

**The Promise of Democracy
in Tunisia since the Arab Spring**

A demokrácia ígérete Tunéziában
az arab tavasz kezdete óta

AMENI MEHREZ



KKI Policy Brief

Series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Publisher:

Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Reviewed by:

Tamás Péter Baranyi

Typesetting:

Tamás Lévárt

Editorial office:

H-1016 Budapest, Bérc utca 13-15.

Tel.: + 36 1 279-5700

E-mail: info@ifat.hu

<http://kki.hu>

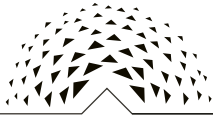
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ISSN 2416-0148

<https://doi.org/10.47683/KKIElemzesek.KE-2021.63>



Abstract: Tunisia has often been praised as the only democratic success story of the Arab world. Today, following the exceptional measures undertaken by President Kais Saied to freeze parliament and dismiss the prime minister, that description is being challenged, and democracy is called “a failed experiment.” This article explains why this is happening in Tunisia by examining the roots of the main political and economic challenges to Tunisia’s democratic path. The article also offers insights into the consequences of these changes at the national and the regional level.

Keywords: Tunisia, protests, Arab Spring, democracy, political unrest, economic hardship, socio-economic grievances, political parties, Covid-19, political crisis, party volatility, North Africa.

Összefoglalás: Tunéziát jellemzően az arab térség egyetlen demokratikus sikertörténetének tekintik. Ezen jellemzés létjogosultsága erősen megkérdőjelezhető a jelenlegi folyamatok, különösen Kais Saied elnöknek a parlament munkájának felfüggesztésére és a miniszterelnök felmentésére irányuló döntését követően. A tunéziai demokráciát ezért ma már számos megfigyelő inkább egy „bukott kísérletnek” tekinti. Az elemzés célja a tunéziai események értelmezése az ország demokratikus fejlődését hátráltató politikai és gazdasági kihívások okainak vizsgálatán keresztül, valamint a tunéziai változások nemzeti és regionális hatásainak vizsgálata.

Kulcsszavak: Tunisia, protests, Arab Spring, democracy, political unrest, economic hardship, socio-economic grievances, political parties, Covid-19, political crisis, party volatility, North Africa.

On the 25th of July, 2021, new decisions were undertaken by President Kais Saied, causing an unprecedented political earthquake in Tunisia’s long decade of democratic transition. The decisions consisted of freezing parliament by [using Article 80 of the Constitution](#), and ousting Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and his government. The measures came following the massive protests that took place in various cities across the country amid a situation of political disputes, economic turmoil, and a health crisis. A few weeks later, the President announced that he would rule by decree and ignore parts of the Constitution. In a most recent speech, he announced that Tunisia will hold a constitutional referendum in July 2022 and a timetable for new general elections by the end of 2022.

Some have described these recent events as [the failure of the only Arab democracy](#) and a [return to the one man-rule](#), while others have argued that the protests “[are more a testament to democratic resilience than failure](#).” All

these decisions and protests have shaken the entire country and prompted the international community to ask the crucial question why this is happening in Tunisia, in a country that has often been referred to as a pioneer of change and a lone democratic success story in the region.

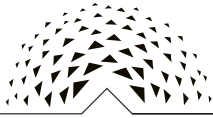
The challenges facing Tunisia's democracy today can be explained through two main factors: the political and economic challenges persisting since 2011, and the brewing dissatisfaction among social forces. On the one hand, the past decade of Tunisian politics has been dominated by pacts and power sharing agreements, which have helped to bring together elites from different ideological backgrounds but have also hindered democratic consolidation. On the other hand, the economic and financial crisis has deepened socio-economic grievances and increased citizens' uncertainty as to whether these political forces are able to deliver long-term solutions to the problems facing the country.

In order to understand what is unfolding now in Tunisia, it is crucial to examine the political, economic, and societal factors that have shaped the country in the past decade. The article also discusses the consequences of these changes at both the national level and in the entire Middle East and North Africa region.

TUNISIA SINCE 2011

An overview of the Tunisian political landscape and the main transformations since the 2011 revolution is key to understanding what is going on in Tunisia. On 17 December, 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi, a street vendor set himself on fire to protest the injustices inflicted on him by the authorities. The incident sparked massive protests, which spread across Tunisia and the whole Middle East and North Africa region. The mass uprisings ended 23 years of Ben Ali's dictatorship. In October 2011, Tunisians went to vote for the first time for the Tunisian Constituent Assembly, the main body responsible for leading the transitional period, drafting the new constitution, and announcing the date for the next elections. This assembly was headed by the once banned Islamist party, [Ennahda, with 89 seats \(40% of the popular vote\)](#), followed by smaller secular and leftist parties such as the Congress for the Republic party (CPR), Ettakatol, Al Aritha Chaabia, and the Democratic Progressive Party. Ennahda formed a coalition government that became known as the "troika government" with Ettakatol and the CPR.

However, soon after, the tensions escalated between, on the one hand, Islamists, who had a wider place for religion and Islamic values in their legislative agenda, and secularists, who wanted to keep Tunisia a secular civic state. In 2012, the Salafist movement, Ansar al-Sharia, led an attack targeting the US Embassy in Tunis. They also attacked [Al-Abdellia palace](#), where they destroyed several art works that they viewed as insulting for Islam and Muslims. The same year, [a Salafist removed the Tunisian flag](#) from the campus of the University of



Manouba in Tunis and replaced it with the Jihadist black flag. This event sparked clashes between students, and more violence. Tensions reached their peak when two secular members of the assembly, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, were assassinated in February and July 2013, respectively.

As a result of the violence and the widespread social unrest in the post-2011 period, the Islamist Ennahda party agreed to step down, join a national dialogue, and form a technocratic government. The agreement was initiated by [the National Dialogue Quartet](#) (four civil society organizations), which was later awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its contribution to designing a roadmap that enabled Tunisia to peacefully move forward in its political transition.

In 2014, Tunisians elected the Assembly of the Representatives of the People, in their first free and fair parliamentary elections. The newly founded secular Nidaa Tounes party won 85 seats out of 217. The Islamist Ennahda party, which had led the previous Assembly, came second, with 69 seats. Although the Nidaa Tounes party had the lead to form the government, they chose to form a government of national unity with the Islamist Ennahda party. In 2016, the two parties announced their grand coalition, sealed as [the Carthage Agreement](#).

In 2019, Tunisians participated in their second free and fair parliamentary elections. The results of these elections revealed a new parliamentary composition that surprised several analysts. First, the secular Nidaa Tounes party, which had led parliament in 2014, only won three seats in 2019. [Ennahda was at the top of the list with 52 seats, followed by political outsiders, such as the Qalb Tounes party and the Dignity Coalition party](#). In January 2020, the proposed government of [Habib Jemli](#) appointed by Ennahda was rejected by parliament. The President of Tunisia nominated a head of government, [Elyes Fakhfakh](#), who resigned a few months later amid brewing political turmoil. The President nominated another prime minister, [Hichem Mechichi](#) in July 2020 but ended up dismissing him in July 2021, following widespread protests.

DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS?

All the events outlined above have led scholars to raise the question why the Tunisian democracy is struggling to consolidate. What is hindering Tunisia from stabilizing its political landscape despite all the important milestones it has achieved so far?

While many have regarded power sharing agreements as necessary to achieve reconciliation, I argue that the power sharing agreements are what have hindered and paralyzed democratic consolidation. As mentioned above, Tunisia was led by coalition governments between Islamists and secularists from 2014 until 2019. The governments were essentially concerned about making alliances and reconciliations that would help them maintain their power in the next elections. Instead of investing their political power in long-term structural plans, such as

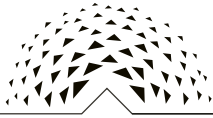
economic reforms, and resolving the budget deficit and social inequalities, the leading parties thought it better to reinforce their alliances and prioritize their parties' agenda. The failure to address socio-economic issues has increased societal unrest and people's frustration with politicians.

Moreover, the power sharing agreements have allowed a wider circle of elites to access state resources and benefit from their position to seize more power in order to mobilize the electorate in the next elections. As a result, corruption became more common and more widespread among politicians during these grand coalitions. Most importantly, power sharing agreements between two extreme ideological forces, such as the one between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda in 2016, had serious consequences regarding party-voter connections. People who had voted for the secular Nidaa Tounes party because they disapproved of Ennahda being in power felt completely betrayed when the two parties announced their grand coalition. As a result, the Nidaa Tounes party ended up severely punished by its electorate in 2019.

PARTY VOLATILITY AND PARTY TOURISM

Another crucial factor that has led to the current political crisis is party volatility. Numerous parties in post-revolution Tunisia failed to establish a long-term link with their electorates. Several ended up splitting or completely disappearing from the political scene. For example, parties such as the Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol moved from having 29 and 20 seats in the 2011 elections, respectively, to zero seats in 2019. The Nidaa Tounes party emerged as a strong secular opposition force to the Islamists in 2014, however, soon after, [internal ideological divisions weakened the party](#). Several members resigned from Nidaa Tounes, which made the party move from the first position in the parliament (89 seats) to the third one (58 seats). The party also witnessed major splits and resignations, particularly the ones made by two important figures, Mohsen Marzouk (who formed his own party called Machrou Tounes) and Youssef Chahed (who formed the Tahya Tounes party). This party volatility reduces not only voters' trust in parties but also turnout rates. The turnout rate during national elections decreased [from 86% in 2011 to 67% in 2014, finally reaching 41% in 2019](#).

Another major characteristic of the Tunisian political landscape in the post-2011 uprisings is party tourism. Several politicians make it to parliament representing a particular party and then soon change sides. Out of the 217 members of parliament, 87 changed their party identification between 2014 and 2019, which constitutes 40% of the total number of representatives. This phenomenon has further weakened the party-voter linkage and created a highly fragmented parliament.



ECONOMIC FAILURE AND WIDESPREAD CORRUPTION

One of the main reasons if not the main reason for why the Tunisian democratic experiment is struggling to bear fruit lies in ignoring deep economic problems. Most economic indicators have dramatically regressed, including employment, living standards, and national growth.

In the past 10 years, [Tunisia's currency has lost 50% of its value](#). Unemployment has been rising to an unprecedented level, [reaching 18.4% as of October 2021](#) (compared to 16.2% in the same period of 2020). In 2020 and with the beginning of the pandemic, [Tunisia's economy shrank by 8.8% \(GDP measure\)](#), considered one of the worse rates since the 1960s. In addition, the past five years have witnessed a significant increase in the prices of basic materials due to inflation, a deterioration of the local currency exchange rate, as well as [public debt reaching 87.6% of the country's GDP](#) (USD 36.3 billion as of August 2021).

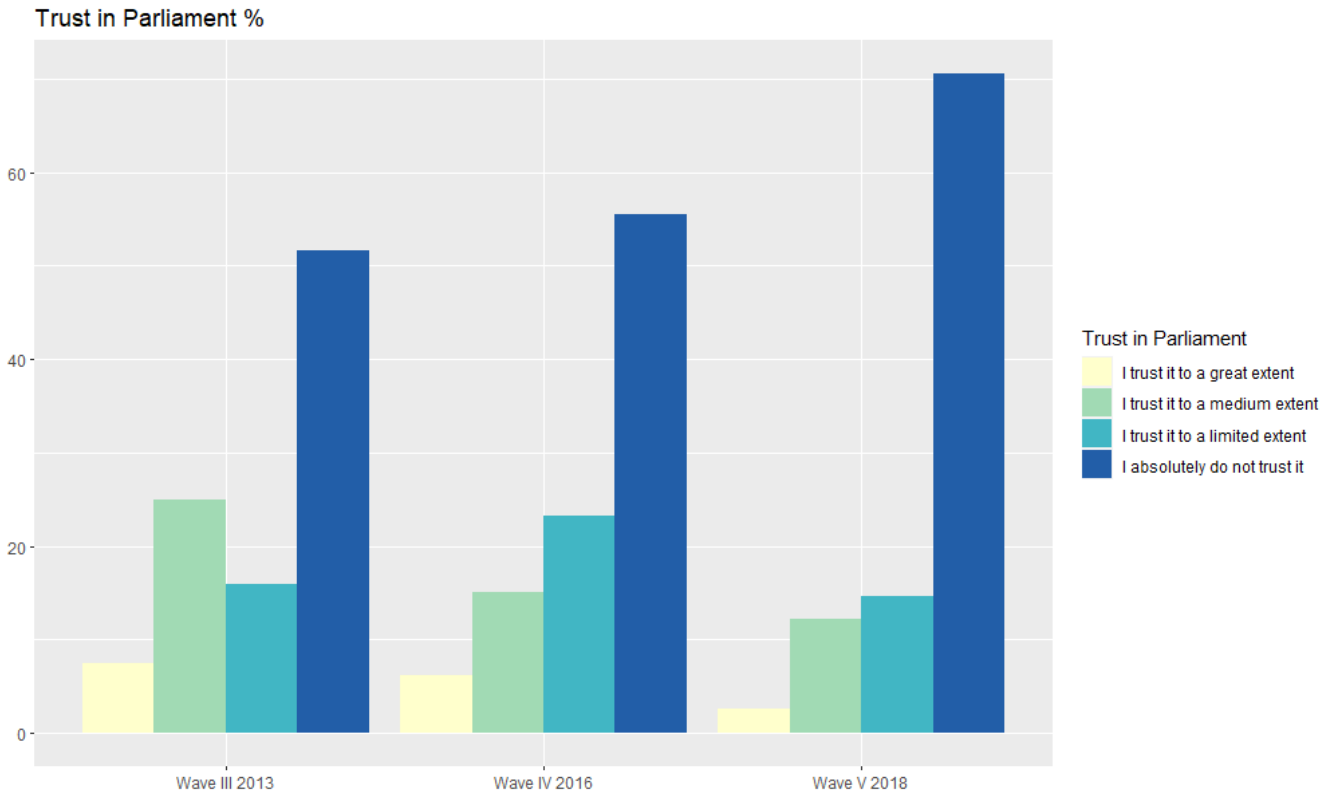
Over the past decade, Tunisian political parties have been struggling to build a stable government able to survive the political crisis. For example, since the revolution of 2011, there have been ten successive governments in Tunisia, all of which have failed to bring structural reforms. The lack of political stability has created a dangerous vacuum, through which Tunisia's economy has entered a vicious circle of debts. The economic crisis has deepened due to the outbreak of the pandemic. In June 2021, the whole health care system was collapsing after the skyrocketing numbers of COVID-19 cases. In July 2021, the country witnessed one of its worst waves of contaminations, with [more than 5,000 infections and around 150 deaths](#) per day.

DEEPENING SOCIO-ECONOMIC GRIEVANCES

As a result of the growing political fragmentation and the ailing economic system, Tunisians have been increasingly dissatisfied with their governments and political parties. [As Figure 1 shows](#), there has been a growing distrust in parliament between 2013 and 2018.

Some scholars have even linked citizens' frustration with the political system [to the emergence of populist outsiders](#) in the 2019 elections, such as Nabil Karoui and Kais Saied. Neither of these two candidates who made it to the second round of the presidential elections has a background in politics or any experience in it. Nabil Karoui is a businessman and owner of the Nessma TV channel, whereas Kais Saied is a constitutional law professor at the University of Tunis. Therefore, it can be argued that there is widespread frustration and anger towards the elites and existing parties.

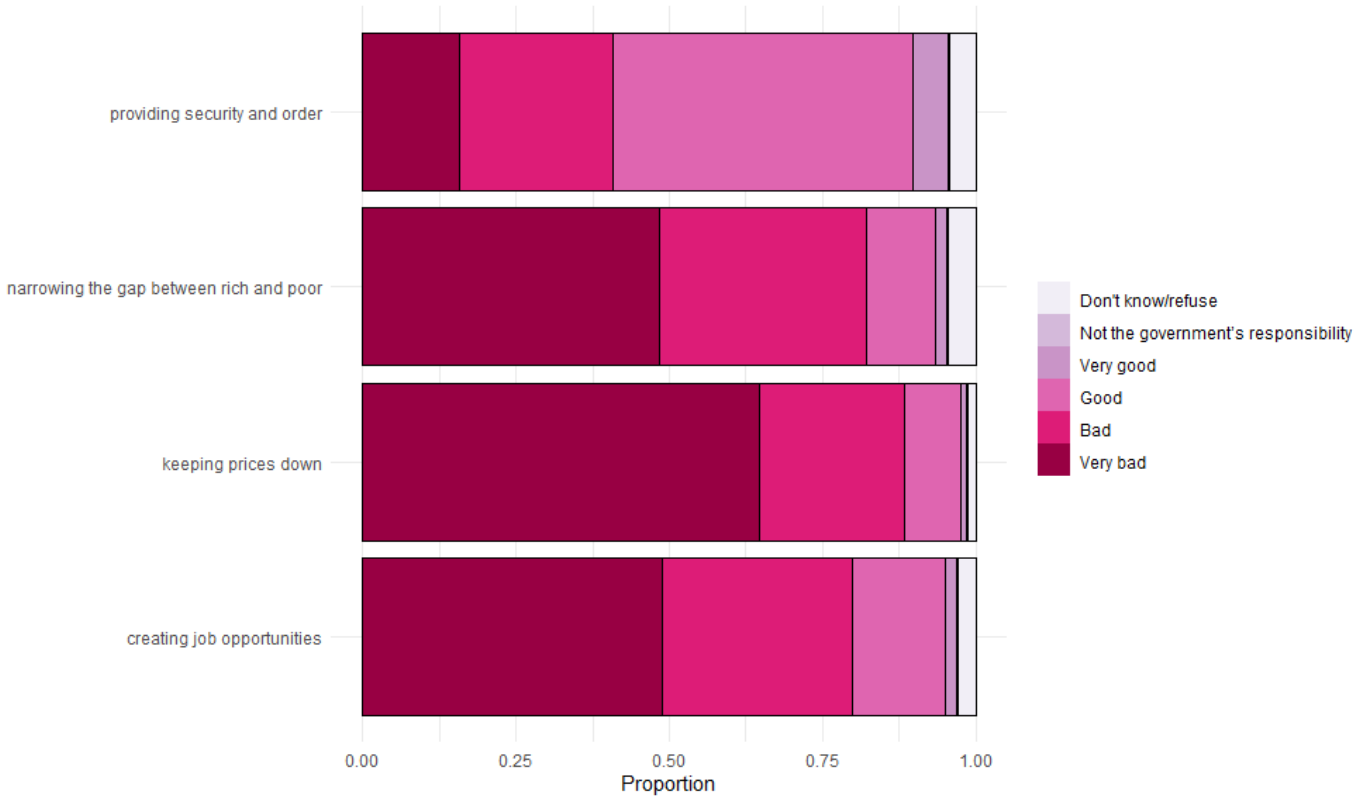
Figure 1
Distrust in Parliament (Chart compiled by the author based on the Arab Barometer Data, Waves from 2013, 2016, and 2018)



[According to another public opinion poll conducted in 2020](#), 87% of Tunisians indicated that the country is heading in the wrong direction, and another 72% said that the current economic situation is really bad. This dissatisfaction with government performance is predominately manifested in policies related to the economy. When comparing Tunisians' satisfaction with economic issues vs. non-economic ones (for example, security), a large proportion of negative views are attributed to the former rather than the latter (see Figure 2). These results further emphasize citizens' frustration with the state of the economy and social inequalities.



Figure 2
Satisfaction with Government Performance (Chart compiled by the author based on the Arab Barometer Data, Wave V of 2018)



Most importantly, since 2011, most analysts and journalists have been solely writing about political Islam and power sharing between Islamists and secularists, instead of focusing on Tunisia's real challenges during the transition period: youth unemployment, poverty, and socio-economic grievances. Hence, many have praised the transitional period and called it "successful", although it is far from it. Success has often been associated with the government's ability to minimize political polarization and politicians' ability to make political agreements. What pundits seem to have ignored is the government's ability to meet citizens' demands and reduce socio-economic inequalities.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Obviously, the exceptional measures taken since the 25th of July do not come without costs. Some of these consequences have raised huge concerns among analysts regarding the future of Tunisia specifically and the whole North African and Middle East region more broadly.

RELUCTANCE OF WESTERN LENDERS

At the national level, the uncertainty surrounding the fate of the Tunisian democracy has prompted several questions regarding Tunisia's economic and financial stability. Will the new Tunisian government be able to save the country from its debt crisis? Most importantly, will the International Monetary Fund and other lenders trust the new political forces leading the country today?

It is important to mention that Tunisia was seeking a USD 4 billion loan from the IMF in May 2021 in exchange for a reform package. The fund was never approved because all negotiations with the IMF stopped when the exceptional measures were introduced and have only started up again in October this year.

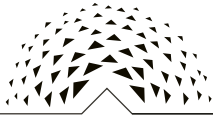
In financial and monetary agreements, the first condition of loan approvals is having political stability. Currently, Tunisia is lacking political and governmental stability, a crucial condition for obtaining funds and winning the trust of Western lenders. Without the IMF and other Western lenders, Tunisia will never solve its chronic economic problems and fiscal deficit, which will directly and indirectly impact its political transition.

Most importantly, Tunisia has suffered several setbacks in bringing in investors since 2011, following the regime change and the terrorist attacks that threatened its tourism sector and economic performance. The exceptional measures have created increasing challenges in attracting foreign investors, who now prefer to go to countries with a stable political climate.

BRAIN DRAIN AND EMIGRATION

Since the 2011 revolution, massive waves of undergraduates, graduates, and highly skilled workers have left the country in search of better working and living conditions. This phenomenon worsened particularly with the terrorist attacks and political assassinations that weakened the economy and repelled investors and foreign companies.

[According to a study conducted by the Economist Maghreb Magazine and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation](#), around 3,000 engineers leave the country every year since 2014. The Arab Barometer Data from 2018 shows that [almost 73% of Tunisians state that they want to emigrate for economic reasons](#), in contrast to only 1.5% for political reasons, and 2.1% who say they want to leave for security reasons. Doctors are also moving abroad. According to the National Order of Tunisian Physicians, around 900 doctors leave the country every year to go to Europe, Saudi Arabia, and Canada. Between 2013 and 2018, the emigration of young doctors, experienced doctors, and heads of departments increased from 6% to 45%.



These numbers are alarming in a country that has neither adopted any reforms in its health sector nor tried to keep its doctors and engineers. Obviously, these waves of emigration have impacted the country's economic performance and deepened its political crisis.

DECLINE OF POLITICAL ISLAM

The failure to meet Tunisians' basic demands and solve the country's ailing economy has been directly associated with the Islamist Ennahda party being in power. Consequently, this has created high levels of mass discontent. Tunisians had high expectations from the Ennahda government to bring change post-2011, however, those hopes soon vanished when they realized that the party is not fully committed to economic and societal reforms. This is clearly manifested in the lower number of votes for Ennahda in the last three elections. During the 2011 Transitional Constituent Assembly elections, for instance, Ennahda received 37% of the votes compared to 27.9% in the 2014 elections, and just 19% in 2019. Tunisia is not the only country that has been governed by an Islamist government and failed to bring economic change. Morocco's long-ruling Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party, has suffered a crushing defeat in the parliamentary elections of 2021. The party moved from having 125 seats in parliament to just 12 seats.

Today, following the Tunisian exceptional measures and the Moroccan elections, the credibility of Islamists in more general is being challenged. Citizens are increasingly uncertain whether political Islam is really the solution for most challenges in the Arab countries. They have lost faith in the notion that Islamist parties and their representatives will realize the idealistic and moralistic vision of society that political Islam has always promised to deliver. Furthermore, the persistent and continuous failure of Islamist parties and movements is expected to lower support for political Islam across the whole region.

THE PROMISE OF DEMOCRACY SINCE THE 2011 ARAB SPRING?

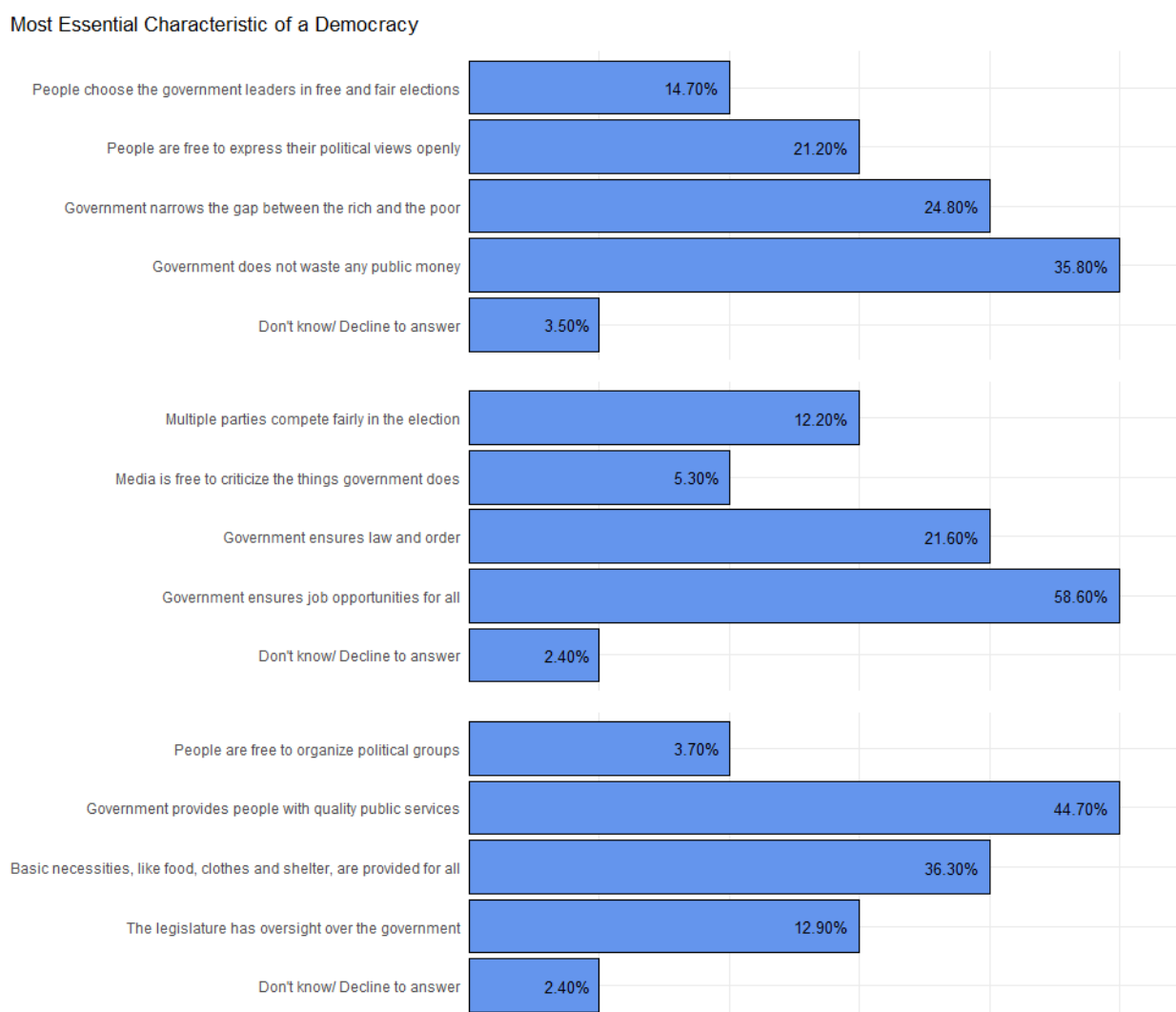
Many are pondering what might happen in Tunisia. Some have suggested that it is already heading towards authoritarianism, while others have urged international leaders to put more pressure on Tunisia and its political actors in order to restore democracy. Given the challenges and the recent changes, it is still unclear what might happen following these exceptional decisions.

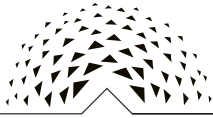
For sure, the 2011 uprisings were largely calls for better living conditions and employment. The post-2011 transition, however, was mainly about power sharing agreements and elections. Most governments have failed to respond to

people’s socio-economic grievances and reduce social inequalities. Tunisians’ dreams about better living conditions, more economic opportunities, and more transparency were never fulfilled.

For several political scientists and analysts, the Tunisian democratic experience has been largely linked to free and fair elections, freedom of speech, freedom of protest, and political equality. Yet for Tunisians, democracy has meant something else. It has meant delivering basic needs, more employment, and social justice. According to the 2016 Arab Barometer data (Wave IV), when Tunisians were asked about the most essential characteristics of a democracy, the majority mentioned an economic factor as the most important (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Most Essential Characteristics of a Democracy (Chart compiled by the author based on the Arab Barometer Data, Wave IV of 2016)





As long as the deep structural economic challenges are not addressed in Tunisia, the promise of democracy will never be fulfilled. Politicians and political parties need to adopt a new vision in order to make radical changes to the economic and financial sectors and meet their citizens' expectations. Right now, everyone is awaiting a change from the newly appointed Prime Minister, Najla Bouden, who has become the first woman to lead a government in Tunisia and the entire Arab World. While this is a historic nomination for Tunisia, it remains unclear whether and how Bouden and her cabinet will respond to the country's economic challenges. Bouden lacks the political experience required to implement radical changes on Tunisia's shaky path, which makes her task to implement reforms and convince her team even more challenging.