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Democracy or Economy?

What needs to be changed to break the deadlock in Tunisia

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Summary:

Ten years after the first country in the Arab world's rose up against injustice, the failure of the democratic process has placed the country at a dangerous crossroads. While Tunisia has not yet recovered from the disastrous consequences of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine is increasingly weighing on the country's economic prospects and threatening any attempt at future reform. Faced with soaring import prices, a widening trade deficit, high debt service costs, and the drying up of external fundings, a new agreement with the IMF is presented as the only way to resolve the Balance of Payments crisis. While the political arena, after 25 July, focuses on redefining the terms of the exercise of power for some, and the struggle for legitimacy for others, if lessons are not learned from this stagnant decade and if bold economic decisions are not taken to break with the past, along with constitutional and political reforms, the country will sink into an unprecedented social crisis. In the light of actual global constraints and the ongoing national roadmap for constitutional and economic reform, this paper draws lessons from the institutional, political weaknesses that have hampered the democratic process and describes the power struggles of different actors that defined the post revolution economic trajectory. Finally, it proposes avenues for reflection and urgent concrete proposals to remedy these weaknesses in the future.

1. A Democracy That Did Not Allow for Economic Revolution

One of the widely observed conclusions about Tunisia's democratic transition is that, despite efforts to implement a liberal democratic model, enthusiasm for democratization has failed to meet the socio-economic demands made by Tunisians during the December 2010 to January 2011 uprisings. Many analyses link the deterioration of socio-economic conditions during this period to the unwillingness of the political class to respond to the needs of the population, due to revived internal—and historical—political quarrels, the polarization between Islamists and secularists, and endemic corruption that has plagued the political class, and the administration, including the security and judicial system.[1] Further analyses point to an economic model[2] based on rents that has replaced the crony capitalism that was in place during

1 International Crisis Group, "La Transition Bloquée: Corruption et Régionalisme en Tunisie", Rapport Moyen-Orient et Afrique du Nord, no. 177, 10 May 2017, available at https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/177-la-transition-bloquee-corruption-et-regionalisme-en-tunisie.pdf - See also GIZ, "Enquête Sur la Corruption en Tunisie", December 2020, available at https://tinyurl.com/2n78y33r

2 Aziz Krichen, 2021 "La Gauche et son Grand Récit, Comprendre L'Économie de Rente", see also Legal Agenda Tunisie Spécial Issue no. 24, 2022 available at https://legal-agenda.com/wp-content/uploads/Legal-Agenda_24_Web.pdf.

the Ben Ali era.[3] As a result, Tunisians' trust in the political class and more broadly in these democratic institutions has gradually eroded, expressing an increased sense of stolen votes and frustration over the failure of these institutions to effect change in the socio-economic situation of the majority of the people.

This political deadlock is due to complex factors that intersected during the democratic transition. One important factor is the electoral law, which was designed from inception by political actors and elites for the specific needs of a constituent assembly and to promote consensus building during the writing of the constitution,[4] and not for implementing a clear parliamentary system. As a result, the various elections since have never produced a significant or stable majority and have led to an era of consensus between inconsistent and changing coalitions.[5]

The situation has been further compounded by a constitutional inconsistency that has drastically reduced the executive powers of the President—who is elected by universal suffrage and on whom the electorate's great political expectations rest—and entrusted crucial executive powers to a head of government appointed from the winning party, who must obtain a vote of confidence from the majority of parliament. This has paved the way for 'quota politics' among the various incoherent coalitions that formed the ten post-revolution governments—including three reshuffles—and has always given the political class a reason to shirk its responsibilities. It has also led to continuous crises over conflicting prerogatives between the two heads of the executive.

To cite just a few examples: Article 77 of the constitution[6] states that: "The President of the Republic is responsible for determining the general policies in the fields of defense, foreign relations and national security relating to the protection of the State and the national territory from internal and external threats" but he remained concretely at the mercy of the Head of Government for appointing high officials[7] or for proposing any budget[8] for these missions. Foreign relations were limited, within the framework of Presidential prerogatives, to protocol visits. Indeed, discussions around bilateral cooperation with foreign countries, or multilateral cooperation were exclusively led by the Head of Government and especially by the Ministry of

3 Bob Rijkers, Carolin Freund, and Antonio Nucifora, "All in the Family: State Capture in Tunisia", Policy Research Working Paper, no. 6810, World Bank, available athttps://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/17726/WPS6810.pdf

4 Alexander Martin & John M. Carey, "Why Tunisia's Parliamentary Electoral Formula Needs to be Changed", 13 January 2022, Arab Reform Initiative, available at https://www.arab-reform.net/pdf/?pid=21020&plang=en.

5 Especially due to the possibility of interparty mobility after elections.

6 Tunisian Constitution of 27 January 2014, Article 77, available at https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session27/TN/6Annexe4Constitution_fr.pdf.

7 Although Article 78 states that the President is responsible for appointing high officials, senior security officials, members of the High Security Council chaired by the President are appointed according to their functions. Therefore, permanent members are replaced on retirement by other members who will be promoted by the ministers in charge. This gives more powers to the ministers of defense and the interior in these appointments and thus, to the Head of Government than to the President. The governmental decrees no. 2017-70 of 19 January 2017 on the National Security Council and no. 2017-71, establishing the National Intelligence Centre issued by Youssef Chahed attempt to withdraw even more prerogatives from the President. Also the appointment of the Governor of the Central Bank or its revocation can only be done on the proposal of the Head of Government and after approval by an absolute majority of the members of the ARP.

8 The President can only establish a budget for the presidency, which includes civilian administrative services and presidential security, and a few other institutions attached to the presidency, such as the Institute for Strategic Studies.

Development, Investment, and International Cooperation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This, in the end, created a lot of tension about who decides what.

An additional example is that loan agreements are never sent to parliament with their complete documentation.[9] These loans were often voted on a one-article basis, stating that parliament approved the amount of a given loan from a given donor. IMF agreements have never been submitted to parliament, as they are considered to be technical agreements and do not take the legal form of bilateral, multilateral, or international treaties that require parliamentary approval.[10] Similarly, with respect to Presidential ratification, the 2014 constitution does not allow the President to review, modify, or disapprove in advance policies related to the loan agreements as part of his prerogatives over international cooperation. He can only refuse ratification or call for a referendum, which is a very costly procedure, especially in the absence of a constitutional court that could have defused these tensions, solved disputes over constitutional prerogatives, and would have permitted the consolidation of the President's crucial regulating powers, such as dismissing a government or dissolving the parliament in case of a political crisis. It is obviously one of the main factors that discouraged the parliamentary coalitions from establishing the court.

The parliament did not exercise its legislative function fully and properly, since the priority of legislation was constitutionally given to proposals from the executive body,[11] while tasks of overseeing and controlling the government were weakened by constitutional loopholes, which do not detail the mechanisms of this control. Although Article 74 in the rules of the Assembly of People's Representatives (ARP) stipulates that the ARP is responsible of developing legislation that regulates the interactions of committees with public institutions and any other external entities, such legislation has never been adopted.[12] Moreover, parliament's internal rules were often flouted, especially with the control exercised by the speaker of parliament (on composition and decision)s over the parliamentary office in charge of planning parliamentary activity, this parliamentary office was not accountable for its failures.[13]

The only few tools the opposition had is to chair the finance committee, but this was insufficient, as decisions were ultimately imposed by the majority representing the government in the committee. Deputies also faced another obstacle in Article 63 of the constitution, which states: "Legislative propositions and amendments

9 A recent report from finance committee published by albawsala marsed majles deplored: "The Committee renewed its recommendation that the document explaining the reasons for draft laws should be given due care and accuracy necessary to include all the data and details that authorize the understanding of the project and allow deliberation on it … in addition to providing the Committee with agreements related to loans and their appendices, and all the documents concerned in Arabic language, which is a requirement previously submitted by the Committee on the occasion of its study of several agreements and did not receive a response from the initiator of legislation". Translated by the author, available at: https://majles.marsad.tn/fr/media/show/2975?periodId=2&search=commission&albumtype=&theme=&between=.

10 C. Samson, "L'Encadrement Juridique de la Conditionnalité des Accords de Confirmation du Fonds Monétaire International", Etudes Internationales, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 651–61.

11 Between 2014 and 2019, of the 446 bills, 77 bills were introduced at the initiative of MPs, and only 9 were accepted. Compared to this, 361 bills from the government were introduced and 315 were accepted. Between 2019 and 2024, out of 207 bills and 71 proposals from the deputies, only 2 laws were accepted, while out of 132 government bills, 117 were adopted, mostly loan agreements.

12 Hamza Mighri and Maxime Poulin, "The Role of Parliaments in SSG: The Case of Tunisia", 2020, DCAF Geneva Center for Security, available at https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/imce/PRD/Role_Parliaments_Tunisia.pdf.

13 See the recommendations of Al Bawsala on the reform of the internal regulations of the Assembly of the People's Representatives, https://majles.marsad.tn/fr/media/show/2351.

presented by members of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People are not admissible if they affect the financial balances regulated in the Finance Law".[14] Thus, the financial admissibility of an amendment or law was left solely to the discretion of the government, namely the Minister of Finance. Most of the amendments proposed by deputies, whether from the coalition or the opposition, have often been rejected because of this rule. Moreover, Article 129 stipulates that "the Instance of Sustainable Development and the Rights of Future Generations must be consulted on draft laws relating to economic, social and environmental issues, as well as on development plans".[15] This body has never been created.

Concretely the economic programmes of the political parties were written only on leaflets during the election campaigns. Once elected, no common programme within the winning coalitions expressing their strategic visions was negotiated, adopted, or implemented.[16] As for the decentralization process, financial dependency on the central government of the newly elected municipalities reproduced the same inconsistencies and failed to deliver on its promises to reduce socio-regional inequalities and improve public services, despite the huge development assistance programmes the governments received. Even in 2013, when Tunisia faced its deepest political crisis after the assassination of two leading figures of the left, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, the national dialogue led by the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet failed to propose an economic roadmap in parallel with the political one.[17]

This political and constitutional stalemate, coupled with the fact that the constitutional court was never established,[18] gave little chance for significant change in the political landscape. Along with the political turmoil, the country suffered from external and internal shocks, causing dramatic economic impacts: The war in Libya[19] and the migration crisis caused by the return of thousands of tunisian workers from the Libyan labour market, political assassinations, terrorist attacks targeting the tourism industry, climatic droughts, increases in international commodity prices, continuous social unrest, the fall in phosphate production, the fall in tourism revenues, and the low inflow of FDI. These internal and external shocks combined, have led to low growth, persistent high unemployment, and a growing Balance of Paiements crisis, which pushed the country towards more external borrowing, and forced it to implement austerity reforms that were dictated by its creditors.

14 Tunisan Constitution, 27 January 2014, ART 63.

15 Tunisan Constitution, 27 January 2014, ART 129.

16 Maha Ben Gadha, "La Justice Sociale: L'Objectif Inatteignable de la Révolution Tunisienne", Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2017, available at https://rosaluxna.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/RLS-TUN-justice-sociale-06-02-2017.pdf.

17 In 2013, The National Dialogue focused primarily on accelerating the ratification of the constitution and appointing a government of technocrats that was supposed to manage current affairs, finish the transition phase by setting up the Independent High Commission for Elections, and ratify the electoral law. This did not prevent it from pursuing the conditions of the IMF Stand-By Agreement (arrangement?) to the letter.

18 Aida Delpuech & Samia Hanachi,"Without a Constitutional Court, We Have No Defence Against Authoritarianism", Inkyfada.com, 2021, available at https://inkyfada.com/en/2021/07/29/constitutinal-court-delay-kais-saied-tunisia/.

19 See Emanuele Santi, Saoussen Ben Romdhane, and Mohamed Safouane Ben Aïssa's "Impact of Libya's Conflict on the Tunisian Economy: A Preliminary Assessment", AFDB, 2011, available at https://tinyurl.com/37ufysdj

2. Economy over Democracy

Parliamentary debates have become a stage for the exhibition of each other's vices for parties with no economic agenda that responds to the real needs of the population and a TV broadcasted arena for political disputes and violence for electoral purposes. This has created the conditions for populism, exacerbated polarization, and supported external interference in domestic politics. Meanwhile the steering of the economy has been carried out by a series of external technical assistance programmes in order to adopt laws and decrees, through close collaboration between the central administration and international donors.

The installments of loans were set within a matrix of conditions agreed upon by the different lenders[20] and used to both anchor the country in a neoliberal economy and to lock it in a peripheral position in the international financial and monetary architecture,[21] maintaining the strategic, commercial and security interests of donor countries. The new funds permitted to maintain a semblance of democracy, and avoid its collapse by allowing the local bourgeoisie and the new emergent class to profit from it, and to change the country's economic laws so that they serve the interests of the capitalist classes operating both inside and outside of Tunisia.

Although various statements by foreign representatives and Tunisian officials themselves deplored the lack of implementation of economic reforms by Tunisia, these statements were made whenever resistance to the most painful reforms for the population emerged. These measures were mainly aimed at reducing the public sector wage bill—affecting the main bases of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT)—and the reduction of purchasing power of average Tunisians by raising taxes—therefore also the bases of the political parties—the announced objective was to reduce budget deficit and more specifically the primary deficit[22] to allow debt repayment. Caught between the interests of international creditors and internal electoral constraints, the political class in power has oscillated between the interests of the former by approving the laws conditioning loan agreements to receive funds, providing more legal advantages to foreign investors,[23] and the interests of the latter by getting closer and closer to the local bourgeoisie and the new emerging class by granting them economic benefits in the form of import licenses, resource extraction permits, tax breaks, tax gifts, and penal amnesties,[24] in exchange for their political and financial support.

While the executive body relied more on the security apparatus to silence the voices of unrepresented groups: the unemployed graduates, the poor in the marginalized interior regions, youth in the urban slums, and football fans, who constituted the

20 A glance at the matrix of reforms carried out by Tunisia under the "compact with Africa" initiative and the institutions in charge of financing and monitoring them clearly shows here: https://tinyurl.com/468h4u7b

21 Colin Powers, "Chronicles of a Death Foretold, Democracy and De-Development in Tunisia", Noria Research, April 2022, available at https://noria-research.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Noria-Research_Chronicles-of-a-Death-Foretold_2022_ENG-1.pdf.

22 Primary deficit is the budget deficit before debt amortization.

23 Such as the new investment law 2016, the public private partnership law 2017, and the law to enhance the investment climate 2019.

24 Amna Guellali, "La Réconciliation Économique Renaît de ses Cendres", Nawaat, May 2017, available at https://nawaat.org/2017/05/10/la-reconciliation-economique-renait-de-ses-cendres/ and Mohamed Haddad, A Tunis, "le Parlement Tunisien Vote une Loi Controversée sur la Corruption", Le Monde Afrique, 14 September 2017, available at https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/09/14/a-tunis-le-parlement-tunisien-vote-une-loi-controversee-sur-la-corruption_5185758_3212.html.

main block of resistance in the streets, with whom no channel for negotiation was possible, no inclusive democratic process was designed to serve their interests, and whose social conditions continued to deteriorate. The fight against terrorism and cooperation on migration allowed the different governments to obtain additional bilateral funds from the European Union and the United States and consolidated the governments' security approach to resolving social tensions.

Despite the human rights violations committed during the transitional period, the high levels of fund disbursements were a signal to the cooperating leaders encouraging their degree of commitment to implement the requested reforms. Indeed, on 31 January 2014, Mehdi Jomâa's government received the highest amount of disbursements the IMF has ever granted to Tunisia in its history, just two days after his technocratic cabinet was approved by the assembly, although its mission was presumably to manage current affairs until elections.[25] Contrary to what is often claimed, political unrest, unstable governments, and weak majorities were always a leverage for creditors, using the pressure of debt repayment, and credit downgrading, to advance the so-called 'structural reforms'. These reforms, in reality, are not intended to respond to the needs of the population, in terms of employment or a dignified life, but to ensure debt repayment and to further lock the country into the model of structural dependency in which it has been trapped for decades.[26]

The first phase of reforms from 2012–16 was led by the World Bank, IBRD, ADB, EBRD, EIB, GIZ, and USAID, and focused on further liberalizing the investment framework,[27] while the IMF has focused more on overhauling the framework of the financial and monetary sector, including limiting the Central Bank's intervention in the foreign exchange market, the devaluation of the dinar, and adopting the controversial Central Bank Independence Act, which removed the Central Bank's ability to directly finance the state's budget deficit and limited its role to inflation targeting. This pseudo-independence has turned the bank into a tool for profit accumulation via the granting of unwarranted privileges[28] to private banks owned by the local bourgeoisie,[29] which only finance their industries, and to foreign owned banks permitting further profit transfers abroad.

25 See IMF Tunisia: Transactions with the Fund from 1 May 1984 to 30 April 2022 available at https://www.imf.org/external/np/fin/tad/extrans1.aspx?memberKey1=970&endDate=2099-12-31&finposition_flag=YES.

26 Fadil Ali Riza, "Perpetual Periphery: IFIs and the Reproduction of Tunisia's Economic Dependence", The Impact and Influence of International financial institutions on the Middle East and North Africa, Frederich Ebert Stiftung 2020, available at https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/tunesien/16107.pdf.

27 The WB country report of 2012, states clearly: "The FSAP [the financial sector assessment programme] is providing the analytical underpinnings for technical assistance and policy reforms that the Bank, IFC and IMF will support to help the Government strengthen the financial sector. Priority reforms include the restructuring and recapitalization of state-owned banks". Indeed, the bailout of the three major banks suffering from Ben Ali family non-performing loans were made in 2015. The same report states that: "A priority policy reform is to simplify the investment code …. (the) IFC's advisory services in Tunisia will also support this agenda, by assisting the authorities in streamlining business regulations, improving competition and investment regulations and implementing regulatory reforms ….(The) IFC will offer its advice to the Government on PPP transactions for infrastructure". This is exactly what happened as the PPP Law was adopted on 27 November 2015. The Central bank new law, the banking law, and the bankruptcy law in April 2016, that the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) were finally approved by the IMF in May 2016. Later the new investment Law, and the new competition Law were adopted in September 2016, with the financial support of the WB.

28 By lending to the state with high short-term profitable rates, especially with the high key rates applied by CBT.

29 Such as Mabrouk Group (BIAT), Elloumi Group (BTK), Doghri Group (UBCI), and Ben Yedder Group (Amen Bank).

The second phase of reforms from 2016–2020 was implemented during the IMF's Extended Fund Facility programme, which set the conditions for austerity through strict control of fiscal and monetary policies. On the fiscal side, in order to ensure debt repayment—officially called restoring financial and macroeconomic equilibrium—the Chahed government committed to the IMF to reduce the primary deficit to 3 percent of GDP in 2019. This resulted in cuts to social and investment spending, salary caps, and recruitment freezes in the public sector in 2016, 2017, and 2018, and changes in the tax system, increasing regressive tax rates in 2017 and 2018, and price increases for a long list of products.[30] This tax pressure essentially weighed on the population and on small companies, trampling the very principle of tax equity enshrined in Article 10 of the Constitution.[31] These austerity measures caused growing discontent over decreasing purchasing power among large vulnerable classes of society,[32] deteriorating the quality of public services, and worsening labour standards and living conditions.[33] In 2019, the deaths of 14 newborn babies in the Rabta public maternity facility due to a nosocomial infection caused by human error and later, the death of a dozen of agriculture women workers due to insecure means of transport[34] have triggered protests across all regions of tunisia and forced the government to launch sector-based dialogues on health, transport, and energy, which came to nothing.

Police repression was the only way to silence the protests, after the entry into force of each finance law, each January became a time of abuse against demonstrators and the arrest of hundreds of young people.[35] Social tensions were so high that EU countries and the US administration warned their citizens of possible riots, asking them to avoid demonstrations and crowds.

In spite of that, the Chahed government has received higher amounts of loans from the IMF and other multilateral and bilateral institutions during its tenure than any other government of the transition. Although the first condition for EU macro-financial disbursements was respect for human rights, it seems that the promise of accelerating the conclusion of a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement before the end of the former European Commission's mandate was enough of an argument for the EU to ignore the human right repressive approach to protests. In the end, the agreement was not concluded, especially since a broad national civil society coalition including the UGTT mobilized and rejected it,[36] but parts of

30 First a long list of products that were under low VAT rates were put on the list of higher rates during 2017, then the 2018 Finance Law increased all VAT rates by 1 to 2 points in addition to the collection of additional specific taxes and other consumption taxes. To this were added decisions of general increases in the prices of water, electricity, transport, gasoline, phone cards, housing, internet use, hotel rooms, and food such as fruits and vegetables.

31 Amine Bouzaiene, "Tax Justice in Tunisia: An Ideal Crushed by Debt Policies", Friedrich Ebert Fondation November 2021, available at https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/tunesien/18725.pdf , See also legal agenda Tunisia no. 22, August 2021, available at https://legal-agenda.com/wp-content/uploads/Legal-Agenda_Tunisia_22.pdf

32 Inflation rose at unprecedented levels, reaching 7.5 percent in December 2018.

33 Hafawa Rebhi, "Sick Tunisia: Austerity and Vested Interests Destroying Health Services, Middle East Eye, April 2017, available at https://tinyurl.com/yd56ayev

34 Thierry Brésillon, Les Ouvrières Agricoles, ces Sacrifiées du Modèle Agricole Tunisien, Middle East Eye, May 2019, available at: https://tinyurl.com/bdzm3y2x

35 For futher information see Inkyfada's reports on arrests and people killed by the police, https://tinyurl.com/3d656sav

36 Karim ben Said, "BLOCK' Aleca, Principale Revendication du 1er Mai", la presse.tn, May 2019, available at https://lapresse.tn/5332/block-aleca-principale-revendication-du-1er-mai/.

it passed in the parliament in the form of laws[37]in order to receive tranches of the EU Macro financial assistance. During the same year, the Mabrouk family funds—the family of Ben Ali's son-in-law—that were frozen by the European Union were unfrozen.[38]

In monetary terms, due to the adoption of IMF conditions, the Tunisian dinar has lost nearly 40 percent of its value. This devaluation has put public enterprises in strategic sectors that are net importers of essential products, such as the national electricity company STEG, the grain office, and the central pharmacy, in deep financial difficulties. According to the Tunisian Observatory of Economy, the cumulative impact of the exchange rate on outstanding public debt from 2016 to 2018 was five times greater than total disbursements received from the IMF over the same period.[39]

Despite the bloodletting imposed on Tunisians by the chahed government in 2018,to reduce the primary deficit the cumulated effect, of the exchange rate depreciation (of +8.91 percent), and of the debt interest repayment (+2.64 percent) on the country's endebtness has completely negated these attempts to reduce the primary deficit.[40] The growth rate has oscillated between 1.1 percent and 2.9 percent, and the average unemployment rate has never fallen below 15 percent, reaching 33.4 percent among 15–24-year-olds, the multidimensional poverty rate has climbed to 28.97 percent of the population and this even before the shock of the pandemic.[41]

The COVID-19 crisis hit an already weakened Tunisian economy with a historic recession of about 9 percent in 2020. The health crisis has particularly affected all sectors of the economy, over the first 9 months of 2020, major sectors such as tourism and transport have recorded a decline in activity of 42.7 percent and 29.6 percent respectively, and tourism revenues have thus fallen by 65 percent between 2019 and 2020.[42] Not eligible for the G20 debt relief initiative and lacking an adequate stimulus package due to the strong resistance of the Central Bank to finance large public deficits, very superficial and insufficient measures have been taken by the Tunisian government to support poorer businesses and households.[43] By the end of 2020, 5.4 percent of businesses had permanently closed, 7.7 percent of companies were temporarily closed, and 37.2 percent of the open companies said they were at risk of closing permanently under these conditions.[44]

37 Such as the sanitary and phytosanitary law that aims at regulatory convergence with EU norms in the agricultural sector. This Law would ultimately allow better market access for European agricultural products.

38 Amna Guellali, "La Réconciliation Économique Renaît de ses Cendres", Nawaat, May 2017, available at https://nawaat.org/2017/05/10/la-reconciliation-economique-renait-de-ses-cendres/.

39 Imen Louati and Chafik Ben Rouine, "Impacts of Tunisia's Currency Devaluation", Briefing Paper, Tunisian Observatory of the Economy, 2021, available at https://tinyurl.com/ycyh9zx3

40 Ministry of Finance report on execution of budget December 2018, p. 10, available at http://www.finances.gov.tn/sites/default/files/2019-08/note_sur_lexcution_de_budget__fin_dcembre_2018.pdf.

41 Riadh Bechir, "La Pauvreté et les Disparités Régionales et Locales en Tunisie: une Analyse Statistique, Observatoire de la Francophonie Economique", DROFE, vol. 5, November 2019, available at,https://ofe.umontreal.ca/fileadmin/ofe/documents/Documents_de_travail/DROFEno5.pdf.

42 UNDP, "Impact Économique du Covid19 en Tunisie Analyse en Termes de Vulnérabilité des Ménages et des Micro et Très Petites Entreprises", available at https://tinyurl.com/yms3x25h

43 Maha Ben Gadha, "Tunisia Joins Forces to Save Global Capital, Bar Al Aman, 2020, https://www.researchmedia.org/tunisia-joins-forces-to-save-global-capital-maha-ben-gadha/.

44 IFC, COVID -19 en Tunisie: Publication des résultats de l'étude d'impact socio-économique sur le secteur privé– available at https://pressroom.ifc.org/all/pages/PressDetail.aspx?ID=26097.

Thus, it is clear that external interests have never been engaged in consolidating democracy in a way that would serve the social demands of the majority of the Tunisian population, or challenge the pre-existing economic interests of the European Union—either as a bloc or in bilateral relations with EU countries. The United States, Turkey, and Gulf states such as Qatar, the Emirates, and Saudi Arabia have also all played a role in strengthening or destabilizing the political powers in place according to their interests in the region, while the gatekeepers of international capital have ensured that the country does not deviate from the neoliberal rules imposed on the Global South.[45]

The election of the 'outsider' candidate Kais Saied in October 2019, in itself, expressed Tunisian hopes of freeing the country from the grip of the corrupt and greedy politicians from both the new and old restructured regime. These hopes were quickly met by the institutional blockages described above. Without the support of a parliamentary bloc, Kais Saied faced even deeper political crises than his predecessors did, even though he succeeded in appointing a head of government from his own circle.[46] The crises further escalated and reached their peak with the mismanagement of the pandemic by the Mechichi government.[47] This contributed to higher mortality rates among the population in June and July 2021, and precipitated the President's 25 July decision to declare a state of exception, dismiss the government, freeze the activities of the parliament, and later dissolve it, and end the narrative of 'democratic success', which failed to meet the basic needs of the population. Even with a controversial interpretation of article 80 of the constitution, Saied's power grab was clearly supported by a large section of the population. He was able to get the vaccines and oxygen needed by thousands of Tunisians who had been plunged into the worst health crisis the country has ever known, at the same time that Mechichi, the head of government, was spending his weekend in the most luxurious hotel in the country. This was the last straw.

3. A Paradigm Shift? Economics after the 25 July

Since 25 July, the international community has urged Kais Saied to "restore democracy"[48] and, continues to put pressure on the Bouden government to reach an agreement with the IMF, to ensure the continuity of the implementation of "structural reforms" in order to receive new funds to support the country.[49] These foreign currency loans will allow the country to avoid defaulting on its foreign debt payments, and

45 Youssef Cherif, "La Tunisie, un Champ d'Affrontement Entre les Pays du Golfe", orientxx.info, 12 April 2018, available at https://orientxxi.info/magazine/la-tunisie-un-champ-d-affrontement-entre-les-pays-du-golfe,2387.

46 Hichem Mechichi served as the President's adviser, then as Minister of Interior, and then he was appointed Head of Government.

47 Thierry Brésillon, "Tunisie: Affrontement au Sommet Entre Kais Saied et Hichem Mechichi", Febuary 2021, Middle East Eye, available at: https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/decryptages/tunisie-kais-saied-hichem-mechichi-crise-politique-ennahdha-qalb-tounes

48 Counsel of the EU, Press Release, 27 July 2021, available at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/07/27/tunisia-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu/pdf - See also a press release from the US Embassy in Tunisia, "Heads of Mission Joint Statement on Tunisia: 10 December 2021", available at https://tn.usembassy.gov/heads-of-mission-joint-statement-on-tunisia-10-december-2021/.

49 The Bouden economic programme of reform explicitly mentioned that mobilization of external financing is conditional on the conclusion of a programme with the IMF.

will allow it to continue buying products from abroad—wheat, oil, gas, medicines, industrial components, etc. In response to this, two divergent paths have emerged, that of the President and that of the government: First the President announced a political roadmap, for holding a referendum on the constitution and organizing new elections. On the economic front, he issued three decrees: One banning illegal speculative behaviour in a desperate attempt to curb runaway inflation. Saied also issued an amnesty law promoting socio-economic reparations by individuals who have committed economic crimes, benefiting the poorest regions, with the hope that the reinvested money will revive some economic dynamism in those areas. Saied also issued an ambiguous community enterprise law to encourage community-led local development initiatives. In addition, in several public statements, he has ordered an audit of external debt without declaring any intention to cancel it. While the political roadmap runs to 2022, the expected effects of these economic initiatives remain unclear and, at best, their expected tangible impact will not be felt immediately.

From the other side, Samir Saied, the Minister of Economy and Planning, who took up his office at the Ministry of Development, Investment and International Cooperation, published a schedule of sectoral consultations between ministries, trade unions, civil society, and professional actors, to prepare the 2023–25 development plan. Although Tunisia has a tradition of preparing five-year development plans, this is the first time in recent history that the government has worked on such a short-term agenda, which seems to be perfectly aligned with the country's debt repayment schedule, suggesting that this dialogue will be a formality, to pass reforms linked to those of international cooperation programmes, i.e. donors. At the same time, a team—including the same Minister of Economy and Planning, supported by the Governor of the Central Bank—has already presented the 2022-2025 reform programme to the IMF without a prior discussion with stakeholders, and presented only a summary of the document in a press conference to the public. The latter does not differ in any way from previous governments reforms: targeting primary surplus by 2026 to ensure debt amortization. It also maintains the same rhetoric of encouraging investment through the abolition of authorizations, to facilitate market access, and reproduces the same accounting approach, namely: reducing the budget deficit by reducing the public sector wage bill, abolishing subsidies, and replacing them with targeted transfers to the poorest. In other words, the stabilization of macroeconomic balances is only centred on the reduction of the budget deficit, with the aim of reaching primary surplus, which excludes from the outset the possibility of debt renegotiation, the burden of this adjustment will necessarily be borne by the taxpayers.

Even before the Russian war broke out, without any prior assessment of the impact of higher oil prices, or the impact of lifting subsidies on certain products, on the overall inflation, the Bouden government has decided to raise the prices of oil at the pump on a monthly basis, and the price of tobacco, sugar, and electricity, in order to be able to come to the negotiating table ready to renegotiate with the IMF.

Despite the President's critical discourse about rating agencies, and his firm rejection of foreign interference and prioritization of the 'the people's will', his government continues to promote the same arguments of 'necessary reforms' that Tunisia must implement. Only different expressions are used: It will not be a question of abolishing subsidies but of directing them towards the neediest, it will not be a question of privatizing public enterprises but of reviewing the role of the state in strategic sectors. Accounting ratios, such as the wage bill/GDP, are often used to highlight the unjustified weight of the public sector in the economy and its crowding out effect on investment. These are perfect arguments for the local bourgeoisie, who see public sector trade unionists as the rentiers of the state, whose power should be reduced in favor of the local private sector, just as the World Bank sees the families and professional groups that control entire sectors as the rentiers of the Tunisian economy, whose power should also be reduced in favour of the international private sector.

Since the GDP, the denominator of the wage bill ratio, has been very low for years, it has become very easy to recommend concrete measures to reduce this ratio by reducing the nominator, namely salaries, by freezing salaries or by retirement plans,[50] and the privatization of public enterprises—through an agency for the management of the state's assets. This accounting ratio does not distinguish between civil servants employed in the military, security forces, national education, or public health, who are salaried employees of these ministries and whose salaries are paid from the state budget, and employees of public enterprises whose salaries do not burden the state budget but are covered by the revenues of these enterprises.[51] Furthermore, an important part of the state's own budgetary resources comes from deductions at source on the salaries of civil servants, thus it cannot indefinitely reduce this wages mass at the risk of reducing its overall revenues, without replacing them with other taxes. In addition, with the precariousness of employment in the private sector,[52] public sector employees are often the only category of workers that can benefit from consumer loans or mortgages, and they are also often guarantors for their families for other forms of credit.

What needs to be considered is that the pressure to reduce the wage bill is not as neutral a technical accounting argument as it appears because this reduction will never affect the security apparatus.[53] Indeed, the Ministry of the Interior has seen the largest wage increase over the past decade, while the Ministry of Health's wage bill only increased in 2021—following additional hiring during the COVID-19 crisis—and then quickly returned to austerity from 2022. Thus, the burden of these austerity measures will ultimately be borne by the public education, public health, and public transport sectors, where the UGTT has strong and well-structured sectoral unions. It is only in this context that one can understand the IMF's demands for the government to reach an agreement with the UGTT on the reforms that Tunisia should carry out before coming to the table.

Although the UGTT has faced many challenges over the past decade, from internal divisions to managing national political crises and sectoral struggles, and despite its bureaucratic nature, the union has managed to play an important political role and has been able to maintain its power of social resistance, as it represents the faction with the greatest capacity to mobilize against those reforms that target its members and because of its ability to federate other interest groups. The union played along in times of crisis by accepting the freeze on wage increases for three years, accepting the change in the tax rate and an additional 1 percent contribution by workers to

50 A decree on early retirement has already been issued, and agreements on wage increases with the UGTT are blocked, in addition to an internal circular (n20) prohibiting the negotiation of ministries with the sectoral unions has been circulated.

51 According to reports published by the Ministry of Finance, the state-owned enterprises that face the highest financial difficulties are those that have experienced a sharp decline in external revenues due to external shocks such as the decline in tourism, the rise in oil prices, and the devaluation of the dinar. This has worsened their external debt sustainability.

52 Fadil Ali Riza, "What Democracy for Tunisian Workers", Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, February 2020, available at https://rosaluxna.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/What-Democracy-for-Tunisian-Workers.pdf.

53 Hakim Fekih, "Trop de Dépenses, Trop de Fonctionnaires' Deconstruire le Mythe" Nawaat, November 2020, available at https://nawaat.org/2020/11/08/trop-de-depenses-trop-de-fonctionnaires-deconstruire-le-mythe/.

social security funds, which is ultimately a distribution of the burden among the poorest. Except that the main claims with the government or with its private sector counterpart, the confederation of companies (UTICA), have mainly focused on catching up wages of workers by indexing them to the increase in inflation, as well as improving the social conditions of its members. These small successes achieved through the social struggles of the working class were wiped out by a more intense and rapid deterioration of the country's economic situation. In addition, the growing number of unemployed, non-unionized workers, and marginalized communities, as well as the disaffected youth of the political class, who do not find themselves in the UGTT's discourse focused on maintaining the 'privileges' of the public sector despite its deficiencies, are today a real challenge for conducting an inclusive dialogue under the aegis of the union. A second version of the 2013 national dialogue for which the union—within the quartet—was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, will no longer be accepted, especially since its role in driving a clear alternative economic vision for the country was sorely lacking during that dialogue.

Gambling on the agreement with the trade union federation to swallow the IMF reforms is to underestimate the power of nuisance of the sector-based unions and regional sections, and other categories such as farmers or the unemployed. Betting on the popularity of Kais said to pass these reforms through his Bouden government, is underestimating the social tensions that may result and will be further sustained by the parties that have been excluded from the political scene. This would increase the risk of entrenching the government in a security and increasingly authoritarian approach that would compromise any possibility of a return to the democratic process for Tunisia, and worsen a situation already very tense.

4. The Imminent Threat: Debt Crisis and Stagflation

It should be clear to all Tunisian policymakers that Tunisia's external position is a real and imminent threat to any democratic or political process. If bilateral and multilateral institutions continue to condition their loans on an IMF agreement, Tunisia will likely face a difficult trade-off between using its foreign exchange reserve to service its debt, or using it to continue importing wheat and oil, medicines, and other industrial components at increasingly high prices because of the Russian war in Ukraine.

Removing subsidies in local currency,[54] privatizing public enterprises, or removing barriers to investment in a non-selective manner, as recommended by international financial institutions, will not solve the current accounting problem which is the root of the unsustainability of the external debt. Current recommendations are only aimed at attracting FDI's, while FDI's are structurally low from decades of debt, and trade deficits are structurally growing. Even if an exceptional agreement with the IMF or with other creditors is reached, to preserve the capacity of the economy to continue its "normal functioning" in 2022[55] and to ensure the repayment of loan amortization or matured bonds on the international market, the threat will only be postponed to

54 Subsidies in Tunisia are generally intended for public enterprises or flourmills in order to maintain prices below cost. This is a public policy pursued by the authorities to maintain a purchasing power that can support the low level of remuneration of employees. The minimum guaranteed interprofessional wage for the 48-hour plan is USD 130 or 122 Euro per month. Although wheat/oil subsidies are considered a burden on the state budget, in reality it is at th end subsidizing foreign companies which profit more and more from low-cost labour.

55 Including the repayment of short-term credits guaranteed by the state for the import of cereals, oil, gas, etc.

the following years, when the level of servicing will be much higher than in 2022, especially with a balance of food and energy that continue to worsen.[56]

The IMF understands the risk of stagflation that hangs over Europe after the outbreak of the Russian war against Ukraine, and the sanctions taken by the EU, the USA, and other nations against Russia. The consequences in terms of increased prices of raw materials, oil, and gas, can in no way be controlled by the Tunisian government. Moreover, The Tunisian Central Bank can in no way reduce the impacts of rising rates by the central banks of northern countries. If this is coupled with austerity measures imposed on the budget, it can only worsen the situation in Tunisia: This will result in a decrease in production because imports will be more expensive, and therefore, will result in the quantity of exported goods and foreign exchange earnings falling. Foreign reserves will become increasingly scarce and will be allocated exclusively to essential goods such as wheat and medicines. With the continued drying up of external flows—due to the high costs of accessing international financial markets and the likely fall in labour remittances and FDIs—if the 'IMF first' clause is not removed by other bilateral and multilateral lenders, this situation will sooner or later push the country to default on its external debt. Tunisia is not the exception here, an international debt crisis is looming in most middle and low-income countries that are heavily dependent on wheat, oil, and gas imports.

The EU member states and the G7 countries which have important economic and security challenges with the countries of the region, have a vested interest in not worsening the social and economic situation of these countries. They should consider taking bold decisions under the German presidency, such as unilaterally cancelling bilateral debts. The meeting to be held in June may be a better opportunity to promote more concrete initiatives than those undertaken within the framework of the G20, which has dramatically failed to propose a comprehensive debt relief initiative including private creditors during 2020.

5. Outlook: How to Get Away from External and Internal Constraints

Tunisian decision-makers should consider a short-term strategy for avoiding the austerity trap and cope with external pressures, in parallel with reforms that should also lay the foundations for a medium and long-term strategy to tackle the roots of the debt problem.

The Russian war in Ukraine, and the 2008 financial crisis has shown the extent to which EU countries have different economic interests and different strategies. However, to what extent they would act as a coherent bloc vis-à-vis the countries of North Africa remains unclear. While Germany is trying to reduce its energy dependence on Russia, relying instead on other countries in North Africa and the Middle East, France, Spain, and Italy will face a new influx of immigrants from North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. In the absence of a radical adjustment of the Balance of Payments, workers/migrant remittances will remain the main sources of foreign

56 See IMF Tunisia staff report article IV consultation 2021, "Tunisia: Amortization and Interest Payments of Central Government Debt", 2020–36, page 58. See also Moez Hdidane, "Tunisie: Etat des Lieux Detaillé de la Dette Tunisienne sur le Marche Financier National et International et ses Échéanciers", Tustex, 28 March 2022, available at https://tinyurl.com/4nfn28ys

currency receipts for non-exporting oil countries, and will refrain these countries from cooperating on controlling migration. Moreover, European companies may find it difficult to operate in a social environment of heightened tensions and security threats south of the Mediterranean. As a bloc or as member states, Europe has a vested interest in offering a different approach to the countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean, rather than increasing their vulnerabilities. Recent release of the second tranche of EU 300 million of the MFA package promised during the COVID-19 crisis is a good first step. However, a push to reach a broader agreement with private creditors to allow debt resolution restructuring and a greater support to countries that will face the impacts of war is more than urgent.

If the timetable for multilateral negotiations is not adequate to the imminent threats facing Tunisia, and if the country does not have the political opportunity to declare a default, bilateral negotiations on debt cancellation should be engaged in with Germany, France, and Saudi Arabia—major bilateral creditors. This could be the most realistic option in today's changing geopolitical environment, and will eventually be politically and economically less costly for these countries than the consequences of inaction. Also, it is essential to strengthen strategic ties with Algeria to secure gas supplies and reduce energy bills, a bilateral currency swap arrangement between both central banks could be a solution to reduce dependence on foreign currency for gas buying. Increasing trade and investment with Libya, which is an important market for Tunisian agriculture and the building sector, is essential in the immediate future. Tunisia also has an interest, in the context of the high price of vegetable oils, to negotiate a unilateral removal of the limitation of annual quotas cleared for Tunisian olive oil and in particular bottled oil, especially in the prospect of a good harvest for 2022–23.

On the domestic front, it is essential to reverse the focus on external debt servicing in policymaking, to focus on a more resilient economy that ensures job creation, high value creation, and decent pay at home, which will ultimately encourage people not to migrate.

In other words, austerity measures will be the bullet that kills any recovery programme. Public spending is not a neutral issue, it is a strategic choice that must meet the objectives of food and energy sovereignty. It must meet the needs of Tunisians before prioritizing creditors. Public spending should project further into the future than the debt repayment cycle, and should meet a quantifiable and controllable objective in terms of welfare that would be generated and redistributed fairly.

Therefore, Tunisia should first support its agriculture and farmers, through large public spending programmes to secure the wheat and barley harvests. Recent relatively good levels of rainfall is a positive factor that will save this season's crop. However, because of persistent droughts and the accelerating climate catastrophe, it is not enough to ensure cereal sufficiency. Water resource management is essential, as well as improving storage capacity that should be managed locally, to reduce transportation costs.

It is also important to refrain from making inappropriate decisions that could increase prices locally. Stronger enforcement measures against speculation and dominant positions should be applied in a strict and non-abusive manner, avoiding a witch hunt atmosphere which could end up discouraging investment in storage and distribution activities. Managing resource waste, regulating intermediate professions such as agricultural transport, regulating intermediary profit margins in agricultural sectors, advanced planning on prices and quantities, and ensuring equitable distribution of water and fertilizers will guarantee the viability of the sectors and reduce internal inflationary pressures in the short and medium term. Spending to contain inflation will be more effective than CBT inefficiently raising the policy rate to contract credit and consumption without challenging the nature of this consumption. Public spending should also be used to strengthen Tunisia's ability to cope with internal shocks. Disaster management committees should be strengthened with all the logistical and financial means to anticipate and avoid disasters, such as diseases that affect crops, fires that can be caused by high temperatures, and floods. the actual scheme of tax breaks and subsidies for export crops that are water and energy resource-intensive should be replaced by a programme supporting sustainable agriculture in regions affected particularly by drought and climate change, this will limit vulnerability to external shocks, and reduce dependence on imported products. This is what directing subsidies to those who need them should mean.

Tax rebates, and credit planning should be targeted primarily at households and SMEs to reduce the tax burden on them, and to provide incentives for them to transform their consumption patterns and serve the ecological transformation. For example, investment subsidies provided by the Tunisian Investment Authority should be eligible for small businesses or community enterprises and households that wish to invest in renewable energy plants, rooftop solar panels, and waste recycling, rather than prioritizing large export-oriented investments in the competition for foreign currency. Tax incentives for capital-intensive activities for investors should target sectors with high employability and a small environmental footprint, and low hard currency outflows.

These are only a few examples of how to enhance the country's resilience and reduce its vulnerability. However, today it is also more than urgent to address the question of the valuing of work. The reassessment of salaries in all sectors of strategic importance, such as industrial, agricultural, environmental, ICT engineers, researchers, public sector doctors, health, and education workers, should be a public policy objective aimed at limiting the brain drain and providing a decent working environment, and to eliminate in-work poverty and gender inequality. Decent social security should be introduced as a constitutional right and banished from market logics. Here, public spending should not be calculated as a cost but as an investment.

Today, it is obvious to the majority of the political class and the international community that it is impossible to return to the pre 25 July situation. Kais Saied has concentrated all the power in his hands and in doing so, he has taken full responsibility for changing the rules of the game. Betting on his failure means taking the risk of putting the country back into the hands of the same political elite responsible for these failures. However, it is more than necessary to challenge the President's singular vision and top-down approach by forming a popular alliance of national organizations and progressive movements to redefine the rules of the game in favour of the majority of the population. The first condition for such an alliance to be effective is for the new constitution to enshrine social dialogue, and the UGTT could play a crucial role in achieving this goal. The second condition is that constitutional reforms strengthen human rights and freedoms, guarantee the independence of the judiciary, end impunity and the police state, and provide independent institutions with adequate means to play their role in making policymakers effectively accountable to their constituents. Constitutional weaknesses that we described should be addressed. The amendment of the political system should ensure a real allocation of powers and a clear balance between the executive and the legislative, and social dialogue should enable a paradigm shift in the economic model.

As an example of institutional reforms that could contribute to better planning and economic results: the Ministry of Economy and Planning should be a supra-ministerial body that coordinates actions between sovereign institutions, like the Central Bank, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministries of Agriculture, Industry, Energy and Environment, and Social Affairs, in order to coordinate effective economic policies. These policies should be based on economic studies and not only prospective but also ex-post evaluations, in order to assess the results of the implemented policies.

Monetary, fiscal, and sectoral policies must go hand in hand and be supported, where necessary, by international cooperation in areas that are in the country's strategic interest, such as research and development, technology transfer, investments for climate change adaptation and good resource management. Policy goals such as full employment or food and energy sovereignty, with quantitative indicators, should be among the goals for which governments, including the Central Bank, must be accountable for to elected representatives, and above all democratic sanction mechanisms must be provided so that popular sanctions do not take place in the streets.

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