

Public Opinion Trends on the Democratic Experiment in Tunisia⁽¹⁾

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Abstract: This paper exhibits trends in public opinion in Tunisia regarding the Tunisian democratic experiment through data from the Arab Opinion Index published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, comparing the 2019-2020 poll to previous surveys. It also measures the popular reaction to decisions taken by Tunisian president Kais Saied during his coup to suspend the constitution and the mechanisms of democratic rule in the interest of seizing power. It seeks to uncover why Tunisians welcomed the president's decisions and whether that means that they have turned their backs to the democratic experiment they inaugurated ten years ago. Finally, the paper monitors a set of Arab public opinion indicators toward institutions of governance and the government's determination to resolve socioeconomic problems, which have intensified during the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

Arab Opinion Index

Tunisian Public Opinion

Kais Saied

Tunisian Democracy

Introduction

Tunisian president Kais Saied unilaterally issued a series of decisions that essentially represented a coup against the Tunisian political system established in the wake of the 2011 revolution. These successive decisions began on 25 July 2021 with the dismissal of the prime minister, suspension of parliament, waiving parliamentary immunity, and the obstruction of its legislative authority. Saied then took over the duties of legislative authority and the executive prerogatives of the presidency, in addition to the office of the Public Prosecutor. He dismissed some ministers and public officials in the Tunisian state who considered these measures unconstitutional or did not cooperate with him in their execution. These decisions were followed by later measures that entrenched his coup against the constitution and concentration of authority in his hands to complete his seizure of power. He oversaw the formation of a new government under the leadership of Najla Bouden without consulting

parliament. He continued with these successive measures that confirmed his grip on power and announced a popular referendum to be held on 25 July 2022, aiming to amend the constitution and hold legislative elections on 17 December 2022. This means that Saied suspended the constitution and led a gradual coup, through which he changed a democratic system into an authoritarian system.

Contrary to the expected popular rebuttal of these unconstitutional measures and running roughshod of the principles of the democratic regime, wide segments of Tunisian society welcomed these decisions. Several surveys conducted locally have indicated that most Tunisians support the president's actions, which begs the following question: does this favorable reception reflect Tunisian renouncement of the fledgling democratic experiment they established ten years ago, following a revolution that inspired the Arab nations and laid the groundwork for what

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² The Public Opinion Polling Unit at ACRPS conducts the Arab Opinion Index annual survey in order to gauge Arab public opinion around a number of political, cultural, and social topics.

would be called the Arab Spring revolutions? Based on the information available in the Arab Opinion

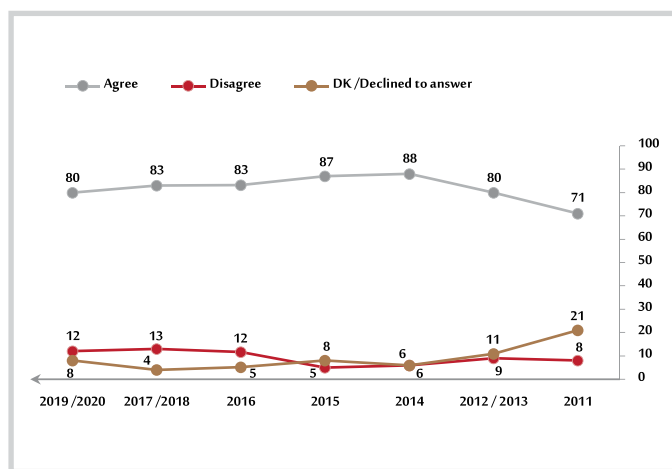
Index results, this paper seeks to identify the reasons behind the popular approval of these decisions.

Tunisians are Committed to Supporting Democracy

Based on the results of the successive Arab Opinion Index surveys in Tunisia, the popular reaction to Saied's measures do not reflect a negative assessment of democracy in Tunisian public opinion. Despite the anti-democratic nature of Saied's measures, there is near consensus among Tunisians, by 80% according to the 2019-2020 survey, that democracy is the best kind of political system despite its flaws. The results indicate that support for democracy increased actually since the first poll, at 71% in the 2011 survey, and 80% or more, as in the 2019-2020 survey, continue to support the democratic regime.

Figure 1

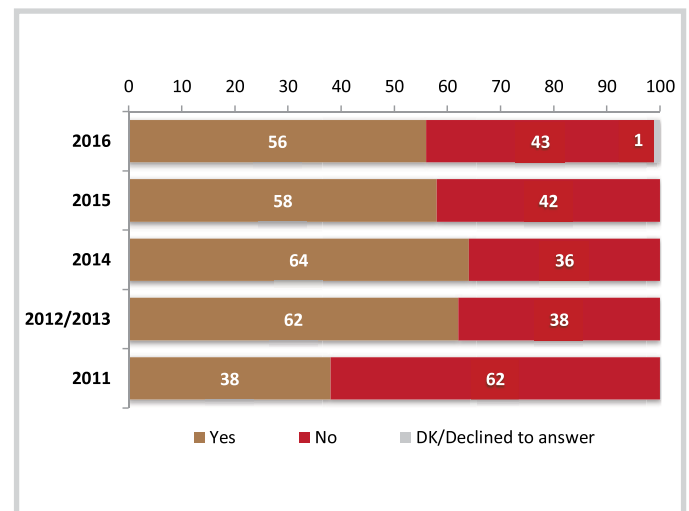
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Democracy has its own problems but remains better than other systems"?



Tunisian interaction with the legislative elections is also considered an important indicator of the extent of their satisfaction with the democratic political regime that was established in 2011, according to what survey results have indicated since that year. In the 2012-2013 survey, 62% of respondents indicated that they voted, which increased to 64% in the 2014 survey until settling between 56% and 58% in the 2015 and 2016 surveys respectively. Although the 2011 survey results, wherein respondents were asked whether they voted in the last legislative elections to occur before the Tunisian revolution, indicate that only 38% had voted, while 62% indicated that they had not.

Figure 2

Did you vote in the last legislative/parliamentary elections?



In the same context, Tunisian public opinion trends express growing trust in the elections. While 71% of Tunisians according to the 2011 survey indicated that the last elections to occur under the reign of Ben Ali were unfair, with only 3% indicating that they were "distinguished by their absolute integrity" or "impartial with some problems," 80% of respondents in the 2012-2013 survey assessed the national elections held in 2011 after the fall of the Ben Ali regime and the foundation of the democratic system as being characterized by integrity. The rate of this confidence remained elevated, demonstrated in the 2015 survey where 83% of Tunisians regarded the 2014 legislative elections as having been impartial. Tunisians' growing participation in elections and increased faith in the impartiality thereof year after year, in a highly polarized political context, indicates that they held onto democracy through verbal expression and electoral participation.

Tunisian political opinion and its evaluation of the Arab revolutions of 2011, especially the Tunisian revolution, is considered one of the important indicators of support for democracy and the specific position on the current political regime in Tunis following the Arab Spring revolutions. Tunisian

Figure 3
Generally speaking, how would you evaluate the integrity of the last legislative/parliamentary elections?

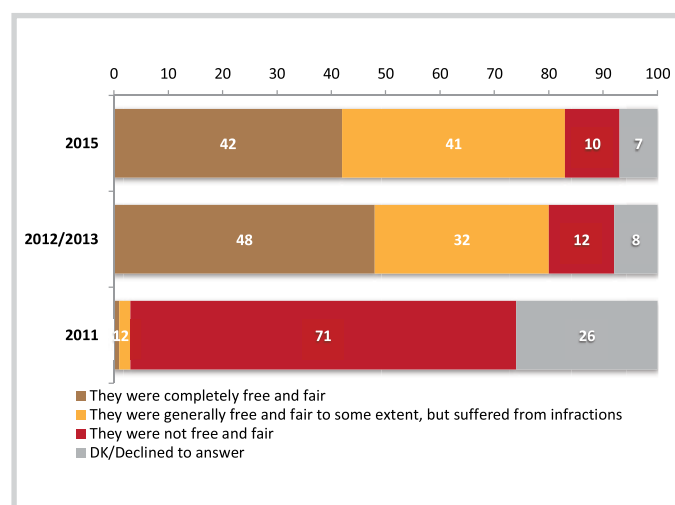


Figure 4
Returning to 2011, several Arab countries witnessed popular revolutions and protests where people came out to the streets for peaceful demonstrations and protests; what is your assessment of that?

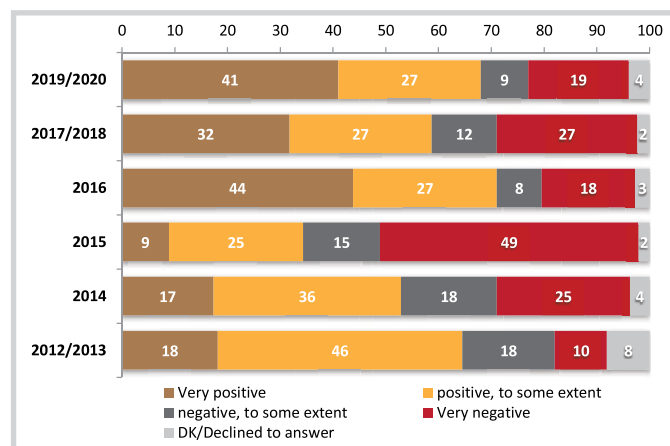


Table 1
Returning to the events of 2011 and not the years following that, what are the two most important explanations for the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings? (%)

Ranking of reasons	First reason			Second reason			Average		
	2016	2017-18	2019-20	2016	2017-18	2019-20	2016	2017-18	2019-20
Response to economic circumstances	38	45	36	17	19	21	27.5	31.8	28.7
Opposition to dictatorship	19	11	19	4	11	9	11.3	11.1	14.2
Against corruption	8	2	12	0	4	7	4.2	3.3	9.6
To end injustice	5	11	10	15	11	8	9.8	11.3	8.8
For the sake of political freedoms	11	7	5	5	4	7	8.0	5.6	6.1
To demand dignity	3	2	4	6	3	4	4.6	2.5	4.2
To achieve equality and justice	2	3	3	7	7	6	4.2	5.2	4.5
To demand democracy	2	6	2	4	3	6	3.2	4.5	3.9
Other Reasons	4	6	2	4	2	2	3.9	3.7	2.0
DK/ Declined to answer	8	7	7	0	0	0	3.8	3.0	3.5
No other choice	0	0	0	38	36	30	19.5	18.0	14.5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

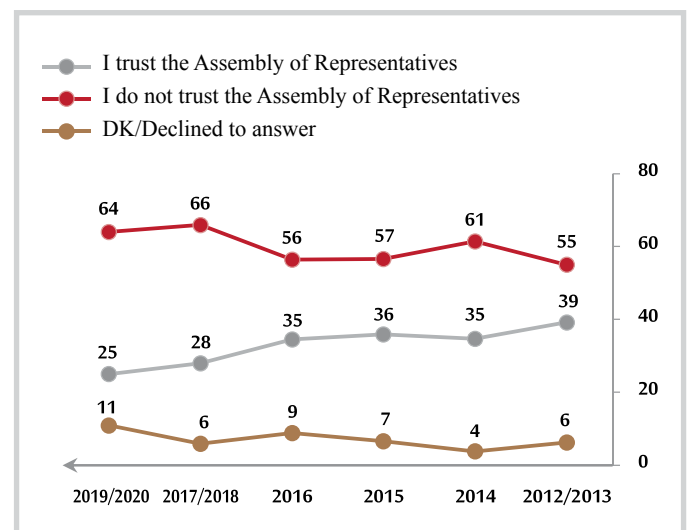
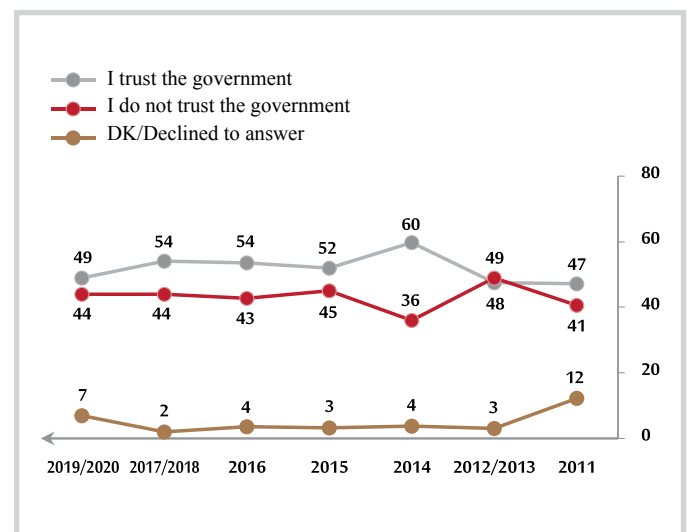
public opinion has increasingly evaluated the Arab Spring revolutions positively, fitting with the 68% of Tunisians in the 2019-2020 survey finding them generally positive; 41% of total respondents believed they are very positive. Tunisian public opinion remained conservative in its positive assessment of these revolutions except in the year 2015, where Arab public opinion of the revolutions' consequences was generally negative, corresponding with worsening conditions in many Arab countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya.

It is very telling to note that 46% of Tunisian public opinion still believes that reasons such as ending dictatorship and oppression, entrenching the principles of political freedoms, realizing the principles of dignity, and establishing democracy were the primary reasons for the Arab Spring revolutions. This percentage considers these revolutions positive because they achieved these ends, while 36% believed that these revolutions broke out as a result of poor economic conditions, while 12% indicated that they were to combat corruption.

Tunisian Public Opinion Trends toward Governing Institutions

Given, Tunisian support for a democratic system, perhaps the welcoming of the president's latest decisions is not caused by a rejection of the principle of the democratic regime and the mechanisms of the political system ushered in by the Tunisian revolution, but rather is linked to a critical position on the institutions of governance. The Index includes a set of questions that gauge the extent of citizens' confidence in state authorities in their country (legislative, executive, and judicial) in addition to questions evaluating institutions falling within the framework of the civil and military executive apparatus on one hand and institutions falling within the state framework in general, such as the political parties and civil society organizations, on the other. These general questions are considered important indicators of the assessment of these authorities and institutions and the degree to which they represent citizens' inclinations; moreover, it is useful to analyze them with other detailed questions relating to evaluating the performance of each institution. The results reveal that there is a crisis of confidence between Tunisian citizens and parliament that has taken hold over the past ten years. Around 60% of Tunisian citizens confirm a lack of confidence in the parliament (average of survey years), while the percentage of those who indicated they do not have confidence in the parliament was 64% according to the latest 2019-2020 survey.

Figure 5
Extent of Tunisians' trust in the Tunisian Assembly of Representatives and government over the years



The government enjoys greater confidence parliament, as the results show. Citizens' trust in the government saw positive breakthroughs in the first years of the democratic era, where 47% in the 2011 survey increased to 60% in the 2014 survey. This increase follows the political agreement that took place between Troika and opposition forces. In other words, public opinion distrusts the legislative authorities and is divided against itself in the context of confidence in the government.

As with confidence in the parliament and government, Tunisians do not trust political parties; 70% of them expressed their lack of confidence in the parties over the past ten years. In the latest 2019-2020 survey, only 20% of Tunisians indicated that they still have confidence in the political parties. It is worth noting that lack of confidence in the parties has increased year after year, from 60% in the 2011 survey to 72% and 71% in the 2017-2018 and 2019-2020 surveys respectively. It is important to indicate that the percentage of those who expressed great confidence in the political parties varied between 1%, in 2011, and 7% in the 2012-2013 survey settling at 4% in the latest 2019-2020 survey. This was accompanied by weak party membership, where the percentage of those indicating that they are affiliated with political parties was 4%, while 24% indicated that they are not associated with any party but said that there is a party or movement that represents them. These percentages remain in decline in a political system based on rival political movements, in addition to the election law that stipulates competition between electoral lists, not individual candidates. The decline of trust in the parties becomes clear by comparing the rates of confidence in the parties over the years with the rates of those who indicated they are affiliated with parties or that there are parties that represent them.

This critical or resentful attitude toward the political parties can be explained with several overlapping factors in their general context, to the effect that the partisan diversity in Tunisia was limited under a single party's dominance over the reins of power and the presence of dictatorial parties in the pre-revolution political scene. Partisan life, however, suffered from several key challenges that led to the decline of confidence in the parties, namely the polarization between political Islam movements and

secular movements that has taken various forms and brought the country into several consecutive crises. A dismissive discourse took hold at this time against the Islamic political movements, in addition to the fierce rivalry between the various political parties which at times appeared to have extended beyond competition over platforms into calling patriotism into doubt and exchanging accusations of corruption and obstructing the economy. This has led Tunisian citizens to consider these parties invested in their partisan interests at the country's expense and unconcerned with moving the country forward.

Figure 6
Extent of Tunisians' confidence in political parties over the years

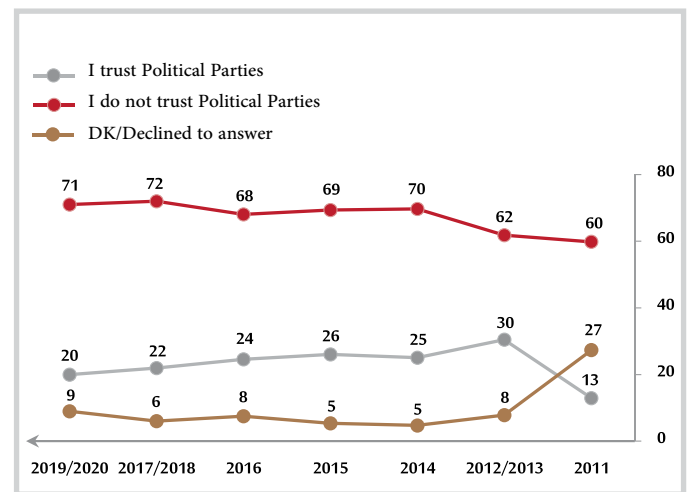
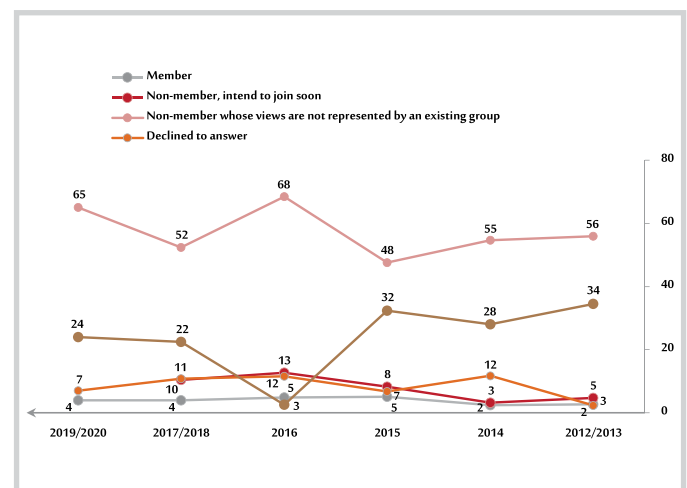


Figure 7
Tunisian public opinion trends on affiliation with political parties or the presence of political parties and movements that represent them over the years



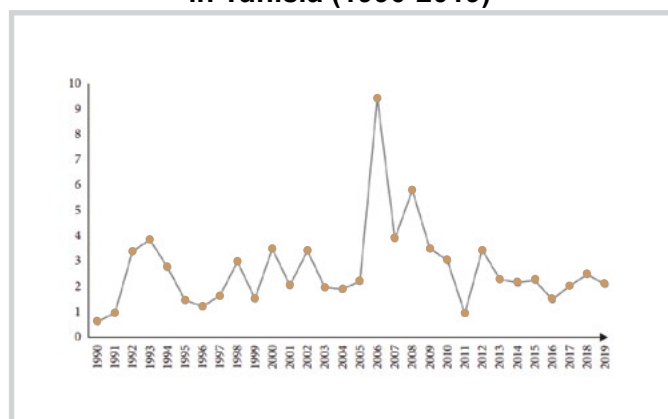
The Absent Economic Recovery and the Impression of Intense Corruption

The Tunisian economic reality is considered one of the central problematic aspects of the crisis of confidence between citizens and governing institutions. Tunisians were expecting an economic revival coming in the wake of the revolution, especially because the revolution would eliminate the corruption that had long depleted the country's funds. The reality, however, was different; the decline in foreign direct investments (FDI) as part of the gross domestic product (GDP) in post-revolution Tunisia had a clear negative impact on development and employment rates and the state's ability to meet the expectations of Tunisian citizens after the revolution. Protests and labour strikes spread as a result which in turn exacerbated insecurity and investor fears. Tunisia fell into this vicious cycle that threatens the economy, the government's plans for human development, and, perhaps, democracy itself.⁽³⁾

As the figures show, development rates in the GDP were negative in 2011, and rates in the ten years after the revolution were lower than those recorded in the ten years prior to it. Though the economic future of Tunisia appeared promising from the perspective of the international financial institutions that predicted this growth and with the gradual decline of the income gap between regions, the decline in the level of international investments, as well as international aid, did not permit that, in addition to the tourism sector in Tunisia being strongly affected by terrorist attacks. The continuance of the Libyan crisis also had a negative effect given that Libya used to offer job opportunities to Tunisians and the Libyan market was a major consumer of Tunisian services.

As soon as Tunisia recovered from this setback, its economy was impacted by the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), in addition to the GDP recording negative development in 2020 specifically. The predictions desired by the World Bank were not realized, and the problems of slow economic development, the unjust distribution of income and regional development, and the spread of unemployment represent a threat to the strengthening of democracy in Tunisia.⁽⁴⁾

Figure 8
Foreign direct investment rate as share of GDP in Tunisia (1990-2019)



Source: Azmi Bishara, *Understanding Revolutions: Opening Acts in Tunisia* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2021), pp. 265-266.

Table 2
Average annual GDP growth rate (2008-2020) (%)

Avg. annual growth	Year
4.24	2008
3.04	2009
3.51	2010
-1.92	2011
4.00	2012
2.88	2013
2.97	2014
1.19	2015
1.16	2016
1.92	2017
2.66	2018
1.04	2019
-2.1	2020 (Q1)
-21.7	2020 (Q2)
-6.0	2020 (Q3)

Source: Azmi Bishara, *Understanding Revolutions: Opening Acts in Tunisia* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2021), pp. 265-266.

3 Azmi Bishara, *Understanding Revolutions: Opening Acts in Tunisia* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021), pp. 265-266.

4 Ibid., pp. 280-281.

The survey results indicate worrisome economic and political conditions in Tunisia, as 80% of Tunisians consider the economic situation in Tunisia to have been bad or very bad during the past ten years. The proportion of Tunisians who rate the economic situation as bad or very bad has never dipped below 80% in any AOI survey.

Tunisian public opinion still reflects a negative image of the economic circumstances of respondents' families, as is shown clearly in comparison with the results of the 2019-2020 survey where the rate of those who said "household income covers our expenditures and does not allow us to save" increased from 31% in the 2012-2013 survey to 40% in the 2019-2020 survey. Furthermore, the rate of those who said "household income does not cover our expenditures and we face difficulties in meeting our needs" increased from 37% in the 2011 survey to 49% in the 2019-2020 survey.

When the question about the greatest problem facing Tunisia was posed, economic issues dominated respondents' answers; in the first place as the greatest problem is poor economic conditions, then unemployment, then price increases and high cost of living. This order has not changed since the

2011 survey, with these three issues alternating in priority. As shown in Table (3), the rate of Tunisians who consider poor economic conditions the greatest problem facing Tunisia grew from 13.8% in the 2011 survey and 9.3% in the 2012-2013 survey to 31.3% in the 2016 survey and 30% in the 2019-2020 survey. The rate of those who consider unemployment the greatest problem facing Tunisia ranged from 16.5% at the lowest to 33.8% at the highest in the past ten years.

Figure 9
Respondents' classification of their household income

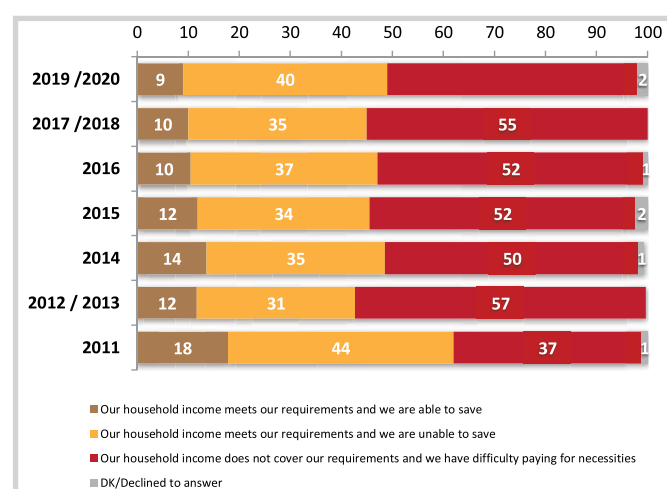
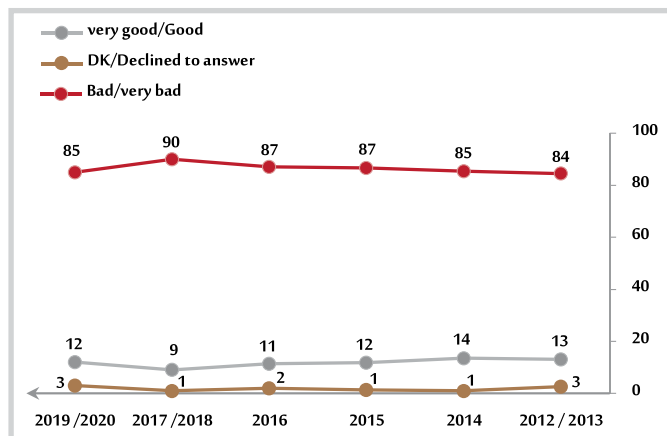


Table 3
In your opinion, what is the most important challenge facing your home country today?

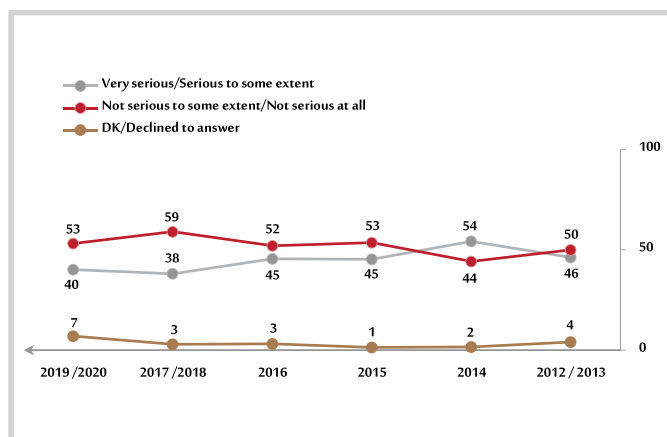
	2011	2019-2020
Negative economic conditions	13.8	30.0
Unemployment	20.4	19.7
Rising prices and high cost of living	0.9	15.8
Absence of safety and security (and threat of terrorism)	19.9	8.3
Poverty and declining standard of living	4.0	6.5
Administrative and fiscal corruption	3.3	3.3
Social issues	2.6	2.9
Lack of political stability	20.1	2.8
Government and its policies	5.9	2.4
Weakness of public services	0.8	2.0
External threats / foreign policy	3.4	0.2
Regional / sectarian / ethnic / tribal divisions	0.9	0.0
Other	1.0	0.2
DK/ Declined to answer	3.0	5.2
There are no problems	-	0.8
Total	100	100

Figure 10
Tunisian respondents' evaluation of the economic situation in Tunisia



Was the government serious about finding a solution to the country's biggest problems? According to most Tunisians, no. With the exception of the 2012/13 and 2014 surveys, the percentage of Tunisians who believe the government is not serious about solving these problems was more than 50%. After the 2014 poll, in which the percentage of those who believed that the government was not serious about solving the problems facing Tunisia dropped to 44%, the belief began to escalate again, reaching 59% in the 2017/2018 poll, before slightly declining to 53% in the 2019/2020 poll.

Figure 11
Trends of Tunisian public opinion toward government seriousness in working to solve the problems presented as the most important facing Tunisia



Added to the miserable economic and political situation, an impression of widespread fiscal and administrative corruption, has proliferated since 2011.

More than 90% of Tunisians believe that corruption is widespread at least to some extent, with the proportion who believe that corruption is rampant much greater than those who believed that it is widespread to an extent. For example, 83% of Tunisian respondents stated that corruption is widespread in the 2019/2020 survey, compared to 79% in 2017/2018. Regardless of whether fiscal and administrative corruption is widespread to the degree expressed by popular opinion, the continued and growing belief in its existence indicates that it has become a firm conviction for the Tunisian public, and that they consider politicians to be the most corrupt segment of society, followed by businessmen. It is important to note that 40% of Tunisians also believe that the government is not serious about fighting corruption.

Figure 12
In your opinion, how widespread is financial and administrative corruption in your home country?

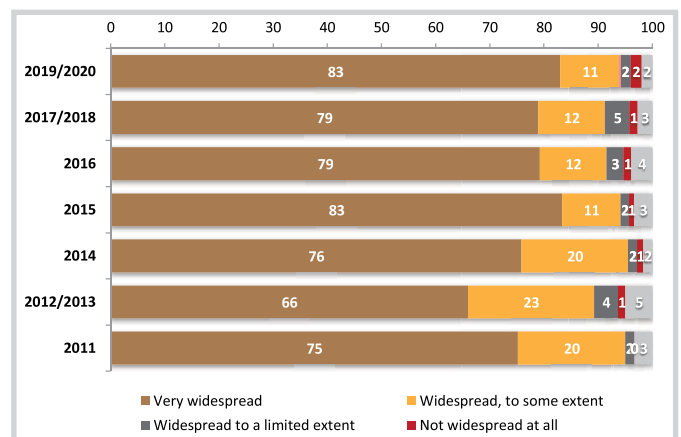


Table 4
Which of the following groups contributes most to the spread of corruption in your country?

Group	Percentage
Politicians	43
Businessmen	34
Senior employees	6
Media professionals / media	4
Mayors	4
Junior employees	2
Others	1
DK/ Declined to answer	6
No other choice	-
Total	100

The Repercussions of the Global Pandemic

Despite taking extremely strict measures to confront the COVID-19 pandemic in the first three months, according to the stringency scale,⁽⁵⁾ earning respect and appreciation from Tunisian popular opinion, the Tunisian government slackened dramatically from early June 2020. It adopted several policies that exacerbated the public health crisis in addition to the existing structural economic problems burdening the public and brewing discontent.

These errors can be summarized in two parts: First, the government was late to obtain vaccines, as Tunisia

received the first batch of the vaccine on 17 March 2021 through the COVAX initiative, which contributed to the sentiment that the government had exacerbated the crisis through its inadequate response. Second, the government mis-managed the vaccination process, slowing its pace, with the number of vaccine recipients as of May 2021 standing at less than 1%. These policies rendered the public health system ineffective in the face of full and under-equipped hospitals and slashed public confidence in the government.

Conclusion

This paper has presented Tunisian attitudes towards democracy, which reflect a positive and constant approval of the revolutions in both Tunisia and the wider Arab region, demonstrating that the popular approval of the president's decisions did not represent a decline in Tunisian support for democratic principles.

The economic crisis that has gripped the country over the past ten years combined with unmet expectations that the Tunisian revolution would result in economic improvement is reflected in popular discontent. This economic decline, exacerbated by low foreign investment and the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in anger directed towards the main governing institution, the parliament, and the government, with political parties bearing much of the popular backlash.

Perhaps partisan bickering and the emergence of various political currents and populist personalities, including Kais Saied, have perpetuated a discourse that blames parties and an impression that the ruling or participating political elite is corrupt. The low turnout in the 2019 legislative elections is an indication that the elections are believed to be useless in effecting real change. Welcoming the president's decisions in large part reflects a soft popular rejection of the institutions and symbols of governance over the past ten years, responding to their lack of achievement, not a rejection of the democratic political system. Continuing support for the president thus depends on his ability to execute policies to improve the economic conditions of the average Tunisian citizen.

References

Bishara, Azmi. *Understanding Revolutions: Opening Acts in Tunisia*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021.

⁵ An indicator to classify measures taken by governments to limit the spread of the virus, such as closing schools, enforcing quarantine, etc.