



Desk study on aid and democracy

Tunisia

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This study is part of a series of ten country-focused desk studies on aid and democracy prepared under the project [The state and statebuilding in the Global South](#). They are prepared under the guidance of Rachel M. Gisselquist as background to a broader research effort on aid, governance, and democracy promotion. The studies follow a common template and each draws on the research literature and selected cross-national sources to discuss regime type and timeline, findings from the literature on democracy/democratization, findings from the literature on aid and democracy/democratization, aid flows and sources, and specific aid examples. This study addresses the case of Tunisia, from independence in 1956 and with focus on the post-Cold War period.

Key words: foreign aid, democratization, Tunisia, statebuilding, development

Note: The datasets and codebook used and drawn upon are listed after the reference list at the end of the study.

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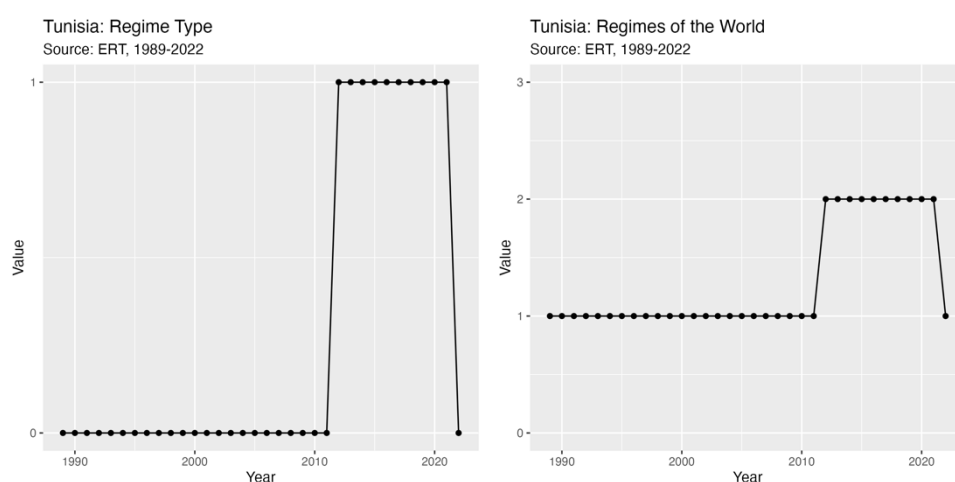
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1 Regime type and timeline

Following its independence from France in the 1950s, Tunisia developed into a one-party autocratic system under the leadership of President Habib Bourguiba. The country has held elections since 1959, but it was not until 1981 that the first multiparty parliamentary elections were conducted and not until 1999 that multiparty presidential elections were held. For most of its post-independence history, Tunisia has therefore been considered an autocracy. Varieties of Democracy's (V-Dem) Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) data categorize Tunisia as an autocracy (0) from 1989 to 2011, at which point it became a democracy (1), from 2012 to 2021. Only recently, as of 2022, has Tunisia reverted back to an autocracy (0), largely because of the current president's autocratic governance tendencies. Regimes of the World (RoW) further specifies Tunisia's regime type as an electoral autocracy (1) for the years 1989–2011 and 2022, and an electoral democracy (2) for ten years from 2012 to 2021.

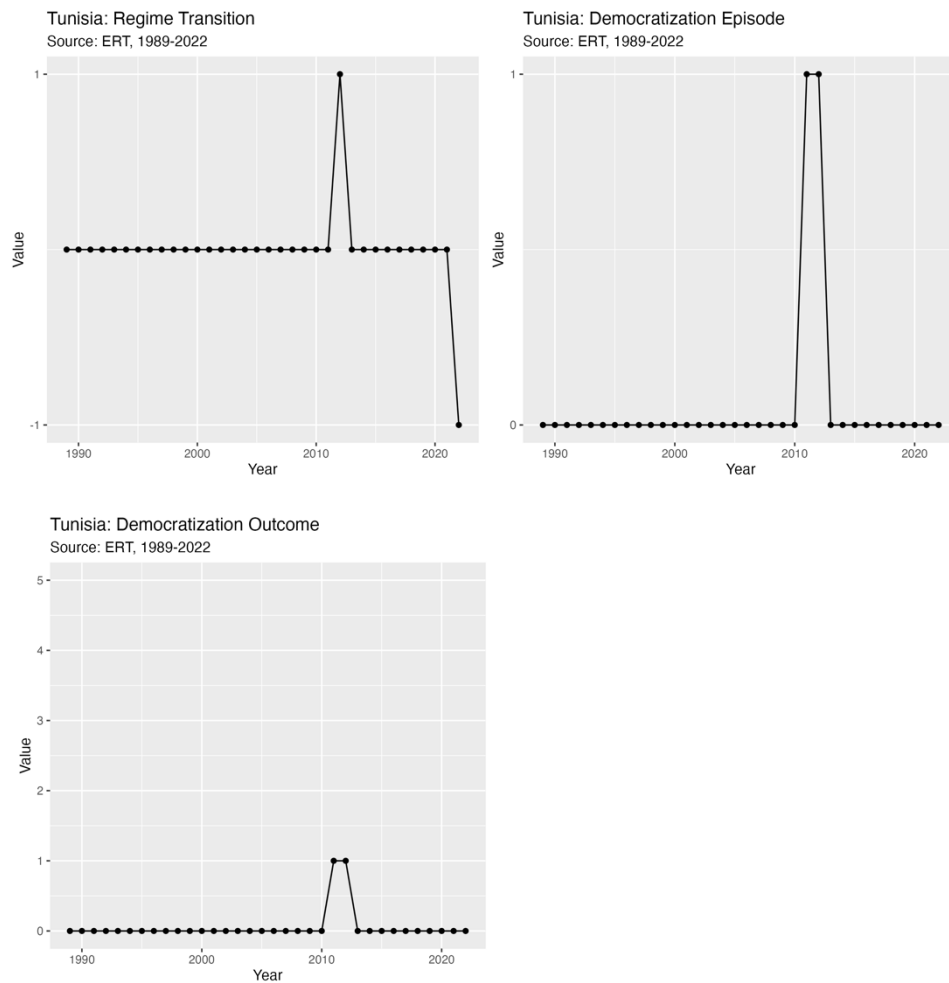
Figure 1: Tunisia's regime types



Source: author's construction based on V-Dem ERT data.

Tunisia has experienced two regime transitions in the post-Cold War period: one transition to democracy (1) in 2012 and one transition to autocracy (-1) in 2022. Its democratic transition in 2012 was the byproduct of what has become known as the Jasmine Revolution and subsequent Arab Spring political revolutions. In late 2010, a series of grassroots movements and calls for political reform from below began to take hold within Tunisia in response to gross corruption within the state and in opposition to the incumbent president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. By January 2011, the protests and opposition against President Ben Ali, who had been in power since 1987, had grown so strong that he fled the country, abandoning his post as president. The overthrow of President Ben Ali represented a break in Tunisian autocracy as well as a concerted effort to reorganize political institutions in the country toward more inclusive democratic ones. This moment of transition also coincides with the single democratization episode in Tunisia catalogued by ERT. This democratizing episode from 2011 to 2012 corresponds to the reshaping of the Tunisian state into a democratic system following the overthrow of President Ben Ali, and it resulted in a democratic transition (1), consistent with regime transition coding. By 2012, Tunisia had successfully transitioned from an autocratic regime to a democratic system, the only successful democratic transition to be sustained from the Arab Spring.

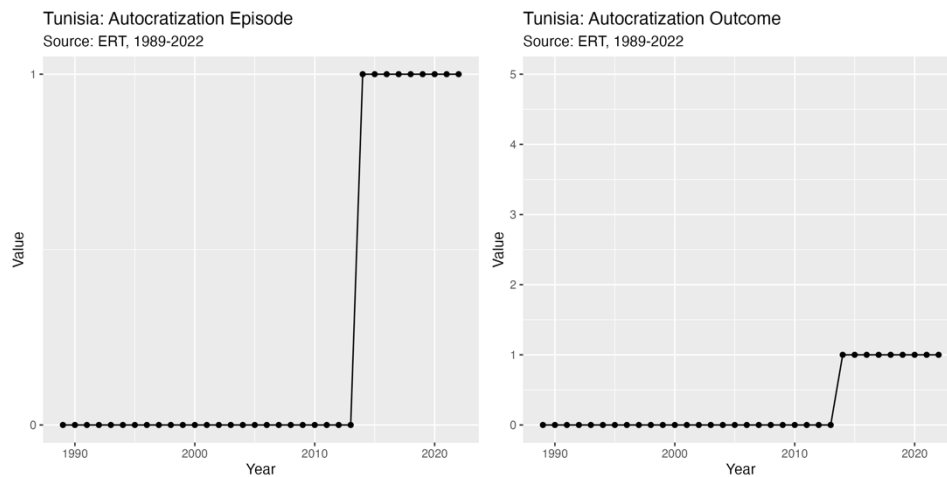
Figure 2: Tunisia's regime transition variable, and democratization episode and outcome



Source: author's construction based on ERT data.

However, as of late, Tunisia's democracy has weakened. Following a series of autocratic governance practices from the Tunisian government, the ERT coded that a transition to autocracy occurred in 2022. The dataset actually identifies a period of autocratization as beginning in 2014 until 2022, when this episode resulted in democratic breakdown (1). In the years following Tunisia's democratic transition, its democracy remained non-consolidated and its institutions fragile. In the immediate aftermath of transition, the government experienced drastic political turnovers, and a series of assassinations of prominent politicians occurred (Kéfi 2015). However, the greatest attack upon Tunisian democracy occurred in 2021, when President Kais Saied initiated a self-coup in July, suspending Parliament and dismissing the Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi. President Saied effectively took power for himself and overrode the democratic processes and institutions established in the country a decade before. With President Saied's usurpation of constitutional protocol and dismantling of the parliamentary system in Tunisia, the country transitioned back to an autocracy.

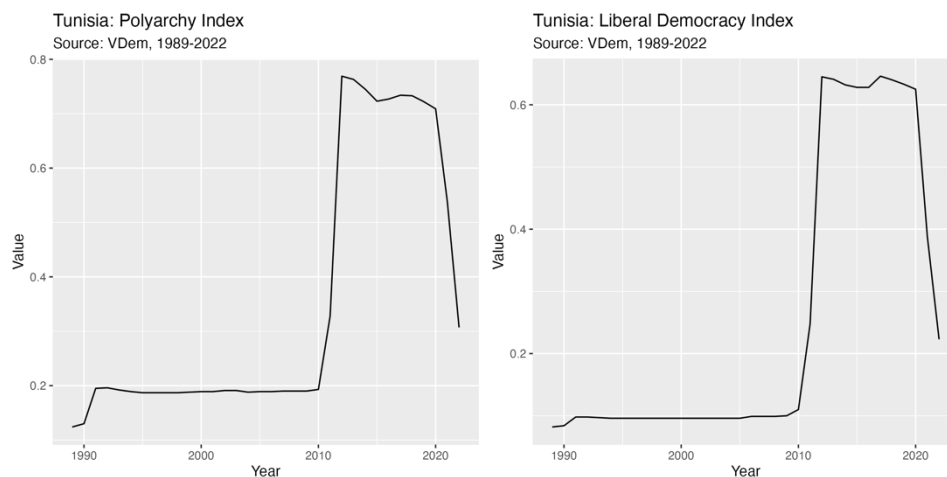
Figure 3: Tunisia's autocratization episode and outcome



Source: author's construction based on ERT data.

Tunisia's regime indicators closely reflect both its tenure as an autocracy and its period of democratization. In 1990 under the Ben Ali regime, Tunisia's polyarchy score was at its lowest in the post-Cold War era at 0.13; this score would only rise by a fraction to 0.193 in 2010, a year before the overthrow of President Ben Ali. By 2012, the polyarchy index in Tunisia would register 0.769 and be relatively sustained at this figure until 2021, when it would sharply drop to 0.538 and eventually down to 0.307 in 2022. Its liberal democracy scores follow an almost identical trajectory. They too were at their lowest in 1990 at 0.084 and would only reach 0.11 by 2010. By 2012, the liberal democracy index in Tunisia would sharply rise to 0.645 and hold at this level until 2021, when it too would drop to 0.388 in 2021 and then to 0.223 in 2022. These parallel fluctuations in electoral and liberal democracy scores reflect the two clear-cut regime transitions that have occurred in Tunisia in 2012 and 2022.

Figure 4: Parallel fluctuations of Tunisia's electoral and liberal democracy scores

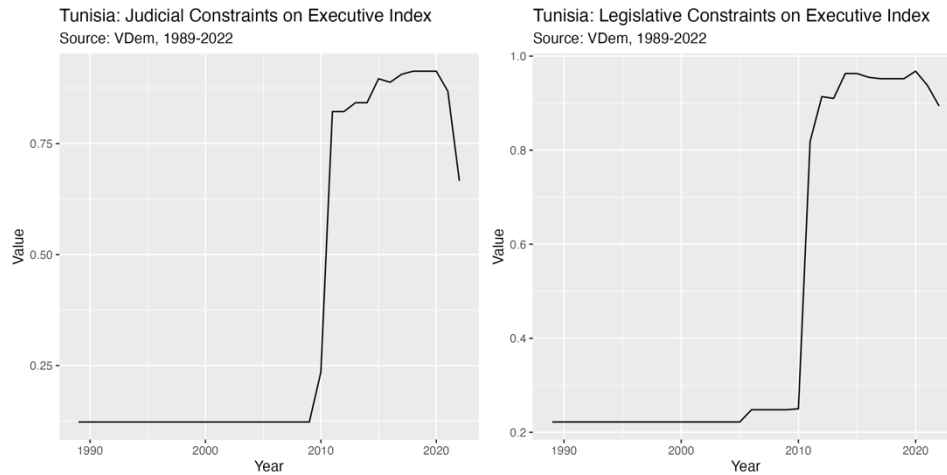


Source: author's construction based on V-Dem data.

Tunisia's recent regime shift away from democracy is also apparent along measures of political checks and balances. Following President Saied's self-coup in 2021 that disbanded Parliament and removed the Prime Minister, two of V-Dem's indicators of constraints upon the executive show downward trends. Both judicial and legislative constraints declined after 2020, demonstrating growing unchecked power on the executive. From 2021 to 2022, President Saied dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council, dismissed several judges from their positions, limited their travel, and placed some under house arrest. For having disbanded the legislature in 2021, the indicator measuring legislative constraints surprisingly

did not register an especially large decline. A new parliament was eventually reinstated in 2023, meaning legislative capabilities were partially restored, although the elections that brought this new legislature to power were heavily boycotted and largely ignored by the general population.¹ Perhaps this indicator will reflect a sharper decline in subsequent years once the aftershocks of the 2021 self-coup are fully realized. In any case, constraints upon the executive have declined in Tunisia since 2020 and indicate diminished democratic adherence.

Figure 5: Constraints on the executive indicators

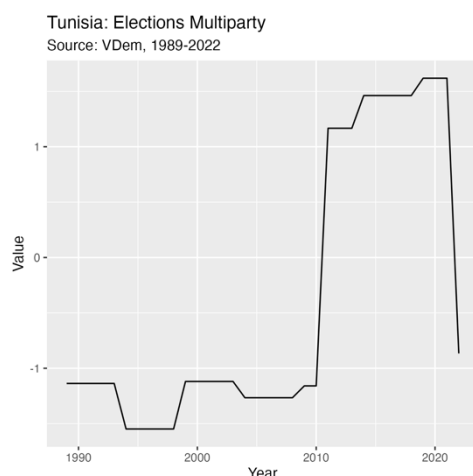


Source: author's construction based on V-Dem data.

Where the shift away from democracy is most notable in terms of regime subcomponent measures is in Tunisia's multiparty elections. V-Dem data capture a steep decline in multiparty elections starting in 2021, following the extra-constitutional self-coup and abandonment of democratic political procedures that year. Legislative elections were revived in December 2022 and a new parliament installed in March 2023. However, a 2022 electoral law significantly diminished the power of political parties in legislative elections. The new law required candidates register without party affiliation, removed gender and age quotas, and abolished the party-based electoral system. The parliamentary elections in 2022–23 were also heavily boycotted by many opposition parties and resulted in a largely pro-Saied government. Combined with the constitutional referendum in 2022 that grants President Saied increased political power and transformed the state into a fully presidential system, Tunisia has entered into a period of reduced democratic accountability and increased authoritarianism.

¹ Voter turnout was at a record low with just over 11% turnout for the legislative elections that took place in January 2023. Legislative elections occurred in two rounds in December 2022 and January 2023.

Figure 6: Tunisia's multiparty elections indicator



Source: author's construction based on V-Dem data.

Tunisia appeared to be a democratic success story. Its transition to democracy in 2012 was catalysed by domestic grassroots protests and demands for political reform, and it reorganized its political institutions in a democratic fashion. While its democracy was sustained for nearly a decade, its recent reversal to autocracy suggests the regime was not consolidated and susceptible to political manipulation. Both the causes of Tunisia's democratization and the reasons for its eventual transition back to autocracy have been a growing focus within the literature, especially as a case study for considering broader processes and conditions of democratization.

2 Findings from the literature on democracy/democratization

Tunisia's experience with democratization did not begin in earnest until 2011, before which time the country had been persistently autocratic. In a coup in 1987, Prime Minister Ben Ali seized power from long-time President Habib Bourguiba, who had ruled the country under a one-party dictatorship for thirty years. President Ben Ali positioned himself as a democrat in contrast to his authoritarian predecessor, but in practice continued to exhibit autocratic behaviours. Although Ben Ali's ascent to the presidency marked a change in executive leadership, and although he did initiate some political and liberalizing reforms, the regime could at best be considered a 'façade democracy' (Sadiki 2002).

There was much continuity in President Ben Ali's leadership with the previous autocratic regime, especially with regards to continued extensions of presidential power. Unlike President Bourguiba, President Ben Ali did not declare himself president for life. In fact, he held presidential elections in 1989, the first to be conducted in the country in 15 years, and he allowed opposition parties to run in parliamentary elections in 1994. Nonetheless, he was elected as president five times and was unopposed or practically unopposed in all the national presidential elections he stood in.² The country also continued to be ruled by a majoritarian party system favourable to the executive. Both his sweeping presidential victories and virtually complete support from the loyalist majoritarian party cemented President Ben Ali's preeminent status within the country.

As compared to the previous regime, the country under President Ben Ali did make some political gains. A wider media scope developed, and a small space was allotted for opposition parties to participate formally in politics. However, in many other respects, political life in Tunisia was highly constrained. The regime resisted upholding human rights and full media freedoms. Islamist parties were banned and

² Ben Ali ran unchallenged and won as president in 1989 and 1994. He ran against opposition candidate in 1999, 2004, and 2009 but won these elections by a margin of larger than 89% in all three elections.

heavily repressed. Strict rules were also put upon foreign actors in the country and many forms of external assistance were barred in Tunisia, particularly those that aimed to bring about any form of political liberalization. Instead, the regime prioritized economic growth and development, and as a result President Ben Ali presided over a relatively robust economy. Tunisia's degree of economic prosperity and higher living standards bolstered political stability within the country, but it came at the expense of democratization.

Economic prosperity became the backbone of political stability for the Ben Ali regime. As long as higher standards of living prevailed, the authoritarian regime was relatively insulated from destabilizing domestic discontent. Consequently, because the regime garnered legitimacy from maintaining higher socio-economic standards, it became far safer for the regime to continue to invest in economic development rather than risk political reform (Van Hüllen 2014). Under this status quo, President Ben Ali ruled for a consecutive 23 years, but once economic conditions began to unravel, a cascade of events ensued that led to the regime's undoing in 2011. At the end of 2010, a series of protests emerged against the Ben Ali regime, its rampant corruption, and the falling living standards that had been felt amongst the Tunisian population. A wave of civil resistance spread rapidly across the country throughout December 2010, snowballing swiftly into a larger revolutionary movement. So powerful was this grassroots opposition to the regime that President Ben Ali would flee from office only a month after the protests began, leaving the country vacant of a president by January 2011.

2.1 Tunisia's democratic revolution

The literature identifies several reasons why Tunisia's democratic revolution occurred and why public manifestations of resistance toward the government were so effective in enacting regime change. Of the countries associated with the Arab Spring, only Tunisia successfully brought about long-term democratic political change. Although it had been a comparatively economically stable nation, the initiation of its democratic transition was catalysed by grievances of poverty, unemployment, and frustrations against a corrupt government. Rather than a middle-class struggle, in line with classic democratization models, Tunisia's democratic revolution also uniquely emerged from lower and marginalized socio-political classes. Calls for revolution did not originate from landed or professional groups; instead, it was a vegetable seller from Sidi Bouzid whose self-immolation sparked the movement for democratic reform.

The immediate causes of the mass protests that sparked Tunisia's democratic revolution and triggered its regime change derived mostly from economic grievances; however, there were a variety of reasons at play that animated the mass movement for democracy. Historic circumstances, structural factors, and political conditions all played a part in initiating and sustaining domestic calls for democratic reform. Historically, Tunisia had enjoyed close ties with Europe, giving the country greater exposure to Western democratic practices and ideologies. As compared with some of its Middle East and North Africa (MENA) neighbours, Western donors generally held higher linkage and leverage within Tunisia, thanks to its smaller economy and minimal security threats (Landolt and Kubicek 2014). As a result of this longstanding connection with Europe, Tunisia also enjoyed a higher degree of macroeconomic stability (Baliamoune 2009), and subsequently political stability. Structurally, Tunisia did possess a large educated and ethnically homogenous middle class (Bellin 2013), which made it a prime candidate for democracy to take hold and flourish. Politically, the authoritarian regime's stability was also tenuous because it relied so heavily on economic conditions to sustain itself. The stark corruption in the Ben Ali government, its restriction of civil liberties, and the state's heavy repression of political opposition generated conditions ripe for widespread opposition to emerge.

However, the key to Tunisia's democratic success was in the steps that were taken after President Ben Ali's departure from office in January 2011. Concerted efforts were made to instil democratic practice within the country after the revolution, and several key characteristics were instrumental in sustaining its democracy.

Following the overthrow of the president, previous institutions of the Ben Ali regime were dismantled and rebuilt. The country's legislative branch, the Chamber of Deputies, was replaced with an interim Constituent Assembly in 2011 and new legislative multiparty elections were held the same year. Principally, a new constitution was also passed in 2014. Upon its adoption, the interim legislative branch disbanded, making way for a new Assembly of Representatives of the People in 2014, which remains the premier legislative body in the country to this day.³ The new democratic government established regular elections, at both the national and subnational levels, which have been relatively free, fair, and competitive and that have seen a wide variety of party and candidate representation.

In addition to establishing new institutions, democratization in Tunisia included making a conscious effort to encourage pluralistic politics within the government. The emphasis within post-revolutionary Tunisia upon cultivating pluralism and inclusivity within politics helped make a cleaner break with past practices of the one-party regime (Landolt and Kubicek 2014). Senior party members of the previous majoritarian party were forbidden from running in the legislative elections in 2011, giving license for a variety of new candidates and parties to take the stage in Tunisia's new government. This panoply of fresh political voices offered provisions for gender parity within party ranks and protected a wide variety of socio-political ideologies, including religiously affiliated ones. Although Islamist parties had been specifically excluded from politics under the previous regime, they gained significant representation in the new interim legislature. The popular Ennahda party, a democratic Islamist party, won the greatest number of seats in the 2011 legislative elections and was a key part of the coalition government from 2011 to 2014. Unlike under President Ben Ali, political plurality was embraced and became a central focus early on in Tunisia's democratic development.

Elites also played a critical role in upholding pluralism and democracy within post-revolutionary Tunisia. Although instigated from the lower classes, the democratic revolution was embraced and defended by many elites in Tunisia, who remained committed to democratization, inclusiveness, and political dialogue (Bellin 2013). They were prime actors in carrying out democratic principles and incorporating them into new political institutions and frameworks. They were also instrumental in ensuring Tunisia's transitional political phase stayed upon a democratic track, especially through their ability to sustain links to international actors who could support these objectives (Marzo 2020a). Their commitment to democracy and political rights was a key aspect of why the democratic demands put forth during the revolution were actually carried out.

Civil society also played a highly influential role in establishing the democratic regime and is one of the main reasons Tunisian democracy was able to survive (Kéfi 2015; Weilandt 2019). Mass public protests and groups supportive to their cause were a major factor in disseminating calls for democratic reform and in undoing the Ben Ali regime. Once the country did transition, civil society also served as a mechanism in keeping the new government accountable and stabilizing democratic practice across political divides (Bellin 2013). After 2011, civil society groups multiplied, with the number of NGOs doubling in the country, and substantively more civil society organizations adopted political and human rights causes (Kausch 2013). Even though Tunisian civil society has been and remains underdeveloped with discernible regional polarizations (Colombo and Meddeb 2018), it still played a strong role in catalysing and sustaining the country's democratic transition, indicating the invaluable role of civil society in the early formation of a democracy.

2.2 Challenges in democratic consolidation

Tunisia's democracy was hailed as the sole success story of the Arab Spring, but very quickly the country faced political issues in sustaining and consolidating its regime. Despite the optimism behind Tunisia's democratic achievements (Bellin 2013; Landolt and Kubicek 2014; Kéfi 2015), there were

³ Although the Assembly of Representatives of the People was unconstitutionally suspended in 2021 and 2022 by President Saïed, the body reconvened in March 2023.

several drawbacks and challenges inherent in the country's new system (Moncef Khaddar 2023). Tunisia's transition in some regards remained incomplete (World Bank 2014), and gaps persisted in the country's economic and political development. Amidst its pluralistic and inclusive system, Tunisia faced high turnover in government, increased political polarization, and three high-profile political assassinations following its transition (Kéfi 2015; Meddeb 2018).⁴ Tunisians have also since expressed increased disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the way democracy has manifested itself within the country (Meddeb 2018).

Although new institutions were constructed, new political parties created, and new political procedures established in post-revolutionary Tunisia, many of these democratic arrangements were not fully systemized. Primarily, Tunisia's democracy has lacked consolidation and institutionalization, putting many of the country's newly installed pluralistic, multiparty practices at risk (Brumberg and Salem 2020). Tunisia made significant institutional progress in drafting a constitution, holding elections, and reshaping the legislature. However, during the transition phase, political associations and interactions often remained ad hoc and informal (Gallien and Werenfels 2019). Political parties struggled to institutionalize themselves and establish legitimate links with society during the interim period, which served to weaken party politics in general (Yardımcı-Geyikçi and Tür 2018). Furthermore, despite the emphasis on political inclusivity, many parties and movements found themselves within a deeply crowded political space, overshadowed and marginalized by other political voices. As political groups vied for power in the new democratic system, significant polarizations also began to manifest. Principle among these divisions has been a wide generational gap within the country's politics, society, and civil society in terms of visions for the country's future (Weilandt 2019). Formalizing and consolidating Tunisia's new multiparty and multidimensional democratic system has proven to be challenging.

It also proved difficult to eradicate previous non-democratic political practices and networks within the state. The previous regime had presided over a systemically corrupt government. Many of the economic development projects cultivated and promoted in Tunisia under President Ben Ali directly enriched and benefitted political elites within the state, embedding corrupt networks directly into the political system (Cavatorta 2001). As a result, many economic, political, and administrative arrangements from the previous regime persisted and threatened to derail Tunisia's new fragile democracy (Gallien and Werenfels 2019). Tunisia's democratic system still struggles to maintain oversight over certain government branches and public sectors, like the security forces and judiciary, which has made managing ongoing corruption even more difficult.

Tunisian democracy has also faced a unique challenge in how it handles the role of religion in politics. Although a Muslim majority country, Islamic parties had been forbidden under President Ben Ali, so incorporating religiously affiliated parties in post-revolutionary Tunisia has proven a test for its democracy. Stepan (2012) refers to this state of affairs as the 'twin tolerations', or reciprocal relationship between religion and the state. Ultimately, Tunisia's ability to incorporate religious representatives within formal politics has been one of the new government's notable strongpoints and achievements (Stepan 2012; Torelli, Merone, and Cavatorta 2012). Testament to the general emphasis upon and embracing of democratic principles, Tunisia's Islamist parties have also tended to rule less by ideological or fundamentalist doctrines and have been more pragmatic and instrumental in their political positions (Dalmaso and Cavatorta 2014). Nonetheless, the pragmatism needed to successfully navigate politics under the new regime has meant that religious parties are often preoccupied more with coalitional groups and political domination instead of larger democracy-building goals (Sommer 2017). By engaging in democratic politics and political power sharing, Islamist parties have to some extent undermined democratic consolidation, and incorporating religion in Tunisia's democracy has provided an additional strain to its system.

⁴ Three prominent political figures were assassinated within a year of each other; a regional political leader was assassinated in 2012 and two opposition political party leaders were assassinated in 2013.

Although none of these factors necessarily foretell an end to Tunisian democracy, they illustrate several vulnerabilities within its political system. Weak institutionalization and accountability have limited Tunisia's democratic consolidation. These weaknesses helped pave the way for President Saïed, who had been democratically elected, to exert extrajudicial political manoeuvres in overruling Parliament and dismissing his Prime Minister in 2021. Some of the fragility of Tunisia's political system at that time can be attributed to global health and economic crises. However, if anything the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated pre-existing weakly consolidated, fragile, and polarized political conditions which offered an opportunity for the executive to override and dominate the system for its own benefit (Moncef Khaddar 2023). Although the full causes and long-term effects of Tunisia's recent reversal in its democratic gains are still being analysed, its democracy is certainly in a current state of crisis.

3 Findings from the literature on aid and democracy/democratization

Foreign assistance has had an asymmetrical impact upon democracy in Tunisia. Prior to 2011, the impact of foreign aid on democratic outcomes was negligent. During that time, external influence was heavily restricted and regulated by Tunisian authorities. Even if Western donors sought to enact political reform, Tunisian officials intentionally made democracy promotion difficult and obstructed many donor efforts (Van Hüllen 2014). Aid distributions were beholden to requirements by the authoritarian government and channelled through the authoritarian administration (Kausch 2013; Reynaert 2015; Marzo 2020a). Therefore, during the Ben Ali presidency, aid to Tunisia tended to focus on economic objectives, rather than democracy building. The extent to which political change via external assistance was considered was typically through the lens of economic development and market liberalization (Reynaert 2015). Foreign assistance initially had very little impact upon political institutions or regime components in Tunisia, thanks in part to the state's resistance to democracy aid flows.

However, donors also played a role in limiting aid's democratizing influence early on in Tunisia. Before 2011, donors subsequently distanced themselves from democracy promotion activities. Western donor intents in Tunisia prior to the democratic revolution fixated on political stability and security over democratic reform (Powel 2009, 2010). Donors often avoided political assistance out of self-interest to preserve their status as donors in the country. Because Tunisia presented an important economic partner, especially for European donors, they often consciously overlooked or avoided democratic reform opportunities. For instance, the EU signed an Action Plan with Tunisia in 2005 bringing the country into the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) framework that governed both the priorities and projects of European aid to Tunisia. The ENP was instrumental in producing domestic economic and financial development in the country, but it was mostly ineffective in terms of political reform (Fontana 2015). Some select channels of aid aimed at socio-political reform were active during this time, and Tunisians tended to perceive these early democratizing actors more favourably than the donor agencies who entered the country after 2011 (Kausch 2013). Indeed, many Western foreign donors, with their willing emphasis upon economic and security rather than political development, were criticized for not supporting Tunisian democracy sooner (Dennison et al. 2011).

Either way, the fall of the Ben Ali regime opened up the door for more foreign donors to enter the country and for a greater scope of external assistance to be distributed. Donors seized the opportunity to offer increased assistance to Tunisia, especially for democratizing purposes, and began supporting existing democracy groups and programmes within the country (Kausch 2013; Bush 2015). To some extent these new political conditions allotted greater opportunities for international donors, although in many regards donor relationships persisted and remained consistent (Zardo and Cavatorta 2019). The onset of the revolution that brought about the end of Tunisia's autocratic regime in 2011 was not heavily influenced by external actors. However, in the aftermath of the revolution, Tunisia received a massive influx of foreign assistance, and external donors played a much larger role in its democratic outcomes.

How foreign assistance manifested in Tunisia offered certain specific benefits for its democracy. Foreign aid activities, especially from international NGOs, helped establish greater professionalization amongst

democracy promoters within the country (Bush 2015). Donors also exhibited some coordination in their democracy assistance strategies, focusing upon different sectors and activities. For instance, the EU tended to concentrate on economic, social, and developmental goals, while the US prioritized security and military partnerships with Tunisia (Durac and Cavatorta 2009; Powel 2010). Foreign aid provided valuable resources and offered certain assurances of political stability for Tunisia's new democratic system.

Foreign actors were integral in helping build the new democratic political institutions and arrangements that emerged in the country. First and foremost, foreign aid donors were critical forces in supporting coalitional, competitive, and multiparty legislative politics in Tunisia's democracy (Marzo 2020a). Western donors in particular offered tremendous support for electoral, legislative, and administrative activities in general and were instrumental in promoting democratic ideology and thought. Their role was fairly effective in this capacity as Tunisian stakeholders tended to embrace EU foreign aid and welcomed donors' emphases upon democratic ideals and principles (Nouira and Redissi 2018).

Additionally, foreign assistance proved crucial in bolstering the civil society sector in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Civil society was a decisive factor in sustaining Tunisian democracy, and foreign backing helped facilitate its role in this regard. The EU was a particularly active donor to the Tunisian civil society sphere. The EU allocated enormous amount of funds to civil society organizations, nearly 30% of which were distributed directly to local Tunisian-led groups (Cherif 2017). In doing so, foreign donors played an indirect but significant role in continuing democracy promotion, defending human and civil rights, and keeping the new government accountable to its democratic aims.

Foreign aid, especially from the US, was also instrumental in securitization and security sector reform in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Tunisia has had a long-standing military partnership with the US and has maintained 'an active schedule of joint military exercises' with them since the 1990s (U.S. Department of State 1994). The US continued to provide resources for security training, equipment, and infrastructure after the revolution and tripled its military aid to the country in 2015 (Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019).⁵ After years of harsh repression by the previous regime's police and security forces, especially during the anti-Ben Ali protests of 2010–11, there was a collective desire within the new democratic system to instil greater rule of law in military and security affairs. Foreign assistance was instrumental in bringing about a more regularized and better equipped military in Tunisia, which also bolstered political stability. By strengthening ties between political actors and US officials and resources, foreign assistance for security also empowered democratic activists and encouraged political coalitions in favour of democracy (Marzo 2020b). Foreign aid for military and security interests simultaneously may have worked in favour of democratization.

3.1 The drawbacks of aid in democratization

Nonetheless, despite many well-intentioned donor activities, the flood of aid that entered Tunisia after 2011 was not all effective or without fault. One of the major drawbacks of receiving such a colossal burst of aid is that a steady flow of external assistance has the potential to quell calls for structural political reform in the long run (Kubinec 2016). Aid distributions to Tunisia have also often been inconsistent, which has impacted the security and stability of the state, as well as the substantive and formal dimensions of the country's democracy (Johansson-Nogués and Rivera Escartin 2020). The impact of foreign assistance on democracy in Tunisia is therefore mixed.

First of all, donor intentions and practices did not always live up to their democratizing promises. Donor actions promoting democracy in Tunisia have often been short sighted, focused on micro outcomes, and were sometimes at odds with stated regime goals (Cavatorta 2001; Durac and Cavatorta 2009;

⁵ Sources note that military aid from the US was especially welcomed by Tunisian authorities, as it was given with less bureaucratic red tape than European aid.

Kartas 2016; Krüger and Stahl 2018). Furthermore, after a while, democracy promotion, which had been a main stated goal of donor aid to Tunisia after 2011, began to wane. In fact, geopolitical, economic, and security goals may have always been bigger motivators for international influence in Tunisia (Cavatorta 2001), so perhaps democracy promotion was a convenient front for several donor programmes. Either way, mismatches between foreign aid flows and local need began to manifest. External support in the post-transition period, especially from the EU, started to shift back toward socio-economic objectives, even while many local actors remained committed to normative goals of democracy building (Boiten 2015). Fundamentally, donor foreign policies were never fully uniform or complementary, and different donors have not always been unified in their understanding of and approach toward democracy assistance in Tunisia (Durac and Cavatorta 2009; Del Sarto and Schumacher 2012; Krüger and Stahl 2018; Holthaus 2019).

Foreign aid to Tunisia has also struggled logistically, especially with regard to aid toward civil society. Donor partnerships in general have been often framed around vague language and inconsistent benchmarking (Del Sarto and Schumacher 2012), perhaps accounting for some of democracy aid's lacklustre outcomes in the country. External aid has also often been subject to mismanagement and competing objectives. For instance, civil society funding is often fragmented, distributed inconsistently, regionally marginalized, and given as a pretext for other development goals (Colombo and Meddeb 2018; Weilandt 2022). Additionally, large portions of civil society assistance are often distributed to externally managed—rather than to native—Tunisian-led organizations, meaning domestic needs and goals are not always being supported (Cherif 2017). Because foreign funding tends to be distributed with a Western framework in mind, external assistance often overlooks local organizations and domestic aspirations or needs.

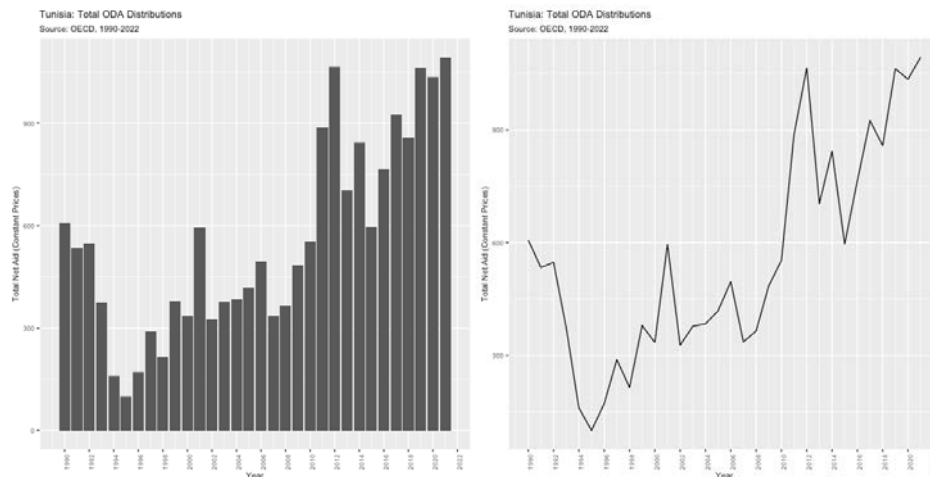
Similarly, security assistance, while vital for stabilizing the country, has also exposed Tunisia to certain vulnerabilities. Security aid initiatives are often flawed or disjointed and external military assistance has, in most cases, weakened political oversight and accountability over the country's domestic security sectors (Kartas 2016; Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019). The security aid that Tunisia has received is often not directly channelled with larger democracy-building objectives in mind. The US in particular has explicitly focused on security aims and military efficiency in its assistance (Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019; Marzo 2020b), partially circumscribing democratic development.

In general, foreign aid toward Tunisia has precipitously risen since 2011. That assistance has proven invaluable in supporting the institutions and actors that make up Tunisia's democratic system. But aid has proven less reliable as a conduit for democratic consolidation, partially because of weak donor resolve, structural constraints, and competing domestic visions for Tunisia's political future. Foreign assistance has been instrumental in constructing and assembling democracy in Tunisia, but weaknesses in the aid regime have also had some bearing on the fact that the country's democratic system is also susceptible to infringement and manipulation.

4 Aid flows and sources

Aid to Tunisia multiplied following the exit of President Ben Ali. After 2011, total foreign aid to Tunisia tripled (Cherif 2017). Flows from bilateral Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors also expanded. Aid from the US and the EU both doubled, and EU distributions accounted for about 35% of the country's GDP, equivalent to its proposed annual budget (Kubinec 2016). Official development assistance (ODA) flows demonstrate that official assistance to Tunisia had been on a slow upward trend since 1995, but it experienced a sharp incline from 2010 to 2012, confirming that donors did immediately contribute to the country in the wake of its democratic revolution.

Figure 7: Tunisia's total official development assistance distributions

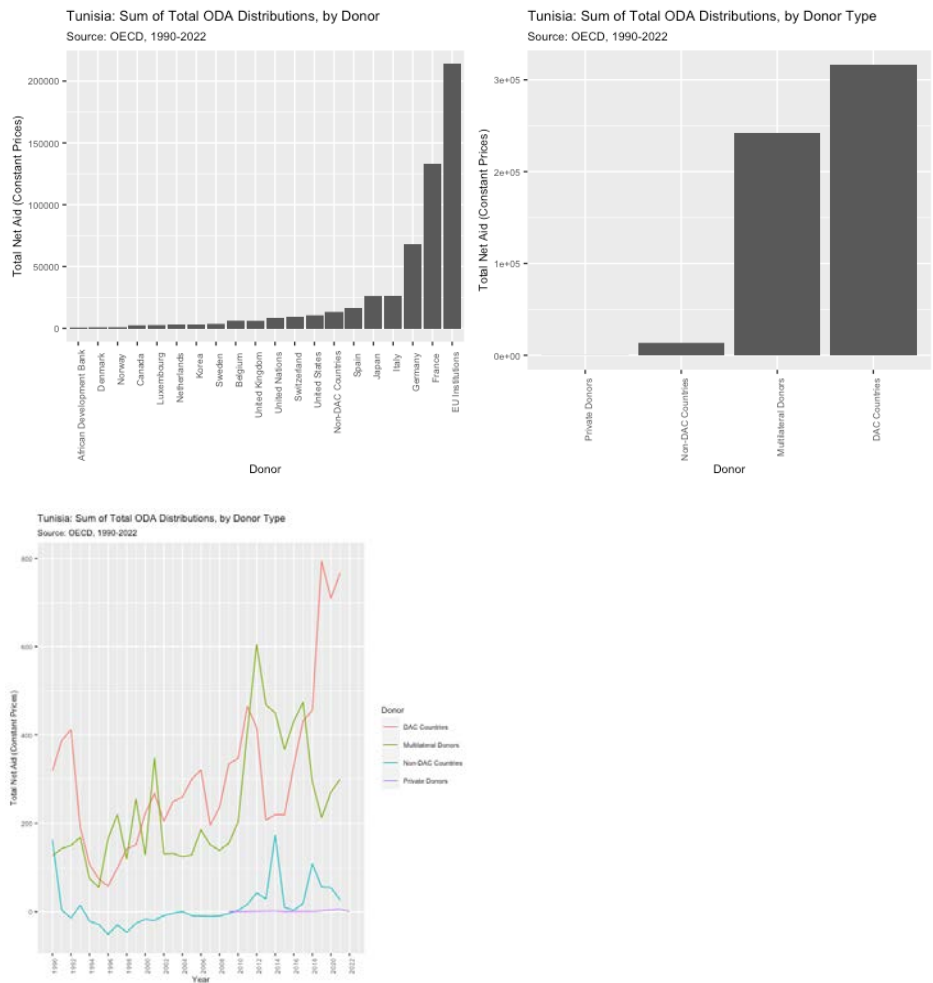


Source: author's construction based on OECD data.

Historically, Tunisia has not been a major recipient of foreign aid; therefore, this influx of assistance is notable. Although ODA flows have tapered off somewhat since 2011, the country still sustains larger ODA flows in this post-2011 period than it had previously. Partially because of the smaller absolute volumes of aid that have been distributed to Tunisia, foreign assistance has not had a severely negative impact upon its economy and has not made Tunisia an aid-dependent country (Addison and Balamoune-Lutz 2017). Some of the fiscal responsibility over its aid resources may also be attributed to types of aid flows that have been distributed in Tunisia.

The EU is by far Tunisia's largest donor and the bulk of foreign official assistance to Tunisia derives from European sources. Apart from the EU, multilateral donors represent a much smaller proportion of aid to Tunisia, with the United Nations and African Development Bank having only a modest presence in the country. Instead, Tunisia receives a bigger portion of aid from bilateral donors, specifically European countries, which has been especially true since 2018. Non-DAC donors have also had a larger presence as aid donors in Tunisia, ranking as one of the country's larger sources of external funding. The role of non-DAC donors may increase in upcoming years, especially given Tunisia's recent trajectory back toward autocracy that may limit its relationships with traditional DAC donors.

Figure 8: Tunisia's sum of total ODA distributions, by donor and donor type

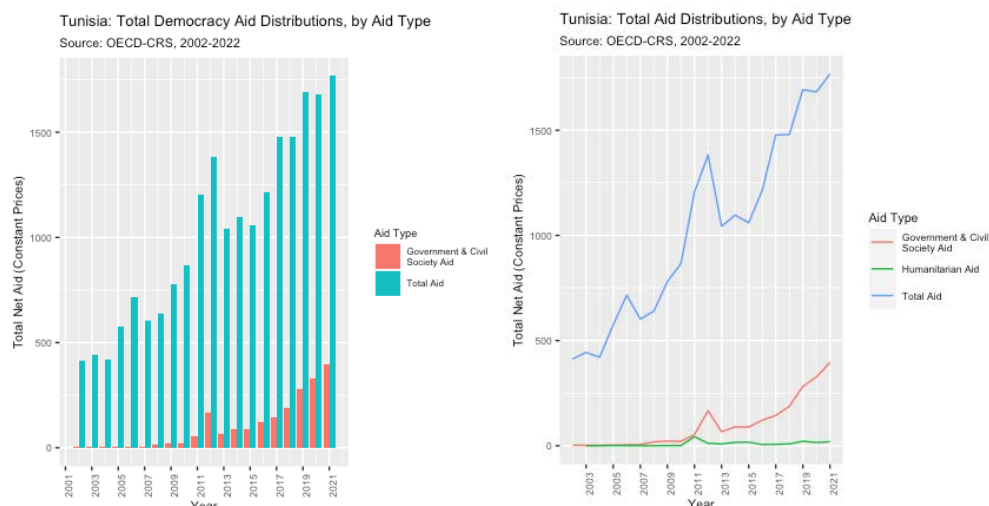


Source: author's construction based on OECD data.

Indeed, this composition of donors is important, particularly with regards to current events. In light of President Saied's violation of democratic political power, the US has recently pledged to rescind aid to Tunisia. The US has been vocal in expressing public criticism of Tunisian political practices in the past (Arieff 2011), but it has taken a further step against the Saied government in acting to withdraw aid distributions. However, the US remains a minor aid partner for Tunisia, which has in total received more aid flows from non-DAC donors that it has from the US. The US announcement was also made while both EU- and Saudi-issued aid packages are actively being negotiated with Tunisia. So, while US aid sanctions are notable, ultimately, they will likely not have as great an impact upon the country or its democratic outcomes, especially as long as EU and non-DAC donor aid flows remain intact. Additionally, rescinding aid to Tunisia and lessening the influence of international Western actors there may usher in greater political instability and authoritarian governance in the long run (Yerkes 2022).

Aid to Tunisia has increased since the early 2000s. Alongside the incline in general development aid, there has also been a simultaneous increase in aid to governance and civil society. Although still only a fraction of total aid distributions, democracy aid has been on the rise in Tunisia. The country experienced a localized spike in democracy aid distributions in 2012, following its transition to democracy, confirming that donors did specifically channel more aid to democratic objectives that year. Civil society and governance aid have accounted for a greater amount of foreign assistance flows ever since.

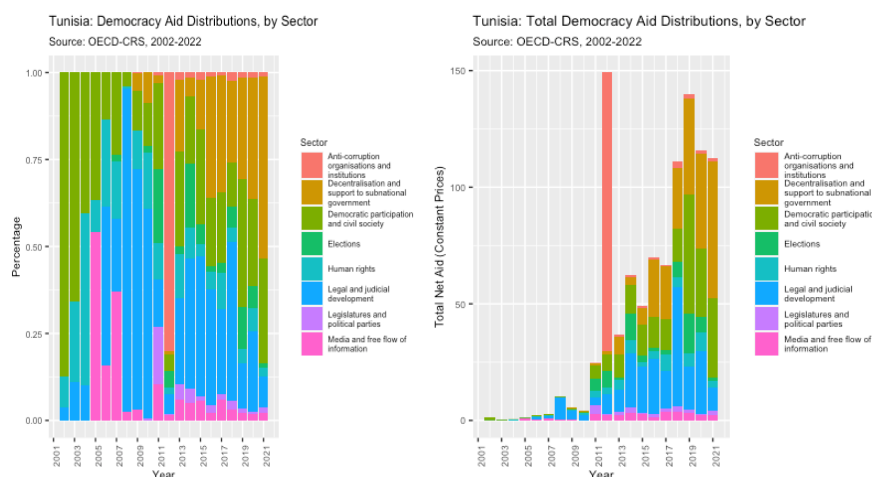
Figure 9: Tunisia's total aid, humanitarian aid, and government and civil society aid distributions



Source: author's construction based on OECD Creditor Reporting System (OECD-CRS) data.

Looking closely at disaggregated democracy aid flows is also telling. In 2012, a disproportionately large amount of democracy aid went toward anti-corruption efforts. Although this aid sector had not been a particularly large focus for foreign donors in Tunisia, it dominated aid flows that year. Otherwise, the bulk of democracy aid, especially in the post-2011 era, has come in the form of aid toward subnational governments, legal and judicial development, and democratic participation and civil society support. A smaller but relatively steady amount of aid has also regularly been distributed for elections and human rights. Given the centrality of Tunisia's legislature and political parties in the formation of its democracy, it seems unusual that democracy aid flows to these critical sectors have been underwhelming. Perhaps the smaller amount of aid distributions to legislative and political party development have contributed to the country's weakened political state and paved the way for President Saied to overrun both these institutions in 2021.

Figure 10: Tunisia's democracy aid distributions, by sector



Source: author's construction based on OECD Creditor Reporting System (OECD-CRS) data.

Tunisia is a mid-level recipient of aid, and it receives most of its aid in the form of developmental, rather than democracy assistance. The bulk of this aid comes from European donors, which dominate the aid landscape in Tunisia. However, non-DAC donors also play an increasingly significant role as aid partners, particularly donors from the Middle East and Gulf States. These dynamics will be especially

important in considering the next foreign policy steps from Tunisia, as it navigates its way under newly hyper-presidential executive leadership and an increasingly autocratic regime.

5 Specific aid examples

There have certainly been success stories regarding aid programmes in Tunisia, but the chronic roadblocks that aid projects typically encounter there are often highlighted. Tunisia has a lot of economic potential, but economic development programmes are often thwarted (World Bank 2014), as is the country's potential for greater democracy building and development. Inequality remains a salient concern within society, and regional development is still very uneven in Tunisia (Sadiki 2019). These asymmetrical conditions have dampened the impact of aid programmes and made them difficult to effectively implement. Many aid programmes have been prevented from reaching their fullest potential in the country.

The bulk of specific aid projects mentioned in the literature on Tunisia focus on assistance distributed after its transition. For instance, the US, out of the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), pledged 'transition support' to Tunisia in 2011, mostly focused on military assistance and counterterrorism, but also coupled with humanitarian aid and aid earmarked for media, civil society, political party, economic, and electoral support (Arieff 2011; Arieff and Humud 2014). Many other local development and infrastructure aid projects in post-revolutionary Tunisia are also co-operated by Tunisian ministries alongside foreign partners, including the UK, Germany, France, and the EU (Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019).

Many aid projects have been obstructed by domestic constraints, especially under President Ben Ali when the regime frequently put a stop to projects it did not approve of. Aid programmes were rarely targeted at social or political objectives during this time, and the few that were often remained underdeveloped or gridlocked in distribution. For instance, a €30,000 grant meant for women's civil society groups was frozen by Tunisian authorities, was never distributed, and eventually returned to the EU (Dennison et al. 2011). This was a common pattern that had long-term impact. Large-scale EU projects aimed at civil society, media, and judicial development in the early 2000s also faced significant implementation issues, which disincentivized democracy assistance in future funding cycles (Van Hüllen 2014). Although some of these projects—assistance to the judiciary for example—were re-funded following local demand and request (Van Hüllen 2014; Reynaert 2015), these early restrictions on aid projects in Tunisia have left a lasting legacy on subsequent aid flows and allocations.

Tunisia's pressing concern at the moment is assistance for public finance and debt relief. The country is in current contention over the details of a potential IMF loan for those purposes. President Saied has made a point of travelling abroad in order to curry favour amongst IMF officials and subsequent aid donors, but his robotic persona has not easily appealed to international funders (Hill and Yerkes 2023). The Saied administration has struggled to cultivate and maintain steady aid flows. However, it is also looking toward alternative donors and has received major loans from Saudi Arabia and Gulf State development funds in the meantime. Tunisia is currently in a precarious state, and the terms and parameters of future assistance programmes and aid flows will certainly have significant impact upon the trajectory and sustainability of its regime.

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