

# Breaking Barriers: Tunisia's Arab Spring

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Even in the twenty-first century, people in countries around the world are still struggling to have something that should be considered a basic human right: a voice. Many of these countries are ruled by dictators, who wield oppressive power, and one of those countries was Tunisia. Until 2011, Tunisia was led by the imprudent and egotistical dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Ben Ali was accused of using his power to extort money for himself and his family while most were struggling to feed themselves and their families. Then, Tunisians managed to transform their country from a dictatorship to a democracy relatively peacefully. Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty-six year old martyr, is considered to have sparked the Arab Spring. Bouazizi became a street vendor to support his widowed mother and his six siblings. In December 2010, the police accused Bouazizi of selling produce without a permit and tried to force him to give them his cart. Bouazizi refused to comply, which allegedly resulted in a policewoman slapping him across the face. According to NPR, Bouazizi ran from the police who were ridiculing him and about to arrest him. In an act of desperation, he lit himself on fire in front of a government building. The controversy was caught on video by bystanders and quickly spread across Tunisia through social media. The following day, Tunisians began staging protests against the government in mass numbers, and the protests lasted for weeks, eventually inspiring similar protests across the Middle East. While Bouazizi's act of defiance sparked Ben Ali's downfall, his corruption and long-term oppression of Tunisians had created great contempt for Ben Ali long before. The Tunisian Arab Spring broke barriers by overthrowing a long-standing dictator, creating a democracy with an improved justice system, and advancing women's rights, which led to a cascade of other democratically-motivated rebellions in the region.

From the beginning of his rule, Ben Ali governed Tunisia with a one-party rule. He was part of the Tunisian government for thirty years, of which he was a dictator for twenty-three. During the weeks following Bouazizi's death, protesters forced Ben Ali to forfeit his long-standing dictatorship and flee into exile in Saudi Arabia. The protests were inflamed due to "economic difficulties, including rising fuel and food costs and high unemployment."<sup>1</sup> The people of Tunisia were exasperated with how their leader was operating the country and treating them. The ever-increasing costs for everyday items while people were failing to find a job was maddening. For others, it was even more upsetting that Ben Ali refused to acknowledge Bouazizi's tragic incident and take action in a timely manner. Bouazizi's mother, Menobia Bouazizi claimed Ben Ali took fourteen days to visit her son and "when Ali finally did reach out to her family, it was too late—both to save her son and to save his presidency."<sup>2</sup> Menobia Bouazizi also added that countless Tunisians believed Ben Ali only visited her son in order to "derail the revolution"<sup>3</sup> rather than out of genuine sympathy.

During mid-January 2011, a few weeks before Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, there had been significant violence between the protesters and the police in Tunis, the capital. This resulted in the death of many protesters as troops were deployed in an effort to regain control. Finally, Ben Ali tried negotiating with the protesters, pledging that when his term ended in 2014, he would not seek another term. In fact, "He even expressed remorse over the deaths of protesters

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, Priscella. "Arab Springs." *World at War, ABC-CLIO*, 2013, [worldatwar.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/2009412?webSiteCode=SLN\\_WAR&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f2009412&token=791A7C34A028B47E5559F6C4EFA21CC2&casError=False](http://worldatwar.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/2009412?webSiteCode=SLN_WAR&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f2009412&token=791A7C34A028B47E5559F6C4EFA21CC2&casError=False). Accessed 10 Dec. 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ritfai, Ryan. "Timeline: Tunisia's Uprising." *Al-jazeera*, 23 Jan. 2011, [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/tunisia/2011/01/201114142223827361.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/tunisia/2011/01/201114142223827361.html). Accessed 14 Feb. 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

and vowed to order police to stop using live fire except in self-defense. Addressing some of the protesters' grievances, he said he would reduce food prices and loosen restrictions on Internet use. However, Ben Ali's concessions didn't satisfy the protesters, who continued to clash with security forces, resulting in several deaths."<sup>4</sup> On January 13, 2011, in his final bid to stop the protests, Ben Ali made the above offer but was rejected by the protesters. The fighting continued, putting the capital into distress. Consequently, on January 14, a state of emergency was declared, and "Tunisian state media reported that the government had been dissolved and that legislative elections would be held in the next six months. That announcement also failed to quell unrest and Ben Ali stepped down as president leaving the country."<sup>5</sup>

Once Ben Ali escaped to Saudi Arabia, his palace was searched and was found to be filled with illegal items that only proved his corruption. According to *New York Times*, "Six months after he fled, a Tunisian court sentenced him and his wife, Leila Trabelsi, to 35 years in prison and a \$66 million fine after a trial in absentia for embezzlement and corruption. He was also accused of possessing illicit drugs, guns and purloined archaeological treasures in his palaces, as well as ordering the killings of those who opposed his 23-year grip on power."<sup>6</sup> The disdain for Ben Ali was so great that his own former subjects created an international arrest warrant for him and his family. Unfortunately, the international arrest warrant was unfulfilled due to Saudi Arabia's refusal to turn in Ben Ali and his family. His family, especially his wife,

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<sup>4</sup> Barbour, Nevill, and John Innes Clarke. "Tunisia." *Britannica School*, 23 Oct. 2019, [www.britannica.com/place/Tunisia/The-Jasmine-Revolution](http://www.britannica.com/place/Tunisia/The-Jasmine-Revolution). Accessed 10 Jan. 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Hubbard, Ben, and Rick Gladstone. "Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, 83, Tunisia Autocrat Ousted in Arab Spring, Dies." *NY Times*, New York Times, Sept. 2019, [www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/world/middleeast/tunisia-ben-ali-dead.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/world/middleeast/tunisia-ben-ali-dead.html). Accessed 8 Jan. 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

were all very involved in the corruption. Ben Ali “married Trabelsi, his second wife after coming to power, and she became the focus of great hatred by many Tunisians for her extravagant lifestyle and promotion of her relatives.”<sup>7</sup> Tunisians were troubled that Trabelsi increased her relatives' status without regard for the will of the people. Furthermore, this was important because if the government consisted of only family, there remained no one to keep Ben Ali in check. Ben Ali, Trabelsi, and other family members were all considered to be part of *the family*, that ran the country similarly to a “mafia state.”<sup>8</sup> Ben Ali and *the family* maintained control over Tunisia through the use of violence and fear which is why Tunisians wanted *the family* out of office.

The Tunisians demanded their leader abdicate, and then attempted to transform the country into a democracy. Even after Ben Ali relinquished his power, the protests continued because Tunisia was still not a democratic state. Protesters did not support interim Presidents Ghannouchi or Mebazaa, both of whom were in Ben Ali’s political party known as the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD). Interim President Ghannouchi’s government retained multiple ministers from Ben Ali’s regime which led the Tunisian people to question the trustworthiness of his government. They required a fresh start with no members of the RCD to ensure that their progress would not be undermined by yet another dictator. However, on January 17, “Ghannouchi defended the presence of ministers from the previous regime in the new government, saying that the ministers had not participated in Ben Ali’s attempts to violently suppress protests.”<sup>9</sup> Ghannouchi promised to stabilize the country and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Barbour, Nevill, and John Innes Clarke. "Tunisia." *Britannica School*, 23 Oct. 2019, [www.britannica.com/place/Tunisia/The-Jasmine-Revolution](http://www.britannica.com/place/Tunisia/The-Jasmine-Revolution). Accessed 10 Jan. 2020.

eventually recognize political freedoms for all, however, this did not calm the protesters. The people of Tunisia knew exactly what they desired: a stable and unthreatened democracy. Fresh rows of protesters appeared the subsequent day, leading to Ghannouchi and various other ministers' resignation.

Replacing Ghannouchi was Fouad Mebazaa, "the former speaker of the lower house of the Tunisian parliament."<sup>10</sup> Contradicting Ghannouchi, when Mebazaa was sworn in as temporary president, he "attempted to signal a break with the past, Mebazaa...and the interim government's cabinet ministers who had served under Ben Ali all withdrew from the RCD—However, demonstrators continued to hold rallies to protest the interim government's close ties to the Ben Ali regime."<sup>11</sup> Two months had passed since Ben Ali deserted the country but the status quo in the capital, Tunis, remained: Tunisians were still protesting and demanding free democratic elections. Mebazaa proposed plans to stay in power until the constitution was rewritten and elections were held. Hoping for a positive reaction, Mebazaa "announced, a new interim government would run the country until then."<sup>12</sup>

Finally, on October 23, 2011, Tunisia's first democratic election was held, a monumental step forward for the country. By the time the election came around, there were twenty-five candidates, including women, running for president of the country. The most prominent party was the Ennahada, a moderate Islamist party that "swept to a plurality of about 40% in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> "Tunisia President Fouad Mebazaa Calls Election." *BBC*, 3 Mar. 2011, [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12642942](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12642942). Accessed 8 Jan. 2020.

preliminary vote tallies.”<sup>13</sup> The eventual winner was the Ennahda candidate, Mohamed Moncef Marzouki, who throughout his career had been a politician, physician, and human rights activist, and earned thirty percent of the votes. Countless Tunisians admired how the Ennahada had fairly obtained leadership of Tunisia with the support of people from all corners of society. In fact, Yusra Khreegi, the daughter of the founder of the Ennahda said “Accepting each other, accepting pluralism, accepting diversity and trying to work together—this is the lesson Ennahda can give to other Islamic political movements.”<sup>14</sup> Despite some concerns in the West about an Islamic party winning, the Ennahda ensured religious freedom for Tunisians. Tunisians remain proud of their successful transition to a democracy that guaranteed everyone their basic rights and freedom of religion.

A crucial and unforeseen breakthrough that occurred during and after the Tunisian Arab Spring was progress on women’s rights. During Ben Ali’s rule, “The government restricted all the avenues in which citizens might exchange ‘sensitive information: freedom of expression, press, assembly, and association, this included rape and assault.”<sup>15</sup> This meant people who had been assaulted were not permitted to speak about it, especially women. In 2014, a little over two years after Ben Ali was overthrown, Tunisia’s government created the Truth and Dignity Commission, whose primary objective was to find rape and assault cases. Within four years, they

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<sup>13</sup> Kirkpatrick, David D. "Moderate Islamist Party Heads toward Victory in Tunisia." *NY Times*, New York Times, 24 Oct. 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/10/25/world/africa/ennahda-moderate-islamic-party-makes-strong-showing-in-tunisia-vote.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/25/world/africa/ennahda-moderate-islamic-party-makes-strong-showing-in-tunisia-vote.html). Accessed 8 Jan. 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Aliriza, Fadil. "Eight Years after It Launched the Arab Spring, Tunisia Still Struggles with the Legacy of Dictatorship." *HRQ*, The Washington Post, 14 Jan. 2019, [www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/14/eight-years-after-it-launched-arab-spring-tunisia-still-struggles-l-legacy](http://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/14/eight-years-after-it-launched-arab-spring-tunisia-still-struggles-l-legacy). Accessed 15 Dec. 2019.

discovered “62,720 files for victims and conducted 49,654 confidential interviews. They exposed crimes that had remained hidden for decades.”<sup>16</sup> They broke barriers by giving justice to many victims who never thought they would get it. This is significant because women who did not have a voice previously now had power, and did not need to hide in shame.

Additionally, women’s roles have changed dramatically in Tunisia. Women played a large role during the Tunisian Arab Spring, and “It was clear that old images of Arab women as deferential, subservient and generally indoors would have to be revised.”<sup>17</sup> Women protested for days and weeks outside, as well as supported from the sidelines. They did more than what they were expected to do, including being “involved in arranging food deliveries, blankets, the stage and medical help.”<sup>18</sup> Women around the world are often expected to provide for others and not be at the forefront. In Tunisia, not only did they provide and care for others but they fought and protested, and “played a hugely influential role this time and put themselves in danger.”<sup>19</sup> Tunisians are starting to understand women’s place and role in society. A woman from the Enahada said, “Look at us. We’re doctors, teachers, wives, mothers—sometimes our husbands agree with our politics, sometimes they don’t. But we’re here and we’re active.”<sup>20</sup> Women in Tunisia and many other Middle Eastern countries have begun to become more open, and many

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> "Women Have Emerged as Key Players in the Arab Spring." *The Guardian*, 2012, [www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/22/women-arab-spring](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/22/women-arab-spring). Accessed 14 Feb. 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Charrad, Mounira M., and Amina Zarrugh. "The Arab Spring and Women's Rights in Tunisia." *E International Relations*, 4 Sept. 2014, [www.e-ir.info/2013/09/04/the-arab-spring-and-womens-rights-in-tunisia/](http://www.e-ir.info/2013/09/04/the-arab-spring-and-womens-rights-in-tunisia/). Accessed 14 Feb. 2020.

hold high positions. In the 2011 election, the women of Tunisia were more involved in politics than in years past and many have run for political positions since then.

Many Tunisians as well as spectators question why the Tunisian revolution took place in 2011. For example, in a rural town in Tunisia in 2008, a similar incident to Bouazizi's occurred where several citizens were killed by law enforcement and yet, there was no significant reaction.<sup>21</sup> Amine Allam, an investment banker and politician remarked that democratic activists had been protesting for two or three decades "and it didn't lead to any tangible results. And it took a whole class of unemployed angry people living in poor economic conditions, and it just took them a month."<sup>22</sup> Unemployment rates were incredibly high in 2011, and many, including Allam, believed that this was the reason for the revolution's success. However, Khreegi, the daughter of Ennhada's founder, believed otherwise, stating that the reason for the uprising in 2011 was because in Tunis, the amount of control in the capital was overwhelming, "there was nothing the state didn't interfere in—it shut all freedom in all fields, there was no choice but a revolution."<sup>23</sup> Tunisians were fed up with being caged in a box where they were expected to do what the state wanted.

The Arab Spring may have started in Tunisia, but it spread through social media to many countries in the Middle East including "Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, UAE, and Yemen."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "Tunisia: The Arab Spring's Success Story?" *Al Jazeera*, 8 Jan. 2012, [www.aljazeera.com/programmes/thecafe/2012/01/20121510056532832.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/thecafe/2012/01/20121510056532832.html). Accessed 12 Apr. 2020. [6:05]

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid* [5:20]

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid* [3:25]

<sup>24</sup> "The Arab Spring Country by Country." *The National*, 17 June 2011, [www.thenational.ae/world/the-arab-spring-country-by-country-1.401358](http://www.thenational.ae/world/the-arab-spring-country-by-country-1.401358). Accessed 14 Feb. 2020.

Luckily, unlike many countries, Tunisia did not descend into a civil war, and their injured and death toll remained relatively low at about “300 killed, and 2,147 injured.”<sup>25</sup> Each Arab Spring ended differently, with Tunisia’s being the most successful with the lowest death toll, while Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen erupted into massive civil wars causing numerous deaths. Many countries that followed in Tunisia’s footsteps were also going through a difficult time, facing high unemployment rates, and a harsh regime.

Over the years, Tunisia has overcome obstacles “with countless failures”<sup>26</sup> and successes, and today, faces several dilemmas including high unemployment rates, and religious differences. While more protests are being staged once more in Tunisia, these protests do not involve the brutal violence associated with the Arab Spring. Learning from other countries that have endured proxy wars has taught Tunisian’s to not involve foreign powers. Instead, they are “embracing peacefulness, authenticity, and reform, and rejecting violence and civil conflict as means to confront oppressive and corrupt regimes.”<sup>27</sup> During the Tunisian Arab Spring in 2011, protestors managed to achieve their primary goals, such as outing Ben Ali, and today, “new uprisings insist on democratic reforms free of sectarianism, fundamentalism and authoritarianism.”<sup>28</sup> Researchers believe that democratic revolutions like this, “are evolutionary by nature and take a long time to change the political culture and transform society.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "Report: 338 Killed during Tunisia Revolution." *AP News*, 12 May 2012, [apnews.com/f91b86df98c34fb3abedc3d2e8accbcf](https://apnews.com/f91b86df98c34fb3abedc3d2e8accbcf). Accessed 14 Feb. 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Bishara, Marwan. "Put the Spring Back in the Arab Spring." *Al Jazeera*, 16 Jan. 2020, [www.aljazeera.com/amp/indepth/opinion/put-spring-arab-spring-200116085121316.html](https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/indepth/opinion/put-spring-arab-spring-200116085121316.html). Accessed 12 Apr. 2020.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*

The Arab Spring protests that took place in Tunisia broke various barriers. Most importantly, they removed the so-called *family* from power and overthrew a dictator of twenty-three years within a month, opening new opportunities for Tunisians. One of the most important improvements was the beginning of a democratic revolution; the establishment of a democracy, which gave the people the freedom to vote and elect their representatives. The Tunisians successfully achieved this without a civil war unlike neighboring countries. Instead, they stood for days, with their heads held high, protesting for what was right for the country and the people. In fact, while protesting for better leadership and rules, they managed to improve women's access to justice and political power. In addition, they learned that they could influence people with a nonviolent tool that they were not aware they had: a voice. In the end, Tunisia's Arab Spring brought many great changes to the country. It broke several barriers in a matter of days and months when changes this significant often take years or decades.