

# Tunisia's unfinished revolution

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The birthplace of the Arab Spring remains locked in transition, with high unemployment and stagnant growth, writes [David Meffe](#).

The streets of downtown Tunis are bustling as Aladdin sits sipping espresso at an outdoor café off Avenue Habib Bourguiba, watching as hundreds of passers-by walk briskly down the commercial boulevard to the soundtrack of honking yellow taxis and pluming diesel exhausts.

“It seems almost quiet here now,” he laughs, recalling when he and hundreds of thousands marched down the same street in 2011, chanting slogans and demanding the end to an autocratic regime.

“There were so many people, you could barely see. We were after something real back then, you could touch it.”

But as the post-revolution economy stagnated in 2013, Aladdin decided to try his luck somewhere else. The 28-year-old packed what he could and booked a one-way ticket for Miami to find work in the United States. When his short tourist visa expired, he went to the beach and burned his passport with a few others, almost ceremonially.

He says he sold junk on the beach to make cash and stayed with other migrants doing the same. But after about six months, he was rounded up by immigration police and carted off to a detention centre with a host of others.

“They separated us by our crime and colour-coded us. So people in yellow were illegal immigrants like me, people in blue were drug offenders and people in red were in for violent crimes,” Aladdin says. “But when it was prayer time we were all mixed together, which was interesting and kind of scary at the same time.”

He would spend six months altogether in the system. Two detention centres,

countless court-appointed lawyers and three appeals later, he was deported back to Tunisia. Sitting in tinted sunglasses and a knock-off Gucci scarf at the café, he laughs and says he'll probably try the gambit again some day, maybe in Europe.

Aladdin is only one of thousands who have illegally migrated from Tunisia over the past four years in search of employment and economic opportunities abroad. Far from a beggar or street thief, the young Tunis native has a degree in industrial maintenance. Since graduating, he has worked in just about every other field but – as a salesman, resort animator, bartender and a host of other odd jobs. Now, back in Tunis, he sells scrap metal and used car parts with his father.

“There are a lot of young people in the country now who are frustrated. You have lawyers and doctors working as cab drivers and souk salesmen. So people leave, to Europe, to the States, wherever,” he says. “This is the time we should be rebuilding our country, our new democracy, not dealing in junk to make ends meet.”

When former ruler Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was ousted in the early days of the Arab Spring, young Tunisians sowed the seeds of what they hoped would be a new democracy built on fairness and inclusivity for a long-ignored lower class. But despite the peaceful democratic election of President Beji Caid Essebsi in December 2014, the country's economy and labour markets have yet to catch up to where they were before the tumultuous revolution.



There are still near-daily demonstrations throughout the capital by labour unions, student groups and just about anyone else with an axe to grind against the current economic standstill. The World Bank puts Tunisia's official unemployment rate at just over 15%, but the reality is much harsher, especially among the youth, who boast one of the highest post-secondary education rates in North Africa. With scarce opportunities, protesting has become a pastime of sorts in Tunis.

“Democracy is not only about political transformation,” says Abdel Basset Ben Hassan, head of the Arab Institute for Human Rights in Tunis, stressing the need for development based on social justice. “The right to work is at the heart of human rights, it's a matter of dignity. It was one of the reasons that started this revolution in the first place.”

Despite a recent decline, the number of unemployed citizens with post-secondary education has nearly doubled since 2006, according to data released by the National Statistics Institute of Tunisia. The youth between 15 and 29 years-old made up 72.2% of the total number of unemployed people in 2012. It's no wonder that young people like Aladdin are leaving the country to find work.

But after decades of rampant nepotism and autocratic rule, a newly democratic Tunisia has set itself on the right track; the only problem now seems to be how to make the train run.

Ben Ali's Tunisia had been a stable economic staple of tourism, trade and foreign investment from important partners in the European Union – many

of whom jumped ship when citizens took to the streets in 2011. But as the post-revolution blues continue to plague North African neighbours Libya and Egypt, the new Tunisian economy has struggled to regain its footing and convince hesitant tourists and world markets of stable ground to play on.

“Politics have negatively impacted the economy. Instability, incompetence, lack of vision, ambiguity, conflicts of interest, partisans interests; all of these have combined to push the economy to the back of people’s minds,” says economist and vocal government critic Moez Joudi. “Stability and confidence are key for a healthy economy, especially confidence on the part of investors. They need to see a stable state, industry, administration and visibility.”

With a current GDP of just under \$50bn and a population of nearly 11m, some are worried about what it will mean for Tunisia if things don’t pick up, and soon. All along the tree-lined main avenues of Tunis, groups of idle fighting-aged males stud streetside cafés and hookah bars, puffing through half-empty packs of cigarettes pretending to look busy – a classic regional honey trap for instability and extremist ideologies.

“In many ways, this is still an unfinished revolution,” says Mourad El Hattab, a director at the Société Tunisienne de Banque, a state-run financial institution. “Full employment is the goal of any properly functioning economy, and Tunisia is no exception. Until we see us moving towards this, how can we say the people have really achieved true change?”

El Hattab says the trick will be to figure out how to reconcile the new republic with an economic system that for so long grew fat off corruption and nepotism. The key now is to keep young educated Tunisians in the country by offering them employment and a stable future to work towards, a feat easier said than done.

Even the once-lucrative and indispensable tourism industry has seen considerable damage since the revolution, falling behind more-branded vacation markets like Morocco. The situation has only been exacerbated by the Tunis Bardo Museum attack in March which led to 19 civilian deaths; 17 among them tourists.

“We’ve invested in democracy, that’s what we’ve done over the past four years. We’ve succeeded in the democratic and political transition, but now it’s time to focus on the economic transition, the cultural transition,” says Joudi. “We also need an economic and a cultural revolution – this is what will bring about the social revolution we need to improve life for people in Tunisia.”

But despite good intentions, many Tunisians believe the revolution was not as advertised, and until things pick up they’ll continue to express their discontent in the streets.

Back at the café in Tunis, Aladdin orders a fresh round of sweet mint tea and coffee – another day without solid work means another uncertain tomorrow. “So far, the revolution has been a farce. We got rid of Ben Ali, but we haven’t addressed the real problems that brought us to the streets in the first place,” Aladdin says. “Until we start engaging the youth, really getting them to be a real part of this society, there can be no great change, and Tunisia will slide back into chaos.”

**David Meffe**