

Tunisia's "Al-Ahyaa Al-Sha'Biya": Socioeconomic Grievances, Mobilisation, and Repression

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Abstract

This paper will look into the dynamics of police repression and violence against contentious actors during the latest wave of protests in Tunisia. It will argue that there is a continuity between the grievances of the recent protests and those expressed during the 2011 revolution, including corruption, access to socio-economic rights and individual and collective freedoms. The paper will also highlight the role of the youth, particularly those from marginalised neighbourhoods, in leading the protests, positioning them as the main targets of police violence and arbitrary arrests. Finally, it will shed light on the recent police repression and violation of individual freedoms, showing that despite being considered as one of the main achievements of the Tunisian's revolution, civil liberties remain under threat.

Keywords: Repression, Police Brutality, collective actions, Social Justice, Socio-Economic, socio-economic demands, Tunisia, Economic & Social Rights

To cite this paper: Stephanie Daher, "Tunisia's "Al-Ahyaa Al-Sha'Biya": Socioeconomic Grievances, Mobilisation, and Repression ", Civil Society Knowledge Center, Lebanon Support, October, 2021 .

DOI: [10.28943/CSKC.002.90002](https://doi.org/10.28943/CSKC.002.90002).

[ONLINE]:

<https://civilsociety-centre.org/paper/tunisia%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%99Al-ahyaa-al-sha%E2%80%99biya%E2%80%9D-socioeconomic-grievances-mobilisation-and-repression>

In 2021, Tunisia witnessed several political and socio-economic crises, which were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The country had already been facing an acute economic contraction – described by the International Monetary Fund as the worst crisis since Tunisia's independence in 1956 (IMF, 2021). In 2020, Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi indicated that the country had a negative growth rate of 6.5 percent and a public debt amounting to 86 percent of GDP (Chomiak, 2021). According to the National Institute of Statistics, the unemployment rate rose to 17.80% post-pandemic in the first quarter of 2021, up from 17.40% in the fourth quarter of 2020.^[1]

In addition to marking the 10-year commemoration of the Tunisian Revolution, the 14th of January 2021 also set off a wave of protests across several cities, which soon gained momentum. Despite the recurrent contentious collective action over the past few years in the country, the recent protests ushered an intense wave of police repression and violence. Hundreds of protesters were arrested, including minors coming from popular neighbourhoods, which triggered a wave of nightly protests denouncing police violations and calling for the release of those arrested.

In this context, post-revolution Tunisia instigated a broad array of comparative literature, positioning it as the lone success story of democratic transition amidst the waves of contentious mobilisations against authoritarian and oppressive regimes which took place in other Arab countries. This was largely due to its regular cycles of legislative, executive and municipal elections over the past few years, with relatively high voter turnout, as well as the country's progressive constitution (ratified in 2014), national dialogues and pacts to overcome political stalemates, proliferation of regulatory institutions, robust civil society and free press (Chomiak, 2021). However, despite supposedly attaining several democratic achievements, the repressive and restrictive measures against civil society – once a trademark of the Ben Ali regime – are still omnipresent in Tunisia today. Individual freedoms, civil liberties and the right to assembly, which are fundamental pillars of the Tunisian democratisation process, were never actually achieved.

This paper will look into the dynamics of police repression and violence against contentious actors during the latest wave of protests in Tunisia. It will argue that there is a continuity between the grievances of the recent protests and those expressed during the 2011 revolution, including corruption, access to socio-economic rights and individual and collective freedoms. The paper will also highlight the role of the youth, particularly those from marginalised neighbourhoods, in leading the protests, positioning them as the main targets of police violence and arbitrary arrests. Finally, it will shed light on the recent police repression and violation of individual freedoms, showing that despite being considered as one of the main achievements of the Tunisian's revolution, civil liberties remain under threat.

Persistence of Grievances a Decade after the Revolution

Ten years ago, Tunisia was praised as the lone democratic success story of the Arab uprisings (Chomiak, 2021). Thousands of Tunisians mobilised and toppled President Ben Ali's regime, which had been in power since 1987, thereby triggering an unprecedented wave of Arab uprisings. At the time, the first to rise up against the ruling regime were the marginalised populations of Tunisia (Zemni, 2021). When Mohammed Bouazizi, a street vendor, set himself on fire upon the confiscation of his vegetable cart by the police in Sidi Bouzid, thousands of people in rural areas took to the streets in protest. When revisiting the goals of the Tunisian revolution, it is clear that the main slogan adopted by the protesters was "Bread, Freedom and Human Dignity" (*Aish, Hurriyah, Karamah Insaniyyah*), reflecting both economic (socioeconomic marginalisation) as well as political (corruption) grievances (Kilavuz, 2020). The slogan originated from the motto of the Union for Unemployed Graduates, whose members began protesting in 2006 and are still active today (Gordner, 2017).

Since 2011, many democratic milestones, including historic human rights triumphs, have been achieved, such as the 2013 National Dialogue,^[2] the ratification of the 2014 Constitution, the holding of democratic legislative and executive elections, and the "*Manich Msameh*" (I will not pardon) movement, which succeeded in blocking a bill aimed at granting amnesty to corrupt officials from the Ben Ali regime, among several others (Meddeb, 2017). However, the nine successive governments have faced numerous challenges, intense political polarisation, fragmentation and a continuous rise in unemployment (Chomiak, 2021). The growing disaffection towards the political class gave rise to an "electoral insurrection" in the presidential election of September 2019, in which Kais Saied, an outsider to the traditional political establishment who advocated the need to respond to social justice demands and replace the semi-parliamentarian political system with one based on direct democracy, was elected with 72% of the votes (Hernando de Larramendi, 2020).

Despite the implementation of progressive reforms, economic inequalities and regional disparities, which were the main triggering causes of protests during the 2011 Revolution, remained a constant issue in Tunisia. Structural cleavages were exacerbated by long-standing geographic inequalities, with the highest

levels of poverty concentrated in the inland and southern regions, and, increasingly, in urban peripheries (Chomiak, 2021). As such, two dimensions of marginality that have influenced the revolutionary process and the forms of social protests in Tunisia have been outlined: social and spatial marginalisation (Zemni, 2021). The first affects the urban poor and popular classes, whereby they mainly suffer from declining incomes, limited access to resources and a general lack of public services, in addition to collective stigmatisation of the neighbourhoods where they live. The second affects Tunisians living in peripheral, largely rural, southern, central and north-western regions within the country and are subject to a process of double dispossession: On the one hand, they suffer from social marginalisation and stigmatisation similar to those experienced by residents of popular neighbourhoods in large cities, and, on the other, they face a form of dispossession embedded within the local political economies of the different regions (Zemni, 2021). While many hoped that the revolution would bring about reforms that address these inequalities and forms of marginalisation, it failed to do so.

As such, protests in Tunisia have been a constant feature of the decade since the revolution. Public discontent with the government and the overall hopelessness have been growing over the past few years (Afrobarometer, 2018). Socioeconomic grievances have been increasingly salient and have gradually crystallized into low-intensity protests, before reaching their climax in the protests since the beginning of 2021. Along these lines, the marginalised border area of Tataouine witnessed hundreds of demonstrations over the past years, reviving the four-year-long Kamour sit-in in March 2017, named after the Kamour pumping station located 110 kilometres (68 miles) from Tataouine. Protesters demanded jobs, regional development for Tataouine and the equitable distribution of the region's oil and gas revenues (Meddeb, 2021). In June 2020, protesters and the government reached an agreement that guaranteed the creation of jobs and a regional development fund (Meddeb, 2021). Similarly, in Gafsa, the phosphate mining region, protesters' demands focused on hiring procedures, access to health services and environmental protection (Chomiak, 2021). The Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights reported almost 800 protests per month, with the highest numbers concentrated in the country's south and centre.^[3]

Today, socioeconomic disparities and corruption, which primarily mobilised Tunisia's historic revolution, still constitute root grievances, particularly to residents of marginalised regions across the country (Meddeb, 2020). For ten years, while all eleven successive governments ritually advanced "regional development" as a national priority, the disparities between coastal and inland cities in terms of access to resources and public services have worsened (Lamloum, 2021). Thus, post-revolutionary governments have failed to address the primary causes of public anger in these regions, including unemployment, inequalities, limited access to healthcare and education, clientelism, corruption and nepotism (Zemni, 2021).

Youth of Marginalised Neighbourhoods: Leaders of Protests and Targets of Repression

In early 2021, a wave of protests erupted, originating in the marginalised suburbs of Tunis, and soon expanded to numerous cities across different governorates (Boussen, 2021). However, rising frustrations and resentment among Tunisians, and the youth in particular, were already evident. The country had been suffering from an economic crisis, coupled with heightened political agitation and an increasingly public perception of corruption (Schoeberlein, 2019). The Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) had previously sounded the alarm, by issuing statements and field studies underlining "the aggravated phenomenon of school dropouts among a large group of youth (more than a million dropouts over the past ten years), drawing attention also to the exacerbation of the feelings of inequality, inequity, and abandonment by the state in terms of promoting health, educational and economic rights of the youth, which triggered in them a feeling of injustice and their self-perception as victims of violence by the state."^[4]

Upon the government's announcement of a strict, four-day lockdown, protesters took to the streets on 14 January in Kasserine and burned tires, denouncing the lack of jobs and state support in the face of the socio-economic impact of the pandemic (Lebanon Support, Mapping of Collective Actions in Tunisia). The following day, when a video was circulated on social media showing a police officer assaulting a shepherd in Siliana, nightly protests erupted in several cities, among which were Sousse and Nabeul, as well as across several popular

neighbourhoods, including Ettadhamon, Malassin, Fouchana and Sejoumi (Ibid). Angry demonstrators denounced the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions by burning tires and erecting dozens of barricades in an attempt to block the streets in several cities. Police forces clashed with the protesters and fired tear gas to disperse the crowds (Ibid). On the third night of violent confrontations, police repression reached its peak with the arrest of 632 protesters in one night, the majority of whom were minors, across several Tunisian cities (Ibid). The movement continued for more than six weeks and spread across many of the country's governorates, especially in the less fortunate and working-class neighbourhoods and marginalized regions.^[5]

The mobilisation of the residents of marginalised neighbourhoods, particularly the youth, is an outcome of the accumulating hardships they have been enduring over the past years. These young Tunisians have been disenfranchised by the (lack of) policies targeting them, including chronic underfunding of public services, a lack of a coherent employment strategy and a securitised approach to addressing social issues in their regions (International Alert, 2021). In parallel, their growing intolerance towards law enforcement forces had been steadily building up over the past years. This is largely due to the way the police treat the residents of these neighbourhoods, especially the youth, who are generally regarded with suspicion and stigmatisation (Ibid). In 2019, in Kasserine, Tataouine and Douar Hicher – three geographically distant cities, which have no more in common than their relegation – no less than one in five young people said they had been arrested or imprisoned (International Alert, 2020). In addition, youth from Douar Hicher and Ettadhamon (two largely marginalised neighbourhoods) reported acts of brutality and humiliation during “crackdowns” and spoke of the harassment and discrimination that they had encountered during identity checks in Tunis city centre and affluent areas (International Alert, 2016).

As the mapping shows, the majority of mobilising actors between January and June 2021 were collective and informal groups (38%), followed by civil society organisations (24%), political parties (10%) and affected groups (7.5%) (inc. NIBMY) (Lebanon Support, Mapping of Collective Actions in Tunisia). In this context, the mobilising CSOs were also youth-led, such as the Tunisian Association for Justice and Equality (*Damj*), the Tunisian Organization of Young

Doctors, *Al-Bawsala*, I Watch Organisation and many others.^[6] The months of January and February witnessed the highest share of contentious movements with a predominant mobilisation of collective and informal groups (38%), followed by civil society organisations (36%), which were leading the protests, of the total mapped collective actions in these two months (Ibid). These contentious collective actions also paved the way for the rise of new social actors, such as the queers, the Wrong Generation movement, and many other groups, each of which had their own forms of protest, demands and grievances. The “Wrong Generation,” a youth-led group that launched the social media hashtag #TheWrongGeneration, clearly distance themselves from the protesters of the last decade and reject traditional mobilising groups, refusing to fit into the typical mould of movements in Tunisia (Abdselm, 2021). The group positions itself in contrast with the “corrupt generation,” adopting slogans such as “free the detainees,” “leave the country” and “down with the police state” and contributing to the development of a narrative of rejection and rebellion (Al-Chaikhawoui, 2021).

As for the mode of action, protesters mainly resorted to demonstrations (65%), sit-ins (12%), roadblocks (5%) and tire burning (5%) (Lebanon Support, Mapping of Collective Actions in Tunisia). Most protests often employed roadblocks conjointly with tire burning during the same mobilisation. These two months also brought about innovative protest methods, such as the dousing of anti-riot police with spray paint and writing on police shields with lipstick (Guellali, 2021). As the frequency of security arrests increased, protesters resorted, in addition to demonstrations, to sit-ins in front of courts in solidarity with those detained and to demand a fair trial (Lebanon Support, Mapping of Collective Actions in Tunisia).

In terms of grievances, the data reveals that the protests were primarily driven by injustice/perceived injustice (48%), policy grievances (19%) and access to socio-economic rights, including the freedom of expression and assembly (12%). The perceived sense of injustice explains the dominant mobilisation of the youth from popular and marginalised neighbourhoods, who suffer from chronically underfunded services and poor access to education and jobs (International Alert, 2021). Employment, development, the improvement of citizen-oriented services and the water supply were the major axes in the demands of the protestors. Approximately 70% of the average monthly number of mapped protests were

related to economic and social demands over the six-month period.^[7] Also, as the intensity of repression and arrests practiced by the security forces escalated, the demands focused increasingly on freedom of expression and assembly and the release of all detainees.

Individual Freedoms and Civil Liberties Astray and the Surging of Repression

The protests were met with a harsh coercive response by security forces, involving the use of water cannons, barricades and the firing of tear gas (Abouzzohour, 2021). Excessive violence was used in confrontations with protesters, and hundreds of arrests took place, including the arrest of minors (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In response to the strong repression by the police and the arbitrary arrests, mobilised actors organised large, cross-sectoral solidarity protests over the subsequent months, extending from the capital Tunis and its marginalised neighbourhoods to the cities of Kasserine, Sousse, Gafsa and Monastir (Lebanon Support, Mapping of Collective Actions in Tunisia). Simultaneous demonstrations in different cities took place. In Sfax, protests in solidarity with those arrested soon emerged with the collective “Revolutionary Movement Continues,” demanding the release of the detainees and expressing anger at the deteriorating political and economic situation in the country (Ibid). Daily protests followed for the rest of the month with a high level of decentralisation, not only across cities but also across popular neighbourhoods. The latter witnessed mass protests calling for the release of detainees, particularly minors, amidst violent confrontations with the police forces.^[8] Protesters chanted anti-police slogans condemning the coercion and repression employed by the security forces against the recent social protests demanding the release of detainees (Boussen, 2021).

Outrage at the police violence was further exacerbated on June 10, 2021, when a video published online showed police officers from the National Rapid Intervention Brigade strip and drag a 15-year-old minor from the popular neighbourhood of Sidi Hassine, in the southern suburb of Tunis (Boussen, 2021). In response, a march was called for by several civil society groups, as well as the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT), which announced in a press conference that it would take the lead in filing a lawsuit brought by 67 civil society

groups against the Prime Minister and acting Interior Minister Hichem Mechichi.^[9] The security forces and their affiliated unions, in turn, organised counter-protests alarmingly calling upon officers not to comply with their leadership's instructions to exercise restraint towards demonstrators and declaring a ban on protests (Elleuch, 2021). Various cities witnessed strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations after one of the unions announced that "all unauthorised protests" in Tunis will be prohibited and "charges will be filed against all demonstrators who insult the police."^[10]

More recently, hundreds of Tunisians took to the streets in several cities on July 25th to voice their discontent with the government and the Islamist party Ennahda. Police used pepper spray against the protesters, who threw stones at them, shouted slogans against the Prime Minister and called for the dissolution of Parliament.^[11] President Saied reacted the same night by invoking Article 80, the emergency clause in the Constitution, sacking Prime Minister Mechichi, freezing the activities of Parliament for at least 30 days (initially) and declaring himself the head of the public prosecutor's office (Grubman and Maz, 2021).

Despite being framed as one of the fundamental gains of the 2011 Revolution in Tunisia, the freedoms of expression and assembly have been increasingly under threat over the past few years in the country. Several activists have been summoned to investigation and charged under the Telecommunications Code for criticizing the police's ill-treatment of activists protesting unemployment and the lack of services (Amnesty International, 2020). A growing number of criminal prosecutions against peaceful expression have taken place over the past years, and recurrent statements by the Ministry of Interior and police unions have threatened to prosecute any criticism of the security forces (International Alert, 2021). As such, several human rights organisations have been sounding the alarm over the violations taking place, the shrinking civic space and the restriction of the freedoms of expression and assembly.

Nevertheless, over the six-month period extending from January to June 2021, police violence and repression was unprecedented in terms of intensity and methods. Various civil society organisations and legal activists denounced and condemned the serious humanitarian violations, torture, ill-treatment and arbitrary arrests.^[12] In the period between January and March 2021, more than 2,000

arrests against civil society and human rights activists were recorded (Boussen, 2021).

Similar to the contentious movements over the six-month period, the arbitrary arrests were decentralised as well. They were not limited to the capital, but rather extended to at least 14 governorates.^[13] In addition, the arrests did not only take place in the streets during demonstrations, sit-ins or roadblocks. rather, the majority of arrests included barging into the homes of minors, in what came to be called as “mass sweeps of minors” (Ben Mbarek, 2021). The National Syndicate of the Internal Security Forces used the photos shared online to launch a real witch-hunt (Boussen, 2021). Also, journalists were harassed for filming arrests and violence by the security forces.^[14] Arrest charges included fabricated claims of indecency, disturbance of public order or slander against on-duty public officials.

Conclusion

Amidst the worsening social and economic crisis, the streets of Tunisia were filled with protesters voicing their long-endured grievances and commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Revolution in January 2021. Protests soon erupted all over the country in a regular and continuous manner, mobilising masses of marginalised Tunisians, particularly the youth, in various regions and neighbourhoods.

This paper aimed at exploring the dynamics of police repression and violence against contentious actors during the wave of protests, particularly between January and June 2021. In doing so, it showed how the successive governments of the democratic transition failed to achieve their adopted national priorities aimed at narrowing regional disparities in terms of service provision and access to socio-economic rights, safeguarding individual freedoms and collective liberties and fighting corruption. The grievances which ignited the protests of the Tunisian Revolution back in 2011 remain unresolved to this day, triggering the recent wave of protests in 2021 amidst the deterioration of the socio-economic conditions of Tunisians.

The study also underlined the leading role of the youth, particularly those from marginalised and popular neighbourhoods, who were primarily driven by a

perceived sense of injustice and abandonment by the state. Their dominant contentious mobilisation also positioned them as principal targets of police violence, repression and arbitrary mass arrests. This repression triggered mobilisations and cross-solidarity protests between the youth of marginalised neighbourhoods and other activists, including the unemployed, calling for the “dismantling of the system of police repression by dissolving security force unions.”^[15]

Finally, the dynamics of police violence and repression during the latest wave of protests demonstrated how individual freedoms, civil liberties and the right to assembly, all pillars of the Tunisian democratisation process, were never truly achieved.

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[6] A list of all civil society organisations and movements which were active in the latest wave of protests in Tunisia can be found on the following link: <https://ftdes.net/ar/????????-????-????-????????-?????????>

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