



من أجل 6 فيفري يومًا وطنيًا  
لمناهضة الإرهاب  
والاعتقال السياسي

ف الحقيقة  
حاكمة القتلة  
المحاسبة

PEACE, DEMOCRACY,  
FUTURE

# A country between hope and uncertainty

## Democracy, mobility and biotechnology in Tunisia after 2011

By Veit Bachmann, Kmar Bendana, Betty Rouland

How has Tunisian society developed after the revolution in 2011?  
Is the North African country really on the way to democracy?  
Viewed from the perspective of human geography, Tunisia presents a contradictory picture.

The Arab revolutions of 2010/2011 began in Tunisia. We have made a conscious choice to avoid the terms “Jasmine Revolution” or “Arab Spring”, since they imply a romanticised Eurocentric view of these revolutions. In the case of Tunisia, the term “Revolution of Dignity” has come to express that the demand for dignity was at the heart of the uprisings. Human dignity, dignity in the face of arbitrary use of power by the police, the dignity of being able to earn a living, the dignity of freedom and the dignity of having control over one’s own body – and the dignity of being able to move freely across national borders.

Neither in Tunisia nor in any other Arab state were all the hopes fulfilled that had been placed in the popular uprisings. However, it is undisputed that the protests triggered by the self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 in the small town of Sidi Bouzid in central Tunisia have massively changed many countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

### Political hope, frustration and uncertainty

While the tragic situation in Syria attracted and continues to attract attention in European media alongside occasional reports on the situation in Egypt and Libya, developments in Tunisia feature far less often in newspapers and news

programmes. This can partially be seen as a positive signal, insofar as it is likely related, among others, to the general absence of violent clashes in Tunisia. But another reason for this media abstinence might also be the complexity of developments in Tunisia, which are extremely difficult to decipher.

Despite all the problems in the country, Tunisians are proud of their revolution. Tunisia is the only Arab country where a revolution has developed in a democratic direction. Over the past decade, a relatively free press, an active civil

Left: In February 2022, Tunisian men and women demonstrated in memory of the assassination of the left-wing opposition leader Chokri Belaid.

Below: “From Tunisia to the Arab World” – Graffiti in the Medina of Tunis, the historical centre of the Tunisian capital.





Private clinics in Tunisia, such as this hospital with an emergency room in Djerba (left) or the fertility centre in Tunis (right), are popular among foreign patients.

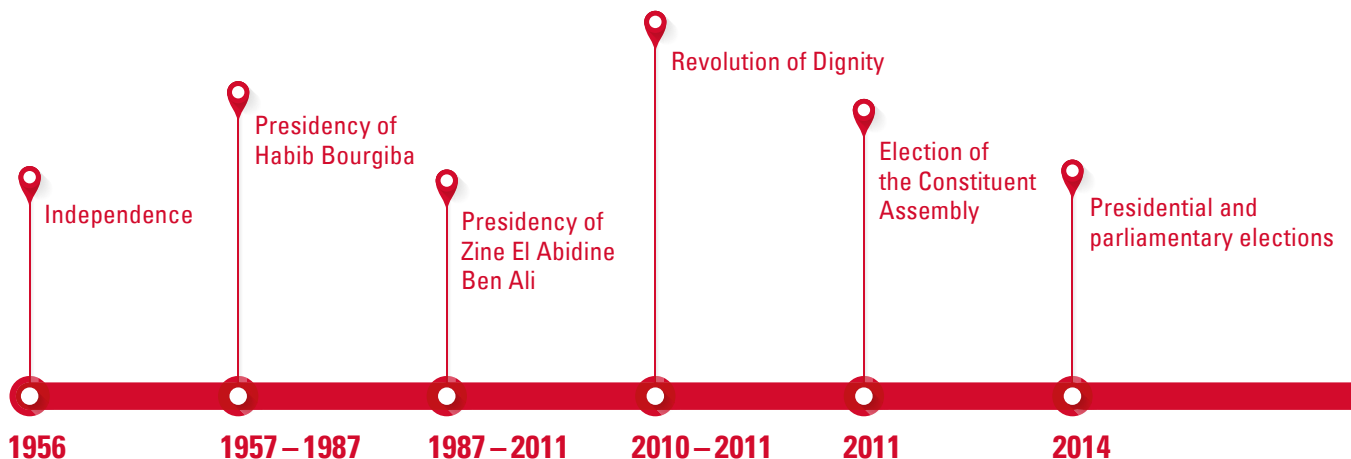
society and an extremely lively and critical art and cultural scene have developed in Tunisia. The economic situation, however, remains tense. The lack of economic prospects, especially for young people, and persistent corruption are once again bringing the question of dignity to the fore.

In addition, current political developments (see timeline below) raise doubts about the sustainability and stability of democratic structures: on 30 March 2022, the fourth President of the Republic of Tunisia, Kaïs Saïed, dissolved parliament. This decision opened another chapter in the complex political crisis that has been ongoing since the summer of 2019. The death of former President Béji Caïed Essebsi in July 2019 led to early elections in the autumn of the same year, in which “outsider” Kaïs Saïed was surprisingly elected as president. In July 2021, Kaïs Saïed suspended parliament, dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and declared a state of emergency. This decision can also be interpreted as a reaction to ongoing political conflicts and repeated stand-offs

within parliament. Tunisia has been ruled by decree since 22 September 2021, and the new cabinet, led by Najla Bouden, was formed on 11 October 2021.

Following a period in which all Tunisian citizens were able to submit proposals for the revision of the constitution, a referendum was held on 25 July 2022 to vote on a subsequent draft constitution. Constitutional parliamentary elections are due to be held on 17 December 2022, the twelfth anniversary of the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. The symbolic date of this election is evidently intended to suggest that President Saïed is the legitimate “consumer” of the revolution.

In this respect, the democratic development in Tunisia since 2011 can be regarded as slightly more positive than in other Arab countries where there was also a revolution. Nevertheless, the current developments under Saïed’s presidency highlight the enormous challenges of any democratisation process and the need for civil society to remain vigilant. Tunisia’s political future remains tense and uncertain.





Courtyard of a nursing home and rehabilitation centre for an international clientèle in Tunis.

### Economic adaptability?

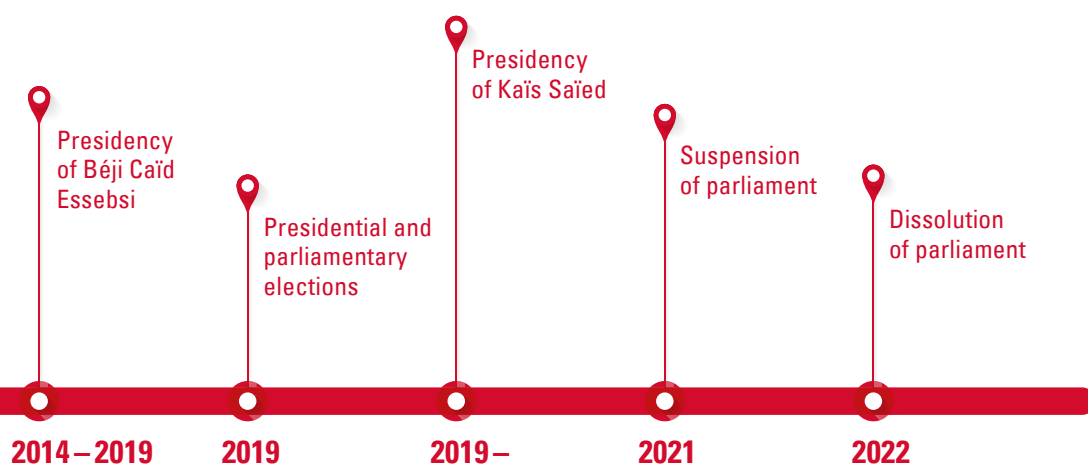
The economic situation in Tunisia is also rather complicated. The devaluation of the national currency (Tunisian dinar), the unstable geopolitical situation in the region and enormous fluctuations in the tourism sector – not least as a result of the terrorist attacks in Tunis and Sousse in 2015 and the coronavirus pandemic – pose great challenges for the economy. However, there are also some success stories, which are often not particularly visible. In any case, and particularly since the autocratic Ben Ali regime was overthrown in 2011, it seems prudent to take a differentiated view of Tunisia's balance sheet. Many economic dynamics can develop or intensify in the course of newly gained freedoms. However, these dynamics are often difficult to grasp, as macroeconomic indicators (such as official figures on gross domestic product or economic growth) do not reflect certain realities, rendering dynamics invisible.

Tunisia is known as a country of “débrouillardise” (resourcefulness/geniality) with an enormous ability to adapt. The informal econ-

omy, that is, activities that are not registered or controlled by the state, is estimated at more than 50 percent of economic output. The economic and social dynamics are thus far more complex than the official statistics suggest. They are based on a colourful mix of local actors who are characteristic of large parts of the private sector and the informal economy of Tunisian “débrouillardise”. Only a qualitative analysis from the bottom up and across the breadth of society could give a realistic picture.

### Health service exports are booming

An example of Tunisia's innovative strength and the interaction of formal and informal economic structures is the development of its private health sector. Thanks to growing mobility in the region, existing expertise in the field of biotechnology and new digital information and communication opportunities, highly specialised health services have become a top Tunisian export. Private clinics offer a foreign clientèle various medical treatments of a particularly high standard and at very attractive prices. One



advantage is that patients can easily enter the country, and those wishing to be treated there are not subjected to restrictive and potentially degrading visa policies like in EU countries.

Against this background, Tunisia has become a centre for global therapeutic mobility, primarily for regular customers from the neighbouring Maghreb countries of Libya, Algeria and Mauritania as well as from Francophone Africa. The range of diagnoses and therapies sought by patients travelling to Tunisia is notably diverse. Cosmetic surgery, a typical reason for therapeutic mobility, is just one of many medical fields. Often, complex and special lifesaving treatments are carried out in the field of oncology or orthopaedic surgery, which are not possible in the patient's country of origin. Many couples also travel to Tunisia for fertility treatment. Tunisian clinics have specialised in this socially highly sensitive field, and this niche generates a lot of

## IN A NUTSHELL

- Tunisia is the only Arab country that has developed in a democratic direction after the revolution. But the country faces great challenges.
- The economic situation is complex. More than 50 percent of economic output is generated by the informal sector. Tunisia is regarded as a particularly resourceful country.
- Its health sector is highly dynamic. High-quality healthcare services at competitive prices attract patients from neighbouring countries.
- The downside to this success story is a weakening of the public health system to the detriment of local patients.



### The authors

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income. In this part of the world, impaired fertility is more socially stigmatised than other health problems. Corresponding treatment, and even the patient's arrival, are handled with the utmost discretion. In addition to the actual treatment in a Tunisian clinic, a complex network of intermediaries, online services (such as consultations, exchange of information, blogs and forums, the planning of entire visits, etc.), travel companies, nursing homes, hotels and other accommodation has developed, which operates through a complex nebula of formal and informal activities.

"Medical tourism", the term much better known, is hardly appropriate here, as patients travel to Tunisia due to medical necessity, rather than for relaxation or recuperation. Tourism plays virtually no role, for example, in the treatment of war injuries from neighbouring Libya. Moreover, not least due to the length of the stay, the per capita contribution to the Tunisian economy by foreign patients is far more diverse and extensive than beach tourism in hotel chains often owned by foreign companies.

Unfortunately, however, the international and economic success of the private health sector in Tunisia also has a downside. Like many private globalisation processes, developments in the Tunisian healthcare sector are also made at the expense of public services. Sought-after health workers are actively recruited away from the public sector and into the private sector not just within the country but by other European countries (particularly Germany and France). The impact this has on public health in Tunisia became particularly apparent during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020/2021. The

high-quality services provided by the private sector remain unaffordable for a large part of the Tunisian population.

### **“Development” and globalisation made in Africa**

From a human geography perspective, the transnational business with health services has a number of aspects that need further consideration. These include growing inequality, macro-economic development, the role of the formal and informal economy, as well as cutting-edge biotechnology, but also questions about restrictive European border policy, international mobility and new opportunities for digitalisation. In any case, this phenomenon of globalisation, which is barely visible from a Eurocentric point of view, deserves more attention from policy and research. There are no quick and simple answers because booming private healthcare contributes, on the one hand, to increasing unequal treatment in the Tunisian healthcare system, but is vital, on the other hand, for patients – and of increasing importance for the Tunisian economy. At least the development processes set in motion are entirely African rather than the result of paternalistic European development cooperation. ●



Tunis city centre on 14 January 2016: the fifth anniversary of the flight of Ben Ali, the autocrat banished to Saudi Arabia during the revolution, brought many people to the streets.