

## Tunisia: Progress achieved and prospects for the social dimension

In 2011, following the outbreak of protests – known as the Jasmine Revolution – which toppled President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime, Tunisia embarked on a path to democratic transition and socio-economic transformation, emulating the reforms and governance practices of established liberal democracies. Nearly eight years on, the country has made significant progress, including in the social sphere, and has emerged as a regional leader in institutional reform. However, to avoid jeopardising the stability and progress achieved, further reforms are needed.

### Association and peaceful assembly

A post-revolution decree governing civil society organisations – [Decree No 88](#) of 24 September 2011 – marked a clear break with the past, replacing Law No 154 and standing out as one of the most civil society-enabling laws in the Middle East and North Africa. The decree introduced broad protection for the exercise of freedom of association and support for a free and independent civil society sector, including provisions for public funding and prohibitions on state interference in organisations' operations. However, the decree has not yet been fully implemented in practice. Civil society organisations continue to face [obstacles](#) in their everyday operations and activities, particularly when it comes to mobilising support or sustaining a long-standing [platform](#) for dialogue, such as Jamaity. The right to assemble peacefully or protest remains governed by a restrictive law dating back to 1969, which gives the government broad discretion to break up public gatherings. Moreover, the state of emergency under which Tunisia has been living since 2015 has made it possible to limit individuals' and organisations' civic freedoms further. Under the emergency law, the government can, among other things, impose curfews and ban public protests altogether without a court order.

### Access to rights

Tunisia has made a lot of progress in giving its population access to economic, social and cultural rights, particularly with regard to education, where standards have improved. However, the country still faces a number of challenges, such as high youth unemployment and low participation of women in the labour force. The [Optional Protocol](#) to the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has not yet been ratified, although several demonstrations have called for its adoption. Tunisia has also yet to ratify the ILO [Domestic Workers Convention](#), which provides for the 'right to a healthy and safe working environment' (Article 13), among other things. Development of the health and sanitation sectors is also lagging behind, with the [sanitation system](#) facing severe limitations in rural areas. There, only a few hygiene and sanitation centres are in operation under the management of the [Groupement de Développement Agricole](#).

### The role of trade unions

Apart from the crucial role trade unions and the [syndicaliste quartet](#) have played in Tunisia's democratic transition – a role that earned the quartet the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 – they have also helped spur social transformation. One of the main players, the Tunisian General Labour Union ([UGTT](#)), was a key sponsor of [Tunisia's independence](#) in 1956 and enjoyed an unprecedented normative influence in society even during authoritarian times. Today, the UGTT's strong representation in the workforce, powerful grassroots network and cross-sectorial organisation allow it to challenge potentially undesirable government policies. Alongside other trade unions, it also advances labour and civil rights through societal discourse and deliberative platforms such as the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights ([FTDES](#)).



## Youth unemployment

Driven by the social inequality they faced, young Tunisians were at the forefront of the uprising, triggered by the self-immolation of 26-year-old street merchant, [Mohamed Bouazizi](#) in December 2010 and later dubbed the Jasmine Revolution. These dramatic events in turn led to the Arab Spring – the revolutionary wave that swept across the entire Middle East and North Africa.

The liberalisation of the Tunisian economy, which started in the 1980s and accelerated under President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, severely disrupted real wages and [employment security](#), including that of young people; with youth unemployment rising steeply. Tunisia's emergence as an offshore destination and the introduction of flexible and interim contracts rendered its economy ever more attractive to foreign creditors and investors, thereby reinforcing the impression of its extraordinary (albeit artificially induced) performance. However, this success came at the cost of youth marginalisation and devaluation of youth labour, which, because it was most pronounced in the countryside, only further intensified the urban-rural divide. The provinces with the highest youth unemployment rates – Gafsa, Skhira, Ben Gardane and Sidi Bouzit – were at the epicentre of the [2010 revolution](#) and its [2008 precursor](#).

Since 2011, given the fact that 28 % of [Tunisians](#) are between 15 and 29 years of age and that [youth unemployment](#) has risen from 13% to 19 % (and to as much as 44 % among highly educated youth), achieving tangible improvement has been difficult. A pro-market policy similar to that of the past is being pursued, to fulfil the conditions imposed by the IMF. To meet employers' demands and labour market needs, there has been an increase in professional training and youth entrepreneurship programmes. Recently, [Jamaity](#) and the EU launched [Jeun'experts](#), an interactive platform enabling young professionals to connect and network with more established experts in order to get a head start on the job market. Apart from the EU, Tunisia receives financial support for its youth employment schemes through alternative channels, including the Fonds d'Amitié Tuniso-Qatari foundation.

## Situation of women

Although Tunisian women have enjoyed a progressive family planning system ([CPS](#)) since the 1950s, divorce and single motherhood are still stigmatised. To reinforce women's rights further, in July 2017 the government adopted a [law](#) criminalising violence committed within the family, sexual harassment in public spaces, employment of children as domestic workers and gender-based pay discrimination. Yet another important [change](#) in 2017 involved amending a 1973 law prohibiting Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men. While this was also a step towards reforming women's inheritance rights, transposition has been rather slow.

In terms of social mobility, women face harsher challenges than men. Although [two in three](#) women hold a post-secondary diploma, women comprise only 26 % of the [active workforce](#) and hold only 11.7 % of corporate leadership posts. On average, women earn 14.6% less than men. [Rural women](#) are in the most precarious position: not only is their [access to education](#) relatively poor, sometimes due to distances, but it is also frowned upon by their communities. Because they are unskilled, they can only find low-paid menial [jobs in agriculture](#) (which employs 43 % of rural female workers) and textiles; both sectors are extremely dependent on global demand and foreign direct investment, and offer very little job security. According to the UGTT, female agriculture workers earn half of what their male co-workers take home. Overall, Tunisia is facing a two-dimensional gender issue of overqualified female graduates and exploited rural workers constrained by archetypal roles, a demographic complication that could potentially have a destabilising impact on the country in the years to come, given the its impressive economic growth.

Following the Jasmine Revolution, the European Parliament assigned Tunisia **priority country** status, entitling it to a [comprehensive democracy support approach](#) to help build the capacity of its parliament. Tunisia's subsequent progress has prompted some to call it the southern equivalent of Ukraine. EU-Tunisia political dialogue has increased significantly since the revolution, with regular high-level exchanges and visits. The [EU-Tunisia Joint Parliamentary Committee](#) was established in 2016; its third session took place on the occasion of the [Tunisian week](#) in the European Parliament, from 2 to 5 May 2017. The Parliament is committed to fostering Tunisian youth engagement through programmes such as the Young Political Leaders and Erasmus+. The Parliament praises the recent legislative advancement on women's rights but appeals for a swifter and more tangible implementation. It furthermore calls for reinforcing the parliamentary aspect in the partnership with Tunisia by making inter-parliamentary meetings more effective, starting already with the [next one](#), due to take place in December 2017 in Strasbourg.