



## Democratization and Radicalization: Understanding Tunisia's Model of Democratic Transition

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*On February 1, 2017, German police [arrested](#) a Tunisian asylum seeker suspected of recruiting for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and planning an attack in Berlin. Meanwhile, the Tunisian Truth and Dignity Commission [broadcast](#)—for the first time in the Arab world—its public hearings investigating human rights abuses in Tunisia since 1955. How is the model country for democratic transition in the Arab world also the host and largest exporter of terrorists?*

In December 2010, Tunisia started the spark for the wave of revolutions that swept the Arab world calling for democracy, human rights, and economic equality. More than six years later, Tunisia has gained the reputation as the lone success story of democratic transitions, while other “Arab Spring” countries continue to descend into wars, extremism, and strengthened dictatorships.

With the inclusion of Islamist parties in governance, all the while exporting the largest number of foreign fighters in ISIL, what conditions contributed to the peaceful democratic transition in Tunisia? What are the main challenges still facing the country today?

### **A Turbulent Transition**

After the “Jasmine Revolution” in 2011 and the ouster of former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali following a 23-year rule, Tunisia held its first free elections since its independence in 1956. The elections of October 2011 [gave](#) Tunisia’s Islamist Party Ennahda a victory with the largest number of seats (89 out of 217) in the National Constituent Assembly (109 were needed for a majority). Left and secular parties gained the next largest numbers of seats, with left-wing Congress for the Republic (CPR) in second place (29 seats), followed by left-wing Ettakatol Party (20 seats), and the secular liberal Progressive Democratic Party (16 seats).

The party initially winning third place, then having seats revoked and members resigning from the party, was a curious case. The Popular Petition Party was [founded](#) only a few months before the election by an Islamist-leaning London-based media entrepreneur, Mohamed Hechmi Hamdi, who claimed that he was contacted by Tunisians urging him to run for election. His appeal appears to be his origin in Sidi Bouzid, in the inner and southern parts of Tunisia which are typically ignored, as elites and politicians have often come from coastal areas. He also painted himself as someone who understands the hardships of marginalized Tunisians and as a victim of the former regime who was exiled for 25 years, and he publicized that his election campaign was excluded from mainstream media coverage.

The 2011 elections and Ennahda's victory did not necessarily lead to a stable transfer of power. Following the elections, Tunisia faced a series of difficult challenges that almost broke the long-praised peaceful democratic transition. Those same challenges, including political, ideological, and violent extremism, were faced by other Arab countries during their transitional periods.

One of the main challenges involved political conflicts. Violence erupted in Sidi Bouzid after eight seats won by the Popular Petition were disqualified in six electoral districts by the Independent High Authority for the Elections (Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Elections [ISIE]). The annulment of seats resulted from allegations of the party's breach of electoral regulations including campaigning during the [purdah period](#) (when no campaigning is allowed), foreign financing of the campaign, and having a successful candidate who held office in the former ruling party. Supporters of the Popular Petition Party [set fire](#) to municipal offices, protested outside Ennahda's headquarters, and hurled rocks at security forces, which led to the imposition of a curfew in the town until the violence was subdued. Although the Popular Petition Party recovered seven of the eight cancelled seats (putting it in third place with 26 seats), 12 of its members resigned and declared themselves independent.

Following the elections and resolution of the seats issue, ideological challenges took over. The constituent assembly's first attempt to draft a new constitution resulted in vast ideological disagreements. After two years, the coalition government led by Ennahda failed to draft a new constitution. In 2013, the assembly reached a deadlock as Ennahda continued to face opposition over what was described by critics as the Islamist party's conservative agenda.

To add to this, the country saw a rise in extremism and attacks, including violent protests by Salafists in 2012 over an art exhibition that was deemed offensive to Islam and a film that was criticized as anti-Islamic. Tensions rose when two left-wing opposition leaders, Chokri Belaid and Mohamad Brahmi, were assassinated in February and July 2013, respectively, for which Salafist groups later claimed responsibility. The years 2013, 2014, and 2015 [saw](#) a rise in terror attacks, suicide bombs, and clashes between police and violent extremist groups. Mass protests erupted in the country blaming the Ennahda Party for the rise of extremism and violence.

These factors presented a substantial recipe for instability and mass violence. Tunisia seemed to be on the brink of a crisis akin to that taking place in Egypt, and it faced potential violence like that unfolding in Libya, Syria, and elsewhere. How did Tunisia deal with the political and ideological challenges that overtook the country after the revolution?

### **The Triumph of the Public Interest**

The deadlock, violence, and public opposition forced the Ennahda Party to step down in October 2013 and hand over power to a non-party government. This was an unprecedented move—to favor the larger public interest over partisan political interests.

Witnessing the instability and violence in Egypt following the election of the Muslim Brotherhood and the military coup, Ennahda opted for a compromise. Compared to the events in Egypt, Tunisia dealt with challenges through dialogue and the empowerment of civil society, rather than militarism. The deal was brokered by the National Dialogue Quartet, a consortium of civil society

federations and councils including the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers, which [won](#) the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 "for its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution of 2011." The Quartet played a mediating role in facilitating dialogue and bridging the political and religious divides.

A new technocratic government was formed and the new constitution was passed in January 2014. The Tunisian [Constitution](#) of 2014 guaranteed civil liberties, a civil and democratic state, the principles of pluralism, human rights, freedoms of assembly and expression, freedom of religion and opinion, prohibition of torture, right to fair trial, and equality between men and women including equal representation in elected bodies—all of which would not have been possible without the Ennahda members of the assembly voting for them.

One of the deciding moments in Tunisia's transition was the Ennahda Party's concessions of power in the interest of the larger public and the future of Tunisia. In the [words](#) of Rached Ghannouchi, co-founder and leader of Ennahda, "a 51 percent majority cannot govern a country whose democratic institutions are recent and fragile." Ghannouchi believes in a consensus government rather than a simple majority. "We lost power, but won Tunisia," he said.

This is not only a leap ahead of other Arab countries but a step ahead of western democracies as well, especially when considering the current deep partisan divisions and lack of consensus in the United States.

Following the establishment of the constitution, the first legislative elections took place in October 2014 and saw a heated contest between the Islamist Ennahda Party and the secularist Nidaa Tounes Party. Nidaa Tounes won 86 of the 217 seats and its leader, Béji Caïd Essebsi, was elected president. Ennahda did not run a presidential candidate but won the second largest bloc with 69 seats, forcing the two opposing parties to work together. Contrary to the events in Egypt and the coup that excluded and ostracized the Muslim Brotherhood, the Ennahda Party continued to be part of the political process. At the same time, Ennahda agreed to allow former regime officials to return to politics, demonstrating a motivation for reconciliation and compromise.

This balance can be explained by Alfred Stepan's [theory of twin tolerations](#), which comprises two components: the first is where religious groups accord elected officials control of governance and do not question their authority over religious claims, while the second involves the state granting religious citizens the freedom of religious expression and political participation. According to Stepan, embracing the twin tolerations "involves a rejection not only of theocracy, but also of the illiberalism that is inseparable from aggressive, top-down, religion-controlling versions of secularism." In Tunisia, religion and the state managed to establish that relationship. The country's ability to reconcile Islamists with secularists on the basis of democratic principles and the public interest, despite deep ideological differences, gave Tunisia an edge among "Arab Spring" countries.

The compromises and unity, for the sake of the public interest, characterize the Tunisian experience and have played a deciding role in the progression of events in Tunisia and the success of democratic transition.

### **The Tunisian Transition and Violent Extremism**

While many refer to Tunisia as the success story of democratic and peaceful transitions, the country has also seen a rise in violent extremism and has gained another reputation: as the largest exporter of foreign fighters joining the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Reports show that over [3,000](#) Tunisians have travelled to Syria and joined ISIL while thousands of others have been blocked. Other [reports](#) indicate that there are 1,000 Tunisians fighting for ISIL in Libya. Additionally, several attacks took place inside Tunisia as militant leaders jailed under the Ben Ali regime were now free, militant Salafists returned to the country from Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, and several [Salafist groups](#) arose and gained popular support. With a small population of 11 million, Tunisians are disproportionately overrepresented among ISIL and Salafist recruits.

When looking at the factors behind this trend among Tunisians, economic, group-based, and ideological marginalization appear to be the primary drivers.

The high unemployment rate among young Tunisian graduates (at [31.4 percent](#)), continuing cronyism, and the lack of socioeconomic initiatives for youth contribute to this feeling of marginalization. In the stagnating Tunisian economy, finding employment is difficult; and when youth seek a higher standard of living, upward mobility is challenging. Meanwhile, the rate of education, especially for those obtaining college degrees, has far outpaced economic development in the country. Economic regulations that [enable](#) disparity and concentrated wealth have also contributed to the struggling job market and lack of economic opportunities. Even seemingly ideological motives like eliminating European-drawn borders in the Arab world have economic underpinnings—that is, to redistribute the wealth from oil-rich nations fairly. While economic grievances played a vital role in driving the revolution, the Tunisian transition model has not yet been able to reform the economy.

Politically, the youth demographic had the lowest voter turnout rate because many don't see the system as working effectively. A Transitional Governance Project (TGP) poll [shows](#) that in 2014, 48 percent of Tunisians believe they were worse off than they were before 2011, while 75 percent did not trust parties. Moreover, only 59 percent of Tunisian respondents believed that democracy is the best form of government, compared to 78 percent in 2012. Disillusionment in the political process is a key theme in voter confidence post-revolution.

Additionally, during the transition period [new freedoms](#) in the country have allowed for free advocacy of ISIL ideology and more open recruitment. The overthrow of the Ben Ali regime paved the way for democratic institutions, including free speech. This has proven a double-edged sword: ISIL recruiters now have a platform to communicate their message openly to potential recruits. By increasing civil liberties, the government has inadvertently given a voice to messages of violence and extremism. Between the open Libyan border and rogue mosques in less developed regions, at-risk youth are more easily exposed to ISIL and Salafist recruiters.

Given such new freedoms, many [Salafists](#) returned to Tunisia and became politicized, especially after Ennahda's compromises and retreat from incorporating Sharia law into the new constitution. With Ennahda [rebranding](#) and the abandonment of political Islam, Tunisian Islamists became disillusioned. Moreover, six decades of top-down secularization and aggressive modernization efforts, including repression of religious actors, have left religious citizens marginalized. Ideologically, the events of the last six years in Tunisia have created a vacuum for youth who espouse Islamist beliefs, and they are now left vulnerable for Salafist avenues.

Geopolitics also play an important role in Tunisia, where politics show [regional preferences](#). Most political processes take place in the coastal and urban areas, while the inner and southern parts of Tunisia remain neglected and vulnerable to influence of militant Salafists. This regional divide was apparent in the results of the elections. The cosmopolitan secular cities saw a surge in liberal votes, whereas the conservative interior went for like-minded parties. The geography of rural and mountainous areas in Tunisia also presents a vulnerability easily exploited by militant groups from Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria, areas that are [conducive](#) to becoming militant training camps.

Moreover, regional divides in Tunisia present unequal distribution of reforms. Despite some reforms to the heavy-handed police system, [police brutality](#) remains common especially in the poor and rural areas of Tunisia where militants are active. There is still lingering distrust toward armed authorities in places such as Kasserine as well as fear of the militias. Imprisonment also risks radicalization, creating a situation similar to that of "[Camp Bucca](#)," where incarcerated ISIL leaders initially met.

### **A Difficult Road Ahead**

Although Tunisia has avoided large-scale violence and chaos, the country's stability and successful transition are judged prematurely. Some are successes but some remain challenges that the country has yet to address and resolve, including corruption, police abuse, economic stagnation, inequalities, ideological polarization, and violent extremism.

In addition to boosting economic progress and opportunities and restoring confidence in government and the democratic process, the struggle for reconciling the Islamist-secularist divide in Tunisia is far from over. While members of Nidaa Tounes pledged to fight terrorism and attempted to place restrictions on mosques, such efforts have not garnered consensus, especially by Ennahda members, and were viewed as oppositional to Islamism. Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi [stated](#) that he would only consider as criminals groups that use violence and function outside the rule of law, but not groups that promote violence and illegal ideologies.

At the same time, restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly, and belief even—and especially—among Salafists and ISIL supporters are likely to exacerbate the problem and not resolve it. Navigating the thin line between freedom and security is an age-old conundrum that countries across the region and the world face today, one that might be a key factor in the future of the lone Arab country that has experienced a successful democratic transition.