



Country Profile: Tunisia

In 1956 Tunisia gained its independence from French colonial rule. For many years following its independence, the country enjoyed a flourishing large middle class and liberal social norms under the rule of Habib Bourguiba who led the country for three decades. Bourguiba was a modern thinker who believed in the advancement of women, abolition of polygamy and compulsory free education for his people.

President Bourguiba drew a clear line against Islamic fundamentalists, and sought to further liberal thinking and education. In spite of the freedoms he allowed his people, behind closed doors he ruled with an iron fist. He ran a one party state and tolerated no dissent from opposition parties. His security forces harassed government critics and human rights activists. Corruption ran rampant in the middle class, ultimately leading to a collapse of the country's economy.

In 1987 Bourguiba was ousted from power and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali' became president. He continued most of Bourguiba's policies against Islamic extremists and maintained autocratic rule. Ben Ali quickly lost popularity at home and abroad. Underground opposition movements grew. In 2002 a suicide bomber killed 21 people during an attack at an historic synagogue in the resort of Djerba.

In 2011 massive street demonstrations erupted against the Ben Ali regime. They became known as the Jasmine Revolution. The riots were so forceful that they prompted Ben Ali to step aside after 23 years in power. This movement began the Arab Spring. Since his removal from power formerly suppressed Islamic groups have risen causing tensions and conflict with secular liberals. In 2011 the country held its first free election, with the consensus in favor of drafting a new constitution and forming a new government. To the dismay of the secularists, the moderate Islamist party- Ennahda won the election. They assured secularists that they would "respect women's rights and not try to impose a Muslim moral code on society."

Despite these promises, conflicts have continued between Islamists and secularists. In May 2012, ultraconservative Islamists known as Salafis went on a rampage, torching police stations and attacking bars that sold alcohol in several towns in the northwest. A television executive was fined \$1,600 for showing the film, "Persepolis," which the Salafists claimed was offensive to Muslims because it included a scene depicting God. Moderates were concerned about the conviction because it was the first prosecution for the exercise of free speech by the new government.

The policies of the new government have scared away tourists who once contributed greatly to the country's flourishing economy, causing a rise in poverty. Ultra-conservative militant Islamists continue to pose a threat to secular liberals.

Despite its successful elections, and transition to democratic government, Tunisia remains polarized, with violence between liberal and Islamist groups.

Tunisia is at Stage 5: Polarization.