



PROGRESS AND PRIORITIES IN TUNISIA:

TUNISIAN CITIZENS EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS

FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH IN TUNISIA
Conducted August 20-27, 2016

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September 2016

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This report and the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) focus group research in Tunisia are made possible through funding from the U.S. Department of State Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) under award No. S-NEAAC-15-CA-1042. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of MEPI or the United States Government.

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NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. With staff members and volunteer political practitioners from more than 100 nations, NDI brings together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and expertise. Partners receive broad exposure to best practices in international democratic development that can be adapted to the needs of their own countries. NDI's approach reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies. The Institute's work upholds the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also promotes the development of institutionalized channels of communications among citizens, political institutions and elected officials, and strengthens their ability to improve the quality of life for all citizens. For more information about NDI, please visit www.ndi.org.

PREFACE

More than a year after the parliament and president took office following elections in fall 2014, Tunisia's elected leaders continue to endeavor to address the country's pressing economic and security challenges while consolidating its young democracy. The 217-member parliament, the Assembly of People's Representatives (ARP), which first convened in December 2014, has made progress on several legislative priorities, but has also struggled with political infighting and a lack of resources and staffing. In June, President Béji Caïd Essebsi called for the replacement of the cabinet with a new unity government to overcome political deadlock and speed progress on an economic reform package. Negotiations among political parties and labor unions this summer culminated in the signing of the "Carthage Agreement," which set out a framework for a more inclusive government and consensual reform priorities. Following a vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Habib Essid, newly-appointed Prime Minister Youssef Chahed formed a unity government—the country's seventh since the 2011 revolution. With significant economic reforms still forthcoming, most Tunisians continue to feel that the gains of the revolution have yet to meaningfully impact their daily lives.

As the transition progresses, local elections are Tunisia's next step towards credible, representative governance at all levels. For the first time in their history, Tunisians will democratically elect the municipal and regional councilors whose decisions directly impact their communities. At the time the research was conducted, Chafik Sarsar, president of the High Independent Authority for Elections (ISIE), had announced a municipal election date of March 27, 2017, but this date was subsequently indeterminately postponed. Delays have been caused by ongoing debate within parliament over the elections law, which will set the framework for the election of municipal and regional councils. In line with constitutional provisions, the law will divide the entire Tunisian territory into municipalities, enabling all citizens to vote in municipal elections. The government has concurrently prepared legislation that will create a framework for the decentralization process, which was approved by the Ministerial Cabinet in July 2016, which it will submit to parliament in the coming months. The *Code des collectivités locales* [Law on local authorities] is expected to grant new prerogatives to heads of municipalities and to municipal and regional councils, but as the decentralization process will likely be ongoing for years, a limited number of powers may be devolved to local officials initially.

Purpose. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) organized this round of focus group research in August 2016. Since March 2011, NDI has conducted regular [qualitative research](#) in Tunisia to provide political and civic leaders with objective information about citizens' attitudes. This 16th round of research—the fifth organized by NDI since the 2014 elections—sought to gauge respondent's evaluation of the performance of the parliament and members of parliament (MPs), assess their views on some of the more pressing matters facing the country, and ascertain their awareness of and expectations for the upcoming decentralization process and municipal and regional elections.

Citizens participated in 12 focus group discussions between August 20 and 27, sharing their views on the following topics:

- The direction of the country and priorities that affect citizens' daily lives;
- The performance of parliament and the extent to which it is fulfilling its key roles;
- Awareness of and expectations for the decentralization process and its anticipated impacts on the country, their region and themselves;
- Views on possible local council prerogatives and on various means of citizen engagement that could be used by local councils;
- Views on the economy and what citizens feel needs to happen moving forward to address challenges in this area; and,
- Views on corruption and what citizens feel needs to happen moving forward to address challenges in this area.

The Institute commissioned ELKA Consulting—a marketing and public opinion research firm based in Tunisia—to organize the study in four Tunisian governorates. NDI also commissioned Quorus Consulting Group Inc.—an international public opinion research firm—to assist in the development of the moderation guide and in the analysis and reporting of the research findings.

Focus Group Research: Focus groups are open-ended group interviews directed by a moderator and following pre-set guidelines. The purpose of focus group research is to understand the attitudes, opinions, and experiences of respondents who are recruited for the exercise. Focus groups are particularly useful in gaining a deeper appreciation of the motivations, feelings, and values behind respondents' reactions. In addition, the group format enables respondents to participate in an exchange of ideas—thus providing a more in-depth understanding of why opinions are held—that may not emerge in individual in-depth interviews or quantitative surveys. Focus group discussions are comprised of a small number of respondents, typically eight to 12 per group. Depending on the situation, however, groups may be slightly smaller or larger. For example, a women's group in a more isolated area may benefit from a larger participant list because it is likely that one or more of the respondents will refuse to speak at length, even if pressed. Focus group findings are only a snapshot of opinions at the moment the research is undertaken. The conclusions of this report therefore only represent opinions held by respondents when research was conducted in late August 2016.

Qualitative research seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively projectable measures. Due to the sample size, the special recruitment methods used, and the study objectives themselves, the work under discussion is exploratory in nature. The findings are not, nor are they intended to be, statistically projectable to a larger population. This kind of projection is strictly the prerogative of quantitative research.

Method: Before conducting the research, NDI developed a moderation guide that reflected the themes and questions proposed and prioritized by MPs and CSO representatives. These themes and questions were compiled using an electronic form they received from NDI specifically developed to understand their priorities and to help design a moderation guide as relevant as possible to their concerns. From August 20 to 27, 2016, NDI conducted 12 focus group sessions with a total of 139 respondents in four cities across Tunisia: Greater Tunis, Monastir, Kairouan, and Sfax. To capture the perspectives of a broad cross-section of Tunisian society, NDI divided respondents at each location into three distinct demographic groups: 1) mixed gender youth (ages 24–35), 2) women over age 35, and 3) men over age 35. Each group comprised between nine and 12 respondents. The final gender breakdown was 47 percent men and 53 percent women. Respondents were selected and pre-screened to ensure gender parity and a diverse representation of neighborhoods, socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, and professions. Additional detail on respondents' demographic profiles can be found in Appendix 1 of this report.

Staffing and Logistics: The Institute commissioned ELKA Consulting to organize the study in four cities across the country. A Tunisian citizen trained in focus group moderation techniques by NDI and ELKA served as the moderator for all focus groups in the series. All groups were conducted in the Tunisian dialect of Arabic.

Group Locations: The 12 focus groups outlined in this report were conducted in four locations throughout Tunisia: Greater Tunis, Monastir, Kairouan, and Sfax (see the map in this section). Locations selected for the study were urban or semi-urban areas. Target cities were selected based on their population size, economic weight, geographical location, and voting patterns in the 2014 elections. Greater Tunis was selected because it encompasses the capital and largest city of Tunis and its surrounding areas, and is the national center for public administration and commerce. Sfax, the second administrative and economic capital of Tunisia, is well known for its economic activities such as fishing, phosphate processing, agriculture, and trade. Monastir, a tourist destination situated on the coast of Tunisia, was historically favored by pre-revolution Tunisian presidents. After experiencing recent stagnation in tourism, this year has seen somewhat of a revival of the industry. Kairouan, the Islamic capital of Tunisia, is situated in the center of the country. Despite its historical heritage and tourism infrastructure, citizens of Kairouan regularly express their frustration regarding their region's economic problems. In all locations, appropriate venues for focus group discussions were identified to ensure participant privacy and sufficient space for indirect observation by NDI staff.

Outside Influence: Every effort was made to ensure there was no undue influence exerted on the respondents in the groups. Focus group discussion guides were not shared with local authorities prior to the sessions. In this study, there was no case in which the findings from one or more groups differed radically from overall findings, which suggests that any local influence that may have occurred did not impact the research.

MAP OF TUNISIA



Executive Summary

The findings of this report provide insights into public opinion in Tunisia in late August 2016. Based on 12 focus group discussions with 139 Tunisian respondents, the report summarizes participants' evaluation of the performance of the parliament and members of parliament (MPs), views on some of the more pressing matters facing the country, as well as awareness of and expectations for the upcoming decentralization process and municipal and regional elections. A summary of the main findings can be found below. The full results, along with selected quotations from respondents, are detailed in the Principal Findings section of this report.

When asked about their views on the **direction of the country**, respondents continued to voice in unison that the country is headed in the wrong direction. Although there were a few areas seen as improving, there was wholehearted agreement that overall, the country is not going in the direction they want. Among the areas that were seen as improving, respondents were most likely to refer to an increased sense that terrorism has been effectively countered and that the increased focus and efforts on national security over the past year or so have been paying dividends. Respondents, especially women, also noted that education is headed in the right direction. Respondents, especially youth, were also enthusiastic about the progress their country has made when it comes to freedom of expression and freedom in the media.

In terms of what is "going wrong," the two major themes most commonly identified were corruption and the economic welfare of Tunisians—the passion and the conviction that respondents manifested when discussing these two issues is undeniable. Nearly all respondents agreed that corruption is a significant challenge in today's Tunisia. One important aspect noted by respondents is that corruption is now seen as more widespread than it used to be; it is seen as firmly entrenched in the police force and has spread throughout public institutions.

The economy was another area that respondents generally agreed is a major issue in Tunisia. Attention tended to focus mostly on employment, especially youth employment, and on inflation.

It should therefore not come as any surprise that when asked to identify what their **parliament** should focus on the most these days, respondents were mostly looking to their parliament to address the economic challenges the country faces, especially employment. Although some Tunisians have seen progress in terms of security and education, these remain important priorities for a good number of other respondents. Accountability and corruption were also seen as priorities, but again, these were quite secondary compared to employment.

Many respondents do not fully understand the role of parliament or have become detached, frustrated or disinterested in it entirely. There was also near-unanimous agreement that the level of confidence they have in their parliament has decreased

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compared to a year ago and a sense that they do not understand the role of parliament as well as they did a year ago.

There is still some optimism however: respondents still feel like they want to understand how their parliament works and what its roles and responsibilities are and they also want to be kept informed of the work that parliament does. A distinct trust gap has emerged and participants feel that the only way to restore any of this trust is to make sure they are kept aware of what is going on.

When specifically asked how they feel MPs should keep them informed of what is happening in parliament, respondents insisted that greater direct contact and interaction with citizens should be a priority.

An important part of the discussion in each session focused on the **decentralization process and local governance**. Nearly all respondents felt they have a low understanding of what decentralization means for them, their region and for Tunisia. After a short explanation of the concept and reviewing a list of prerogatives being considered for local councils, many respondents reacted in a positive way to the possibility of having their region become more, if not entirely, responsible for all the prerogatives presented. The prerogatives that respondents wanted their local council to prioritize the most were the collection of garbage and the repair and maintenance of roads, walkways, and utilities owned by the municipality.

Some did challenge what was being proposed, however. The fact that municipalities seem to struggle already to effectively deliver on basic public services left a good number of respondents skeptical about the feasibility of the proposed prerogatives and of decentralization in general.

Respondents were also provided a list of the means of citizen engagement mechanisms that could be used by the local councils in their decision making process. Reactions to this list were generally positive and respondents were inclined to heavily favor mechanisms that empowered or gave a voice to citizens before decisions were made by local councils.

With the benefit of the list of prerogatives and of the mechanisms of engagement, respondents were mostly inclined to believe that decentralization will have a positive impact on Tunisia, on their region, and on themselves. In particular, respondents felt there was greater potential for regional needs to be met, that they will be much more involved in important decisions made in their region, and that they will have more access to decision-makers since these individuals will reside in the region rather than in far-off Tunis.

The **economy** was a topic that all respondents were eager to discuss. When asked to use a single word to describe the current economic situation in Tunisia, respondents almost unanimously used negative terms. There was also general agreement that the

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economy is worse today than it was a year ago. Notably, many seemed to feel that the economic situation in their specific region is better compared to other parts of the country.

As noted above, the discussion around the state and direction of the economy revolved primarily around unemployment and inflation. For a few participants, the foreign debt that the country is accumulating has depressed their overall view of the economy and for a few others, the growth in the parallel economy was the greatest concern. Only a select few mentioned hearing about any specific actions the government has taken to suggest it is focused on improving the economy.

In terms of strategies that could be considered to turn the economy around, respondents emphasized a need to improve access to loans and funds to make it easier for citizens to start a new project or business, and many suggestions specifically targeted youth employment. Many respondents suggested the parallel economy needed to be contained or eliminated, some described how Tunisia needed to become more appealing to both domestic and foreign investors, and finally, a few suggested that their government needs to be more focused on improving the economy.

The general sentiment that best summarizes how respondents feel about **corruption** is that there is a moral crisis in Tunisia. Respondents described how corruption is omnipresent; it has become increasingly common and has become so established that many fear that it will never be overcome. It is seen as pervading the economy, the political arena and even personal and national security. Needless to say respondents are eager to see steps taken to combat corruption even if there is a growing sense of despair surrounding any potential for success on this front. For most the solution simply involves punishing, or having more severe punishments for corrupt individuals. A variety of other suggestions were proposed across the sessions, including public and mass media shaming, greater oversight in public institutions, and a special anonymous whistleblowing program for citizens.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

This study evaluates participants' evaluations of the situation facing the country approximately one and a half years after the seating of a new president and parliament, and five and a half years after the revolution. NDI conducted 12 focus group sessions with 139 respondents throughout Tunisia in late August 2016. The findings, drawn from respondents' comments, are detailed below.

I. National Direction

Tunisians continue to voice in unison that the country is headed in the wrong direction. Although there are a few areas that respondents highlighted as improving, there is wholehearted agreement that overall, the country is not going in the direction they want. It is important to underline here that this sentiment is equally shared among young and old, among men and women, and across all regions where focus groups were conducted.

What is going well?

Respondents were specifically asked if anything in Tunisia is going right. One almost gets the sense that unless specifically prompted for positive elements, respondents would have focused exclusively on what is going wrong in Tunisia. In light of this specific line of questioning, respondents were able to identify a handful of positive developments, including:

- **Safety and security** – One of the more common “positives” in Tunisia is the increased sense among citizens that terrorism has been effectively countered and that the increased focus and efforts on national security over the past year or so have been paying dividends. Respondents certainly seem to be feeling safer. Arguably, this is an important achievement since many people will place their own personal sense of safety above all else – if they feel their life is in danger at every turn, all other aspects of a properly functioning society and country tend to be secondary.

Respondents who live in regions where tourism is important to their local economy, notably Monastir, also indicated that tourism has rebounded somewhat as a direct result of improved safety and security.

A few also noted that Tunisia is exemplary in its handling of terrorism, especially when compared to the situation in Libya and Syria.

- **Education** – Women respondents in particular also noted that education is headed in the right direction. Although this sentiment was not unanimous and a

few respondents criticized the direction of education, the more common view tended to be positive.

“My sister is a primary school teacher, we have kids both in primary and secondary school in the family. From observing them, I noticed that they had a huge amount of homework, but they learned nothing, I mean, some kids would score 18/20 in their finals but when you evaluate them during the holidays, you realize they retained nothing out of what they learned. Mainly because there is a lot of homework, kids preferred to learn by heart and rely on private tutoring, and when summer holidays come, they would forget everything and start anew. What changed now is that, I noticed, that since they have put an end to private tutoring, although not completely, kids are now relying more on themselves. Also moms used to keep their kids in daycares for the whole day, not only were kids physically and emotionally exhausted, but also daycare operators kept a close relationship with the kids' teachers and did them favors in order to inflate the kids' grades to keep parents happy. When this was stopped, moms started spending more time and effort on their kids, because they knew that daycares no longer tutored their kids on all subjects, they now have to do it themselves. I noticed that students are now getting better. If you would have visited a child psychiatry ward last year, you would have seen a lot of kids are there to see a therapist, I have noticed, a lot of them are getting better.” (Woman, Sfax, 38, employed)

- **Freedom of expression and media** – Respondents were also enthusiastic about the progress their country has made when it comes to freedom of expression and freedom in the media, especially younger respondents. People feel that they can say what they want about whomever they want without fearing any repercussions. This observation did compel some to counterbalance this notable gain with a notable challenge: that some citizens have not respected or understood the acceptable limits to freedom of speech. A few felt that open opinions, as welcomed as they are, can at times seem outrageous, disrespectful and insulting. So for some respondents, increased freedom of expression is seen as a double-edged sword.

“Freedom of expression is going in the right direction. The revolution helped people express themselves without fear of anything. Nevertheless, this kind of freedom being enjoyed in Arab countries also belittles the value of parliament and government. Anyone who is not satisfied with something shows up and criticizes it no matter how negative this is going to be on national interests.” (Woman, Tunis, 27, unemployed)

“Now, if we watch T.V. channels, we notice there is a freedom of speech. Even though there are some violations, we have come a long way. Before, we couldn't even mention the name of a higher-ranking person or authority, or criticize certain political parties. Now we are able to do that.” (Woman, Tunis, 38, employed)

- **Foundations of democracy** – While many were apt to criticize how democracy has evolved in their country (which is discussed later in this report), a few

respondents felt that at least the basic pieces were in place, including having undertaken a first national election, having an elected parliament, and having various civil society organizations in place to help the voice of citizens be heard and to keep politicians in check.

What is going wrong?

While it was sometimes a struggle for respondents to identify at least one aspect of life in Tunisia that is going in the right direction, the opposite could be said for naming aspects there are going wrong. Many bluntly stated that “nothing is going well” or “everything is going wrong.”

The two major themes most commonly identified when asked to specify what is going wrong were corruption and the economic welfare of Tunisians. The passion and the conviction that respondents manifest when discussing these two issues is irrefutable. These are by far the greatest concerns of participants and they are two issues that appear to have worsened over time. What is also noteworthy about these two themes is that they are complex, multifaceted issues.

- **Corruption** – Nearly all respondents agreed that corruption is a significant challenge in today’s Tunisia. Most would agree that it has always existed in their country, but that it has evolved over time in ways that they fear are now almost impossible to control or correct.

One important aspect noted by respondents is that corruption is now more widespread than it used to be. Participants feel that corruption was mostly concentrated in certain areas of activity such as big business or political leaders (or as one participant said, “it was more narrow”) whereas now they feel that corruption has spread to every corner of society. Respondents were especially concerned with the extent to which corruption has established itself in the police force, which they feel challenges their ability to trust them and feel safe in general. Many also highlighted the extent to which corruption has spread throughout public institutions, from front-line service clerks asking for small bribes to expedite service delivery, to bribery and preferential treatment in the education and the healthcare systems.

“Bribery is in the Tunisian administration. I don't think that the parliament will be able to take action regarding bribery; even the Tunisian government can't do anything to put an end to it since it is a matter of mentality. The mentality of a whole society; we need first to change it if we want to get rid of bribery.” (Male, Sfax, 27, unemployed)

“Corruption is a serious problem. Although we had a ministry of local governance and fighting corruption, there were no serious achievements in this respect. Before, we

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knew the corrupt people we were chasing; now, corruption is widespread." (Male, Kairouan, 62, retired)

"I think the biggest problem is with the public services, public officers are not doing their job. You know some were seen bringing a mattress and a pillow to sleep at work after spending a night out, there is no supervision; there should be someone to check on these places. And us who work for the private sector end up paying for their mistakes.

They ill-treat people and don't respect their code of conduct. On the other hand, people are very careless, I have seen once when I went to a hospital at 2 a.m. in the morning, a nurse changing a patient's bandage, he was throwing the dirty bandages on the floor, instead of the bin that was right next to him, not caring about the cleaner who would have to pick up those bloody bandages off the floor. What I want to say is both citizens and public officers are equally responsible for the chaotic situation."

(Woman, Sfax, 38, employed)

- **Economic situation** – The economy, or a specific aspect of the economy, was another area that respondents tended to all agree was a major issue in Tunisia. Attention tended to focus mostly on employment, especially youth employment, and on inflation. Youth employment was a common theme among youth, and it was also widely raised by older Tunisians who expressed concern for their own children who, in many cases, pursued post-secondary education and now, many years after graduating, are either unemployed or under-employed.

"We made a revolution because of unemployment, but on the contrary it's getting worse than it used to be." (Woman, Sfax, 28, employed)

"Economy in general is not going right. There are no efficient employment strategies that help boost the economy. In Tunisia, all youth want to create projects and be productive. The problem is that when one goes to the banks, mainly the Bank of Solidarity, he would be discouraged and refused to be helped financially. Even if they give financial support, they keep harassing him afterwards in order to make him pay back. In addition, even when the project starts working, there will be no help in relation to marketing the goods and making them available in markets." (Male, Tunis, 33, employed)

"I am jobless. I do feel ashamed when my son asks me for pocket money." (Male, Tunis, 43, unemployed)

"I am married, and I have two children. My wife is a housewife. I wonder how I can still afford life expenses. I contacted the ministry of Social Affairs, but doors were closed. They don't even care for my children." (Male, Tunis, 50, employed)

Beyond the economy and corruption, a variety of other areas were seen as "going wrong" in Tunisia. Even though these issues tended to be only raised by a few

respondents across all focus groups, they remain deeply controversial and important issues for those who raised them in the sessions:

- Security and safety against terrorism and against basic violence in the streets;
- Health care services;
- Education, e.g. there are issues with national exams;
- Political maneuvering and constant changes among those in power;
- The inefficient functioning of municipalities, e.g. garbage collection, road repair, cleanliness in general, etc. As well, basic requests and simple processes are taking too long.
- Agriculture, especially the challenges brought on by the drought;
- General and growing disregard for the law among common citizens;
- Tax evasion;
- Growing disconnect between what politicians are doing and what citizens need;
- The biased perspectives of the media, including the hype they create around some issues but not others and the focus they have on certain politicians or ministers and not on others.
- Inefficient exploitation of the country's natural resources.

II. Parliament

A significant segment of each session was dedicated to gauging participants' awareness, expectations, and assessment of the parliament.

In terms of priorities, respondents are mostly looking to their parliament to address the economic challenges the country faces, especially employment. As seen in the word cloud below¹, this is by far the most dominant theme raised by respondents.

Although some Tunisians have seen progress in terms of security and education, these remain important priorities for a good number of other respondents. Accountability and corruption were also seen as priorities, but secondary compared to employment.

¹ Word cloud only shows top-10 most common responses provided across all respondents.

AMONG ALL THE ISSUES FACING TUNISIA TODAY, THE ONE AREA PARLIAMENT SHOULD FOCUS THE MOST ON IS...



Respondents were eager to assign priorities to their parliament, but in reality, many respondents do not fully understand the role of parliament or have become detached or disinterested in it entirely. It was not uncommon to hear participants explain that they were initially curious and engaged with their parliament shortly after the election but that over the span of just a few years, they have become both disenchanted and in some instances uncertain about what their MPs are supposed to be doing.

Many factors have contributed to this general sense of frustration with parliament:

- Every time participants have tried to watch the parliament on television, they feel MPs are only bickering, insulting each other or even sleeping;
- Participants do not understand the exchanges happening in parliament;
- MPs seem to be passing laws, but many feel no actions are taken afterwards;
- There is a sense that the laws MPs are passing and the efforts they are expending have nothing to do with the priorities of citizens or with what is important for Tunisia as a whole;
- There is a sense that MPs are more focused on serving their own ends and the ends of their political party and family rather than representing those who elected them.

Also notable is that citizens are not just frustrated with their parliament; there is also near-unanimous agreement that the level of **confidence** they have in their parliament has decreased compared to a year ago and a sense that they do not **understand** the role of parliament as well as they did a year ago.

"I understand but I feel like I don't understand. Actually, it's not a question of understanding; I'm not convinced about what they're doing." (Woman, Sfax, 28, employed)

"We actually know what they want to do. They behave as if we don't exist. They only care about their personal interests. As far as they're concerned, they got the positions they wanted and reached the level they were aspiring for. They don't care about us anymore, bye bye!" (Male, Sfax, 27, unemployed)

*"They only show up together when there is a session about increase in salaries or a promotion for a certain minister. Otherwise, you will never find 217 present MPs."
(Woman, Monastir, 29, student)*

*"I totally understand their roles but they don't. [...] It's so shameful and pitiful. The parliament includes many MPs who are businesspeople. Many of these businesspeople are dealing with this kind of economy. We've heard of confiscating many smuggled goods as for example what they caught in Sfax. Where have all those goods gone? They're sold and consumed. We're fed up of hearing fireworks every night! Where is the government? Why doesn't it control all this? How did these goods enter the country? Wasn't it through the customs or did they fly over the borders? The problem is that there's a whole system encouraging this kind of trade."
(Male, Kairouan, 62, retired)*

*"People's purchasing power is deteriorating. The Parliament has done nothing."
(Male, Tunis, 50, employed)*

*"I have zero confidence in the Parliament. It's a constitutional illusion based on co-existence between two opposite blocks who later conspired against the people's will. It's an abomination to see a coordination of groups with totally opposed inclinations and directions; members from the ex-Constitutional Assembly, communists and Islamists some of whom don't even believe in the notion of the State. There is interference between terrorism and the state, so I have good reason to think that the state is behind some crimes. One day in the far future, we may know who was indeed behind them."
(Male, Tunis, 48, unemployed)*

Despite these sentiments, respondents still want to understand how their parliament works and what its roles and responsibilities are. Although not unanimous, the following summarizes how most participants feel about their parliament:

*"Of course it is. It is important to know what new laws the MPs are passing. Are they really working or not? Are they making reforms or not? I think the parliament matters more than government, because the latter will follow the laws set by the parliament."
(Female, Monastir, 27, student)*

Given this fundamental interest in the functioning of their parliament, it is not surprising that respondents also want to be kept informed of the work that parliament does. In fact, considering that most do not feel their parliament has been addressing their needs as citizens, there is perhaps a heightened state of interest in wanting to know what their parliament is doing moving forward. It seems a trust gap has emerged and respondents expressed that the only way to restore any of this trust is to make sure they are kept aware of what is going on.

When specifically asked how they feel MPs should keep them informed of what is happening in parliament, respondents insist that greater direct contact and interaction

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with citizens should be a priority. In every session, respondents insisted that MPs were very engaged and visible during the election campaign but that afterwards, they became distant and inaccessible.

"They should leave their offices and get in touch with the citizens wherever they are; in shops, etc." (Male, Tunis, 50, employed)

"They should interact with the different administrations and citizens. They should also watch the situation, offices and delegations closely and make sure services are O.K." (Male, Tunis, 42, employed)

"MPs are always present in TV programs. I think that they should have their own offices to interact with people. Hence parliament sessions will revolve around the information and ideas they collected from the citizens. They should also have their own blogs to receive people's inquiries and suggestions. They should also work with volunteering teams from civic society organizations." (Male, Tunis, 48, unemployed)

"First, we voted for MPs representing our region; where are they now? I don't know any of them. I worked so hard in order to support them and I hesitated more than once but was keen on supporting them. Should we have intermediaries between us and them? Should it still be the same situation? Should we have representatives representing the representatives? Would this be more logical? MPs should be in direct contact with the people who voted for them. They should meet with people in their regions. They should leave their offices and meet with people from time to time. They should listen to the youth both employed and jobless. At least, even if there are no concrete achievements, the voices of people are heard and their interests are conveyed to the government. In this way, MPs would gain more public trust. They should not hide avoiding people. Many of them move out of the city generally to Sokra. Even when they come for a visit to their hometowns, they come as VIPs and not as members of the same community. But, since I don't want to be pessimistic, I would say I still have some hope in them." (Woman, Monastir, 42, employed)

"MPs should pay site visits to their regions in order to listen to the concerns of the people there and this may happen through direct meetings with the people. They should pay attention to all details: major and minor." (Woman, Monastir, 51, employed)

"Forums, meetings, the media. The parliament should not only work for its own interests; instead, the MPs should come into direct contact with the people since they represent the people. If I represent 20 persons, I should listen to them. MPs should come and listen to the needs and concerns of the people and also the suggestions they want to make. MPs should be more sociable and meet people in the streets." (Male, Sfax, 26, employed)

"Organize dialogue circles in every governorate to serve as a liaison where MPs from my region for example would come for a meeting with the civil society in a session like

this one and talk about the situation of the country and exchange ideas and information.” (Female, Kairouan, 30, unemployed)

“Only during the elections they do so to attract you and me. I think they should do like what Britain did when they were questioning Tony Blair. They should bring normal citizens and an MP from every governorate and let the people ask the MPs about their work.” (Male, Kairouan, 22, unemployed)

III. Decentralization and Local Governance

As noted in this report's preface, local elections are Tunisia's next step towards elected, representative governance at all levels. For the first time in their history, Tunisians will democratically elect the municipal and regional councilors whose decisions directly impact their communities. The government has prepared legislation that will create a framework for the decentralization process, which was submitted to parliament. The *Code des collectivités locales* [Law on local authorities] is expected to grant new prerogatives to heads of municipalities and to municipal and regional councils. A part of the discussion in each session focused on this important decentralization process.

This research helped establish a baseline understanding of the decentralization process in Tunisia. Nearly all respondents feel they have a low understanding of what decentralization means for them, their region and for Tunisia. Some are aware that a decentralization process is underway, but that often represents the extent of their knowledge. Even among those who claim they understand decentralization, many provide vague and inaccurate explanations when they are asked to describe the process and what it means for Tunisia and the regions.

To enable respondents to have an informed discussion and opinion of decentralization, the moderator provided the following basic explanation of the process: *Decentralization is a government planning process which transfers some of the central government's prerogatives and powers to regional and local jurisdictions.* The moderator then provided respondents with a sheet of paper that listed the prerogatives being considered for local councils according to the draft version of the *Law on local authorities*. Without this extra layer of information, respondents would not have been able to form an opinion on the impact decentralization could have on them, their region, or their country.

After receiving this information from the moderator,, respondents were not only able to better understand what decentralization represents in general but also they were able to clearly establish priorities and voice any concerns they might have about the process. By and large, respondents reacted in a positive way to the possibility of having their region become more, if not entirely, responsible for all the prerogatives presented. The prerogatives that respondents want their local council to prioritize the most were the collection of garbage and the repair and maintenance of roads, walkways, and utilities owned by the municipality.

The next level of priorities tended to focus on the environment and on employment, more specifically: managing green spaces, ridding the region of sources of pollution, ensuring the labor market can meet employer human resource needs, and introducing initiatives to encourage job creation. The various other prerogatives, while not entirely void of value in the eyes of respondents, were widely seen as less of a priority compared to other items.

What are the priorities that local councils should tackle in your region?

Most important

- collect housing garbage and sort it out in case of need
- fix and build roads, walkways, gardens, and utilities owned by the municipality

Very important

- manage gardens and green spaces, decorate the city and get rid of sources of pollution from the public road
- follow up of labor market in the region and introduce initiatives to encourage job creation

Somewhat important

- guarantee health prevention, cleanliness and environmental protection
- clean the roads, public spaces and maintain state roads passing through the municipality
- make and support professional training plans to help youth employment
- clean and fix sewage and related infrastructures
- take care of the elderly and homeless

Less important

- organize and strengthen public and school transportation and improve their services
- equipment and establishments related to the disposal of rain water and protection from floods
- implementation of all municipal markets, shops, commercial and cultural events and slaughterhouses
- make decisions related to the municipality buildings, its properties, naming spaces, streets, gardens...
- manage coastal line belonging to the municipality and manage it according to legislation and measures

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The particular focus on garbage collection was consistent across all focus groups. Respondents expressed that this should not only be a priority because of its direct impact on the health of citizens and communities, but also because it is widely seen as a public service that has become increasingly neglected by municipalities.

The list of prerogatives did leave some respondents concerned about whether or not it was realistic to expect the municipalities to take on these responsibilities. As hopeful as respondents wanted to be, the fact that municipalities already struggle to effectively deliver on basic public services left a good number of respondents skeptical about the feasibility of the proposed prerogatives and of decentralization in general. The biggest concern was with respect to budget and resources – that unless the reallocation of responsibilities was also accompanied by adequate funding, the process of decentralization was doomed to fail. A few were also worried that local corruption might impede the effective roll-out of decentralization.

The skeptics in the group were compelled to suggest that perhaps the list should be shortened so that municipalities remained focused; otherwise some prerogatives are likely to be ignored, mismanaged or underserved.

“This list is so long. The question is who is going to specify the budget designed for these prerogatives? Is it going to be the government or the local boards? For example, laying and cleaning dams is a huge responsibility and it needs a lot of money. It is very important to know who is going to lay the budget for all these prerogatives that need huge amounts of money. In this case, the government might escape its responsibility in specifying the budget leaving it to the local boards which would claim that their resources are limited and there would be no budget able to cope with all these prerogatives. So, citizens would be lost between the government and the local boards.” (Male, Kairouan, 62, retired)

“If municipalities could not assume their responsibility in cleaning the environment, how could they be able to do all this? Mentalities should be changed first.” (Male, Kairouan, 67, retired)

“There are some other important responsibilities that should be assumed by the municipalities. These include observing hygiene conditions in markets for example. Besides, putting an end to illegal construction and trade is another important responsibility of the municipality. It's total chaos now: all the streets have been invaded and there are no more pedestrian pavements. In addition, main roads are now full of garbage, which makes it hard for citizens to move from one place to another and the municipality is absent in all this.” (Male, Kairouan, 68, retired)

“I agree with everyone else. I personally think they should focus on two or three tasks, that they would do properly and don't give false promises.” (Woman, Sfax, 35, housewife)

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"It is already the responsibility of the municipality which hasn't done its basic duties like flattening the land and cleaning up so how can it take care of public transportation or old and helpless people?" (Male, Kairouan, 22, unemployed)

Even though many felt the list of prerogatives was already too long, a few respondents noted that some items could be added, including: addressing begging/street poverty; controlling merchant stands, street vendors and cafés; improving public lighting; increasing consumer protection; improving tax collection; attracting investment to the region; establishing youth clubs and associations; developing and improving housing; and better managing and improving sanitation in prisons.

Respondents were also provided a list of the means of citizen engagement mechanisms that could be used by the local councils in their decision making process. Reactions to this list were generally quite positive and some even felt that if this list is implemented, they would then be living in a truly democratic country.

When asked to identify the two or three means of engagement in which they would be the most interested, respondents were inclined to heavily favor those that empowered or gave a voice to citizens before decisions were taken by local councils.

The popularity of the various mechanisms is summarized below:

<p>Most interested in:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult civil society and citizens, and inform them prior to making decisions related to public policies, development plans, and meetings of local councils • Keep a register of citizen opinions (could be computerized) containing the remarks, propositions and complaints
<p>A lot of interest in:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize referendums to consult citizens • Online publication and posting on walls of local councils after taking decisions • Local council meetings are open to the public
<p>Some interest in:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to reports, projects, and contracts • The creation of an obligatory permanent commission related to the participatory democracy and open governance within the municipal councils
<p>Marginal or limited interest in:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication of citizens' opinions to local councils via emails and letters • The possibility of having 10 percent of voters audit and question local councils

Among the various mechanisms presented, respondents tended to be the most concerned with the possibility of local council meetings being open to the public. As

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much as this would promote transparency and accessibility, there was some concern that it is not likely to be very practical or productive. There was concern that attendance would be difficult to control and that these meetings are likely to be very chaotic.

Some respondents had additional suggestions:

Youth suggested:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have a toll-free service• Send SMS messages to citizens updating them on initiatives and decisions• Allow citizens to provide feedback via SMS• Use regular email and the Internet to contact the MP• Create "open spaces" on the Internet similar to OpenGov.com
Men suggested:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish an office dedicated to citizen relations where any citizen can go• Create a mobile app or a web portal to allow citizens to communicate directly with the municipality• Create neighborhood committees
Women suggested:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grant radio airtime to local councils to inform citizens• Create a citizen whistleblower program to denounce other citizens safely• Use TV, Facebook, and SMS messages to communicate messages

With the benefit of the list of prerogatives and of the mechanisms of engagement, respondents were mostly inclined to believe that decentralization will have a positive impact on Tunisia, on their region and on themselves.

- In some of the first sessions, respondents were asked whether there would be any benefits to decentralization *before* seeing the list of prerogatives and mechanisms of engagement. Compared to the sessions where benefits were explored after seeing these lists, respondents were much more reserved in their opinions and were much less likely to appreciate the full potential of decentralization. Clearly just a little bit of information can go a long way in advancing understanding and appreciation of the decentralization process.

The most common benefit noted by respondents was the greater potential for regional needs to be met. Instead of blanket policies being applied uniformly throughout the country, respondents felt that municipalities would be able to cater to what each individual region needs and be much more responsive to evolving needs. Respondents also believe that they will be much more involved in important decisions taken in their region and will have more access to decision makers since these individuals will reside in the region rather than in far-off Tunis. Finally, many in areas outside Tunis also seemed to be under the impression that more public services would become conveniently available locally and that they would no longer need to travel to Tunis for these services. Similarly, respondents in Tunis seemed to think that fewer Tunisians in the

regions would travel to Tunis to access these services, leading to decreased congestion in the capital.

IV. Economy

The economy is a topic that all respondents were eager to discuss. As noted above in this report, participants feel that the dire state of their economy is one of the main reasons, if not the main reason, they feel their country is headed in the wrong direction.

When asked to use a single word to describe the current economic situation in Tunisia, respondents almost unanimously used negative terms such as "very weak," "in crisis," "very bad," "in an abyss," "suffering," "deteriorated," "catastrophic," and "may God help us." There is also general agreement that the economy is worse today than it was a year ago although some participants feel it is just as bad today as it was a year ago. Only a minority of respondents feel that the economy has improved, a sentiment that is mostly supported by a sense that tourism has improved (which was more likely to be noted in Monastir) and that prices for some products have come down.

Ironically, many seem to feel that the economic situation in their specific region is better compared to other parts of the country. Respondents in Monastir were most likely to feel their region is doing better compared to other parts of the country and compared to last year, largely because of improvements in tourism. Respondents in Sfax were mildly more positive whereas those in Tunis seemed to feel that things were not necessarily better in the capital than in other parts of the country. Kairouan respondents stood apart from those in other cities by the fact that many feel their region is in worse economic shape compared to Tunisia in general, largely because of the plight of agriculture in their region.

The discussion around the state and direction of the economy revolved primarily around unemployment and inflation. For a few, the foreign debt that the country is accumulating is depressing their overall view of the economy and for a few others, the growth in the parallel economy is the greatest concern.

If the government is acting on these issues, participants have not taken note. Only a select few mentioned hearing about any specific actions the government has taken to suggest it is focused on improving the economy. Actions include: controlling the price of certain products and commodities; catching smugglers; building walls to control the parallel economy; and undertaking some efforts to improve access to loans to start projects or businesses.

Respondents were vocal when asked to specify strategies they feel their government could consider to improve the economy. Some of the more common ideas included:

- **Improving Access to loans:** Many participants complained that it is too difficult to obtain a loan from a bank to start a new project or business. They suggested

programs that would allow easier access to loans and ones that were more lenient in terms of the delay allowed to pay them back.

- **Youth Employment Programs:** Some suggested that it should be easier for youth to start their own projects or that training programs be more readily available and affordable for youth to acquire skills that are in demand.
- **Contain or Eliminate the Parallel Economy:** As entrenched as the parallel economy is in the Tunisian economy, many participants agreed that it poses a general threat to the economic health of their country and even a threat to their security since it invites or encourages terrorism and violence. Respondents do not tend to have sophisticated solutions to combat the parallel economy – for them, it is mostly a matter of creating legitimate employment opportunities to redirect people away from illegal ones. A few respondents suggested improving salaries so that legitimate jobs become more appealing compared to illegitimate ones. Participants also suggest greater enforcement at customs, stronger punishment for smugglers, and additional mechanisms for combatting corruption in general since corruption is supporting the parallel economy and vice versa.

“I don't think you got me, supermarkets are complaining about Souk Libya, nobody is buying anything from them anymore, and everybody goes to Souk Libya.” (Woman, Sfax, 61, housewife)

- **Make Tunisia More Appealing for Investors:** Some respondents argue that combatting corruption and terrorism should make the country more appealing for Tunisian and foreign investors. Participants feel there is too much risk and uncertainty within the current investment environment, as well as too much bureaucracy, which are significant deterrents to investment.
- **Greater Focus and Expertise:** Some participants also feel that their government does not have any particular focus or clear priorities, especially related to improving the economy. They also feel that decisionmakers could benefit from the advice of economic experts.

Respondents do not feel that employment mechanisms like temporary work or SIVP are useful or practical solutions to assuage unemployment. They expressed that these mechanisms are degrading, only generate very weak salaries, provide no social coverage is, and result in delayed and inconsistent payment. Many referred to these mechanisms as “band-aid” solutions or stopgaps aimed at appeasing Tunisians.

V. Corruption

The general sentiment that best summarizes how Tunisians feel about corruption is that there is a moral crisis in Tunisia.

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As noted above in this document, focus group respondents described how corruption is omnipresent; it has become increasingly common and so established that many fear that it will never be overcome. These few comments from men in Monastir summarize some of the key issues related to corruption:

"In the past, corruption existed and tried to infiltrate public institutions. Now, corruption is widespread in public institutions. It has even infiltrated the parliament, the ministries, and the administrations. This is something that we cannot deny. It has even a say and has an impact on decision making. When we can observe corrupt business people in the parliament, I cannot imagine that they would pass laws that would put in danger their interests. Everyone knows them by the way." (Male, Monastir, 41, employed)

"This year corruption is worse and the coming year it will worsen. It is a virus that is spreading." (Male, Monastir, 38, employed)

"One employee plainly asked me to give him a bribe if I wanted to get a service. I took the documents, tore them apart and left. In this case, I was not obliged to give a bribe, but in the previous case I had no choice." (Male, Monastir, 60, employed)

Some of the areas where respondents say they have noticed or experienced corruption in their everyday lives include in healthcare, in the judicial sector, with the police, in public administration in general, in interacting with employers who feel they can hire and fire as they see fit, and at customs.

"It impacts too much when there is injustice, i.e. when injustice is done to you but you have to give a bribe nevertheless. For example, when I respect the traffic lights but a policeman says "you didn't mind the red light" I say "I swear by Allah..." and he says "so now you are sinning. You swear on a lie", so I have to give that 10 or 20d to get away." (Male, Sfax, 56, employed)

"You can't do anything without bribes in all the institutions. If you mind giving a bribe, the person in charge would turn it against you, i.e. he would say you wanted to bribe him." (Male, Sfax, 45, employed)

"Corruption unfortunately affected all sectors in Tunisia. I remember when my sister was about to deliver her baby, so I took her to the hospital. The problem was that the midwife, whose job is to help her deliver the baby, asked for 50TD while it's her job! Or else she would let her suffer. Besides, when I went to Algeria, I was asked by the Tunisian customs to pay 30TD in order to be able to cross the borders." (Male, Tunis, 32, employed)

"I contacted CNAM. I couldn't get a document I needed, so I bought the clerk a packet of cigarettes and everything was OK." (Male, Tunis, 43, employed)

*"Sometimes, they accuse the passers of committing violations that they did not do and this is for the sake of getting some money from them. The problem is that not all citizens are aware or cultivated; so, they surrender and accept to give bribery. These officers do also share the profits with their bosses. In addition, as to what relates to the judicial sector, cases are being bought and sold. Actually, there are people specialized in this. So, in case these two sectors are not fixed, corruption can never be put to an end."
(Male, Kairouan, 68, retired)*

"If there is corruption in all the administrations, the first thing it would impact upon is employment. I am talking about bribery for example. If we present ourselves for a contest examination for instance, they know beforehand who is going to succeed so I get tired; I waste money to present my papers in vain. It's very much so that I have become afraid of presenting myself for contest examinations because of the expenses like the stamps and papers I have to provide." (Female, Monastir, 31, student)

Corruption, according to respondents, pervades the economy, the political arena and even personal and national security. Respondents are convinced that corruption is rife at the highest levels of both parliament and the government. In terms of security, the greatest concern is with respect to police forces who seem to have lost the trust of most citizens.

Respondents are eager to see steps taken to combat corruption even if there is a growing sense of despair surrounding any potential for success on this front. For most participants, the solution involves punishing the corrupt, although most respondents realize the irony in wanting to enforce punishments when the enforcers are also corrupt (according to respondents).

Other strategies to combat corruption suggested by respondents include:

- Develop some form of public or online shaming whereby average citizens would audio and/or video record corruption in action and these recordings could be posted online or sent to the media;
- Publicize through mass media those found guilty of corruption to dissuade others;
- Increase oversight or supervision in public institutions;
- Hold a new election to replace "those at the top" or to "replace all the politicians";
- Undertake another revolution;
- Encourage fellow Tunisians to refuse to pay the bribes;
- Raise children to be more ethical;
- Create a new special task force, special agents, or police unit to combat corruption;

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- Create an anonymous whistleblowing program for citizens;
- Remove professions/titles from ID cards so that others cannot use this information to solicit bribes;
- Increase salaries in some sectors so that they become less dependent on bribes;
- Encourage a "citizen informer" mentality;
- Introduce random visits by managers in public institutions to keep employees on alert;
- Reduce the power syndicates/ unions have in defending corrupt employees;
- Increase the power or scope of civil society organizations to better investigate corruption.

APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

- **139 total respondents** from Greater Tunis, Kairouan, Monastir, Sfax
- **Up to 12 respondents** per group
- **Diversity** of ages, professions and neighborhoods within each group

Gender	Count
Female	74
Male	65
Age	Count
25-34	49
+35	90
Profession	Count
Employed	87
Unemployed	16
Retired	10
Homemaker	18
Student	8
Education	Count
University	81
Secondary	33
Primary	22
None	3