

---

## The evolution of individual rights and religious freedom following the Arab Spring movement in Tunisia

Mehdi Mejri

Humanitarian & Civil Society Activist, Tunisia

---

In the last decade, the new democracies of North Africa that came out of the Arab Spring movement have experienced division, violence, and exclusion across political and social divides. This decline has negatively affected the image of political leaders across the region and opened the doors for external interference that threatens the possibility of peaceful democratic transitions of power. The Egyptian coup against the Muslim Brotherhood party and the transition of power is an exception among other nations.

Within Tunisia, violent speech fueled by the media and a lack of dialogue between the political leaders created the bipolarization of society and a need to establish a real dialogue between the main ideologies in search of a common ground of coexistence. Tunisians demonstrate a lack of trust and indifference to political life and the capacity of political parties to ensure security, stability, and prosperity.

The transition process to democratic rule faced many challenges and disappointed the youth. More than ten years after the revolution, Tunisia is still sinking as a result of significant social, political, and economic issues, which are manifested most notably in high unemployment rates and a shrinking middle class.

Despite efforts to establish a peaceful atmosphere and dialogue between Islamists and secularists following the Arab Spring in 2011, conflict and tension have prevailed on both sides. One of the most significant indicators of the crisis of communication is the emergence of violence.

Tunisians suffered a rise in terrorist attacks and political assassinations as well as an increase in violence as a result of social and political tensions. The assassination of two popular political leaders, [Chokri Bleaid](#) and [Mohamed Brahmi](#), in separate incidents were seen as significant attacks on democratic efforts in the country. Moreover, [increasing terrorist attacks](#) fueled a sense of insecurity and instability across Tunisia.

Following the 2014 legislative and presidential elections, things became more complicated. Tunisians watched immature political leaders spread violence and accusations in the parliament, which led to total disappointment in politicians and political processes more broadly.

The youth, in particular, were nostalgic for the sense of stability they once knew. The political class that rose up after the Arab Spring did not meet their expectations. As a result, calls for a “one-person regime,” like those of former Tunisian Presidents Benali and Bourguiba, increased as this leadership style was viewed as an ultimate solution to the country’s political and social crises.

The emergence of Kais Saied as a “savior” was praised by the young generation in Tunisia and was supported by the social grassroots. In 2019, he was elected by a disappointed young generation in order to reinstate peace and stability in the country.

After his election, the first step President Saied took was to suppress the activities of the parliament. This move was welcomed by his supporters and a portion of the Tunisian population, but denounced worldwide because the parliament was viewed as the legitimate voice of the Tunisian people and the main expression of free speech and democracy. As a result, the political crisis only deepened.

According to the political elite, activists, and many political actors, both locally and internationally, President Saied abused his powers to reconstruct the political sphere and revert to a one-person regime.

The measures taken by President Saied were considered illegitimate, and there were calls for a return to the democratic process and, importantly, the inclusion of all actors and civil society in a peaceful democratic transition of power. In response, the new regime began a campaign against NGOs and “watchdog” organizations, which are integral to the protection of human rights and often serve as the last firewall against dictatorship.

As part of his reshaping of the political sphere, President Saied pushed forward with a national referendum on a new constitution. The July 25, 2022 constitutional referendum was questioned and rejected by national and international experts, including the [Venice Committé](#), because of the lack of inclusion in drafting the new constitution. Moreover, many Tunisians believe the 2022 constitutional referendum was unnecessary for two reasons:

1. the 2014 constitution was much more inclusive and received wider acceptance from national and international actors alike, and
2. Tunisians are more concerned with economic challenges, which were exacerbated by COVID-19 and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, than with constitutional reform.

President Saied insisted on his commitment to protect individual rights in the 2022 constitution, namely in the 34 articles of the legislation’s second chapter. Freedom of religion was clearly noted in articles 27 and 28 using the same language as the 2014 constitution. The first article of the constitution no longer notes the religion of the state, which is considered by some to be a significant step toward the separation between the state and religion. However, the constitution now states Tunisia belongs “to the Islamic Ummah” and mandates the state to achieve “the goals of pure Islam in preserving [people’s] souls, money, religion and freedom” (article 5).

President Saied’s several speeches offering Tunisians assurance that their individual rights remain protected have not convinced the majority of the population. The regime has been accused of an “illegitimate coup,” and society remains split between supporters and those in opposition to President Saied.

Tensions have manifested in several ways, including:

1. a significant boycott and refusal to participate in the constitutional referendum due to lack of inclusion in the drafting process

2. the imprisonment and detention of several political leaders, deputies, and journalists, as well as the revocation of rights (including travel bans) for leaders of the main Islamic political party
3. the sharp increase in emigration from the country as Tunisians lose hope in the regime and their future (more than 7,000 Tunisians immigrated to Italy in the first half of [2022](#).)

In general, individual rights — including religious freedom — were enhanced following the uprising of 2011. While the 2022 constitution theoretically guarantees the same rights as the 2014 constitution, the coming weeks, months, and years are critical in determining whether these rights are upheld in practice.

**Urgent action must be taken to secure pluralism and the individual rights of Tunisians, including the establishment of an elected constitutional court and the drafting of an elections law that ensures pluralism and diverse representation in parliament to protect the voices of minorities.**

The diversity of Tunisians has been observed and protected in the past. Tunisians are witness to the religious celebrations of the Jewish community, which are held without interruption in Djerba [every year](#). Government figures attend these events to show support for this practice. Additionally, Christian celebrations in [Tunis](#) are resuming after interruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Tunisian dream of a democratic state and society that respects individual choices and human rights is still possible and achievable. National dialogue is needed in order to restore social peace and pluralism. The next few years will be very dynamic, and it is still unclear which direction Tunisia will go without an active parliament or a constitutional court. During this time, it is critical that President Saied listen to the Tunisian people and initiate the process of legislative elections as soon as possible.

---

*Mehdi Mejri is a Tunisian civil society activist holding a master's degree in legal sciences. Currently a humanitarian worker for Doctors Without Borders, he is also the founder of a local NGO focusing on climate justice. Throughout his career, Mr. Mejri worked on several projects and activities contributing to the success of the democratic transition in Tunisia, including human rights, religious freedom, political participation, youth empowerment, and civic education.*



All views and opinions presented in this essay are solely those of the author and publication on Cornerstone does not represent an endorsement or agreement from the Religious Freedom Institute or its leadership.

**Permanent Link:**

<https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/arab-spring-movement>

The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security

**Religious Freedom Institute**  
316 Pennsylvania Ave. SE | Suite 501  
Washington, D.C. 20003  
202.838.7734 | [rfi.org](http://rfi.org)