



Arab  
Reform  
Initiative

# NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY: CIVIL SOCIETY'S STRUGGLES AND CHALLENGES IN POST-2011 TUNISIA

*Rania Berro and Hamza Meddeb*

## About the Authors

**Hamza Meddeb** is a fellow at Carnegie Middle East Center with research interests spanning politics, economics, and security studies. His work focuses on the political economy of Tunisia and North Africa, the politics of illicit transnational flows, governance and corruption, and the development-security nexus. He is currently co-leading the Political Economy Program at MHC Carnegie Middle East Center. Meddeb has also consulted for several international organizations on issues related to development policies, socioeconomic policy analysis, and fragility and conflicts. Before joining Carnegie, Meddeb was a research fellow at the European University Institute in Florence and a Jean Monnet post-doctoral fellow at the institute. He holds a doctorate in political science from Sciences Po Paris.

**Rania Berro** is an independent consultant in policy analysis, advocacy, and grants management in the fields of human rights, political affairs, and civil society development. She worked as a Senior Program Officer for the Policy and Advocacy - MENA program at Open Society Foundations.

---

© 2025 Arab Reform Initiative. All Rights Reserved.



This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms.

Cover photo: People at a protest demanding the release of detainees and improvements of their socio-economic status on the 14th anniversary of the Tunisian Revolution in Tunis, Tunisia on 14 January 2025.

April 2025

---

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The changing civil society landscape in Tunisia</b>	<b>2</b>
Civil society before 2011: Between burgeoning citizenship and repression	2
The role of civil society in post-2011 Tunisia	4
<b>The post-2011 legal and institutional framework that protected rights and guaranteed civic participation</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The emergence of new actors and new forms of engagement in the civic space</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The limits of civil society</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>From an obstructed to a repressed civic space</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Possible trajectories for civil society as it faces more restrictions</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Assessing donors' intervention in Tunisia post-2011</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>18</b>

## Introduction

The concept of “civil society” (*mujtamaâ madanî*) emerged in Tunisia during the associative boom of the 1980s, a period marked by the transition from a political monopoly by the ruling party to a more pluralistic party landscape. This genesis during the political dynamism of the 1980s positioned “civil society” as a symbol of participatory ideals and citizenship.<sup>1</sup> Over time, the term in Tunisia became largely synonymous with the associative sector, overshadowing other forms of autonomous sociability and collective action, such as trade unions, professional organizations, clubs, and leisure-focused organizations. Far from being a neutral concept, “civil society” acquired a political charge, often tied to democratization efforts.

The pre-2011 history of civil society in Tunisia was characterized by a persistent duality, with many associations navigating between authoritarian co-optation and the affirmation of citizenship.<sup>2</sup> Created or co-opted by the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes, many associations served as tools for exerting control over society. Whether initiated from the top by incumbent authorities or fostered and directed by the State, numerous organizations became instruments of patronage and played a crucial role in bolstering and perpetuating authoritarian regimes from 1956 to 2011.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to these were associations operating in domains deemed “politically sensitive,” advocating for public and individual freedoms. These groups championed causes ranging from human rights and women’s rights to the rights of unemployed graduates, political prisoners, children, migrants, and journalists. They stood against torture and violence towards women, reflecting a profound

aspiration among individuals and social groups to expand realms of freedom. In their confrontation with the regime, they asserted their determination to transition from the status of subjects (*ra'ya*) to that of citizens.<sup>4</sup>

These independent groups played a key role in the January 2011 revolution and the subsequent transition. The post-2011 period was marked by a major upheaval in the legislative framework which facilitated the creation of numerous associations active in different fields and across different geographies. Given the active role of Tunisia’s civil society in the post-2011 transition, it is crucial to examine the underlying factors that have facilitated this active engagement. The substantial financial and technical support provided by both institutional and private donors has played a significant role. Nevertheless, this influx of support has also led to the emergence of an associative landscape heavily dependent on foreign funding and shaped by project-based approaches that, in one way or another, align with donor agendas. This approach, coupled with a project-cycle funding model, has left little room for associations to develop their own long-term agendas and strategies, thus weakening their community connections. Furthermore, it has widened the existing gap between well-established civil society associations with strong connections in the capital city of Tunis and smaller, mainly service-oriented organizations, in peripheral and rural regions.

Over more than half a century, the trajectory of civil society in Tunisia has been shaped by professionalization, which stands as the main dividing factor between the pre- and post-2011 eras, between generations of activists, and, to some extent, between Tunis and the rest of the country. While professionalization empowered civic actors after 2011, it also paradoxically contributed to their vulnerability, as they found themselves increasingly targeted and delegitimized by populist discourse, which portrays them as “foreign-funded elites” that are a threat to national sovereignty. However, this fragility is not solely a product of populism. It also stems from the multiple internal cleavages that cut across civil society and from a conception of democracy that ultimately failed to consolidate.

---

1 **Habib Belaid**, “Le mouvement associatif en Tunisie à l’époque coloniale : quelques réflexions”, *Les cahiers du CRASC*, no. 5, 2002, pp. 93-104. (**Belaid**, 2002).

2 **Sana Ben Achour**, “Société civile en Tunisie : les associations entre captation autoritaire et construction de la citoyenneté”, in **Anna Bozzo** and **Pierre-Jean Luizard**, eds., *Les sociétés civiles dans le monde musulman*, Paris, La Découverte, 2011, pp. 293-311. (**Achour**, 2011)

3 **Michel Camau** and **Vincent Geisser**, *Le syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2003.

---

4 **Achour**, 2011.

This paper aims to provide insights into Tunisia's civil society landscape, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. It will underscore its notable achievements, such as active participation over the past decade in the drafting of the 2014 constitution, the transitional justice law, and anti-racism legislation. However, it also examines missed opportunities and obstacles that have contributed to the current situation, including the resurgence of authoritarianism and the repressive measures imposed by President Kais Saied on dissenting voices, including civil society organizations (CSOs).

## The changing civil society landscape in Tunisia

### Civil society before 2011: Between burgeoning citizenship and repression

The emergence of civil society in the Muslim world is intrinsically tied to the history of colonization. Numerous studies have shown how the development of a public sphere in the Muslim world occurred within the context of colonial society.<sup>5</sup> The application of French laws created a legislative framework that was appropriated by local actors when they were confronted with colonization. The idea of modern citizenship thus took shape in a context of conflict with the State – embodied by the colonial power–, and this conception has persisted ever since: civil society in opposition to the state.<sup>6</sup>

Formally adopted in 1888, a few years after the establishment of French colonial rule in Tunisia, the legal framework for “associations” was part of the exceptional laws. However, in 1936, the French protectorate authorities introduced several reforms,

adopting a declaration system inspired by the French law on associations of 1901. Despite this loosening of restrictions, colonial authorities retained the right to screen associations based on political considerations, maintaining their control over civic activities. Four criteria were established to define associations: voluntariness, publicity<sup>7</sup>, legality, and plurality. During colonial rule, the modern association emerged as a new form of social organization, serving as a platform for the emergence and assertion of political nationalism, and as an expression of Arab-Muslim cultural identity. The proliferation of Tunisian “associations” was particularly notable between 1905 and 1913. By official estimates in 1937, 149 Tunisian associations, compared to 1,714 French ones, were active in Tunisia across various domains, engaged in actions related to charity, sports, youth, women, culture, professional activities, and collective interest associations.<sup>8</sup>

Despite their relatively small numbers in a population of two million, these associations represented the emergence of civil society within a context of colonial dominance and the complex dynamics of modernity that the colonial power both fostered and inhibited, aiming to suppress the rise of Tunisian nationalism. During the colonial era, many associations actively contributed to shaping a new cultural landscape and disseminating progressive values in opposition to traditional norms. Intellectual circles, youth movements, educational, cultural, sports, students, and women's associations flourished, serving as catalysts for social transformation and advocates for the cultivation of a national consciousness that aspired towards liberation. These associations played an active role in fostering the growth of the national liberation movement, serving as conduits between the civil society or associative spheres and the realm of political activism and the struggle for freedom. The scout movement and the “*jeunesse scolaire*” (School Youth – *Achabiba Al-Madrassiya*) served typically as relays for the nationalist cause. Associations provided a platform to mobilize young people, fostering connections between leaders and grassroots members, and disseminating political messages and ideas.

In the 1940s, the associative movement expanded significantly both socially and geographically,

---

5 See: **Anna Bozzo** and **Pierre-Jean Luizard**, eds., *Les sociétés civiles dans le monde musulman*, Paris, La Découverte, 2011 (**Bozzo & Luizard**, 2011); and **Belaid**, 2002.

6 **Jean Leca**, “De la lumière sur la société civile”, in **Sudipta Kaviraj** and **Sunil Khilnani**, eds., *Civil Society, History and Possibilities*, Cambridge University Press & New Delhi, Foundations Books, 2003, cited in **Bozzo & Luizard**, 2011.

---

7 “Publicity” here refers to the requirement that associations operate openly and transparently, that their existence, purpose, and activities be publicly known or accessible, and that this ensures accountability and legitimacy.

8 **Belaid**, 2002.

evolving into a mass movement characterized by heightened "tunisification".<sup>9</sup> By 1944, the trade union movement, represented by the UGTT (*Union générale tunisienne de travail*, Tunisian General Labor Union), had separated from the CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*, General Confederation of Labor) – the French confederation of traders unions –, signaling a pronounced shift towards the exclusion of Europeans from Tunisian organizations. Concurrently, there was a trend towards the consolidation of associations into federations or unions.<sup>10</sup>

Following Tunisia's independence in 1956, civil society underwent a transformation under the influence of the modernizing and paternalistic Bourguibian state. The regime, characterized by the dominant figure of the leader-president, espoused a centralized and monolithic conception of power. Early on, it intervened extensively in civil society, dissolving numerous charitable, cultural and solidarity associations, alliances, clubs, and other organizations (including associations related to the conservative Al-Zeitouna Mosque). Their assets were often transferred to new committees, as the regime sought to restructure and impose its authoritarian order.<sup>11</sup> This transformation also led to the creation of organizations such as the UNFT (*Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes*, 'National Union of Tunisian Women'), designed to replace the various women's associations that had emerged during the colonial era.

As Habib Bourguiba initiated a modernization process that dismantled traditional religious institutions and marginalized the religious establishment, a revivalist movement – later known as the Ennahda movement – emerged among conservative swaths of the population in the 1960s, in reaction to fears of Westernization in post-independence Tunisia. The president's modernization program sought not only the confiscation of assets used to fund mosques, Quranic schools, and charities but also the reform of the religious curriculum of Al-Zeitouna Mosque, the premier educational and Islamic institution in Tunisia.<sup>12</sup> Polygamy was prohibited and a personal

status code that promoted women's rights was adopted by presidential decree in 1957.<sup>13</sup> The 1970s saw the expansion of the *da`wa* movement (preaching movement) to mosques and universities. This movement initiated in the 1980s a politicization process that aimed at connecting preaching, charity, and political activism.

In the 1970s, a segment of the Tunisian left began to engage in the establishment of associations, leading to the formation of several significant groups, including the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH, 1977), the Tunisian office of Amnesty International and the "ciné-clubs" movement.<sup>14</sup> These activists aimed to redirect the pursuit of freedoms from solely the political sphere to the civic space. Faced with constraints in formal politics and the growing influence of Islamist groups in popular mobilization, certain factions redirected their activism to the civic space, which, though perceived as elitist, was nonetheless deemed significant.

Under Ben Ali, who assumed power in 1987, civil society became a focal point in the struggle for fundamental rights and civil liberties between an authoritarian regime and its opponents. The Ben Ali regime appropriated the narrative of "civil society" to promote it as its own legitimizing rhetoric. State personnel, the ruling party (the *Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique*, RCD), official media outlets, and the press consistently touted the apparent vibrancy of civil society, which, on the eve of the regime's downfall in 2011, boasted 9,517 associations. However, many of these associations lacked autonomy and were effectively co-opted by the regime, creating only the illusion of a thriving civil society landscape. The surge in the formation of new associations peaked between 1987 and 1990, with an extraordinary increase of 2,845 new associations during this period—a staggering 144 percent rise, averaging 948 new associations per year. Following this trajectory, growth increased from 1,976 to 7,321 associations between 1987 and 2000. This trend continued steadily, with associations proliferating year after year, reaching a total of 9,517 by 2010, on the eve of the fall of the regime.<sup>15</sup>

9 Belaid, 2002.

10 Najet Mizouni, "L'UGTT, moteur de la révolution tunisienne", *Tumultes*, nos. 38-39, 2012, pp. 71-91.

11 Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Le syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2003.

12 Kenneth J. Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia*, London, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

13 Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda*, London, Hurst, 2017.

14 Larbi Chouikha and Éric Gobe, "Les organisations de défense des droits de l'Homme dans la formule politique tunisienne : acteurs de l'opposition ou faire-valoir du régime ?", *L'Année du Maghreb*, V (2009), pp. 163-182.

15 Achour, 2011.

The civic landscape in 2010 was divided into three categories: trade unions and professional organizations (the ONAT – *Ordre National des Avocats de Tunisie*, Tunisian Bar Association –, judges, engineers, etc), apolitical development or leisure-focused organizations (Scouts, sporting associations, etc.), and “watchdog organizations” that had focused on human rights such as the LTDH (*Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme*, Tunisian League for Human Rights), ATFD (*Association Tunisienne des Femmes démocrates*, Tunisian Association for Democratic Women) and CNLT (*Conseil National pour les Libertés*, National Council for Liberties). Each of these had different repertoires of action, resources, aims, and relationships with the regime. The first group – trade unions and professional organizations – were allowed to exist but were subject to attempts at restrictions and co-optation. Apolitical organizations were allowed to function so long as their activities remained in line with the regime’s agenda or were created and controlled by the regime itself. Among this category, certain associations were even labeled by regime critics as OVGs (Overtly Governmental Organizations), primarily focused on assisting and serving the population to compensate for the state’s retreat and its declining redistributive capacities. The third category of associations – watchdog organizations – were repressed, infiltrated, and/or co-opted.<sup>16</sup>

## The role of civil society in post-2011 Tunisia

Tunisia’s successful political transition came about through the deep and consistent involvement of civil society – from the moment the uprising began, through the constitution drafting process, and into the democratic transition era, up until the presidential coup on 25 July 2021.

The civil society landscape in Tunisia underwent a major upheaval following the January 2011 revolution. While a number of organizations had been established under the Ben Ali regime, the post-2011 period was marked by the creation of numerous associations active in different fields that were marginalized under the former regime – notably in human rights promotion, good governance, anti-corruption, and accountability.<sup>17</sup> This rapid expansion

in the non-profit sector was fueled by a surge of hope and a desire to bring about real change in the conduct of public affairs. It was also facilitated by the adoption of a new liberal legislative framework in 2011 – known as Decree-Law 88 – which made the registration of associations much easier.

Many of the citizens who later established many of Tunisia’s new CSOs were at the forefront of the protest movement against the former regime. While this “boiling citizenry” reflected the dynamism unleashed by newly achieved freedoms, this associative fabric did not emanate from nothing. Despite the repression of the former regime, Tunisia had a pre-existing civic landscape consisting of trade unions, professional associations, charities, and grassroots organizations, which had long engaged citizens in local and regional life and contributed to national debates. A small yet determined group of autonomous associations played a crucial role before the revolution, including human rights associations such as the LTDH, the ALTT (*Association de lutte contre la torture en Tunisie*, Association for the Fight against Torture in Tunisia), the local branch of Amnesty International, the CNLT, feminist associations such as ATFD and AFTURD (*Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement*, Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development), trade unions and professional organizations such as the UGTT and the Bar Council.

It was alongside these organizations that the newly established CSOs earned rapidly, through their commitment and civic spirit, their place as key players in the construction of a pluralist political system based on the rule of law. They also helped lay the foundations for a culture of citizen action that shaped Tunisia’s public sphere for a decade. The post-revolutionary period also saw a qualitative leap in civil society activism, reinforced by the newfound legitimacy of social demands conferred by the revolution. This shift was evident in the growing diversity of causes defended early on, particularly in relation to human rights, democracy, and citizenship, freedom of expression and the fight against censorship, women’s rights and gender equality, social development, solidarity, economic and social rights, regional and local development, and sustainable development.

The growth and transformation of civil society

<sup>16</sup> Béatrice Hibou, *La Force de l’obéissance. Économie politique de la répression en Tunisie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> *Étude sur les organisations de la société civile en Tunisie*, Fondation for the Future, 2013, available at <https://www.cawtarclearinghouse.org>.

were also accompanied by redistribution at the geographical level. Historically urban and concentrated in the country's major cities, Tunis, Nabeul, and Sfax in particular, CSOs finally burst into the previously marginalized regions of the interior, becoming increasingly representative of the diversity of Tunisian society itself. The emergence of a small network of associations in the Center-West region (Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, and Kairouan) as well as in the South (Gafsa and Medenine) seemed to be driven by an increased desire of CSOs to form a network around common subjects, particularly in terms of human rights and regional development.

Overall, the number of associations registered in Tunisia more than doubled in the decade after 2011 increasing from 9,115 before January 2011 to 24,836 as of June 2023. Among them are 1 815 focused on sciences, 216 focused on women, 3 047 on sports, 4 795 on cultural matters, 2 698 on social support, and 209 who are listed as foreign associations.<sup>18</sup> One-third of these NGOs are established in the capital city, Tunis. Of the more than 24,000 registered associations, only about 3,000 are active, and between 300 - 400 (non-official estimation) are working on human rights, governance, transparency, and citizenship. However, only about 300 to 400 of these active organizations (around 10-15%) are estimated to be well-established with a sustainable level of activity.

With the opening up and expansion of civic space, civil society has gradually asserted itself in its role of protecting the gains of the Revolution, ensuring that all attacks on the rule of law and democratic principles are addressed and playing an essential role in the national dialogue processes. Moving away from the service provider type of NGOs, post-2011 CSOs became an effective actor in Tunisia's democratization process, engaging in advocacy, human rights, media, anti-corruption actions, and operating as "watchdogs" in the democratic transition process. From this perspective, these CSOs were widely perceived to have played an important role in the country's political transition. Not only did they actively participate in the various transitional mechanisms put in place following the departure of President Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, but they also contributed to the drafting of the country's first democratic constitution and repeatedly stepped up their political role during times of political crisis.

<sup>18</sup> IFEDA - Centre d'information, de formation, d'études et de documentation des associations, available at <http://www.ifeda.org.tn/stats/francais.pdf>.

Most notably, four prominent CSOs (later known as the Quartet<sup>19</sup>) launched a 'National Dialogue' initiative to act as mediators during the 2013 political impasse that threatened to derail the Tunisian political transition following the successive assassinations of two left-wing opposition figures, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi. The role played by civil society helped to safeguard social cohesion at the height of the political crisis, as did the role played by the Quartet in the success of the national dialogue, which earned the group the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 "for its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution of 2011."<sup>20</sup> Three of the organizations – UGTT, LTDH, and ONAT – enjoyed substantial symbolic capital for their role as rare voices of opposition during the Ben Ali regime.

## The post-2011 legal and institutional framework that protected rights and guaranteed civic participation

The democratic transition that began in early 2011 brought about a radical change in perspective by enacting a law that provided civil society with the necessary space to act. The expansion of civic space was accompanied by the evolution of the legal framework that protects rights and freedoms. However, the intensification of the war on terrorism after 2015 led to increasingly restricted and subtly constrained CSOs, and the framework that once facilitated the expansion of civic space has been jeopardized, particularly following President Saïed's coup on 25 July 2021. This decline has worsened with the adoption of a new constitution in 2022, which

<sup>19</sup> The organizations of the Quartet are: UGTT, UTICA (*Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'artisanat*, Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts), ONAT, and LTDH.

<sup>20</sup> Norwegian Nobel Committee, *Press Release: Nobel Peace Prize 2015*, available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2015/press-release/>.

replaced the 2014 Constitution.

In 2011, the interim government established the Higher Authority for the Realization of Revolutionary Objectives, Political Reform and the Democratic Transitions (the “Authority”), which reviewed various repressive laws and regulations and issued several decrees to guarantee the enjoyment of civic freedoms, including laws regulating elections, the establishment of political parties, and free audio-visual media. In September 2011, the Authority issued Decree-Law 88, which allowed associations to establish themselves by a simple letter or statement of notification to the office of the Prime Minister - they no longer had to wait for prior authorization. The Decree granted associations the right to access foreign funding and work in previously restricted fields, including human rights, advocacy, and governance. It also provided them with the right to access information, evaluate the role of state institutions, and submit proposals to improve state performance. The associations enjoyed a large margin of freedom in their operations and were able to organize meetings, conferences, demonstrations, and all kinds of civic activities.<sup>21</sup> As such, Decree-Law 88 was a breakthrough that totally transformed the civic space in Tunisia into the most enabling environment in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the new constitution adopted in January 2014 enshrined rights and freedoms and further consolidated the right to freedom of association in Article 35.<sup>23</sup> Other progressive laws followed and were adopted such as the Law on Access to Information (Organic Law No. 22-2016), the Law against Torture and Ill-Treatment (Organic Law No. 2013-43 of 23 October 2013), the Law against Violence against Women (Organic Law No. 2017-58 of 11 August 2017), the Law on Police Custody (Law No. 6-5 of 16 February 2016), and the Law against Racial Discrimination

(Organic Law 50-2018). The post-revolutionary institutional framework promoted and enabled citizen participation and theoretically gave CSOs an important place in public policy-making processes. Both the adoption of the Law against Violence against Women and the Law against Racial Discrimination are successful examples of CSOs' tireless efforts. Through coalition-building, active advocacy, and sustained engagement with decision-makers — particularly the National Constituent Assembly (Parliament, NCA) — these organizations played a crucial role in pushing for legislative change.<sup>24</sup> Civil society also played a pivotal role in the passage of the 2017 law protecting whistleblowers who expose corruption. Equally significant was the involvement of civil society actors and organizations in the establishment and support of the Truth and Dignity Commission (*Instance Vérité et Dignité*), which aimed to investigate human rights abuses committed before 2011.

## The emergence of new actors and new forms of engagement in the civic space

The post-revolutionary era was marked by citizens' active participation in reclaiming rights and freedoms, increased political and social engagement, and a strong investment in public affairs and the public sphere. It is in this particular context that CSOs played

21 **Hafidha Chekir**, *The Problematics of Governance in the Human Rights Movement in Tunisia*, Arab Reform Initiative, 2017, available at <https://www.arab-reform.net/en/node/1198>.

22 **CIVICUS**, *CIVICUS's 2013 Enabling Environment Index*, Johannesburg, 2013, available at <https://www.civicus.org/downloads/2013EEI%20REPORT.pdf>.

23 **Constitute Project**, *Tunisia's Constitution of 2014 (July 2018)*, available at [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia\\_2014.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2014.pdf). Freedoms of opinion, thought, expression, information and publication (Article 30), freedom of conscience (Article 6), freedom of assembly and peaceful demonstration (Article 36), individual rights and freedoms (Article 48).

24 “The Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, EuroMed Rights and the Committee for the Respect of Liberties and Human Rights in Tunisia had presented a draft law criminalizing all forms of racial discrimination during a press conference held on 21 March 2016 on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. These organizations have also been coordinating with the Assembly of People's Representatives, parliamentary groups, and the Minister for Relations with Constitutional Bodies, Civil Society, and Human Rights to accelerate discussions and the adoption of the draft law.” — **EuroMed Rights**, “Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Tunisia: A Historic Step in Achieving Equality”, 10 October 2018, available at <https://euromedrights.org/publication/law-on-the-elimination-of-all-forms-of-racial-discrimination-in-tunisia-a-historic-step-in-achieving-equality/>.

a vital political watchdog role, essentially geared towards influencing reform processes and holding the government to account rather than focusing on winning power. These new CSOs focused mainly on exposing corruption, advocating for greater transparency and accountability, and addressing injustice and issues that led to the 2011 uprising, namely social and economic rights. Organizations such as al-Bawsala<sup>25</sup> (the Compass), I-Watch<sup>26</sup>, FTDES<sup>27</sup>, or Mourakiboun<sup>28</sup> (Observers) enjoyed great public attention and were early on recognized as important actors in the Tunisian civic space.

The toppling of the Ben Ali dictatorship also transformed Tunisia's media sector, ending years of suffocating government control and ushering in a new era of pluralism. However, the newfound freedoms did not necessarily translate into good journalism. Like the country's fractured politics, news media were also beholden to political party interests and media barons who controlled some of the most influential outlets, especially in television and radio.

---

25 Al-Bawsala gained a favorable reputation in the early years after the revolution for its monitoring of the NCA work. Their initial mission statement was to follow and monitor the NCA's progress in drafting the constitution, improve transparency of their activities and report on the meetings they held. However, they have developed into a wider monitoring and reporting CSO that also advocates for greater accountability. For more information, see: <https://www.albawsala.com/en>.

26 I-Watch's main focus is on fighting corruption, encouraging transparency and monitoring elections. They aim to put pressure on the government through advocacy, lobbying, and engaging with decision-makers directly. For more information, see: <https://www.iwatch.tn/ar/>.

27 FTDES (*Forum Tunsien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux*, Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights) was launched by leading figures from Tunisian NGO's and labor unions in cooperation with the LTDH. With a central office in Tunis and six regional offices, FTDES' aims are: monitoring and researching policies related to economic and social rights; raising awareness and influencing decision-makers by informing debates through publications, field studies, and analysis; enhancing and supporting the role of civil society in promoting and defending economic and social rights; and Fighting corruption and pushing for government transparency and accountability.

28 Mourakiboun has the general aim of establishing democracy in Tunisia through observing the electoral processes. Between elections, they focus on enhancing democracy and raising democratic awareness while also working with youth in all these areas. For more information, see: <http://mourakiboun.org/>.

Rare were the outlets that sought to provide the public with quality fact-based journalism to inform public debates. Yet, a number of small, modestly resourced independent and alternative media outlets have tried to buck this trend. Nawaat and Inkyfada are prime examples, offering investigative journalism and fostering public debates on issues such as human rights, economic and social rights, good governance, and accountability. These outlets also became the echo chambers of social and civic activism in the country and are today *bonafide* media platforms and standard-bearers of alternative journalism in Tunisia. Since the overthrow of Ben Ali in 2011, they have become a reference point for public interest journalism independent of political parties and have helped highlight issues of concern for civil society and marginalized communities across Tunisia that are often ignored by mainstream outlets. As muckraking publications that have specialized in publishing government leaks, these alternative media outlets often found themselves in the crosshairs of political elites and other antagonists and have been the target of digital attacks, threats, and lawsuits.

The post-revolutionary period also saw the emergence of several social movements and informal, horizontally organized single-issue campaigns that mobilized in response to specific political developments.<sup>29</sup> Alongside the growing number of CSOs, these informal movements proliferated across the country. In March 2020 alone, the Tunisian Social Observatory recorded 223 informal protest movements across the country, out of which 119 (53.4%) were spontaneous and 104 (46.6%) were organized.<sup>30</sup> What these movements have in common is that they are limited in time and specific to a cause: the demonstrations of January 2011 to demand the departure of Ben Ali, the sit-ins in Kasbah 1 and 2 to demand the rupture with the old regime and the election of a Constituent Assembly, and the numerous sit-ins to demand the right to work such as the sit-ins of unemployed young people in Tataouine in September 2012<sup>31</sup> and in Le Kef in

---

29 Monthly overviews of social movement developments are provided by FTDES.

30 FTDES, "OST: Rapport Mars 2020 des mouvements sociaux, suicides et violences", 11 April 2020, available at <https://ftdes.net/rapports/fr.mars2020.pdf>.

31 Yassine Bellamine, "Tunisie : Les jeunes chômeurs de Tataouine entament un sit-in ouvert devant le siège du gouvernorat", *Tunisie Numérique*, available at <https://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-les-jeunes-chomeurs-de-tataouine-entament-un-sit-in-ouvert-devant-le-siege-du-gouvernorat/141837>.

September 2012.<sup>32</sup>

Several other informal movements, some of which translated into concrete actions on the ground, have marked Tunisia's civic space in recent years. Among the most influential, particularly in mobilizing youth, are:

**“Manich Msema7” (*I will not Forgive*)**, a youth-led social movement that opposed the reconciliation bill introduced by the government in 2015 to grant a general amnesty to former officials of the Ben Ali regime and the Tunisian administration accused of corruption. The movement presented itself as “an independent citizenship initiative open to anyone who wants to join, and seek[ing] to bring together all citizens and the political, human rights and intellectual components around the task of withdrawing the Reconciliation Law that allows corruption and declares the innocence of the plundering capital of people's money.” It declared that its main and only goal is “withdrawing the draft bill on allowing corruption and rejecting the coup against the transitional justice process that seeks to uncover the truth, preserve memory, accountability, reparation, rehabilitation, reform of institutions and reconciliation”. The structure of the movement – spontaneous, horizontal, and decentralized – attracted people and created innovative ideas and ways for action and engagement, including by providing data, drawing graffiti on the walls, and launching a “wanted” campaign featuring senior figures of the former regime. The movement “sought to form a national public opinion opposing the draft bill. It also organized periodic marches in the country's states and held extensive discussions on social media. It welcomed the political parties opposing the bill in its various activities, with the stipulation that they should not be used in a partisan manner partisanship and that they should not raise their flag in popular rallies. It also worked to expand the debate on the draft bill to include opening an argument with its defenders about its political effectiveness, economic efficacy, and compatibility with the provisions of the 2014 constitution.”<sup>33</sup>

---

32 **Babnet Tunisie**, “Sit-in illimité d'un groupe de jeunes sans-emploi devant le siège du gouvernorat du Kef”, 12 February 2013, available at <https://www.babnet.net/kiwide-tail-58136.asp>.

33 **Mohamed al-Sahbi al-Khalfawi**, “The Reconciliation Law and the ‘I am not forgiven’ (*sic.*) campaign”, in *Breaking the Mold, Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making*, Issam Fares Institute for International Studies, AUB, 2018.

**“T3allem Soum” (*Learn to Swim*)**, a movement launched in 2018 that is at its origin a large wave of indignation against police violence. It came in response to the death of a young football fan who was chased by police officers after a match and lost his life after drowning, without police assistance. 31 March marks the anniversary of this tragic event. For several years now, several CSOs in Tunisia have been advocating and calling upon the authorities to recognize this day as an official national day against impunity.

**The EnaZeda (*Me Too*) movement**, launched on Twitter in October 2019 in support of a young girl victim of sexual harassment. The slogan #EnaZeda (the Tunisian #MeToo) has gained momentum with the creation of a Facebook group as well as a page with the same name. The initiative was launched by young Tunisian women to denounce sexual harassment through testimonies delivered in statutes and tweets. Since then, the mobilization has moved from social networks to the streets, including demonstrations in front of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People.<sup>34</sup> Managed by the “Aswat Nissa” organization, the #EnaZeda group on Facebook brought together thousands of testimonies denouncing sexual harassment.

**“Falgatna” (*We're fed up*)**, another citizen and independent feminist collective launched to fight against patriarchy, discrimination, and violence against women. The collective demands women's right to dignity, security, and justice and denounces the impunity of aggressors and the absence of a real policy for change. Initiated on social networks, this collective then distinguished itself by its “flash mob” operations against sexual violence held in front of the Government headquarters.<sup>35</sup>

---

34 As of publishing, the “*Carthago Nostrum*” website with further information appears to have been taken down.

35 **Nawaat**, “Falgatna : flashmob féministe contre les agressions sexuelles”, 15 December 2019, available at <https://nawaat.org/2019/12/15/falgatna-flashmob-feministe-contre-les-agressions-sexuelles-video/>.

## The limits of civil society

It is undeniable that in the years since 2011, civil society actors in Tunisia have occupied an important place in the public debate. Through their diversification, they have gained the capacity to influence public policies and contribute positively to reform processes. However, despite some important gains, their capacity to federate public support around their actions, and to push back against the “*retour en force*” of an authoritarian regime has been progressively weakened since 2019, putting CSOs in Tunisia in an uncomfortable space, and threatening their very existence. Several factors have led to this, some are inherent to the structures and the ways in which CSOs have operated over the years, while others are the immediate consequence of the political shift that has occurred since 25 July 2021 and that has targeted civic space in general.

The political configuration resulting from the 2014 elections, coupled with a security context that fostered a discourse opposing security and human rights, has forced many civil society actors to direct their efforts toward the preservation of civic space, public and individual freedoms, and the transitional justice process. Moreover, civic space in Tunisia has been also marked by a growing divide between traditional CSOs and other unorganized actors and social movements. At times, these unstructured actors have expressed a certain distrust of established CSOs, and vice versa. A notable example is the “Falgatna” (*We're fed up*) campaign which emerged in response to growing criticism of the Ena Zeda (MeToo) movement, which was accused of being co-opted by professional NGOs. This reflected the tensions that can arise between horizontal movements and NGOs.

Tunisia's civic space has also been shaped by a series of cleavages. **First, the authoritarian legacy of politics** left deep suspicion and ambiguity as to how civil society approached political issues. To avoid political confrontation and survive the authoritarian rule of Ben Ali, CSOs regularly resorted to framing issues in technical and neutral terms. Over a decade of democratization, civil society discourse retained some of its anti-political rhetoric, with many organizations frequently asserting, “We are the ones looking after the public interest, but we are not political.” Beyond an expression of neutrality, such statements reflected a certain ambiguity amongst NGOs, as many claimed to serve the public

interest without clearly defining which segments of society they were advocating for. This anti-political narrative, which emphasizes neutrality, is not unique to Tunisia and reflects the dominance of neoliberal contexts where the political nature of certain issues is obscured by self-evident moral claims (e.g., corruption is bad) or framed through expertise and good governance. Such a stance reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of neutrality, particularly in a context where politics permeates every aspect of society. After 2011, certain donor-driven discourses further entrenched this confusion by imposing conditions that emphasized neutrality and discouraged advocacy. This inadvertently constrained civil society's ability to address systemic issues and drive meaningful change. The experience of a decade of democratization highlights the urgent need to clarify the concept of neutrality and acknowledge the inherently political role of civil society, especially in contexts where governance and public life are deeply intertwined with political dynamics and where meaningful change requires systemic and structural changes – which by definition require political decisions.

**Second, there was an excessive focus on procedural democracy at the expense of substantive democracy.** Over the course of a decade, efforts disproportionately prioritized legislative reform rather than implementation, institutional transformation, or societal change, due to the fact that laws are often easier to amend than reform is to enact. Procedural democracy emphasizes formal mechanisms, such as elections, drafting new laws, and establishing constitutional checks and balances. In contrast, substantive democracy focuses on realizing democratic ideals, such as social justice, equality, and meaningful participation in governance. This imbalance has been a significant weakness in Tunisia's democratic experiment.

Informal activism often prioritized the promotion of economic and social rights, advocating for genuine reforms such as land ownership reform. Meanwhile, many CSOs focused on election monitoring and institutional reform. This emphasis on procedural democracy over substantive democracy led to the neglect of critical demands from the population. The economic sector has therefore seen little meaningful reform, perpetuating a corrupt structure in which the old economic elite were merely replaced by a new, politically and economically entrenched elite. One of the core issues that sparked the 2011 revolution – economic inequality and rent-seeking behavior – remains inadequately addressed by

successive political and economic elites. This failure has contributed to the growing influence of rentier economic elites, the expansion of the informal sector, and widespread corruption. However, this failure is not solely the responsibility of CSOs. The State and political elites bear significant responsibility for prioritizing procedural democracy over substantive democracy. A key example is the introduction of youth quotas in elections – an initiative not driven by civil society but adopted by legislators primarily to appeal to donors. In fact, most of the so-called progressive “legal successes” during the democratic decade followed a similar pattern, with such laws serving as a means for the State to appear cooperative with CSOs and gain favor with donors.

This neglect of substantive democracy created fertile ground for populism. President Saïed capitalized on these neglected issues, building his popularity and populist appeal by portraying himself as a champion against corruption and pledging to “clean” the country of its corrupt political and economic elites. It is important to recognize that civil society bears some responsibility for the rise of populism. A segment of civil society has actively contributed to reducing politics to a moral contest between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ actors. This tendency is particularly evident in the oversimplification of economic debates, where anti-corruption – and, to a lesser extent, anti-rent policies – have been framed as near-magical solutions to Tunisia’s economic challenges. This reductive approach ultimately created fertile ground for Kais Saïed’s rise.

**Third, there is the traditional conflict between professionalized CSOs and informal or horizontal activism.** This is illustrated by the refusal of unorganized movements – for example, the environmental movement in Gabès, the movement of unemployed youth in the mining region of Gafsa, and several farmer and peasant movements, among others – to formalize themselves for fear of losing the meaning of their militancy, and by their rejection of certain CSOs whom they accuse of co-opting their struggles in order to attract funds from foreign donors. CSOs, on the other hand, are sometimes critical of the approach favored by individual activists and informal movements, which favor confrontation over consultation with authorities and decision-makers. The divide between professionalization and informal activism was exacerbated after 2011, deepening the crisis of trust by fostering the perception that civil society professionals were part of the “foreign-funded” elites. This, in turn, made them vulnerable to anti-Western and populist discourses

**Fourth, Tunisia’s civil society was characterized by a generational cleavage.** A clear generational division exists within Tunisian civil society between activists who began their engagement in the late 2000s or during and after the 2011 ouster of Ben Ali and those who were active before this period. This divide is shaped by several factors, including a mutual sense of entitlement to leadership within post-2011 civil society, a lack of respect and trust between the two groups, and differing approaches to civil society practices and priorities. These generational differences have often led to tensions, hindering collaboration and the development of a unified civil society agenda.<sup>36</sup>

**Fifth, the Islamist/secularist divide** has exacerbated public mistrust of CSOs. Since the 1980s, fear of political Islam has pushed many secular and progressive groups to ally themselves with authoritarianism. Progressive NGOs aligned with the UGTT to protect against the takeover of the state by conservative forces. This polarization continued after 2011 and even after the National Dialogue of 2013, which ended up creating a compromise between secularist and Islamist political forces. This compromise was based on transactional politics and was aimed at avoiding conflict rather than resolving it. This polarization continued to divide civil society and had its most recent manifestation in the 2021 coup. Driven by anti-Islamism, many progressive NGOs ended up supporting the power grab operated by Kais Saïed on 25 July 2021 in the hope that he would weaken the Islamists. This divide that shaped Tunisia’s politics and expanded to the civic space, has prevented the emergence of large coalitions between diverging actors that would have helped in implementing crucial reforms and resisting a slide towards authoritarianism.

**Sixth, the ambivalent role of the UGTT.** As a representative of the State-dependent middle class, the UGTT has been the major interlocutor and partner of regimes since Bourguiba. During the democratic transition process, the UGTT used its political leverage and its role in brokering a political compromise to defend the interests of its support base (increasing wages, hiring, and benefits in the public sector). This was done to the detriment of outsiders (unemployed, popular classes). The UGTT has actively sought to assert dominance in negotiations with governments, particularly aiming to control protest movements

<sup>36</sup> **Ragnar Wellandt**, “Divisions within post-2011 Tunisia’s secular civil society”, *Democratization*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2019, pp. 959-974.

not originating from its core constituency. Various social groups, including unemployed graduates, impoverished farmers, and residents protesting against worsening environmental conditions, have been considered challenging the dominance of the UGTT who had a complex and ambivalent relationship with them. While the union aspired to position itself as a mediator, seeking to consolidate its control over the social landscape, it did not prioritize the integration of these outsider groups. The UGTT's primary focus remained on advancing the interests of its core members, exacerbating the existing asymmetry between insiders and outsiders. Insiders, represented by the union members who represent the state-dependent middle class, held a distinct advantage, while outsiders resorted to protests as their sole means of expression. The attitude of the UGTT with its focus on a short-term strategy concerned with maintaining the status quo undermined the creation of a large coalition for a comprehensive agenda for economic reform. The divisive strategy of the UGTT exerted pressure on CSOs who were unable to build large coalitions for change without them.

The double-edged role of the UGTT also extends to its fluctuating relationship with protest movements and civil society, coordinating with some at times while distancing itself from others, depending on its strategic interests and level of influence. Often perceived as opportunistic, the UGTT's engagement with protest movements has been largely shaped by its own calculations, prioritizing the protection of its constituency's interests (higher wages, better work conditions, increase in recruitment) over broader economic reforms and the rebuilding of the social contract.

**Seventh, CSOs suffered, notably after 2019, from being seen by some as vehicles for individual promotion of their members.** The particular context that marked the legislative and presidential elections at the end of 2019 deepened the divide between CSOs, other components of civic space, and public opinion, following the emergence of associations that, under the guise of charity and citizenship work, have constituted political platforms for specific presidential or legislative candidates.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Interview with **Maher Hanine**, April 2024. The two most striking examples of this phenomenon are the "3ich Tounsi" association of the politician Olfa Rambourg who was elected in November 2019 as a deputy to the Assembly of the Representatives of the People; and that of "Khalil Tounes" of the politician Nabil Karoui, whose party was the largest opposi-

This confusion between associative activism and political engagement has harmed the image of CSOs, which are not always perceived as genuine, reliable, and disinterested actors. Furthermore, it created an image among the public that the civil society sector was used by many of its members to serve their own interests and in some cases, act as a political elevator for civil society members to gain attention to integrate the political sphere by becoming ministers or holding official positions within the government.

**Eighth, the massive intervention and support provided by the donor community** to Tunisia in the wake of the Arab Spring and during a decade post-2011 provided CSOs with more opportunities, resources, and tools but also contributed to creating an associative landscape highly dependent on the foreign agendas of donors and their priorities. Priorities shifted over the years as CSOs jumped around topics like extremism, entrepreneurship, and migration, and their actions became determined by a project-cycle approach, leaving little room for associations to develop their own agendas and strategies over the long term, which also contributed to weakening the links between associations and their communities. While CSOs attracted and succeeded in mobilizing around them many activists, women, and young volunteers sharing the same enthusiasm for newfound freedoms, they continuously struggled to find the path that could lead to the emergence of a responsible associative life that fully plays its role as an actor and vector of democratization.

Additional important factors have played a major role in hindering the already difficult processes of democracy consolidation in Tunisia and have ultimately left civil society quite exposed to authoritarian consolidation. These difficulties are to be seen in three major and important sectors, where much-needed reforms never happened. While the 2014 constitution clearly enacted the establishment of a constitutional court, none of the successive governments that have held power since were able to form and put in place that constitutional court – which could have prevented, or at least slowed down, Saied's hijacking of constitutional power. "The

---

tion party in parliament in terms of seats. These two associations were very active before and during the electoral campaign, to the point of being accused by the rest of the political class of pursuing unacceptable political objectives, which motivated the draft reform of the electoral law presented by the government on the eve of the legislative and presidential elections, prohibiting the candidates at the head of these associations from standing for universal suffrage.

absence of the Constitutional Court creates a regime in which necessary linkages between government organs are rendered void, nullifying remedies to constitutional violations and creating exploitable loopholes for power-driven individuals or entities.”<sup>38</sup> Not to mention that the absence of the court also had serious consequences on the constitutionality and safeguarding of several laws that were passed.

Neither did the many reforms that were necessary to ensure the independence and transparency of the judiciary happen, exposing the fragility of this essential pillar of democracy, which has since been diluted to become only a token in Saïed's 2022 Constitution.

The security sector, particularly the police, posed significant threats to Tunisia's democratization process. Initially marginalized after 2011, the police quickly regained power, enjoying privileges and impunity. Despite substantial international support for security sector reform, progress has been minimal, with internal reforms falling short. The growing influence of opaque and unaccountable police unions, coupled with the broad and vague application of counter-terrorism laws, has further undermined transparency and accountability in the security apparatus, weakening civil society actors and organizations.<sup>39</sup>

---

38 **Luca Utterwulge**, “Tunisia's Forgotten Court: A Constitutional Oversight and the Rise of Authoritarianism”, *Columbia Political Review*, March 2024, available at <https://www.cpre-view.org/articles/2024/3/tunisia-forgotten-court-a-constitutional-oversight-and-the-rise-of-authoritarianism>.

39 **Audrey Pluta**, “Impossible ‘réforme’ du secteur de la sécurité ? Syndicats, organisations internationales et collectifs militants dans la question policière”, *Arab Reform Initiative*, 7 April 2013, available at <https://www.arab-reform.net/fr/publication/impossible-reforme-du-secteur-de-la-securite-syndicats-organisations-internationales-et-collectifs-militants-dans-la-question-policiere/>.

## From an obstructed to a repressed civic space

In its 2019 annual report on the state of civil society, *Civicus* described civic space in Tunisia as obstructed.<sup>40</sup> The report noted that “the demonization of human rights defenders and civil society actors is warmly welcomed by populist audiences, leaving the door wide open to restricting space for human rights CSOs, with an extrapolation that accuses civil society of being a platform for supporting terrorism.”<sup>41</sup>

While these alarming trends have multiplied since 2019, it is important to mention that numerous attempts to restrict civic space and freedom of association have marked the Tunisian context since 2014. This observation is shared by the Civil Collective for Individual Liberties (CCLI), for which threats and violence against CSOs and individuals have always been present: “Five years after the promulgation of the Constitution of 27 January 2014 and the adoption of many revolutionary and progressive legal texts, flagrant violations of a highly alarming nature continue to occur.”<sup>42</sup>

During the democratization process, an insidious atmosphere of securitization emerged and continued to grow with the intensification of the war on terrorism. The deterioration of Tunisia's security landscape, marked by the 2013 political assassinations and, more notably, the 2015 terrorist attacks, paved the way for the securitization of public life and the subtle return of a police state. Authorities leveraged gaps and ambiguities in the legislative framework to discipline CSOs and constrain civic space. Police unions and the public terrorism debate

---

40 **CIVICUS**, “Résumé analytique de l'état de la société civile 2019”, 2019, available at [https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2019/SOCS\\_YIR\\_2019\\_ExecSum\\_French.pdf](https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2019/SOCS_YIR_2019_ExecSum_French.pdf).

41 **Amine Ghali**, “Civic space in Tunisia: international dynamics don't always help”, *CIVICUS*, 24 July 2018, available at <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/re-imagining-democracy/stories-from-the-frontlines/3319-civic-space-in-tunisia-international-dynamics-don-t-always-help>.

42 **Collectif Civil pour les Libertés Individuelles (CCLI)**, “Libertés individuelles: ‘Bas les masques!’”, *Jamaity*, 12 April 2019, available at <https://jamaity.org/2019/04/libertes-indivuelles-bas-les-masques/>.

significantly influenced the media discourse around civil society, fostering suspicion and hostility.

The 2015 Counter-Terrorism Law further restricted CSOs by limiting access to financial resources and foreign funding. Authorities began to adopt tactics reminiscent of the Ben Ali era, appearing outwardly open and liberal while employing more covert means to curtail civil society. Since 2014, numerous CSOs have faced frozen funds under the pretext of money laundering. Such tactics are not unique to Tunisia. Across the MENA region, governments have invoked terrorism concerns to stifle civil society over the past decade. Between 2014 and 2019, officials and police unions frequently accused CSOs of financing terrorism, creating a climate of suspicion. However, these claims were often refuted by the Financial Task Force at the Central Bank, which found that instances of fund misuse in Tunisia were rare. Despite this, the growing securitization discourse and the Counter-Terrorism Law significantly hindered the growth and development of CSOs.

Several post-2014 governments also engaged in attempts to restrict the freedoms of CSOs through legal (laws and regulations contrary to freedom of association) and administrative (bureaucratic processes and delays) means. These obstruction attempts included an attempt to overhaul the legal framework for associations, the revision of the anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering laws, the amalgamation of associations and companies in the adopted national register of companies, the maintenance of the state of emergency for years, and the attempt to close down a pro-LGBTQIA+ association.<sup>43</sup> Administrative barriers have multiplied, with a particularly common practice of withholding the administrative receipt of incorporation from newly formed associations. This document is essential for completing the registration process, as it enables publication in the official journal. The delay or refusal to issue these receipts effectively hinders the formal establishment and operational capacity of emerging CSOs. Other restrictive practices include the administration's recurrent requests to associations wishing to register to modify some of their objectives mentioned in their statutes, particularly when these are related to the fight against corruption or the

43 **Yassine Bellamine**, "Le gouvernement perd définitivement son procès contre l'association Shams pour la défense des droits des homosexuels", *Kapitalis*, 21 February 2020, available at <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2020/02/21/le-gouvernement-perd-definitivement-son-proces-contre-l-association-shams-pour-la-defense-des-droits-des-homosexuels/>.

observation of the functioning of public services.

Thus, despite a prevailing political discourse that appeared favorable to civil society for a decade and an encouraging legal framework, there has always been a discrepancy in practices that reflected a desire on the part of the political authorities to confine associations to politically neutral roles, illustrated in particular by the criticisms expressed towards associations that engage with sensitive or critical issues such as governance, public policies, the fight against corruption, and the rights of sexual and religious minorities. Associations were regularly accused by politicians and the media of supporting terrorism and money laundering and of serving hidden and dubious agendas. In their official discourse, the political leaders justified this desire for restriction by the need to safeguard the higher interests of the Nation in economic and security matters and by the demands of foreign parties in terms of compliance with international standards and norms in the fields of the fight against terrorism and money laundering.<sup>44</sup>

Several legal measures were also adopted in Tunisia to limit civic space and crack down on activists, human rights defenders, journalists and women activists. While the specific Decree-Law 88 guarantees and enables CSOs to operate quite freely, other more restrictive laws were enacted to limit civic space. Articles from the Penal code, the cybercrime laws – Law 54 in Tunisia – and the counter-terrorist law of 2015 are often used to attack CSOs and actors, making it even more difficult to counter governments' narratives. Increased securitization of the space is increasingly becoming one of the major challenges faced by civil society actors in Tunisia, as well as in the region at large.

It took just two-years for Tunisia to move from a country where civic space was obstructed to one where it is repressed according to *Civicus*: "The 2021 decisions of President Kais Saied to freeze parliament, suspend the constitution, dismiss the head of government and indefinitely extend his extraordinary powers have resulted in a more hostile environment for civil society."<sup>45</sup> With the election in

44 In its 2017 follow-up report to the FATF, Tunisia identified an inherent risk in the "non-profit" sector and proposed to overhaul the legal framework governing associations, even though the FATF's initial assessment spoke of a framework "largely in compliance" with international standards.

45 **CIVICUS Monitor**, "CIVICUS Monitor Report 2022: Middle East and North Africa", 2022, available at <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2022/01/01/civicus-monitor-report-2022->

2019 of President Kais Saied, things started to slightly shift, culminating in a coup on 25 July 2021 when President Kais Saied suspended the parliament, later dissolving it in March 2022. Many of the civil society actors and organizations who initially supported and voted for Kais Saied welcomed the dissolution of the Parliament as a “courageous step” made by the President against the Ennahda party, since the Islamist party was seen by many as the main culprit for the political and economic crisis in the country and was accused of covering up corruption and bad governance.

What civil society expected less were all the measures that President Saied took unilaterally, and which are all alarming signs of a slip towards authoritarianism in the country. Several international and national organizations started reporting increased attacks on protesters and human rights defenders and particularly attacks and detention of LGBTQIA+ activists. This is quite alarming, particularly when it is known that President Saied has on several occasions expressed his opposition towards sexual minorities considering their defenders as “foreign agents”. Furthermore, many of his speeches use violent terminology to name his adversaries, going so far as to incite hate speech.

The repressive trend escalated significantly with President Saied intensifying anti-CSO campaigns. Saied's accusations of CSOs engaging in espionage and his pressure on the central bank to restrict transactions have led many international partners to withdraw funding for Tunisian CSOs, forcing many to drastically scale back their activities. Moreover, a draft civil society law proposes requiring government authorization before receiving foreign funding, further tightening restrictions. Since 2021, Saied's emphasis on national sovereignty has been weaponized against civil society. Activists have faced harassment, arrests, and investigations, while dozens of CSOs have had their bank accounts frozen. This crackdown extends beyond the capital to local levels, where police have systematically summoned and interrogated local activists and CSO members. In several regions, police units have methodically contacted every CSO in the local register, subjecting them to intense scrutiny. Many CSOs, both national and local, have had their funds blocked, offices searched, and members arrested, creating a pervasive atmosphere of intimidation. This combination of legal, financial, and administrative constraints represents a serious challenge to the survival and autonomy of Tunisian

[middle-east-and-north-africa/](https://www.middle-east-and-north-africa/).

civil society.

Concerns grew further amongst national and international civil society actors when, near the end of 2021, the Tunisian government decided to introduce amendments to the Decree-Law 88 of 2011. A joint declaration issued by the *Observatoire pour la protection des défenseurs des droits humains* and the FIDH notes that “the amendments to the Decree-Law No. 2011-88 of 24 September 2011, on the organization of associations, appear to bear witness to a desire by the Tunisian authorities to provide themselves with legal tools to control and foreseeably muzzle civil society, especially since it arises in a climate of increased attacks against human rights defenders in the country and the complete lack of dialogue between the authorities in place and the agents of civil society.”<sup>46</sup> Several interviewed representatives from CSOs (national and international) expressed deep concerns about the state of freedoms and civic space in the country, mentioning that international organizations received an increasing number of complaints over the past year highlighting a growing arsenal of repressive measures in law and in practice. Numerous violations and repressive measures are being used to crack down on independent organizations, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly, in addition to stigmatizing discourses and media campaigns “lynching” and targeting opponents, judicial harassment leading to imprisonment, threats, and intimidation, including physical violence.

Civic space in Tunisia is being eroded gradually through subtle but repeated attacks. This gradual erosion is harder to detect and call out than a singular attack, and the sum of such gradual erosive tactics seems to be harder to mobilize against.<sup>47</sup> This assessment is shared across many civil society actors who see in the many moves and actions of the president a *retour en force* of authoritarian rule in the country: “We are clearly moving away from the democratic transition and from what has been achieved in the country over the past decade. Saied holds all powers in his hand, there are no checks and

<sup>46</sup> FIDH, “Serious threats to freedom of association in Tunisia”, 2022, available at <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/north-africa-middle-east/tunisia/serious-threats-to-freedom-of-association-in-tunisia>.

<sup>47</sup> Maina Kiai, “Thinking democratically: a comprehensive approach to countering and preventing ‘shrinking space’”, OHCHR, 2017, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/CivicSpace/ThinkPiece-ShrinkingCivicSpace.pdf>

balances, and no independence of the judiciary.”<sup>48</sup> President Saïed further weakened the judiciary when he dismissed 57 judges on 1 June 2022 accusing them of obstructing investigations into terrorism and corruption cases. Several CSOs and actors signed a letter calling on the president to reverse his decision but to no avail.<sup>49</sup>

The introduction of Decree 54 in 2022 which purports to combat “false information and rumors” on the internet has further compounded the constraints faced by CSOs through the imposition of severe restrictions on freedom of speech and expression, particularly in the digital space. Previously, many events and mobilizations were organized and conducted online, providing a vital platform for civil society activities. However, under the provisions of this decree, maintaining such online engagement has become increasingly risky, as individuals and organizations now face the threat of judicial prosecution for their digital content. This has significantly curtailed the ability of CSOs to mobilize, advocate, and engage with the public, further shrinking the already limited civic space.

The major concern for CSOs in Tunisia now is a proposed revision of Decree-Law 88, which was put before the Parliament in October 2023.<sup>50</sup> As mentioned by a member of a Tunisian CSO: “We’re probably heading towards a collapse of associative life, especially at the level of small associations working in the field, which is the most dangerous scenario.”<sup>51</sup> Several attempts have been already made to amend the text yet so far have been met with failure due to pressure from local and international CSOs. With a President ruling by decree, CSOs express worries about waking up to an amended law on associations overnight. If amended, the law would, among other things, restrict and possibly prohibit foreign funding to CSOs. In

February 2024, 46 local and regional CSOs in Tunisia issued a joint statement in support of Decree-Law 88, sounding the alarm on the dangers of adopting a new law that would inevitably curtail rights and freedoms and “undermine the achievements of democracy.”<sup>52</sup> Needless to say, CSOs are totally excluded from the discussion around the proposed new law.

The proposed draft law will impose further financial and administrative complexities on local as well as foreign organizations operating in Tunisia and will restrict foreign funding and even criminalize it. In a national security meeting in February 2022, President Saïed stressed “the need to issue a decree prohibiting foreign funding of NGOs that constitute “extensions” of parties and “satellite offices” of foreign powers in Tunisia”<sup>53</sup> deeming it necessary to protect the country’s interest and issue a decree to put an end to foreign funding.

Given the lack of domestic financing for associations, it is very hard to imagine how local CSOs would survive a prohibition on foreign funding. In interviews conducted after Saïed’s power grab in 2021, members of CSOs in Tunisia declared that their main source of funding comes from foreign donors as none of them has ever received any public funding in support of their work. All organizations also indicated that they have very little financial reserves and would barely survive a few months (maximum 6 months) in the event of restrictions on foreign funding. These interviews also showed that perceptions of the threats to CSOs are not shared in the same way. Major CSOs, mainly based in the capital Tunis, have a greater awareness of the threats facing civil society than those operating in rural areas and in the regions. For example, most CSOs in the inner regions did not express great concern about the possible revision of Decree-Law 88. According to an EU representative, critics and worries about this matter remain very weak among CSOs outside the capital.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Interview conducted with **CSO actors**, 2022

<sup>49</sup> **Avocats Sans Frontières (ASF)**, “Non à l’élimination du pouvoir judiciaire”, 2 June 2022, available at <https://www.asf.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CP-2-juin-2022-Non-a-lelimination-du-pouvoir-judicictionnel.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> The proposed law is known as “Organic Law 027/2023” – **Assemblée des Représentants du Peuple (ARP)**, “Proposed Organic Law No. 027/2023 on the Regulation of Associations”, 10 October 2023, available at [https://www.arp.tn/en\\_US/loi/project/3957](https://www.arp.tn/en_US/loi/project/3957).

<sup>51</sup> **Inkyfada**, “Law on association: a bill that threatens civil society”, 15 February 2023, available at <https://inkyfada.com/en/2023/02/15/law-on-associations-a-bill-that-threatens-civil-society/>.

<sup>52</sup> **Tunis Afrique Presse (TAP)**, “CSOs express concern over proposed amendments to association law”, 12 March 2023, available at <https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Society/17118072-civil-society>.

<sup>53</sup> **Tunis Afrique Presse (TAP)**, “President Saïed discusses new measures affecting civil society”, 15 April 2023, available at <https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Top-News-EN/14918963-president-saied>.

<sup>54</sup> Interview conducted with **EU staff in charge of Civil Society and Governance in Tunisia**

## Possible trajectories for civil society as it faces more restrictions

This systematic crackdown has put CSOs on the defensive, constantly pushing back against the closing of civic spaces. In this new context defined by repressive measures, structured and established CSOs will be the first targeted and the most affected. The space for them will gradually be closed, and their sphere of action drastically reduced – especially those working on human rights issues or fighting for social justice and exposing corruption. The predominance of professionalization since 2011 means that the end of access to foreign funding would have a severe impact on Tunisia's civil society. NGOs are already struggling to survive, and the growing crisis of trust – fueled by President Saïed's discourse discrediting 'foreign-funded' elites – is further undermining civil society and shrinking civic space.

As a result, we are likely to witness the decline of civic engagement through NGOs while, at the same time, the civic space is being reclaimed by spontaneous and informal movements capable of mobilizing the public around specific issues. These mobilizations may be unpredictable, chaotic, disorganized, and fragmented but, despite these challenges, informal activism will help keep hope alive, ensuring that the progress made over the past decade is not entirely erased. Even in the face of autocratic restoration, spaces for protest, expression, and demands for rights will continue to exist.<sup>55</sup> For example, the environmental movement against the waste crisis in the city of Agareb, southern Tunisia, illustrates how grassroots activism rooted in local communities is gaining traction.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the protest movements organized by farmers and livestock breeders against

the increase in the price of fodder in 2021 and 2022, during which they camped outside fodder production plants to demand the reversal of increases in fodder price and to ask for a rise in the price of milk, showed the potential of mobilization of farmers to defend sectoral claims as well as the capacity of certain social groups to adopt confrontational strategies under authoritarianism.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, the solidarity movement with political prisoners and human rights activists detained by the regime highlights the resurgence of informal activism at a time when political parties are banned, NGOs and unions are weakened, and political freedoms are severely repressed.

These developments expose the limits of foreign-funded, professionalized civil society, demonstrating that the NGOs best equipped to survive are potentially small NGOs in the peripheries that have been less dependent on foreign funding and NGOs who have already prepared for difficult times – whether by diversifying funding sources, engaging in social entrepreneurship, or securing greater autonomy.

## Assessing donors' intervention in Tunisia post-2011

The massive intervention and support provided by the donor's community to Tunisia in the wake of the Arab Spring and in the ensuing decade provided CSOs with more opportunities, resources, and tools but also contributed to creating an associative landscape highly dependent on donors and their priorities linked with a project cycle approach to funding, leaving little room for associations to develop their own agendas and strategies over the long term, which also contributed to weakening the links between associations and their communities.

It is uncontested that the donor community, be it philanthropic foundations or foreign governments, played an important role in providing resources to CSOs and enabling them to operate. However, the type of funding was often restricted, project-based, and non-flexible, a situation that did not allow

---

<sup>55</sup> Interview with **Maher Hanine**. This argument was also illustrated by the example given around the funeral of Dr. Jad Hanchiri, that was attended by an important crowd of youth and civil society members, almost transforming his funeral, end of March, into a political gathering.

<sup>56</sup> **Maha Bouhlel**, "Environmental Mobilization Amid Tunisia's Waste Crisis", *Arab Reform Initiative*, 18 January 2024, available at <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/environmental-mobilization-amid-tunisia-waste-crisis/>.

<sup>57</sup> **Inkyfada**, "Ouled Jaballah : Les paysans de Mel-louleche en lutte pour l'eau", 25 February 2021, available at <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2021/02/25/ouled-jaballah-mel-louleche-manifestation-paysans-tunisie/>.

CSOs to respond swiftly to emerging challenges or contexts and hindered their ability to develop their sustainability in the long term. Furthermore, the widespread financial mechanisms based on calls for proposals and project-based funding have pushed CSOs to align with the donor's objectives, thematic areas, and priorities to access funds. This definitely undermined the ability of national/local CSOs to set their own agendas, priorities, and strategies that would respond to a local context and needs (that national CSOs know much better than donors) and would legitimize their work and actions among the people they intend to serve or represent. Inevitably, this has contributed to the creation of an elitist group "the *NGO folks*" that is perceived as pursuing its own interest rather than the country's needs. This situation created by the donors' approach results in a constant need for CSOs to secure resources to be able to operate.

Over the years, donor requirements for good NGO governance led some CSOs in Tunisia, mainly those based in the capital, to develop internal procedures and work on their administrative and financial management – often benefiting from capacity-building programs that accompanied them in this process. The interviews conducted with CSOs showed a good knowledge of practices they need to adhere to in terms of good governance, strategic planning, financial management, and human resources procedures. Yet it is worth noting that the aspects mentioned here are specific mainly to organizations based in the Tunis area, with greater access to the donor community and funding opportunities. While it is necessary to recognize that efforts have been made by CSOs to develop internal policies and put internal processes in place, it is important to mention that, in most cases, this was linked to donors' requirements and not based on the organizations' prioritization. When assessing organizations' health (including criteria such as financial health, leadership, management, governance, and so on) over several years, a number of observations can be drawn: there are weaknesses at the institutional level in terms of governance, division of labor, and most importantly in fundraising strategies and absorption capacities. The project-cycle model imposed by major donors in Tunisia has created a system where CSOs compete with each other, broaden their mandate according to the call for proposal requirements, and inevitably stretch their capacities (human and financial alike) too thin in order to comply with the donors' requirements. Not only do they find themselves competing against each other but also against other bigger international NGOs (INGOs) that have greater

access, know-how, and capacities. With this system in place, little room is left for coalition and network building, unless again, this is part of the goals set in the call. Yet, even in this case "the obligation of partnerships, often imposed by donors, is highly inefficient to curb this competitive effect. [While they may be clear on paper, partnerships are rarely effective in practice, with a high possibility for] disguised sub-contractors, cheap implementers, or [refusals] to take into account cost-sharing; they are the source of infinite problems that the main grantee has to hide from the donor and deal with [in order] to respect its contractual obligations."<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand, while the civil society sector has undoubtedly proliferated and has been a source of employment for the youth,<sup>59</sup> it is worth noting that the capacity to retain employees over a long period of time in the same organization is very short and often depends on the project cycle that they have been hired for. With skills and know-how acquired, it is not surprising to see the same people hopping from one organization to another in a short period of time, creating thus a technical "professionalization" within the sector away from any form of activism. It is also this aspect in particular that has further contributed to widening the gap between those CSOs, the informal movements, and the public.

The COVID-19 pandemic, the global economic recession, and the multiple crises people are facing at the global level have pushed funders and philanthropic foundations to rethink the way, means, and mechanisms through which they provide support to the people and how they can really affect social change. Calls to end the "starvation cycle"<sup>60</sup> in

<sup>58</sup> **Nadia Sherif**, "Improving Foreign Support to Tunisia's Civil Society", *CAPerspectives*, no. 5, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> "The impact on the careers of countless Tunisians, especially the youth, who have either worked, undergone valuable training, or volunteered with CSOs, cannot be underestimated. In a nation grappling with the pervasive issue of youth unemployment, civil society has provided opportunities for growth, learning, and meaningful engagement that have left an indelible mark on Tunisia's future." — **Lamine Benghazi**, "The Suffocation of Civil Society in Tunisia: A Chronicle of a Slow Constriction", *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, November 2023, available at <https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/the-suffocation-of-civil-society-in-tunisia-a-chronicle-of-a-slow-constriction/>.

<sup>60</sup> **Humentum**, *Breaking the Starvation Cycle: How International Funders Can Stop Trapping Their Grantees in the Starvation Cycle and Start Building Their Resilience*, available at <https://humentum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/>

the non-profit sector have been growing and ideation spaces have opened up to rethink the way aid is provided.

As the space for CSOs is shrinking, both CSOs and donors need to adapt to the operating environment and find ways to continue to push back against closure and repression. The donor community has an important role to play here in providing the needed resources (financial and technical) without which CSOs in Tunisia will struggle to survive. Yet, the experiences of other Arab countries where civic space shrunk show that donors tend to have little appetite for risk and are quick to stop their support for CSOs to avoid any political fallout from local authorities. This is likely to occur in Tunisia as the space closes further. CSOs very often mention that their donors do not want to share the risk, particularly when operating in closed spaces. Yet CSOs cannot carry this burden alone.

Rising authoritarianism and further shrinking space in the region are also making it much more difficult to convince donors to support CSOs. New forms of civic engagement through grassroots organizational models have emerged and we see other non-conventional forms of resistance that will probably make it more difficult for both donors and actors of these movements to access funding. For donors, the main reasons are their burdensome procedures and legislation, lack of flexibility and compliance systems, along with their lack of direct access to these communities, which make them less prone to engage and support them. On the other hand, these groups do not have all the required resources and know-how either to access donors or to comply with the donors' complex requirements.

## Conclusion

Since President Saied's authoritarian restoration began in 2021, Tunisian civil society has reached a moment of truth. The professionalization process, which expanded after 2011 and led to the creation of thousands of NGOs – many of them highly active – has now hit its limits. Over time, this professionalization has deepened internal divisions, fueling populist narratives about “NGO folk” and “foreign-funded elites” that have contributed to the breakdown of democracy.

Three key lessons can be drawn from Tunisia's post-2011 trajectory. First, populism in Tunisia has largely emerged from demands for sovereignty, resonating with marginalized groups, the “forgotten”, and the would-be middle class – particularly university graduates who were promised social mobility but who never achieved it. Disenchanted segments of the population, feeling alienated from the political and economic system, ultimately gravitated toward Saied's anti-Western and anti-elite rhetoric. This rhetoric has often targeted CSOs as being part of a “Western plot” to undermine Tunisia and “change” the values of society. At the same time, the prioritization of procedural democracy over substantive democracy, combined with the entrenched divides (Islamists versus secularists; insiders represented by UGTT and UTICA versus outsiders, and professionalized NGOs versus informal activism), further weakened and discredited an already fragmented civil society. With foreign funding becoming increasingly scarce, well-connected NGOs are being forced to rethink their activities, downsize their staff, and shift into survival mode within a shrinking civic space. At the same time, spontaneous and informal movements around specific or sectoral issues are emerging. These mobilizations are mainly unpredictable, chaotic, disorganized, and fragmented. This crisis raises urgent questions about the future of activism and civic engagement in Tunisia.

Second, as Tunisia experiences an authoritarian restoration, CSOs are reflecting deeply on their future. Relieved from the intense demands of project management, they must assess the trajectory taken, the choices made, and the options for navigating the uncertainty that has defined the period since 2011. At the same time, resisting repression has become an urgent priority. Repression against civil society at the local level has escalated significantly since 2021, yet the full extent of this crackdown remains unclear. There are many unknowns, as no comprehensive monitoring or reporting mechanisms currently exist to document what is happening to CSOs on the ground. Organizations like Amnesty International primarily focus on national-level dynamics, leaving a critical information gap regarding the daily challenges faced by Tunisian CSOs. This lack of visibility underscores the urgent need to establish mechanisms for systematically monitoring the health and status of civil society at both the national and local levels. Such mechanisms would provide valuable insights into the repression CSOs face and help inform strategies to safeguard their operations and ensure their resilience.

Last, Tunisia's post-2011 trajectory reflects the role internal cleavages played in weakening not only civil society but also democracy itself, creating fertile ground for populist and anti-democratic forces. Addressing the Islamist-secularist divide would help ease tensions and strengthen the pro-democracy movement. Additionally, creating spaces for reflection, debate, and discussion – where civil society actors can take stock of a decade of democratization, draw lessons, and strategize for the future – is crucial for rebuilding trust, defining shared goals, and preserving what remains of the civic space. Under Ben Ali's dictatorship, the UGTT played this role. Now with the weakening and delegitimization of the UGTT, civil society groups have to invent and create these spaces in and outside Tunisia. These spaces must be reconstructed in times of repression, particularly as the Saied regime grapples with mounting socio-economic failures. Many of those who once accepted restrictions on freedom in exchange for economic benefits are now realizing they have lost both. In this context, civil society must find new ways to sustain activism, reassert democratic values, and maintain a space for deliberation despite increasing authoritarianism.

---

## Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

---



[contact@arab-reform.net](mailto:contact@arab-reform.net)  
Paris - Beirut - Tunis