied from 45 minutes to two and a half hours. While participants declined to be audio-recorded, detailed notes were meticulously taken to accurately capture the discussions. The



semi-structured interview protocol covered key topics relevant to our research objectives, such as the democratic transition in Arab Spring countries, internal (economic and other) and external (international context) challenges faced by governments, and the role of economic achievements in the success or failure of democratic transitions.

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This study sought to offer a comprehensive understanding of the trajectory of Tunisian democracy by integrating findings from participant observation, interviews, and secondary data sources. This analysis contributed to existing literature on democratization and added to ongoing discussions concerning the interplay between democratic change and economic development.

FINDINGS

This section presents the principal findings of our study on Tunisia's democratic transition, examining the country's journey since the coup d'état by Kais Saied. Drawing on participant observation, empirical evidence, and insights from high-level government officials, our research provided a comprehensive analysis of Tunisia's democratic evolution during the Arab Spring era. We uncovered a nuanced narrative that explored achievements, challenges, and the intricate interplay between political and economic dynamics.

Despite significant hurdles, Tunisia demonstrated notable progress, evidenced by its rise in global democracy rankings from 56th to 35th place between 2011–2012 and 2014–2015, respectively. By 2020, Tunisia had stood out as the sole democratic Arab nation within the top 100 of the Democracy Index, prior to Kais Saied's coup. Our study underscored the expansive scope for freedoms and robust civic participation, highlighting successful transitions of power and responsibilities through various elections.

While acknowledging these achievements, our research critically examined the major challenges encountered in Tunisia's democratic trajectory, particularly within the economic dimension. We explored whether democracy catalyzed economic development in a nascent democratic state, emphasizing the equitable distribution of power and economic resources as pivotal.

The study delved into the consolidation of power by democratically elected leaders, analyzing opposition to democratic transition from influential entities such as the Tunisian General Labor Union, media owned by business figures, and internal bureaucratic centers of power.

Additionally, we assessed external influences on Tunisia's democratic path, attributing resistance to democratic principles to political forces and elites within the country (Fentahun 2023).

[268] Furthermore, our research identified and analyzed four key factors that had impeded Tunisia's democratic experience: shortcomings in transitional justice and reconciliation processes, challenges in establishing constitutional courts and addressing constitutional issues, the limited roles played by civil society in the democratic transition, and the emergence of populist rhetoric (Lakhal 2022; Khaddar 2023).

In summary, this academic inquiry contributed a nuanced understanding of Tunisia's democratic experiment to the fields of political science and international relations. Grounded in empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks, it offered insights into the complex dynamics shaping Tunisia's democratic journey and enriched global discourse. Particularly significant was our examination of internal factors influencing democratic transitions, including the roles of political forces, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), media, civil society organizations, and bureaucratic structures. Moreover, we critically assessed factors related to transitional justice, the establishment of constitutional institutions, populism, and economic achievements (Lakhal 2022; Khaddar 2023).

Our study also provided valuable insights for international relations by contrasting Tunisia's democratization experience with that of Eastern European countries, which received robust Western support during the 1990s. Tunisia's unique geopolitical challenges during its democratic transition underscore its distinctive path.

Elite Failures, Union Power, and Media Meddling

The responsibility for obstructing democratic transition in Tunisia primarily lies with the political elite and various parties (Hassan, Lorch, and Ranko 2020; Govantes and Hernando de Larramendi 2023), who have failed to effectively engage and redirect forces opposed to democratic principles. Historical analysis reveals that during President Ben Ali's tenure, challenges faced by the opposition were exacerbated by party and ideological divisions, which impeded progress toward democracy.

We do not condemn the opposition political parties and elites during the Ben Ali era, as they were engaged in a continuous struggle against an authoritarian regime heavily reliant on security forces and the ruling



political party, the RCD, which dominated all levels of the state and administration (Maryon 2023). Ben Ali himself, with a background in security and having previously served as Minister of the Interior before his coup d'état in 1987, bolstered his rule through the Ministry of the Interior's security apparatus. Similar to Bourguiba, Ben Ali distrusted the military, leading to their marginalization under his regime, along with the Ministry of Defense. [269]

The systematic occupation of administrative positions by the RCD was a deliberate strategy of the Ben Ali regime. Following a widespread security crackdown on Islamists in the early 1990s, the regime swiftly consolidated control over public administration and various sectors of the economy within a few years. This prolonged control over the administration for more than two decades allowed the Ben Ali regime to establish a deep state, which obstructed Tunisia's democratic transition following the revolution.

In contrast to previous periods under Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali, where the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) showed limited activism with notable exceptions like the 1978 confrontations and a brief strike in 2011, recent years have witnessed a surge in strikes, exceeding 35,000 in 2012 and 2013 alone. These strikes, notably affecting education, health, transportation, and phosphate production, underscore the UGTT's powerful influence despite its participation in post-2011 governments. However, as confirmed by Weipert-Fenner (2023), following the bloody repression of the 1978 general strike, the UGTT became increasingly obedient to the ruling elite at the national level. Nevertheless, after the revolution, instead of supporting the democratic transition, it often played a role of social, economic, and political blockage.

Several leftist parties, including the Popular Front, often aligned with the UGTT, have been accused of hindering governmental efforts since Ben Ali's departure. Scholars like Netterstrøm (2016) argue that the UGTT's role has been counterproductive to democratic ideals, echoing Prime Minister Youssef Chahed's accusations in 2018. Yerkes (2023) contends that the UGTT's historical alignment with regimes, exemplified by its avoidance of involvement in the 2008 Gafsa protests, illustrates its non-revolutionary stance.

Media outlets owned by figures with corruption allegations also played a significant role in undermining Tunisia's democratic transition, perpetuating anti-democratic sentiments and disparaging elected

[270] officials. Despite the establishment of the Higher Authority for Audio-visual Communication (HAICA), intended to regulate media impartially, its failures allowed media manipulation to flourish, influencing public opinion and favoring counter-revolutionary factions (Albrecht et al. 2021). Our findings corroborate those of several other studies on the Tunisian context regarding the negative role played by the media in the democratic transition. Contrary to their assumed role as a catalyst for democracy, our research supports the conclusions of Lynch (2013), Karolak (2020), and Rennick (2023): the media have promoted social division, fostered uncertainty, and amplified frustration during the transition. As Rennick (2023) elucidates, the media primarily assumed this negative role through manipulation by political parties from the radical left or remnants of the former Ben Ali regime.

Administrative resistance to reform within the Tunisian government further complicated democratic progress. The persistence of bureaucratic inertia and loyalty to past regimes hindered ministerial initiatives, perpetuating inefficiencies and obstructing meaningful change (Söyler 2013). Moreover, international indifference toward Tunisia's democratic struggles, in stark contrast to support extended to other post-revolutionary movements, exacerbated internal challenges.

The broader regional context, including the 2013 military coup in Egypt led by Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi on July 3, and ongoing crises in Libya, has also impacted Tunisia's democratic trajectory, with Algeria adopting a cautious stance towards its neighbor. These external factors, combined with internal challenges, have tested Tunisia's resilience and its commitment to democratic ideals amidst political, economic, and security uncertainties (Maryon 2023).

While our research addressed the issue of external actors and delved into interviews, the findings remain inconclusive, lacking clarity for definitive conclusions. Participants acknowledged the significance of foreign intervention but expressed ambiguity rather than certainty. They emphasized the positive impact of direct involvement from official channels like ambassadors and official delegations, who showed sympathy and support for Tunisia's emerging democracy. However, discussions also revealed concerns about indirect impacts, including distrust from certain countries toward the Tunisian revolution (such as France, the UAE, Saudi Arabia) and issues related to NGOs and civil society in relation to donors or foreign actors (Krüger and Stahl 2016; Weilandt 2021). Despite the clearly negative perceptions of these latter



actors, it is noteworthy that many respondents maintained cautious reservations, particularly concerning potential implications in the terrorist attacks or riots.

In conclusion, Tunisia's path to democratic consolidation remains fraught with internal and external challenges, necessitating comprehensive reforms, robust institutional frameworks, and international support to safeguard its democratic gains and foster sustainable development. This version aligns with the style and structure typically found in academic journals, emphasizing citations and objective analysis of events and scholarly perspectives.

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Political Failures and Populist Obstructions

In addition to the main entities that were presented in the previous paragraph and which hindered the democratic process in Tunisia, several critical factors linked to the political trajectory also played an important role. Previous research emphasizes comprehensive and inclusive reconciliation as essential for a successful democratic transition (Jeffery 2021). This reconciliation process should encompass a national dialogue, compensation for victims, accountability for those involved in the previous regime's abuses, and comprehensive institutional reforms. However, Tunisia has failed to implement these measures. The absence of reconciliation efforts will not only have adverse consequences for the current democratic transition but will also leave unresolved grievances for affected individuals and their families, potentially for decades (Albrecht et al. 2021).

There exists a significant gap between theory and reality in Tunisia concerning dialogue, reconciliation, and the outcomes of the democratic transition. This paradox becomes more pronounced when we examine the sociological characteristics of Tunisians and the events that have transpired during the democratization process.

Tunisia, known for its tourism and strategic geographic location, is a crossroads of diverse cultures. Tunisians are generally welcoming, open, cultured, and tolerant. Historical experience shows that Tunisians favor dialogue over violence, resolving successive crises through discussion. However, despite these attributes, Tunisians have struggled to achieve true reconciliation, remaining distinctly divided.

This division can be attributed to enduring ideological conflicts among political parties, which have deep roots. Many of today's political leaders were rivals or even enemies during their university years.

[272] For decades, Tunisian universities were frontlines for different political and ideological factions, particularly between Islamists and leftists. The overwhelming influence of ideology has hindered reconciliation, fostering a climate of distrust and even hatred. This environment ultimately facilitated the rise of Kais Saied, who exploited these divisions for his own ends.

We agree with Govantes and Hernando de Larramendi (2023), one of the critical missteps during Tunisia's democratic transition was the failure to establish a functional Constitutional Court and to consolidate other constitutional bodies. Despite significant progress in setting up various institutions and judicial bodies, their operations have been plagued by controversies and conflicts. These issues have allowed anti-revolutionary forces to undermine and, in some cases, terminate the functions of these bodies.

Several entities have utilized populist rhetoric to disrupt the democratic process (Lakhal 2022; Khaddar 2023). Following the 2014 elections, anti-democratic factions such as the Free Constitutional Party emerged. This party, supportive of the old regime, dedicated itself to obstructing parliamentary sessions and discrediting the legitimacy of the democratically elected parliament. Funded by various anti-revolutionary forces, these groups exploited their resources to destabilize Tunisia's political landscape, contributing to the current state of affairs.

The lack of neutrality among many civil society organizations has prevented them from fostering dialogue or national consensus on democratic principles, including the acceptance of election results (Ufen 2023). The retreat of most civil society components from the protest scene after July 25, 2021, is therefore unsurprising (Yom 2005). The politicization, ideological alignment, and pursuit of self-interest by entities like the Tunisian General Labor Union, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts, the National Bar Association, the Tunisian League for Human Rights, the National Union of Tunisian Women, and the National Union of Tunisian Journalists have hindered their endorsement of democratic transformation. This bias has profoundly negatively affected Tunisia's democratic transition, as civil society is fundamentally required to monitor and defend human rights and freedoms (Juan and Stepan 1996; Henneberg 2024).

In conclusion, these factors, alongside the obstructive actions of key entities, have significantly hindered Tunisia's progress toward a stable and functional democracy. The interplay of political missteps, lack of



reconciliation, and the detrimental role of both populist and civil society organizations underscore the complexity of achieving democratic consolidation in Tunisia (Lakhal 2022; Khaddar 2023).

*Post-Revolution Economic Trials: Missed Opportunities
and Structural Pitfalls*

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Despite the talk of the Tunisian economic miracle that we heard during the Ben Ali era, several unfavorable factors affected the revolution, including unemployment, social injustice, regional imbalances and nepotism, corruption, and bribery. In 2011, under Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi, over 200,000 new employees were recruited into the public sector, mainly in the Ministry of the Interior. Additionally, about 40,000 individuals with questionable legal statuses were regularized. Appointments also included beneficiaries of the general legislative amnesty (5,850), and the martyrs and wounded of the revolution (2,480). This increased the number of government employees from around 450,000 to 650,000.

Political parties lacked precise economic programs and a clear vision for reform. Opposition parties, primarily focused on rights and freedoms against the Ben Ali regime, were unprepared to formulate economic policies. Consequently, economic policymaking was entrusted to individuals from the previous regime and unelected experts with no party affiliations. This lack of alternative visions led to a continuation of the previous regime's approach. Despite the revolution and global fascination with it, significant opportunities for Tunisia's economy were squandered locally and regionally (Selmi and Dornier 2017).

Engaging with international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank was deemed essential, but these interactions frequently compromised Tunisia's sovereignty. For example, the IMF had access to detailed information through interviews with officials in state institutions, which weakened the state and all parties involved in governance.

To address urgent demands and continuous pressure on governments, there was a notable inclination toward borrowing and favoring a market economy without adequate controls (Govantes and Hernandez de Larramendi 2023). Many loans intended for investment were redirected to other purposes, such as salary increases or general consumption. This led to a gradual erosion of transparency, increased corruption, tax evasion, and the shadow economy. Business leaders and

[274] wealth owners were criticized for not showing enthusiasm for additional investment. Some influential families continued to dominate the country's economy (Statement by Patrick Bargamini, European Union Ambassador to Tunisia, to *Le Monde* on July 9, 2019). Government leniency toward corruption encouraged many businesspeople to infiltrate media and politics, establish parties, and run for elections, leading to inefficiency.

Public institutions in Tunisia face complex economic challenges, including precarious financial situations, poor management, and performance issues. Many public sector institutions are led by directors who were chosen without consideration of their competence. As a result, they are unable to implement effective strategies for improving performance and are often overwhelmed by union pressures, leading some institutions to bankruptcy. The large-scale disarray after the revolution had severe negative repercussions on the Tunisian economy. For example, the phosphate sector, a significant source of hard currency income, was almost entirely halted due to union demands and protests by residents around production sites.

Inconsistent policies of successive governments after the revolution detrimentally affected both the economy and the social situation of citizens. Continuous wage increases led to inflation rates exceeding 10 per cent for the first time, resulting in a deterioration of individual income levels and purchasing power. Despite growing debt, funding for many projects without thorough feasibility studies was justified by popular pressures or electoral objectives. Frequent changes in government created significant performance confusion, worsening economic conditions. Successive governments were weak against business leaders who exerted pressure on ministers, administration, and parliament for more benefits and favorable policies. Tax evasion was one of the most complex issues, with little progress made towards tax reform by various sectors. Governments were unable to resolve the subsidy issue, with much of it not reaching its intended recipients (electricity, fuels, and consumer goods). This created a suitable environment for smuggling and exploitation by many foreign companies, leading to Tunisia being listed on the European Council's 'tax havens' list in 2017. The volume of commercial fraud from invoice manipulation presented to customs authorities by importers and exporters was estimated to be \$374 million in 2021.

Certainly, the Tunisian economy faced numerous structural prob-



lems during the post-revolution period (Selmi 2017). However, although economic achievements did not meet the aspirations of weaker social classes, there were bright spots. One example is the decrease in the poverty index during the Arab Spring period (2011–2020), or before and after 2014. Measures to improve economic reality for individuals included the requirement to declare assets to a constitutional authority, an important step toward transparency and combating illicit wealth (House 2020). Additionally, the establishment of a Higher Judicial Council sent a strong message to reassure investors. Several laws considered pillars for a sound national economy were approved, such as the Public Procurement Regulation Act, the Public Institutions Reform Act, the Investment Climate Improvement Act, and the Startup Act Tunisia. However, time and conditions were insufficient for their effective implementation or for achieving tangible and visible goals.

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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Popular expectations naturally run high after a revolution. However, these expectations can also hinder the democratic transition (Holmes 2023). High levels of disappointment, anger, feelings of deprivation, and resentment toward politicians provide fertile ground for counter-revolutionary forces aiming to undermine emerging democracies. These forces succeed in obstructing the democratic transition, not merely due to economic challenges, but also by leveraging these issues to attack the democratic process and negate its accomplishments.

Many economists and researchers argue that years of democratic transition often coincide with challenging economic conditions, with growth rates hovering around zero. Acemoglu et al. (2019) examined 164 countries between 1960 and 2010, finding that achieving democracy after non-democratic rule can result in a 20 percent increase in gross national income over the next thirty years following the transition. Despite potential negative economic indicators during the transition, research confirms significant economic improvement within ten years of democratization.

The results of our study support those of Acemoglu et al. (2019), who emphasize that democracy involves more than institutions and free elections; a robust democratic culture and stakeholder unity are crucial. Our study also supports the findings of Yin (2014), who argues that democracy cannot be stable in a society divided into two large blocs, each seeing the other's victory as a significant threat to its core val-

[276] ues. Mexhuani (2024) concurs, noting that ideological conflicts do not constitute democratic pluralism but rather lead to a zero-sum game. He concludes that democratic transition requires a consensus among change forces for its success, commitment to democratic procedures, and prioritization of these over their differences. Consensus is not the sole path to democratic transition. The example of Tunisia and the coup d'état by Kais Saied highlights the critical role of institutions. This supports the conclusion of Weipert-Fenner (2023), who emphasizes that while consensus is vital for democratization, the development of institutions that manage conflicts constructively significantly impacts both the experiences within and the expectations of the new political system.

Hinnebusch (2024) believes that the political economy in the Middle East and North Africa is unsuitable for democracy. He argues that while Tunisia and Egypt have the best prospects for democracy, revolutions often fail because of the control some families have over the economy. These powerful families need guarantees before accepting coexistence with democracy. Neglecting social and economic priorities, and turning political competition into cultural wars over identity – such as conflicts between secularists and Islamists – leads to destabilization. The return of the old elites in Tunisia's October 2014 elections is a natural result of such ideological wars.

Our examination of the Tunisian case yields findings that challenge the recommendations of Lowenthal and Bitar (2016), who advocate for extensive collaboration with supporters of the old regime to reassure them and safeguard all their rights and assets. The outcomes of our interviews align with those of Teorell (2010), who stipulates that the success of democratization in the presence of elements from the old regime hinges on a specific set of skills that democratic elites must possess notably strong negotiation abilities. Furthermore, Tunisian politicians have fallen into the same trap highlighted by McCarthy (2023), failing to subject the security forces and armed forces to democratic civilian oversight. The Tunisian case underscores the assertions of Mietzner (2014), illustrating how political party conflicts provided an opening for Kais Saied to declare an almost military regime. The absence of genuine coalitions and the conflicts characterizing political life and interactions among democratic factions played a pivotal role in halting the democratic transition in Tunisia (Lachapelle and Hellmeier 2024; Lowenthal and Bitar 2016). The media's influence emerges as an-



other crucial determinant of a successful transition to democracy (Teorell 2010). Additionally, certain civil society organizations have posed substantial threats to democracy by adopting disruptive or even destructive stances (Lowenthal and Bitar 2016; Henneberg 2024).

In conclusion, our examination of Tunisia's democratic transition and economic progress indicates that the primary setback is not solely economic but also stems from ideological conflicts and counter-revolutionary forces. These forces, backed by radical left-wing political parties and associations, adeptly utilized the media, civil society, the UGTT, and the deep state to their advantage. Understanding the relationship between democracy and economic growth has the potential to enhance forecasting precision, aiding non-democratic nations in harnessing democratic mechanisms to effectively combat poverty. Future research should expand the sample size of interviewees and include more Arab Spring countries to better generalize the findings. Lastly, if scholars like Marc Lynch (2013) have previously forecasted the resurgence of repressive Arab regimes, drawing from past mistakes, we, in turn, assert that despite the failed democratic transition in Tunisia, the elites still possess the capacity to navigate toward democracy if they glean insights from historical errors.

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