



**Prospects for
peace in the
Maghreb region:
A decade since the
Arab Spring**

POLITICAL LANDSCAPE SINCE THE ARAB SPRING

EMMAUS
STOCKHOLM

CHAIN-REACTION OF HOPE

During the Arab Spring, large-scale protests against ruling authoritarian regimes spread across countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Political exclusion, corruption and limited political rights and opportunities were some of the main factors that contributed to the discontent. People increasingly demanded democratization of their countries, as well as realization of political rights and civil liberties. The widespread protest movements and demands for fundamental political change demonstrate the overwhelming frustration with corrupt political systems and the desire among citizens in the region to fight for their basic rights and freedoms.

Today, ten years after the Arab Spring protests first started, the political outcomes of the uprisings vary dramatically between different countries. This article discusses, analyzes, and compares the political landscape in several countries of the Maghreb region, a decade since the start of the Arab Spring.

The action by Mohamed Bouazizi to set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid in protest of the corrupt political system was the starting point of the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia.¹ The large-scale domestic protests against the regime would ultimately force the dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali to resign and leave the country.² 26-year-old Bouazizi, who worked as a street vendor, set himself on fire to protest against the political system after an event where the authorities had humiliated him and confiscated his wares.³ Mistrust and boiling frustration with corrupt authorities were already widespread among large segments of the population, and Bouazizi's dramatic action inspired other Tunisians to finally come together in large protests against Ben Ali's authoritarian regime.⁴

The ousting of the Tunisian dictator contributed to a powerful chain-reaction of hope in other states in

the Middle East and North Africa. People in various countries gathered on the streets to protest against the fundamentally flawed and corrupt systems that created economic despair. Bouazizi's action and the following revolution in Tunisia are often described in international media as catalysts for the intense uprisings during the Arab Spring. Although the events in Tunisia certainly were important in inspiring protesters in neighboring countries, chronologically speaking, protests against political injustices and economic issues took place in Gdeim Izik in Western Sahara prior to Bouazizi's action and the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia.⁵ In fact, protests in Gdeim Izik in October 2010 gathered approximately 10,000 to 30,000 people, who demanded better living standards, job opportunities and an end to the Moroccan occupation of the country.

The political results of the civil unrest that swept across many countries during the Arab Spring vary



dramatically. While the revolution in Tunisia is usually described as successful in terms of bringing down the dictator and transitioning to democracy, similar protests for instance in Syria were met with brutal repression from the government, which developed into civil war.⁶ Although Tunisia has achieved democratic progress with democratic elections and freedom of expression, the country still struggles with economic problems and unemployment, especially among youth.⁷ In September 2021, the Tunisian President Kais Saïed announced that he would rule the country by decree, which resulted in protests for his resignation in the capital.⁸

The Arab Spring protests in countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya were followed by civil wars.⁹ Since uprisings started in Syria in 2011, the Bashar al-Assad regime has responded with brutal repression against the Syrian population.¹⁰ The al-Assad government, along with Russian military forces, has carried out deadly attacks against opposition groups and civilians to stay in power. This includes deliberate bombing strikes on health care facilities and schools.¹¹ An investigation by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons shows that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons in strikes against civilian targets in Syria.¹² Attacking civilians with chemical weapons is a violation against the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Syria acceded to the Convention in 2013.¹³ Several parties in the conflict in Syria have committed

serious violations of international humanitarian law, for instance war crimes, crimes against humanity, and grave human rights abuses.¹⁴ Approximately 500,000 people have been killed in the war.¹⁵ Today, more than half of Syria's population are either displaced within Syria or have become refugees in other countries.¹⁶ Furthermore, veto powers Russia and China have blocked resolutions in the UN Security Council, for instance regarding cross-border humanitarian aid.¹⁷

In similarity to developments in Syria, uprisings in Yemen and Libya led to armed conflicts.¹⁸ In comparison to Syria, however, protests in Yemen and Libya eventually led to the fall of the authoritarian presidents Ali Abdullah Saleh and Muammar al-Gaddafi.¹⁹ Human rights organizations have reported on humanitarian crises both in Yemen²⁰ and Libya.²¹ The civil war between the Yemeni government (supported by the Saudi Arabian military) and the oppositional Huthi forces, has had large-scale consequences for civilians.²² Today, there are severe food and medicine shortages, in part because of the Saudi Arabian coalition's blockade of ports in Yemen. Both sides of the conflict in Yemen have engaged in attacks with civilian casualties. Today, most of the country's population needs humanitarian assistance and there are approximately 4 million internally displaced persons.²³ In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has put a bigger burden on the already dysfunctional health care system.²⁴

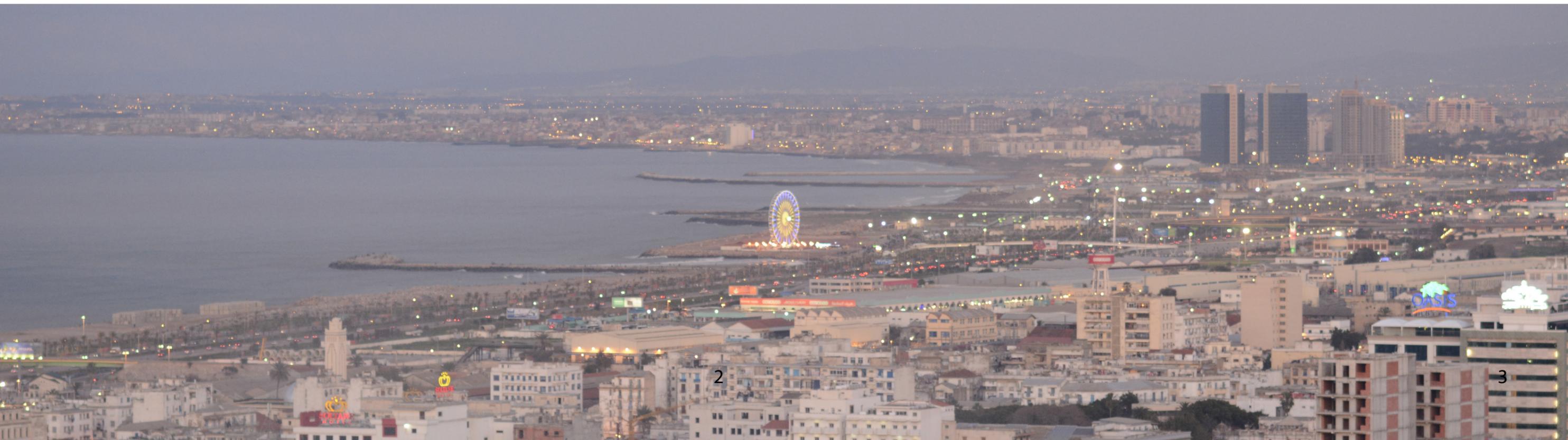
POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE MAGHREB REGION

ALGERIA

As the Arab Spring protests continued to spread to various countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the Algerian government tried to calm protesters by promising them economic and political reforms.²⁵ Morocco's government had a similar approach.²⁶ In comparison to countries such as Tunisia and Syria, the majority of protesters in Algeria did not initially have the final goal of overthrowing the government, but people were mainly protesting for economic reforms that would generate better living standards.²⁷ For instance, Algerians demanded that the government would implement policies to decrease food prices. The government presented reforms that made it easier for the younger unemployed segment of the population to be granted government loans. As a response to the Arab Spring protests, the Algerian government lifted its state of emergency, which had been in effect since the early 1990s. Political reforms during the Arab Spring in Algeria included a new law that legalized more political parties. However, the American organisation

Freedom House still considers the country as "not free".

Different explanations have been presented as to why protests during the Arab Spring remained relatively calm in Algeria compared to several other countries in the region. Looking back at the country's recent history might shed light on the government's reluctance to use violent methods to control the protests. Fresh memories from the civil war in the 1990s may have given the government incentive to promise economic and political reforms to the protesters rather than turning to military force.²⁸ The Algerian government did deploy security forces in response to protests, however this did not escalate into a deadly war as in several other Arab Spring countries. Algeria also had a more open political system in place before the protests started, compared to most other Arab Spring countries. This might help to explain why many Algerians did not initially have the ambition to overthrow the government during the Arab Spring.



New massive protests, referred to as the Hirak movement, emerged in Algeria in February 2019. Tens of thousands of Algerians took to the streets to demand President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's resignation.²⁹ Furthermore, the relation between the President and the military had deteriorated since he announced that he would run for a new term in 2014.³⁰ Bouteflika ultimately resigned from office in April 2019 after 20 years in power.³¹ The political instability followed by Bouteflika's resignation created a vacuum in which the Algerian military were able to step in and gain more political influence.³²

The military has played a dominant role in the public sphere since the War on Independence, where it gained popular legitimacy by successfully fighting the French colonial power. The military has since then had a significant influence on the Algerian government and close connections with the political elite. The military responded to the Hirak movement's demands by purging a wide range of high-position officials connected to the Bouteflika regime, accusing them of corruption and treason. Although this initially seemed like a response to the Hirak movement's demands for a dismantle of the political elite, suspicion regarding the military's motives gradually increased among the people. The Hirak movement has expressed concerns about the army's political influence with the slogan "A civilian state – not a military state". Despite this, recent developments in the country show little indication that the military is committed to a genuine transformation. For instance, the army has been reluctant to initiate a dialogue with the Hirak movement and the appointment of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune in 2019 has been argued to be a tactic for the military to remain in control. Under the new presidency of Tebboune, a new constitution has been put into effect in Algeria.³³

Women's rights have been enhanced under the new constitution. Nevertheless, some critics argue that the new constitution limits freedom of speech and weakens the independence of the judiciary system. Amnesty International has reported that the Algerian authorities still detain peaceful citizens, activists and journalists associated with the Hirak movement.³⁴

In the last two years, restrictions associated with the pandemic has also limited various actors from participating in protests against the government.

MOROCCO

The Moroccan regime feared the political development in neighbouring countries and therefore made limited concessions at an early stage during the Arab Spring to control protests.³⁵ This method can be compared to the Algerian strategy, which also introduced reforms. In Morocco, King Mohammed VI presented political reforms to maintain his political stability.³⁶ In other words, the Moroccan government was able to adapt early on by making strategic reforms in a period of significant turbulence in the Middle East and North Africa. After a national referendum, Morocco implemented a new constitution in 2011.³⁷ As a result, some political power was transferred from the monarchy to the elected legislature. However, the King still has veto power and continues to influence the state and society. Moreover, there are still restrictions regarding civil liberties, such as freedom of speech. It is illegal to publicly criticize Islam, and people who express critique regarding Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara face risks of repression.³⁸

According to Freedom House's annual freedom rankings, Morocco is considered less free today compared to a few years ago. The desire for economic and political reforms in Morocco is still present, however, especially among the younger urban population.³⁹ In other words, even though the political system in Morocco stayed stable through the Arab Spring, the protests created hope for a more democratic future.

Relations between Morocco and Algeria have been frosty for decades, for instance because of disagreements regarding the status of Western Sahara.⁴⁰ The border between the two countries has been closed since 1994.⁴¹ Moroccan-Algerian relations have become more tense recently. In August 2021, Algeria decided to cut diplomatic relations with Morocco, accusing the Moroccan government of "hostile actions" against Algeria. In the last year, Algeria has also recalled its ambassador to Morocco and closed off its airspace to Moroccan planes.⁴²



WESTERN SAHARA

Morocco has illegally occupied most of Western Sahara since 1975⁴³, and today Moroccan laws are applied within the occupied territories.⁴⁴ In its ruling from 1975, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found that Morocco has no right to sovereignty in Western Sahara.⁴⁵ Additionally, the United Nations has recognized Western Sahara as a non-self-governing territory that should be decolonized.⁴⁶ Spain, which previously was a colonizer of the territory, signed an illegal tripartite agreement in 1975 with Morocco and Mauritania, in which Spain let the two countries invade the territory in exchange for revenues from Western Sahara's natural resources.⁴⁷

The Polisario Front, which represents the Sahrawi people, proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976.⁴⁸ Three years later, Mauritania withdrew from Western Sahara. The Polisario Front fought a war with Morocco from 1975 to 1991, until the UN brokered a cease-fire with the condition that a referendum was going to be held the next year. In this referendum, people would get to choose between independence for Western Sahara or integration with Morocco.⁴⁹ A UN mission called MINURSO was sent to Western Sahara with the dual mission of monitoring the cease-fire and securing implementation of the referendum. Nonetheless, 30 years later, the referendum has never taken place, largely because the parties never have agreed on who should be allowed to vote. Morocco has repeatedly delayed the referendum in various ways.

"30 years later, the referendum has never taken place"

For a long time, Morocco and the Polisario Front had difficulties to agree on who should be accepted as the new Special Envoy for Western Sahara. The Italian-Swedish diplomat Staffan de Mistura was finally appointed to the position in October 2021. In the period when the UN Secretary-General was missing a Special Envoy for Western Sahara (May 2019 – October 2021), i.e., after Horst Köhler resigned from the position, the conflict between the Moroccan government and the Polisario Front escalated.

In November 2020, Moroccan forces illegally entered a buffer zone in Guerguerat in Western Sahara, which is a violation of the 1991 cease-fire agreement.⁵⁰ Consequently, the Polisario Front

declared that the cease-fire no longer was in effect, and a low-intensity war between the two parties resumed. Since then, both the Polisario Front and Morocco occasionally have reported to the UN Security Council about shots fired across the wall that separates the occupied and free parts of Western Sahara.⁵¹ According to the Security Council, such reports have decreased since January 2021.

The Polisario Front, based in Tindouf, Algeria, controls around one-quarter of the Western Sahara territory and runs the SADR government-in-exile.⁵² Ibrahim Ghali is the leader both of SADR and the Polisario Front. The government consists of a legislature, called the Sahrawi National Council (SNC). The SNC has 51 members and is elected by the General Popular Congress of the Polisario Front. Elections are organized by the Polisario Front and no competing political parties are allowed. Elections in the occupied territories of Western Sahara is administrated by Morocco. The representation of Sahrawis in the Moroccan parliament is limited as pro-independence candidates or parties are prohibited.

In October 2010, a couple of months before Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire and protests started to spread in Tunisia, large protests also took place in Gdeim Izik in Western Sahara. Approximately 10,000 to 30,000 Sahrawis joined the demonstration.⁵³ In similarity to protests that would soon begin in other neighbouring countries, the Sahrawis protested against economic hardships, limited work opportunities, and hard living conditions. Over time, the protests were broadened to also include pro-independence claims, i.e., for Morocco to stop its occupation of Western Sahara. The fact that people demanded independence differentiates the protests in Gdeim Izik, Western Sahara, from Arab Spring uprisings in other countries.⁵⁴

A month into the Gdeim Izik protests, Moroccan security forces dismantled the protest camp. Two civilians and eleven agents from the security forces died in the disturbances. Several pro-independence protesters were blamed for the deaths of the security force agents, some of which were later sentenced to life in prison.⁵⁵ The Gdeim Izik judgements have been heavily criticized by human rights organizations. Human Rights Watch has reported that several convictions from the Gdeim Izik trials were based on confessions that were allegedly forced by torture.⁵⁶ According to Morocco, however, the country does not have any political prisoners.⁵⁷



CORRUPTION

The high prevalence of corruption in many Middle Eastern and North African countries was one of the main issues in society which made people join protests during the Arab Spring. People were, and for a large part remain, frustrated with corrupt politicians, police officers, and judges. Corruption is dangerous to society for many reasons; it undermines transparency and accountability efforts, making it difficult to secure democratic institutions, and ultimately results in mistrust between state and people.⁵⁸

To build trust between the citizens and the state, it is important that the government is active in its fight against all forms of corruption. Government efforts should include, for instance, promotion of transparent and accountable institutions, protection of whistle-blowers, and empowerment of civil society.⁵⁹ To prevent corruption and strengthen democracy, it is crucial that citizens, journalists, civil society, and civil servants are able to report on corruption without fear of retaliation. Corruption should be properly

investigated and legally punished. Low accountability against corruption offences not only makes people frustrated with state authorities but can also become a source of mistrust against democracy as a political system. To prevent abuse of power by politicians, judges, and other decision-makers, it is also important that the judiciary system is built on the separation of powers.

The United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) is a legally binding instrument. The UN General Assembly adopted the Convention in 2003, and it was entered into force two years later. Today, the majority of UN Member States have ratified UNCAC, among them most of the Arab Spring countries.⁶⁰ The Convention recognizes that the fight against corruption ultimately is the responsibility of the states.⁶¹ It obliges governments to combat corruption both through preventive and punitive measures.⁶² UNCAC emphasizes the importance that states collaborate with each other in combating corruption. It also highlights the opportunities of

civil society and non-governmental organizations in the work against corruption.⁶³

Transparency International, which is a global coalition that reports on issues of corruption in different countries, has expressed concern about corruption in the Maghreb region. Their 2019 report finds that the majority of people in the Middle East and North Africa believe that corruption is increasing in their country.⁶⁴ For instance, 67 percent of Tunisians responded that they think corruption is increasing, while 53 percent agreed to this statement in Morocco.⁶⁵ As reported by Freedom House, corruption is also common in Western Sahara even though it is rare that anyone is held accountable for corruption offences.⁶⁶ Transparency International's report also finds that protests in North Africa and the Middle East in recent years often have strong connections with the 2011 protests. In other words, citizens feel that the governments of their countries have not done enough to improve economic issues or to fight corruption, and for this reason, people still take to the streets to express their mistrust.⁶⁷

The groups in society that people generally find most corrupt are parliamentarians and government officials. People are also critical of corruption in the police sector, education, and health care system, for instance in the form of bribes. On a positive note, many people believe that citizens themselves can make a difference to combat corruption.⁶⁸ One of the ways in which people can act, according to

Transparency International, is to report when discovering corruption.⁶⁹ For this to happen, however, governments need to make sure that there are institutions in place where people can easily do this, without harmful reprisals. The persistence of protests against corruption in countries of the Middle East and North Africa is a sign that many people are still optimistic about their opportunities to improve the situation.

Due to lack of political will, reforms needed to combat corruption are stalled in Morocco.⁷⁰ Only a limited number of corruption cases are handled, revealing a troubling gap between promises and actions. People's frustration with corruption has continued in Morocco after the Arab Spring and has caused large-scale protests. According to Transparency International's 2019 survey, as much as 74 percent of the Moroccan population think that their government is not doing enough in the fight against corruption. As previously mentioned, Tunisia is usually described as the country that has been most successful in transitioning to democracy since the Arab Spring.⁷¹ Nevertheless, Tunisian society still faces serious challenges with widespread corruption. Initiatives to combat corruption are underfunded while most of Tunisian citizens believe that the government is not doing enough.⁷² Corruption is affecting people's daily life and economic problems have given rise to new anti-government protests.⁷³ On a positive note, it is legal for civil society organizations to report on cases of corruption in Tunisia.⁷⁴



STRUGGLES FOR CIVIL LIBERTIES AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

Almost all the countries where the Arab Spring took place have ratified the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁷⁵ As State Parties, governments are legally obliged to implement the treaty's provisions. The ICCPR covers different freedoms and rights that states should guarantee to the citizens of their country. The Convention regulates both positive and negative rights and freedoms. For instance, the ICCPR contains provisions on the right to life (Article 6); prohibition of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 7), and prohibition of slavery

(Article 8). Although most Arab Spring countries have ratified the ICCPR, the implementation of civil and political rights varies in the region. For instance, while the realization of political rights and civil liberties have improved significantly in Tunisia since the 2011 revolution⁷⁶, Sahrawis living in the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara still face a reality of almost no political rights and civil freedoms.⁷⁷ Sahrawi activists face risks of repression, arbitrary arrests, and police violence.⁷⁸ According to Freedom House, Western Sahara is in fact among the least free countries in the world.⁷⁹

IMPORTANCE OF CSOs/NGOs AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Movements that demand implementation of freedoms and rights in the Maghreb region often emerge from initiatives within civil society. A sign of a healthy democratic landscape is the ability of civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to freely organize protests, express opinions and bring issues to the political agenda without reprisals. This is not only a fundamental cornerstone of a functioning democracy, but also important for the free reporting on injustices and abuses of human rights. Unfortunately, the work of CSOs and NGOs is sometimes met with resistance

from governments in some countries of the Maghreb region. During the Arab Spring in Tunisia, however, young people mobilized – in some cases via civil society – in protests which eventually led to the fall of Ben Ali's government.⁸⁰ Young Tunisians were very active during the 2011 protests and social media was often used for communication between protesters.⁸¹ As could be seen for instance in Tunisia in 2011, social media can create new opportunities for CSOs and NGOs regarding free speech, which in turn may influence political development.



THE ISSUE OF MARGINALIZATION

A **persistent** problem in countries of the Maghreb region, which also contributed to the 2011 uprisings, is the high level of unemployment. Exclusion from work opportunities, especially among youth, thus became a source of anger against ruling regimes during the Arab Spring.⁸² Unemployment has large consequences for individuals as well as for society. Marginalization in the form of unemployment can result not only in economic problems for the person affected but can also create strong feelings of powerlessness.⁸³ As previously mentioned, the high level of unemployment has remained for instance in

Tunisia in the decade after the revolution, and people continue to protest against economic injustices. As ruling authorities impede the work of many CSOs/NGOs in several Maghreb countries, for instance in the occupied Western Sahara, it is dangerous to express certain opinions.

Furthermore, countries cannot achieve democratic transition and sustainable development if segments of the population are systematically marginalized from the labor market or from decision-making processes.

RISING FRUSTRATION AND NEW WAVE OF PROTESTS

While concessions may buy authorities some time to curb social unrest and political demands, as seen in Morocco and Algeria during the Arab Spring, it will not manage to suppress demands for change in the long run. When people are excluded from political processes and general trust in the political establishment is low, people often find new channels to express their voices. Ten years ago, people took to the streets to express their dissent against authoritarian rulers. Again, we see a wave of protests in the region. As mentioned earlier, the Hirak movement in Algeria is an example of this phenomenon. The movement's peaceful protests eventually triggered Bouteflika's resignation in April 2019. Today, the Hirak movement continues to mobilize people in protests with demands for more political reforms.

In Tunisia, new protests have erupted as politicians have not yet handled the major social and economic issues that were central in the 2011 Arab Spring protests. Although pluralism and democratic institutions have appeared in Tunisia since the revolution in 2011, this has not always delivered everything that people hoped for regarding the country's economic

issues.⁸⁴ For instance, marginalization of youth and lack of economic opportunities are still problems in Tunisia. A second wave of protests in Maghreb countries shows people's continuing mistrust of governments in power.



CONCLUSION:

POLITICAL OUTCOMES, NEW PROTESTS AND STATE RESPONSIBILITY

Ten years have passed since people started to protest against authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring. People who joined the protests were tired of issues in society such as corruption, unemployment, and political injustices. This report has shown that, as ten years have passed, the political results of the Arab Spring protests differ between various countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Tunisia's development in the last decade is usually described as an example of success. Not only did the uprisings lead to the overthrowing of the authoritarian Ben Ali regime, but Tunisia has also experienced an unprecedented democratic transition. In comparison to the political situation before the revolution, the organization Freedom House now considers Tunisia as a "free" country (out of three categories: "free", "partly free", and "not free").⁸⁵ Although Tunisia has made great democratic improvements in the last decade, the country still struggles with high levels of corruption and unemployment, and such issues have given rise to new protests.

"People who joined the protests were tired of issues in society such as corruption, unemployment, and political injustices."

The prevalence of corruption is dangerous to the political development in societies for many reasons. For instance, corruption may impede the democratic consolidation of a country since corruption generally weakens people's trust with authorities. It is therefore important that governments effectively combat corruption through preventative as well as punitive measures, in accordance with their legal obligations by the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC).

In contrast to the political development in Tunisia, the Moroccan and Algerian governments made economic and political concessions to cope with

the Arab Spring protests. However, new large-scale protests have emerged in recent years for instance in Algeria. In particular, the country's President Bouteflika resigned in 2019 due to growing pressure from the oppositional Hirak movement. In similarity to other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, such protests clearly show the persistence among people to keep fighting for their political rights and civil liberties.

After the 2010 Gdeim Izik protests in Western Sahara, human rights activists likewise continue to fight for their basic rights and freedoms, including an end to the illegal Moroccan occupation. The war between Morocco and the Polisario Front resumed in November 2020, after Morocco breached the 1991 cease-fire agreement. Still, however, Morocco's illegal occupation and the severe human rights situation in Western Sahara remain largely ignored by the international community.

This is the second part in a series of articles about prospects for peace, a decade after the Arab Spring in the Maghreb region. Next part is about regional integration as opportunity for economic development, and will be followed by articles about gender equality and human rights.

The article series will focus mainly on four countries in the Maghreb region: Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Western Sahara.

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CONTACT:

Emmaus Stockholm

Vretensborgsvägen 6, 126 30 Hägersten

Telephone: 08 - 744 22 22

info@emmausstockholm.se

emmausstockholm.se

TEXT: Agnes Hornsved, Alicia Lindeborg,
Agnes Holm

PHOTO: Juan Obregón, Caroline Nord

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