

University of Ottawa  
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**Arab Spring and Social Media: the Social, Economic and Governance Issues**  
**Driving Revolutions: The Case of Tunisia**

by

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A major research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MA  
degree in Globalization and International Development

August 2015

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## Abstract

Many scholars have given a prominence and importance to the role played by Social media in Arab Spring. The purpose of this research, A Case Study of Tunisia, is to identify and discuss the causes (other than the usage of social media) of the Tunisian revolution (December 2010 – January 2011) mainly through an analysis of the social, economic and political conditions in Tunisia in the pre-revolutionary period. Given Tunisia's human development index (HDI) showing positive movements towards socio-economic growth and stability, this paper explores the indicators of economic and social well-being that are not included in the HDI: the state of unemployment, the nature of the political regime, the state of corruption, the state of rule of law and order, and the state of freedom of thoughts and expression.

The study methodology consisted of collecting and analyzing statistics from the UNDP, World Bank, Amnesty International, and other official web sites. Secondary scholarly sources were also used to better understand and analyze economic, social and governance issues in Tunisia before and during the Arab Spring.

This study concluded that the main reasons for the Tunisian uprising, beyond the role played by social media and regardless of the HDI statistics of increasing social and economic stability, are: unemployment, the imbalances in regional development, the lack of opportunities for educated young people, corruption, autocratic and dictatorial rule, and lack of freedom of expression.

**Key Words:** Arab Spring, HDI, Unemployment, Corruption, Freedom

# Acknowledgments

This paper is the final deliverable in my pursuit of a post-graduate certificate in the Globalisations and International Development program. It has been an endeavour that has facilitated my intellectual, professional and personal growth.

After several years of studies I have been able to acquire new knowledge and insights on various topics taught in the School of International Development at the University of Ottawa. Specifically, I have learned a lot about economic, social and political conditions in Tunisia before and during the Arab Spring.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all professors, administrators, and colleagues that have made this program of study a pleasure to undertake and a successful venture. I am grateful to my family members for their encouragement and support throughout. A special 'thank you' to Professor Nipa Banerjee who has been a constant support, an excellent source of knowledge, a very helpful supervisor and a wonderful individual to work with.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Tunisia, located in Northern Africa between Algeria and Libya and bordering the Mediterranean Sea, is one of the countries involved in a revolution- the Arab Spring that began in late 2010 in North Africa and the Middle East.

According to the World Bank web site (2012), the Tunisian population is 10,835,873 and is young (the median age is 31). The literacy rate (for those aged 15 and over) is 79.1%.

The Human Development Index (HDI) reflects an increase in the social and economic stability of Tunisia since the 1980s (UNDP, 2012). The HDI is “a summary measure for assessing long-term progress in (...) a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and a decent standard of living” (UNDP, 2012, para. 4). Three indicators are used to measure healthy life, access to knowledge, and standard of living: life expectancy, mean years of schooling, and gross national income (GNI) (World Bank, 2012).

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) web site (2012), Tunisia’s life expectancy at birth increased by 12.6 years, mean years of schooling increased by 4.5 years, and expected years of schooling increased by 6.4 years between 1980 and 2012. Tunisia’s GNI per capita increased by approximately 107% during the same time span.

Although these statistics show economic and social progress, the wealth was unequally shared among the population. Basbous (2011) states that the president’s siblings and in-laws took advantage of the most profitable sectors of the economy, a most condemning statement.

Despite the improvements in the HDI, the unemployment rate remained very high. As Piot (2011) mentions, 72% of the country’s unemployed were under 30 in 2008, and the

unemployment rate of young graduates was about 22% (compared to the national rate of 14% unemployment). In 2011, the national unemployment rate was almost 24%, and in some regions, this rate exceeded 45%.

Politically, Tunisia is a dictatorship. The last decades have been characterized by repression, bribery, corruption, and a lack of freedom and opportunities. “Tunisia remains a deeply authoritarian place. (...) The government regularly violates a broad range of individual and collective rights.” (Alexander, 2010, p. 36). “The mixture of education and lack of opportunities was a breeding ground for revolt in Tunisia”, says Castells (Castells, 2012, p. 25). Indeed, in these conditions of high unemployment, corruption, and lack of opportunities for young and educated people, several uprisings occurred. As Mabrouk (2011) states,

During its modern history (...), Tunisian society has experienced a number of uprisings and social and political protests. (...) The bread riots in 1984, the protests in the Gafsa mining basin in 2008 and events in the border region of Ben Guerdane in October 2010, as well as, finally, the social protest launched from Sidi Bouzid, which was the only one, (...) to be transformed into a dramatic revolution. (p. 626)

The social protest in Sidi Bouzid started on December 17, 2010 when a young man named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire. As explained by Howard and Hussain (2013):

This young street vendor had tried in vain to fight an inspector’s small fine, appealing first to the police, then to municipal authorities, and then to the region’s governor. At each appeal, he was physically beaten by security officials. Bruised, humiliated, and frustrated by an unresponsive bureaucracy and thuggish security apparatus, Bouazizi set himself alight in front of the governor’s office. By the time Bouazizi died in a local hospital on January 4, protests had spread to cities throughout the country. (p.18)

This was the beginning of the Arab Spring. The Sidi Bouzid revolts might have inspired other countries experiencing different degrees of political change. For example, in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, governments were overthrown; in Syria, an armed rebellion was raised; in Iraq and

Algeria, there were widespread protests; in Mauritania, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia, there were minor protests.

Many scholars consider *social* media to be the main driver of the Sidi Bouzid uprisings. For example, Whitlock, in his DVD “How Facebook changed the world: Arab spring” (2012) purports that social media was the driver; Chouikha and Gobe suggest the same in their book *Protestations sociales, revolutions civiles. La Tunisie virtuelle: caisse de résonance du mouvement protestataire (2011)*; Faris, in his work, *The “Arab spring” and social media (2012)* supports the view that social media was the driver; and Alterman, in *The revolution will not be tweeted (2011)* is of the same opinion. These scholars argue that social media played a key role in the Arab Spring; however, to fully comprehend the causes of the revolution it is necessary to review the economic, social and political conditions in pre-revolution times in Tunisia. The research questions of this paper are to be focused on the extent to which social, economic and political conditions acted as drivers of the revolution in Tunisia.

## 1.2. Topic and research problem

### 1.2.1. Topic

Arab Spring and social media: the social, economic and governance issues driving revolutions:  
The Case of Tunisia

### 1.2.2. Research problem

Tunisia is a developing country, an upper-middle-income economy, and not everybody has access to the Internet. In addition, the Tunisian regime was a dictatorship that controlled access to the Internet and violently reacted to the uprisings. Under such circumstances, the

Tunisian revolution could not have been solely driven by social media. The main contributory factors, in effect, were economic, social, and political instability despite the positive indices of HDI showing increasing social and economic stability in Tunisia since the 1980s.

### 1.3 Objective

This paper undertakes research on the causes (other than the usage of social media) of the revolution in Tunisia mainly through an analysis of the social, economic and political conditions in Tunisia in the pre-revolutionary period. Analysis in this paper will show that social media played a role in strengthening the revolution but it was not a cause resulting in the revolution.

### 1.4. Literature Review

#### 1.4.1. Influence of Social Media

Social media has been used in various circumstances, such as during the presidential elections in the United States, various uprisings and other significant events across the world. Some scholars believe that social media is a powerful tool for motivating and mobilizing people. Westaby (2011) explains that new advances across the social sciences are highlighting social networks as a phenomenon that can motivate people and change lives. Romm-Livermore (2012) states that social media facilitates the building of new communities for action.

Most authors accept some influence of social media that was widely used during the Arab Spring. Many, such as Regourd (2012), Khonder (2011), Chouikha and Gobe (2011), Schraeder (2012), and Gelvin (2012), not only acknowledge the use of social media but also believe that social media played a key role during the Arab Spring. These authors, so-called cyberphiles according to Gelvin (2012), claim there was an increase in the number of Facebook memberships

in Tunisia and the Middle East, in general, during the Arab Spring (December 2010 to January 14, 2011 in Tunisia). They also claim that Technology created a community of protesters in cyberspace, since anti-regime activity was not allowed in Tunisia.

Gelvin (2012) explains the arguments used by cyberphiles authors who stress the key role of social media in Arab Spring: Three months before Mohammed Bouazizi set himself alight in Sidi Bouzid, there was a similar case in Monastir, but no one knew about it because it was not filmed. What made a difference this time is that images of Bouazizi were up on Facebook and people viewed them. Cyberphiles authors argue that journalists could not go on site because the area where Bouazizi's self-immolation occurred was blocked by police. Therefore, journalists and other traditional media relied on information posted on Facebook and YouTube. The initial protests in Sidi Bouzid that followed Bouazizi's self-immolation were recorded on cell phones, posted on the Internet, and shared on Facebook (Gelvin, 2012). These are the primary reasons behind certain scholars' claims of social media's key role in the Arab Spring.

However, Alterman (2011), considered cyber skeptic by Gelvin (2012), states that social media did not play a key role in successful start of the Arab Spring. He also provides instances of other uprisings (Moldova and Iran in 2009) in which social media appeared to play key roles but these uprisings were short-lived. His view is that crediting the social media as the key role player in Tunisian uprising underplays and undervalues the role of individuals who made invaluable contributions despite not being tech-savvy.

According to Altermann (2011), Tunisia's online censorship was the worst in the world, and there were not enough Facebook memberships in Tunisia to impact the uprising significantly. The author says that traditional media (i.e., television), such as Al-Jazeera, rather than social media, played a more critical role in disseminating information, He also notes that

the protests began in Sidi Bouzid, a semi-arid farming town almost two hundred miles from Tunis, an area with relatively low Internet penetration.

#### 1.4.2. Social, Economic, Political and Governance issues

To further explore if social media played a major role in starting the factor Tunisian revolution, Honwana (2011) while agreeing with authors who claim that social media played a role, explains that a combination of many other factors made the Tunisian revolution the success it turned out to be. He stresses the important role that the youth played in that revolution, along with lack of employment opportunities for the youth, which in fact incited youth outrage. Honwana (2011) states that a large number of university-educated youths without employment and any future employment prospects constituted a mass of potential activists who were ready to be mobilized.

Castells (2012) confirms that the protesters were mainly unemployed educated youth, and their search for dignity was an important driver of the protests. He does not deny that among the factors that made the success of the Tunisian popular revolts possible was the role played by the Internet. However, overall, to Castells, the Tunisian revolution was more of an expression of protest against dire economic, social, and political conditions, such as unemployment, high prices of essential commodities (inflation), inequality, and poverty, brutality of the autocratic and undemocratic regime, censorship, and corruption across the country. He provides statistics to support his view.

Petersson (2011) admits that politically there was an improvement during the first year of Ben Ali's rule in 1987s. However, overtime, Ben Ali limited freedoms, banned real opposition parties and used the police to control political opponents and civilians. According to Henry "The regime was particularly focused on repressing Islamist parties and had since the early 1990s

vigorously repressed the popular Islamist Ennahda movement” (2011, P. 3). This included imprisonment, torture, assassination, harassment and intimidation of Ennahda members. Gandhi (2013) confirms the suppression of the Ennahda movement and also states that Islamists were harassed, severely repressed, and often prohibited from travelling. For Paul (2012) there were decades of state terror and dictatorship under Ben Ali’s regime despite the apparent political tranquility.

Statistics on Political Rights and Civil Liberties recorded by Tunisia’s annual Freedom House (FH) confirm the views of these authors. Scores assigned to countries by Freedom House range from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free), with the worst-possible combined score being 14, and Tunisia has been assigned a score of 11, 12 and even NOT FREE over the last decades (Schraeder and Redissi, 2011). These scores present a grim scenario.

Overall, these authors provide useful information about the Arab Spring in general, and elaborate governance economic and social problems plaguing Tunisia. The research question posed and the research findings analyzed in this paper allow a deeper understanding of the main reasons for the Tunisian revolution, maintaining that social media did play a role during the revolution period but that it was not one of the root causes of the Arab Spring.

## 1.5 Research Hypothesis and Research Question

### Research Hypothesis

The hypothesis drawn is that Tunisia’s human development index showing positive movements towards socio-economic growth and stability was not indicative of real increase in the wellbeing of the Tunisian people, as such; and that, in fact, unemployment, limited

opportunities for educated young people, corruption, autocratic, dictatorial and repressive rule and lack of freedom were amongst the primary factors that mobilized people's revolution in Tunisia; social media played a less significant role in starting the revolution.

### Research Question

In order to assess the above-stated hypothesis, the following research question is to be answered: What were the critical economic, social and governance factors that led to the Arab Spring in Tunisia and what was the degree of importance of these factors, as compared with social media, in driving the Tunisian revolution?

## 1.6. Justification for and Significance of the Study

The prominence typically given to the role played by the social media as the key driver of the Tunisian uprising appears to be exaggerated. Therefore it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the main reasons for the Tunisian revolution. This paper presents the many factors that underwrote the revolution, and assesses the importance of each. In so doing, the paper illuminates the actual causes of the Tunisian unrest and contributes to the development of knowledge and academic literature relevant to public policy.

Case study of the Arab Spring movement in a single country out of many that experienced the Arab Spring will help to better understand and further analyze the primary causes of the uprisings.

## 1.7. Research Strategy

This research takes a case-study approach. There are four types of case studies, as explained by Vennesson (2008): **Descriptive** case study, which is used to describe a phenomena

with no theoretical frameworks; **interpretive** case study, which uses theoretical frameworks to provide an explanation of particular cases; **hypothesis-generating** case-study, which seeks to generate new hypotheses inductively and/or to refine existing hypotheses; and **theory evaluating** case study which is used to assess whether existing theories account for the processes and outcomes of selected cases (p. 228).

For a better and an in-depth understanding and analysis of the causes of the Tunisia-specific uprising a descriptive method will be applied. As Vennesson (2008) states, a descriptive case study is a “systematic description of the phenomena with no explicit theoretical intention” (p. 227). A descriptive case study is considered useful and invaluable in this instance for shedding “new light on known data” (Vennesson 2008, p. 227). Besides, findings of one case study, based on detailed research, have potentials of identifying research needs for testing other hypotheses on the similar topics.

The Tunisian uprisings, being the starting point of the Arab Spring and overthrow of the Tunisian government within the short period of only a month have excellent potentials in constituting an ideal case study addressing causes of the Arab spring.

## 1.8 Methodology

The case of Tunisia manifests Amartya Sen’s (2011) assertion that economic growth alone, without conducive policies and actions to invest in people’s well being does not lead to economic development to benefit the people. Development is more multidimensional and inclusive of elements that promote *human development*, which is a more holistic concept, encompassing both economic and social well-being that enriches people’s lives. This research, following Amartya Sen’s theory of economic growth and

development, will focus on search and analyses of data related to some economic and social elements of Tunisians' well-being.

The research will explore the following:

- a. The state of unemployment **measured through** national unemployment rates by region, the latter to discern regional inequities in employment opportunities. Unemployment raises people's anxiety and often results in social and political tensions.
- b. Income and national wealth-sharing data research and analysis to assist with equity analysis.
- c. Data research and analyses on entitlements to determine the extent of public access to resources and opportunities, such as opportunities to find employment, sell labour, earn an income, and buy essential commodities.
- d. An analysis of the nature of the political regime
- e. An analysis of the state of rule of law and order (including civilian police behavior and actions)
- f. State of freedom of thoughts and expression as ramified in the media and other outlets, such as the internet, the latter to be explored in-depth.

Notably, the scope of Internet usage and the challenges Internet users faced during the Arab Spring will be researched to help examine the role played by social media and the internet in the Tunisian uprising; and specifically determine the extent to which the spread of internet use mobilized people living in abject poverty to initiate and spread the revolution.

The method of data collection will be statistics collection. Statistics from UNDP, World Bank, International Amnesty, and other official web sites will be collected and analyzed in order to assess people's deprivation levels resulting from unequal distribution of income and opportunities.

Secondary sources- the existing scholarly studies- will be used in order to better understand and analyze issues affecting human well-being adversely and establishing causality between the iniquitous states of human well-being and the uprising in Tunisia

Using the methodology proposed, this research will provide a clearer picture of Tunisian economic, social and governance conditions before and during the Arab Spring and will help understand the main reasons for the Tunisian uprising beyond the role played by social media and regardless of the HDI statistics indicating increasing social and economic stability.

## Chapter 2: Social and Economic Issues

The hypothesis that economic, social and political issues were the main factors that caused the Tunisian revolution, as defined in the first chapter, requires further assessment. Using a few key indicators, this chapter analyzes the major issues that dominated the social and economic context in the pre-revolutionary period in Tunisia. The country's political conditions are analyzed in the third chapter.

### 2.1. Development and Its Principal Indicators

The indicators that are used to measure a country's development have evolved over time. Traditionally, development was seen as the process of "achieving sustained rates of growth of income per capita to enable a nation to expand its output at a rate faster than the growth of its population" (Todaro & Smith, 2012, p. 14). In fact, a country's level of development was measured most commonly by the rates of growth of its income and its real gross domestic product (GDP). Tunisia's GDP is an indicator of the extent of the country's economic growth. This analysis examines the extent to which Tunisia's economic growth has enabled its citizens to achieve their development goals, as per Todaro and Smith's definition of development.

Todaro and Smith (2012) argue that sustenance, self-esteem and freedom are core values that are shared by all individuals in all societies and that constitute a conceptual basis for understanding the underlying meaning of development. These authors explain that development must have an impact on three broad areas of human life by

1. increasing the availability and widening of access to basic life-sustaining goods such as food, shelter, health, and security

2. provision of employment and income opportunities, access to quality education ...; and
3. freeing individuals from servitude and dependence in relation to human misery (Todaro & Smith, 2012, p. 23).

According to the World Bank web site (2004), the notion of human development, “in a broader sense, incorporates all aspects of individuals’ well-being, from their health status to their economic and political freedom”.

Since the GDP indicator only focuses on economic growth, the Human Development Index (HDI) was developed in order to “...emphasize that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone” (UNDP, 2014).

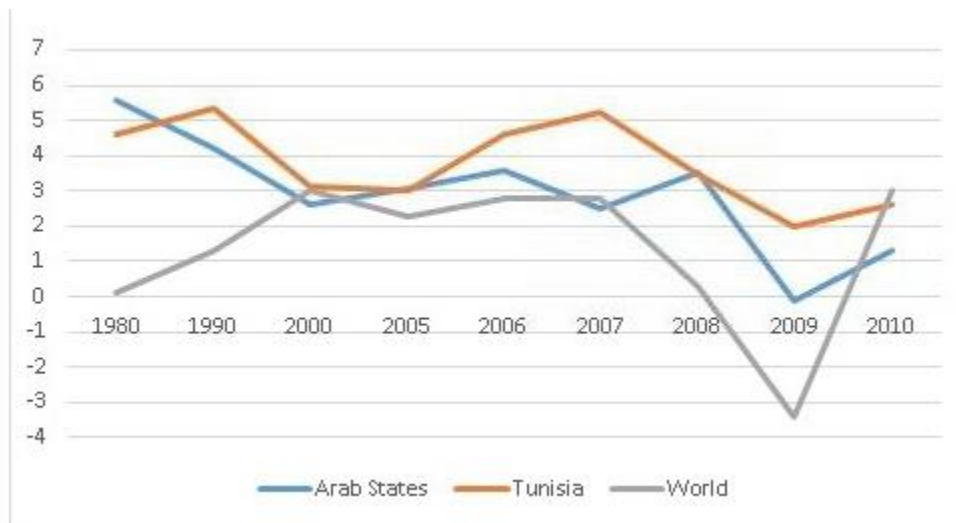
The extent of Tunisia’s development can certainly be partially assessed through an analysis of the country’s human-development indicators. The Human Development Index takes into account “three facets of development: real income per capita (...); health as measured by life expectancy, undernourishment, and child mortality; and educational attainments as measured by literacy and schooling” (Todaro & Smith, 2012, p. 44).

However, other indicators, such as unemployment, poverty ratios and inequality, also need to be measured in order to determine the degree to which Tunisia, in the pre-Arab Spring days, addressed such development needs of the people. The collection and analysis of data in these areas are of great importance for presenting a clear and comprehensive picture of the levels of and gaps in development in Tunisia before the Arab Spring. The findings help to identify the social and economic factors that acted as major drivers of the social, economic and political tensions that promoted the Arab Spring.

## 2.2. Tunisia's Economic Growth Indicator – Gross Domestic Product

The growth trend of Tunisia's GDP per capita (in annual percentage terms) has long been characterized by repeated ups and downs. As shown in Figure 1, from 2005 to 2007, GDP per capita increased and reached a growth rate of 5.25% in 2007. Then it started to decrease and, only after the growth rate had declined to 2% in 2009, did it once again begin to increase. Despite this chequered economic progress, Tunisia's rate of growth per capita over the last three decades has surpassed not only that of most of the other Arab states but also that of the world as a whole. Overall, despite many fluctuations, the country has been doing very well in terms of economic growth.

**Figure 1: GDP Per Capita – Tunisia versus Other Regions**



Source: <http://www.arab-hdr.org/data/indicators/2012-9.aspx>

The GDP indicators, as shown above, have been used by the political authorities to claim that Tunisia is prospering from a developmental standpoint, as per the traditional view of development which is explained above. According to Cavatora and Haugbolle (2012), the

economic growth and hence prosperity argument was used by the Tunisian regime to build domestic and international legitimacy.

However, can we actually rely on analyses of economic growth alone to understand the day-to-day realities of the average citizen? As explained by Todaro and Smith (2012), the reality of many countries shows that income growth is not sufficient to guarantee the successful realization of development objectives. Economic progress as measured by a country's GDP does not take into account the state of key social factors, such as health and education. Therefore, GDP alone cannot be used to assess a country's level of development or prosperity. While enhanced economic growth does generate public resources, in order for development to occur, these resources must be reinvested in critical sectors such as health, education and nutrition with a view to benefiting the public as a whole. Economic growth is very helpful to a state in terms of the way in which it can be used to improve living standards,<sup>1</sup> but it should not be considered the ultimate indicator of development. A high GDP does not necessarily go hand in hand with a high quality of life for citizens.

A study conducted by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (2011) comparing India and Bangladesh demonstrates that, despite India's higher rates of economic growth relative to those of Bangladesh, Bangladesh is doing better in terms of life expectancy, the proportion of underweight children, the mean years of schooling, the mortality rate of children under five and immunization with the DPT vaccine. This research supports the conclusion reached by Todaro and Smith (2012), who argue that the traditional view of development is too narrow and allows many developing nations to reach their economic growth targets without increasing the quality of

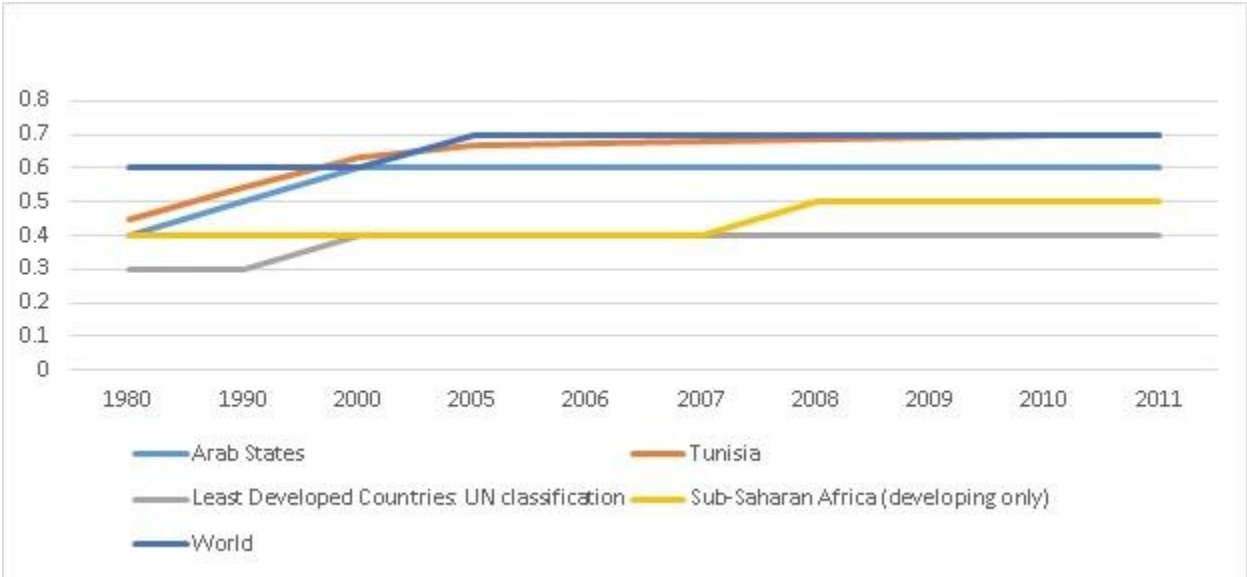
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<sup>1</sup> The standard of living dimension is measured by gross national income per capita. The goal posts for minimum and maximum income are \$100 (PPP) and \$75,000 (PPP) respectively (UNDP, 2014).

life of the majority of their population. Therefore, other development indicators must also be assessed. The following sections of this chapter focus on the analysis of some of these indicators.

### 2.3 Human Development Indicator

**Figure 2: Tunisia’s HDI Relative to Other Countries/Regions**

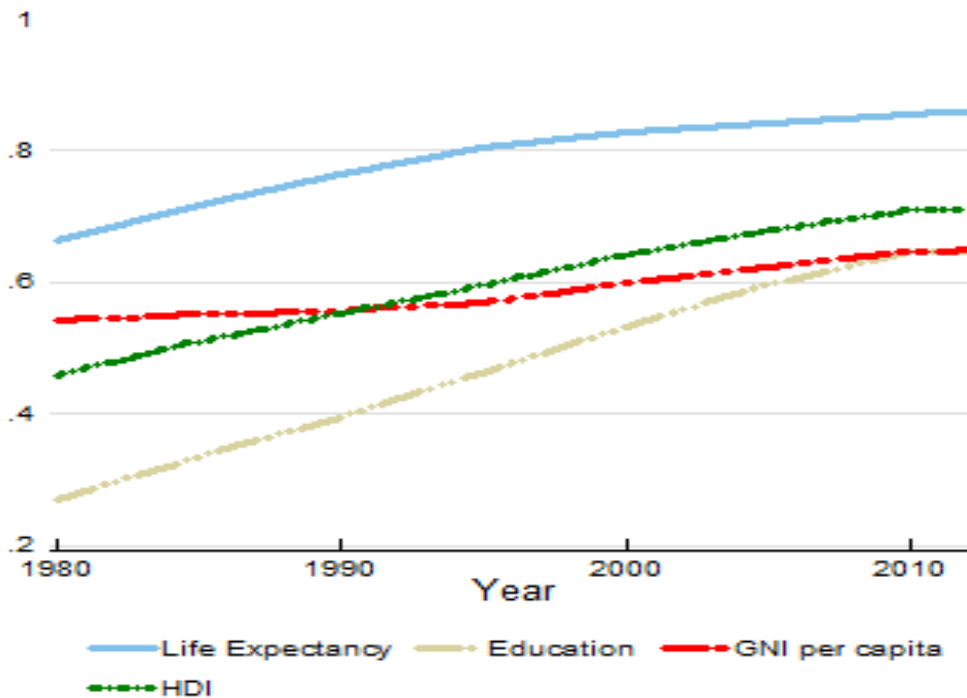


Source: <http://www.arab-hdr.org/data/indicators/2012-54.aspx>

Overall Tunisia’s HDI (Figure 2) has been on the rise since 1980 and has remained well above the HDI trend of the Arab countries in general and of the sub-Saharan countries, though it remains below the world’s average HDI trend. It is interesting to analyze the extent to which each of the components (education, health or GNI per capita) has affected Tunisia’s HDI. Figure 3 shows that the education component has been progressing at a much faster rate than those of life expectancy and GNI per capita. The implication is that that the “mean years of schooling for

adults aged 25 years and expected years of schooling for children of school entering age” (UNDP, 2014) have been increasing.

**Figure 3: Trends in Tunisia’s HDI Component Indices (1980–2012)**



Source: UNDP, 2013

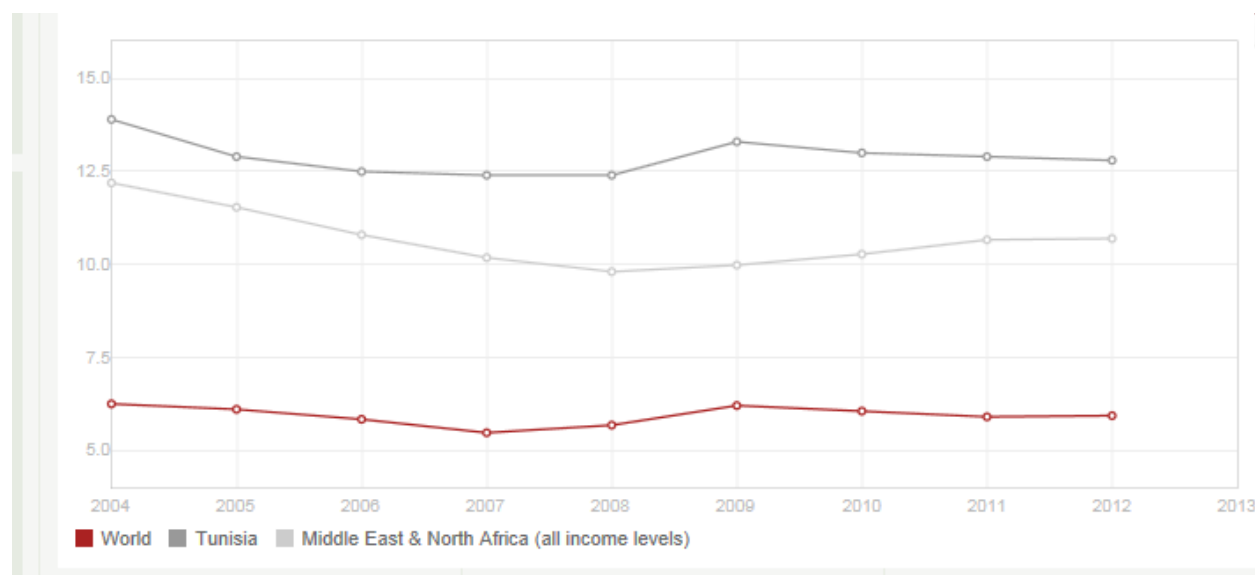
Education is a critical area to prioritize in any country, particularly in developing countries. UNESCO (2014) argues that education “...should be a means to empower children and adults alike to become active participants in the transformation of their societies” (para. 1). However, in order to fully participate in the development of their country, those who are educated also need to have a job that generates a level of income that is approximately commensurate with their level of education. For this case study, the question to ask is whether educated Tunisians were able to use their skills and knowledge to make a positive contribution to

their country's development. Could they find employment that matched their educational achievements, or even any employment at all?

## 2.4 Unemployment

The unemployment<sup>2</sup> trends in Tunisia (Figure 4) show that Tunisia suffers from a higher rate of unemployment than the average for every other country in the Middle East and North Africa as well as the average for the rest of the world. For example, in 2009 the unemployment rate in Tunisia was 13.3%, as opposed to 10.00% in the Middle East and North Africa and an average of 6.2% for the rest of the world.

**Figure 4: Tunisian Unemployment Relative to Other Regions**



Source:<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS/countries/1W-TN-ZQ?display=graph>

<sup>2</sup> The World Bank (2014) explains that “unemployment refers to the share of the labor force that is without work but available for and seeking employment” (para. 1).

The unemployment data do not necessarily indicate that the Tunisian government did not adopt and implement any policy instruments to help create jobs. The National Employment Fund, established to help reduce unemployment, serves as just one of many examples of Tunisia's political will to tackle unemployment. Indeed, "The Fund strengthens existing mechanisms aimed at addressing unemployment issues. It improves the chances of the unemployed to find a job and seeks to identify sources of employment" (Sfeir, 2006, p. 100). However, despite the Tunisian government's efforts, it was not possible to generate a sufficient number of jobs to cater to the high volume of young people entering the workforce. Moreover, nepotism and clientelism corrupted the employment creation system (Honwana, 2013, p. 25). Honwana (2013) explained that:

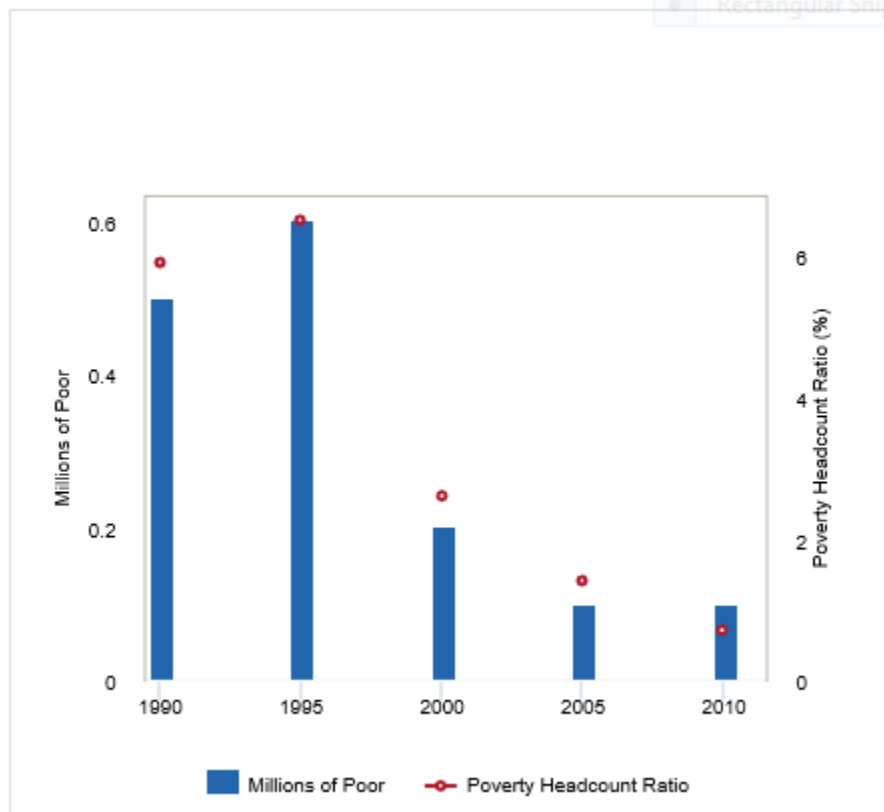
Each year about 140,000 people are ready to enter the labour market while only 60,000 to 65,000 jobs are created, mainly in Greater Tunis and the coastal regions. Among these 140,000 new jobseekers, 70,000 are university graduates, 40,000 have completed professional training, and 30,000 have no training (p. 25).

Unemployment is especially affecting young graduates in Tunisia. As explained by Piot (2011), in 2008 72% of the country's unemployed were under 30 years old and the unemployment rate of young graduates was about 22% (as opposed to 14% nationally). In 2011, Tunisia's national unemployment rate was almost 24% and, in some regions of the country, the rate was even known to exceed 45%. Such high levels of unemployment have contributed to rising poverty rates. The following section focuses on poverty in Tunisia.

## 2.5 Poverty and Regional Development Inequalities within Tunisia

Between 1995 and 2010, Tunisia saw progress in terms of overall reduction of its poverty rates. The two graphs set out below confirm this progress. Figure 5 and Figure 6 show the poverty trends for people living on less than \$1.25 per day and for people living below the national poverty line.

**Figure 5: Poverty Trend by International Standards: People Living on Less Than \$1.25 per Day**

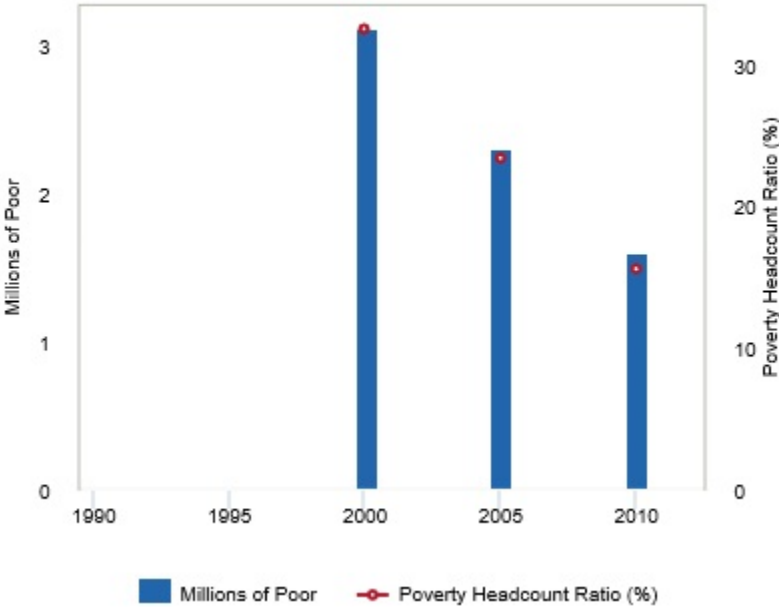


Source: <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/TUN>

The number of people living on less than \$1.25 per day increased from 1990 to 1995 and decreased from 0.6 million people in 1995 to 0.1 million people in 2010. From 2005 to 2010, the

number of people living on less than \$1.25 per day remained the same (0.1 million). This means that, from 2005 to 2010, Tunisia saw little success in its efforts to reduce poverty.

**Figure 6: Poverty Trend by National Standards: People Living below the National Poverty Line**



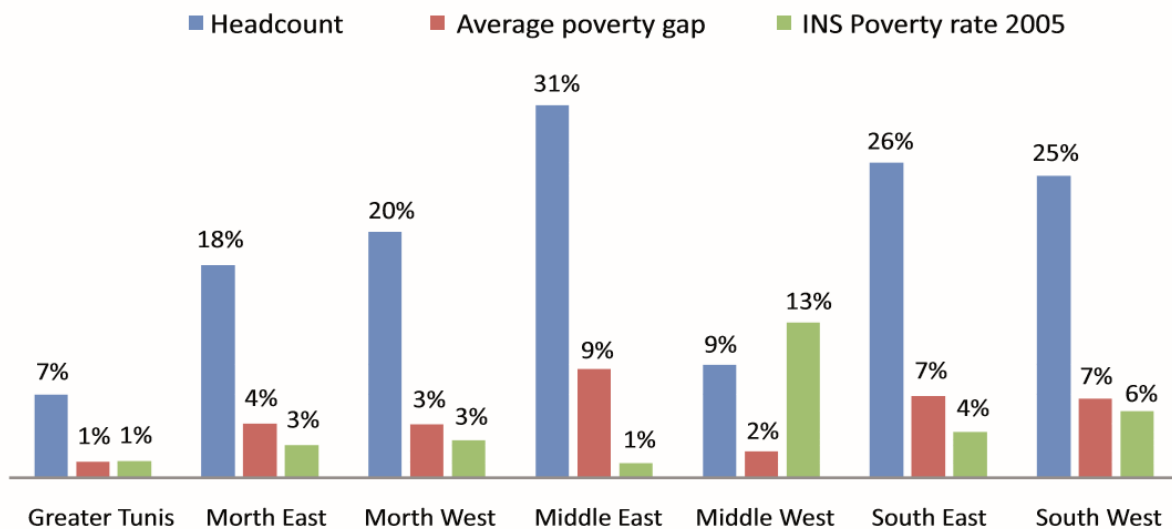
Source: <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/TUN>

Figure 6 shows the number of people living below Tunisia’s national poverty line from 2000 to 2010. The chart shows that the number of poor people in Tunisia decreased from 3.1 million in 2000 to 1.6 million in 2010, which is a reduction of almost 50% within only a decade. However, it must be noted that the statistics on poverty featured above only consider national poverty averages and do not necessarily show regional inequalities and disparities. Despite the progress that has been made in reducing poverty rates in Tunisia as a whole, there remain

important regional economic imbalances and many people continue to suffer from severe poverty. In fact, Honwana (2013) indicates that “an increased number of Tunisians were living in poverty and unable to meet their economic needs or achieve their life aspirations” (p. 23).

As Honwana (2013) explains, the unequal levels of regional development were one of the consequences of the neo-liberal economic policies led by the Ben Ali regime, which marginalized the central, western and southern desert regions and favoured the northern and eastern coastal regions of the country. The author further explains that the marginalized regions were so neglected that they became disgruntled and frustrated with the government. These views are also shared by Haseeb (2013), who states that, while the capital and the northern coastal cities benefited from Tunisia’s economic progress, the interior of the country and the southern regions did not benefit. Other researchers confirm these unequal levels of regional development. Mabrouk (2013) highlights the fact that “an unfair socio-economic discrimination existed between the interior and the coast in Tunisia” (p. 121), while Saidi (2013) explains that the interior regions of Tunisia did not benefit from economic growth and instead suffered from the highest rates of unemployment and poverty. Saidi (2013) continues by explaining that there was a contradiction between coastal area, which was wealthy and open to the world, and the interior, which was more or less closed in (p. 172). Allal and Pierret (2013) state that unequal regional development was widely discussed in the analyses of the causes of the Arab Spring in Tunisia. Finally, when describing the regional profile of poverty in Tunisia, the World Bank explains that “Although there are marked differences in poverty among the regions, in all regions the incidence of poverty is higher in rural areas” (World Bank, 2011).

**Figure 7: Poverty across Regions**



Source:

<http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Tunisia%20Economic%20and%20Social%20Challenges.pdf>

Overall, Tunisia has succeeded in reducing its rates of poverty in general but there remains a high level of inequality between its regions, as shown in Figure 7. Regardless of whether poverty rates are measured by headcount or by average poverty gap, the middle-west, south-west and south-east regions of Tunisia are found to be the most affected by poverty whereas Greater Tunis shows the least poverty. As explained by the African Development Bank (2012),

...in some governorates, poverty increased significantly, while at the national or even regional level poverty was decreasing. This is the case for Kasserine, where both the absolute and relative poverty rates increased, from 19.3% to 30.7% and from 30.3% to 49.3% respectively between 1990 and 2000. Similarly, the relative poverty rate increased from 39.8% to 45.7% during the same period in Sidi Bouzid (p. 26).

In a nutshell, poverty has been successfully reduced in Tunisia as a whole but remains high in the hinterlands. As the current chapter shows, in addition to poverty, unemployment and unequal regional development were major issues that were present in Tunisia before the beginning of the Arab Spring. The GDP and HDI, as well as the unemployment rates, poverty levels and inequality levels discussed above, are all economic indicators that have an impact on the development of a country, as per the arguments of Amartya Sen, Michael Todaro and Stephen Smith. It also must be noted that none of the indicators discussed in this chapter take into account governance issues, such as corruption or human-rights violations, both of which can have concrete and severe repercussions on average citizens' quality of life. In this vein, Todaro and Smith (2012) explain that the concept of human freedom, which is one of the three development criteria, "...also encompasses various components of political freedom, including personal security, the rule of law, freedom of expression, political participation and equality of opportunity" (p. 22).

Tunisia's political conditions are assessed in the third chapter in order to identify the governance issues that prevented the nation from addressing the development needs of the people and that contributed to Tunisian people's revolt.

## Chapter 3: Governance Issues

The second chapter discusses economic conditions in Tunisia and concludes that unemployment, poverty and regional-development imbalances were the main issues that prevented the population from achieving its development objectives as set out in Chapter 2, Section 2.1. However, in order to achieve these development objectives, it is also necessary to implement sound policies that are designed to foster positive political conditions.

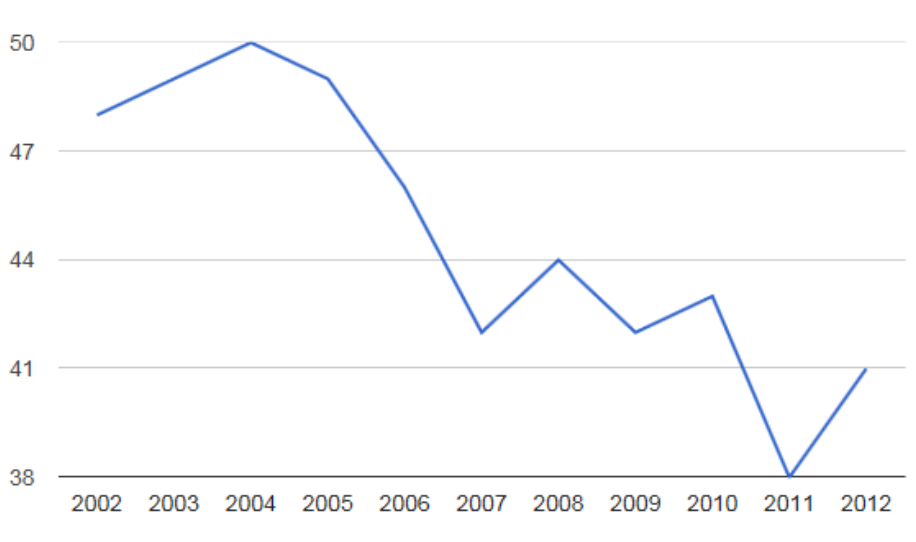
A country's level of development depends on a range of factors that extend beyond income, health and education. These other factors are largely intangible contributors to citizens' quality of life, including "personal security, the rule of law, freedom of expression, political participation and equality of opportunity" (Todaro & Smith, 2012, p. 22). These factors are more likely to be promoted when good governance, inclusive of freedom of expression, democracy, security, human rights and civil liberties, is nurtured.

This chapter reviews the Tunisian polity and state of governance in order to assess the extent to which these factors contributed to Tunisia's failure to attain a level of development that satisfied the people's needs and aspirations.

### 3.1 Corruption

Over the last decade (2002–2012), Tunisia scored less than 50 out of a maximum of 100 on the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), which is an indication of the fact that the country is facing serious corruption issues. Tunisia's score on the CPI drastically decreased over the last decade, as is illustrated in figure 8. The lowest score over that decade was for 2011.

**Figure 8: Corruption Perception Index**



Source: Transparency International

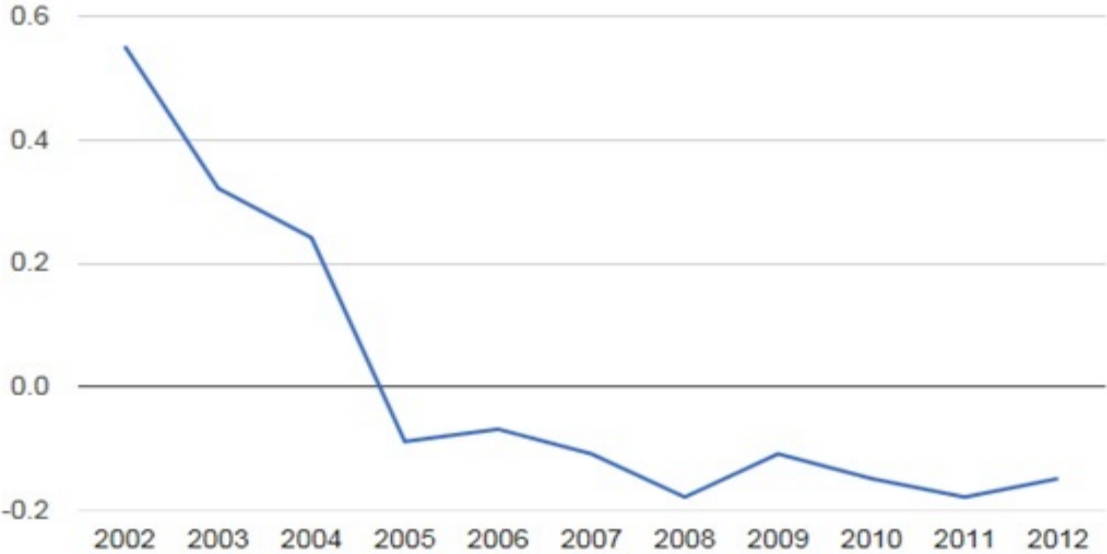
As explained by Haas and David (2013), “While corruption characterizes all states in varying degrees, the systemic corruption of the Ben Ali regime was breathtaking in its shameless audacity and sheer scale” (p. 16). The Tunisian president and his family members were extremely corrupt. Basbous (2012) claims that the president’s in-laws took advantage of the most profitable sectors of the economy (p. 95). The existence of a high level of corruption in Tunisia is also confirmed by Cavatorta and Haugbolle (2012) in the following terms: “The correct macro-economic policies put in place in the early days of the dictatorship to redress the Tunisian economy degenerated by the 2000s into a predatory economic system with members of the president’s family and close collaborators taking advantage of these networks of patronage to acquire an increasingly large slice of the economy” (p. 185). Practices of corruption and bribery seriously undermine economic development.

Political authorities should be a model of integrity for the rest of the population and also should take action in order to control corruption. But controlling corruption is difficult when

those who indulge in corrupt practices are at the highest levels of political power. Examples of corruption involving high political authority are provided by Honwana, who says that “The president and his wife ran a mafia-like network involving relatives and close friends that plundered the country and amassed amazing wealth (...).They controlled most major businesses, from information and communication technology through banking to manufacturing, retail, transportation, agriculture and food processing” (2012, p. 146).

The effectiveness of mechanisms to control corruption<sup>3</sup> is measured on a scale that ranges from -2.5 (weak) to +2.5 (strong). Given the fact that actions such as those outlined above with regard to Tunisia’s regulation of corruption within its borders have been decreasing over the last decade, it is not surprising that the country’s position on the corruption scale reached a nadir of -0.18 in both 2008 and 2011.

**Figure 9: Control of Corruption (-2.5 = weak; 2.5 = strong)**



Source: Transparency International

<sup>3</sup> Control of corruption assesses the likelihood of countering red tape, corrupt officials and other threats to good governance (World Bank: govindicators.org).

Corruption negatively affects the equitable distribution of resources, increases inequality, and undermines the regulatory environment and the efficiency of state institutions (Transparency International, 2014). In summary, corruption harms a country's attempts to achieve its objectives for the development of its people. Development projects cannot be completed because the resources allocated for these programs typically are syphoned away by corrupt individuals and groups in positions of power. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in the way in which the Tunisian National Employment Fund failed to address unemployment effectively. Honwana (2013) states that "The National Employment Fund became an instrument of the State used for political control and clientelism. Access to public and private sector jobs became tightly controlled by those connected to the regime" (p. 27).

In a highly corrupt country, people tend not to develop the skills and competencies required for career development. It is more helpful for people in a corrupt polity and society to take advantage of their connections with friends and family members who are in positions of authority; in the case of Tunisia, this was especially apparent among individuals who had a close connection with the President. In such a political context, success ceases to be based on merit but instead on the degree of connection with the president and his inner circle including his siblings. As Schraeder (2011) emphasizes, "The key to personal success was not achievement in a given field, but links to the extended family of the ubiquitously photographed president" (p. 5).

Corruption also can create discontent and frustration and can result in political uprisings, which undermine security. For instance, Schraeder and Redissi (2011) report that, in 2008 in the south-western region of Gafsa, when the results of an employment competition launched by state-owned Gafsa Phosphate Company were made public, locals took to the streets to express

their fury because the new hires had no ties with the region but instead had won the competition based on their political connections with the president and his regime (p. 5).

A country's level of corruption has an impact on foreign investment and, in the long term, on economic growth and human development. In effect, if a small group of people or – as in Tunisia a clan – controls the economy, foreign investors are obliged to partner with that group and play by its rules. Such rules of the game are likely to deter foreign investors.

The US-based McDonald's fast-food chain's unsuccessful attempt to invest in Tunisia is just one of many examples of the negative impact of corruption on foreign investment. Honwana's (2012) finding is that McDonald's wanted to open a restaurant in Tunisia but, after satisfying all of the official requirements, the company was asked to partner with members of Ben Ali's extended family (p. 147). The response of McDonald's was to cancel its plans to invest in Tunisia.

In addition to deterring foreign investment, corruption in such forms as bribery, nepotism, and mismanagement of resources has affected people of various income groups and social strata. According to Cavatorta and Haugbolle (2013), "The general predation by members of the Ben Ali clan on numerous sectors of the economy, of which they had no knowledge, simply to derive speculative rents, alienated not only ordinary working Tunisians increasingly under pressure from job insecurity and declining living standards, but crucially the business and middle classes" (n.p.). Corruption is so rampant in Tunisia that it affects the life of every citizen. While people in some professions, such as those in police services, benefit from this state of affairs by accepting bribes or favours, those who do not enjoy "privileged" positions that provide access to these kinds of "opportunities" bear the brunt of systematized corruption and are the most exploited members of the society.

## 3.2 Human Rights Violations

Human rights “are rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. We are all equally entitled to our human rights without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible” (United Nations Human Rights, 2015).

As illustrated in Table 1, Freedom House (FH) assigns countries scores for their level of respect for human rights ranging from 1 (Best) to 7 (Worst) and defines the status of each country as “Free,” “Partly Free” and “Not Free.” From 2008 to 2010, Tunisia’s scores for political rights remained consistently poor while the scores for its other civil liberties were rated 5 out of 7. FH’s status for Tunisia has been “Not Free” for the last decade.

**Table 1: Human Rights Status**

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<b>Status</b>	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free	Not free
<b>Freedom Rating</b>	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	6.0	6.0	6.0
<b>Civil Liberties<sup>4</sup></b>	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
<b>Political Rights<sup>5</sup></b>	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	7	7	7

Source: Freedom House reports

<sup>4</sup> The right of people to do or say things that are not illegal without being stopped or interrupted by the government (Dictionary Merriam-Webster,2015)

<sup>5</sup> The rights that involve participation in the establishment or administration of a government and are usually held to entitle the adult citizen to exercise of the franchise, the holding of public office, and other political activities (Dictionary Merriam-Webster,2015)

From 1956 to 2010 (54 years) only two presidents ruled in Tunisia. The authoritarianism of Ben Ali extended from the manipulation of election rules to his advantage to the restriction of the civil liberties of the people. Ben Ali amended the constitution to make himself eligible for more than three terms as president (Gelvin, 2007, p. 38). This action, as well as his multiple violations of human rights, played an essential role in preserving his authoritarian regime. Human-rights activists and groups like Freedom House have documented a wide range of abuses committed by the Tunisian government over the last two decades. Among these, Alexander (2010) identifies the following:

...prolonged incommunicado detentions; extracting confessions through a variety of methods of torture; surveillance; phone tapping; threats against family members; job dismissals; passport confiscations that prevent foreign travel; physical assaults by plain-clothed officers. The assaults, particularly on journalists, lawyers, and human rights activists have actually become more frequent in recent years (p. 62).

Normally, in a country with an independent judiciary, those who have been grossly abused by political leaders or civil servants have the right and the ability to complain and to ensure that remedial measures are taken. However, there is no doubt that throughout the Ben Ali regime the judicial system was under the tight control of the executive branch of government which not only determined the appointment and assignment of judges (Transparency International, 2011) but also ensured that they had little autonomy (Alexander, 2010, p. 64). In addition to controlling the judicial system, the Ben Ali regime went so far as to create a parallel security force to keep the citizens in a state of fear and mistrust in order to sustain his preferred system of corruption (Saidi, 2012). This author states that the dictatorship depended on a

sprawling police apparatus supported by an untold number of informers and stool-pigeons; Tunisians felt spied-upon, monitored and followed everywhere - in cafés, at work, in the streets.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these human-rights violations, “the Tunisian regime allowed for some political party participation, albeit weak and circumscribed” (Shadi, 2014). However, Islamist political parties, such as An-Nahdha, were simply banned from participating in elections and its members were watched, harassed, denied security clearance for jobs and sometimes even denied permission to travel abroad (Noueihed & Warren, 2012). Suspected An-Nahdha sympathizers also suffered and were subjected to severe punishment. According to Freedom House (2001), “Actual or suspected members of the outlawed An-Nahdha movement constitute the majority of an estimated 1,000 to 2,000 political prisoners in Tunisia (...). Many others are in exile. Former political prisoners and their families are often deprived of their passports, monitored and searched by police, and discriminated against with regard to employment” (n.p.).

### 3.2.1 Freedom of the Press

Freedom of the press was severely restricted by Ben Ali. Journalists were also among the more frequent victims of the government’s human-rights violations. As noted by Freedom House (2009), “The situation for journalists in Tunisia is one of the worst in the Arab world. Tunisia continues to block free expression in print journalism, television, and radio, and is among the most aggressive governments in policing the internet” (n.p.). This claim is supported by the NGO Reporters Without Borders, which agrees that freedom of the press in Tunisia is among the worst in the world, as is reflected in Tunisia’s 2010 ranking of 164 out of 178 countries (see Table 2).

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<sup>6</sup> Original French: “Cette dictature reposait sur un appareil policier tentaculaire secondé par un nombre incalculable d’indicateurs et de mouchards. Le tunisien se sentait épié, surveillé, suivi partout où il allait; au café, au travail, dans la rue. Bref, on lui interdisait même de penser qu’il pourrait être un citoyen” (Saidi, 2012, p. 173).

**Table 2: Freedom of the Press in Tunisia**

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Rank</b>	128	149	152	147	148	145	143	154	164	134
	out of 139	out of 166	out of 167	out of 167	out of 168	out of 169	out of 173	out of 175	out of 178	out of 179

Source: [http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=classement&id\\_rubrique=297](http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=classement&id_rubrique=297)

Under a dictatorship like that of Tunisia where criticism of dictator Ben Ali and his political decisions was not accepted, journalists faced challenges each and every time they chose to even comment on the regime's actions or structure. Freedom House (2009) asserts that Tunisian journalists were detained, physically assaulted, fired from their jobs, prevented from leaving the country and subjected to seemingly arbitrary police surveillance on numerous occasions. Pro-Ben Ali journalists, however, were not victims of restrictions or violence.

### 3.2.2 Internet Control

In many countries where the traditional media is censored and tightly controlled by the government, the Internet has been used as an alternative sphere for public debate on political and social issues (Freedom House, 2011). The Tunisian authorities, however, have not permitted the usage of the Internet as a forum for dissent. As explained by Freedom House (2011), the regime created "...an extensive online censorship and filtering system. In 2009 and especially in 2010, censorship expanded and became increasingly arbitrary. Even websites with no political or pornographic content have been censored."

Freedom House scores countries according to their level of Internet freedom (among other criteria) on a 0–100 scale where 0 = Most Free and 100 = Not Free. In both 2009 and 2011,

Internet freedom in Tunisia was considered to be “Not Free”; in 2009 the country was given a total score of 76 on the 0–100 scale and, in 2011, a total score of 81, as illustrated below in Table 3. The extent of control of Internet usage by the political authorities creates some basis for questioning the belief that social media played an essential role in inspiring the Tunisian revolution.

**Table 3: Status of Internet Freedom**

	2009	2011
Internet freedom status	Not Free	Not Free
Obstacles to access (Total score range of 0–25)	21	21
Limits on content (Total score range of 0–35)	25	28
Violations of user rights (Total score range of 0–40)	30	32
Total score on a scale of 0–100 (0 = most free; 100 = least free)	76	81

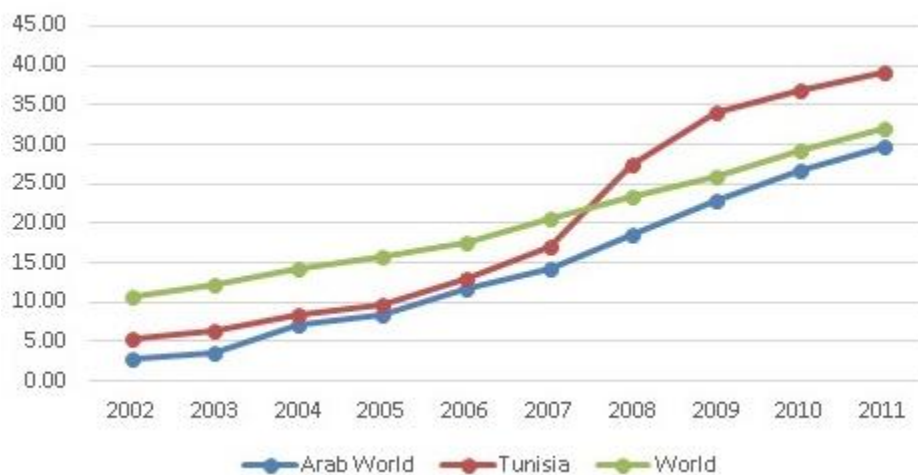
Source: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2011/tunisia#.VRHon3IFCUI>

The following Chapter examines the issue of the influence of social media on the Tunisian revolution.

## Chapter 4: The Root Causes of the Tunisian Revolution and the Influence of Social Media

According to Haugbølle and Cavatorta (2012) “[The Ben Ali] regime’s embrace of education and adoption of new technologies was perceived to be crucial in developing an educated workforce that would attract further investment” (p. 186). To promote a better educated workforce, the Tunisian political authorities initially made a firm commitment to making the Internet available to the general public. In 1999, the first PubliNets – Internet cafés accessible to the public for a low fee – were set up across the country and expanded rapidly (Haugbølle & Cavatorta, 2012). As illustrated in Figure 10, the trend of Internet usage in Tunisia has been increasing. It is higher than in the rest of the Arab world and, in 2008, was higher than the world average. By 2011 online access had been so widely implemented in Tunisia that almost 40% of the country’s population was regularly using the Internet.

**Figure 10: Internet Usage in Tunisia**

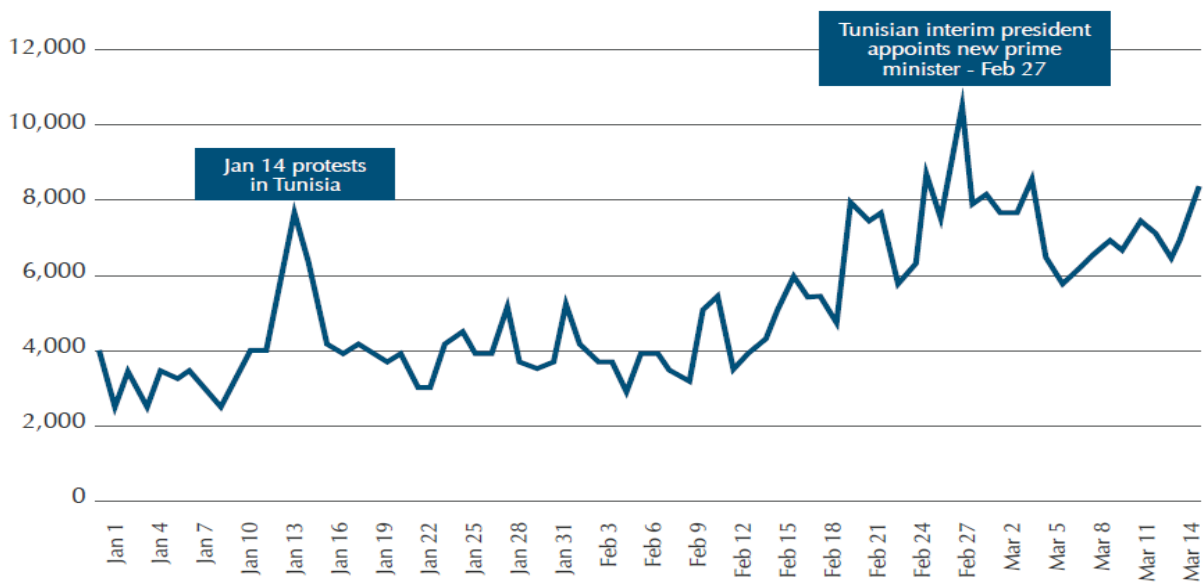


Source: [http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=WDI&f=Indicator\\_Code%3AIT.NET.USER.P2](http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=WDI&f=Indicator_Code%3AIT.NET.USER.P2)

The growth trend in Internet usage in Tunisia, which was almost identical to that in the Arab world as a whole from 2002 to 2007, was faster a few years before the revolution as well as during the revolution. This increase is not likely attributable to PubliNets since the Internet cafés were set up in the country before 2002. Rather, the increase might be related to the social and political conditions that led to Tunisian revolution.

As illustrated in Figure 11, the volume of daily tweets in Tunisia, which was less than 4,000 at the beginning of January 2011, increased to 8,000 by January 14 when the president resigned from office. The volume of daily tweets drastically decreased after the president’s resignation. Similarly, the volume of daily tweets increased on February 27 when Tunisia’s interim president appointed a new prime minister, and significantly decreased after that date. This means that the tweets sent on those dates most likely were related to the aforementioned political events and more generally to Tunisian revolution.

**Figure 11: Volume of Daily Tweets in Tunisia**



Source: Arab Social Media Report, 2011

**Table 4: Mobile, Internet, Facebook and Twitter Penetration 2011**

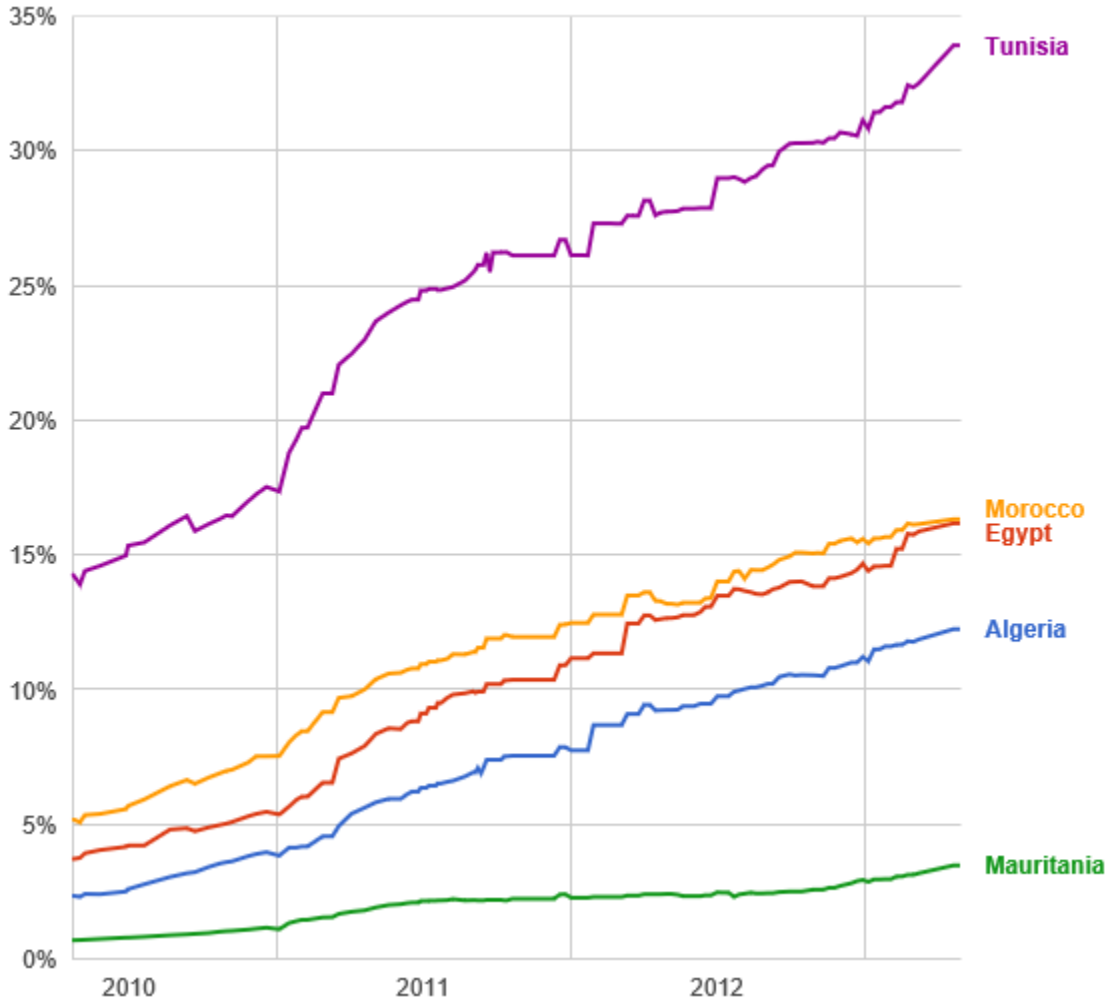
Country	Mobile Subscriptions (%)	Internet Users (%)	Twitter Penetration (%)	Facebook Penetration (%)
Tunisia	106.04	36.80	0.09	26.25
Mauritania	79.34	3.00	0.01	2.22
Morocco	100.10	49.00	0.08	11.92
Algeria	92.42	12.50	0.02	7.42
Egypt	87.11	26.74	0.15	10.23
Libya	171.52	14	0.07	3.46

Source:

<http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/PremiumContent/ICTTables.aspx?&PriMenuID=17&CatID=22&mnu=Cat>

Table 4 indicates that in 2011 26.25% of Tunisia's Internet users were also Facebook users. Moreover, Arab Social Media (2011) reported that the growth rate of Facebook users during the 2011 protests (January 14 to April 5) was 17% as compared to 10% during the same months in 2010. Figure 12 indicates that the Facebook penetration trend in Tunisia increased significantly during the revolutionary period. In addition, some Arab countries where the Arab Spring did not take place did not witness a similar increase over the same period of time. This points to a probable correlation between Facebook usage and the Tunisian revolution.

**Figure 12: Facebook Penetration**

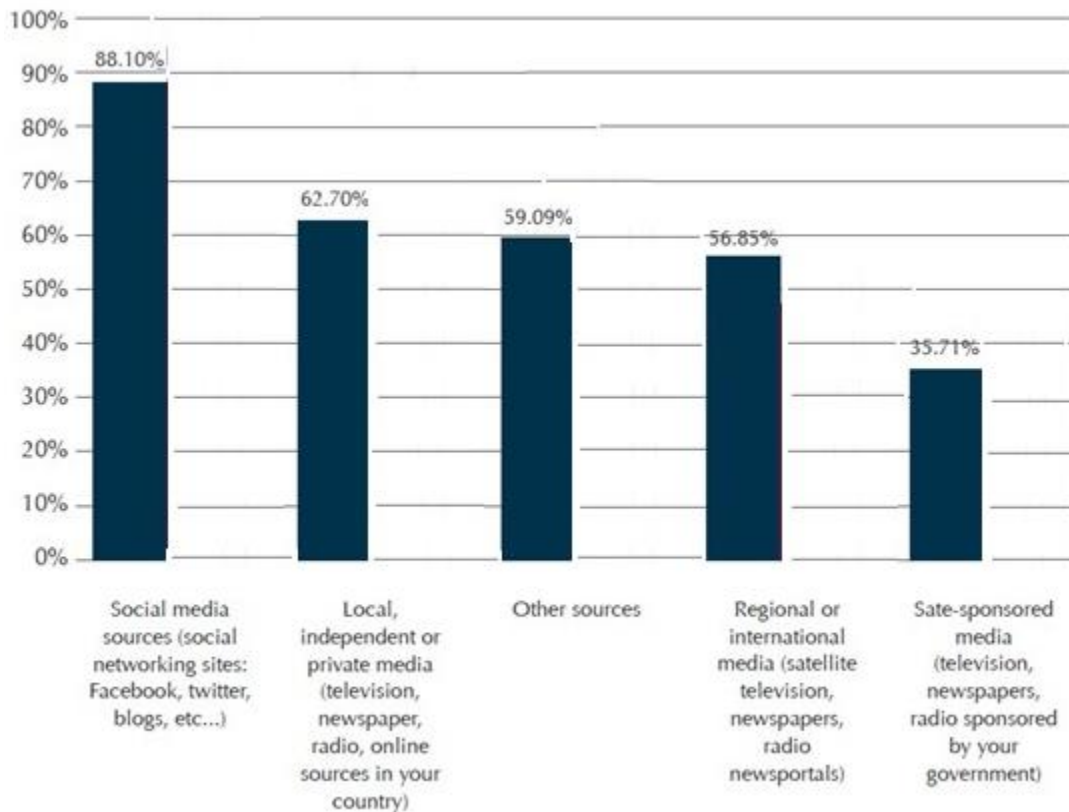


Source:

<http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Facebook/LineChart.aspx?&PriMenuID=18&CatID=24&mnu=Cat>

Figure 13 below, which indicates that 88.10% of Tunisians accessed social-media sources for news and information pertaining to the events during the civil movements, confirms the above-mentioned correlations between social media and the Tunisian revolution. All these figures can be interpreted in a manner that supports the argument that the Internet in general and social media in particular played some role in Tunisia during the Arab Spring.

**Figure 13: Where did you get your news/information on the events during the civil movements?**



Source: Arab Social Media report, 2011

A reasonable conclusion that can be reached is that the expansion of the accessibility of the Internet to all Tunisians through the implementation of PubliNets across the country not only helped educate the Tunisian workforce but also had the effect of “creating many technologically savvy youth who would use social media as a tool of political dissent and finally of political mobilization” (Haugbølle & Cavatorta, 2012, p. 186).

While the increase in access to social media including Facebook and Twitter might have strengthened the revolution through the facilitation of the dissemination of information, the access itself cannot be considered to have been one of the underlying causes of the revolution.

Rather, it was an important factor that influenced the revolutionary process, its structure and results.

Khonder (2011) stresses the role of conventional and social media, stating that both television and Facebook played significant roles in disseminating information and mobilizing the masses of protestors in Tunisia. In support of his view, Khonder (2011) presents the argument put forward by the president of Tunisia's Internet Society: "Of the 2,000 registered tweeters barely 200 were active users but before the revolution there were two million users of Facebook. Social media was absolutely crucial [to the revolution's success]."

Khonder evidently believes that social media played such an important role in Tunisia that the revolution would not have occurred but for such a high level of accessibility. Another author, Schraeder (2012), agrees with Khonder, stating that "Facebook and Twitter were critical to the speed with which protests spread throughout the country. Facebook was particularly influential in the revolutionary process, prompting many to refer to the events in Tunisia as the first Facebook revolution" (p. 78). However, the role played by social media in the Tunisian Arab Spring should not be overstated. Regourd and Hamdouni (2012) explain that, even if a substantial proportion of the population took advantage of social media – most particularly of Facebook – to accelerate the country's revolutionary process, the majority of revolutionaries were not necessarily Facebook users. For example, the rural provinces and the poor suburbs which did not have access to Facebook were still able to mobilize people in support of the revolutionary movement.

Supporting this argument Laacher (2013) while not underestimating the role played by social media in the Tunisian revolution, believes that rigorous sociological analysis leads to the conclusion that one must not also overestimate the role and power of social media by

erroneously characterizing these platforms as instruments of national liberation for oppressed peoples. In Laacher's opinion, social media is just one among many political processes that contributed to the overall success of the Tunisian revolution. Alterman (2011) also asserts that:

Social media certainly played a part in the Arab revolts of 2011, but they played a sometimes surprising one that was intimately related to traditional media. It was not Twitter and Facebook, but television that was absolutely fundamental to the unfolding of events, playing a decisive role in expanding protests of thousands into protests of millions (p. 103).

Although these authors do not agree on the degree of importance of the role that social media played during the Arab Spring, they both acknowledge that social media had a tangible influence on the 2011 Tunisian uprisings. While social media evidently played a key role, it did not cause the Tunisian revolution nor was it the most important factor that led to the revolution. In fact, the most important underlying cause of the revolution was the inability of the state apparatus to address people's development needs. It was this fundamental weakness of the state that inspired a revolutionary upsurge in which social media was an important tool for disseminating and exchanging information.

Upon realizing the importance of the role that social media can play, Tunisia's authoritarian regime tried to control access to the Internet, and this included attempting to prevent people from using the Internet for disseminating information critical of the government. According to Haugbølle and Cavatorta (2012), "the regime monitored PubliNets very closely and periodically blocked access to a number of websites" (p. 187). But these measures had little effect. Hackers were able to circumvent the roadblocks and thus facilitate a continuous electronic exchange of information. As explained by Regourd and Hamdouni (2012), although the regime tried to hack and block many accounts, a group of anonymous hackers continued to exchange information and publish photos and videos that totally evaded the control of the Tunisian

authorities.<sup>7</sup> Despite the regime's best efforts to prevent publicity, the images, posted on social networks, mobilized the inhabitants of prosperous cities who sympathized with their fellow citizens in the hinterland<sup>8</sup>.

Tunisia's social protests arose out of Tunisians' dissatisfaction, discontent and anger with the socio-economic and political conditions in the country. Haugbølle and Cavatorta (2012) explain Tunisians' resentment in these terms: "The predatory behaviour [of the state], backed by the possibility of relying on political contacts and the security services, led to a significant increase in corrupt practices that not only undermined economic performance, but created widespread resentment against the ruling elites among ordinary citizens, given the increase in income inequalities" (p. 185). This resentment affected citizens of all social classes. These authors state that even "middle and upper-class people who had benefited from the integration of Tunisia in the world economy and managed to create successful businesses during the 1990s turned against the regime, as they were forced to share their profits with members of the Ben Ali clan" (Haugbølle & Cavatorta, 2012, p. 185).

Dissatisfaction and resentment were common responses to the widespread corruption, bribery, political repression, lack of freedom and nepotism to which Tunisians had been subjected for years. Living under an authoritarian regime might have been more acceptable to the majority of Tunisians if the regime had actually made a sincere effort to help the country and its people meet their basic development needs. But, as Zeleza (2012) explains, "Beneath its apparent political tranquility, tensions had been simmering in Tunisia for years, Ben Ali's

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<sup>7</sup> Original French: "Malgré les tentatives de piratage et de blocage de plusieurs comptes, un groupe de hackers anonyme a continué d'échanger des informations et de publier des photos et des vidéos échappant totalement aux autorités tunisiennes." (Regourd & Hamdouni, 2012, p. 136).

<sup>8</sup> Original French: "Ces images postées dans les réseaux sociaux ont poussé dans les rues les habitants des villes prospères qui se sont senties solidaires de leurs concitoyens de l'intérieur du pays" (Laacher, 2013, p. 85).

dictatorship was despised, its capacity to deliver growth without development and democracy severely eroded” (p. 131).

As analyzed in the two preceding chapters, the root causes of the revolution were regional imbalances, poverty, unemployment, corruption, human-rights violations and repression of freedom. These factors combined to prevent Tunisia from addressing the development needs of the country and its people. The autocratic regime generated frustration, discontent and dissatisfaction within many Tunisians who expressed their frustration through street demonstrations and protests. Social media was used as a tool for disseminating critical information for mobilizing discontented citizens. The influence of the media was so extensive that many claim that, without it, the revolution “would not have had the same magnitude” (Regourd & Hamdouni, 2012, p. 136).

## Conclusion

The steadily increasing GDP statistics, relied upon by Tunisia's political authorities to claim economic progress, did not reflect the reality of the deterioration in the social and economic conditions of common Tunisians. In effect, whatever growth occurred over the course of the Ben Ali regime was not used in a manner that benefited the majority of the population, manifesting that growth is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for meeting development needs. The Tunisian HDI also had been increasing over the last few years before the revolution, which suggests progress in terms of education, health and incomes relative to other Middle Eastern and North African countries. However, these indicators include some but not all of the factors that affect people's well-being. By UNDP's admission, HDI does not include a number of indicators of inequality that are essential components of human security and well-being and that "a fuller picture of a country's level of human development requires analysis of other indicators" (UNDP, 2014). Analysis of other indicators, analyzed in this paper, reveals economic, governance and political inequities that created dissatisfaction, anger and frustration within the populace. These issues, including high unemployment resulting in lack of opportunities for educated young people; autocratic, dictatorial and repressive rule, resulting in human rights violation and repression of freedom; regional inequalities in development, with some regions showing high levels of poverty and access to benefits compared to deprived regions, where people had little or no access to life opportunities; and rampant corruption mobilized Tunisians to embark on a revolutionary path that relied on social media as a tool to express dissent and to disseminate and exchange information among protesters. The significance of the influence of social media has led some scholars to characterize the Tunisian revolution as

a “Facebook” or “social media” revolution. The reality (as analyzed in this paper) is that economic, political and social issues, analyzed in this paper, were the main factors that propelled the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime; and the social media played a role in dissemination of information on the inadequacies of the Ben Ali regime, served as a tool for people’s expression of dissatisfaction with the state of governance and overall, helped spread strengthen the revolution. This conclusion, based on the analyses in the paper, supports the hypothesis that Tunisia’s human development index showing positive movements towards socio-economic growth and stability was not indicative of real increase in the wellbeing of the Tunisian people, as such; and that, in fact, unemployment, limited opportunities for educated young people, corruption, autocratic, dictatorial and repressive rule and lack of freedom were amongst the primary factors that mobilized people’s revolution in Tunisia; social media played a less significant role in *starting* the revolution.

Data research and analysis presented in this paper show that:

- a. Tunisia’s improving economic and human-development statistics in the period before the revolution did not reflect the deterioration in access of the people to basic rights (basic needs satisfaction and political and human rights), which generated frustration and dissatisfaction in the polpulance;
- b. Economic and social and political and governance issues were the root causes of people’s revolt against the governing regime;
- c. Social media played an important but secondary role in disseminating critical information for mobilizing discontented citizens.

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