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"To what extent was Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution a success?"

After World War II, former European protectorate nations fought for independence across North Africa and the Middle East. After years of fighting, Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956. A modernization movement was instituted by the newly elected president, Habib Bourguiba, and Tunisia adopted policies reflective of its European colonizer, including legal reforms and women's rights. Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, the succeeding president, consolidated his power and ruled Tunisia as an authoritarian leader. Years of political oppression and a stagnant economy led to protests, which turned violent after Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation. Photos of his act were captured and disseminated via Twitter and Facebook, sparking outrage across the state. The widespread civil resistance eventually culminated in Ben Ali's abdication of power. Only 28 days long, Tunisian's Jasmine Revolution of 2011 successfully ousted a despotic leader and instituted a democracy. Despite its creation of a democratic constitution, and that it engendered the 'Arab Spring' across the Middle East and North Africa, the Jasmine Revolution was only a moderate success, because the current political corruption and economic turmoil threaten the stability of its nascent and fragile democracy.

While the Umayyad Caliphate originally incorporated Tunisia as part of its large empire, it was the Ottoman Turks who contributed to its growth and development as a vassal state, ruled by the Husaynid Beys in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the 1800s, as European powers were scrambling to carve up the continent of Africa, the Beys heavily invested in the infrastructure of Tunis, building up its economy and military (Moalla). However, the debts accrued in doing so left Tunisia ultimately vulnerable for invasion by Europeans, and the French, who had conquered the neighboring state of Algeria, forced the leaders of Tunis to sign a treaty that made Tunisia a French Protectorate. Following the rise of nationalism and self-determination throughout the former Ottoman Empire during and after World War I, the Neo-Destour, a party created by Habib Bourguiba and supported by the youth of Tunisia, started aggressively protesting against French rule and subsequent social and economic problems. After World War II, the Neo-Destour party allied itself with the Tunisian General Labor Union, and, through strikes and massive protests against the French elites, were able to declare Tunisia's independence in 1956 (Benstead).

One of the most notable and modernizing acts under Bourguiba's new rule was passing the Personal Status Code in 1956, which increased rights for women, outlawed polygamy, and made it permissible for women to ask for a divorce. As Bourguiba's leadership progressed, devout

Islamists became disillusioned with the secularization of the state; that, coupled with increasing political corruption (such as Bourguiba's self-appointment as president for life), growing economic debt, and the increasing influence of socialist and communist parties in the parliament, led to the brink of a civil war by the late 1980s (Benstead). Bourguiba's prime minister, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, organized a bloodless transfer of power, and became the leader of Tunisia in 1987.

Although originally praised for his commitment to reformation and modernization, Ben Ali's presidency soon was characterized by censorship and corruption. However, after the Algerian Civil War began in 1991, Tunisians reluctantly submitted to Ben Ali's authoritarianism, because they feared the potential spread of violence. Ben Ali utilized this fear, and passed laws raising the age limit and abolishing the term limit for the presidency. By the late 1990s, those who criticized the government were "jailed, co-opted, or driven into exile," and the simmering protests that had been loosely present throughout the 1990s had quelled (Benstead). It was not until the late 2000s that protests against Ben Ali's corruption began to fester again, partly due to the widespread use of social media platforms that united and ignited the oppressed population.

The Jasmine Revolution, the beginnings of what became known as the 'Arab Spring,' began in the interior town of Sidi Bouzid in December 2010. Mohamed Bouazizi, who lacked a vendor permit to sell his fruit and vegetables, had his goods confiscated and disposed of by the police. In order to protest this corruption, and the lack of response from local city officials, Bouazizi set himself on fire (Benstead). His act, which quickly spread via social media, triggered a series of protests across the country. These riots were mainly led by youth, who were disillusioned with poor economic prospects; in 2010, approximately 14% of the workforce in Tunisia was unemployed. The protests continued to grow in influence, especially after an unemployed 24-year-old, Hussein Nagi Felhi, committed suicide by electrocuting himself after shouting "no for misery, no for unemployment" (Saleh).

The demonstrations continued to gain traction, as many within the country felt the effects of living in a state with high unemployment, inflation, poor living conditions, and oppression. In response, President Ben Ali criticized the "use of violence in the streets by a minority of extremists," and Tunisian officials censored the publication of opposition newspapers that supported the protests against Ben Ali's authoritarian regime (Randeree). However, the use of social media was able to mobilize the oppressed population, and protestors expressed their views

and broadcasted the state-sponsored violence on Facebook and Twitter. Three weeks after Bouazizi's self-immolation, Ben Ali and his family fled to Saudi Arabia. Even though Ben Ali abdicated, his regime was still in power; fighting continued until late February, when Tunisian protestors forced the resignation of much of the old regime. In March, former prime minister and president Al-Baji Caed Essebsi became the interim leader. A transitional government was instituted, and free elections created a Constituent Assembly ten months after the original protests began (El-Khawas).

The Tunisian Arab Spring was ultimately successful at achieving its original goal - removing a corrupt and oppressive authoritarian ruler. Unlike in other revolutions, such as Libya, where order breaks down when an autocrat flees, Tunisian society remained stable. Its history of established state structures, initially set up by the Ottomans and further strengthened by the French, ensured that society would not descend into civil strife after Ben Ali's abdication. Tunisia itself is also a small, ethnically, religiously, and culturally homogeneous country, with minimal sectarian conflicts. Tunisia's strong civil society ensured that the state would not fall into political chaos at the removal of its leader.

The revolutionaries aimed to fix the corruption from the old regime, and also desired a new constitution and a full democratic transition. It was during this early state-building period that the divide between Islamists and secularists arose. In 2011, Tunisians had their first free and fair elections, and voted for their Constituent Assembly. Fortuitously, a coalition government was elected, which forced compromise between the Islamists and the secularists. While the new constitution included the people's "commitment to the teachings of Islam," there was no language about the enforcement of shari'a law; rather, the constitution dictated that Tunisia would be "characterized by openness and moderation," and that the government is devoted to "human values and the highest principles of universal human rights" (*Tunisian Constitution*).

Socially, and more specifically regarding gender and women's rights, the Tunisian Arab Spring was only a success in that in continued their already established elevated status of women. The reforms originally made by Bourguiba at the beginning of the newly independent nation set the foundation for the higher status of women, especially when compared to other women in the Middle East: as of 2016, Tunisian women have "among the highest levels of political representation and labor-force participation in the Arab world" (Benstead). Although fears of the rise of political Islam threatened the status of women after the revolution, the 2013

constitution included laws that guaranteed women's representation in the government and protected women's rights (*Tunisian Constitution*). Presently, the status of women in Tunisia is reflective of the status of women in most parts of the Western world: equality has been legally achieved, but tangibly, there are still some remnants of complementarianism. Prior to the revolution, women held 26.7 percent of seats in the national parliament; currently, Tunisian women hold 31.3 percent, which is far higher than the global average of 23.9 percent (*World Bank*). Although those numbers are high, especially when compared to the United States' female representation - which sits at 19.6 percent - they reveal that there are certain gender-based biases or structures in place that prevent women from reaching political equality with men. While women's status was permanently codified after the revolution, the overall relative egalitarianism was not a major change from Tunisia's past, as it exemplified more of a continuity in women's rights.

Politically, while democratic institutions are in place, their current success is debatable. The once-collaborative coalition government between the Islamist Ennahda party and the secularists has strained over the past four years. The weak compromises made by the coalition have led to only 46 percent of Tunisians agreeing that "democracy [is] preferable to other forms of government" (Meddeb). Tunisians seem to view the weak government and subsequent weak economy as indicative of democratic failure; 47 percent of Tunisians agree or strongly agree with the idea of military rule (Meddeb). Their nascent democratic system may not be able to withhold the internal governmental conflict, the subsequent popular dissatisfaction, and the external economic pressures.

Economically, the revolution aimed to end economic corruption within the Ben Ali regime and sought to bring about more economic equality, but Tunisia's economy since the revolution has been in near-chronic turmoil. Tunisian GDP was $39.86 billion USD in 2018, which shows a significant decrease from 2011, when it was $45.81 billion USD. However, the government is not entirely to blame for the deteriorating economy: the biggest detriment to the Tunisian economy are the current problems plaguing the European Union and the increase in terror attacks within and surrounding the country. Economic downturn in the European Union has led to a decrease in trade and a decrease in tourism to Tunisia. Tunisia's tourism industry makes up a large percentage of job opportunities and greatly contributes to Tunisia's GDP, and tourism to Tunisia has fallen by 50 percent since the revolution (Achy). It is not only the

economic trouble in the European Union that is contributing to a lack of tourism, but it is also the terrorism that has plagued many North African countries for over a decade. In 2015, three terrorists attacked the Bardo Museum in Tunis, killing 22 people and injuring 50 others, most of whom were European tourists. The Bardo shooting, coupled with the escalating conflict in the border countries of Libya, Algeria, and Sudan, has devastated the Tunisian economy. This economic crisis has, in itself, led to thousands of disillusioned Tunisians joining the Islamic State for the prospects of gaining stability, shelter, and security, as they cannot find those necessities in their home country (Trofimov).

Despite external impacts on the Tunisian economy, internal impacts not helping the unfolding crisis: the government has not aided economic growth, as the rate of inflation has risen to 7.4 percent, and unemployment stands steady at 15 percent (Gerwal). Shortly after the revolution, foreign investment fell by 20 percent (Achy). Due to the increase in Tunisia's debt-to-GDP ratio, Moody's Investor Service downgraded their credit rating, which has further deterred lending to the country. The government's solution was to raise taxes, which in turn weakened the purchasing power of middle class Tunisians, which continues to perpetuate the downward economic cycle (Ben Ameur). Tunisian government spending has increased 72.87% since 2011 (Saleh). While that does take into consideration the increased spending on security infrastructure due to the increase in terrorism in Tunisia, the money was mainly funded through austerity measures and increasing taxes. President Essebsi entered Tunisia into a period of austerity in 2018, which increased the prices on basic necessities through the introduction of a value-added tax. The austerity measure was met with protests across Tunisia, mainly led by unemployed, university-educated youth. The originally peaceful protests turned violent, and hundreds of protestors were arrested across the state (Trofimov). Tunisia faced even more economic strife in 2018, when the Trump administration cut aid to Tunisia by more than half (*US Congress*). Tunisia's economy is crippled, and the democratically-elected government is not taking the steps it needs to in order to support its constituents. Voter turnout has decreased, as 81 percent of Tunisians do not believe that their political leaders are paying attention to their local problems (Grewal). Although the current economic state of Tunisia was not caused by the Jasmine Revolution, Tunisians, faced with fierce economic deprivation and meager job prospects, are beginning to doubt the effectiveness of democracy.

Just as with the aforementioned themes, the lasting effect of the Jasmine Revolution is debatable. Similarly to how the American Revolution against the British Empire engendered rebellions against imperialist powers in both the New and Old Worlds, the Tunisian Revolution likewise incited similar political revolutions across the Arab world, from North Africa to the Arabian peninsula. But, just as the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries in Latin America and France had mixed results, so did the Arab Spring. Tunisia is the only country from the Arab Spring that has had lasting success with creating and implementing democratic systems, and is the only North African country listed as "free" according to the Democracy Index in 2016 (*The Economist Group*). None of the other Arab Spring nations have experienced success in implementing and maintaining democratic institutions within their state without severe corruption or utter failure. However, the current riots and economic turmoil have caused Tunisians to doubt democracy and desire authoritarian or rule (Grewal). Tunisia must hold fast during its current period of turmoil, and must be able to retain its democratic principles, police political corruption, and figure out ways to increase employment and end austerity, all through democratic and diplomatic means. If it cannot, Tunisia might slide back into autocratic rule.

The success of the Tunisian Revolution is dependent upon one's definition of success. To a Western government, the revolution was a major success, as it implemented democratic elections, allowed for freedom of speech, and showed the ability for collaboration between Islamists and secularists. It was the first successful popular revolution of the region. It was the first in the North Africa to hold free and fair multiparty elections. An authoritarian and corrupt leader was removed in a relatively bloodless coup (not to discredit the violence faced by protestors leading up to his abdication). Compared to the revolutions of other Arab Spring states, which, although successful in their initial goals of removing the leadership, have descended into relative chaos (Yemen) and violence (Syria), Tunisia has remained relatively stable. It is a state where people have the freedom to express themselves, as evidenced both by its representative system and its current freedom to protest against governmental corruption without threat of repercussion. Tunisian's nascent democracy is still a democracy, and Western countries turn to Tunisia as "shining example to those who claim that democracy is not possible in this part of the world" (Kerry). The extent to which Tunisia will be able to continue as a democracy remains to be seen, but the revolution itself was successful in that it removed an authoritarian leader and implemented a government that is by and for the people.

While Western heads of state herald Tunisia's democratic triumph, the revolution's aftermath led to increasing economic challenges. Granted, that economic hardship is not entirely directly from the Tunisian government - instability in Northern Africa and terrorist attacks on western tourists in Tunis place Tunisia as the victim in this case - however, the government has increased the poor economic situation in the past two years. As tourism is an incredible factor in Tunisia's economic success, the government should seek to spend more money supporting advances in security across the state, but it must not fund those ventures through increasing taxes. However, the unpredictability and violence across North Africa will continue to affect Tunisia's tourism, so the extent to which funding those ventures in order to bring back tourism to the country is unclear. What is clear, however, is that Tunisia's economy is weaker and more unstable than it was during Ben Ali's rule, and the current administration has not taken substantial steps to reverse the country's economic downturn.

One continuity throughout Tunisia's recent history is its elevated status of women, which has continued throughout Tunisia's democratic state. Arguably, equality between men and women has increased, as it became codified law. Article 46 of the Constitution states that the government will take necessary measures to "eradicate violence against women," which shows tremendous state support of and protection for women (*Tunisian Constitution*). With the threat of political Islam and shari'a law immediately after Ben Ali's removal, the systemization and implementation of laws that not only encourage female participation in the government but also safeguard women from violence highlight one of only clear major successes of the revolution: the preservation and protection of women's rights.

The Jasmine Revolution ushered in democracy, and Tunisia is the only surviving democratic state in North Africa. Its ability to relatively withstand external conflicts and pressures highlights the country's strong civil society and the citizens' commitment to preserving democratic institutions in times of great hardship. The Tunisian example shows that Islam and democracy may be able to coincide, as secularists and Islamists have collaborated in government since 2011. The preservation of women's rights has been upheld by the administration. All of those suggest that the Jasmine Revolution was successful to a major extent. If the country is able to endure its current economic failures, the Jasmine Revolution will ultimately be successful. However, its continuing economic disaster could be seen as an omen of grave portent: its new democratic government failed to create a stable economic situation, and has itself contributed to

economic disaster. The failure by the democratically-elected government to economically support its people threatens the longevity of democracy in the state, which would render the Jasmine Revolution pointless.

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