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What Was the Arab Spring?

The Promises and Perils of Globalization

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ABSTRACT

The 2011 Arab Spring protests took place amidst the Great Recession, with limited or declining foreign direct investments in the region, rising food prices, high rates of unemployment (especially among youth), and low public and private investments. In 2014, oil prices fell. At the same time, the fallout from the 2003–4 U.S./UK invasion and occupation of Iraq, the NATO invasion of Libya, and the attempts to destabilize the Syrian regime helped spawn the so-called Islamic State, which wreaked havoc on communities in Iraq and Syria and had spillover effects in Tunisia. Hailed as the one democratic outcome of the Arab Spring protests, Tunisia began to unravel economically and politically, as it amassed a large debt burden, was unable to reduce high youth unemployment, and then faced the 2020–21 COVID-19 pandemic.

As the latest stage of capitalism, neoliberal globalization turned out to be not the great equalizer that its early proponents claimed, but rather something closer to a wrecking ball. This chapter contributes to the literature on globalization's dimensions and evolution through application to the Arab region and the Tunisian case study. Concepts from Marxist and world-systems theories will elucidate the promises and perils of neoliberal capitalist globalization as experienced in a democratizing polity.

KEYWORDS

Arab Spring, crisis, democratic transition, globalization, Tunisia, world-system

In March 2022, *The Economist* magazine declared that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was "the third big blow to globalization in a decade," the first two being former U.S. president Donald Trump's trade wars and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which revealed the fragility of global supply chains (*The Economist*, 2022c). In typically liberal fashion, the magazine warned that "free trade and freedom," which were to have "gone hand in hand," had fractured, and that countries might be pursuing protectionism and even self-reliance. It is true that in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war, precipitated by NATO's refusal to cease its eastward expansionism, the price of wheat and fuel rose. But the weaknesses of neoliberal capitalist globalization had revealed themselves much earlier, in the form of the Asian, Russian, and Latin American financial crises of the late 1990s; the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; the Great Recession of 2007–9, followed by austerity measures and indebtedness; and the growing wealth of elites at a time of stagnating wages, rising prices, and deteriorating public services.

Those "contradictions" (in Marxist parlance) generated the social movements and new governments of the early twenty-first century (the World Social Forum and the Latin American "pink tide") and the protest wave of 2011, encompassing the Arab Spring protests, the European anti-austerity protests, and Occupy Wall Street. Even so, the hierarchical world-system remained intact, and countries in the Middle East and North Africa experienced harsh economic sanctions (Iran) and military invasions (by NATO in Libya, by numerous countries in Syria, and by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, armed by Western countries, in Yemen). The one success story of the Arab Spring, Tunisia, was spared military incursions, but neither was it rewarded for its admirable procedural democratic transition, whether from the European Union (EU) or the system's hegemon, the United States. By 2021, its national debt had ballooned to 90 percent of GDP, its unemployment rates remained in the double digits, and its political system was fraying. The problems were exacerbated by the rising price of food and fuel in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine-NATO (EU-U.S.) crisis. For Egypt as well as Tunisia, the price of wheat skyrocketed (Hamzawy et al., 2022).[1] Had the leaders of NATO, the U.S. government, and the EU even considered the implications for citizens in medium- and lower-income countries of provocation of Russia, a possible war, and sanctions?

This chapter begins with a summary overview of the trajectory and travails of the Arab Spring protests, followed by a focus on Tunisia's democratic transition under conditions of neoliberal capitalist globalization. The case of Tunisia's economic travails points to how the economic and political dimensions of contemporary globalization can be disconnected or decoupled. That is, despite globalization's presumed promotion of democratization, its economic model—neoliberal capitalism—undermines prospects for sustained democratic development or an economically viable democratic transition. Source materials for this chapter include the many academic studies produced after the 2011 uprisings; press accounts; government, UN, and NGO documents; and my own observations and interviews over two decades. The chapter is framed by world-systems analysis, which posits a hierarchical world economy driven by capital accumulation imperatives and an interstate system led by a hegemon. The economic zones of core, periphery, and semiperiphery may at times coexist in some degree of equilibrium but are periodically beset by crises—or challenges from within the semiperiphery—that may augur systemic transition and chaos. Developments in the twenty-first century exemplify these postulates.

THE ARAB UPRISINGS: BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

The Arab Spring, which began with protests in Tunisia in December 2010, initially raised expectations of region-wide democratic transitions, along with new social and gender contracts (Karshenas, Moghadam, & Alami, 2014). Some studies attributed the structural causes of the uprisings to the fallout from two decades of neoliberalization, including rising prices, high unemployment, and deteriorating public services (Achcar, 2013; Hanieh, 2013). Others explored the combination of internal and external factors and forces: authoritarianism and unpopular regimes; collective action legacies; democracy promotion and diffusion of norms of human rights; the effects of the Great Recession (Brownlee, Masoud, & Reynolds, 2015; Mako & Moghadam, 2021). The protests engulfed many countries in the region; four autocrats fell (in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen); and other governments quelled the protests and avoided revolts through some degree of reform and concession.

The Arab uprisings failed to produce either transformative revolutions or consolidated democratic transitions. Shamiran Mako and Valentine M. Moghadam (2021) attribute this in part to the less propitious international and regional environment for such protest movements and the deleterious effects of external intervention, both coercive and noncoercive. In Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, outside intervention in support of, in opposition to, or to neutralize regimes drastically altered protest trajectories (see table 2.1). Internal factors also played a role in determining the outcomes: the quality of political institutions, the capacity of civil society, and the strength and status of feminist organizations. In this respect, only Tunisia had the requisite advantages that enabled it to embark on a democratic transition. The 2010–11 protest demands for jobs, bread, and dignity reflected a desire for a *social* (if not socialist) democracy.

Tunisia established a parliamentary proportional representation system of government, with various freedoms as well as state obligations enshrined in its 2014 constitution. However, it almost immediately felt the consequences of the regional and global crises. The NATO intervention in neighboring Libya had dire effects in terms of a deteriorating security situation as well as revenue losses (see discussion below). Western military incursions into Iraq, Libya, and Syria contributed to the rise of the terrorist network ISIS and its "caliphate," attracting youth from Tunisia's deprived regions. The withdrawal of foreign direct investment (FDI) exacerbated unemployment and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the overall

TABLE 2.1 Arab Spring Protests: Divergent Outcomes, 2011–2022

Nonviolent; no external military intervention	Violent; external military intervention
Tunisia: procedural democratic transition; economic difficulties; president suspends parliament July 2021	Bahrain (Saudi/GCC intervention): return to status quo
Egypt: MB win elections; more protests; army intervenes summer 2013	Libya (no fly zone; NATO assault): fractured, failed state
Morocco: Mouvement 20 fèvrier rallies lead to constitutional amendments	Syria (Turkey opens border to arms and jihadists): massive refugee outflow; fractured state but remains intact
Algeria and Jordan: protests quickly quelled with reforms and concessions; Algeria experiences anti-government protest wave in 2019 (government concessions)	Yemen (Pres. Saleh resigns after attacks): new government challenged; Saudis and UAE attack in 2015; devastation and hunger through 2022

socioeconomic situation, which in turn resulted in political polarization and dysfunction. Neoliberal globalization's promise of a new interconnected world order of cooperation, freedom, and trade proved false.

In what follows, I focus on Tunisia's place in the global system and its patterns of economic, societal, and political development. In world-systems terms, Tunisia is a peripheral country with a small economy that pursued a modernizing strategy characterized by a welfare state, an independent foreign policy, and a dynamic civil society. In the 1960s Tunisia briefly experimented with a socialist development strategy but then moved toward a more liberal economy, which subsequently encountered debt, structural adjustment policies, and a wave of privatizations. The shift was in keeping with the "Washington Consensus," the term coined by economist John Williamson to refer to a set of market-led policy prescriptions for Latin American economies managed by the Washington, DC–based World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the U.S. Treasury. Policies such as "fiscal discipline" and ending subsidies, trade liberalization, privatization of state enterprises, and deregulation were then promoted for all world-regions.[2]

TUNISIA: ECONOMIC OVERVIEW

Tunisia's experience with debt and structural adjustment was accompanied by worker protests, the rise of Islamist militancy, and increasing repression. The *Union générale des travailleurs tunisiens* (UGTT) organized wide-scale protests in 1984 and provided refuge for dissidents and the country's weakened Left activists (Netterstrøm, 2016; Omri, 2015; Zemni, 2013). The end of the decade saw the removal of the country's first postindependence president, Habib Bourguiba, and his replacement by Zein El-Abedin Ben Ali. The Islamist movement was repressed, the two feminist organizations that had formed earlier were legalized, the former communist party was allowed to operate under a new name, and other civil society actors—notably the Bar Association, the Human Rights League, and the UGTT—became more active.[3] Nonetheless, the economic policy framework continued. If the 1980s were a period of debt restructuring through structural adjustment policies for many Third World countries, the 1990s consolidated the wholesale shift to privatization, liberalization, and flexibilization. Tunisia was no exception.

In the 1980s and 1990s, export-led manufacturing boomed and became the most female-intensive sector of the economy and the labor force (Moghadam, 1998: 68). Production of garments in Tunisia had close links with enterprises abroad through FDI, foreign contracting, and localization in export-processing zones. However, the success of the Tunisian garment industry was contingent on special trade policies giving it preferential access to the EU market. Once other countries, mostly in postcommunist Eastern Europe, received similar treatment and Tunisia lost its privileged position, the performance of the garment industry worsened (Aita, 2008: 164). The major trading partners and foreign investors in Tunisia's manufacturing sector were from France, Spain, Italy, and to a lesser degree Germany, and overconcentration of exports in EU markets, especially southern ones, exposed Tunisia to recessions in those markets from 2009 onward (Jaud & Freund, 2015: 11–12), resulting in job losses and higher unemployment. The Great Recession then took a toll. More job losses ensued after the 2011 political revolution, hitting women especially hard (Mouelhi & Goaied, 2017).[4]

Throughout this period, and to remain competitive, "flexible" employment contracts expanded in Tunisia's private sector, which meant lower wages, more temporary work, and less job security for workers. Flexible forms of employment include job rotation, short-term contracts, part-time work, flexible work hours, weekend work, night work, and overtime work. A study found that workers involved in flexible work practices faced a higher risk of work injuries and more mental strain than workers in a more traditional work organization (Haouas & Yagoubi, 2008). Flexibility and low wages were behind the 2008 strikes in the industrial region of Gafsa, but conditions did not change. The privatization and liberalization program continued. In the early years of the new century, the Ben Ali government tried to break up the national airline, Tunis Air, into smaller companies, privatize them, and sell them one at a time. Kasper Ly Netterstrøm (2016) explains how the UGTT's airport workers' union opposed the gradual privatization, leading the national body to call a strike. The government tried to buy off union leaders with generous retirement packages, but the issue continued until the 2011 revolution, after which Tunis Air was renationalized.

In 2012, workers benefiting from indeterminate-length contracts constituted 43 percent of the working population, but fully 44.6 percent had no contract at all, while 12.3 percent were on fixed contracts (CREDIF, 2015: 47). Declining government expenditure entailed a contraction of the public-sector wage bill, and public-sector employment as a percentage of total employment in Tunisia continued to fall. By 2013, public-sector employment as a percentage of total employment in Tunisia had fallen to about 22 percent, just above the OECD average, and considerably lower than the oil-rich economies (*The Economist*, 2015). Economists writing on the economic costs of the Arab Spring have highlighted the significant output loss in Tunisia: 5.5 percent, 5.1 percent, and 6.4 percent of the GDP in 2011, 2012, and 2013, respectively. One study mentioned "the high dependence of Tunisia's economy on economic activity in the Euro area" and found that Tunisia's sluggish economic activity after 2011 "was driven by weaker demand from the Euro-area" (Matta, Appleton, & Bleaney, 2016: 12).

Tunisia's assets include a diversified economy, a relatively well-developed infrastructure and well-trained workforce, and a strategic geographic location between Europe and Africa. However, scholars have noted that the growth of nontradable sectors, such as construction, real estate, wholesale and retail trade, transport and food services, have led to what Dani Rodrik (2016) has termed "premature deindustrialization." Even though high-productivity service sectors—finance and insurance, and information and communications—have grown rapidly in Tunisia, they have done so from a small base with limited impact on the overall structure of employment (Assaad & Marouani, 2021).

Moreover, Tunisia's role in the neoliberal globalization process reflected a pattern seen everywhere: uneven and unequal development and regional and class disparities. Parts of Tunisia also suffer from environmental degradation associated with extractivist practices, as in the Gafsa mining basin. We will return to Tunisia's uneven and unequal pattern of development. First, we examine the security and economic fallout from the 2011 NATO military assault on Libya that dislodged the Ghaddafi regime.

Regime Change in Libya and Effects in Tunisia

Prior to 2011, oil-rich Libya had been a source of employment for Tunisian migrant workers, and many Libyans turned to Tunisia for banking, vacations, and medical treatment. A sober assessment of the fallout from the NATO bombing of Libya notes the ensuing state collapse and fragmentation (World Bank, 2017). By 2014, "about 60,000 Tunisian workers (out of 91,000) officially registered in Libya [had] returned home." As a result, official remittance inflows from Libya dropped to TD 38.1 million in 2014, from about TD 55.9 million in 2010—a decline of 32 percent. Tunisian workers repatriated included construction sector employees, self-employed businesspersons, and similar categories of workers. The World Bank report notes that Tunisia's poorest regions were adversely affected by both the fall in remittances and unemployment, as many of the Tunisian workers who returned home were from those areas (World Bank, 2017: 2, 7).

Tunisia's financial and monetary authorities continued to allow Libyans to open bank accounts, thereby providing useful foreign currency inflows and much-needed liquidity to Tunisia's banks. In 2014, Libyan deposits in seven Tunisian banks surveyed in the World Bank report amounted to TD 2.07 billion (2.4 percent of 2015 GDP), or 12 percent of total deposits in those seven banks.[5]

Cash was also brought over the Tunisia–Libya border after being declared to Tunisian customs, according to the 2017 World Bank report (p. 1), which adds that informal currency exchange agents in Tunisian border towns processed an estimated 1.25 billion Libyan dinars (LD) in 2015 (about TD 814 million) from Libyan travelers entering Tunisia. However, that level of cash inflow was three times lower than in 2013.

Tunisia had been a popular resort destination for Europeans, as well as for Libyans and Algerians. After 2011, the growing security threats lowered Tunisia's appeal as a tourist destination. According to the 2017 World Bank report, between 2010 and 2015, foreign tourist arrivals dropped by 9.5 percent per year, compared to an increase of 3.2 percent per year, on average, from 2000 to 2010, with a concomitant dramatic decline in night stays in hotels and similar establishments. The two terrorist attacks in Tunisia in 2015—at Tunis's Bardo Museum in March and the tourist resort of Port El Kantaoui in June—led to a sharp contraction in Tunisian tourism. Tunisia generally had shielded itself from the political risks and deep civil strife witnessed in other Arab Spring countries such as Libya, Yemen, Syria, and to an extent, Egypt. However, ongoing, unpredictable security threats continued, exacerbated by substantial regional spillovers.

Although Tunisia's initial transition period (2011–14) was beset by security and economic challenges, its dynamic civil society organizations and modern and well-functioning institutions averted the violence and collapse seen elsewhere. The adoption of a new constitution in early 2014 was a major accomplishment. However, challenges remained, as the country's uneven development, high unemployment, lack of substantial external support, and the rise of ISIS attracted youth from Tunisia's deprived regions. Indeed, despite Tunisia's reputation as one of the more liberal countries in the Arab world and the region's only democratic success story, it became a fertile recruiting ground for the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. In turn, the Tunisian government sharply increased defense and security spending (Mako & Moghadam, 2021: 199–200).

Uneven Development

Despite efforts to reorient its economy in the 1990s and into the new century, Tunisia failed to promote private sector jobs. Indeed, private sector employment became overwhelmingly informal and precarious (Assaad & Marouani, 2021; Weilandt, 2018). Sectors with the potential to generate formal private sector jobs—manufacturing, finance, tourism, communications, and other high-end services—grew too slowly, played a limited role in the overall mix of employment, or became victims of the Great Recession. Years of restructuring and privatization also reduced the employment rolls. In the Gafsa mining basis, for example, employment contracted when the Gafsa Phosphate Company, once a state monopoly, was increasingly privatized (Gobe, 2010). Although many of the unemployed had but a high school degree, college-educated youth found themselves increasingly without job prospects. The Union of Unemployed Graduates was established in 2006 and gained legal recognition in 2011 (Bishara, 2021).

Unemployment became more pronounced among women, youth, and low-income groups (OECD, 2018; World Bank, 2015: 8). Whereas total unemployment stood at 15 percent in mid-2017, it was highest among youth (35.7 percent), women (21.5 percent), and university graduates (39.5 percent, with women at 40 percent). The total labor force participation rate remained low (51.7 percent), particularly among women (28.2 percent).[6] High unemployment rates are found in the interior regions of the southeast and southwest, which also experience poverty and deteriorating social services and physical infrastructure. Sadiki (2019) refers to the "multiple marginalizations" that are present in such regions, which have led to frequent protests in recent years. According to one analysis (Weilandt, 2018: 213), "Overall poverty is 10 times higher in the cities of Kairouan (34.9%) and Kef (34.2%) than in the city of Tunis (3.5%). On average, 88% of the Tunisian population has access to drinkable tap water. While this covers almost 100% of the population in the affluent parts of the country, it only includes half of the citizens of Sidi Bouzid."[7]

After 2011, successive governments increased social spending and public sector hiring to cope with the rising social unrest and youth unemployment, but this was carried out through IMF loans that came to burden the country. The IMF continued to monitor Tunisia for currency devaluation, containment of the public sector wage bill (through retirement packages and wage and hiring freezes), "flexibility" with the minimum wage, recapitalizing the banks, and "strengthening the Central Bank's independence" (Aliriza, 2020: 37–38). The UGTT compelled the government to approve salary increases in 2018, but these were offset by inflation. Protests and strikes in the country's interior, where residents demanded more employment and investment, paralyzed gas, petroleum, and phosphate production. Most of Tunisia's debt is external debt, and in July 2020, with a shrinking economy but increased spending to offset the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government sought to delay debt repayment to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, France, and Italy.[8]

Voices within Tunisia's civil society and government as well as internationally called for debt restructuring or cancellation, as debt-servicing repayments were high at a time of decreasing government revenue. At a parliamentary session at the start of his term in September 2020, Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi noted that the public debt servicing amounted to twice the state's development expenditure (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2020). Tunisia's public-debt-to-GDP ratio increased from about 40 percent in 2010–11 to 77 percent at the end of 2018 (Aliriza, 2020: 35–36). As of 2022, it was perhaps as high as 90 percent. An OECD report highlighted problems associated with the budget deficit, debt, and the pandemic (OECD, 2021). A 2019 UN Human Rights Council report states that Tunisia's prime minister at the time "stressed the fiscal challenges the country was facing in meeting the rising expectations of the Tunisian people with regard to their social and economic rights, and urged the international community to recognise the importance of contributing to the country's economic development which is integral to consolidating the democratic gains of the revolution" (Human Rights Council, 2019: 2). A recent study of Tunisia's economic woes reiterated calls for more European assistance to bolster Tunisia's economy and help consolidate its democratic transition (Megerisi, 2021).

Instead of loans, Tunisia needed investments and growth in sectors such as manufacturing, finance, communications, tourism, and food processing, in part to offset premature deindustrialization and employ more workers. The end of the Ben Ali era and the transition to democracy created high expectations among the population. But the new democratic system "has so far failed to satisfy peoples' hopes for improved living standards. In fact, it has presided over their deterioration" (Weilandt, 2018: 217). Social and economic grievances generated protests, often met with harsh government interventions followed by more societal and trade union defiance. Protests in the Gafsa mining region—caused by grievances over low wages, unemployment, and how salaried workers were selected by the Gafsa Phosphate Company—disrupted phosphate production, leading to police action (Sadiki, 2020). In June 2020, healthcare workers went on strike to protest cutbacks and reduced salaries and to demand better working conditions.[9]

Tunisians' discontent with their living conditions became a fundamental threat to the country's democratic transition. Economic difficulties led to political paralysis and dysfunction, which in turn precipitated a drastic intervention by the new president, Kais Saied. In July 2021 he fired the prime minister, suspended parliament, and assumed vast executive powers.

WHAT KIND OF DEMOCRACY UNDER CONDITIONS OF NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION?

Decades of state-led development, which had expanded the public sector, had also generated high expectations for improved socioeconomic rights. In turn, this motivated teachers, health care workers, and civil servants to be at the forefront of public protests and, in combination with other sectors of the population—such as industrial workers, the marginalized poor, and precarious workers—to exert pressure on government. Indeed, Arab Barometer survey data shows that citizens in Tunisia, as in other Arab countries, generally associate democracy with economic and social rights as well as with civil and political rights (Teti, Abbott, & Cavatorta, 2019). My own survey of Tunisian civil society documents, various webinars, and Facebook postings, as well as interviews I have conducted in Tunisia since 2013, confirms the preference for a robust social democracy. This is perhaps why Tunisia's public social expenditure in the early years of the democratic transition was relatively high. According to a 2015 World Bank report, Tunisia's total public social expenditure—inclusive of education, social insurance (retirement, health, minimum income allocation, social services), and subventions—was, at 26 percent of GDP in 2013, considerably higher than in many middle- and high-income countries (World Bank, 2015: 4).[10]

Samia Letaief, an officer of the UGTT also active in the feminist movement, explained in an interview in March 2014 that within both movements "we work for equality of public and private labor law, social insurance for all workers, maternity leave and crèches, healthy workplaces, and against sexual harassment. We want the government to ratify ILO Convention 183 [on maternity protection]."[11] Those goals were shared by the Forum for Economic and Social Rights, which organized a march and rally in Tunis in March 2014, along with the Tunisian Social Observatory, the UGTT, and the two long-standing feminist organizations ATFD and AFTURD. Similarly, Nadia Chaabane, a member of the National Constituent Assembly representing the left-wing El Massar party, stressed the importance of socioeconomic rights:

> We need social insurance for all citizens and infrastructural development in the interior—roads, schools, and so on—so that people in the interior don't have to leave it for the cities; this is part of the state's responsibility. We don't need to rely on private investment and especially not on foreign investment because we had that in the past and it was used in a corrupt manner. We have our own internal resources and they need to be deployed and distributed in an effective and equitable manner. And we need consultation and participation in decision-making; this way we can build the people's confidence in themselves and in government.[12] As she observed: "I like the welfare system of the Nordic countries with its extensive social protection of citizens and the participatory model [*un modèle participatif*] of the left-wing Latin American countries. The future must be more participatory: with the participation of civil society organizations and youth; with transparency, no corruption, and no paternalism."[13] She hoped that Tunisia would not become "like those countries with limited voting. We have seen the deficits of democracy and want to avoid them."

Such participatory and consultative measures were in fact attempted after the work of the Constitutional Assembly ended and new elections took place. A draft law was prepared in 2014 for the creation of a new National Social Dialogue Council. With a rotating presidency, the Council would have tripartite representation by the government (coordinated by the Ministry of Social Affairs), labor unions (represented by the UGTT and other bodies), and the private sector (represented by *Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat*, or UTICA, and other bodies). A new government formed in 2015 was charged with developing the country's first midterm, five-year development plan since 2010. Tunisia's National Development Plan for 2016–21 provided an important platform for financing a unified social protection and labor reform agenda. Democratic consolidation in Tunisia would entail enhancing social protection and labor delivery systems over the short term and realigning policies on benefits, eligibility, and financing schemes over the medium to long term (Moghadam, 2019). However, the necessary international support—whether in terms of foreign direct investment for job growth or concessionary loans and grants—was not forthcoming. Instead, Tunisia's debt burden increased, unemployment remained high, and informal, non-regular types of work proliferated.

A poll conducted for the U.S.-based International Republican Institute (2017) showed that 68 percent of respondents described the current economic situation in Tunisia as very bad, and a further 21 percent described it as somewhat bad. Some 61 percent felt that the incumbent government was bad or very bad at creating jobs. Fully 83 percent felt that the country was heading in the wrong direction. And while there was widespread support for democracy in principle, 41 percent said that economic prosperity was "definitely more important" and a further 21 percent deemed it "somewhat more important." Tunisian respondents to the wave IV and wave V Arab Barometer surveys considered the economy to be "very bad." In 2019, 48 percent of respondents identified "economy" as "the most important challenge facing Tunisia today"; a majority (56 percent) of young people said they wished to emigrate (Arab Barometer, 2019: 4, 11).

Despite the continued political economy challenges, the UGTT and UTICA in 2017 jointly produced a "decent work" program, *Le contrat social: Un exemple innovant de Programme par Pays pour le Travail Décent (PPTD) pour la Tunisie 2017–22*, which addressed industrial relations and decent working conditions, employment policies and vocational training, social security, income and wage policy, collective bargaining, and regional development policy. And in April 2021, the government of Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and the UGTT signed a joint agreement to launch reforms in seven state enterprises (including Tunis Air) and in the subsidy and tax systems. This "historic agreement on important battles" was meant to prevent further crippling loans and IMF impositions. According to the press release, Mechichi reaffirmed commitment to preserve state enterprises and not to cede them to the private sector as they were, according to him, the state's treasures. For his part, the UGTT leader Noureddine Tabboubi called for reform of the tax system toward more social justice, and he criticized the lifting of subsidies for some food products such as oil and sugar.[14] This agreement, however, could not prevent the presidential "coup" of July 2021. Nor did it prevent the request for additional IMF financial assistance in 2022, $1.9 billion in a forty-eight-month arrangement (IMF, 2022). A World Bank study notes the 'lost decade for growth' after 2011, government inability to meet citizen aspirations for more and better jobs despite poverty reduction through social transfers, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the country's growing indebtedness (World Bank, 2022). It makes no mention of a small, fledgling Arab democracy's need for international economic support.

CONCLUSIONS

The Arab Spring protests began in the momentous year of 2011, which also included the European anti-austerity protests in the summer and Occupy Wall Street in the autumn. Rising prices, informality, unemployment, and growing income inequality were problems even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Perversely, wealth concentration increased after COVID-19, not only in the United States but also in Arab countries (Abu-Ismail & Hlasny, 2022). In August 2021, the IMF allocated $650 billion of new "special drawing rights" (SDRs), a quasi-currency used to augment countries' foreign exchange reserves. But because SDRs are allocated based on what each member-state contributes to the Fund, most of the SDRs went to core countries, such as the United States and Germany (Ellmers, 2021). Tunisia and other medium- or low-income members hardly benefited. In 2022, the Russia-Ukraine-NATO conflict exacerbated food and fuel shortages and rising prices. Economic challenges and interstate rivalries are indicative of the structural crisis that world-systems scholars discuss. As Immanuel Wallerstein (2013: 35) noted, the world-system has veered so far from equilibrium that it is unlikely to return.

Tunisia's travails exemplify the deficits of an international system predicated on a flawed economic model and pretenses about what democracy can deliver under such economic conditions. But there is no end to the same flawed policy advice: ending subsidies, reducing the cost of labor, upgrading employment regulations, limiting the public sector wage bill (see, e.g., OECD, 2018: 3; World Bank, 2021, 2022). In contrast, scholars more sympathetic to Tunisia's travails call for more external assistance, especially from the EU: "National development banks as well as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development should provide further favourably conditioned loans for Tunisian public and private investment. . . . The EU should unilaterally liberalise trade with Tunisia, particularly for agricultural products. . . . Tunisian companies [should obtain] immediate access to the EU market [with] Tunisia opening its own market only gradually" (Weilandt, 2018: 215).

An even more assertive perspective was provided by former member of the Constituent Assembly Nadia Chaabane: "We must be more creative in our solutions, for example, create employment in the context of sustainability, such as advancing renewal energy."[15] Chaabane's comments on renewable energy were echoed by Tunisian scholar Larbi Sadiki (2019), who promotes "Greening Development." Tunisia's government, he writes, must try to reverse environmental degradation coupled with the spread of chronic diseases resulting from chemical production and mining:

> The central government must commit to offering serious compensation to mitigate the consequences of multiple marginalization. To do so, it must collaborate with deprived regions and the international donor community to promote inclusive

> development practices. The aim should be to seek assistance in cultivating self-regenerating regional development; political decentralization that helps ensure greater regional representation at the national level; and clean air and energy systems. Such policies will also help stop environmental and health degradation caused by uneven postcolonial development that is detrimental to man and nature. (Sadiki, 2019: 8)

There is merit to the argument for more EU support for Tunisia's democratic development. There is no evidence, however, that the EU and the United States will work toward a global political economy of a new type, predicated on the redistribution of wealth and more transnational solidarity. At this writing (May 2023), all Western eyes remain fixated on Ukraine's plight, generosity to Ukraine appears boundless, and Western military spending is on the rise. Neoliberal globalization as a system of interconnectedness with the promise of uplift has turned into its opposite, and it has failed to provide conditions for sustained—let alone sustainable—democratic development.

NOTES

1. On rising bread and fuel costs, see *The Economist* (2022a, 2022b).

2. For details on the making of the Washington Consensus, see Babb (2009). For details on the key features and consequences of this neoliberal capitalist model, see Harvey (2007).

3. The two feminist organizations: *Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates* (ATFD) and *Association des femmes Tunisiennes pour la recherche sur le développement* (ATFURD). Following the collapse of the USSR and the communist bloc, the Tunisian party changed its name to *Tadjdid* (Renewal).

4. See also *Jeune Afrique*, no. 3102, July 2021, "Out of Africa," 124–25. A decade-long wave of departures of enterprises, mostly foreign, occurred because of political and economic uncertainties.

5. The bulk of Libyans' bank accounts in Tunisia were funded by wages, including payroll transfers from the Central Bank of Libya (CBL) to Libyan state employees residing in Tunisia, and salary transfers from private sector employers.

6. In 2020, Tunisia's unemployment rate was 16.7 per cent. See "Employment in Tunisia—Statistics & Facts," Statistica, www.statista.com/topics/8902/employment-in-tunisia/, accessed April 2, 2022.

7. Sidi Bouzid is where the self-immolation of fruit-seller Mohammed Bouazizi in December 2010 sparked the Tunisian uprising.

8. See "Tunisia Seeks Late Debt Payments as Crisis Hits Economy, State Budget," Reuters, July 13, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-economy-2020-idUKKCN24E18V.

9. Personal communication from a UGTT health sector official; see also "As Tunisia Declares 'Victory' over Virus, Healthcare Workers Strike to Demand Reform," *The New Arab*, June 19, 2020, https://www.newarab.com/news/tunisian-healthcare-workers-strike-demand-reforms?amp.

10. Even not counting subventions (7 percent), Tunisia's social spending, at 19 per cent of GDP, was higher than that of Mexico (14 percent), Turkey (16 percent), and Chile and Korea (17 percent).

11. Author's interview with Samia Letaief, Tunis, March 4, 2014, at AFTURD Espace Tanassof.

12. Nadia Chaabane, personal interview, March 6, 2014, National Assembly, Tunis. A representative of El-Massar, she was also a member of the *Commission des instances constitutionelles* (covering corruption and effective governance). A dual national (French-Tunisian), she had been active in the antiglobalization movement and close to ATTAC (which called for a tax on financial speculation) but returned to Tunisia in 2011 to take part in the democratic transition.

13. Nadia Chaabane interview.

14. "Gov't, UGTT Ink Joint Agreement to Launch Reforms in 7 State Enterprises, Subsidy and Tax Systems," Agence Tunis Afrique Presse, April 1, 2021, www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Society/13848744-gov-t-ugtt-ink.

15. Nadia Chaabane interview.

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