

## **The Failed Revolution**

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The modern history of Tunisia can be divided into two major eras, pre-Jasmine Revolution (1970-2011) and post-Jasmine Revolution (2012-2021). The Jasmine Revolution occurred in 2011, overthrowing President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, and was a result of the Tunisian people demanding help with unemployment, increased press freedom and democratization of the government. Tunisians believed that these three things would increase their freedoms and quality of life, as seen through the lens of the Capability Theory. Capabilities, created by Amartya Sen, state that the development process should aim to give citizens the freedom and materials necessary for them to achieve the life which they desire. The Capability approach was used to create the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a series of 17 goals that provide indicators to determine if a country is on track for development and enhancing the capabilities of its citizens. Using the Capability Approach and SDG indicators this essay will argue that Tunisia has not been successful in increasing the capabilities of its citizens from 1970 to today as it has failed to address unemployment, lacks press freedom and lacks political participation.

### **Unemployment**

The first development indicator discussed is the unemployment rate concerning SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth. The measurement of the unemployment rate has been criticized for failing to recognize the employment differences in groups that may suffer from higher rates of unemployment including highly educated people and those living in rural areas. This section will separate the demographics to make fair comparisons. It will argue that their levels of unemployment have not changed significantly and their capabilities have not increased.

The unemployment rate in Tunisia was never much higher than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, but this number hid inequalities. Tunisia developed its textile, clothing and leather industries along the coastline, but neglected the interior (Ayadi & Mattoussi, 2016). Those that live in the interior had difficulty accessing jobs due to a lack of transportation infrastructure and information networks (Ayadi & Mattoussi, 2016). The development of the interior was neglected by President Ali's government, as it focused 65% of public investment in coastal areas (Ayadi & Mattoussi, 2016). Unemployment rates for educated Tunisians were also high due to a lack of jobs that require a university education, but a wealth of university graduates. This unemployment level for highly educated people mainly affected young people exiting the schooling system. In 2008 the unemployment rate for individuals below 30 years was 30%, twice the overall unemployment rate (Ayadi & Mattoussi, 2016). As is seen in Table 1, unemployment levels decreased among those who had the lowest level of education, primary school, but increased among those who had higher education (International Labour Organization, Unemployment with advanced education, 2021). This high level is because most development and new job creation were in manufacturing which did not require university education (Rama, 1998). This resulted in 50% of highly educated young Tunisians between the ages of 15 and 24 entering the informal workforce (Giorno, C et al. 2015). In 2008 as a response to the global recession, Tunisia implemented a stimulus package to increase employment. Rural-living and young highly educated Tunisians once again felt ignored as the focus was placed on manufacturing in coastal cities (El-Khawas, 2012). As their unemployment rates rose, they became frustrated leading to the Jasmine Revolution and their insistence that unemployment is addressed.

The Jasmine Revolution was orchestrated by frustrated rural and educated young people. It began as a rural revolt set off in 2010 by Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor who set himself on fire to protest his cart being taken away by police (El-Khawas, 2012). He had been forced into the informal sector due to high unemployment, nearly 30%, in his rural town of Sidi Bouzid (Fahim, 2011). This event was filmed and distributed across Tunisia sparking protests by young educated Tunisians experiencing high unemployment (El-Khawas, 2012). Although these protests were aimed at decreasing unemployment, both rural and educated Tunisians continued to be overrepresented. Some rural areas had rates of 37% unemployment (Giorno, C et al. 2015). As can be seen in Table 2 the unemployment rate did not drop after 2011 for those who were highly educated and this rate experienced little change in the years following the revolution (International Labour Organization, Unemployment with basic education, 2021). The unemployment rates of both rural and young educated Tunisians were not affected by the Jasmine Revolution.

The issue of unemployment has not been solved. Rural and educated young people are overrepresented in unemployment statistics. While the Jasmine Revolution's goal was to reduce unemployment, the government failed to address this problem sufficiently. Tunisians continue to struggle to find gainful, decent work and their capabilities have not improved.

**Table 1**

*Unemployment Rates In Tunisia By Highest Level of Education Achieved 1984-2008*

(International Labour Organization, Unemployment with advanced education, 2021)

|                  | 1984 | 1994 | 1999 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Primary School   | 22.4 | 19.2 | 18.9 | 15.7 | 15.7 | 15.2 | 13.5 | 12.3 |
| Secondary School | 11.7 | 13.0 | 16.4 | 14.7 | 14.9 | 14.3 | 15.4 | 15.3 |

|                  |     |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|------|
| Higher Education | 2.3 | 3.8 | 8.6 | 10.2 | 14.8 | 17.5 | 19.0 | 21.6 |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|------|

**Table 2**

*Unemployment Rates In Tunisia By Highest Level of Education Achieved 2011-2017*

(International Labour Organization, Unemployment with basic education, 2021)

|                    | 2011  | 2012  | 2013  | 2015  | 2016  | 2017  |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Advanced Education | 29.16 | 26.06 | 30.25 | 26.84 | 28.53 | 29.12 |
| Basic Education    | 12.41 | 12.16 | 9.91  | 8.85  | 8.61  | 8.31  |

### **Press Freedom**

The second development indicator discussed is the freedom of the press associated with SDG 16 - Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. To measure press freedom this essay will use data provided by Freedom House, gathered using a 100 point questionnaire. They assign a level of freedom and a value ranging from 0 to 100, 0 being the freest, and 100 being the least (Giannone, 2014). This section will discuss that while Freedom House has assigned a freer value to Tunisian media as institutionalized censorship decreased, the actual freedom has not increased, and neither have the capabilities of Tunisians.

The second goal of the Jasmine Revolution was to increase press freedom. Before the revolution in 2011 the press was rated Not Free by Freedom House, as seen in Table 3 (Refworld, 2021). When President Ali gained power in 1987 he attempted to liberalize the press to gain support of opposition parties (Stafford, 2017). He allowed previously banned opposition journals to publish, new journals to begin, and opposition parties to publish newspapers (Stafford, 2017). However in 1989 when these parties posed an election threat he restarted state censorship, preventing journalists from insulting the President or his policies, imprisoning

dissident political journalists and requiring permission to produce and import media (Allen, 2011). The Committee to Protect Journalists claimed that he “brought Tunisia's press to almost total submission through censorship and crude intimidation” (Allen, 2011). Journalists were prevented from producing content through censorship, and self-policed because of President Ali’s intimidation. The 2011 uprisings led to the belief that after President Ali’s government was overthrown, the press would be free from violence, censorship and intimidation. However, this was not the case.

The virtue of a free press is that it provides information about the community, politics, and world events to inform the public. While freedom of the press was lauded as a success of the revolution, the Tunisian media is still constrained. After the revolution, the Freedom House upgraded the press rating to partially free, as seen in Table 3 (Refworld, 2021). However, this measurement focuses on official censorship, not unofficial or press bias. Several of the largest newspapers were placed under government control after the revolution, and journalists feel that the government sees them as an organization that they control (Høigilt & Selvik, 2020). As a result, journalists often publicly support bills that violate the civil rights of citizens and allow the government to have more power (Høigilt & Selvik, 2020). These journalists grew up in an undemocratic culture and are hesitant to critically examine governmental decisions and default to supporting either the party in power or the opinions of other political parties (Høigilt & Selvik, 2020). Many journalists appear to support more authoritarian political leaders even if the strength of these leaders comes from depriving Tunisians of civil liberties.

While there have been decreases in state-sanctioned censorship since the Jasmine Revolution, censorship has continued in Tunisia in the form of government pressure and lack of critical examination. They are unable to fully educate the public or offer opinions, thus citizens

are not fully informed of current events. This lack of press freedom means that the revolution was unable to increase the capabilities of Tunisians.

### **Political Participation**

The third development indicator discussed is political participation as a part of SDG 16 - Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. Political participation is the ability and capacity of citizens to participate in governmental functions. This essay will use two measurements for this, opportunities for participation in the pre-revolutionary period and the ability of citizens to participate in the post-revolutionary period. These measures will demonstrate that citizens were structurally prevented from participation, but are now prevented through social factors. As they are still unable to meaningfully participate, the revolution did not increase the capabilities of Tunisians.

From independence in 1956 to 2011 Tunisia had two leaders, President Habib Bourguiba and President Ali. Neither established democracy, both running façade democracies that had elections, parliaments, and opposition parties, but afforded no opportunity for opposition (Sadiki, 2002). During President Ali's 23 year reign he held five elections, winning them all nearly unanimously after disqualifying most opposition parties (El-Khawas, 2012). Until 1994, he refused to give opposition parties a seat in the legislature, and relied on a winner takes all system (El-Khawas, 2012). This system meant apathetic political elites ruled without leaving room for Tunisians to participate in government (New Initiative for Middle East Peace [NIMEP], 2012). Tunisians were not equitably represented and failed to develop a democratic mindset, lacked the patience needed for democratic functions, had radical and unstructured political organizations, and lacked civic understanding of their rights and freedoms (NIMEP, 2012). There was a lack of

democratic clubs, civic groups and political education in communities which particularly affected people living in rural areas (NIMEP, 2012). While under authoritarian rule democratic culture was not fostered causing problems as the country transitioned into democracy.

After the Jasmine Revolution citizens lacked democratic skills needed to participate in political decisions. After the Jasmine Revolution, a proportional representation system was introduced to avoid a one-party state reforming (El-Khawas, 2012). This new system allowed for opposition parties and meaningful elections (El-Khawas, 2012). However, elections are not valuable unless citizens are politically aware. Political awareness is knowledge about political events such as campaigns, parties, elections, and major issues (Abdo-Katsipis, 2017). Without this citizens are unable to gainfully participate in government or politics. One study examined awareness of an upcoming election finding that 44% were aware with a lower rate of 35% for women (Abdo-Katsipis, 2017). There are three contributing factors to low political awareness, the aforementioned lack of democratic culture, low literacy rates, and distance from the capital. Literacy rates are 89.6% for men, and 74.2% for women meaning that some may struggle to read political information, be informed and vote (Abdo-Katsipis, 2017). Distance from the capital means that people are further from the government that affects them with less access to civil organizations (Abdo-Katsipis, 2017). It may also mean that they live in more traditional societies that discourage women from being politically active (Abdo-Katsipis, 2017). These factors culminate in a low level of political awareness and participation.

While there are no longer institutional political restraints on participation, lack of democratic culture, low literacy rates, and distance from the capital, limit participation. This lack of participation means that citizens are unable to communicate their needs to the government thus the capabilities of Tunisians have not increased as a result of the Jasmine revolution.



**Table 3***Press Freedom Scores From 2002-2017 (Refworld, 2021)*

|      | Total Score (0 = Most Free, 100 = Least Free) | Press Freedom Status |
|------|---|----------------------|
| 2002 | 73/100  | Not Free             |
| 2003 | 78/100  | Not Free             |
| 2004 | 80/100  | Not Free             |
| 2005 | 80/100  | Not Free             |
| 2006 | 83/100  | Not Free             |
| 2007 | 83/100  | Not Free             |
| 2008 | 81/100  | Not Free             |
| 2009 | 82/100  | Not Free             |
| 2010 | 85/100  | Not Free             |
| 2011 | 85/100  | Not Free             |
| 2012 | 54/100  | Partly Free          |
| 2013 | 52 / 100                                      | Partly Free          |
| 2014 | 48/ 100                                       | Partly Free          |
| 2015 | 53/100  | Partly Free          |
| 2016 | 52/100  | Partly Free          |
| 2017 | 51/100  | Partly Free          |

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Capabilities of Tunisians were not increased after the Revolution. Although the Jasmine Revolution set out to decrease unemployment, increase press freedom and increase political participation, this did not occur. Unemployment rates for rural and educated young people remained stagnant. While the press was no longer officially censored, they

self-censored and were influenced by the government. Finally, while citizens could participate in the government, the structure of Tunisian society prevented this. While the Jasmine revolution toppled President Ali's government, it did not achieve its long-term objectives as it did not increase the ability of individuals to live the lives they desire. While this revolution did not result in increased capabilities, it demonstrated that Tunisians were not willing to settle for poor governance, and through more pressure and education, they can increase their capabilities.

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