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Education Reform in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia: Between Covid-19 and a Divided Civil Society

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In Tunisia the spread of coronavirus continues at an alarming rate, with a huge surge of infections during the last few months, growing from 20 new cases per day in July to more than 2000 cases per day in Mid-October.¹ The Tunisian Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi has announced a series of measures aiming at limiting the infections² while Minister of Education Fethi Sallout proposed moving to distance learning in the event that schools needed to be closed,³ which turned out to be the case at the end of October.⁴ However, limited internet access and a shortage of digital devices in rural and peripheral regions in contrast to urban ones⁵ have raised questions about whether Sallout's proposal is a realistic solution for Tunisia.

Despite the widespread perception that Tunisia has successfully navigated its post-revolutionary transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, the pandemic is laying bare some of the disappointments since Tunisia's 2010-2011 revolution. In particular, the coronavirus crisis has exposed civil society's failure to achieve meaningful reform in Tunisia's ailing public education system.

Beyond the lack of accessibility, difficulties faced by students and teachers stem from poor infrastructure and inadequate basic services, especially in rural areas like Kasserine, Qairouan, and Sidi Bouzid. Tunisian President Qais Saeed marked the

¹ [Worldometer: Coronavirus: Tunisia](#), accessed on November 7, 2020.

² [Covid-19: L'essentiel des mesures annoncées par Hichem Mechichi](#), *Business News*, October 3, 2020.

³ Maher Chaabane, ["Tunisie: l'Éducation optera pour l'enseignement à distance, en cas de fermeture des écoles"](#), *Webdo*, September 29, 2020.

⁴ Rana Jawad, ["Schools close as Tunisia avoids a total lockdown"](#), *BBC News*, October 29, 2020.

⁵ Nizar Alaya, Riadh Ben Jelili, and Abdessatar Mabkhout, ["Déséquilibres régionaux et inégalités sociales en Tunisie, Axes et actions prioritaires"](#), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Tunisie, 2018.

opening of the school year this past September with a visit to a school in Franana where, a year ago, 11-year-old Maha Gadhgadhi was swept away by rainwater due to the public school's dilapidated infrastructure. Her death catalyzed civil society activists in Jendouba; they took to the streets to demonstrate against the deterioration of school infrastructure, the lack of opportunities for young people, and the marginalization of populations along the Tunisian-Algerian border.⁶

Tunisia faces additional educational challenges. Brain drain is accelerating and drop-out rates continue to climb at alarming rates.⁷ Tunisian students receive only an average of 7.1 years of schooling.⁸ Much of Tunisia's current problems are the consequence of Ben Ali's populist reforms to an education system that under his predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, had set Tunisia apart for the quality and selectivity of its citizens' education.

Bourguiba's education system mandated a competitive national exam at the end of primary school that determined eligibility for admission to secondary school. Most of those who did not pass enrolled in terminal vocational schools, *collèges moyens*, designed to match graduates' skills with the needs of employers. Appealing to popular demand for greater school access, Ben Ali, through a 1991 reform, annulled the secondary-school entrance exam, closed the *collèges moyens*, and made it easier for secondary school graduates to enter universities. With the 2002 reform, which made it even easier for students to pass the baccalaureate exam, the universities became suppliers of degrees that no longer represented the level of accomplishment they once did.⁹

The aftermath of the revolution saw some improvements to the educational system, with an increased annual budget and the formulation of different political initiatives, such as "the national Dialogue on Education reform" of 2015,¹⁰ the Education's White Paper of 2016,¹¹ and the most recent Strategic Plan (CSP) 2018-2022,¹² aiming at

⁶ "[Jendouba: rally in solidarity with the family of little girl Maha.](#)" *Agence Tunis Afrique Presse*, November 14, 2019.

⁷ Hajer Mehouchi, "[Indice Global de la Compétitivité Davos 2019.](#)" Ministère du Développement, de l'Investissement et de la Coopération Internationale, Institut Tunisien de la Compétitivité et des Etudes Quantitatives, November 2019.

⁸ Sarah Yerkes, "[Tunisia's perennial priorities.](#)" Carnegie Middle East Center, March 20, 2020.

⁹ Safwan M. Masri, "[Repairing Tunisia's Education System in Key to Tackling its economic Woes.](#)" *al-Fanar Media*, May 23, 2019.

¹⁰ "[Tunisia's education sector to be overhauled.](#)" Tunisia report, Oxford Business Group, 2017.

¹¹ Kristen Canavan, "[Education Reform 2016-2020: Building a better future for students in Tunisia?](#)" *Nawaat*, September 19, 2016.

¹² "[Tunisia Annual Country Report 2018: Country Strategic Plan \(CSP\) 2018-2022.](#)" World Food Program.

reforming the education system, improving teachers' training, upgrading curricula, and infrastructure.

However, despite all these political initiatives, a comprehensive education reform has not yet materialized. What is missing is a structural reform that focuses on the one hand on enhancing decentralization in financial, pedagogical, and administrative decision-making and, and on the other hand on strengthening the use of new information technologies in schools.¹³ Hichem Mechichi's government has its hands full addressing the country's severe economic challenges, aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic. It is clear that education is not the government's top priority, yet the inability of a democratically elected government to effectively tackle educational challenges has only intensified popular discontent.¹⁴

In January 2017, primary and secondary school teachers, with the support of their trade unions, notably the *Syndicat général de l'enseignement de base* (SGEB-UGTT) and the *Syndicat général de l'enseignement secondaire* (SGES-UGTT), both members of the *Tunisian General Labor Union* (UGTT), came together from across the country in protest to urge the government to secure a quality education for every student and to demand the resignation of the Minister of Education Neji Jalloul.¹⁵ Jalloul, was dismissed a few months later, on April 30, 2017, but the real challenges remained. School management was not improved, and school infrastructure was not upgraded; school teachers continued to protest, claiming that teaching was jeopardized by the precariousness and lack of basic safety due to the infrastructure, especially in the rural areas.¹⁶

In July 2018, thirty-two Tunisian higher-education institutions supported by the *Syndicate of Tunisian University Professors* protested demanding reform of the higher education system.¹⁷ Two-thousand university professors went on strike and refrained from holding exams, asking for better salaries to halt the "brain drain" of professors and highly skilled university graduates who were leaving the country.¹⁸

¹³ ["L'éducation en Tunisie, quel avenir ?"](#) TanitJobs, le portail de l'emploi en Tunisie, December 18, 2018.

¹⁴ ["Tunisia's Mechichi Government: Context and Challenges,"](#) Arab Center, Washington D. C., September 14, 2020.

¹⁵ ["Tunisia: teachers unite to demand essential education reform,"](#) Education International, January 17, 2017.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ This is an independent group of university professors known by the abbreviation, "Ijaba," which means "answer" in Arabic. For more information on their activities see their Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/syndicatijeba>, accessed on October 18, 2020.

¹⁸ Ibtissem Jamel and Tarel Abd El-Galil, ["Protests Disrupt Universities in Algeria and Tunisia,"](#) *al-Fanar Media*, July 2, 2018.

However, these actions failed to meet any of their demands, and new protests erupted shortly afterwards in December with the same claims followed by the same outcome. Although the secondary education unions supported the initiative by seeking a dialogue with the government, negotiations between the two sides did not bring any improvement.¹⁹

The limited negotiating strength of the trade unions seems very different from that of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprising when, together with three other civil society organizations, they successfully mediated between various political actors, leading to peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy, an action for which, in 2015, they were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.²⁰

The limited role of trade unions in the current educational debate is best explained by the profound transformation the unions have undergone since the post-revolutionary period, a transformation that has made dialogue with the current political order increasingly difficult and ineffective.

The legal framework governing civil society immediately after the revolution replaced the old restrictive rules and created a “very liberal founding criteria with a view to promoting political pluralism.”²¹ The structure of trade-union organizations was also affected by these changes. New trade organizations were established separately from the UGTT, as was the case for the *Confederation Generale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (CGTT), the *Organisation Tunisienne du Travail* (OTT) and *The Union des travailleurs* (UTT).²² Their memberships increased quickly, adding thousands of members and hundreds of representatives just a few years after their formation. The same happened with the number of social categories (teachers, doctors, civil servants, etc) and sectors (education, health, agriculture, technology,

¹⁹ [“Tunisian teachers resume protests after winter break.”](#) *Middle East Monitor*, January 3, 2019.

²⁰ Sami Adouani and Said Ben Sedrine, [“Trade Unions in Transformation: Trade Union Power and Democratic Transition in Tunisia, The UGTT: A Unique Story, An Unprecedented Experience.”](#) Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, January 2018.

²¹ Kristina Kausch, [“Foreign Funding in post revolution Tunisia.”](#) FRIDE, January 2018.

²² [CGTT opposes an excessively centralized unitary trade union organization such as the UGTT](#) and proposes a confederation based on the principle of federation, where the latter have broad prerogatives. Its membership is progressive, democratic, and mainly composed of women and young people under 40. Unlike UGTT, CGTT's role is not limited to the civil service, but it also encompasses innovative private sectors. [OTT is a militant trade union organization, aligned with Islamists](#), set up to counter the UGTT, which it does not consider independent and [aligned with certain political parties](#). UTT, which became Union Syndicale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (USTT) in [2016](#), aims to build a social solidarity economy and cement the principle of union plurality; it embraces all components of society (women, young people, and pensioners).

etc.) within these new organizations, making internal coordination challenging.²³ The proliferation of actors on both the trade-union and employers' sides created tension in the way the two sides traditionally solved problems. Furthermore, as far as the legal framework is concerned, while the law provides very clearly for the possibility of sector-level bargaining (and also practice), there seems to be no permanent negotiation bodies, nor a specific structure, legally installed to enhance sector-level dialogue or negotiations.²⁴ The number of irregular strikes seems to confirm a lack of discipline within the trade-unions, making it difficult to adhere to the central guidelines and undermining the central leaderships' bargaining power in these organizations.

Despite the limited achievements of their unions, civil society has not given up on voicing its needs in the education sector and has found other parallel channels, such as NGOs, to advocate on its behalf. However, like trade unions, NGOs have also experienced a profound transformation during the post-revolutionary period.

The 2011 legal framework governing civil society led to an overwhelming number of new and small organizations with different programs and orientations, resulting in polarization between secular and religious organizations. By September 19, of this year, there were 23,569 NGOs registered in the National Register of Associations, a myriad of political, economic, religious, social, cultural, and good governance organizations.²⁵ The education agendas of these new organizations are diverse, ranging from the inclusion of the most vulnerable students in the school system; seeking public investment in education, reducing differences in the educational sector between urban and rural areas; promoting the educational debate and greater awareness of the needs of a reform.²⁶

The large number of organizations with competing agendas has made it almost impossible to coordinate their actions, especially given that most of these organizations have few affiliates and a high turnover rate, mainly due to limited financial resources, which compromise their survival. This is particularly true of some

²³ European Commission report, "[Social Dialogue in Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan Regulations and realities of social dialogue](#)," international training center publication, November 2015.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ My calculation is based on IFEDA, 2020, "Recherche dans le registre national des associations", http://www.ifeda.org.tn/fr/index.php?lang=fr&id_page=5.

²⁶ Jamaity is a privileged space for NGOs, displaying activities promoted by the different partner organizations but it is also an online resource for digital documentation, sharing of experiences and the place where the results of community projects are published. more information can be found on their website <https://jamaity.org/associations/>. See also the press release, "[Launch of Jamaity.org: the largest NGO Platform in Tunisia](#)," Euromed rights, January 2014.

civil society organizations in central Tunisia such as the provinces of Kairouan, Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, which suffer from a lack of resources, and are often forgotten.

The polarization between secular and religious organizations has also had a negative impact on their ability to engage in meaningful dialogue with the government and to speak with a unified voice. This clear divide between the agendas of secular and religious organizations is the result of different sources of funding and different realities in which they operate. The secular NGOs are mainly located in the urban areas and are supported by international organizations, such as the European Union, the main contributor to Tunisia,²⁷ United Nations, International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.²⁸ They voice the demands of the secular public schools in Tunisia. The religious associations, on the other hand, advocate for the *Katateeb* (the traditional schools) which are the only legally recognized schools, operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, due to the fact that in Tunisia Quranic schools, or *Madradas*, are outlawed.²⁹ The religious NGOs usually operate in the suburban areas or in the poorest and isolated rural interior where economic and social exclusion is widespread.³⁰ Unlike the secular NGOs, the religious NGOs do not benefit from a wide and diverse range of international funds, likely due to the view of some international organizations about the use of the funds, such as the risk of embezzlement to support destabilizing political extremism.³¹ They are financially supported by local actors as well as by some international donors mainly from Qatar and Kuwait. However, the lack of sufficient funds often prevents faith-based associations from expanding their agendas and efficiently and systematically servicing the educational needs of the areas where they operate.

The new government was formed on September 1, 2020, and the initial talks between Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and the general secretary of the Tunisian union (UGTT), Noureddine Tabboubi, have focused on economic challenges and the public health emergency, while the reform of public education has not yet been discussed.

²⁷ Since 2011, EU assistance to Tunisia has amounted to almost €3 billion (over €2 billion in grants and €800 million in macro-financial assistance); see: [European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations](#).

²⁸ In 2015-16, the top 10 donors of ODA were: EU institutions, France, Germany, the Arab Fund (AFESD), Japan, Italy, the United States, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and Kuwait. data retrieved at OECD DAC Aid at glance page, retrieved at the link https://public.tableau.com/views/OECDDACAidataglancebyrecipient_new/Recipients?:embed=y&:display_count=yes&:showTabs=y&:toolbar=no?&:showVizHome=no.

²⁹ Iman Zayat, "Cult-like 'Quranic school' exposed in Tunisia," *The Arab Weekly*, February 10, 2019.

³⁰ Ester Sigillò, "[Tunisia's Evolving Islamic Charitable Sector and Its Model of Social Mobilization](#)," Middle East Institute, September 15, 2016.

³¹ Mena Fatf report, "[Anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing measures](#)," May 2016.

How long "the mother of all reforms," as the Tunisian president himself referred to educational reform,³² will need to wait is difficult to predict. Even the cries of the demonstrators for the dead 11-year old Maha Gadhgadhi were of little use and nothing has changed, apart from some timely and "urgent" intervention, aimed at stemming those cracks in the system that are now only too visible.³³

Clearly without a strong, well-organized civil society capable of coordinating its actions and speaking with a common voice, these protests are unlikely to persuade the government to implement the kind of reform which, according to experts, could help prevent further economic decline by producing graduates with skills that meet the demands of the private sector and are in line with the needs of the economy.³⁴

In this context, in which the coronavirus pandemic may get worse in Tunisia, it is reasonable to assume that the most serious consequences will be felt by the students, many of whom are at risk of being left behind.

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³² Abou Sarra, "[Education: Des petites réformes à portée de main.](#)" Web Manager Center, September 13, 2020.

³³ [Facebook page of Tunisian president Qais Saeed](#), accessed on October 18, 2020.

³⁴ "[Tunisia accelerating Economic Challenges.](#)" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 21, 2020.