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Tunisia's struggle for democracy isn't over

10 years after the revolution, patronage and populism rule the country. But Tunisians want a deeper form of democracy

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It's been a bit more than 10 years since longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled Tunisia – on 14 January 2011. In short order, several other despots also took to their heels. The 'Arab Spring' had begun and was to change the region for once and for all. Wars and bloody counterrevolutions followed. But of all the countries whose citizens rose up, only Tunisia is still carrying the banner of democracy. But for how much longer is the question. Its citizens, too, have long since become disenchanted.

In the capital city, Tunis, where a second countrywide lockdown was imposed on the revolution's tenth anniversary, people are pessimistic. The Covid-19 pandemic dominates daily life, with infection and death rates rising daily. State hospitals are overflowing and private clinics largely unaffordable. The lockdown was intended to prevent large crowds and demonstrations – not only those celebrating the revolution, but also those protesting political and social grievances. This attempt failed spectacularly. All over Tunisia people took to the streets, expressing their frustration and even engaging in violent confrontation with police. Protestors as young as 15 attacked state institutions and looted supermarkets. The young generation that grew up in post-revolutionary Tunisia, it seems, has lost all hope for a better future.

For them, the events of 2010 and 2011 are merely stories from a history book belonging to another era. Back then, fruit and vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation on 17 December 2010 stimulated long pent-up social frustrations that erupted into mass protests and culminated in the resignation of President Ben Ali, who had held office since 1987 After that, his police state gave way astonishingly quickly.

The ensuing constitutional process was jarring until the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet of trade unions, the employers' confederation, the bar association and the Tunisian Human Rights League intervened and brought it to a brilliant conclusion in early 2014. No other country in the Arab world has such a progressive constitution – one that guarantees fundamental civil rights. Yet after a Nobel Peace Prize and five free and fair elections, Tunisians are increasingly wondering what has really changed.

Tunisian democracy's flaws

The young democracy has many serious problems: The lack of jobs and prospects continues to mar daily life and the economy was in a nosedive even before the pandemic. Hardly anyone believes the economy can be restarted after the pandemic ends. Moreover, the Tunisian state is threatened with insolvency in the second quarter of 2021, not least because there are no tourists to bring foreign currency.

The absence of ideas for stopping the country's downward spiral is paralysing Tunisians. The country has become tired and lethargic, and more and more young people feel that all they can do is leave. In October 2020, three times as many Tunisians crossed the Mediterranean than the year before.

The political system's dysfunctionality starts with Tunisia's political parties.

It's clear that Tunisian democracy must reinvent itself. In fact, economic difficulties are not the main problem. The widespread assumption that the political revolution succeeded but the socio-economic one failed just obscures the serious political dysfunctions that must be corrected for Tunisia's economy to be revived.

The political system's dysfunctionality starts with Tunisia's political parties. In 2014, when the very first elections for the new constitutionally defined hybrid presidential/parliamentary democracy were held, the main parties appeared to have forgotten the revolution's basic demands: freedom, jobs and dignity. Throughout the electoral campaign they instead zeroed in on the differences between modernism and Islamism. The 'modernists' of the *Nidaa Tounes* ('Call of Tunisia') party incessantly invoked their connection to Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's secular founder, and despite having many representatives of the *ancien régime*, won an upset victory.

As expected, however, *Nidaa Tounes* soon was fighting with its coalition partner, the Islamist *Ennahda* ('Renaissance') Movement, which had only recently been legalised. Intrigues and trading positions took centre stage, while defending privileges took precedence over making real reforms. There were no programmatic debates. Some MPs switched factions many times within a single legislative period and most governments lasted less than a year.

Tunisia's own version of clientelism

Tunisia's political parties, however, are merely symptoms of a much deeper problem. In Tunisia, economic development has always presupposed access to powerful positions. Alliances are not built out of conviction or to implement specific policy issues, but rather as an end in themselves. Even during the Ottoman Empire, favours were granted and decisions taken in the *Bey*'s backroom.

Even a decade after the Tunisian revolution, this regional type of clientelism continues to shape Tunisia's political and economic culture – deep into the workings of the state-owned companies and civil service. Structures and mechanisms that survived both the colonial era and the dictatorship persist under democratic governance. Tunisia's mutually dependent social protests and corruption-prone bureaucracy have created the country's peculiar character, a combination of grafter culture and civil servant mentality.

In the past ten years, Tunisia has accomplished a lot.

Tunisians who don't have access and power always hit glass ceilings. They have to look on as established societal and social relations are perpetuated. This frustration affects the young start-up entrepreneur and the taxi driver – and the fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi: They have all foundered over Tunisia's rentier economy.

Populism's threat to Tunisian democracy

Those politicians and political parties who try to question Tunisian politics' fundamental evil are thwarted over and over again. The most prominent case is the failure of the government of the social democrat, Elyes Fakhfakh. He and his Civil Service, Governance and Anti-Corruption Minister, Mohamed Abbou, had dared to question the functioning and recruiting practices of state-owned enterprises. Fakhfakh

was immediately accused of conflicts of interest and forced to stand down in June 2020.

Shortly after, another government was formed. Its most important member was the 'Heart of Tunisia' party of media mogul Nabil Karoui – also known as the 'Tunisian Berlusconi'. Recently, however, he's been imprisoned again, for money laundering and tax evasion. So he won't be making any trouble for Tunisia's entrenched political power structures.

In light of these events, it's no surprise that Tunisians are losing their enthusiasm for representative democracy. The 2019 presidential election was won by Kais Saied, an anti-establishment candidate who seeks to replace *party* democracy with *direct* democracy. The ex-regime nostalgics and revanchists of the Free Destourien Party(PDL) claim to be the heirs to Tunisia's nationalist *Destour* ('constitution') movement and the only ones who can improve security and stability. With the PDL attracting the most voters, it's clear that populism is now the biggest threat to Tunisia's democracy.

In the past ten years, Tunisia has accomplished a lot. Citizens enjoy freedom of opinion and assembly, their lively civil society is not shy of conflict and trade unions and the women's movement are influencing public discourse. Despite political instability there will be no return to authoritarianism in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, a decade after Tunisia's radical change, its party democracy leaves a lot to be desired. Tunisians want a 'Democracy 2.0' that finally fills the shell with democratic content. Whether they'll get one is unclear: Tunisian democracy will either go down in history as an anomaly – or as a model for a region whose transformation is far from complete.



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