



BRIEFING PAPER

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Tunisia 2018

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Summary

Tunisia is often seen as the single success story since the Arab uprisings of 2011. The democratisation process has indeed been more successful there than in other Arab countries that had upheavals, but it has still been difficult.

The Tunisian Assembly of the Representatives of the People was elected in 2014 and two parties dominated: Nidaa Tounes, a secularist party, and Ennahda, a mainstream Islamist party. Next elections are due in 2019. Nidaa Tounes has some members with connections to the former regime, including the President Beiji Caid Essebsi, who served as speaker of the Ben Ali-era parliament for many years. Ennahda's leader describes himself as a "Muslim democrat" rather than an Islamist; Ennahda does not propose sharia law for Tunisia.

Tunisia has a strong record on women's rights compared with other countries in the region. Women hold almost a third of seats in Assembly of the Representatives of the People.

While Tunisia's constitutional set-up is democratic, several recent moves have caused concern for Tunisia's future democratic development:

- the Truth and Dignity Commission, set up to investigate gross human rights violations since 1955 did not have its mandate renewed by Parliament in April 2018
- The Constitutional Court has still not been set up
- a reconciliation law passed in September 2017 provides impunity for acts of corruption by public servants under the Ben Ali administration, according to critics
- the opposition says a new law on associations risks suppressing public debate

A government of national unity was established in 2016, ostensibly to push through reforms, although some worry that it stifles opposition. Youssef Chahed, a member of Nidaa, was appointed head of government. Local elections were held on 6 May, but turnout was disappointingly low, suggesting that enthusiasm for democratisation may be waning.

In January 2018, riots spread across the country as people demonstrated against austerity, rising prices and unemployment. Hundreds were arrested. Tunisians are also angry about corruption and nepotism, although Tunisia is not the worst offender in the region by any means.

Dissatisfaction with their standard of living and prospects for improvement have led many Tunisians to emigrate, some taking the dangerous route across the Mediterranean.

Many Tunisians have also travelled to Syria, Iraq and Libya to fight with *jihadi* groups. The authorities have been relatively successful at controlling the border with Libya, however, and containing a revolt in the mountainous region to the west of the country. In 2017 the FCO relaxed its warnings about travel to Tunisia, although it still advises against travel to areas in the south and west.

The UK has increased its aid to Tunisia and cooperates on security, economic governance and political development.

There is undeniably growing frustration that the revolution has not delivered better economic conditions; high unemployment causes much suffering in Tunisia, particularly in

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the less-developed south and west. Some are calling for the Prime Minister to be sacked, although observers question whether that would help much.

Although there are some signs of a return to authoritarianism, Tunisia is still the most hopeful of the countries that had uprisings in 2011.

1. Basics¹

Area and Population

Area: 163,610 sq km (land area 154,530 sq km)

Population (1 July 2017): 11,438,575

Population density (land area only, at 1 July 2017): 74.0 per sq km

Life expectancy (years at birth, 2015): 75.1 (males 74.5; females 77.8)

Finance

GDP in current prices (World Bank estimates, 2015): US \$43,015m.
(\$3,822 per head)

Real GDP growth (2017): 1.9%

Inflation (average change in consumer prices, 2017): 5.3%

Currency: Tunisian dinar (TD)

Government and Politics

Head of State: President Béji Caïd Essebsi

Head of Government: Prime Minister Youssef Chahed

Last election: Presidential, 23 November 2014 (first round); 21
December 2014 (second round)

Next election: Legislative, due 2019

2. Democratic process

2.1 Parliament

Tunisia has a unicameral parliament – the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) has 214 members, 161 of whom are elected directly, while there are 26 multi-member constituencies.

The most recent election was held in 2014, the first to the ARP, which had replaced the Constituent Assembly.

The major parties in the present Assembly and the number of seats they hold are:

Nidaa Tounes	86
Ennahda Movement	69
Free Patriotic Union	16
Popular Front	15

The next elections, parliamentary and presidential, are due in 2019.

Legislative procedure

Bills can be introduced with the support of at least 10 Representatives. They can also be proposed by the President or by the Head of

¹ Europa World Year Book, Tunisia

Government. Government bills and bills originating with the President take priority. Bills must be sent to the Provisional Authority for the Control of the Constitutionality of the Draft Laws. Bills and amendments presented by Representatives are struck down if they damage the budgetary balance previously set out in Finance Acts.

ARP standing legislative committees cannot make substantive amendments to bills submitted by the executive branch.²

Ordinary laws can be passed by a simple majority in the ARP, as long as that does not represent less than a third of all Members.³

2.2 Parties

Nidaa Tounes

Nidaa Tounes is a secularist party created by its leader Beji Caid Essebsi in 2012. It is hostile to political Islam of Ennahda, although it is governing in coalition with the Islamists. Some former Ben Ali officials are in the Cabinet.⁴

11 out of 39 members of Nidaa Tounes's executive committee are female. This party enshrines the representation of women written into its party rulebook and also has a women's commission.⁵

Nidaa Tounes's 2014 manifesto included a commitment to remove the obstacles to access for women to the labour market, and to reduce unemployment, especially as it affects women more than men. The party promised to develop childcare facilities, improve housing provision for women in areas where there are jobs; create a high commission for women's equality; introduce positive discrimination to boost women's representation in bodies such as trade unions, and paid maternity leave. Nidaa Tounes also wanted to ensure that women were represented in the next Government.⁶

Ennahda

Ennahda is a mainstream Islamist party that many commentators have congratulated for keeping the Tunisian democratic reform process going. Co-founder of the party, Rachid Ghannouchi, describes himself as a Muslim democrat rather than an Islamist.⁷ It has abandoned some of its stronger Islamist policy positions when they have been controversial, and strengthened its condemnation of violent *jihadis*. Ennahda easily topped the poll in the elections to the Constituent Assembly in 2011 but came second to Nidaa Tounes in the 2014 parliamentary election.

² ['Carter Center Urges Tunisia to Ensure Full Legislative Authority for Parliament'](#), Carter Center press release, 12 January 2017

³ ['Tunisia's Constitution of 2014'](#), translated by IDEA

⁴ ['Amnesty for Ben Ali-era corruption in Tunisia condemned'](#), *Financial Times*, 14 September 2017

⁵ ['Counting \(on\) women in politics - Experiences from Morocco & Tunisia'](#), UNESCO Division for Gender Equality, 2017

⁶ ['Programme électoral de Béji Caïd Essebsi: "That's the way it is!"](#), Business News .com.tn, 15 December 2014

⁷ Ahmed Gaaloul, ['The Radical Change of the Tunisian Peaceful Revolution'](#), Washington Institute, 5 October 2017

In declarations of its leadership, Ennahda, the moderate Islamist party, has stressed its support for women's rights. In the party platform for the 2011 election, the party said: "

We seek to protect women's achievements and encourage their role in all fields in order to allow them to contribute to the development of society free from abstractions of decadence and pitfalls of marginalization.⁸

Nevertheless, certain Ennahda politicians have made statements which may contradict this line. One female politician explained that single mothers and their children should not get the same legal protection as married mothers because this would 'normalise' children outside marriage.⁹ Some Ennahda members have rejected certain articles of the 1979 [Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women](#). Ennahda backed away from including a reference to sharia law in the Constitution, supporting in the end a reference to Tunisia's Arab and Muslim heritage instead. The party retains a conservative view of gender roles.

2.3 Women in Parliament

There is a requirement for 'vertical gender parity' on lists of candidates for the ARP, meaning that the lists alternate male and female candidates. Most lists are headed by men but, as soon as a party does well enough to have more than one Representative, the system ensures that a woman will take the second seat. Most women in the Assembly were elected from the second or fourth position on party lists.¹⁰

After the 2014 election, there were women in 31% of seats, a slight increase over the figure for the outgoing Constituent Assembly.

Parties were split about the requirement for 'horizontal equality' on lists, that is that parties should present as many lists headed by women as by men. The Constituent Assembly debated requiring that a third of parties' lists should be headed by women, instead. This suggestion was not passed.¹¹

Parties in rural constituencies in the south of the country were much more likely to report difficulties in recruiting enough potential candidates; that means principally Ennahda.

2.4 Truth and Dignity Commission

In April 2018, the Tunisian Parliament voted to end the mandate of the Truth and Dignity Commission. This had been set up to implement the transitional justice law by investigating gross human rights violations committed by the government since 1955. Parliament's move was controversial – critics said that it was not entitled to stop the

⁸ [Gender equality policy in Tunisia](#), European Parliament, 2012

⁹ Karima El Ouazghari, [Ennahdha in Practice: Democracy, Gender, and Sharia in Tunisia's New Constitution](#), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswertiges Politik, 2014

¹⁰ [Final report on the legislative and parliamentary elections in Tunisia](#), 2014, National Democratic Institute, undated

¹¹ [Final report on the legislative and parliamentary elections in Tunisia](#), 2014, National Democratic Institute, undated, p58

commission's work and that it was anyway inquorate. The vote in parliament was led by Nidaa Tounes, underlining suspicions that the party represents Tunisia's previous regime; Ennahda, the Islamist party, supported continuing the commission's work.¹²

In May 2018 Amnesty International called for the Commission's work to continue:

...since the creation of this mechanism, Tunisian authorities have been trying to obstruct its work. The Tunisian parliament recently voted against extending its mandate. Without the extension, the Commission won't be able to complete its currently open cases, and hundreds of victims would be denied accountability and truth.¹³

2.5 Constitutional Court

Tunisia's Constitution of 2014 provided for a Constitutional Court, an essential element in the country's system of the rule of law. It has still not been set up yet, and experts argue that it could contribute to the country's fight against corruption:

Constitutional bodies and supervisory commissions in all sectors can supplement the pivot away from corruption. The Court would have the authority to prevent members of Parliament from crossing any constitutional "red lines". The parliament currently runs without any supervisory body. Introducing a watchdog that the public trusts would be further assurance that politicians are held accountable, thereby boosting voter turnout.¹⁴

2.6 Civil society organisations

The Tunisian Government is preparing to amend the law on associations. Under the Ben Ali government all civil society organisations had to be approved by the Ministry of the Interior. The revolution swept those restrictions away and civil society organisations gained new prominence, under a new decree law that provided one of the most enabling regimes in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Government now says that the fight against terrorism and money laundering means that a new, more restrictive legal framework is needed. Although discussion of the new law of associations predates it, the fact that the EU added Tunisia to the list of countries at risk from money laundering and terrorist financing added to calls for a change.¹⁵

Civil society organisations pointed to the five officials from the Central Bank formally accused of money laundering, and said that the move to tighten the law on associations was politically motivated.¹⁶

¹² ['Parliament votes to disband Tunisia's truth commission'](#), *Al-Monitor*, 13 April 2018

¹³ ['Tunisians have waited decades for justice and accountability, but Parliament's obstructionism poses a threat to transitional justice.'](#), Amnesty International, 28 May 2018

¹⁴ Amir ben Ameer and Erin Neale, ['Democracy in Tunisia: Façade or Reality?'](#), Atlantic Council, 23 March 2018

¹⁵ ['EU deals Tunisia another heavy blow'](#), *Al-Monitor*, 1 March 2018

¹⁶ ['Réforme de la loi sur les associations: vers une dérive liberticide en Tunisie?'](#), *Nawaat*, 30 March 2018

3. Government

3.1 Presidential election

Beji Caid Essebsi, of Nidaa Tounes, won the first presidential election since the fall of the Ben Ali government in 2011, beating his opponent, Moncef Marzouki in a second round run-off. Ennahda did not present a presidential candidate; several areas of traditional support for Ennahda voted for Marzouki. Essebsi had been the Speaker of the parliament under Ben Ali and some feared that his election to the presidency meant that the old regime was returning to power.

His first Prime Minister was Habib Essid, an independent. Essid lasted for 18 months, until a motion of no confidence passed by the ARP brought about his resignation.

3.2 Government of national unity

In early June 2016 the President, Beji Caid Essebsi, appealed for a government of national unity, to carry out economic reforms and deal with social disruption.

On 13 July 2016, a range of political parties and trade unions signed the Carthage Declaration, setting out six priorities for the new government: combating terrorism, increasing economic growth and job creation, fighting corruption, improving the country's fiscal and social policies, regional and local development initiatives and increasing government efficiency.

In August Youssef Chahed (sometimes spelt Shahid, Chahid), a member of Nidaa Tounes, became Tunisia's seventh Prime Minister since the revolution, heading a government based on Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda but also including other parties and some independent ministers. Critics said that Chahed lacked experience and was close to the President's family.

Despite the change to a national unity government, it still proved difficult to deliver economic reforms and any improvement in public services. Protests against austerity measures increased in spring 2018, and the powerful UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union) said that the Government had failed to deliver on the Carthage Declaration goals.

In May 2018 Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, along with the biggest unions, signed Carthage II, with some parties calling for Prime Minister Chahed to go. Chahed has been involved in an increasingly bitter battle with Essebsi's son Hafedh, party leader of Nidaa, who called for his dismissal in May 2018. Ennahda, the junior partner in the government, rejected Chahed's dismissal and Chahed retorted that Hafedh Caid Essebsi was destroying the party.

3.3 Local elections 6 May

Tunisia held its first free municipal elections in May 2018. The turnout was low, at 33.7%, suggesting that public confidence in the democratic

project in Tunisia is not strong; youth turnout was reported to be particularly weak. Results were poor for the two main parties, particularly for Nidaa Tounes, while independents did better.¹⁷

¹⁷ Haifa Mzalouat, [A step forward for independents](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 May 2018

4. Domestic situation

4.1 The economy and the protests

The Tunisian economy has been passing through difficult times, managing only anaemic growth, partly provoked by the collapse of tourism after 2015 terrorist attacks. Public debt has increased sharply in the last few years, to represent about 70% of GDP,¹⁸ and foreign currency reserves are low; Tunisia has had a \$2.9 billion financing facility with the IMF since 2016.

Growth picked up somewhat in the past two years but inflation has increased sharply to more than 8% on one measure.¹⁹ Economic activity is concentrated in coastal areas, leaving high unemployment and few opportunities for those that live in the impoverished interior.

Demonstrations, sometimes turning violent, spread through much of the country in January 2018. People were angered by the 2018 finance law, which increased taxes and the price of consumer goods. More than 800 people were arrested in January, according to reports.²⁰

Attempts at reform have been obstructed by entrenched interests: unions, an elite that is sometimes corrupt and leaders of the informal economy, which dominates remote regions.²¹ Critics say that austerity measures required by international financial institutions are endangering the democratic process:

...the International Monetary Fund and other Western lenders demand that governments balance their budgets and open their economies. Those policies often produce jarring hardship and political upheaval that can undermine support for the very kind of democratic and capitalist systems the West is trying to build.²²

The protests may have further weakened the Prime Minister, Youssef Chahed, whose increasingly independent anti-corruption campaign had targeted individuals close to the two party chiefs of Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, costing him support.²³

Corruption

In NGO Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index 2017](#), Tunisia is a mid-ranking country, doing marginally better than China. The organisation says that Tunisia is taking "small yet positive steps towards fighting corruption", but questions the economic reconciliation law, passed in September 2017, which grants impunity to civil servants who were implicated in corruption under former dictator Ben Ali and allows them to return to positions of power. The reconciliation law

¹⁸ [IMF Statement on Tunisia](#), 13 April 2018

¹⁹ OECD, [Tunisia - Economic forecast summary \(May 2018\)](#)

²⁰ ['Nearly 800 Arrested in Economic Protests in Tunisia'](#), *New York Times*, 12 January 2018

²¹ ['Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia'](#), International Crisis Group, 10 May 2017

²² ['Belt-Tightening Demands Put Tunisia's Democracy at Risk'](#), *New York Times*, 3 May 2018

²³ ['Tunisia's Unfinished Economic Reforms Put Its Democratic Evolution in Danger'](#), *Syndication Bureau*, 30 January 2018

allows information about corruption cases to be hidden, as Human Rights Watch comments: “in contravention of the principles of transitional justice”.²⁴ On top of that, the closing down of the Truth and Dignity Commission was another blow to anti-corruption efforts. As demonstrators denounced the legislation outside the parliament in Tunis, an opposition politician said: “I congratulate you on the return of the dictatorial state and reconciliation with the corrupt.”²⁵

In an opinion poll conducted in August 2017, before the passage of the reconciliation law, around 90% of Tunisians said they thought that corruption had got worse since the revolution.²⁶ On the other hand, the same poll suggested that Tunisians rated employment as by far the most pressing economic problem, much worse than corruption.

4.2 Migration

One of the consequences of high unemployment and poverty, and lack of faith in the democratic process, is emigration; the pace of the exodus has increased sharply in the last couple of years, with 2017 seeing four times as many Tunisians arriving in Italy as the previous year. In June 2018, at least 48 migrants were drowned as a migrant boat capsized – the occupants were Tunisians and other nationalities. Nevertheless, migration levels are still lower than in 2011.²⁷

The EU authorities have collaborated with the security forces of next door Libya and some have suggested that this has moved the migrant route to pass through Tunisia. Others argue, however, that most of those leaving Tunisia are Tunisian, while most travelling through Libya are Africans from south of the Sahara and Bangladeshis; the Tunisian exodus is rooted in Tunisian economic and social conditions, according to this argument.

4.3 Terrorism and security

The Tunisian authorities claim success against the terrorist threat: “Tunisia has defeated terrorism. The threat from jihadists is now behind us. Tunis is as safe as Paris or other European capitals,” said the Director of the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies in an interview.²⁸

Since the notorious Sousse and Tunis attacks in 2015 and an attempt in 2016 by ISIS to take over a town near the Libyan border, there have been no major terrorist incidents and tourists are beginning to return.

Although Tunisian security forces have been relatively successful in preventing incursions across its border with Libya and in suppressing the revolt in the Chaambi Mountains, a state of emergency has remained in

²⁴ [“New Reconciliation Law Threatens Tunisia’s Democracy”](#), Human Rights Watch, 2 October 2017

²⁵ [“Tunisia parliament approves controversial amnesty for Ben Ali-era corruption”](#), *Reuters*, 13 September 2017

²⁶ [Public opinion survey of Tunisians](#), Center for Insights in Survey Research, International Republican Institute, August 2017

²⁷ Stefano Torelli, [“Escaping from Tunisia”](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, 10 November 2017

²⁸ [“Seeing the ‘political crisis’ behind Tunisia’s economic morass”](#), *Arab Weekly*, 11 March 2018

place since 2015. In March 2018, the authorities announced that they were extending it for another seven months.

On 3 June ISIS claimed that its fighters had conducted an explosive attack on a gas pipeline in the Kasserine governorate. Tunisia remains a significant source of recruits to ISIS/Daesh and al-Qaeda. In 2015, the [United Nations called for](#) urgent measures to stop the flow of Tunisians to jihadi groups. In January, Interpol circulated a list of 50 ISIS fighters who are Tunisian nationals and who it believed had crossed into Italy.

Attacks on civilians continue to take place. On 31 March 2018, two Western tourists, one of whom is British national, were attacked by an individual with a knife in the town of El Kef, in northwest Tunisia.

Although in July 2017 it dropped its advice not to travel to any part of Tunisia, the [FCO still advises](#) against travelling to large areas of western and southern Tunisia.

International security collaboration

Tunisia has a Partnership and Cooperation agreement with NATO, but the Tunisian government rejected a plan to build a joint command centre in Tunisia, because of the move's unpopularity. Collaboration with US forces, allowing them to use Tunisian air base to launch drones over Libya, for example, has been controversial.

[The EU](#) and individual European countries, including the UK (see below), have worked closely with Tunisia on security, providing training and equipment for counter-terrorism.

International collaboration has focused on the border with Libya, conscious that the chaos in Libya could overwhelm neighbouring Tunisia. The US Defense Threat Reduction Agency, an office of the US Department of Defense that fights against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, gave Tunisia a \$24.9 million grant in 2016 to help build a fence along half the Tunisia/Libya border. The Pentagon plans to invest a further \$20 million, from a joint fund set up with Germany, on sensors for the border.²⁹

²⁹ ['Pentagon partners with Germany on Tunisia border security'](#), *Al-Monitor*, 23 February 2018

5. UK relations

In March 2018, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon answered a Parliamentary Question on UK support for Tunisia's transition to democracy:

This financial year, we are supporting Tunisia with £10 million of programme funding. Our projects include support for the drafting of legislation that strengthens the rule of law, access to justice and the foundations for the creation of democratic and judicial institutions; the government of Tunisia's drive to tackle corruption by improving the governance of public bodies; and the effectiveness of Tunisia's Parliament. In our contacts with Tunisian Ministers and officials, we have consistently underlined the importance of Tunisia's first municipal elections in May this year, of progress in the establishment of the Constitutional Court and other independent bodies, and of the rights guaranteed by the Tunisian Constitution.³⁰

UK development aid to Tunisia has increased sharply in the current year. The biggest project aims to improve economic governance. The [Tunisia CSSF Economic and Governance Programme](#) has a budget of £5,150,000 and involves the (UK) Government Communications Service, the British Council, the OECD, the African Development Bank and the World Bank.

The Tunisia CSSF Security Programme ran from March 2017 to March 2018 and aimed to support security sector reform, strengthening its capacity to counter violent extremism and to manage Tunisia's borders. Its budget was £3,300,000.³¹

The UK Government-funded NGO Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) also has a [programme in Tunisia](#), aiming to strengthen the Parliament's legislative, oversight and representation functions.

WFD has, for example, been working to help the Tunisian Parliament's Committee for Administrative Reform, Good Governance, Anti-Corruption and Oversight of Public Expenditure develop expertise in overseeing public expenditure, drawing on the experience of the UK's Public Accounts Committee and National Audit Office.³²

Home Office minister Ben Wallace MP visited Tunisia in February 2018, where he discussed security arrangements for UK tourists and the broader fight against terrorism. Mr Wallace said:

My first official visit to Tunisia comes at an important time for both our countries ahead of the imminent return of British holidaymakers this year. I was pleased to be able to visit some of the areas where tourists will stay and to see for myself the security improvements.

I was delighted to meet a wide range of ministerial counterparts from the Government of Tunisia. A central theme of my meetings

³⁰ Written question - HL5489, 21 February 2018

³¹ [Tunisia CSSF Security Programme Summary](#)

³² See for example 'Tunisian Parliament saves 70m Dinars from review of sugar subsidies', Westminster Foundation for Democracy press release, 24 January 2017

was our strategic security partnership in the fight against global terrorism. Countries around the world must work together by sharing information and expertise in order to combat this scourge and to mitigate the risks against all our citizens.

I also made clear that the UK remains a steadfast partner in support of Tunisia's remarkable democratic transition. We will continue to work hand in hand with Tunisia in the years ahead to support economic growth and prosperity as well as stability and security.³³

Both the ministers, Lord Ahmad and Alistair Burt, will be visiting Tunisia in Summer 2018, to encourage democratic development, especially the establishment of the Constitutional Court, and to underline the UK's support.³⁴

³³ [‘Home Office Minister visits Tunisia’](#), Home Office press release, 2 February 2018

³⁴ [HC Written question – 147365](#), 8 June 2018

6. Outlook

6.1 Growing frustration

Since 2014, the Tunisian economy has contracted. While the World Bank forecasts that growth will pick up again in 2018 and will hit 4% by 2020,³⁵ unemployment remains stubbornly high, especially away from the coast and, notably, among young graduates. Inflation has been on the rise, and other problems that provoked the revolution, particularly corruption, have not been solved. Pressure from the International Monetary Fund to reduce government spending, particularly on the public sector wage bill, and to cut energy subsidies, could make many Tunisians' plight worse, at least in the short term.³⁶

The situation compared with 2011 is in one way worse: at least then there was a sense of optimism that a new political system could improve Tunisians' lives. That optimism is hard to find now.

6.2 Expendable Prime Ministers

In several countries in the Middle East and North Africa, presidents (and kings) have a habit of sacking heads of government when those governments try to introduce unpopular reforms.

Tunisia has been no exception to that practice, and there is now pressure on the present Prime Minister. Removing the Chahed would be unlikely to resolve the underlying conflicts that are making reform difficult in the country, and the government instability could undermine both Tunisians' and potential foreign investors' confidence in the system.

6.3 Return of the Ancien Régime?

There are increasing fears that Tunisia may not be immune from the sort of reaction that is happening in Egypt. While Egypt is an extreme example, concerns about Tunisia are not unreasonable.

Tunisia suffered a sharp decline in the [2018 report](#) of Freedom House, an NGO working on human rights and democratic change:

With the latest downgrade, Tunisia has come dangerously close to losing its status as the only "Free" country to emerge from the Arab Spring.³⁷

Freedom House says that increasingly brutal and unjust police tactics were on show in the January 2018 riots, that journalists are being prosecuted in military courts, and that democratic institutions and norms are not being strengthened.

The national unity government has not delivered convincingly on economic reform but it has meant that there is little opposition, helping to alienate Tunisians from the democratic process, as the poor turnout

³⁵ World Bank, [Tunisia- data](#)

³⁶ ['IMF Statement on Tunisia'](#), IMF press release, 13 April 2018

³⁷ ['Tunisian Democracy Stands at the Precipice'](#), Freedom House press release, 5 February 2018

at the local elections suggests has happened. The President's former role as Speaker of the Ben Ali Parliament and the prominent role the president's son, Hamed adds to the suspicion that the old guard are re-establishing their power and returning to the 'mafia-style' family rule of the Ben Alis.³⁸

Nevertheless, Tunisia remains a democracy; there has been no coup, such as happened in Egypt. Despite its flaws, the unity government represents a majority of voters and Tunisians still think that Nidaa Tounes, the dominant party, is more likely to be able to tackle corruption than any other party, according to the August 2017 poll.³⁹

Of the uprisings across the region that were sparked by the suicide of Tunisian stallholder Mohammed Bouazizi in 2011, none can show such positive results as Tunisia, and UK Ministers such as Alistair Burt retain some optimism:

The excellent work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and those who have taken part through the British Council in encouraging the development of democracy are playing an important part in Tunisia, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to draw attention to a good move forward for Tunisia, which we hope foreshadows other things to come in the region.⁴⁰

³⁸ ['Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and his family's 'Mafia rule'',](#) *Daily Telegraph*, 16 January 2011.

³⁹ [Public opinion survey of Tunisians](#), Center for Insights in Survey Research, International Republican Institute, August 2017

⁴⁰ [HC Deb 23 May 2018, c827-9](#)

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