



## FEEDBACK LOOPS AND BRIDGING DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE FROM ABOVE AND FROM BELOW:

THE CASE OF TUNISIA, 2011–2021

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# About the Author

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# Abstract

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The paper begins with a discussion of the scholarship on democratic resilience and on transformative collective resilience, building up to a conceptualization of ‘democratic resilience from below’. It then turns to the empirical analysis of the Tunisian case, briefly setting the scene with an overview of the political turbulence in Tunisia since July 2021. To illustrate the argument, the paper draws on extensive fieldwork in Tunisia since summer 2021,[1] showcasing two (sometimes overlapping) sets of examples from civil society: street protests, on issues ranging from Palestine to pollution to Gen Z.; and defiant, pro-democracy and rights-based activism by organized civil society organizations in the face of state crackdowns. In this vein, the paper explores the nexus between state-led (‘from above’) and community-based (‘from below’) resilience, mapping the feedback dynamics that tie them together.

## Introduction

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How do feedback loops bridge resilience initiatives from above and from below in the Arab setting? Democratic resilience remains under-researched in such a setting pre and post the 2011 revolutions. In an attempt to understand this problematic with special reference to Tunisia, the article considers the co-dependence of resilience from above and from below. In so doing, it looks at how ‘feedback loops’ bridge top-down and bottom-up resilience initiatives, which ideally create a dynamic, a two-way flow of information that aligns institutional resources with local realities. Institutional frameworks ‘from above’ provide critical policy support, data and legislation, while community-led actions ‘from below’ offer real-time, context-specific insights and lived experiences. When effective feedback loops are established, as in the Tunisian example in the context of incipient democratization launched in 2011, local successes and challenges are continuously communicated upward to reshape and refine policies and pressure state response. This continuous cycle of engagement transforms resilience into an integrated whole. This ensures that governance is forced to remain grounded while grassroots pressure, demands and even solutions gain the state support needed for long-term sustainability.

Democratization and democracy promotion have slipped down the agenda for both global and local stakeholders. Much of the attention in MENA taking shape under the second Trump administration is focused on the serial war conflagrations that have erupted or intensified in the wake of October 2023. The genocide in Gaza and wars in Lebanon and Iran have upended the landscape of regional and global politics, alongside continuing conflicts in Yemen and Sudan. Democracy and its setbacks, the focal point of much analysis in the early years after the 2011 popular Arab uprisings/revolutions, has for years been sliding from scholarly and even policy interest. Yet the widening democratic lacunae across the Arab geography means that people face compounded threats not only to their security and livelihoods, but also their political freedoms and public existence. Precarity afflicts the region’s peoples not only in the form of war, but also in the shape of resurgent authoritarianism. Analyzing democratic erosion solely through a top-down lens risks treating the public as passive bystanders; incorporating a bottom-up perspective reveals how, despite societal polarization and pockets of illiberalism, there is grassroots resistance against authoritarianism such as in Tunisia since July 2021.

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[1] During fieldwork stays in Tunisia since the ‘self-coup’, I engaged in participant observation (e.g. street protests and academic workshops) and interviews, in addition to collecting other written primary and secondary data (e.g. local newspapers and Tunisian-authored books). Stays include summer 2021; May 2022; summer 2022; summer 2023; October–November 2024; June 2025; and January 2026.



Drawing on Korosteleva's (2025) work on transformative collective resilience and the emerging literature on democratic resilience, the paper suggests that in Tunisia, there are hints of *democratic resilience from below*. In street protests and in actions by (more or less organized) civil society actors, critics of President Kais Saied's new political regime enact various forms of resistance *against* resurgent authoritarianism and *for* restoration of the country's short-lived democratic institutions. Years into Tunisia's 'Third Republic', these democracy advocates remain relatively feeble, vastly outnumbered and out-powered by the state where political power is concentrated in the hands of the President. Yet, their expressions of resistance may be the seeds of a burgeoning democratic resilience from below.

## Democratic 'resilience from below'

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It is not just citizens and (opposition) policymakers but scholars, too, who have grappled with democratic retrenchment around the world over the past several years. This growing body of research takes up the problems of backsliding in (mostly Western liberal) stable democracies. Have such setbacks been reversed, and if so, how? This question is explored in a recent scholarly turn to 'democratic resilience'. The latest in democratic theory (Holloway & Mainwaring 2023), this burgeoning literature investigates the ways in which actors and institutions in liberal democracies from the United States to Germany counteract, with varying degrees of success, top-down de-democratization policies put in place by elected executives, such as media censorship, hand-selected judiciaries, and other extensions of executive power. Merkel, for instance, conceptualizes democratic resilience as the ability of a democracy to "absorb external challenges and internal stressors" through "dynam[i]c adapt[ation]" that does not compromise the "defining principles, functions and norms" of democracy, or fall into regime change (2023, 3). Resilience manifests at different degrees, depending on the pushback against challenges to constitutional powers, party systems, civil society, and the overall political community (Merkel 2023).

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***...civil society might be at least partially culpable for democratic backsliding that exhibits a "failure of collective action"***

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Investigated at the level of institutions (Volacu & Aligica 2023), democratic resilience can be activated (or observed) at one of two stages: the beginning of democratic decline, or, more regressively, democratic breakdown (Boese et al. 2021). Some scholars argue that the case for democratic resilience is an over-stated 'myth', arguing that those regimes that managed to make a 'U-turn' from de-democratization did not undergo full restoration to the same level of pre-backsliding democracy (Bianchi et al. 2025). Bunce et al. (2024) emphasize dynamism and contingency in their cross-regional examination of de-democratization and democratic resilience. They make an important observation that seems relevant to the Arab region: civil society actors can be agents of resilience *or* of autocratization (Beissinger 2024). In fact, civil society might be at least partially culpable for democratic backsliding that exhibits a "failure of collective action," perhaps by giving more weight to "personal gain" than the "public good" (Beissinger 2024, 203). Merkel agrees, noting that civil society, at least in the Western cases he examines, "sometimes tend to deepen the already existing cleavages in society" and exacerbate political polarization (2026, 479). However, civil society has an important role to play, by overcoming the various identitarian divides in politics and strengthening the "communal sense of social belonging" (Merkel 2026, 480). The damage wrought by civil society in cases of democratic backsliding, then, speaks to its potential as a force of democratic resilience—alongside political parties, and within existing democratic political institutions. A democratic political culture can also be propagated by civil society, whose actors engage in democratic learning (of civic values and practices) and unlearning (of authoritarian values and practices) (Sadiki 2020). In their resilience capacity index, Croissant and Lott (2025) consider the "robustness of civil society," active in disseminating "democratic values and attitudes" in society, a key factor in offsetting "external shocks and internal challenges" to democracy. This in turn enhances the capacity for resilience in society (Croissant and Lott 2025, 10).

It is likely no accident that the literature on democratic resilience spotlights mostly ‘Third Wave’ democratizers, in addition to long-standing democracies such as the United States. The Arab world appeared to be on the cusp of major democratic transition in 2011, and then 2019, as millions took to the streets demanding freedom, dignity, and social justice. To the great precarity of the region’s peoples, counterrevolutionary forces, sometimes aided by Western governments, led these countries back to military rule (e.g. Egypt, Algeria), supported superficial reforms in otherwise authoritarian monarchies (e.g. Jordan, Morocco) or indirectly abetted the freefall into multi-sided, internationalized wars (e.g. Libya, Yemen, Sudan). In Syria, where the stunning collapse of the Assad regime appears to have been carefully managed by regional and international powers (Iran, Turkey, Russia, the US), a murderous dynasty has been deposed. Whether democracy will take root in its stead is yet to be determined. (The signs are not promising.) Out of all these Arab countries whose vibrant publics apparently surprised the world with their insistence on liberty, it was only in Tunisia that the democratic experiment lasted all of ten years. Hence, the resilience of democratic institutions, or of political parties which stand up to dictators with the protection of the rule of law, is almost a moot point in the Arab setting.

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***Democratic resilience in a country such as Tunisia is potentially observable from below, at the level of collective struggles in civil society***

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Meaningful democratic institutional pedigree is almost non-existent in the Arab world. But popular agency is. Protest politics and challenges to authoritarian rule extend back at least 150 years, to pre-colonial times (Sadiki & Saleh 2024a). In contemporary parlance, the struggle for freedom is (more or less) coterminous with democratic activism. Here lies the crux of adaptation to the concept of democratic resilience. Democratic resilience in a country such as Tunisia is potentially observable from below, at the level of collective struggles in civil society. Human beings have a remarkable tendency not just to resist, but to regenerate and even self-govern, as Elena Korosteleva points out in her new book (2025). She notes how external and internal crises, from environmental catastrophes to wars and suffocating dictatorships, can be tipping points that activate the *collective resilience* of various communities. Korosteleva’s emphasis on the ‘relational’ and ‘community’ aspect of resilience is perfectly relevant for our interest in democratic struggles, which are after all political and thus collective. For her, resilience is a “sense of togetherness, common good, a communion of purpose, woven into the fabric of relations and care, giv[ing] rise to a new poetics of life” (Korosteleva 2025, 45). Resilience is not just about survival or adaptation; it is about transformation, in confronting crisis. It flowers among “communities of relations.” From the family to civil society, for her community is a group with certain commonalities such as “a specific locality, culture, behaviour, norms, institutions”, and most relevantly, a “shared vision’ and a commitment to uphold that shared way of life” (Korosteleva, 2025, 63–4).

These features of resilience are captured by the concept of ‘transformative resilience’ and are on display in Tunisia’s anti-authoritarian struggles. First is the emphasis on *immaterial sources* and manifestations of resilience: cultural, religious, and historical forms of knowledge. This includes the historical memory and experiential adaptations of earlier ‘protestscapes’, from the student movement to the country’s famed syndicalists (Sadiki & Saleh 2024a). Second is the *local* dimension of practices and relations of resilience. Just as democratic knowledge necessarily emanates from the locale (Sadiki 2015a), people in Belarus, Ukraine, or Russia will not exhibit resilience in the same manner, or with the same resources, as those in Tunisia with its post-colonial history and Arabo-Islamic culture. Third, Korosteleva differentiates between resilient states (e.g. relatively stable and ‘closed’ authoritarian regimes) and societies, who attempt to ‘recalibrate’ and create new realities (2025, 59–60). This is the bottom-up space for social, cultural, and political manoeuvring that (civil) society carves out for itself. Finally, Korosteleva expounds on the political trajectory that collective resilience can take. Resilience is “about transformation” and not just ‘adaptation’ in a “world of becoming” (2025, 58). Communities of relations can, bound by a common understanding of the ‘good life’ and propelled by the cognition and affect to change their world, rise from ‘personhood’ to ‘peoplehood’ to pursue a political project (2025, 123–7).

According to this paper, the ‘transformative’ dimension of democratic resilience from below in Tunisia is the effort to counteract the authoritarian bent of the President’s political project, acting against the ‘disempowerment’ of precarity, rendering ‘vulnerability’ a common state where authoritarianism compounds socio-economic uncertainty. Democratic resilience from below is the collective enactment of agency to resist repression and/or defy restrictions on civic space, political participation, and civic-political freedoms. These acts may or may not be explicitly critical of executive aggrandizement through denouncement of particular policies, such as the ‘fake news’ law Decree 54, or Decree 117 in which the President allotted himself near-unlimited powers. Alternatively, enactments of democratic resilience from below may object to particular situations of precarity, such as the environment, by daring to protest in public space despite the risks. In its various guises, Korosteleva writes, peoplehood, even if not apparently successful, “set[s] the ‘wheel’ in motion, towards a new status quo, and new power arrangements” (2025, 125). Thus, one caveat is in order. The paper does not intend to exaggerate the unfolding pattern of democratic resilience in Tunisian civil society. There are no clear signs, at the time of writing, that the President will relinquish his overblown powers, or even abide by the two-term constitutional limit and opt out of the presidential contest in 2029. Democratic resilience from below remains incipient, enacted by the country’s civil society and (opposition) political elites who cannot claim to have the power of ‘the street’ behind them. Still, we regard these hints of democratic resilience worth exploring in this and future research.

## Tunisians vs. authoritarianism (again)

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### BACKGROUND: SELF-COUP AND ITS AFTERMATH

Students and observers of Arab politics recognize the specificity of the Tunisian case. It was in this small, otherwise geopolitically unobtrusive North African country that the ‘Arab Spring’ broke out. A street vendor set himself alight, sacrificing his life in what would become memorialized objection to a precarious life stripped of dignity and freedom. Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation carried the revolutionary flame across the region, and Tunisia’s dictator Ben Ali fled in the dark of night on 14 January 2011. A decade of rapid democratic institution-building enthused (many) citizens and excited scholars of Arab democracy and authoritarianism. A new political elite (and some from the old guard) pulled off a series of free and fair elections: a National Constituent Assembly in 2011; presidential and parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2019; municipal elections in 2018. The country’s democratic constitution, ratified in 2014, was delayed but celebrated nonetheless. Yet a combination of economic stagnation, high unemployment, and regional under-development (especially in the country’s interior and south) ensured rising frustration among Tunisians. Political polarization and in-fighting further deepened the chasm between ruling elites and the voting public. It was in this toxic milieu, during the COVID-19 pandemic which exacted a devastating death toll in a country with retrograde health infrastructure, that President Kais Saied froze parliament and arrested the Prime Minister on 25 July 2021 (Sadiki and Saleh 2023, 19–20). Invoking Article 80 of the Constitution, the President cited ‘imminent danger’ in justifying his coup. In September 2021, he passed Decree 117, granting him rule by decree. Since then, he has installed a new constitution (via a referendum in 2022) and a new parliament (elected in late 2022/2023). Dozens of judges have been sacked, and independent constitutional commissions (e.g. against corruption) have been shut down, or co-opted by Saied supporters (e.g. the ‘independent’ election commission). He himself was re-elected (after jailing more than one rival candidate) in October 2024. In the meantime, political parties have been shut out of the new system, dozens of opposition politicians and journalists languish in prison, and civil society faces severe crackdowns. V-Dem considers Tunisia’s democratization ‘episode’ to have ended in 2023. Elections between 2022 and 2024 were “designed to legitimize Saied’s rule and were boycotted by most parties” (V-Dem 2026, 28). Within this perilous political environment, some citizens occasionally but consistently come together to resist the new re-autocratized order. Here slight indications of democratic resilience from below can be spotted. However, grassroots resilience remains limited without corresponding institutional resilience, as shall be argued below.

## Resilience from above and below: The feedback loop

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The foregoing discussion has sought to frame resilience from below not to be a total fix. It ignores how deeply state and societal resilience echo one another. In this vein, the argument advanced above may be considered fallacious for pitching ‘resilience from below’ as a standalone cure in settings of de-democratization as in the case of Tunisia. Doing so completely misses the dynamic of co-extensiveness and co-dependence in that communal resilience and state resilience do not operate in a vacuum. Top-down structures and bottom-up agency engineer recovery via feedback loops that enable grassroots societal resilience and state frameworks to be mutually reinforcing.

To an extent, pre-2021 Tunisia offered a fledgeling example of a rare Arab Spring policy in which citizen resilience and state resilience did not compete. Rather, they fuelled each other. This dynamic may be referred to as a form a continuous feedback loop whereby a newly emancipated and resilient society helped construct a resilient state, and vice versa. Indeed, in pre-2021 Tunisia, state and society did not always smoothly work in tandem, producing what might be described as a polarized democratization process, featuring at once intense friction and institutional breakthroughs. Nonetheless, a vibrant civil society and new electoral laws enabled remarkable consensus building at critical moments despite a degree of economic stagnation and deep state–society friction. The specific institutional milestones during that democratic window included the following: 1) three democratic and competitive legislative elections in 2011 (to elect the National Constituent Assembly), 2014, and 2019; 2) two multi-candidate presidential elections in 2014 and 2019, producing orderly and legal transfers of power; 3) a general referendum on a democratic constitution, which was promulgated in January 2014, creating separate powers to the president and the National Assembly; 4) a multiparty landscape with dozens of registered political parties.

This reciprocal resonance between societal and state resilience partly rendered the relationship complementary—and not binary. Thus, a feedback loop was at play. In practical terms, throughout the course of democratic openings (2011–2021), the loosening of formerly authoritarian state controls enabled newly empowered political parties, independent media, trade unions, citizen-led digital platforms, women’s groups (e.g. Femmes Démocrates, Boukhatia 2021) as part of an increasingly proactive civil society organizations, to carve out a margin of existence. Within this margin via legally sanctioned and protected networks, citizens were able to speak back to the state and parliament and enabled channels of uncensored communication for voicing views on political issues of the day, lobbying National Assembly deputies—decision-makers for key reforms in education, employment and regional development—whilst at the same time criticizing policy that opposed the 2011 revolution’s demands for dignity and freedom. The newly found resilience, so to speak, made sense in a democratizing setting in which civil and political liberties were instrumental in the creation of real-time public feedback loops on government performance. This was one key rupture with the pre-2011 revolution authoritarian period. Several publics put digital networks to good use in the documentation and publicization of injustices, corruption cases and even consumer matters involving unfair trading. The resulting feedback loops forced an unprecedented level of people-led accountability. Civil society initiated public meetings and forms of bottom-up consultations, particularly around police brutality (e.g. the 2018 ‘Taallam Oum’ or ‘Learn How to Swim’ movement (See Sadiki & Saleh 2024a, 346) mobilized against police brutality) [2] investigation of two political assassinations, and economic rights (e.g. ‘Kamour movement’ for rights to employment in the southern oil fields—see Sadiki 2021).

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[2] This followed the drowning of a football fan named Omar Labidi following clashes between security forces and youth. Police in pursuit on the edge of a river ignored the 19-year-old man’s protestations that he did not know how to swim to which officers responded “learn to swim”. Consequently, the young man ended up in water, tragically and unnecessarily dying.

A noteworthy example of a knowledge/learning loop in the domain of reinforcing inclusive bargaining and civil trust was facilitated by the Tunisia's National Dialogue Quartet, winner of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize (Sadiki, 10 October 2015) for building democracy and pluralism.[3] The dialogic feedback loop for civil rights through civic mediation and conflict resolution helped anchor legal protections against all kinds of transgressions by state apparatuses into the 2014 democratic constitution. A prominent organization with a track record second to none in the entire Arab region is the NGO the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), a by-product of the normative upgrade of activism immediately after the 2011 revolution. It has successfully enabled continuous feedback and knowledge loops, bridging grassroots social activism with structural public policy analysis. It has carved a niche for its fight for social and transitional justice through focus on regional/geographic and communal socio-economic inequalities (FTDES 2026). Its forte is the skill of investigating and presenting raw field-level grievances into data-driven advocacy. The feedback loops connecting societal and state resilience constitute the most visible stamp of the democratization period (2011–2021). A plethora of formidable non-state actors with vast know-how, constituency and a history of anti-authoritarian struggle paved the way for a productive synergy between resilience from below and resilience from above. The civic apparatus of that resilience was nurtured by the aforementioned organizations and the likes of the La Roujou3 ('No Return' or 'Never Again') national awareness campaign for transitional justice with Lawyers Without Borders, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD—see FIDH 2026), the Committee for the Respect of Freedom and Human Rights in Tunisia (CRLDHT), and the LTDH, the first human rights organization in the Arab world.

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***It was in the crucible of sacrifice by activists and civic bodies that public dissent successfully forced state course correction***

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Incipient democratization acted as a critical catalyst for Tunisia's institutional resilience. Thus, democratic transformation functioned as the 'glue' that stabilized and reproduced positive knowledge and feedback loops—themselves mediators of democratic learning—by induction of the civil and political societies into the practice of free information flow, and public scrutiny of systemic governance failures, response to public grievances, public participation and the relevance of institutional trust. However, the gains in terms of state resilience through these brands of feedback loops connecting state and society would not have been possible without the specific type of citizen-to-government feedback loops initiated during the struggles for democratic rights in the authoritarian period. It was in the crucible of sacrifice by activists and civic bodies that public dissent successfully forced state course correction (e.g. rescinding price hikes of bread in the 1980s) and even collapse in the 2011 revolution. However, it is in the reliance on democratic infrastructure, solidarity, and bargain skills that bottom-up resilience finds synergy with state resilience, working in tandem to regulate politics, aggregate demands, respond to public pressure, account for systemic failure and reproduce the system in its entirety.

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[3] It was made up of four key civil society organizations: The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT); The Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), The Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), and The Tunisian Order of Lawyers.



## Protesting (life under) authoritarianism

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In this exploration of democratic resilience in Tunisia, it is worth highlighting that the country's experiment with democratization (2011–2021) was kick-started by a popular revolution. That is, mass protest, tearing through the country's impoverished south (Sidi Bouzid) through the interior and up to the capital Tunis in the north, exploded into a revolution that pushed a long-standing dictator aside. Then came the flurry of elections, new (and old) political party competition, and arduous but eventually fruitful constitution drafting. This revolution in turn was preceded by over a century of 'protestscapes' in which Tunisians clamoured in the streets and went on strike in non-institutionalized, dissident modes of political participation. The historical memory, the 'pedagogy of struggle', and learned experience, of protest in Tunisia fed into continued protest in the years after the revolution, in response to particular issues of political contestation. Major episodes include constitutional framing of women's private/public roles (August 2013) to refusal of the Administrative Reconciliation Bill that spelled the death of the transitional justice process (2017), to the Kamour sit-ins demanding a share of oil wealth in marginalized southernmost Tataouine governorate (2017–2020), to the recurring, anti-systemic football ultras' protest/spectacles that were quelled neither by bans from stadium attendance nor the killing of young Omar Labidi (2018), and many others in between, including those mobilized by the country's largest labour union, the (always-politicized) General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT). Put another way, in the social imaginary (mikhyaal) and local repository (makhzun) (Sadiki 2015a) of Tunisian struggles for liberation—in contemporary terms, civic and democratic struggles—protest is a key practice in the anti-authoritarian arsenal.

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***One new phenomenon has been the Tunisian Gen-Z protests, featuring tech-savvy youth (some of them also football ultras) who situate themselves completely against the political (and perhaps social) status quo***

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The post-2021 political order in Tunisia has of course elevated the risks involved in public protest. Security forces have perfected the art of blocking access to the traditional sites of protests, namely Habib Bourguiba and the perpendicular Mohammed V Avenues, to an art. Waist-high street barricades have occupied, on and off, large sections of Habib Bourguiba Avenue, in addition to the unmistakable, ubiquitous presence of (plainclothes and uniformed) police lounging on their motorbikes all along the street. Yet protests have been persistently announced, planned for, and attended over the past five years, if not with the same frequency, momentum, or numbers as the decade prior. Some small routine protests are allowed to proceed undeterred, such as the near-weekly demonstrations in support of Palestine since October 2023, or some by unemployed university graduates. At times, however, police presence rivals or even outnumbers that of the protestors!

In the months after the self-coup, several protests were organized by the 'Salvation Front' (DW 2023). This coalition includes mostly members and supporters of the Islamist Ennahda party and their allies, such as Nejib and Issam Chebbi's longtime opposition Republican Party, and figures such as Chawki Tabib (former head of the Tunisian Bar Association) and Shaymaa Issa, now all in prison (Sadiki, 29 July 2026). Protests held in the name of the Salvation Front have petered off. Growing opposition to the coup, even among Tunisia's civil society and political elites, has not necessarily translated into cross-ideological cooperation (that is, willingness to join forces with Ennahda) in staging public demonstrations. Yet post-2021 political prisoners hail from across the ideological spectrum, from Ennahda to social democrats (Ghazi Chouachi of the Democratic Front) to its arch-rival leader of the re-branded political party of ousted dictator Ben Ali, Abir Moussi. Restrictions on civic space, including heavy police presence clearly meant to intimidate and deter participation, affect all and sundry. Thus, even in January (Al-Ayadi 2026, 3) and as late as April 2026, protest has drawn hundreds from civil and (opposition) political society decrying the political situation, bearing slogans like "oppression makes

revolution permissible.” One new phenomenon has been the Tunisian Gen-Z protests, featuring tech-savvy youth (some of them also football ultras) who situate themselves completely against the political (and perhaps social) status quo. These young people, deliberately leaderless, hold themselves apart from the full gamut of (opposition) political parties. Yet they too object to the restrictions on civil space, Decree 54, and overall clampdowns on freedom (Al-Zaghdoudi 2026). Like other ‘traditional’ oppositionists, they face security crackdowns, for instance, being chased by police in a protest on 14 January 2026 (the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution).

Not all protests are explicitly against the new authoritarianism in Tunisia. Some mini-movements pertain to regional issues, such as Palestine in the wake of the protracted genocide since October 2023 (Sadiki & Saleh 2024b). In the early months of the Gaza war, some anger was directed towards the (rubber-stamp) parliament’s blocking, reportedly at the behest of the President, a long-debated bill that would criminalize normalization (i.e., restoration of diplomatic ties) with Israel. These and other positions have made the President’s declarations of solidarity with Palestine and the new constitution’s insistence on Palestinian sovereignty seem perfunctory. For instance, large protests have been met with security repression in Tunisian universities in 2024 (Chakraoui 2026). Still, Tunisian activists have made a name for themselves, regionally and internationally, more than once organizing the global ‘Sumud’ Flotilla headed to Gaza in attempts to break the Israeli-imposed blockade. Delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza faces more than just Israeli obstacles, however. Leaders of the flotilla in Tunisia were arrested in March 2026. Even from prison, however, they choose to wage a double resistance. In mid-April, they waged a hunger strike, both in solidarity with Palestinian prisoners, and in defiance of being prisoners themselves (Kashf Media 2026). Other notable protests include the days-long mini-uprising in Gabes (a southern governorate) against pollution that causes suffocation, asthma, lung diseases, and even cancer, shortening lives and stripping away the right to health that erupted in October 2025 (Nawaat 2025). The Gabes protests brought attention to a long-festering problem in Tunisia, where industrialization has come at the price of clean environments and clean living, as in the phosphate basin that was the site of a pre-revolution uprising in 2009. Yet now, as then, official statements by the President and other policy makers have done little if anything to mitigate precarity and ensure the ‘dignity’ of Tunisian lives.

Not all protests are pro-democratic, of course. Demonstrations where popular anger was on full display, where slogans against elected parliament itself were chanted, or celebrations of the coup on the night of 25 July 2021, also take place in Tunisia. This dialectic, between street support for ‘strongman’ politics if not authoritarianism, and against the demolition of democracy, are not unique Tunisia. However, the paper has highlighted some examples of rights-based protest in Tunisia that persist despite the self-censorship and threats of imprisonment (and harassment) faced by anyone criticizing the President and his new order. These are significant markers of the protest ethos that has animated the many protestscapes dotting Tunisia’s modern history. Collective organizing, mobilizing, asserting and enacting public presence, in the direction of freedom and dignity, is no small feat. The transformative power of protest, in the examples briefly catalogued here, speaks to popular aspirations for lives liberated from the precarity of authoritarianism and marginalization. The tenacity of these various protestors, then, is a healthy sign for democracy watchers. The moral flame of political protest resists being extinguished. It proves resilient.

## GEOPOLITICAL OBSTACLES TO RESILIENCE

One perennial question concerns the extent to which strengthening democratic systems can practically draw upon deeply rooted Islamic values of collective strength. In other words, the potentiality of civic democratic resilience and local Islamic communal values to reinforce one another is yet to be tested in Arab settings, such as Tunisia where Islamists did not stay in power long enough. The potentiality remains unverified as definitive evidence has yet to materialize. Moreover, the latent capacity of Islamic teachings to galvanize social cohesion and resilience remains sequestered within foundational texts rather than realized in contemporary civic life. By placing action (*‘amal*) at the centre of inclusivity out of which Muslim becoming fulfils itself, the praxis of compassion and solidarity coming forth from within the community provides a medium to ensure self-regeneration (*tajdid*), socially, morally, intellectually, economically and even politically (Rahman 1982). In an ontological, spatial, and temporal sense, the community is invested in self-renewal by re-reading and re-interpreting the terms of the pact to be Muslim only through a shared purpose within and with a community of believers. Thus, the community is never complete but in a state of becoming. Its endurance is tested

continuously by its resourcefulness to, first, renew the primordial covenant (Lumbard 2015) to obey God and enact the Godly-sanctioned good (*khayr*) (God-community relationship founded on the absolute oneness of God) (Rahman 2009). Subsidiary to this covenant is one of human–human mutual shaping, dynamically interacting with the vicissitudes of life, obligating co-constitutive disposition of individuals and community or *jama 'ah* to uphold the ‘body-politic’ in which the practice of Godly ethics and commands permit interdependent existence of all. The Prophetic Tradition (*hadith*) makes use of the ‘body’ metaphor. It is an embodied framework expressing the moral structuring of the Muslim body-politic and explaining its worlding, religiously, socially, and even emotionally. As one Hadith (Prophetic saying) captures the co-constitutive character of the collective public realm (ummah) as a body-politic: “The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever” (Sahih Al-Bukhari quoted in Al-Bukhari 2002). Both structure (grounded in interconnection) and affect (morally and emotionally bound together) matter. They are foundational for renewal of community. They enable collective agency (in accordance with divine guidance but in response to earthly exigencies of self-preservation); govern public behaviour and test its capacity to seek justice; manage shared resources (including the repository of religious teachings and affiliate knowledge); and define rights and obligations (key to accountability of humans to God and within a community of human to human).

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Returning to resilience departs from normative positions, when considering the obligations of the Muslim community. The first regards ‘resilience from below’ as an obligation and responsibility. The second relates to voluntarism and agency as a capacity for self-governing action necessary to affirm the group’s will to survive and self-preserve outside the logic of territoriality or even in spite of it. This centres primarily on the precarity of being Muslim in secularist ethno-nationalist political units that are literally ‘under siege’ with regard to managing Islam, domestically and externally. Domestically, the standoff between authoritarian regimes and Islamist groups prompted regimes to reverse Muslim Brotherhoods and Islamists’ influence over public policy. The risk this carried to ideological challenges to rulers’ legitimacy was felt widely, from Egypt to Tunisia and from Jordan to Saudi Arabia. Regimes sought to recast Islam in a cultural rather than political light. This rebranding aimed to limit Islamist electoral successes and curb ‘politicized Islam’, or ideologies that contest power. A variety of strategies attempted to appropriate religious discourse, making it an arm of the state. Externally, the ‘war on terror’, whilst packaged in political speak of human rights and democracy, introduced new rules of engagement following the 9/11 attacks on the US. Namely, strict conditionality: aid given (mostly through authoritarian regimes) requires compliance or partnership in the war on terror and the fight against Islamic ‘radicalization’, shorthand for all activities by Islamists. That is, a) recruitment of Arab regimes in the suppression of Islamist groups and activists at home; b) adopting Western powers’ (especially the US) position that Islamic movements and organization are a threat not only to US national security, but also to regime survival and regional stability; and, flowing from this, d) imposition of security cooperation (training and arming of security forces within MENA). This stress on security has been at the expense of democratization in the region.

## Concluding notes

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If one proceeds from the understanding of politics being a form of dispersed activism and conversation to find common ground, then the resurrection of the authoritarian playbook in Tunisia may be described as a centralized system that has broken down the state and societal toolkit of resilience. That is, a reference to varying degrees of breakdown in the feedback loops between state and society as well as within localized margins of existence opened up during the democratization period by civic bodies and political parties. Thus, if one is to view Tunisia's 'pressure cooker' situation through resilience and knowledge loops, the goal ahead for civil society and democratic activists is to repair the public sphere (in a Habermasian sense), protect the attendant communicative space, and, ultimately, restore the knowledge (and speech) loops (Habermas 1987).

The democratic synergy fusing resilience from above and from below collapses when institutional democratization atrophies as exclusionary politics and regime survival overrides knowledge and feedback (or in a Habermasian sense 'speech') loops. As in the case of Tunisia, localized, grassroots resistance ('resilience from below') loses the formal mechanisms required to translate community survival into systemic policy change. While the country's civil society, mutual aid networks, protests, surviving Islamic principles of mutuality and compassion, and democratic activists partly absorbed the initial political shocks of de-democratization in the July 2021 coup by sustaining struggle from below and attendant feedback and knowledge loops, they cannot inherently change legislation or constrain authoritarian state apparatuses. When formal democratic channels—such as free and fair elections, independent judiciary, and legislative responsiveness—wither away, the bridge between public pressure and state action is severed.

That is one way to read and capture the essence of de-democratization in Tunisia post-July 2021. As a result, the ruling elite has since then grown increasingly insulated from the public. To an extent, this democratic reverse rendered grassroots efforts defensive rather than transformative. Today, despite the state of democratic erosion, citizen-led resistance still fosters some resilience from below, *qua* an informal defensive mechanism. Thus, the same activism, whilst partly muted and dampened in the face of increasing oppression, continues within dispersed pockets of local resistance still cultivating critical skills via organization, feedback loops, and collective mobilization. These grassroots capacities do not disappear entirely when democratization subsides. When opportunities for political renewal arise, these locally acquired skills transition from tools of resistance into instruments of reconstructing polity. The bottom line is that democratic recovery occurs when this bottom-up civic energy and resilience achieve synergy with resilience from above—via renewed political bargains, protected civil freedoms, constitutional power-sharing arrangements, and institutionalized policy negotiations. Thus far, most academic and journalistic narratives of de-democratizing polities, such as post-July 2021 Tunisia, tend to focus heavily on top-down state actions, institutional decay, and executive overreach. However, a definitive account of grassroots resilience—how ordinary citizens, local communities, and marginalized civil society actors resist, adapt to, and survive democratic erosion from below as in Tunisia and neighbouring MENA states—remains largely untold.

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