



# In Focus

## Tunisia's Nobel Peace Prize

On 9 October 2015, the Norwegian Nobel Committee [awarded](#) the Nobel Peace Prize for 2015 to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet for its “decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution of 2011”. From early 2013, political turmoil and social unrest threatened to undermine Tunisia’s democratic transition, bringing the country to the [brink of civil war](#). The Quartet was formed in the summer of 2013, and sought a peaceful solution to Tunisia’s turmoil through a national dialogue. It comprised [four civil society organisations](#): the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Confederation of Industry Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers. [According to the Nobel Committee](#), the Quartet was instrumental in helping Tunisia to establish a constitutional system of government guaranteeing fundamental rights. Moreover, the Nobel Committee [argued](#) that events in Tunisia since 2011 were “unique and remarkable” because it showed that it was possible for Islamist and secular parties to cooperate, and demonstrated the role civil society institutions could play in a country’s democratic transition.

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### Background

In 2011, Tunisia’s [Jasmine Revolution](#) led to the [overthrow](#) of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali’s authoritarian regime and [inspired](#) further uprisings across the Arab world in what became known as the ‘Arab Spring’. Commentators suggest that the revolution was provoked by the [events of 17 December 2010](#), when a young unemployed man, Mohamed Bouazizi, set fire to himself after police stopped him from selling fruit and vegetables. Anti-Government protests followed, and soon spread across the country. The BBC [attributed](#) the protests to “widespread discontent at economic hardship, decades of autocratic rule and corruption”. Between mid-December 2011 and mid-January 2012 there were a number of deadly clashes between protestors and police—though the army [reportedly](#) refused to fire on the protestors. On 14 January 2011, Ben Ali [fled the country](#) to Saudi Arabia, ending his 23 year reign. It is estimated that [338 people were killed](#) during the revolution.

Following a period of interim Government, [elections](#) were held for Tunisia’s National Constituent Assembly (NCA) in October 2011, which was [tasked](#) with drafting a new constitution; setting a date for future Parliamentary elections; and forming a caretaker Government. The moderate Islamist Ennahda party [won the poll](#), and went on to form a [coalition government](#) with the liberal Congress for the Republic and the left-of-centre Ettakatol Party. However, several [incidents](#) in 2013 appeared to threaten Tunisia’s move to democracy. The [assassination](#) of two high-profile opposition leaders in February and July—[reportedly](#) by Islamist extremists—prompted further [unrest](#), and [protests](#) again spread across the country calling for the Government to [resign](#). These events came amid [ongoing political disagreements](#) between the Islamist-led Government and secular opposition over the drafting of a new constitution, as well as the [emergence](#) of Salafist extremists.

## The National Dialogue Quartet

The National Dialogue Quartet was formed in the summer of 2013, and on 18 September 2013, the Quartet unveiled a '[Road Map](#)' for resolving Tunisia's [political deadlock](#). The [Road Map](#) called for: the Ennahda-led Government to step down and for a caretaker government to be appointed; the creation of a new independent election commission; and for revisions to and approval of the draft constitution. However, the leader of the Ennahda Party, Rached Ghannouchi, considered it only a "basis for discussion", rather than a [binding agreement](#). This prompted opposition parties to demand a further [promise](#) that the then Prime Minister Ali Larayedh resign, which took [three weeks to agree](#). The 'national dialogue' over the implementation of the Road Map eventually [started](#) on 25 October 2015. The [negotiations](#) among Tunisia's political factions were protracted and difficult—it took seven weeks to reach an agreement on a new Prime Minister and the [dialogue almost collapsed](#). However, a settlement was finally reached, and Larayedh and his Government [stepped down](#) on 9 January 2014. A [new constitution was agreed](#) later that month.

The new constitution was [approved](#) by the NCA on 26 January 2014, receiving 200 votes out of 216. The *Financial Times* [argues](#) that a key reason for that approval was the Ennahda party's willingness to compromise on its desire for an "overtly Islamist document". For example, although Tunisia's [constitution](#) enshrines Tunisia's Muslim identity, it does not mention Sharia law. Overall, reaction to Tunisia's new constitution has been mostly positive, with the *Guardian* [noting](#) that "the new constitution is considered one of the most progressive in the Arab world". The document guarantees equality between men and women, and commits the state to protect women's rights. It also contains numerous provisions protecting citizens' rights—such as freedom from torture and the right to due process.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) suggested that there were a [number of reasons](#) for the Quartet's success, and that a "key factor" was the support from Tunisian society. The organisations constituting the Quartet represented different sections of Tunisian society, and together had "both moral clout and political brawn; they could mobilise public opinion and steer the national debate". The ICG also [argues](#) that the Quartet proved to be an effective body for promoting negotiation between Tunisia's political parties, especially given that the UGTT and UTICA—who often disagreed—were willing to work together. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace also [praised](#) the "determination, talent, and sheer stamina" of the UGTT's General Secretary, Houcine Abbassi, "who personally ran hundreds of hours of negotiations".

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## Future Challenges

Commentators [observe](#) that Tunisia still faces a number of challenges. Monica Marks, visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, [argues](#) that the country is facing a "looming economic crisis and serious, growing security threats, aggravated by the destabilising effects of Libya". Indeed, 2015 saw the country rocked by two serious terrorist attacks against the [Bardo Museum in Tunis](#) and on tourists at the [resort of Port El Kantaoui](#) in June. The *Economist* also [notes](#) that Tunisians make up the largest group of foreign fighters joining ISIL.

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