

The Unfinished Transition. The Post-revolutionary Path of Tunisia and the Test of Covid19. A Historical and Socio-Economic Perspective

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Abstract

This contribution analyzes the post-revolutionary path of Tunisia by placing it within the historical process that led to the building of the contemporary nation-state. Social, economic and political elements are taken into account in shaping the history of the country since the French colonization to nowadays. Moreover, in the second part of this essay, the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic is used as magnifying glass to analyze current challenges and internal politics. The society's response and the government policies implemented to counter the contagion show fragilities and socio-economic inequalities within the country. Finally, the chapter dwells on the weight of the social conflict in the current socio-political context of Tunisia.

1. Introduction

This contribution aims to analyze the post-revolutionary path of Tunisia by placing it, on the one hand, within the historical, political and economic processes that led to the formation of contemporary Tunisia and, on the other hand, within the challenges that the country has been facing since the end of Ben Ali's regime in January 2011. Lights and shadows of the so-called emocratic transition are critically examined, taking into account social, economic and political elements. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is used here as magnifying glass to understand the path of Tunisia from the revolution to the present. The government policies implemented to counter the contagion and people's response to them show fragility and inequalities of the Tunisian context that are rooted in the time of the French occupation and of the governments of Bourguiba (al-Ḥabīb Būrqība) and Ben 'Ali (Zayn al-'Ābidīn bin 'Alī). Finally, this chapter dwells on the weight of the social conflict in the current socio-political pattern of Tunisia.

2. An historical overview: the building of contemporary Tunisia

Tunisia, the smallest country in North Africa, has always been open to the encounter with different Mediterranean cultures (Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Ottomans, Italians, French...) that have shaped its history. An incredible transculturality that is the result of an historical multi-layered past marks its

identity and makes contemporary Tunisia (El Houssi, [2013](#)). Conquered in the eighth century by the Arabs who were proceeding in their expansion in the territories of North Africa, Tunisia has been ruled by Aghlabids, Fatimids, Almohads, Hafsids until the sixteenth century, and it was under the Hafsid reign (1207–1574) that modern Tunisia was born (Guazzone, [2016](#): 149). In 1574 it became part of the Ottoman Empire, from which it partially autonomized with the birth of the 'beylical' dynasty of the Husainids (1705–1956). Under them a strong modernization of the country was promoted as response to the economic and military decline and the rise of the power of European countries in the Mediterranean. In particular, between 1837 and 1881 a series of reforms aimed at modernizing and strengthening the Tunisian state were implemented. Under Ahmed Bey (Aḥmad Bāi, 1837–1855) important reforms took place in the army, administration, and social structure. In 1846 slavery was abolished. In 1861 Muhammad al-Sadiq (Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq, 1859–1882) approved the first constitution of the Arab world. Nevertheless, the realization of the reforms was accompanied by an increase in taxes and a growing indebtedness, which represented the end of Tunisia's independence. In 1867, Tunisia failed to heal its financial situation and was in fact subjected to the protection of an international commission for the settlement of debts contracted with European banks in order to implement the modernization of the country. Thus, the Tunisian state was deprived of large part of its sovereignty, and eleven years later, in 1878, the Congress of Berlin accepted that the country would pass under direct French colonial control, despite the formal persistence of the Bey. On May 12, 1881 the 'Treaty of Bardo' authorized the French military presence, and the protectorate of Tunisia formally began, shattering Italy's dream of colonizing this country where lived a big Italian community (Finzi & Kazdagli, [2000](#)).

The French occupation of Tunisia was welcomed differently by the inhabitants of the various regions of the country. The colonial government could in fact substantially count on the support of the city's elite, while it had to deal with the resistance from the mountaineers of the North-East and the Bedouins of the South (Guazzone, [2016](#): 152). Under the protectorate, the country was ruled differently according to the areas. The diverse management of the territory and its resources produced inequalities between coastal and inland areas that were perpetuated in the post-independence era by the governments of Bourguiba and Ben 'Ali, and still persist to this day as will be explained further in the following paragraphs. The French colonial policy based on the expropriation of tribal and public lands led to the rapid impoverishment of many peasants, who were deprived of their lands and pushed to cities. Urbanization and redefinition of the country's economy were the main results of this choice (Ayeb & Bush, [2019](#)).

In this phase of transformations caused by the colonial experience, education grew and a new city bourgeoisie, which demanded reforms rather than independence was formed. However, it was necessary to wait until the end of World War I—in which 60,000 Tunisians had participated supporting France—in order to have the first important nationalist claims. Only at the end of the conflict, the first nationalist demands emerged. In less than two decades they became demands for

independence. A fundamental step in this path was the foundation of the Destour party (from Arabic *dustūr*: constitution) in 1920, which demanded the respect of the already mentioned Constitution of 1861, the recognition of the Arab-Islamic identity and a representation in Parliament. As the party was considered too elitist, conservative and far from the problems of the people, in 1934 it experienced a split that marked its decline. A group of dissenters led by Habib Bourguiba founded the Neo-Destour party. Relying on a mixed social base, composed of workers, exponents of the new city's middle-class and people of the Sahel, the Neo-Destour asked France for full independence (Torelli, [2015](#): 27–32).

In 1938, intense demonstrations for independence took place in Tunisia and led to the arrest of Bourguiba and other independent leaders who were in France. With the Second World War the path towards the independence of Tunisia took a further step. Bourguiba, who was under arrest in France ordered to support the movement 'France libre' of De Gaulle against the Germans who had occupied Tunisia since 1942. At the same time, however, Germans encouraged Tunisian nationalism in an anti-French key and therefore released Bourguiba and other leaders in the hope of being supported by them. With the Anglo-American liberation of Tunisia in 1943 and the re-establishment of the French protectorate, Bourguiba, who had returned to Tunis, was accused of collaboration with Germans and forced to flee to Cairo in 1945. In Bourguiba's absence, Neo-Destour was led by Salah Ben Yousef (Ṣāliḥ bin Yūsuf), expression of the Pan-Arab, Islamic and conservative soul of the party that was silenced and repressed in the following years. In 1946, while the struggle for independence was intensifying, the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union) was founded. In 1951–1952, the Neo-Destour and the UGTT organized a series of large strikes, and from 1953 the guerrilla warfare of the *fellagha* (fighters, partisans; from the Arabic *fallāqa*: bandit) hit the symbols of colonialism (Guazzone, [2016](#): 115). Faced with an increasingly difficult situation, in 1954 negotiations for independence began leading to a first 'internal autonomy'. The full recognition of independence was only in 1956 and in 1957 Bourguiba became the President of independent Tunisia, a country that was marked by a deep economic crisis and political divisions. In open contrast to Salah Ben Yousef vision, Bourguiba's policy was characterized by a modernist, centralist, secular and 'pro-Western' project. Considered an 'enlightened despot' for his authoritarian and progressive policies at the same time, Bourguiba built his power on a modern, non-militarized, bilingual (Arabic and French) centralized state in which the Arab-Islamic identity was characterized by a distance from the ideals of Pan-Arabism and the centrality of Islam in the public sphere. He proposed a modernist interpretation of Islam that was reflected in the marginalization of traditional religious authorities. In 1975, Bourguiba became President for life and ruled Tunisia for 30 years. It is possible to summarize his Presidency in at least three phases (Guazzone, [2016](#): 157). The first one (1956–1969) was marked by the consolidation of the regime through administrative and legal reforms, and the elimination of the opposition ('yousefists', military, trade unionists, communists etc.). In this period presidential authority was strengthened and political representation was channelled into the President's party, namely the Neo-Destour.

Between 1964 and 1969 Bourguiba attempted a socialist experiment, and the party's name changed from Neo-Destour to the Socialist Desturian Party (PSD). Under the leadership of the then Minister of Economy Ahmed Ben Salah (Aḥmad bin Ṣāliḥ), a series of socialist reforms were implemented. Industrialization of the country and development of a collectivist agriculture, based on cooperatives and nationalization of foreign owned lands, were the objects of these reforms. Nonetheless, following important protests in the country, the project failed and in 1969 the end of socialist policies was decreed. Ben Salah was considered the only one responsible for the failure. During Bourghiba's second term (1970–1980) the economy was oriented in a capitalist way and an economic growth based on the exploitation of raw materials took place. The initial relative liberalization of the political debate, started at the beginning of the 1970s, was soon supplanted by the return of authoritarianism. Strong repression of the opponents was the government answer to the growth of left-wing movements in universities and among workers, as well as to the spread of the Islamist movement. The peak of the social and political conflict was reached on January 26, 1978 (also known as Black Thursday) when the first general strike since independence took place and the government harshly repressed the protestors.

The third phase of Bourguiba's Presidency (1980–1987) was opened by the so-called 'controlled liberalization', which produced a return to multipartyism as foreseen by the 1956 constitution. As a result, several parties, with the exception of the MTI, were admitted to the 1981 elections, which were however won by the PSD allied with the UGTT. The year 1983 marked the beginning of the final crisis of Bourguiba's regime. In 1983–1984 the so-called 'bread riots' broke out in response to the suspension of subsidies for basic necessities. In that same year, General Ben 'Ali was appointed Secretary General of National Security (i.e. Head of the secret services) and began his political rise. In 1987 he became Minister of the Interior, then Prime Minister and finally President of the Republic, following the medical coup that in the night between 6 and 7 November dismissed Bourguiba (Torelli, [2015](#): 64–67).

Fundamentally, Ben 'Ali's government (1987–2011) continued along Bourghiba's path in the management of the political and economic system (Chaouika & Gobe, [2015](#): 54). The country was ruled through the hegemonic role of the dominant party, namely the PSD that in 1988 changed its name to Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD); and the process of economic liberalization, which had begun in 1986 with the structural adjustment plans, was intensified. Considered by Western countries as the *bon élève* of the neo-liberal globalization and the bulwark against the advance of Islamists in Tunisia and the region (Hibou, [1999](#)), Ben 'Ali transformed Tunisia into a dictatorship in a few years, betraying the initial premises regarding political openness. Indeed, the initial democratic opening was soon replaced by a harsh authoritarianism, marked by the consolidation of the family clan Trabelsi and the repression of opponents, Islamists as well as secularists. The 90s and early 2000s were characterized by the suppression of all internal dissent. Nevertheless, in the second half of 2000s, as consequence of the effects of the global financial crisis and the worsening of the socio-economic

conditions in the country, the opposition re-emerged. In January 2008 the revolts of the Gafsa mining basin (Chouika & Geisser, [2010](#)) marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of Tunisia. However, it was necessary to wait until December 2010 to see the emergency of a large opposition movement in response to the growing unemployment and lack of freedom. On December 17, the death of Mohammed Bouazizi (Muḥammad al-Bū‘azīzī), a street vendor from Sidi Bouzid (a city in the interior), who had set himself on fire to protest against police abuses gave birth to a vast protest movement that soon turned into a revolution. The demonstrations, which started in the inland regions and spread from there to the whole country and Arab region, led to the fall of Ben Ali’s regime on January 14, 2011.

3. From revolution to present days (2010–2020) between successful results and betrayed promises

Ten years after the 2010/11 revolution, Tunisia continues to be seen as the only success story of the Arab Spring. Undoubtedly, a number of important objectives in terms of democratic transition have been achieved: recognition of free speech and association, approval of a new constitution in 2014, free elections in 2011, 2014 and 2019 (Walles, [2020](#)), greater involvement of women in political life and enhancement of gender equality legislation.² The list of successes achieved could go on, to the point that many analysts say that at least two of the objectives of the revolution, namely that of freedom and democracy—forcefully demanded in the protests that led to the fall of Ben ‘Ali—have been achieved. However, on closer scrutiny this entirely successful narrative of the Tunisian transition falters. In a collective volume edited by Amin Allal and Vincent Geisser the authors ask with the title and then with a series of specific examples: ‘Tunisia, a democratization above suspicion?’ ([2018](#)). Although, from a formal point of view several rights have been assured to citizens and the democratic game is formally guaranteed, in practice many of the rights written in the new constitution (right to work, right to a clean environment, right to access to water, right to health...) are not applied. Moreover, in answer to the terrorist challenge that has seriously afflicted the country several times between 2012 and 2015, and that continues to undermine national stability,³ a growing security clampdown risks jeopardizing the acquired freedoms, paving the way to the return of the authoritarian practices of the pre-revolutionary regimes. On the other hand, the political forces in power, both secular and Islamist, have chosen not to seriously settle accounts with the authoritarian past, despite the incredible work carried out by the Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD) in charge of shedding light on the crimes and attacks on human rights that occurred from 1955 until 2013, the date of promulgation of the Tunisian law on transitional justice.⁴ Although the 2014 Constitution itself recognizes this process of reconstruction of the memory of human rights violations and the state’s responsibility for such violations since independence, the path of the IVD has been hindered by several political forces. The political parties, including Ennahda (*Ḥarakat al-Nahḍa*), which

had been among the main supporters of this path—considering itself the main victim of post-independence regimes—preferred to settle for an unfinished trial of the dictatorship in exchange for token awards and compensation, facade discourses on memory and national reconciliation, while trial hearings concerning judicial proceedings transmitted by the Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD) are constantly postponed (Brésillon, [2020a](#)), blocking the process of transitional justice that had raised so many national and international hopes in recent years.

But the shortcomings in satisfying the demands of the revolution emerge above all on the economic level. On this front, Tunisia's post-revolutionary path has led nowhere, failing to secure new jobs and to ensure the dignity and social justice called for in the street demonstrations in 2010–11 and then repeatedly re-claimed by citizens who continue demonstrating for fulfilment of the promises of the revolution. GDP growth has remained well below expectations of 3%, and this year because of Covid19 it is expected to stop around 1%. Moreover, as reported by Stefano Torelli in an article on the political-economic situation in the country, the public debt almost doubled from 2011 to 2018, rising from just over 35% of GDP to 70% (Torelli, [2018](#): 64), and this percentage is expected to rise yet further. In fact, in order to tackle the challenges of the transition and to cope with the pandemic, Tunisian governments have repeatedly requested (the last time was at the end of March 2020) help from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which have granted loans totalling more than 5 billion dollars. However, this aid goes hand in hand with a programme to review national spending, which has an impact on household incomes with significant cuts in basic necessities, while for years Tunisians have been witnessing devaluation of the Tunisian dinar and loss of purchasing power. It has been calculated that unemployment in the country stands at 15%, representing the highest rate of unemployment in the entire area of North Africa and, turning the focus on youth unemployment, it reaches 35%, with high percentages among graduate students (Torelli, [2018](#): 64), who not surprisingly are among the forces most present in the ongoing protests. The social contract at the basis of the governmental choices of post-independence that were supposed to guarantee jobs in exchange for education and political consensus has been ignored for years and nowadays young people in the country are facing formidable difficulties. If during and soon after the revolution the young were considered 'heroes', agents of change, today they are increasingly depicted as a threat to the fragile Tunisian political system, characterized by limited statehood and recurring crises in the relationship between the state and societal forces (Hanau Santini, [2018](#)). In a few years, the heroic narrative about young people changed dramatically and a securitarian and paternalistic approach has taken its place. Blocked in an unachieved transition to adulthood that moulds their daily life, the young people are showing increasing disenchantment with a political elite, considered corrupt and incapable of responding to the demands for justice, dignity and employment (Pepicelli, [2018](#)). And it is precisely the economic question, as mentioned above, that is the main and most problematic issue unanswered by the post-revolutionary government elites, who have failed to produce an economic strategy or respond to the shortage of jobs. In continuity with the previous

governments, the post-revolutionary ones accepted the neo-liberalist path traced out by Bourguiba in 1986 with adoption of the structural adjustment plans, and later confirmed by Ben 'Ali (Paciello, [2013](#)). Ennahda party, although initially described as the champion of socio-economic reform, has also fully embraced the liberalist path as Maryam Ben Salem demonstrates in her article 'God loves the rich. The Economic Policy of Ennahda: Liberalism in the Service of Social Solidarity' ([2020](#)). On closer examination, 'Ennahda failed to enact substantive land or fiscal reforms because it proved unable or unwilling to antagonize well-entrenched interest groups and economic elites or draw public attention to towering economic and regional inequalities. Instead, the party downplayed confrontation and tried to have it both ways. While this approach secured Ennahda's inclusion and protected the fledgling democracy in the most rudimentary sense, transactional politics between Islamists represented by Ennahda and elites from the former regime represented by the secularist Nidaa Tounes party came with a cost: a political settlement that neutralized tangible and substantive socioeconomic reforms. [...] By overvaluing political expediency for the sake of access, Ennahda allowed old regime hands to continue to pillage the state and enrich themselves' (Meddeb, [2020](#)). Meanwhile, corruption, having permeated the entire system, represents another serious obstacle that paralyzes the development and real democratization of Tunisia, which is increasingly dependent on the outside world in terms not only of financial aid but also of its economy and its ability to meet its internal needs. Although it is an agricultural country, Tunisia depends largely on external sources to satisfy its food needs. 'Tunisia is not self-sufficient in terms of food production: more than 50 percent of the food the country consumes is imported. In 2008, agri-food products worth TND3 679.9 million (USD 4 400 million) were imported. In 2017, that figure was TND6 340.6 million (USD 15 500 million). While the imports allow Tunisia to meet food demand, and although the state subsidises certain basic foodstuffs to ensure that the population has access, affordability increasingly becomes an issue' (Amayed, [2020](#)).

4. The effects of Covid19 in Tunisia: magnifying lenses on fragility and regional inequalities

Faced with this situation, the arrival of the Covid19 pandemic in late winter/early spring 2020 showed the real situation of the country, its fragility and the challenges it faces. Thus, analysis of the impact of Covid19 on Tunisia offers a useful magnifying glass to understand the path of Tunisia from the 2011 revolution to the present. When the epidemic turned into a pandemic and the first cases of Covid19 also emerged in Tunisia, the government tried to shelter the country from the worst of the pandemic, also because the health system would not have been able to cope with the spread of the virus. On March 18, president Kais Saied (Qays Sa'yd) proclaimed a night-time curfew (closing restaurants, cafes, etc. in the afternoon) and two days later a lockdown for non-essential purposes. To impose respect of mandatory confinement at home he also chose to use military and police forces,

although civil society was showing serious concerns about the tightening of the security clampdown (Yerkes, [2020](#)). Throughout the country all travel was interdicted, the workforce partially demobilized, mosques were closed and schools, universities and businesses shut down. The measures taken have borne fruit from the health point of view. On June 21, at the time of the reopening of the borders, there were 1159 declared cases, 89 active cases, 1020 recoveries, 50 deaths, 67,233 tests performed. Tunisia has fared relatively well during the Covid19 pandemic, compared to other Maghreb countries. In Morocco, on the same date there were 9801 cases and 213 deaths; in Algeria 11,631 cases and 837, in Libya—but the data are certainly unreliable—520 cases and 10 deaths (Inkyfada, [2020](#)).

However, despite the capacity to contain the contagion, in Tunisia, as elsewhere in the world the pandemic has shown up the insufficiencies and fragility of the system from the point of view of health, economy, politics and society (Cimini, [2020](#)). Covid19 exposed deep social inequality in the country, but, alas, the history shows that there is nothing new about economic and social exclusion in Tunisia (Sadiki, [2020](#)).

The social and regional inequalities, which appeared in all their gravity during the pandemic, have characterized the Tunisian history since the time of French colonialism and were structured and crystallized through the governments of Bourguiba (1957–1987) and Ben ‘Ali (1987–2011) (Ayeb & Bush, [2019](#)). Despite proclamations and electoral promises, post-revolution governments have failed to reduce the gap between the centre and periphery, and the inland regions still remain seriously disadvantaged compared to the coastal regions in terms of services (including access to water) and employment and poverty.

‘In 2015, some communities, particularly in central western Tunisia, had poverty rates twice as high as the country as a whole on average: in 2015, the average national poverty rate was 15.2 percent whereas Kef (North West), Kasserine (Center West), and Beja (North West) had poverty rates of 34.2 percent, 32.8 percent, and 32.0 percent, respectively. Meanwhile in places like Tataouine, Jendouba, and Kasserine, unemployment was two times the national average’ (Meddeb, [2020](#)). The inequality and disadvantages of inland regions are the result of a logic of ‘internal colonization’, (*al-isti‘mār al-dākhiliyya*, Al Salihi, [2017](#)), which has been going on since independence in 1956 and is based on exploitation of the resources of peripheral/inland regions to support the development of coastal areas. As Hamza Meddeb recalls, ‘today, inland provinces hold 50 percent of the country’s oil, gas, and water resources; 70 percent of wheat production; and 50 percent of olive oil and fruit production. Yet these regions are disadvantaged’ (Meddeb, [2020](#)). During the confinement imposed with the measures to contain Covid19 contagion, regional inequalities emerged mainly in terms of income, possibility of access to basic resources and, in particular, to health services, unevenly distributed throughout the territory.

Under Ben ‘Ali the public health system was severely undermined: there was a progressive reduction in public funding by the state and opening up to private investments, including foreign investments, which have been directed in particular

towards the coastal areas at the expense of the inland areas and the working-class districts of large cities.

This policy has continued even after the fall of the dictator. As Olfa Lamloum writes: 'the budget percentage allocated to health care in 2018, under Youssef Chahed's government, was lower than in 2006, under Zine El-Abidine Ben 'Ali (5.2% in 2018 compared with 7.4% in 2006) [...] In 2016 (latest data available) the governorate of Tataouine (150,000 inhabitants) had only three gynaecologists and obstetricians. Even today, the hospitals in Tataouine and Kasserine do not have resuscitator doctors. [...] There are no laboratories for the analysis of samples of potential patients [of Covid] in any of the governorates of the North-West and South, including those where the number of patients infected with corona virus is high, such as the governorates of Kebili and Mednine in the South-East. Similarly, most of these regions, such as Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid, where the revolution started, had no beds for resuscitation until March' (Lamloum, [2020](#)). On top of this critical situation of extreme shortage of health infrastructure has been added the serious shortage of doctors in hospitals, resulting from the considerable migration of many doctors going abroad in recent years in search of better employment opportunities and higher salaries.

5. The social victims of pandemic between economic crisis and gender inequalities

Although the number of health victims of the pandemic has been relatively small, the social victims have been countless and their number is destined to grow since, as the IMF writes, Tunisia is now expected to go through the worst recession since independence (IMF, [2020](#)). However, if the health crisis has had a heavy impact on the middle class, the impact has been devastating for poor families, who live in precarious conditions, depending on day-to-day jobs, without sufficient savings and financial resources to cope with long periods without work. To have an accurate picture of the impact of Covid19 on Tunisian households, the Institut national de la statistique (INS), in collaboration with the World Bank, launched an investigation with the intention of casting light on the way Tunisian households reacted to the pandemic. Meanwhile, a study by the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) entitled 'Pandémie Covid-19 in Tunisie: les inégalités, les vulnérabilités à la pauvreté et au chômage' (Mahjoub, [2020](#)), carried out by Azzam Mahjoub, has already shown a number of social implications of the pandemic in terms of inequalities and vulnerability of the population. The main inequalities that emerge from the report are in terms of poverty exacerbation, housing inequalities, educational inequalities and gender inequalities. The obligation to be confined at home has shown that several families, especially in suburban areas, do not have access to 'decent housing', and are forced into small households, unhealthy environments, and often into situations of overcrowding. At the same time, Mahjoub's study pointed out that with the impossibility of implementing distance education during the lockdown of schools, children had different access to forms of

pedagogical support depending on the families they came from. Finally, the report highlighted the increase in Tunisia, as in the rest of the world, of violence against women during the phase of confinement at home. In an article for 'New Arab', later taken up by Carnegie, Sarah Yerkes and MaroYoussef analyze the situation in depth, describing the increase in gender-based violence cases in the country.

'The Covid-19 pandemic saw a five-fold increase in reported incidents of GBV in three months [...] According to UN Women, there were 40 reported acts of violence in the span of one week in March 2020, compared to seven during the same period the previous year. Between March and May, government GBV hotlines received over 7,000 complaints, 1,425 of which occurred during the first month of the lockdown. ATFD's Tunis domestic violence shelter received 350 women weekly during the lockdown, a four-fold increase compared to before the lockdown' (Yerkes & Youssef, [2020](#)). On closer inspection, in Tunisia, as elsewhere in the world, the drastic confinement measures taken by the government to stop the spread of the virus have had a serious effect on many women who found themselves more exposed to male violence.

6. Social conflict and protests

While, as already said, the measures restricting freedom of movement and assembly adopted by the Tunisian government have succeeded in limiting the contagion, they have not, however, stopped the protests that have been erupting in the country since the 2010/2011 revolution, creating a climate of constant tension that calls into question the successful narrative with which Tunisia is described, discussed at the beginning of this contribution. The monthly report of the FTDES on the protests in the country in March showed that, despite the exceptional epidemiological situation and the choices made by the government to confine the population, the social charter of the protest has not changed, but has been confirmed, with peaks of protest, as in previous months, in the regions of Kairouan, Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba (FTDES, [2020](#)). The end of March 2020 saw demonstrations by workers in the informal sector on a large scale: overwhelmed by the economic crisis, they took to the streets to call for state aid. It was only on March 30 that the government began to distribute financial aid (Wirtz, [2020](#)). With the end of confinement, the demonstrations increased significantly throughout the country. The claims of the protesters are various: for water in rural areas, for the payment of wages for tourism workers in Gerba and workers in the industrial area of Zaghouan and the Gafsa mining basin (Brésillon, [2020b](#)). Particularly significant in June were the protests in the Tatouine area, where unemployment reaches 30%, one of the highest percentages in the country. The protests broke out for implementation of the 2017 deal to create jobs in oil companies and infrastructure projects (at Jazeera, [2020](#))—an agreement that was the result of major protests of the population led by the El Kamour movement (*I'tiṣām al-Kāmūr*, Blaise, [2017](#)).⁵ But as said above, these protests are not isolated but come from afar and are part of a complex national dynamic. If we extend our view to the first 100 days of government of Elyès Fakhfakh (Iliyās al-Fakhfākh)—from February

27 to June 5, 2020—we can see the extent of the protest movements in Tunisia. According to data from the FTDES, 1138 protest movements were active during this period. The majority of the protests (47.6%) took place in the central western region: in particular, Sidi Bouzid and Kairouan. More than half were organized and not spontaneous, and took place, in particular, in relation to health, safety, employment/work and access to water. These continuous widespread protest movements expressed disillusionment with and anger towards the government elites who failed to respond to demands for employment, services, security, education, and were not committed to reducing inequalities and the gap between the centre-periphery, coastal and inland areas. However, despite the spread of protest movements, as researcher Jihed Haj Salem points out, ‘none of these dynamics is echoed in political life or in parliamentary debates...The paradox of these movements is that they are radical in form: road or rail blocks, administrative or factory blocks. In short, they block the system, but demanding to be integrated into it. They are not articulated in any political or social alternative’ (Brésillon, [2020b](#)).

7. Conclusions. Beyond the myth of the Tunisian exception

The economic crisis and the growing and consequent political crisis, in the absence of a credible political and social alternative, are seriously destabilizing Tunisia and the positive results achieved as from 2011. The democratization achieved is weak because it has failed to settle the economic inequalities and imbalances between the coast and the interior regions. The President of the Republic, Kaies Saïed (Qays Sa’iyyd), who was elected with a broad popular consensus in the autumn of 2019, has so far failed to fulfil his electoral promises, nor has he managed to ferry the country towards a new future of discontinuity with previous policies. On the contrary, although the country has chosen not to fully come to terms with its authoritarian past, depowering the work of the IVD, it seems to be stuck in a past dimension where the main political actors, whether ‘Bourguibist’, ‘Benalist’ or Islamist, are stuck in diatribes of the past, without being able to make new proposals for the present and the future. The myth of the Tunisian exception, to use a concept by Michel Camau ([2018](#)), is no longer enough to hide the problems of the country. The explosion of the Covid19 pandemic has brutally exposed all the fragility of a process of democratic, but above all economic, transition which is unfinished. A widespread sense of betrayal of revolutionary promises has pervaded the country and produced different responses: a departure from formal politics, which translates into a significant drop in participation in the elections, with the exception of the 2019 presidential elections⁶; a state of permanent unrest in the country with constant protests and demonstrations; new migrations; and violent extremism. It has been estimated that Tunisia supplied organizations such as the so-called Islamic State (*al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya*, also known with the acronym Daesh) with the highest per capita rate of foreign fighters in the world: between 6000 and 7000 people, mostly young, left the country for Syria, Iraq and Libya.⁷

To free itself from this morass, as Hamza Meddeb writes, ‘the country requires genuine compromises to facilitate wealth sharing. New ruling elites need to make hard economic choices and promote deep structural changes, like levying more taxes on privileged social groups, implementing a genuine land reform that could unleash developmental forces in the hinterlands, and curbing rent-seeking to ensure financial and economic resources are deployed to develop the country's interior regions. Furthermore, new elites should build a larger and more inclusive social coalition, an indispensable ingredient for establishing a more legitimate political and economic order’ (Meddeb, [2020](#)).

Notes

1. After a decade of growth of the so-called political Islam, the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) was founded in 1981, under the leadership of Rached Ghannouchi (Rāshid al-Ghannūshī) and Abdel Fattah Mourou (‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Mūrū).
2. For example, in 2017 a remarkable law combating Gender Based Violence was passed. It is well known that Tunisia stands out in the region for women’s rights. However, although many important laws on gender equality have been approved since 1956 they still need to be fully implemented.
3. The last attack was on March 6, 2020 when suicide bombers targeted the US embassy.
4. Cf. Loi organique 2013–53 du 24 décembre 2013, relative à l’instauration de la justice transitionnelle et à son organisation, Journal Officiel de la République Tunisienne 105 (201), available at: <http://www.legislation.tn/sites/default/files/journal-officiel/2013/2013F/Jo1052013.pdf>, (Accessed on 11 March 2020). For an analysis of the transitional justice in Tunisia cfr Andrieu ([2016](#)), Belhassine ([2019](#)), Gobe (ed.) ([2019](#)).
5. To better understand the June 2020 Tatouine protests we should go back to the 2017 Al Kamour protest and even before to 2008, when the strongest social protest under Ben Ali erupted for the first time in the Gafsa region. “The Kamour protests did not explode in a vacuum. They must be situated within the context of more than fifteen years of revolutionary action in the phosphate basin” <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/tunisian-protesters-democracy-not-enough/>.
6. Cf. the special issue of the *Revue Tunisienne de Science Politique*, v. 1, no 01, 2020 dedicated to the 2019 elections.

7. Cf. http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.

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