

Tunisians' thwarted dreams of democracy and progress

The Alarming Indicators of A Declining Social Democracy

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A decade after their successful uprising, Tunisians are still waiting for the realization of their political, economic, and social demands, despite frightful signs of a lagging economy and stunted politics.

The Tunisian uprising in 2011 was triggered by a spontaneous public demand for social justice and democracy, and although the masses were not necessarily educated in political terminology, their revolutionary slogan of "Freedom, Jobs, and Dignity" embodied the essence of social and political reform.

Today, almost a decade later, Tunisians, deeply disenchanted with the political establishment, continue to push for change and organize non-violently. The government's reaction to their lively struggle for justice was at times peaceful and forgiving and in others violent and repressive, as evidenced by the shootings in the city of [Siliana](#).

The achievements that politicians applaud, like the formation of multiple political parties and the instatement of broad political freedoms, are futile to the ordinary Tunisian citizen. In fact, it is ordinary citizens who are burdened by the weight of the lawlessness, political failures, and terrorism that mars everyday life in Tunisia. Politicians, busy campaigning for parliamentary seats in recent years, are taking advantage of Tunisians and are completely oblivious to the fact that they are using a dysfunctional pattern of politics that, for more than ten years, has driven Tunisia to its current stage of crisis.

According to the latest economic figures of November 2021, Tunisia's exports totaled 4,081.7 million dinars and imports totaled 5,638.1 million dinars, leading to a [trade deficit](#) of 1,556.3 million dinars in October 2021. [1] Inflation in [domestic consumption increased](#) by 6.4 percent due to a rise in the prices of materials and services for transport (from 4.9 percent to 5.4 percent) and education (from 7.8 percent to 9.1 percent). [2]

Additionally, the country growth rate recorded a negative result of 0.3 during the third quarter of 2021, [3] and in the absence of a clear economic and developmental policy, [unemployment](#) rose to 18.4 percent in the third quarter of 2021. Male unemployment rate reached 15.9 percent in the last third quarter, while female unemployment was at 24.1 percent. [4] The recent projections of the Tunisian government indicate that the state budget deficit for 2021 will be around 9.79 billion Dinars (\$3.42 billion) as per the Supplementary Budget Act, [5] an increase from 7.094 billion Dinars (\$2.48 billion) in the original finance law of 2021. [6]

These bleak figures are likely to deteriorate even further in the absence of a functional political system and an effective economic strategy that provides viable solutions for the country's current state of recession and inflation.

Since the 2011 revolution, successive Tunisian governments relied heavily on foreign loans and grants to support the country's economy. This behavior led to an economic situation that does not bode well when coupled with current governmental inefficiency, misconduct, and corruption.

According to international financial institutions, Tunisia's total public debt in 2021 has reached around 100 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), compared to 40 percent in 2010. To meet its financial obligations, the government was forced to take on [further debts](#). Nearly three quarters of Tunisia's debt is external debt, half of which is from international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, African Development Bank, or partner country investment groups like the German Development Bank (KfW). Other debts come from loans taken from financial markets and direct inter-state loans. [\[7\]](#)

Over the past decade, Tunisians have been living in a state of uncertainty, characterized by financial crises and growing social inequality. Thus, poverty has become a fact of life for many Tunisians, especially following the Covid-19 pandemic. Extreme poverty [increased](#) from 2.9 percent to 6.9 percent, and the percentage of the poor and vulnerable groups together is expected to increase from 16.7 percent to 20.1 percent of the country's population of about 11.7 million (World Bank 2021, 2019). [\[8\]](#)

The pandemic revealed furthermore the fragility of Tunisia's healthcare system and the absence of dependable public health infrastructure. With scarce medical supplies, equipment, and proper medication, Tunisians were forced to overcome challenges ranging from an absence of oxygen machines to shortages of medical and paramedical staff, especially in areas outside the capital.

The economic hardships resulting from the pandemic led to a noticeable surge in [illegal immigration](#)—Tunisians call it "harraga," or burning borders. In 2021, the Tunisian Forum of Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) reported 1,470 Tunisian migrants that have landed on the Italian coast, bringing the number of Tunisian arrivals since the beginning of the year to 14,308 people. [\[9\]](#) According to the FTDES report, 27 percent of migrants that arrived to Italy in 2021 were Tunisians – meaning that the number of undocumented migrants who reached Italy rose 27.6 percent compared to same time last year. In October 2021, the Tunisian coast guard intercepted around 263 attempts to cross the border– an increase of 67.5 percent compared to October 2020 – and prevented 2,739 people from reaching the Italian coast, thus bringing the number of thwarted illegal immigration attempts to 22,147 since the beginning of the year. The highest recorded number of irregular immigrants was in 2011, with a total of [26,000](#) individuals; this number reached its second highest peak in 2020 with [13,000](#) immigrants.

These statistics are alarming particularly given the increase in the number of minors and families attempting the risky migration journey, a fact indicative of the appalling social and educational decline that is forcing Tunisians to look for alternatives elsewhere, even at the risk of their own lives.

Another emerging phenomenon in contemporary Tunisian society is increased suicide and attempted suicide. In September 2021, 15 cases were recorded – an average of one suicide every two days. [\[10\]](#) Indeed, the variety of suicide methods attempted are proof of an overwhelming desperation and loss of hope at Tunisia's current circumstances: 33 percent, for example, attempted suicides by immolation; 27.7 percent by jumping or falling; 20 percent by ingestion of drugs; 13.3 percent by hanging, and 6.7 percent by white weapons. 365 suicides were recorded in 2015, and 372 in 2014. The rise of child suicide was another painful reality check for Tunisian society, as 2015 witnessed an increase of 400 cases compared to 2014, [\[11\]](#) while attempted suicide among children in 2015 rose to 184 cases compared to 40 in 2014. [\[12\]](#)

These worrying suicide rates are interlinked with increased drug addiction and school dropouts as a result of dire economic and social conditions – all of which is having a spillover effect among Tunisian youth.

And although Tunisia's political environment before the 2011 revolution was characterized by limited freedoms and absence of public liberties, the socio-economic situation was, generally, more balanced and conducive to economic growth and financial stability. The revolution and its subsequent political, security, and social instability has worsened Tunisia's economic and social realities. Political and governmental instability, continuous terrorist attacks, and the lack of realistic economic reform strategies all led to the economic recession evident today.

It is pivotal at this moment of Tunisia's democratic transition to acknowledge the various gaps that separate Tunisians today, as opposed to the unified front they all shared in 2011. The social unrest, political uncertainty, and absence of economic reform have widened the trench between political actors and the masses, who have lost faith in the ability of their political elite to shoulder the challenges of the democratic transition.

The fact that President Kais Saied is testing his people's patience by acting on in a unilateral manner that rejects dialogue and partnership with other political parties – whom he sometimes accuses of ineptitude or treason – is troubling, and indeed detrimental to Tunisia's quest for stability and progress. Unless ongoing political conflicts cease and Tunisians find a common approach to build a viable social democratic alternative, Tunisia is bound to enter a phase of even greater unrest and uncertainty.

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Footnotes

[1] National Institute of statistics (INS), Trade Balance, 12/11/2021

[2] INS, Inflation, 5/12/2021

[3] INS, Growth, 11/12/2021

[4] INS, Unemployment, 15/11/2021

[5] Official Gazette, Supplementary Budget Act, 16/11/2021

[6] Official Gazette, Budget Act, 2511212020

[7] Article, Hakaekonline Website.

[8] International Monetary Fund (IMF) report, 2021.

[9] The Tunisian Forum of Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), Irregular Migration Report, 2111112021.

[10] FTDES, monthly report, September, 2021.

[11] Jerasa News and Media Website, 2015

[12] Tunis Afrique Presse, 2015.