

The Tunisian Revolution and the Role of Regional Development Disparities in its Outbreak

ABSTRACT For several decades, whole regions of Tunisia were excluded from the national development process, which had focused mainly on the coastal regions. Indeed, an ongoing territorial disparity between the governorates of the country was observed. This article addresses this disparity and its relationship with the revolution of 14 January 2011.

KEYWORDS: Tunisian revolution, development indicators, regional disparities

INTRODUCTION

Following Tunisia's independence from France in 1956, the country was characterized by regional and local imbalances between the north and the center, on the one hand, and the south, on the other. This was due to natural factors and particularly the remnants of colonialism, where the European community was concentrated in the most fertile regions and in cities and a limited number of estates in the center and south. Today, the biggest imbalance exists between the coastal regions and the interior, a feature resulting from economic trends after independence. The pattern of development in Tunisia is based on ninety percent of investments in coastal cities and ten percent in the rest of the country.

Regional Development of Tunisia from Independence in 1956 to the Revolution of 2011

Historically, the issue of regional development in Tunisia has been addressed in two phases within the framework of the sponsoring state, but in different orientations as follows:

1. The first phase was in the 1960s within the framework of the short-lived socialist trend and the experience of solidarity which ended in failure, and which subsequently embraced liberalism in the early 1970s. This cooperative experience had the greatest impact on the increase

Contemporary Arab Affairs, Vol. 11, Number 3, pp. 69–84. ISSN 1755-0912. Electronic ISSN: 1755-0920. © 2018 by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/caa.2018.113004>

in migration to the towns and the capital city, mainly during the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s, causing record high demographic growth rates in these urban spaces. This led the ruling authority to carry out several studies on the bigger cities of Tunisia, Sfax and Sousse, in the early 1970s with the objective of controlling urban growth and meeting needs through infrastructure and facilities (Abaab and Elloumi, 2009).

2. The second phase was at the beginning of the 1980s and structured around the General Directorate for Regional Development and three offices for regional development in the south, center, west, and northwest, in addition to the development of an integrated rural development program in 1987.

Nonetheless, the crisis that broke out in the mid-1980s led to the adoption of a structural adjustment program and the state's abandonment of economic issues and privatization in its broadest form through a partnership agreement with the European Union in 1996 and the preparation of a twelve-year plan for the Tunisian economy (1996–2008). The integration of the Tunisian economy into globalization divided the country in two: coastal Tunisia, where economic dynamism was evident and highlighted as the only region of the country capable of being included in the world order; and inland Tunisia, which has little or no resources and where the population had to be subsidized through a redistribution mechanism to help improve living conditions.

In 2008, there were major protests in the state of Gafsa that lasted for more than a month; the regime succeeded in containing it at the time. The same happened during Ramadan in 2010 in the town of Ben Guerdan, but in late 2010 and early 2011 the people's solidarity against police attacks contributed to the outbreak of the revolution. It is imperative here to underline three aspects that enabled the revolution to succeed:

1. It would not have taken place had it not been for the internet and social networks that facilitated the propagation of events and enabled the protests to be organized.
2. It would not have happened without the Tunisian people acting in solidarity and in unison.
3. The role played by the Tunisian General Union of Labor was crucial. The union has been a significant popular force and organization in the country since colonial times. It was instrumental in organizing and maintaining popular resistance to the dictatorship, even if some of its members only joined it after the revolution broke out.

CAUSES OF THE TUNISIAN REVOLUTION

The popular revolution that overthrew the rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was not framed by traditional Marxist, nationalist, and Islamic parties and movements; the latter were not sufficient to absorb the tsunami of social mobility that took protesters onto the streets of Tunisian towns and cities. The people were revolted by the growing sense of social injustice resulting from the level of corruption that prevailed in the country.

The Tunisian revolution was non-ideological when measured by established practical and theoretical standards. It was the youth movement that played the main role in the insurrection, right up to the fall of President Ben Ali. This movement was made up mainly of unemployed university students and graduates standing up against President Ben Ali's family who were playing an influential part in running the national economy in diverse sectors such as banking, industry, real estate, and tourism. It is in this context that it is possible to understand why this social revolution began from the region west of center and spread mainly to the marginalized regions where an atmosphere of regional injustice and injustice prevailed among the youth of these forgotten regions.

The 14-Janvier revolution highlighted the anger of the Tunisian people against rampant corruption in the country, rising food prices, increasing poverty, especially in the interior, rising unemployment, government neglect of development and social issues, and the state media masking the truth. The context was rife and it only took a match struck by the young Mohammed Bouazizi to ignite the fire of the spontaneous civil revolt that was to engulf the whole country.

Economic and Social Causes

When appraising the situation of the Tunisian economy before the revolution, it is noteworthy that for many Western countries, specialized observers, and international political monitoring institutions Tunisia was very unlikely to be the subject of political and social popular protest, even with limited reforms. All the national economic and social indicators were indicative of social stability, and the general situation did not suffer from any imbalance that could contribute to any extent in creating popular unrest and social tension. However, the reality was that the economic situation in Tunisia was characterized by a quantitative imbalance and qualitative and structural differences between the regions in terms of quality of services, relations of production, social links, quality of industries, political ideology, and social structure

(United Nations 2004). Added to that was the social and economic marginalization of the population. The basic demands of the population after the revolution of 14 January 2011 were employment, development, dignity, social justice, and all the elements of a decent life for all segments of society, and a popular economic and social policy that would eliminate all forms of bribery and fraud. Nepotism and corruption left no region of the country untouched and it worked to uphold its fragile justification without any focus on democracy and the promotion of a culture of human rights.

To highlight the regional disparity between the regions in meeting the requirements of a decent life for the population, principal component analysis (PCA) was used for this research. Using XLSTAT software based on selected development indicators for 2014, this method gathers in a single table clear information to highlight homogenous clusters of Tunisia's regions. The following indicators were applied (Béchir, Sghaier and Dhifallah 2011):

- V₁: Percentage of the population who do not have tap water in their home.
- V₂: Percentage of the population who do not have water filters in their home.
- V₃: Proportion of the population who do not have electricity in their home.
- V₄: Proportion of the population who have no bathroom in their home.
- V₅: Proportion of the population who do not have a car.
- V₆: Proportion of the population who do not have a television in their home.
- V₇: Percentage of the population who do not have refrigerator in their home.
- V₈: Proportion of the population who do not have a phone.
- V₉: Illiteracy ratio.
- V₁₀: Number of medical dispensaries.
- V₁₁: Unemployment rate.
- V₁₂: Number of destitute families.
- V₁₃: Number of births in hospitals.
- V₁₄: Female unemployment rate.

The results are shown in figure 1.

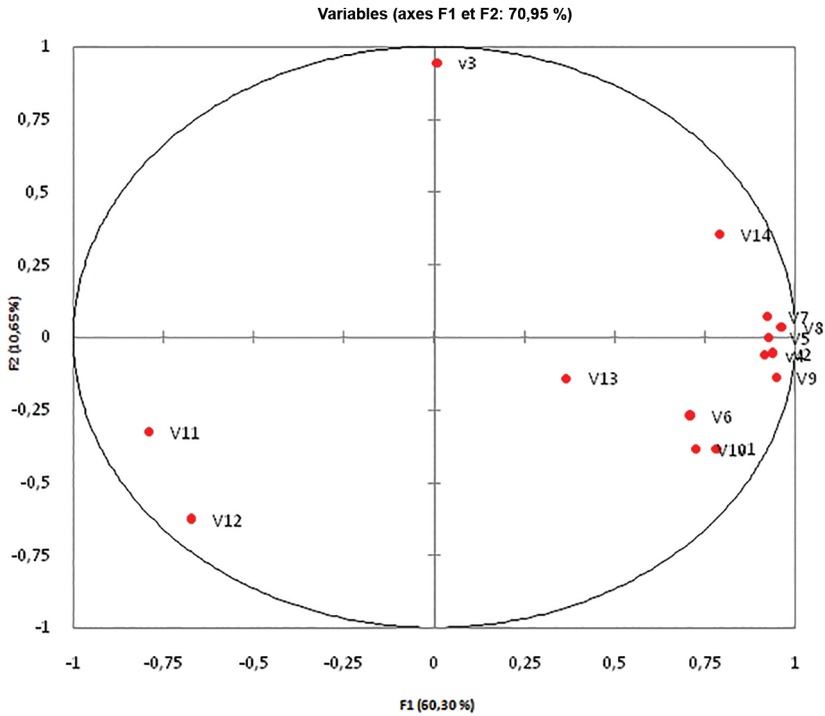


FIGURE 1. Circle of Correlations using the Main Components Analysis Method.

Figure 2 shows the regions divided into three different homogeneous clusters by level of development.

Local variations are categorized in figure 3 as follows:

1. In terms of “poor” development and “weak development” are Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, Kairouan, Siliana, and Jendouba.
2. Areas characterized in terms of “medium” development are Zaghuan, Beja, Kef, Gafsa, Madenine, Tataouine, Mahdia, Bizerte, Gabes, Tozeur, Kebly, Manouba, Sfax, and Nablus.
3. Areas characterized in terms as “most” are Tunis, Ariana, Ben Arous, Monastir, and Sousse.

Historically, and in the wake of Tunisia’s independence, the Tunisian state focused its development strategies on specific areas where the Tunisian coast was identified as a priority development area because this region had strong political representation in the various departments of the Tunisian state.

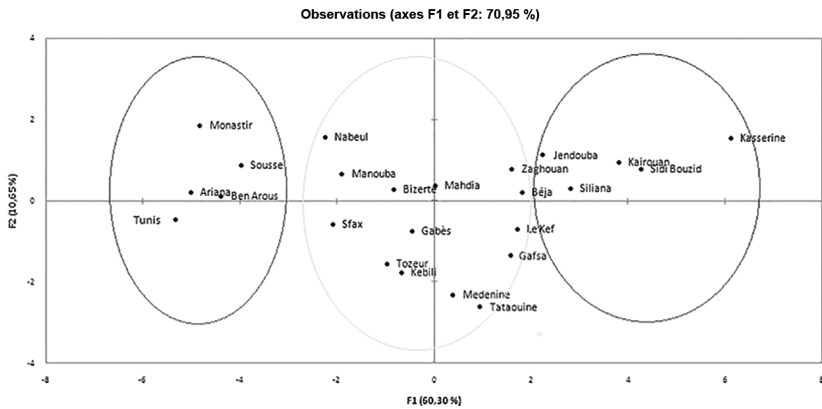


FIGURE 2. Regional Clusters by Level of Development through the Application of the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) Method.

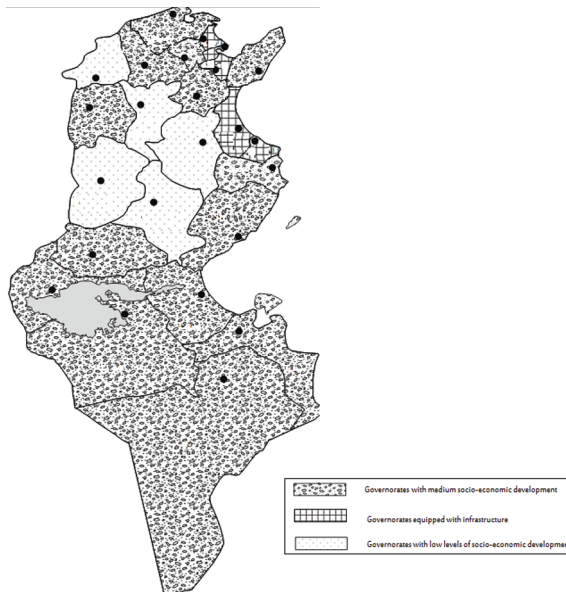


FIGURE 3. Regional Disparities in Tunisia.

Moreover, the interior areas of the country, especially the southern ones, were considered as areas politically opposed to former President Habib Bourguiba and in support of Saleh Ben Youssef, arch-enemy of President Bourguiba. During Ben Ali's reign of power, the same rule continued to dominate

the regime's contrivance by controlling business people and politicians; it was the coastal regions that had influence over national decisions, whether on issues of development or diplomacy. This resulted in the aggravation of regional disparities.

Instead of adopting policies necessary for future development to achieve sustainable development for all states, especially the interior regions, the disparity between the country's regions was the result of a futile development policy adopted by Tunisia for decades.

Figure 4 illustrates the high percentage of the poor in the western regions of the country, especially in the western center, where there was a marked concentration of the poor at 32.3 percent in 2010. As for the unemployment index, the highest rate of unemployment in 2011 was in the Midwest (28.6%), whereas in the eastern center, it did not exceed 11 percent. In terms of the rate of unemployment among university graduates, Gafsa was in first place with 47.4 percent, representing double the national average of 23.3 percent, Sidi Bouzid (41.0%), Gabes (39.4%), Tataouine (39.1%), and Kasserine (38.9%) (Béchir and Sghaier 2013).

With respect to health indicators for individuals, these are also very variable in Tunisia. As an example, despite a rise in life expectancy at birth as a result of a general improvement in health and living conditions, reaching 74.5 in 2009, there are significant differences between coastal and inland areas. Figure 5 shows the average life expectancy is estimated at seventy-seven years in the states of Tunisia and Sfax, while seventy years is estimated in the states of Kasserine and Tataouine.

Regional disparity is one of the most crucial problems facing Tunisia. The current situation with respect to the level of development and observed disparities, essentially since the end of the 1970s, varies between the Sahel and the regions in the northeast and between the states of the interior, especially the center and the northwest. In this context, it is easy to understand why the social revolution began among poor families in the western-central regions (Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine), and spread mainly within the disadvantaged and forgotten regions where social injustice prevailed. (Figure 6.)

Political Causes

The policy of the former regime greatly fuelled popular anger in Tunisia; the regime was weakened, especially from the late 1990s onwards, when the family of Leila Trabelsi, wife of the president, emerged as a powerful and corrupt gang wielding incredible influence. The system focused on highlighting some

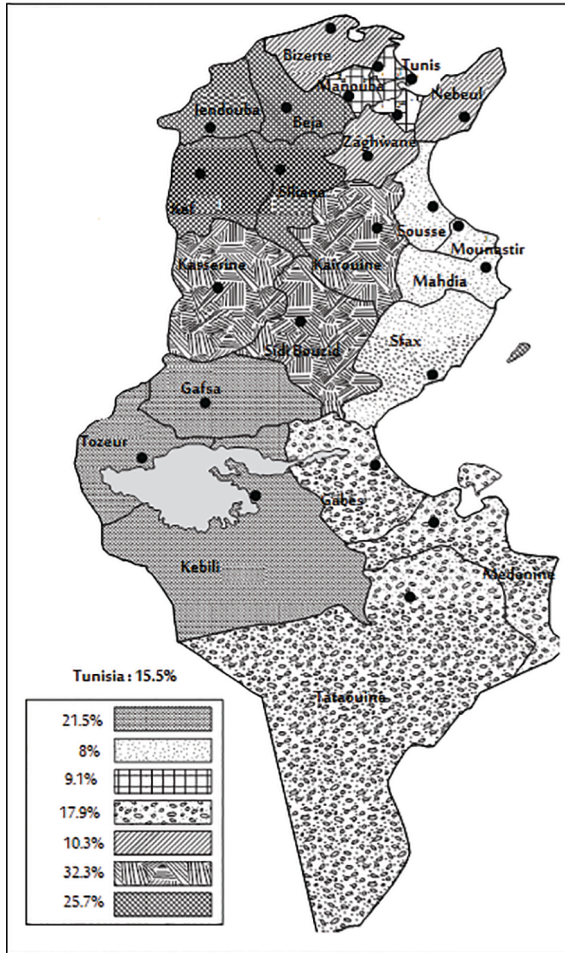


FIGURE 4. Regional Disparity of Poverty Index in Tunisia, 2010. Source: Author based on indicators of the Institut National de la Statistique (2012).

of the positive, though questionable, indicators, while ignoring the negative indicators and the evident disparities between the regions on unemployment and poverty indexes. The regime's lack of both transparency and solutions to the country's social problems contributed to increasing the immigration flows of Tunisia's citizens, especially young people, who could not find any other places to express their views and positions other than in football fields, which became the arenas of regional conflicts with the state's security apparatus. The inability of some governors and ministers to find solutions to the problems

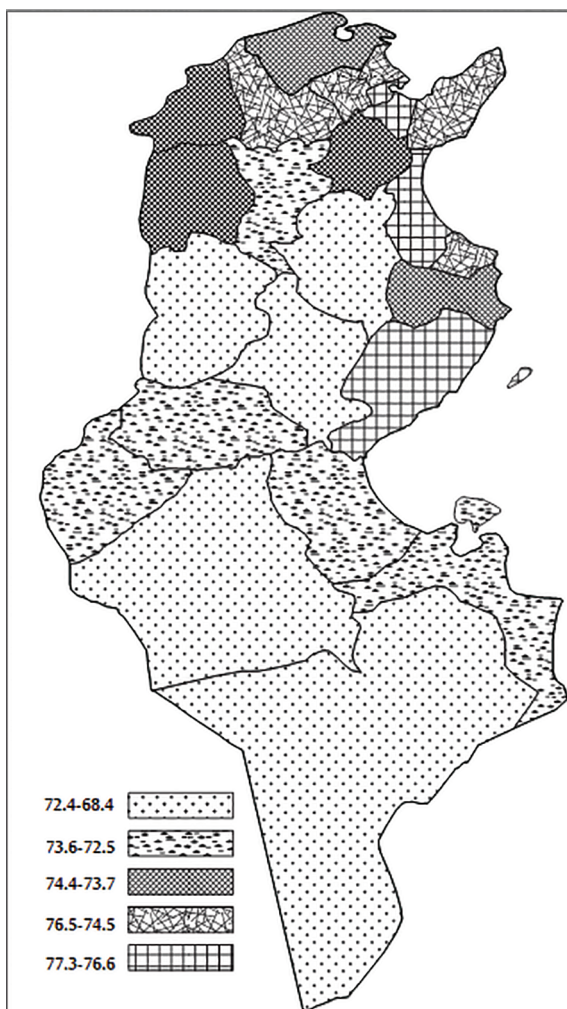


FIGURE 5. Regional Variation in the Index of Life Expectancy in Tunisia. Source: Ministry of Regional Development White Paper for Development 2011.

of the parties resulted in public outcries, which were not publicized for fear of the regime's violent repressions. Over time it was through repression that the same system managed to survive in power through the clamping down of political activity and the monopoly of the ruling party over public affairs. The regime dominated, controlled the political community, and besieged state and civil institutions. The president's family and in-laws governed and controlled

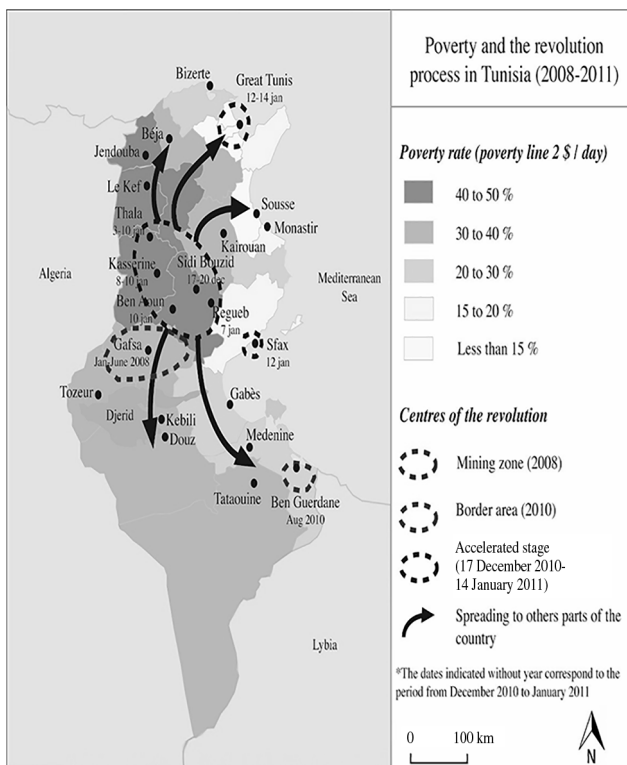


FIGURE 6. Evolution of Protests in Tunisia, from 2008 to the 2011 Revolution. Sources: Habib Ayeub and Mathilde Fautras, 2012. <https://habibayeb.wordpress.com/2013/05/15/pauvrete-et-revolution-en-tunisie-poverty-and-revolution-in-tunisia-cartes-maps/>.

the communications and media system, the judiciary and the Ministry of the Interior, which operated according to its orders and recommendations. Politicians, trade unionists, and human rights activists who opposed the regime were imprisoned following fake trials for trumped-up charges against them. One noteworthy example of this was how, during the World Summit on Information, held in Tunis in 2005, the regime repressed the protesters involved in the October 18 Forces of Rights and Freedoms who had united the forces of the right and the left to confront the regime and expose its practices and corruption to the world.

Reasons for Corruption

Ironically, it was the great Tunisian thinker Abderrahmane Ibn Khaldun in his famous *Muqaddimah* (introduction) who was the first to pay attention to political corruption being a key factor in measuring the stability of countries and their degeneration through the so-called “science of architecture.” He elaborated what is known as the Khaldooni pattern for the establishment and extinction of countries in which he defined five stages of the life of the state and considered that the phase in which corruption breaks the institution of the state is the stage of decline and evidence of the inevitability its extinction.

In Tunisia, during the last years of the rule of Ben Ali, the country suffered a massive infiltration of bribery and corruption, especially in circles with political, economic, and administrative influence, who exploited their power to obtain huge privileges and benefits from profiteering from public transactions to exemption from tax payments. They exercised control over many sectors of the Tunisian economy. The president’s network of relatives and in-laws wove “spider webs” around all sectors and institutions as wide-ranging as mobile phone services, banks, education, aviation, hotels, private radio stations, vehicle assemblies, and real estate investment. The multi-sectoral scourge of bribery in public employment (especially the secondary education sector) became an axiom especially in central administrations. Suspicions of corruption and abuse of influence even surpassed the borders of the Tunisian state to include suspicious agreements with foreign parties such as the airport deal and the mobile phone crisis.

TUNISIA AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Since the revolution, Tunisia has been undergoing a difficult and complex period characterized by an influx of ideas, options, and decisions at a time when insecurity, economic, and social problems and challenges are increasing and rife. This has led to a relaxation of the national consensus that characterized the first phase of the revolution, when partisan unionist and ideological conflicts became apparent. Legitimate popular demands in various social sectors have been raised. However, some of those who raise these demands are showing impatience, believing that the government holds keys to solve all problems magically and immediately. Solutions are difficult to achieve at this stage due to the limited potential in Tunisia, the country’s legacy of economic and social crises, a breakdown of citizens’ relationship with the state, the loss of trust between the parties, pressure from an external

and tense regional neighborhood, and the high prices of fuel and foodstuffs on the international markets.

Tunisia's Post-Revolution Economy

It has been six years since Tunisia faced the 14 January 2011 revolution. The challenges of the political forces in the field, especially those that have divided the seats of the People's Assembly following the outcome of the 2014 elections, still carry many perils for the success of the economic and social challenges. Finding solutions to poverty, unemployment, and regional development disparities in Tunisia is one of the main problems that the government must effectively address, given that many factories and private institutions have closed due to economic difficulties and the deteriorating security situation in Libya (Jaoued et al. 2015). Furthermore, the fluctuation of the tourist industry—an important source of income—has fuelled the emergence of terrorism, and, in turn, has exacerbated the economic situation. Today, local development and job creation for the unemployed are among the most difficult issues facing Tunisia. All development programs have failed to find appropriate solutions. In the general framework of openness and globalization, it is very difficult to reverse immediately some of the choices Tunisia had taken over a long time, while it is equally clear that local policies cannot continue to develop in the same way. This requires relinquishing the vertical and projected rule that governance or good governance emanates from the people who are supposed to bear responsibility for determining options, charting directions, and establishing a new course of development.

The Economy

The Tunisian economy is the state component most affected after the revolution, as unemployment has increased by the closure of many institutions due to sit-ins and lack of security. This post-revolution period has also been characterized by a marked rise in inflation, a budget deficit, a rise in national debt, and deterioration in purchasing power. Nonetheless, the economic situation not only depends on improving living conditions, such as the provision of labor, food, medicine, housing, infrastructure development, and enduring the economic crisis resulting from the market economy and privatization of the public sector, but also spiritual and moral factors related to values of dignity are equally important. The latter have been desecrated and replaced by global values derived from the market, compounded by the pre-revolutionary spread of injustice, arrogance, inequality, and humiliation suffered by popular groups. Despite the government's attempts to redress the situation, the economy is

experiencing numerous difficulties, as testified by decision-makers and some of the ministers themselves. The trade unions have also contributed to compounding the pressure on the state budget by demanding an increase in wages of public administration employees, which has resulted in many legal and illegal strikes.

POST-REVOLUTION REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Regional development was one of the principal concerns of the post-revolutionary government. Since the revolution, a regional development program has been elaborated, and its principal key components include:

1. *Objectives of development* to be achieved in the states characterized by poor development by creating a geographical balance based on citizenship, democracy, and governance (Belhedi 1999).
2. *Spatial balance* is to function according to a balanced land structure that can be adapted to most external and internal conditions. This structure is based on a moderate distribution of the population, cities, economic activities, basic equipment, and infrastructure to ensure that all states are developed equally.
3. *Citizenship* based on equity between individuals and states and the reduction of differences between the parties.
4. *Democracy* as based on enabling the individual to be a citizen in the true meaning of the word through a positive and effective contribution to all aspects of social life at all levels.
5. *Governance* (or good governance) as involving actual participation in local and regional affairs, perception and choices, requiring the involvement of all regional stakeholders as well as a convention that ensures the inclusion of all parties in the development process, including the state whose representative is elected by the population, in conjunction with councils of regional technical departments that will undertake consultation and studies.

Nonetheless, it is noted that regional development has not achieved a significant change compared with what it was before the revolution. This is for several reasons, including delays and slow administrative work, security chaos, and the reluctance of investors to invest in these areas. The situation has resulted in numerous protests in several internal states of the republic, which increases the obstacles to investment in these areas. In order to achieve regional development in this new post-revolutionary phase, it is imperative

to go through all the facilities and services, but these basic elements should not be limited to structural, that is, the promotion of internal bodies and having them play an effective role at the national level in an equal manner with the various parties involved (Belhedi 2011). The developmental process of the country and the homeland can be done only through the empowerment of the mechanisms and possibilities of self-reliance, even relatively and to a limited extent, depending on their potential and their specificities and constraints. In order to achieve this, it is imperative to enhance the image of the authority to be a magnet for residents and investors. There can be no regional or local development without local or regional stakeholders taking in hand the development process, in association with external stakeholders, whether they be from home or abroad, and through the intervention of the key stakeholder who is the Tunisian state, irrespective of the political and economic system being pursued, so that local actors can participate in developing their regions (African Development Bank 2011). Therefore, administrative and economic decentralization must be carried out effectively with an evaluation of all the development policies that have been followed to this day (African Development Bank 2012). Transparency must be a primary requirement in this endeavor to allow for a comprehensive reform of the fiscal system that will enable the affected areas to contribute to the development of the disadvantaged and poor areas in a way that can finance regional and local development.

CONCLUSIONS

Regional and local development disparities are one of the biggest problems facing Tunisia. Today, it is necessary to reconsider the development process, the need to define new visions, and to formulate proposals and solutions that can reformulate a new pattern of regional development in Tunisia by drawing on the experiences of some developing and developed countries. Since independence, development efforts have been concentrated on the coastal areas, which were thought to be developed on the basis of tourism and industry, and would automatically result in the development of internal bodies. However, this has not happened. This does not negate the progress and advancement made since independence by various states on multiple levels in terms of roads and infrastructure. This was the norm applied over a period of more than fifty years. However, the 'abnormal' aspect to the aforementioned was the survival of the regional development disparity between the regions of the coast and northeast and between the regions of the center and the south. Regional

or local development is not limited to the creation of jobs or the creation of certain projects or facilities, nor only to achieving positive national growth rates, but mainly to address problems of exclusion, marginalization, and equitable distribution of wealth among the various states. Hence, the Tunisian state must redefine its role in the economic system and reconsider the relationship between it and the private sector to determine a strategy for the post-revolution period. This requires appropriate funding through the establishment of mechanisms and institutions in the form of banks and regional development companies, and a fund for regional development in the marginalized states. It is also important for the interior regions to benefit from a percentage of the revenues from their natural resources (phosphate, petroleum, etc.), as indicated in the Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia. ■

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