

## Tunisia: Democracy in transition

Tunisia has taken key steps toward democracy since its Jasmine Revolution, and has so far avoided the violent chaos and/or return to authoritarian government seen in other Arab Spring countries. Tunisians adopted a new constitution in January 2014 and held national elections between October and December 2014, marking the completion of a four-year transition period.

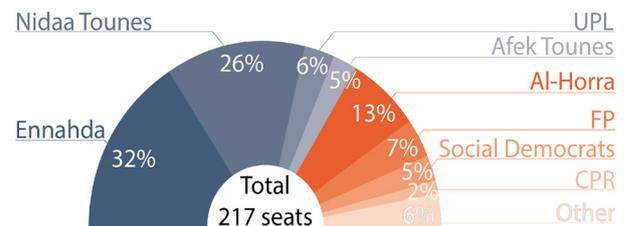
### The Jasmine Revolution: causes and effects

The Arab Spring, which triggered a chain of reactions across most of the Arab world, began in Tunisia on 17 December 2010. Anti-government protests broke out in Tunisia's interior after a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in an apparent protest against state repression and a lack of economic opportunities. Protests spread to neighbouring towns and eventually to the capital, Tunis, and to wealthy coastal communities associated with the ruling elite. Police opened fire on protesters and made sweeping arrests; an estimated 338 people were killed. The army, however, reportedly refused an order to use force against demonstrations. On 14 January 2011, [President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali](#), in power since 1987, fled the country for Saudi Arabia, where he remains to this day.

The protests constituted [civil resistance](#) against [illiberal politics](#), [illicit practices](#), [poverty](#) and [unemployment](#), affecting [young people](#) in particular. The success of the uprising in Tunisia, later referred to in the media as the [Jasmine Revolution](#), inspired a wave of similar protests throughout the Middle East and North Africa. In the weeks following the uprising in Tunisia, countries including [Egypt](#), [Jordan](#), [Algeria](#), [Yemen](#), [Iran](#), [Bahrain](#), [Syria](#) and [Libya](#) experienced significant mass demonstrations demanding political change. Protestors in Tunisia [pushed](#) the transitional government to abolish the [Democratic Constitutional Rally](#) (RCD), the political party that had [dominated](#) politics since independence in 1956, and demanded leadership carry out an array of reforms. In October 2011, the transitional government held relatively free and fair [elections](#) to the National Constituent Assembly, which was tasked with drafting a new constitution. The vote was [won](#) by the moderate [Islamist Ennahda](#) party by a wide margin. Soon after, however, many in the secular opposition [felt](#) their views on constitutional reform were being disregarded.

[Consensus](#) was eventually possible, partly thanks to an inclusive national dialogue brokered by the Nobel-prize winning '[quartet](#)' – an alliance of various civil society groups. The National Constituent Assembly [adopted](#) the new landmark constitution for the country on 27 January 2014. The 2014

[constitution](#) established a unicameral legislative structure known as the [Assembly of the Representatives of the People](#) (*Majlis Nuwaab a-shaab*). The secularist party [Nidaa Tounes](#) won the largest block of parliamentary seats in the [2014 elections](#) and its founder, [Caïd Essebsi](#), was elected president. The government was approved by parliament on 4 February 2015, but was then [reshuffled](#) in January 2016.



Breakdown of seats based on the outcome of the 2014 elections and 2016 reshuffle following the departure of 31 Nidaa Tounes deputies late in 2015.

Data source: [Marsad Majiles](#), 2016.

NB: the total percentage exceeds 100% due to rounding.

### The current situation in Tunisia

Democratic transition in post-Ben Ali Tunisia has [achieved many objectives](#); foremost being the establishment of a multiparty tradition. Vibrant political activity has emerged and this was reflected in a high electoral turnout in both 2011 and 2014, with partisanship dispersed among many political parties with various socioeconomic and political agendas. The absence of a majority-seat winning party has necessitated



the formation of a coalition government, requiring concession among contending and competing parties. On the other hand, since the revolution, Tunisia's [economy](#) has suffered across multiple sectors, while political instability, decreased outside investment, and security threats have complicated the recovery. Following the terrorist attacks of 2015 and 2016, Tunisia, greatly affected by [instability](#) in the surrounding regions, currently faces serious [political, security and economic challenges](#). The risk of terrorist attacks persists. Levels of tourism, which, together with related sectors, accounts for 15% of Tunisia's GNP, have [fallen significantly](#). The [unemployment rate](#) is higher than before the 2011 revolution. Although since 2011 Tunisia has received substantial political, financial and technical assistance from the EU, stronger trade relations with the EU could benefit the Tunisian economy. This in turn might help Tunisia to overcome the major challenges to political reform that it still faces. These include the need to create jobs, control inflation and the deficit, reform the Ministries of Justice and the Interior – which are still viewed as bastions of repression, attract foreign direct investment, combat corruption and public inefficiency, and tackle migration, climate change and terrorism. The turmoil in Libya, meanwhile, is both an economic and a security concern for Tunisian officials. In the face of these challenges, the country's elected government has pursued policies aimed at supporting economic activity while also seeking to address long-standing socioeconomic grievances expressed during the uprisings. These five years have marked the first steps towards democracy. Civil society has awakened and political change has also been demonstrated at the level of free speech. Consensus building is still a major difficulty across the political spectrum. Safeguarding the newly ratified constitution, and ensuring that all parties accept its ramifications without reserving the right to overturn its provisions, is clearly another immediate and fundamental challenge.

### The European Union's response

Tunisia and the EU are committed to a legally binding [association agreement](#). The EU cooperates with Tunisia in the framework of [European Neighbourhood Policy \(ENP\)](#) and the [2013-2017 EU-Tunisia Action Plan for privileged partnership](#), for which a political agreement was reached in April 2014. The [European Neighbourhood Instrument](#) (ENI) is the key EU financial instrument for EU cooperation with Tunisia for the period 2014-2020. In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution the [EU responded](#) rapidly to the evolving economic and political challenges as it was essential for the EU to accompany the Tunisian transition process. The EU has also [increased its financial support](#) to Tunisia to contribute to the reduction of socio-economic inequalities. Since 2011 Tunisia has benefited from over [€1 billion](#) in grants through the ENI (principally through the [SPRING programme](#) and afterwards the [Umbrella programme funds](#)) and other EU external cooperation instruments. Tunisia has also received over €1.3 billion in loans from the European Investment Bank. In addition, a first instalment of [macro-financial assistance](#) (MFA-I) was approved in May 2014 and, in August 2015, the European Commission offered to provide Tunisia with a second MFA payment amounting to a maximum of €500 million. This assistance should complement a new IMF programme, which is currently still under negotiation. The opening of negotiations for a [Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement](#) in October 2015 is a key element of the EU's commitment to support democratic consolidation. Moreover, as an exceptional measure to bring short-term economic benefits to Tunisia, the EU has offered additional temporary access for Tunisian [olive oil](#) to the EU market. Since 2011 the role of [Tunisian civil society](#) has become more prominent and several initiatives have been funded to strengthen capacity building and to promote dialogue. The EU recently co-funded the creation of the [Jamaity.org](#) platform, bringing together more than 1 600 Tunisian civil society organisations on a single online platform, which provides information on projects, resources, events, funding opportunities, documents and tools.

### Outlook for Tunisia

Tunisia is mentioned as a priority country in the EP's Comprehensive Democracy Support Approach (CDSA), a programme managed by the [Democracy and Elections Actions Unit \(DEAC\)](#) to offer support to Tunisia and to help the Tunisian Parliament with capacity-building. In its resolutions of [23 October 2013](#), [9 July 2015](#), [7 October 2015](#) and [25 February 2016](#), the Parliament sets out multiple priority areas for action. Various fact-finding missions by MEPs to Tunisia as well as visits by Tunisian parliamentarians to the European Parliament have taken place. An own-initiative report is currently being prepared by the EP's committee on Foreign Affairs (Rapporteur: Fabio Massimo Castaldo, EFDD, Italy) on [EU relations with Tunisia in the current regional context](#) against the backdrop of relations with the countries of the Maghreb.