

# Tunisia at a Crossroads: The Arab Spring's Lone Flame, Fifteen Years On

Written by Suraj Yadav

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SURAJ YADAV, OCT 10 2025

Walk down Avenue Habib Bourguiba in 2025 and the scene feels familiar, only heavier. Cafés hum, traffic inches, red-and-white flags flutter in the breeze. Yet conversations often return to the same topics: sugar rationed in Ramadan queues, milk vanishing from chillers, prices that pinch like winter. Over the last two years, reporting has traced recurring shortages alongside high living costs reported by the World Bank and Tunisia's INS data the quiet metronome that sets the public mood. Inflation is the baseline beneath those kitchen-table laments. Headline prices jumped to 10.4% in February 2023, then eased toward ~6.2% by December 2024, according to African Manager and World Bank data — encouraging on paper, less so at the till. When flour is scarce or sugar arrives by quota, decimals don't butter bread.

That tension between bread and breath has shadowed the story from the start. In December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi struck a match in Sidi Bouzid; less than a month later, on January 14 2011, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled, marking the start of Tunisia's uprising. That was the revolution's first miracle: a dictator toppled by street power, without tanks, without an army coup. Bouazizi's cart became a symbol across the Arab world, from Cairo's Tahrir Square to the streets of Tripoli and Sana'a. The chant that began in Tunisia "Work, freedom, dignity!" was echoed in Amnesty International's 2025 report on arbitrary detention of human rights defenders and in its 2024 report on the clampdown on media freedom.

Avenue Habib Bourguiba today feels heavy, but not mute. The cafés are crowded, the traffic relentless, and children still wave the red-and-white flag. Yet the boulevard that once shook with chants of "Dégage!" during the Arab Spring now hums with quieter complaints, like the price of milk and empty shelves where sugar should be, or the sense that politics is happening somewhere far above. It's a reminder that revolutions are not judged by their opening fireworks. They are judged in the patience of citizens, in the stability of prices, in whether dignity, that elusive word that carried the chants of 2011, feels any closer fourteen years on. And here lies Tunisia's paradox: the Arab Spring's brightest flame still burns here, but it flickers in a drafty room.

The early transition chalked up two achievements that still matter. First came a genuinely competitive election in 2011. Then, after bruising debate, Tunisia's 2014 constitution, which enshrined freedom of conscience, gender equality, and the right to organize while placing checks on the executive, was signed into law, as reported by Al Jazeera. For a region haunted by Caesars, the text looked like a lighthouse.

In the immediate years that followed, Tunisia charted a course its neighbors could not. In October 2011, the country held its first free elections, producing a coalition led by the Islamist Ennahda party. Despite ideological tensions secular and Islamist blocs negotiated rather than fought: a contrast to Egypt, where the army removed Mohamed Morsi in 2013, or Libya, where rival militias tore the country apart. Meanwhile, civil society stepped from the wings to the script. After the 2013 assassinations of Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi pushed politics to the brink, the National Dialogue Quartet UGTT, UTICA, the Human Rights League, and the Bar brokered a path out, later earning the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize. Even then, underlying tensions persisted as growth slowed, unemployment hardened,, and the coast surged ahead while the interior was left behind.

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The Belaïd (February 6, 2013) and Brahmi (July 25, 2013) killings pierced early optimism, with landmark verdicts arriving only years later. Violence in 2015 then reshaped priorities: the Bardo Museum attack in March and the Sousse beach massacre in June 38 dead, most of them British tourists buckled tourism and stiffened the security state, and budgets and bandwidth tilted toward emergency measures, leaving the messy bargaining of 2011–2014 less room to breathe. This discontent grew nationwide in 2018 with the “Fech Nestanneu?” movement, literally translated to mean “What are we waiting for?”. The campaign erupted after new austerity measures, including tax hikes and subsidy cuts, were announced under pressure from international lenders. Nawaat documented protests across 18 governorates, from Tunis to Gafsa, proving that economic frustration was universal. The slogans were eerily familiar: “Work, freedom, dignity”. Seven years after Bouazizi’s fire, little had changed in the daily lives of many Tunisians.

Economically, the engine coughed. Overall unemployment hovered in the mid-teens by 2024, youth joblessness far higher, especially inland where public hiring and mining once absorbed shocks. Then COVID-19 landed hard: a strict March 2020 lockdown throttled services and tourism, strained public finances, and depleted household buffers fuel for a later judgment that a decade of politics hadn’t moved the fairness needle, according to the World Bank’s overview of Tunisia. On July 25, 2021, President Kais Saied invoked Article 80, dismissed the Prime Minister, froze parliament, and assumed extraordinary powers; emergency surgery to some, a self-coup to others. A year later, a 2022 constitutional referendum centralized authority: turnout hovered around ~30%, with the opposition largely boycotting. Legislative elections in December 2022/January 2023 then returned the lowest participation since 2011 — about 11.4% in the second round leaving a fragmented, weaker chamber. In 2024, Saied won a second term by a crushing margin, consolidating presidential dominance even as enthusiasm thinned.

Material conditions kept tugging the political thread. After stop-start talks, Tunisia reached a staff-level agreement with the IMF in October 2022 for a 48-month, ~\$1.9B arrangement then stalled over fuel and food subsidies and other sensitive conditions. Analysts warned that domestic financing patches risked squeezing credit to the private sector without fixing structural ills; in households, the fixes looked like smaller baskets and swapped brands rather than relief. Shortages of milk, sugar, coffee arrived like a drumbeat: not constant, but common enough to sour the national mood. By December 2024, inflation had eased to around ~6.2%, yet families still felt the bite, according to TAP and the World Bank. Migration turned into both a pressure valve and bargaining chip. Departures from Sfax toward Lampedusa surged in 2023, prompting an EU–Tunisia memorandum tying financing to border control and anti-smuggling cooperation. Rights groups documented abuses against migrants and asylum seekers, warning against externalizing harm in Human Rights Watch reports.

Meanwhile, civic space narrowed. Decree-Law 54 (2022) framed as a cybercrime tool against “false information” has been used against journalists, lawyers, and opposition figures. In May 2024, two journalists were sentenced to a year; in April 2024, commentator Mohamed Boughalleb received six months. Press-freedom monitors tracked the chill; Tunisia ranked 118th in 2024. Yet old muscle memory hasn’t atrophied. Unions, especially the UGTT, have remained a weather vane. Arrests of sector leaders in 2023 and detentions into 2024 sparked nationwide protests and warnings about intimidation, signalling that organized labor still channels anger before it explodes.

It is tempting to look at Tunisia’s empty shelves, low-turnout elections, and shrinking freedoms and declare the revolution a failure. But that ignores the regional baseline. Compared with its Arab Spring peers, Tunisia still stands apart. Egypt returned to full authoritarian rule within two years of its uprising, with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi cementing military dominance; Syria collapsed into one of the most devastating civil wars of the twenty-first century, displacing half the population and killing hundreds of thousands; Yemen descended into a conflict that produced one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises; and Libya fractured into rival governments and militias, its oil wealth fuelling chaos rather than cohesion. Tunisia, by contrast, negotiated a constitution, transferred power more than once, and staged a Nobel-recognized dialogue before its current freeze. Even now, watchdogs publish, unions mobilize, and protests occur—albeit under tighter constraints. Tunisia still wagers that bargaining beats bullets, and that institutions, however bruised, can be rebuilt. Comparisons can mislead if they lower the bar, but they help set the horizon: Egypt snapped back to authoritarian rule, Libya fractured, Syria shattered, and Yemen plunged.

For Tunisia, economics isn’t a side plot. Citizens judge systems by prices, jobs, and fair access to services. The

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2023 spike and recurring shortages drained legitimacy from both the coalition era and the presidential reset. Stabilization that protects the vulnerable for instance, targeted cash transfers has more oxygen than austerity framed as destiny. It must also be understood that sovereignty talk can't replace a solvency plan. The IMF track has stalled not only because subsidy reform is hard but also because there is no broad domestic coalition for change. A plausible path would pair gradual retargeting with visible anti-corruption enforcement and measures to unclog credit to small firms steps that ease political pain while building credibility. Finally, order without rights is brittle. Decree-Law 54 prosecutions, arrests of unionists and lawyers, and tighter media rules may buy temporary quiet but erode trust the resource that helped Tunisia step back from the edge in 2013–2014. Narrowing vague speech provisions, shoring up judicial independence, and restoring meaningful parliamentary oversight would not only satisfy abstract ideals; they'd help the system absorb the next shock.

External partners should be clear about the trade-offs they underwrite. The EU–Tunisia migration compact may reduce departures in the short run; without legal safeguards and independent monitoring, it risks normalizing rights-eroding practices. Financial support should be tied not just to fiscal arithmetic but to civic space and social safety nets—the only way reforms survive the daily grind.

Tunisia offers two sobering lessons. First, democracy cannot survive on constitutions alone. The 2014 document was celebrated globally, but it could not put bread on tables. Dignity, the revolution's rallying cry, turned out to be as much about food, jobs, and fair services as about elections. When politics failed to deliver materially, citizens turned away in frustration. Second, foreign support that prioritizes short-term stability over dignity backfires. The European Union's migration deal may stem boat departures in the near term, but it risks entrenching authoritarian tendencies and fuelling resentment. The IMF's conditionality may be economically rational, but politically it looks like external diktat a gift to sovereignty rhetoric and a curse for public trust. For Tunisians, dignity means not having to queue endlessly for sugar, not being forced onto a dinghy toward Lampedusa, and not fearing arrest over a Facebook post. For outsiders, it should mean supporting both economic reforms and civic freedoms, not trading one for the other.

Tunisia may be small, at just 12 million people, but it carries symbolic weight. For Europe, it is the buffer state of the Mediterranean, a gatekeeper for migration. For Washington, it is the last test case of the Arab Spring, a gauge of whether democratic experiments in the region are still possible. For the Arab world, Tunisia shows that revolutions do not always collapse immediately into dictatorship or war. They can stumble, backslide, and persist in twilight. Losing Tunisia to full authoritarianism would not only matter for Tunisians. It would send a chilling signal across the region: if even the "success story" cannot survive, what hope remains? Conversely, if Tunisia can steady itself through modest economic delivery, civic resilience, and external support that respects dignity, it may yet prove that the Arab Spring planted seeds worth tending.

Tunisia in 2025 sits uneasily between hope and resignation. Elections are still held, but enthusiasm evaporates. Civic space still exists, but under siege. Protests flare, but outcomes fade. The embers of 2011 are still alive, but they glow dimmer. When one walks down Avenue Habib Bourguiba today, the murals of Bouazizi are faded but not gone. Children still wave flags, cafés still hum, and the red crescent moon still flutters in the dusk. The revolution's promise of dignity — *karama* — remains Tunisia's unfinished business. So why does Tunisia matter? Because the flame still burns, lower and closer to the wick. The 2014 constitution and the 2015 Nobel were not mirages; they were waypoints on a road that stalled when material dignity lagged behind political dignity. The question now is quieter but consequential: can modest economic delivery, restored checks, and oxygen for organized dissent nudge the country from suspended animation to incremental progress? That would not be a triumph; it would be a function. In this neighbourhood, that is no small thing.

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