

# Tunisians Want a Better Economy and a Democractic System

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April 24, 2017



Arab Center Washington DC  
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

In addition to the natural difficulties of the development process, Tunisia faces numerous challenges stemming from the Jasmine Revolution against the regime of former President Zein al-Abidin bin Ali and his ouster in January 2011. If its movement for change at the beginning of the “Arab Spring” has proven to be less raucous and chaotic than others still gestating in the Arab world, there still lurk in its immediate and distant future political, economic, and social difficulties that, unfortunately, can set back its successful experiment. As heirs to these changes, Tunisian political elites must continue to cooperate to steer the ship of state through the straits of competing agendas and interests, to resolve the complications arising from a poorly performing and dependent economy, and to reconcile the competing views about the nature of the country’s society and its institutions.

Indeed, Tunisia is at a crossroads that may take it in many different directions. The first potential and desirable destination is one that could consolidate the hopes of the 2011 revolution, but it requires the continued compromises necessary for post-revolutionary periods. The second could easily be the opposite, as elites retrench into their particularistic discourses and interests, thus jeopardizing the post-2011 outcome. And yet a third direction may see Tunisia tackling some issues and failing in others, most importantly those related to the dreaded radical fringes of society who have either joined the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and may return in the future, or who have committed themselves

to challenging the peaceful sociopolitical transformation the country needs.

The future of Tunisia’s developments in the immediate and distant future will likely be a reflection of the aggregate views expressed by Tunisians in a public opinion survey conducted from September to October 2016 by the Doha, Qatar-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. As part of an overall sample of over 18,000 citizens in 12 Arab countries (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Tunisia), 1,499 Tunisians were asked their opinions about several issues – from personal well-being to views about democracy and governance, religion, regional and international questions, and ISIL. As expected from a country where the Arab Spring had its best success, Tunisian citizens’ views were generally hopeful and indicated a desire for the political elites to get serious about working on improving the people’s living conditions, especially their economic well-being.

### **To Borrow a Phrase, “It’s the Economy, Stupid”**

The survey clearly showed dissatisfaction in personal and country-wide economic conditions. Less than half—46 percent—of Tunisians expressed satisfaction with their own family’s financial situation. Only 10 percent said their income covers their expenses and they can save; 37 percent could not save; and 52 percent said that they could not make ends meet. To cover their deficits, most in need resorted to the

old social networks that have sustained their society in good and bad times. Sixty-one percent of respondents in need said they routinely borrow from relatives, neighbors, and friends to cover their expenses. While 11 percent expressed satisfaction with the state of the national economy, an overwhelming 87 percent viewed it as unsatisfactory. Concomitantly, almost half of the respondents, or 48.8 percent, said that the priority for Tunisia is to improve the general economic situation in the country and address unemployment, especially among the youth. Improving security came in second with 20 percent.

Interestingly, however, and despite expressing a low level of confidence (45 percent) in officials' seriousness about addressing urgent issues, only 28 percent expressed an interest in emigration while 72 percent thought they would be better off staying in their country. A large majority, 83 percent, of those willing to leave said that their primary reason for emigrating is precisely to improve their economic situation. These opinions have persisted since 2011 and are a direct extension of what most Tunisian citizens today say they wanted from the Arab Spring. When asked in 2016 about what they had expected from the developments in 2011, 54 percent of respondents said that the most important reason for supporting the movement for change was to improve economic conditions in the country. Subsequently, improving the standard of living of Tunisians in their seventh year of major sociopolitical change remains the crucial

factor deciding how the Tunisian experiment fares in the future.

### **A Clear Preference for Pluralism and Democratic Practices**

If most Tunisians see that improving the economy is essential for their experiment's success, an overwhelming majority indicated that political pluralism and democracy are their preferred goals. This is despite the fact that 73 percent of them are dissatisfied with the current political situation in the country. A large majority, or 83 percent, believe that a democratic system is better than any other; 77 percent that a pluralist political system is the best representation of political forces in society; and 58 percent that democracy is compatible with Islam. In a state where 80 percent are either very religious (10 percent) or moderately religious (70 percent), and where the first elections produced an Islamist-controlled government, less than a quarter of the population (23 percent) think that it is a good idea for only Islamist parties to compete in elections, and 19 percent that Sharia should be implemented. A solid majority of the respondents, or 78 percent, believe that press freedoms are essential and should be protected.

Relatedly, 65 percent of respondents think that an Islamist party can govern only if chosen in free and fair elections, and 46 percent think that if a secular party were chosen. Tunisians' religious and nonreligious orientations provided a good backdrop for these political opinions. A full 70 percent of respondents

considered religion to be a private matter; 80 percent thought religious leaders should not decide how people should vote; 74 percent reject these leaders' interference in political decision-making; and 67 percent want a complete separation of religion from politics. Only 7 percent of respondents believed that a nonreligious person is a "bad" human being; 81 percent rejected the principle of *takfeer* (declaring someone an apostate); 74 percent opposed considering non-Muslims apostates; and only 15 percent preferred to deal exclusively with religious people.

Like the majorities in the other Arab countries surveyed, Tunisians had very poor opinions of civilian institutions and their performance, a trend that should worry governing elites. Thirty-seven percent of respondents were dissatisfied and 16 percent were very dissatisfied with government performance; only 34 percent were satisfied with their legislature; and a mere 24 percent approved of political parties. Even the judicial branch received the approval of just 60 percent of respondents, with a mere 11 percent thinking there is equality in applying the rule of law, while 70 percent thought that some people received preferential treatment. These opinions of civilian institutions and their performance are coupled with the results that 91 percent of respondents think that corruption is either rampant (79 percent) or moderate (12 percent), and only 39 percent who are satisfied with government services and their delivery.

By contrast, and again expressing similar views to those of citizens surveyed in other Arab countries, a whopping 95 percent of Tunisian respondents were confident or very confident in the armed forces, and 73 percent were confident or very confident in the police. This could be a positive result, since the army did not interfere in politics and behaved as a guardian for the revolution, and since the police has enacted some badly needed, although insufficient, reforms. It could also be negative as Tunisians have expressed dissatisfaction with the performance of their political institutions and politicians since 2011. It is worth noting that the army still considers itself above the fray of political wrangling and limits its role to facing the new challenges posed by Salafist forces inside the country or by cross-border attacks from Libya and Algeria.

Finally, respondents had unequivocal views of ISIL even though Tunisia has supplied the largest number of Arab recruits to the millennial organization. Like other Arabs surveyed, a solid majority of Tunisians, 95 percent, had negative views of ISIL while only 3 percent viewed it positively. But, poignantly, a plurality of 44 percent thought that recruits join ISIL for economic reasons. Propaganda by the organization was the second most important reason for joining according to 16 percent of respondents. Still, a majority, or 77 percent of respondents, thought that powers outside the region were responsible for the rise of the organization, and only 12 percent blamed its growth on problems in the Arab region.

## Needed Action

As the only successful Arab experiment in political change since 2011, the Tunisian case speaks so far of dashed hopes for a better economic and political situation. A report by the World Bank for the spring of 2016 projected the year's economic growth at an anemic 1.8 percent, as important sectors of the economy suffered and overall unemployment stood at 15.4 percent (22.6 percent among women, 31.2 percent among college graduates, and 31.8 percent among the youth). Politically, the national unity government of Prime Minister Youssef Chahed is under tremendous pressure as it attempts to implement a severe austerity program to prop up the deteriorating economy. It also must face the security challenges that will likely increase as many Tunisian ISIL recruits return and Libya's instability spreads across the common border.

Much is required from the Tunisians themselves to address the reasons for the dreaded failure of Tunisia's so far hopeful change from authoritarianism. Specifically, what over the last few years has proven to be readiness among some political elites—especially the Islamist Al-Nahda movement—to compromise about important concerns

continues to be needed today. Despite hardships, Tunisians may still have to put up with the demands of structural adjustment; otherwise, badly needed infusions of cash from international lending institutions could dry up. The government must also show a clear commitment to fight corruption and cronyism that plague wide sectors of the economy and society.

Concomitantly, the Arab League and the international community, especially the European Union and the United States, would do well to help Tunisia weather both its dire economic conditions and the challenging security situation. As a strategic landscape that borders an unstable Libya and a confused Algerian political environment, Tunisia could be a source for future trepidation. Alternatively, and if given proper help, the country could provide a model for needed compromise in Libya and for peaceful and incremental change in Algeria. The prospects for Tunisia remain good if its elites choose proper avenues for compromise. In that, they will find good help from ordinary Tunisians who dared an authoritarian regime and triumphed over its repressive apparatus to make the Jasmine Revolution possible.

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