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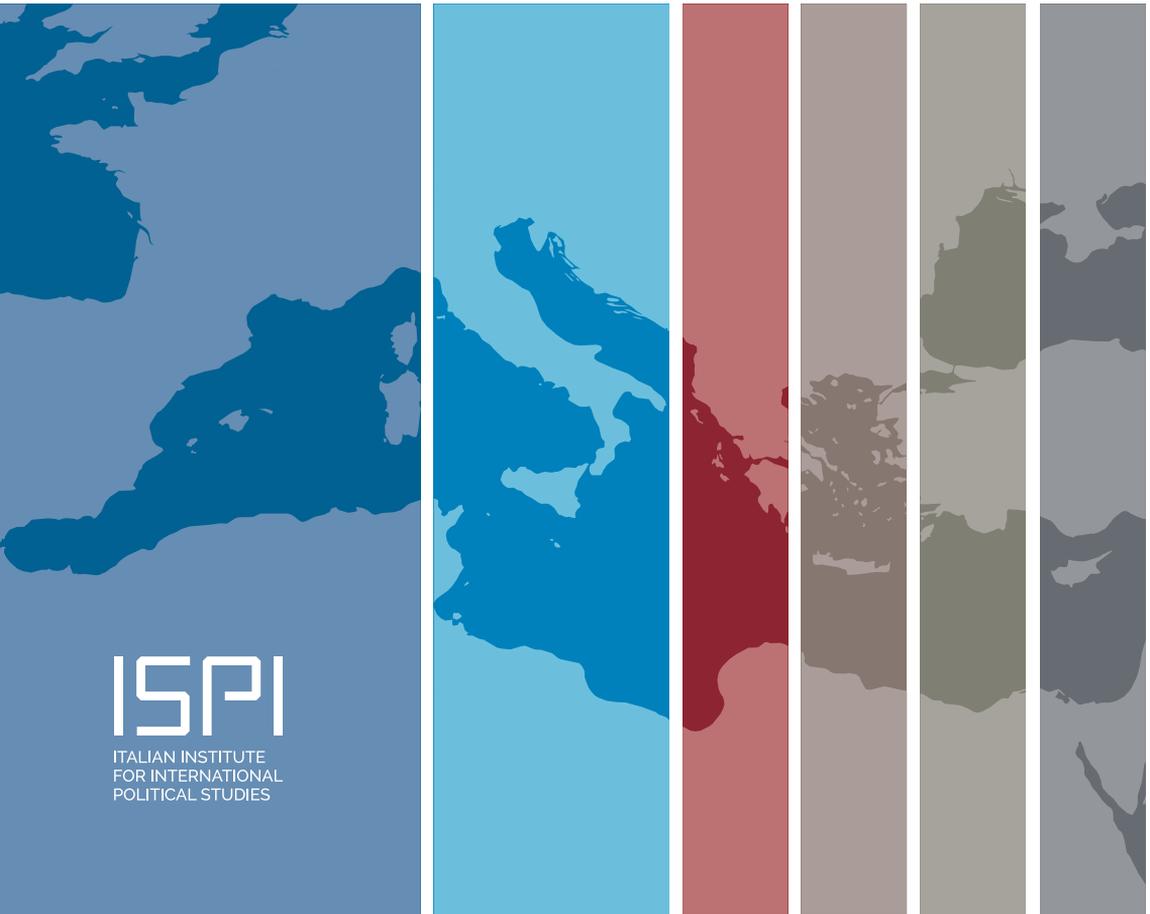
**ROME** 2017

**MED**

MEDITERRANEAN DIALOGUES

LOOKING AHEAD:  
**CHARTING NEW PATHS  
FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN**

**REPORT**



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# Political transition in Tunisia despite everything

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**Elite consensus and power sharing during times of division and polarisation are core characteristics of the Tunisian democratic path that have proved immensely valuable.**

For this reason the Tunisian experience is rightly applauded internationally. Still it would be inaccurate and misleading to measure Tunisia's success story mainly by the ability of the political elite to generate consensus. Far more important is to evaluate this peculiar model of governance in terms of its ability to implement direly needed reforms, particularly in the social and economic realm that continues to rank highest on the list of people's priorities, and its impact on society's perception of democracy as the pathway to more individual and societal wellbeing and advancement.

When the country witnessed serious internal conflicts and polarisation reached alarming heights in 2013, consensus was built to keep the transition process on track thus paving the way for core milestones such as the 2014 Constitution and subsequent elections. In summer 2016, a national unity government headed by Youssef Chahed was endorsed by Parliament, replacing the legitimate government of Habib Essid. In this case, there was again an elite consensus particularly between the two largest parliamentary factions, namely Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, that only power sharing in the form of a new national unity government could prevent destabilising the country. The Carthage agreement reached in July 2016 was the peak product of these informal negotiations between the two central players and it went even further, including other five opposition parties as well as three civil society or-

ganisations, which are the Tunisian Union for Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), and the Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fishery (UTAP). Thereby, opposition parties as well as civil society organisations were catapulted to the decision-making level.

## THE SHORTCOMINGS OF CONSENSUS GOVERNMENT

Had Tunisia's consensus-based power constellation fulfilled people's expectations, the arrangement would seem reasonable. But until today, the public has been gravely disappointed. The pursuit of the interests of a plethora of actors has complicated and often blocked decision-making. As a result, unemployment remains persistent at 15% and in the southern and western regions it is even believed to be twice as high. Social inequality and regional disparities have not decreased and the neglected regions remain major theatres of social unrest. Consequently, there is a waning trust in democracy as a system that translates into positive change. The consensus arrangement is also problematic for the country's democratic evolution from a different viewpoint: it has led to a blurring of the political spectrum and the absence of clear demarcation lines between political parties. While all decisive political actors are directly or indirectly involved in government and governance, genuine pluralism and opposition are missing. For the development of a healthy democratic environment that offers discontested bases viable alternatives to choose from based on convictions and ideology, this is no

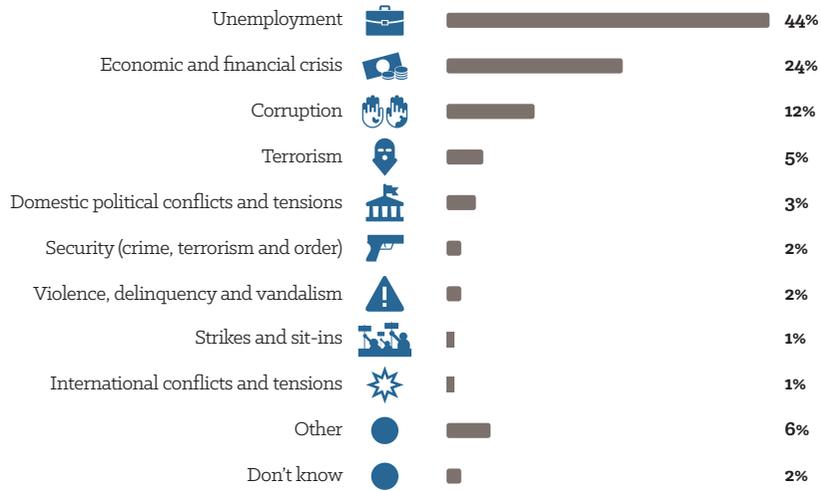
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prime ministers have been appointed since the fall of Ben Ali

Opinion poll: "What is the biggest economic problem facing Tunisia?" (2017)

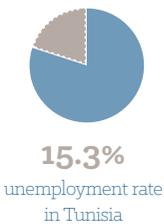


Data: International Republican Institute (IRI)

doubt counterproductive. Equally problematic is the fact that informal, highly personalised meetings, like those between Beji Caid Essebsi and Rachid Ghannouchi, rather than formal structures such as parliament and the ballot box, are the basis for decision-making. Thus a trade union such as the UGTT – which is de jure not a political decision-maker – is today a de facto ruling partner. These practices are detached from elections that have grown increasingly insignificant and annul the power of parliament, not to mention the repercussions on the legitimacy of those governing in the eyes of citizens. Indeed, polls and voter turnout in 2014 as well as registration numbers for the municipal elections suggest that many Tunisians consider politics devoid of any substance and have lost trust in the democratic system itself. Particularly young people have turned their back on politics. Lack of pluralism also strengthens actors on the far right or left of the spectrum. The significant rise of jihadism among the country's youth could also partly be regarded as a consequence of this context.

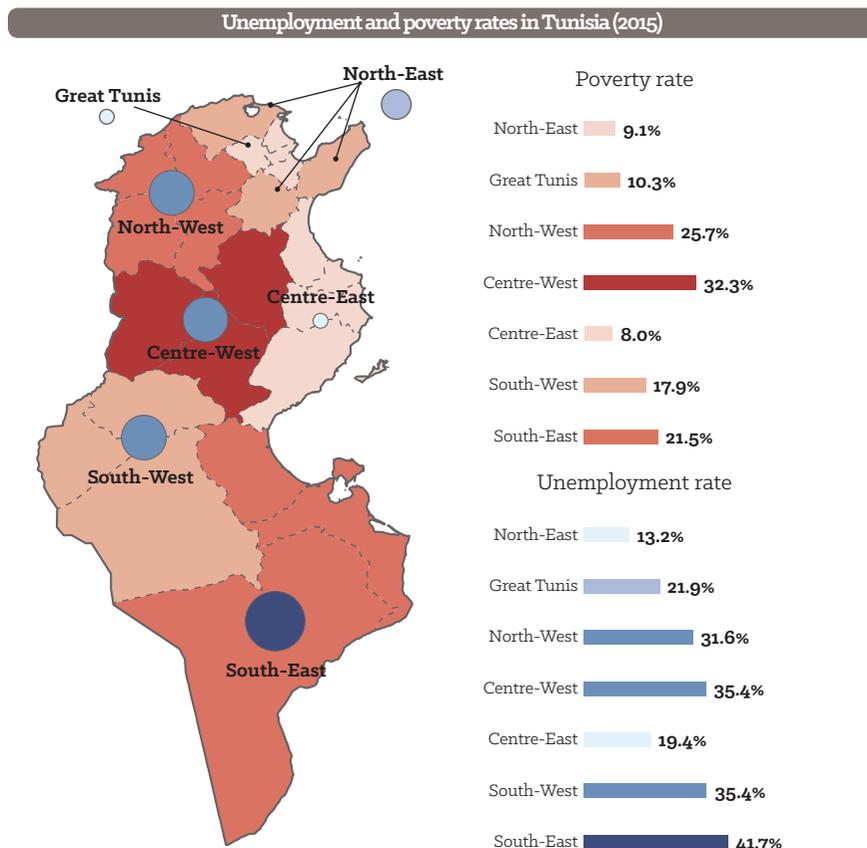
of governance that reflects the ballot box and that more clearly divides actors into opposition and government forces might be worth testing after the general elections in 2019. This would require Tunisia's political actors to espouse a new self-understanding of their political engagement.

First, the grand significance and responsibility of genuine opposition need to be valued as much as exercising executive power. Increasingly, it seems that central actors such as Nidaa Tounes, Ennahda, and the UGTT are power thirsty for the mere sake of remaining relevant and bolstering their might. In light of the country's nascent democratic process such attitudes are irresponsible. Also, the very narrow pursuit of partisan politics needs to be rethought and weighed against its impact on the higher goal of democratic and economic progress. For example, the UGTT's vast power through its extensive countrywide reach and its ability to mobilise large segments of society needs to be responsibly devised as to not paralyse the entire country and derail economic recovery further. The third postponement of Tunisia's first-ever municipal elections to Spring 2018 serves as another example of how the predominant power-driven attitude of political actors is hindering fundamental de-



**A CALL FOR AN ALTERNATIVE DEMOCRATIC UNDERSTANDING BY TUNISIA'S POLITICAL ELITE**

In Tunisia, a shift to a more "classic" mode



Data: Tunisian National Institute of Statistics

developments. One of the main reasons for postponement seems to be the non-Islamist parties' fear of Ennahda's comparative advantage in outreach and organisation, and a very likely victory at the local level. But local elections are indispensable in order for the abandoned and highly underdeveloped regions with the highest socio-economic grievances to be equipped with legitimate local authority and financial means to address their serious woes.

Second, and conducive to such a renewed self-understanding and reassuring for future and potential opposition forces, is the further amelioration and consolidation (and prevention from regression) of the democratic system. This needs to be prioritised by those in power as well as by opposition forces: a system based on the principles of the devolution of power, checks and balances, an independent judiciary, the rule of law, freedom of associ-

ation and assembly, and the protection and advancement of human rights. Despite ongoing deficiencies and partial regression, many mechanisms through which political actors and society can push to alter courses, change reforms and eventually claim power are already in place but they have to be continuously developed and overseen to prevent setbacks. An essential step to further strengthen and expand the democratic system could be the establishment of a constitutional court where new laws' compliance with the principles enshrined in the constitution are scrutinised. It would offer an institutionalised platform with a clear mandate for checks and necessary decision-making.

#### **THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE AND INCLUSION CONTINUES**

To be clear, the country is going through a



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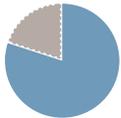
*an increase in budget support would clearly allow for more gradual austerity measures that are socially acceptable*

historic existential phase where fundamental pillars and the orientation of society and state are being negotiated, reformed or built anew. For example, issues like transitional justice, the place of religion in state and society, and the nature of Tunisia's social and economic model need to be widely debated in a participatory fashion. Evidently, inclusion and dialogue with other actors are core. Civil society should continue to play a significant role here. The establishment and continuation of expert and public fora respectively that transcend party affiliation and where themes as complicated as for example the desired socio-economic model are intensely debated are core. These debates also need to address the feasibility and timeframe for achieving a certain model, and technical experts need to demonstrate in simple language the linkage between the everyday life of average citizens and potential measures at the macro level. At the same time there has to be also an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of those voted into power and their prerogative to take decisions. Political actors in the driver's seat on their part need to strike a delicate balance between politics and avoiding too polarising, antagonising measures, particularly if widespread opposition to certain measures is evident, as was the case with transitional justice. The new Administrative Reconciliation Law passed in September 2017, which was highly contested and now offers amnesty to officials from the Ben Ali regime involved in corruption, as well as the most recent change in government that saw the inclusion of two former ministers of the Ben Ali

regime – measures bearing president Essebsi's hallmark – are worst-practice examples. They carry high potential for conflict and division. Besides, they show troubling autocratic tendencies that can only be counterbalanced with a strong unified opposition, calling yet again for an organised, unified opposition camp.

#### THE NEED FOR MORE FUNDS

One of the major challenges facing Tunisia and too often constituting a major point of division among the political elite that derails economic reforms is the introduction of necessary austerity measures whilst keeping the social price of these measures low. The reduction of the government's hefty public wage bill serves as an example. Tunisia's socio-economic challenges certainly require much more than cash. But for example an increase in budget support would clearly allow for more gradual austerity measures that are socially acceptable, and it would enable the government to spend money on the vital health and education sectors as well as on infrastructure. Finally, much more attention needs to be given to the regions suffering from chronic government neglect. Quick social and economic wins are necessary. More targeted development cooperation that makes a qualitative difference might be one avenue. It is already a fait accompli that this continued lack of improvement or even deterioration in standards of living is undermining the entire democratisation process. A change in attitudes and commitments by the international community as well as Tunisia's elite is therefore paramount.



**31.3%**

seats held by women  
in the Tunisian  
Parliament