

Support for democracy dwindles in Tunisia amid negative perceptions of economic conditions

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 232 | Youssef Meddeb

Summary

In 2010 and 2011, Tunisians launched a wave of protests that led to the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, ending 23 years of iron-fisted rule marked by the repression of public and individual freedoms. Since then, the country has achieved several democratic milestones, among them the establishment of a Constituent Assembly, the drafting of a new Constitution in 2014, and the organization of four successful elections, including local elections held in May 2018 after being postponed four times. Tunisia was also recently classified as a democracy and ranked 69th out of 167 countries by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index – a dramatic improvement from the 144th rank in 2010 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2010; 2018).

However, the country has also witnessed a sharp political split, political assassinations, terrorist attacks, and persistent economic and social challenges. In less than eight years, Tunisia has had eight governments, the most recent of which has been asked to resign or seek a renewal of trust from the Assembly of People's Representatives. Political parties are split on whether to maintain Youssef Chahed as the head of government (Reuters, 2018a). Economic and social conditions, difficult since 2011, have worsened, with an unemployment rate of 15.3% as of the first quarter of 2018, a trade deficit exceeding 15 billion dinars as of May 2018, and an inflation rate of 7.5% as of July 2018 (National Institute of Statistics, 2018).

These challenges combine to cast a cloud of uncertainty over the democratic process in Tunisia, especially with the approach of legislative and presidential elections scheduled for 2019. Some analysts blamed low voter participation in the recent municipal elections on candidates' inability to address the country's pressing economic problems (Erem News, 2018).

New Afrobarometer survey results reveal that Tunisians hold gloomy views of national economic conditions, that support for democracy is continuing a downward trend, and that almost half of all citizens are not satisfied with the way democracy works in Tunisia.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Tunisia, led by One to One for Research and Polling, interviewed 1,200 adult Tunisians in April-May 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Tunisia in 2013 and 2015.

Key findings

- Almost eight in 10 Tunisians (79%) say the country is heading in "the wrong direction," a 12-percentage-point increase since 2013.
- A large majority of Tunisians perceive the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (72%) and continue to give the government poor ratings on what they see as the country's three most important problems – managing the economy, creating jobs, and fighting corruption.
- Six in 10 Tunisians (62%) say the country is "a democracy with major problems" or "not a democracy." The proportion who say the country is not a democracy has doubled since 2015, from 14% to 29%.
- Half (51%) of Tunisians are "not very satisfied" or "not at all satisfied" with the way democracy is working in their country.
- Popular support for democracy over any other political system continues to decline, dropping to 46% compared to 71% in 2013. The proportions of Tunisians who reject authoritarian alternatives to democratic governance have also decreased.
- A majority of Tunisians support limits on executive power. Three-fourths (74%) favour presidential term limits, and majorities say that the president must always obey the laws and courts (56%) and that accountability is more important than speed in getting things done (58%).
- About half of Tunisians say the country enjoys greater freedom of expression, association, opposition, and media than it did a few years ago.
- Although almost two-thirds (64%) of Tunisians endorse "regular, open, and honest elections" as the best way to choose their leaders, a majority (57%) said they were "not at all interested" or "not very interested" in the recent municipal elections, and most (84%) declared they had little or no information about these elections. Furthermore, trust in the electoral commission has decreased by 18 percentage points compared to 2015.

Is Tunisia going in the wrong direction?

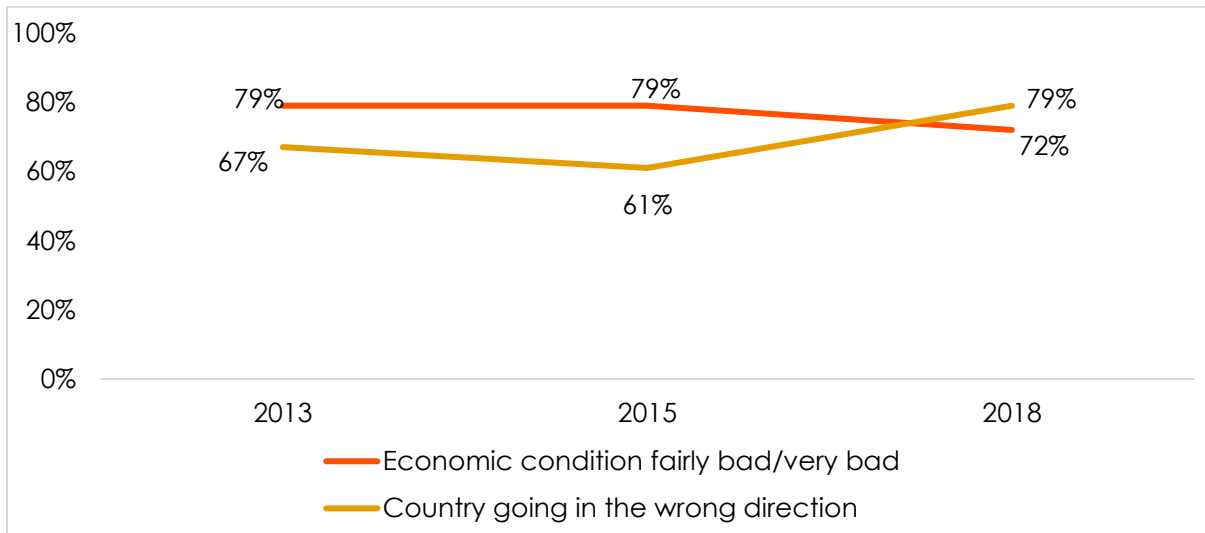
Tunisians are broadly disappointed with the economic situation; seven in 10 (72%) perceive the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (Figure 1). Although this proportion decreased by 7 percentage points from 2015, "very bad" responses increased from 45% in 2015 to 56%. Thus citizens' perceptions remain overwhelmingly negative as bad economic news continues to pour in, including Moody's downgrading of Tunisia's sovereign rating from B1 to B2 due to a decline in the balance of public finances and trade balance (Moody's, 2018) and a dramatic increase in the country's foreign debt, from 41% of gross domestic product in 2010 to 71% in 2018 (Guardian, 2018).

In line with the trend that Bratton, Dulani, and Nkomo (2017) noted in Zambia and other African countries, the public's "perceived trajectory of the country closely follows popular assessments of 'present economic conditions.'" This means that the unhappier people are with national economic conditions, the more they worry about the country's future. In this case, almost eight in 10 Tunisians (79%) say the country is heading in "the wrong direction" – a 12-percentage-point increase since 2013 (67%).

In this environment, even assistance may portend trouble: Tunisia and the International Monetary Fund appear to be at odds over when the next tranche of an IMF loan will be released, after a row within Tunisia's coalition government stalled the country's economic

reforms (Reuters, 2018b). According to the same report, the IMF has asked Tunisia to reduce its budget deficit and to increase fuel and electricity prices to offset a rise in oil prices, a move that could exacerbate Tunisia's difficult social situation.

Figure 1: Direction of the country and views on economic conditions | Tunisia | 2013-2018



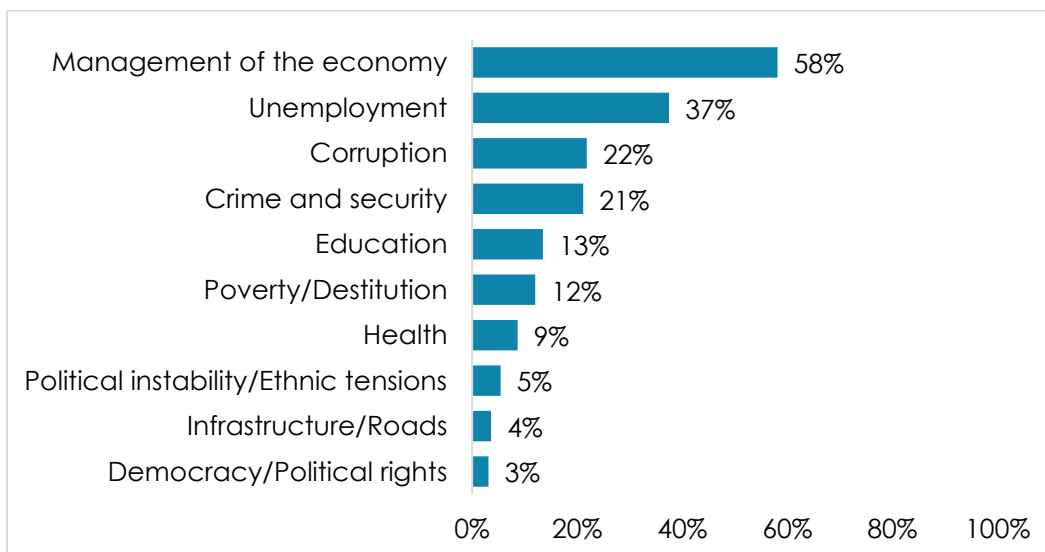
Respondents were asked:

- Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?
- In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?

Evaluation of the government's performance

To understand citizens' concerns, Afrobarometer asks respondents to state what they think are the most important problems facing the country that government should address. Citing up to three issues per respondent, Tunisians identify management of the economy (58%), unemployment (37%), and corruption (22%) as their top priorities (Figure 2).

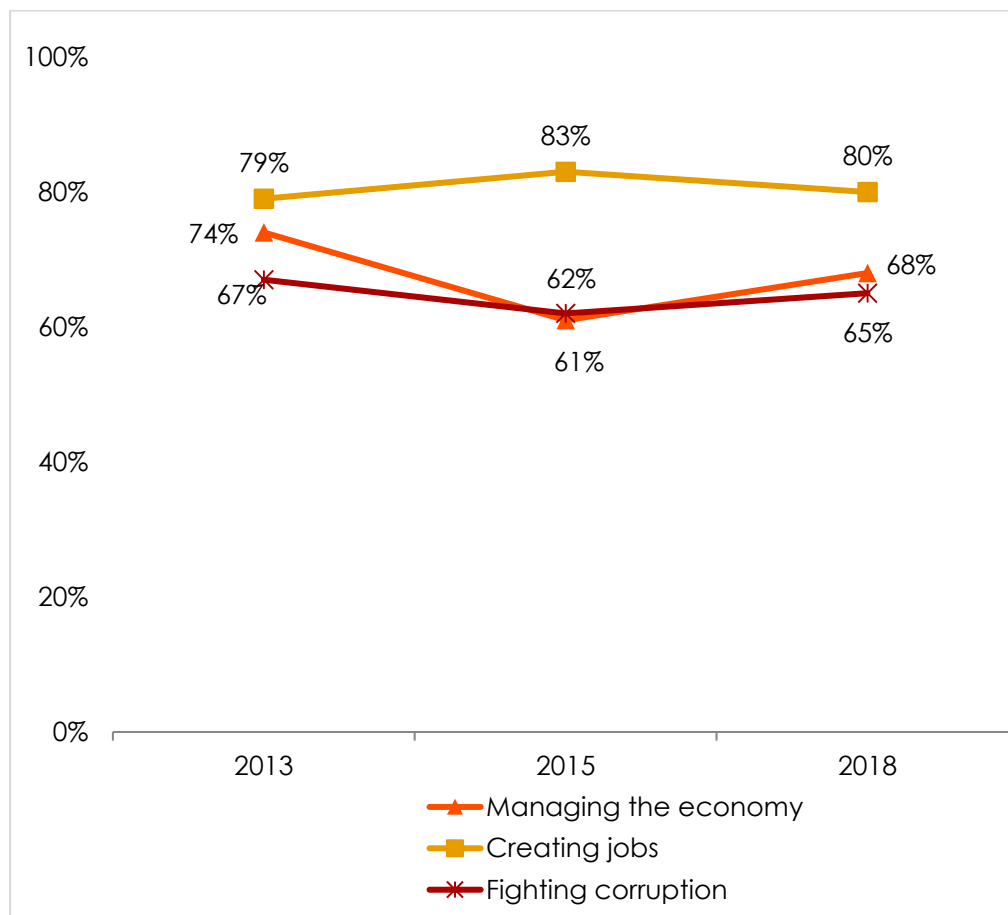
Figure 2: Most important problems that government should address | Tunisia | 2018



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?

In Afrobarometer surveys since 2013, the government has consistently been rated poorly on its performance in handling these three priorities (Figure 3). In 2018, large majorities continue to say the government is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” in managing the economy (68%), creating jobs (80%), and fighting corruption (65%).

Figure 3: Negative evaluations of government’s performance on most important problems | Tunisia | 2013-2018



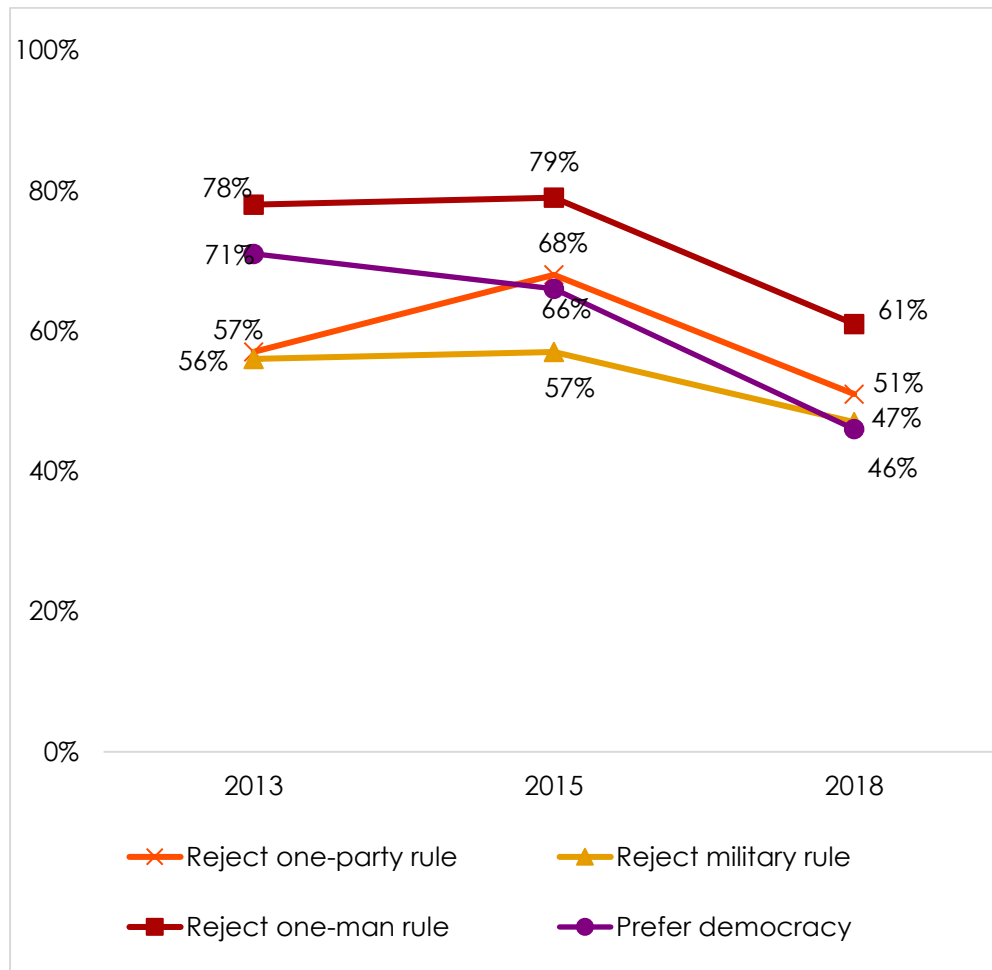
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say “very badly” or “fairly badly”)

Declining support for democracy

In tandem with a perceived lack of improvement in the government’s ability to handle the main challenges facing the country, we see a drastic decline in Tunisians’ support for democracy. Fewer than half (46%) now say they prefer democracy over any other form of government – a 15-percentage-point decline since 2013 (71%) (Figure 4).

At the same time, the proportion of Tunisians who reject authoritarian alternatives to democracy has also decreased. Only about half of respondents now reject one-party rule (51%, down from 68% in 2015) and military rule (46%, down from 57% in 2015). Opposition to one-man rule also decreased sharply, from 79% in 2015 to 61%, but remains stronger than resistance to other authoritarian systems – perhaps in line with Bratton’s (2006) assertion that political attitudes may be learned on the basis of direct experiences with different political regimes, such as that of former President Ben Ali.

Figure 4: Preference for democracy and rejection of autocratic alternatives | Tunisia
 | 2013-2018



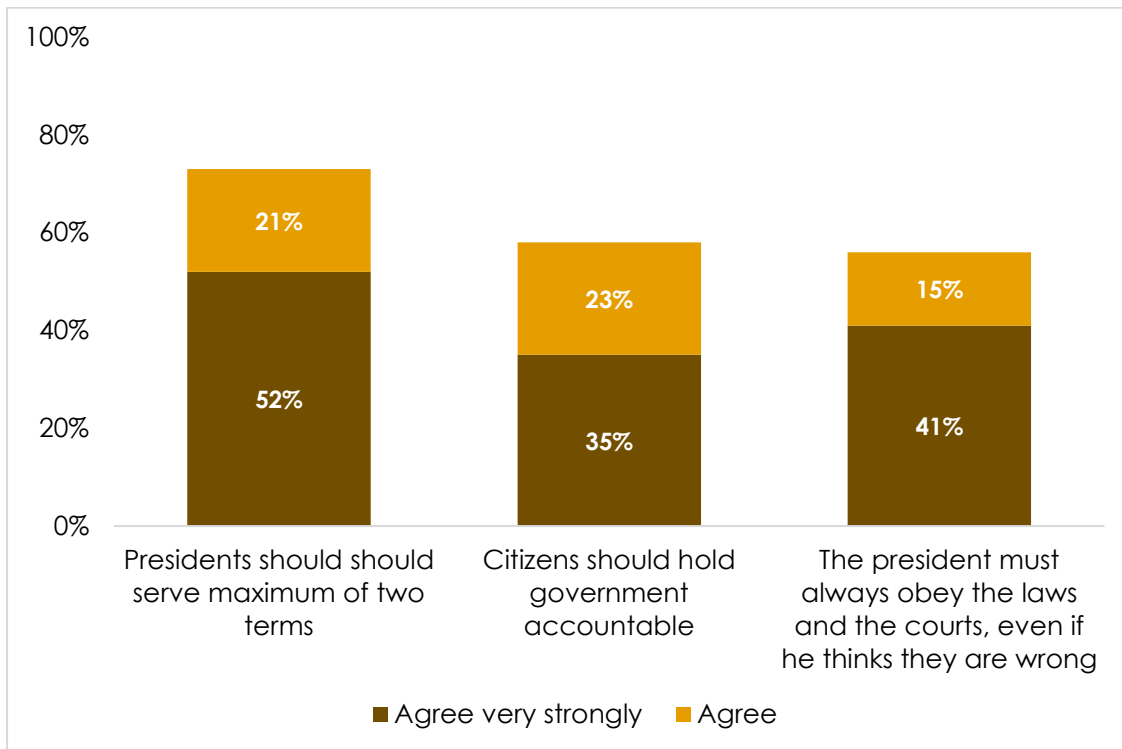
Respondents were asked:

- There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?
 - Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.
 - The army comes in to govern the country.
 - Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything.
- Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 - Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 - Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 - Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

Notwithstanding declining popular support for democracy, a majority of Tunisians endorse the supremacy of the law and checks on the presidency. About three-fourths (74%)¹ of citizens say the president should be limited to serving a maximum of two terms in office, while more than half say the president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong (56%) (Figure 5). And 58% affirm that it's more important to have a government that's accountable to the people than to have one that can "get things done."

¹ Due to rounding, the total of a combined category (e.g. 74% agree/agree very strongly) may differ slightly from the sum of subcategories (e.g. 21% agree, 52% agree very strongly).

Figure 5: Support for checks on the presidency | Tunisia | 2018



Respondents were asked:

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.
 Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 1)
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done even if we have no influence over what it does.
 Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 2)
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.
 Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.

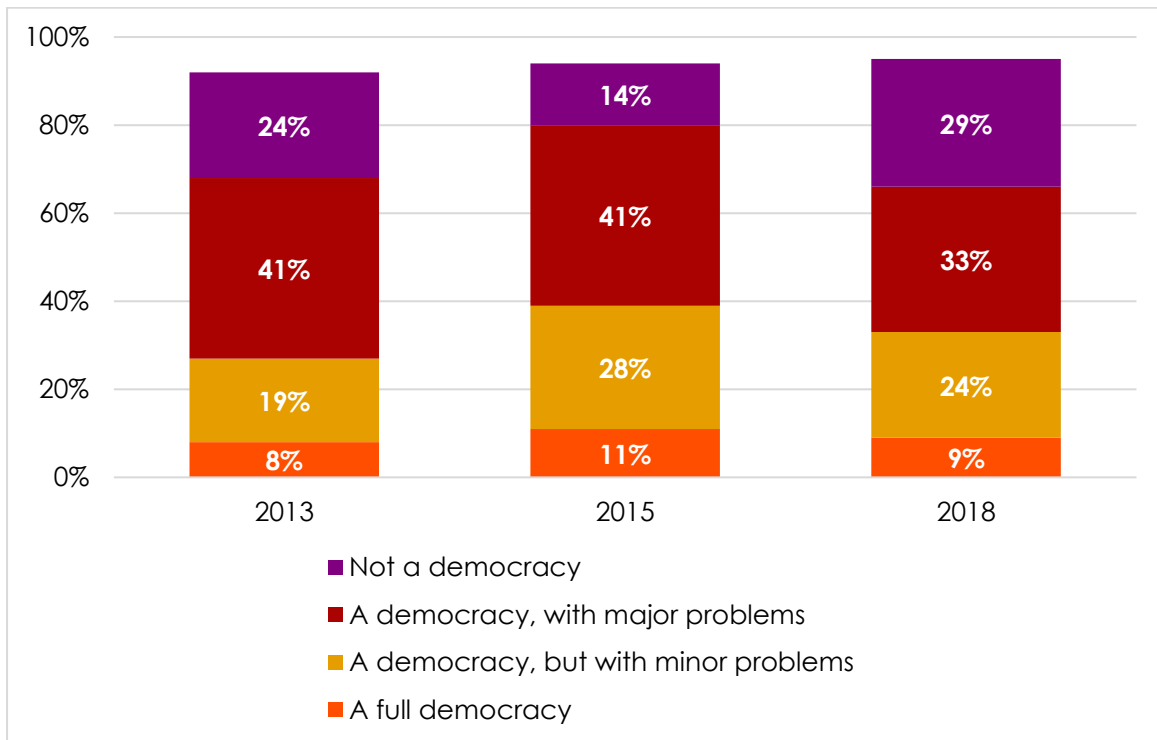
Evaluation of Tunisia's democracy

Tunisians' declining support for democracy is mirrored in increasingly critical perceptions of how democracy is working in their country.

When asked "how much of a democracy" Tunisia is today, six in 10 respondents (62%) describe the country as "a democracy with major problems" or "not a democracy" at all (Figure 6). While this perception is similar to assessments recorded in 2013, the proportion who say the country is "not a democracy" has doubled since 2015, from 14% to 29%.

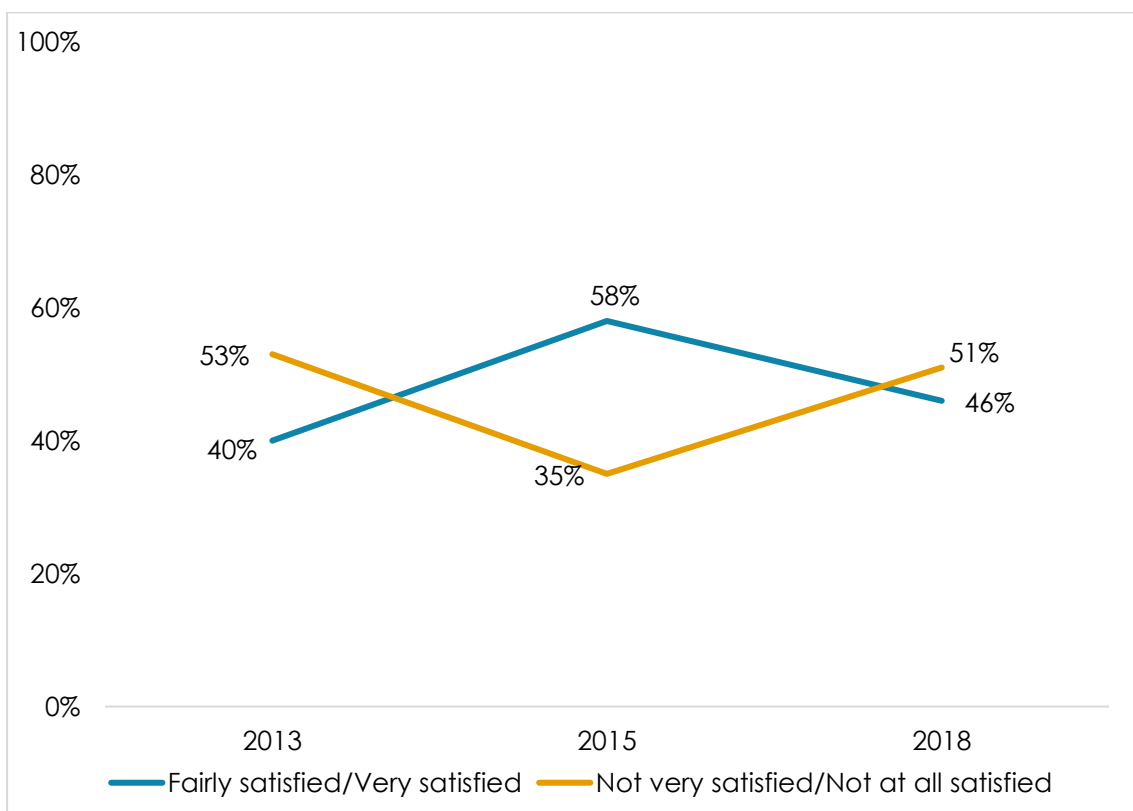
Moreover, fewer than half of citizens are "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the way democracy is working in Tunisia (Figure 7). The level of satisfaction increased from 40% in 2013 to 58% in 2015, but dropped to 46% in 2018.

Figure 6: Extent of democracy | Tunisia | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Tunisia today?*

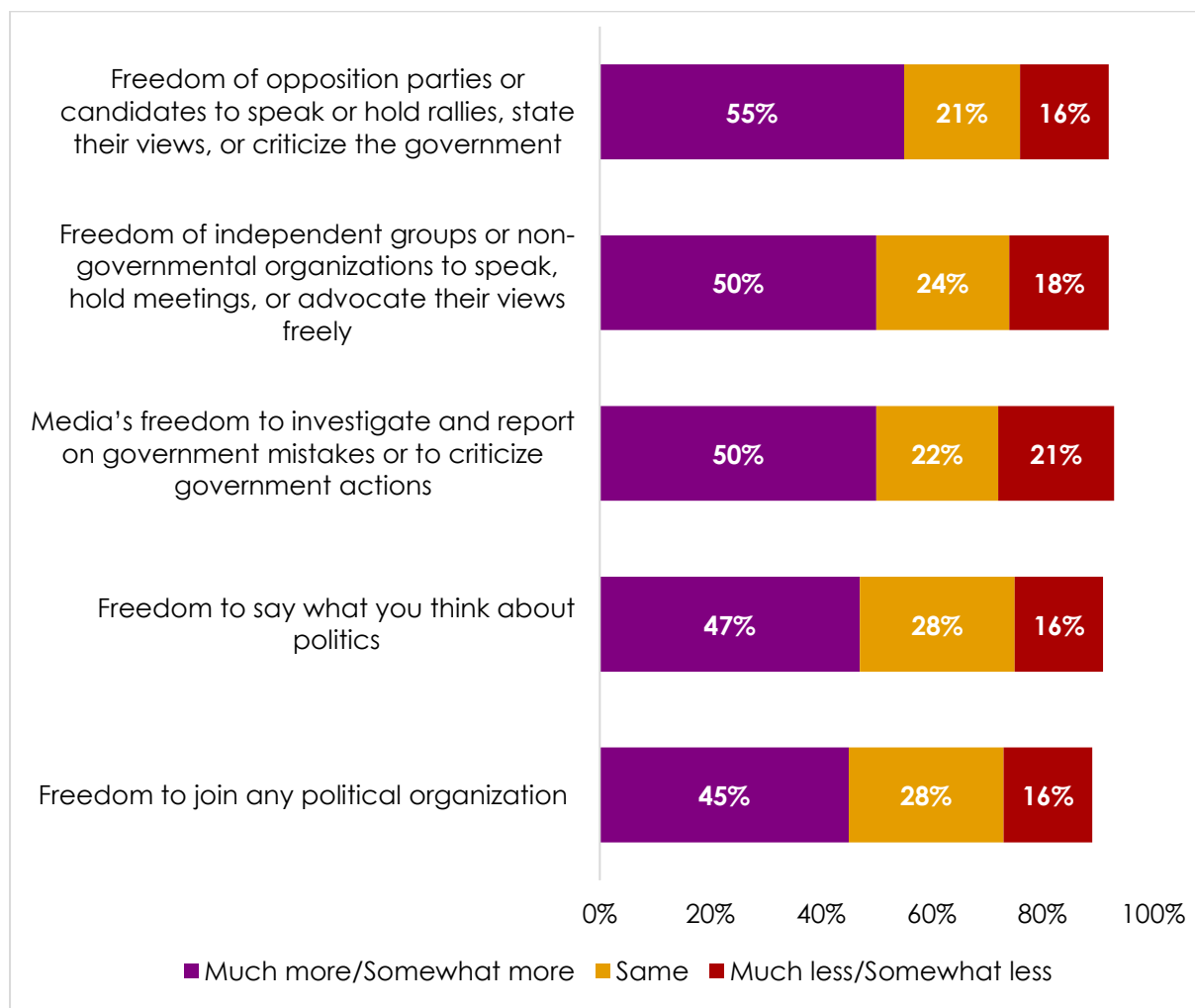
Figure 7: Satisfaction with democracy | Tunisia | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: *Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Tunisia?*

As Tunisia has transitioned to democracy after ousting its long-time autocratic leader in 2011, it has earned “free” status from Freedom House (2018). In line with this, survey respondents are more likely to see progress, rather than stagnation or retreat, when it comes to political rights and civil liberties. Still, only about half say that compared to a few years ago, there is now “somewhat more freedom” or “much more freedom” for opposition parties or candidates to function (55%); for independent groups to advocate their views (50%); for the media to investigate and criticize government actions (50%); and for citizens to say what they think about politics (47%) and to join any political organization (45%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Freedoms, present vs. past | Tunisia | 2018



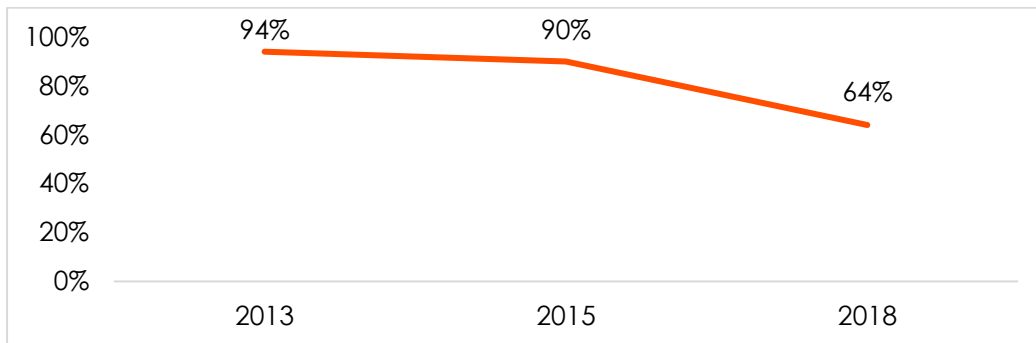
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same?

Decreasing support for elections and trust in electoral commission

Adding to a trend toward less support for democracy, popular support for elections and trust in the Independent High Electoral Commission are in decline.

While almost two-thirds (64%) of Tunisians endorse “regular, open, and honest elections” as the best way to choose their leaders, this represents a drastic decline from the overwhelming support in 2013 (94%) and 2015 (90%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Support for elections | Tunisia | 2013-2018

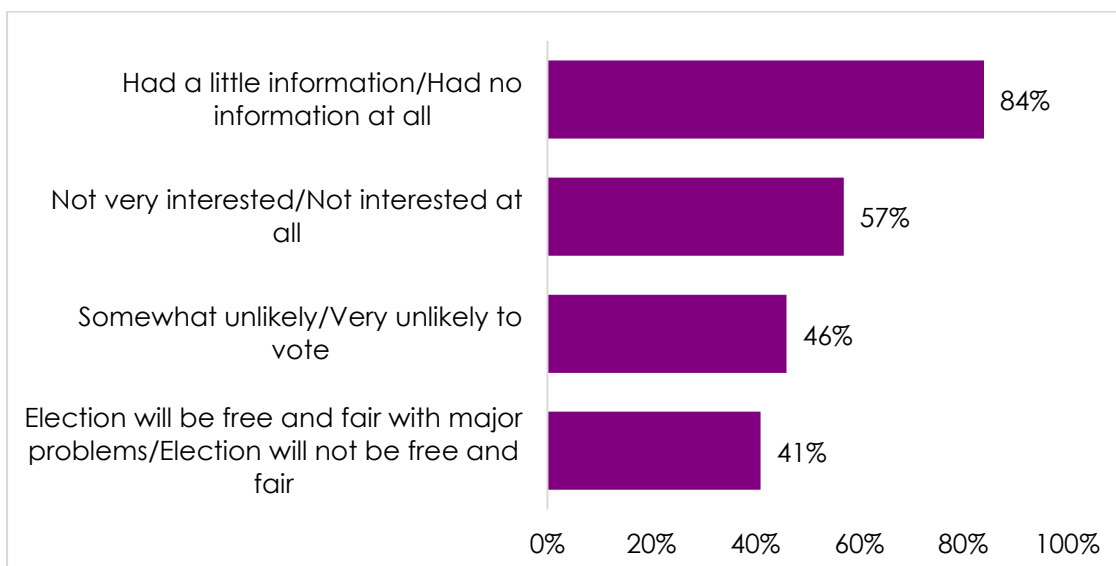


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

In an illustration of this trend, ahead of the recent municipal elections, almost six in 10 respondents (57%) said they were "not very" or "not at all" interested in the elections (Figure 10). More than eight in 10 (84%) said they were not well informed about the elections, including two-thirds (67%) who said they had "no information at all" about the contest. Almost half (46%) said they were "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely" to vote, and four in 10 (41%) expected the elections to be "not free and fair" or "free and fair but with major problems."

Not surprisingly, voter turnout was low (35.6%), which some observers attributed to popular frustration with the failure of political parties and candidates to address the country's urgent problems (Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, 2018).

Figure 10: Perceptions of the municipal elections | Tunisia | 2018

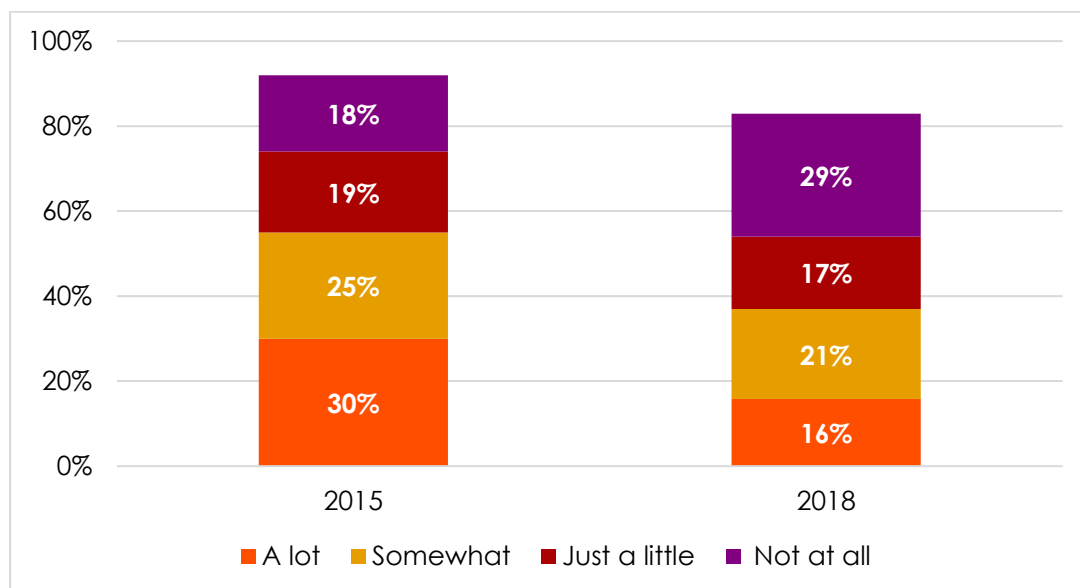


Respondents were asked:

- How interested are you in the forthcoming municipal elections?
- How much information do you have about the forthcoming local government elections?
- How free and fair do you expect the upcoming municipal elections to be?
- How likely are you to vote in the forthcoming municipal elections in 2018?

More broadly, popular trust in the Independent High Electoral Commission has declined by 18 percentage points since 2015, from 55% who say they trust the commission “somewhat” or “a lot” to 37% (Figure 11). This drop in trust may reflect a series of problems that the commission has faced since 2017, including the resignation of its president, Chafik Sarsar, who publicly questioned the commission’s independence and revealed that he had faced political pressure; delays in electing his successor; and repeated postponements of municipal elections (Freedom House, 2018). Freedom House cited these developments in reducing the country’s score on fairness of electoral laws and their implementation from 3 to 2. The commission’s crisis continues with the resignation of a second president after the municipal elections.

Figure 11: Trust in electoral commission | Tunisia | 2015-2018



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The electoral commission?

Conclusion

Democracy seems to be losing ground in Tunisia amid consistently negative perceptions of the country’s economic situation. Citizens’ assessments of government efforts to address the country’s most important problems remain highly critical. Although a majority of Tunisians support regular, open, and honest elections, they expressed little interest in recent municipal elections, and popular trust in the electoral commission is on the decline.

To restore faith in democracy, the political class must prioritize the country’s interest and urgently resolve its current economic difficulties. Further, Parliament should quickly elect a new president of the electoral commission and ensure the commission’s independence as the legislative and presidential elections approach.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It’s easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

References

- Bratton, M. (2006). Poor people and democratic citizenship in Africa. Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 56. <http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Working%20paper/AfropaperNo56.pdf>.
- Bratton, M., Dulani, B., & Nkomo, S. (2017). Zambia at a crossroads: Will citizens defend democracy? Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 157. http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ab_r7_dispatchno157_zambia_democracy_at_a_crossroads.pdf.
- Economist Intelligence Unit. (2010). Democracy Index 2010: Democracy in retreat. https://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy_Index_2010_web.pdf.
- Economist Intelligence Unit. (2018). Democracy Index 2017: Free speech under attack. http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Democracy_Index_2017.pdf&mode=wp&campaignid=DemocracyIndex2017.
- Erem News. (2018). Tunisian elections ... low turnout and irregularities amid "frustration" hangs over the voters. <https://www.erenews.com/news/arab-world/1319010>.
- Freedom House. (2018). Tunisia profile. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/tunisia>.
- Guardian. (2018). The IMF has choked Tunisia. No wonder the people are protesting. 17 January 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/17/imf-tunisia-people-rioting-2011-economic-reforms>.
- Moody's. (2018). Rating action: Moody's downgrades Tunisia's rating to B2, outlook changed to stable. https://www.moody's.com/research/Moodys-downgrades-Tunisias-rating-to-B2-outlook-changed-to-stable--PR_380521.
- National Institute of Statistics. (2018). <http://www.ins.nat.tn/>.
- Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy. (2018). Tunisia's local elections: How to build trust in politics? <https://nimd.org/tunisias-local-elections-how-to-build-trust-in-politics/>.
- Reuters. (2018a). Tunisia's president says PM should quit if crisis continues. 15 July 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-politics/tunisias-president-says-pm-should-quit-if-crisis-continues-idUSKBN1K513Q>.
- Reuters. (2018b). Tunisia, IMF locked in difficult talks over next loan tranche. 30 August 2018. <https://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL8N1VK50R>.

Youssef Meddeb is an engineer in statistics and data analysis and CEO for One to One for Research and Polling, Afrobarometer's national partner in Tunisia. Email: youssef.meddeb@121polling.com.

Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 7 has been provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and Transparency International.

Donations help the Afrobarometer Project give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Felix Biga (felixbiga@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

For more information, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.



/Afrobarometer



@Afrobarometer



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 232 | 3 September 2018