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**“PULL YOURSELF UP BY THE BOOTSTRAPS” A NEOLIBERAL GUIDE TO  
DEMOCRACY: HOW WESTERN BANKING INSTITUTIONS PREVENT ECONOMIC  
EQUALITY IN TUNISIA**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL  
FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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**5 February 2021**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research would not have been possible without the support of Professor Sumita Pahwa. Professor Pahwa worked tirelessly, sending edits over the weekend, rereading my paper countless times, and most importantly, encouraging me throughout the entire process. I would like to also thank the Scripps College Politics Department for all the work they have done to prepare me for this thesis and for encouraging my interest in politics. I would especially like to thank Professor Nancy Neiman for reading my thesis. Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for their love and support throughout this process.

## Methodology

Almost ten years since the onset of the Tunisian revolution, the country remains engulfed in a series of democratic reforms drawing pressure from transitional justice groups and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Amidst this pressure, economic inequality, one of the catalysts of the revolution, has worsened, creating an even greater disparity between the wealthy coastal area and the poor interior regions. Many Tunisians, particularly those from the interior region, are dismayed by the outcome of the revolution and the continual transfer of power and money between elites at the impoverished south's expense. Economic inequality was at the forefront of the interior region's revolution, with the slogan, "freedom, work, and dignity," illustrating their major complaints with elitist corruption. While the revolution did give Tunisians their freedom from the authoritarian regime, the region faces high unemployment and inequitable access to resources, signaling that while freedom has come, work and dignity lag behind. Almost a decade later, these same issues continue to dominate the forefront of the interior region's complaints. The Afrobarometer surveyed Tunisian youth in 2020 and found that 43% believe that both unemployment and management of the economy are the most pressing problems their government must address.

However, the government's current approach ignores the plight of the interior region by instead adopting structural and economic adjustments encouraged by international actors. Despite a political upheaval only just a decade ago and the new promise of democracy, Tunisians have grown politically apathetic and have even begun to mistrust the democratic institutions they advocated for years prior. These Tunisians, mainly from the country's interior region, have become rightly disillusioned with the government since they have seen little change, particularly in terms of economic inequality or job opportunities, the reason they first turned to democracy. This disillusionment is evidenced by significantly low voter turnout in the interior region,

particularly among the youngest voters, and polls indicating a great mistrust and dissatisfaction with the country's political future. As a result, Tunisia's successful and long-lasting transition to democracy is teetering at the brink of another revolution. Quantitative data from the Afrobarometer shows that only 46% of people polled prefer democracy over any other form of government. Over 79% say that the country is heading in the wrong direction. Tunisia's government has chosen to ignore the lessons from democratic consolidation and post-soviet transition theory and instead listens to international financial institutions such as the IMF or World Bank, who have encouraged them to prioritize free-market restructuring. Thus, without full government or international support, transitional justice has failed to answer some of the most pressing inequities. This raises the question of why the Tunisian government has failed to address economic inequality, particularly through their transitional justice process, and why they have instead pursued austerity measures put in place by the World Bank and IMF.

Data from the Afrobarometer clearly illustrates that a significant percentage of Tunisians are also worried about the direction of the country, and in stark contrast to the democratic yearnings of the revolution, less than 50% of those surveyed prefer democracy. The Afrobarometer's data can be seen beyond the polls through mass protests rejecting privatization and neoliberal economic reform. In turn, the regime led by political elites from the former Ben Ali and Bourguiba regimes have continued to follow the guidance of the IMF and World Bank, which has failed to address high unemployment and has only increased the cost of living. There is a significant discord between what Tunisian civil society believes is most important in the transition—economic inequality—and what the political elite and Western Banking Institutions advocate—neoliberal economic reform. The majority of Tunisians surveyed are worried about the state of the economy and its growing inequality. Yet, the Tunisian government has done little

to address this inequality despite it being one of the leading causes of the revolution. The Tunisian government's failure to address its people's economic concerns has led to a lack of confidence in the country's future.

Tunisia's democratization process is undergoing two monumental changes simultaneously even before the first mass suffrage election for president —the creation of a new political system and a dramatic economic restructuring. Democratization theory raises the question of whether Tunisia can undergo both political and economic transformation while still maintaining mass support for the democratic regime. Theories of democratic consolidation argue that democratization processes are threatened if a country in transition is undertaking both political and economic restructuring.<sup>1</sup> For example, democratic consolidation theory argues that a country cannot attempt economic restructuring without first having established political institutions respected by the majority of the population. This is even more of a threat if the public is dissatisfied with the overall political processes since a positive opinion could work as a buffer to economic upheaval. Linz and Stepan argue that a democracy is not consolidated if a majority of the public is unhappy with the economic and political future of a country. They draw on past cases of democracy promotion to critique the belief that economic reform and market liberalization will create a consolidated democracy. Linz and Stepan write that pursuing economic reform will create painful restructuring that will, at first, economically hurt many people. Thus, they must have well-established and trusted political institutions. Otherwise, they will be unable to see the rationale for economic. In turn, Linz and Stepan believe that if

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<sup>1</sup> Linz, Juan, and Alfred Stepan. "Toward Consolidated Democracies." In *Debates on Democratization*, eds. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner and Philip Costopoulos, 3-19. (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2010).

democratization occurs at the same time as economic reform, there will be significant public dissatisfaction with the direction of the country. Therefore, Linz and Stepan argue that democratization cannot coincide with economic restructuring. As a result, these political scientists believe that privatization and market reform cannot happen without first addressing the need to create strong democratic institutions.

Despite democratization theory illustrating that a country cannot assume both political and economic restructuring at the same time, the Tunisian government expects successful democratization through austerity measures enforced by the IMF and World Bank while not currently possessing strong democratic institutions. Democracy promotion theory and its critique argue that Western Banking Institutions take advantage of developing countries, particularly those in transition who need monetary aid and foreign recognition, by offering loans with strings attached requiring neoliberal reform even if it is not in the best interest of the country. Former leader, Bourguiba, set Tunisia on a course towards neoliberal reform by establishing a relationship with the IMF in 1958. This relationship forced Tunisia to implement neoliberal reforms. They continue to remain indebted to the IMF, meaning that they cannot sever this relationship without having the funds to pay off their debt. Similarly, Tunisian presidents have expressed an importance in reforming and privatizing their economy to spur foreign investment and even argue that it is the most crucial agenda to move the country forward. Tunisia's relationship with the IMF and World Bank has prevented transitional justice in Tunisia from fully holding those accountable for past human rights abuses, in which the Truth and Dignity Commission attempted to claim that the IMF and World Bank were responsible for monetary reparations for the harm they've done; therefore, there is a conflict between democracy promotion policy and transitional justice efforts in Tunisia. Political scientist Corinna Mullin

critiques democracy promotion and its influence on transitional justice, arguing that transitional justice is merely an extension of democracy promotion which works to ". . . [L]ock postcolonial states within an unequal capitalist global economy so that they can continue to be sites of speculative investment, and natural-resource and surplus-value extraction" (27)<sup>2</sup>. Mullin further argues that democracy promotion theory emphasizes the importance of individual rights versus collective rights. Therefore, if this were the case in Tunisia, we would see a strong emphasis on individual rights and reparations throughout the transitional justice process coupled with neoliberal economic reform.

Democracy promotion as an academic theory in political science argues as Linz and Stepan pointed out, that democratic transitions must focus first on establishing political institutions and then focus on economic reform. However, democracy promotion as a policy does not follow this sequencing. Instead, its followers, such as the World Bank and IMF, advocate for dramatic economic reform through privatization and neoliberalism while the transitioning country is simultaneously undergoing a political transformation. The Tunisian government had little choice but to follow this policy, they had been indebted to the IMF since the late 1950s, and if they were to cut off this relationship, they would have to pay off all their debt. Also, the Tunisian government led by political elites is dependent on foreign recognition and monetary aid, which they believe is integral to moving the country forward through a unified government. Therefore, there is a significant dichotomy between academic theory on democracy promotion and its use in policymaking decisions. As political theorist Sheri Berman points out, democracy

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<sup>2</sup> Mullin, Corinna, Nada Trigui, and Azadeh Shahshahani. 2019. "Decolonizing Justice in Tunisia: From Transitional Justice to a People's Tribunal." *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 71(1): 22–39.



promotion as a foreign policy, particularly foreign policy from Western Nations such as the United States, believe in a “shock approach” in which, “. . . [T]he key to democratization was the removal of authoritarian elites standing in its way, after which the structures and institutions of democracy would develop spontaneously out of desire of all peoples for freedom and self-rule” (Berman 147)<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, democracy promotion does not seek to create strong institutions that can support economic restricting or neoliberal policy; rather, policymakers misguidedly assume that countries in transition will naturally form strong institutions in conjunction with economic reform.

Tunisia’s transitional justice process follows an outdated approach to democratization from the 1990s, emphasizing individual over collective rights by working to address violence or human rights violations on an individual basis rather than working to disrupt systemic inequality and human rights violations. This research will better inform democratization theory and transitional justice committees on the role of economic inequality in democratic transition. It can aid transitioning countries, whether current or in the future, particularly those in the Arab World with a similar history to Tunisia. It can also help transitioning governments make the best decisions for their country when struggling with conflicting pressure from organizations such as the IMF and World Bank or human rights backed groups, such as the International Transitional Justice Committee. Most importantly, this research will provide a human rights approach to transition and democratization theory.

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<sup>3</sup> Berman, Sheri. “How Democracies Emerge.” In *Debates on Democratization*, eds. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner and Philip Costopoulos, 145-158. (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2010).

## Democratization Theory

Democratization theorists are conflicted on the role market reform, and privatization plays in countries undergoing a transition to democracy. Democracy promotion advocates from the United States and European Union argue that once a country begins a transition, through the removal of the authoritarian government, democratic institutions will arise, particularly if the country focuses on rebuilding its economy and embracing neoliberal policies, such as privatization. The same people <sup>4</sup>believe that the country in transition's main goal should be on creating a prosperous government, with the support of Western organizations such as the IMF and World Bank, and that the harmful remains of the authoritarian regime (economic inequality) will disappear once the economy improves. In this paper, I will argue that this framework is based on flawed assumptions since Tunisia's history of regional economic inequality has continued to be a prominent issue throughout their transitional process and continues to be a major factor in Tunisians' dissatisfaction with the government. While political scientists have argued that economic shock therapy ultimately harms the democratization process, many transitioning countries follow foreign powers' misguided advice and democratization policy. Tunisia's choice to follow democratization policy, not theory, provides important insight into why countries undertake political and economic reform and the role foreign democracy promoters play in enforcing this decision.

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<sup>4</sup> Linz, Juan, and Alfred Stepan. "Toward Consolidated Democracies." In *Debates on Democratization*, eds. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner and Philip Costopoulos, 3-19. (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2010).

## Post-Communist Lessons

The fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent transition to democracy inspired Western leaders to promote democracy in a diverse range of countries. This democracy promotion was established out of the post-communist transition and argued that capitalism and democracy go hand in hand. Thus, in order to promote democracy, Western powers, such as the United States or European Union or their international banking institutions, must establish economic reform that may even precede established political institutions. Post-communist literature finds that countries that fared better economically, in the long run, were those that underwent rapid free-market liberalization as opposed to countries that chose to establish democratic political institutions while undergoing gradual economic liberalization. As a result, this literature prompted democracy promoters to emphasize the need for free market liberalization even before other democratic changes. This is illustrated through agreements between international financial institutions and transitioning countries, such as Tunisia. In these agreements, the transitioning country is required to implement swift economic reform in order to widen their private sector and become more attractive to foreign investors. As a result, post-communist transitions illustrate that elite cooperation means that economic reform will not be led by those who wish to create a more equitable economy; instead, they will focus on establishing neoliberal reform. Thus, showcasing that capitalism is integral to democracy promotion policy.

Literature on post-Soviet transitions<sup>5</sup> explore the role of democracy promotion and consolidation theory, finding that economic and political justice cannot occur in conjunction with

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<sup>5</sup> Solnick, Steven L. 1999. "Russia's 'Transition': Is Democracy Delayed Democracy Denied?"

*Social Research* 66(3): 789–824.

one another without impacting the future of democracy. This literature also explains that a focus on consolidation of democracy and a transition enables the political elite to move from one regime to another and that they can often take advantage of a transition by espousing democratic ideals and the emphasis on a free election while allowing remnants of the authoritarian regime to survive. Elite consensus theory further explains that the political elite from former regimes will spur a transition by forming a consensus to implement neoliberal economic reform. Thus, this research from post-soviet transitions, in particular studies of Russia, illustrate that democratization does not simply result from a removal of the authoritarian regime and that democracy promotion and consolidation theory often lead to neoliberal economic reform, which in turn, distracts from creating meaningful and substantial democratic and institutional change.

However, the critique of this view of democratization has grown in recent years.<sup>6</sup>Critics, such as political scientist Valerie Bunce, argue that transitioning countries cannot undergo market reform or privatization while also reforming their institutions and political processes. According to political scientist Valerie Bunce, this critique develops out of post-communist democracy theory in which, after time passed, political scientists began to see the flaws in upholding the former Soviet Union, particularly Russia, as a model for democracy promotion. This critique the view of western democratization organizations that emphasize that market reform and liberalization will then lead to more democratic institutions, “The widely held view that market reform and privatization can legitimate new democracies is based on the dubious assumption that economic improvement can be achieved simultaneously with the installation and

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<sup>6</sup> Bunce, Valerie. 2003. "Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Post-communist Experience." *World Politics* 55(2): 167–92.

legitimation of democratic institutions” (Linz and Stepan 17). Therefore, this view supports my argument that Tunisia cannot expect that rampant economic inequality will be resolved through austerity measures advocated by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. My research will also add to the growing literature that economic equality is a right, not a privilege, and thus, that transitioning countries must address these issues head-on and not allow them to be left to market-driven reforms (Arbour 2006).

### **Transitional Justice Theory**

The Tunisian people have grappled with a long history of political violence, starting first with France's colonial power and then later through the authoritarian regimes installed after their independence. Similar to how a transition from colonialism to authoritarian rule did little to address the Tunisian people's grievances, so too would a mere transition from revolution to democracy. Thus, Tunisia needed to implement transitional justice to uphold the human rights of its people, but also, to create a new future, they must address their past. Unfortunately, transitional justice is not an overly simple process and depends on the country's political and economic ability. Transitional justice groups can only create as meaningful of change as the country will allow, and thus, often ends up as a relatively performative process whose fate rests in the hands of the political elite and foreign democratic policy promoters who do not want its emphasis on economic, human rights to interfere with their separate economic agenda. Thus, transitional justice theory often conflicts with democracy promotion policy.

Transitional justice theory has developed throughout the past few decades as its use has grown, and since there is more available data from early countries that completed transitional justice, such as South Africa. A growing debate in transitional justice theory is the role social and economic rights should play in its process. Transitional justice has formerly sided with policies

advocated by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank that argue that social and economic rights will naturally come after the transitioning country strengthens the economy (Arbour 2006). However, human rights groups have critiqued this theory, arguing that transitional justice leaders should actively work to dismantle the existing structures that allow and create violations of social and economic rights. Transitional justice must focus on economic issues of inequality through a collective lens rather than an individual if it is used as a mechanism to support democratization in a transitioning country; otherwise, it will do little to disrupt the already existing systemic inequalities, adding to revolutionaries' distrust of substantial change through democratization. However, while transitional justice groups may try to push for more structural change to combat economic inequality, their wants will be overtaken and ignored by elected leaders who are indebted to foreign democracy promoters and must implement neoliberal economic reform that is often the antithesis of economic equality. Thus, in the case of Tunisia, the Truth and Dignity Commission was unable to implement structural economic reform while the government ignored their reports and passed economic reform that granted amnesty to corrupt officials and raised the cost of living for the Tunisians the Truth and Dignity Commission found in most need of reparations and reform.

### **International Understanding of Transitional Justice**

Transitional justice may have only first begun to gain prominence in South Africa in the 1990s. However, it has drawn on past political struggles for democracy, particularly those after the breakdown of the Soviet Bloc. Thus, transitional justice is also strongly impacted by the West's infatuation with democracy promotion in former authoritarian regimes. Bush's words clearly illustrate a newfound interest in democracy promotion but also the new view that democracy and capitalism go hand in hand, something not exactly backed up by political

scientists. Despite this critique of neoliberal democracy promotion, institutions such as the IMF and World Bank espouse the notion that capitalism and creating a free market is the most important step towards bringing democracy to former authoritarian regimes. As a result, countries such as Tunisia that rely on Western banking institutions for necessary foreign aid must implement neoliberal economic policies if they wish to receive any funding, even if this does not necessarily bring about equality or democracy for all.

### **Transitional Justice in South Africa**

Western countries and democracy promoters have regarded South Africa as the first country to undertake transitional justice successfully. However, many Black South Africans have complained that the process was performative and did little to mitigate existing inequities that continue to impact them today. Therefore, South Africa is yet another example of the failure to address economic inequality through a transition process. Analyses of transitional justice in South Africa, a country often lauded for its adoption of a post-apartheid transitional justice process, have critiqued the often-symbolic notion of justice found in this process. Although South Africa is upheld as a successful transition that has undergone transitional justice, particularly by Western groups such as the International Committee on Transitional Justice, the country has failed to receive justice or create equality for a large majority of South Africans. International Relations professor Leslie Vinjamuri critiques this process arguing, "Strategies for dealing with the past are not only political by design, but they also have significant distributional effects, delivering justice, truth or reconciliation for some and denying it from others. South Africa's Commission Commission was inevitably compromised, the vast majority of political crimes remain unreported, and the majority black population has so far failed to reap the economic benefits of transition" (Vinjamuri 2014). South Africa's transitional justice process

was, as Vinjamuri refers to as "compromised" since its mandate purposely left out social and economic rights, thus failing to address the historical inequities that excluded Black South Africans from financial success, employment, and education. Similar to South Africa, Tunisia's transitional justice process has been "compromised" in that its government has prevented it from acting on economic rights violations. Therefore, South Africa and critique on its transitional justice illustrate a warning for Tunisia—that transitional justice historically fails to promote economic equality, particularly among historically marginalized groups.

### **Economic Rights**

The former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour<sup>7</sup>, argued in 2006 that transitional justice must address economic and structural inequality that occurred not only under past regimes but prevent it from occurring yet again. Arbour contends that the current understanding of transitional justice enables it to focus solely on past abuses that clearly violate international law. However, this limited view, she argues, allows other abuses, particularly those that violate economic, social, and cultural rights, to escape transitional justice, meaning these victims do not get justice but also that these abuses can and often will continue into the new regime. Arbour contributes this separation between economic and social rights with political rights to two distinct human rights covenants in 1966—The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Arbour believes that this separation supports the notion that these human rights are not linked and that one—civil and political rights—is not as important as the other. As a result, economic rights can be separated from transitional justice, preventing its reach. In Tunisia's case,

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<sup>7</sup> Arbour, Louise. "Economic and Social Justice for Societies in Transition." 40: 28.



the Truth and Dignity Commission in charge of the transitional process wanted to pursue economic rights. However, the government refused to provide reparations or structural change and instead offered symbolic reparations and acknowledgment of infringements of economic rights. The government refused to acknowledge the Truth and Dignity Commission's complaint that the World Bank and IMF were responsible for economic rights violations. Thus, although the Tunisian transitional justice process wished to include economic rights, the government at the hands of western banking institutions refused to cooperate with this inclusion.

If transitional justice's broader objectives of social transformation and the prevention of conflict are to be achieved, it is not only important to build dispute resolution institutions and ensure accountability for abuses but also—and perhaps even more importantly—to attack the sources of legitimate grievances that, if political rights are intrinsically linked to violations of economic, social and cultural rights, whether they are causes or consequences of the latter (Arbour 8). Therefore, all human rights are intertwined and must be addressed in transitional justice.

### **History of Economic Inequality in Tunisia**

In order to contextualize Tunisia's current transitional justice and its economic inequality, I will use chapters from the book *The Arab Anomaly* to understand the history of Tunisia's economic policies since their freedom from French colonization. This literature will enable me to understand better how Bourguiba and Ben Ali's authoritarian regimes created regional economic inequality. This literature also explains the complacency of the IMF and World Bank have played in perpetuating this inequality by enforcing austerity measures that enable the Tunisian government to perpetuate economic inequality while simultaneously refusing to address this inequality until democratization became a reality here. Ultimately, this will strengthen my

argument by allowing me to trace the ways in which regional economic inequality has persisted even throughout the transitional justice process and how economic inequality severely threatens the continuation of democracy in Tunisia and must be addressed immediately.

Although almost anyone can start a revolution, in Tunisia's case a mere fruit vendor, the subsequent political transition and the new regime's lasting success are often dependent on what political scientists Higley and Burton call "the elite variable."<sup>8</sup> Higley and Burton argue, "Stable democratic regimes depend on heavily on the 'consensual unity' of national elites" (245). Thus, according to this theory, the opposite can be true—unstable regimes result from a disunified elite. Higley and Burton's theory is upheld in Tunisia—elites in Tunisia were split between two main factions: Islamists and secularists. These warring political parties were at odds ever since Tunisia's independence from France. However, after the 2011 revolution, these two political groups were forced to work together to create a lasting democratic transition. After Ben Ali's resignation in January of 2011, the Islamist party Ennahda won elections and formed a coalition government with two secularist groups. Despite some tensions between these two groups, further heightened by two secular politicians' assassination in 2013, these groups continued to work together to establish a constitution and continue the country's transition to democracy. As a result, in 2014, when the secularist group Nida Tounes won the election, they similarly formed a consensus with Islamist groups. Thus, this elite consensus enabled Tunisia's government to continue with its democratic transition; however, it also meant that compromise could undermine some of the revolution's most pressing issues.

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<sup>8</sup> Higley, John, and Michael G. Burton. 2012. "The Elite Variable in Democratic Transitions and Breakdowns [1989]." *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 37(1 (139)): 245–68.

After the removal of Ben Ali in 2011 and the subsequent revolution, the country was thrown into turmoil, with no clear path to democracy, thus, preventing transitional justice from taking place until things settled down. The first pathway towards democracy in Tunisia began in January of 2011 when the country, led by the coalition between the Islamic Ennahda party and two secular parties were tasked with forming an interim government and a constitution that could create a sense of normalcy and transition towards a democratic government chosen by the people. In September of 2013, Ennahda formally transitioned power to the interim government formed by the renowned Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, and the country becomes one step closer to addressing its past. As a result, transitional justice was not formally established until December 2013, two years after Ben Ali's removal, under the Organic Law on Establishing and Organizing Transitional Justice. Ultimately, transitional justice did not begin in Tunisia until the spring of 2014, when members of the newly formed Truth and Dignity Commission were elected at the General Assembly of the National Constituent. In October of 2014, the Truth and Dignity Commission teams up with the International Transitional Justice Committee to receive international guidance; however, the process is still dictated by Tunisian elected officials.

### **Role of International Financial Institutions**

The IMF and World Bank, the world's most prominent international financial institutions that grant economic support and guidance to developing countries, have tightly clung to the belief that democracy cannot exist without a free-market economy and that this must precede other democratic institution building. These institutions not only argue that transitioning countries must embrace capitalism, they argue that the free-market economy and other neoliberal policy changes must come first, since democracy, they argue, cannot exist without first a free-market. This line of thinking is upheld by the United States and the European Union through

their democracy promotion; however, yet again, it does not reflect the significant critique from the political science community. Both the World Bank and IMF signaled support for democracy in Tunisia by supporting the G-8 Action on the Deauville Partnership with Arab Countries in Transition in 2011, which focused on economically assisting transitioning countries on their path to democratization. This partnership reflected democracy promotion theory in arguing for the implementation of neoliberal reform at the very beginning of the transition to democracy. Thus, these institutions do not reflect the dialogue and immense research from political scientists who have begun to seriously doubt the theory and implications behind deeming democracy and capitalism mutually exclusive. Rather, these institutions, similar to the democracy promotion groups in the West, act out of their own interest. Political scientist Milja Kurki explains this self-interest, ". . . [M]any international financial organizations have increasingly sought to expand the sphere of market economies of states to capitalist-economies and liberal democratization have been treated as conjoined agendas" (122). Therefore, Kurki points out that despite a growing fracture between capitalism and democracy, international financial institutions continue to strive towards increasing their capitalist influence across the world.

#### Tunisia's relationship with Financial Institutions

In 1956, Tunisia escaped the long-held grasp of colonial power France, gaining independence after a four-year struggle. However, shortly after, in 1958, under President Bourguiba, Tunisia joined with another colonial power, the International Monetary Fund. By joining the IMF, Bourguiba not only wished to gain international aid to help a newly formed Tunisia left marred by France, but he also wished to gain Western support and approval by signifying that he wanted to work with them. Almost thirty years after joining the IMF, in 1986, Tunisia signed a structural adjustment package that would significantly shift the future of the

economy and Tunisians' lives. This structural adjustment policy emphasized the need for private sector growth in Tunisia, stripping away food and energy subsidies many impoverished Tunisians in the interior region relied on for survival. As a result, this policy hurt the interior regions while aiding the already wealthy coast. Thus, further dividing the two regions and paving the way for the economic inequality that would spur the revolution.

This economic inequality was further solidified through decades of IMF loans and authoritarian rule, leading up to the 2011 Revolution. Interestingly enough, the very things that the revolutionaries in the interior region demanded—basic economic rights—were supported by decades of neoliberal policies enforced by Western Financial Institutions. Larbi Sadiki<sup>9</sup> explains that revolutionary Tunisians' in the interior regions wanted equitable distribution of resources and employment opportunities and were angered by their high levels of poverty, at around 26-32% in comparison to 8% in the coastal region (2).

The Tunisian government had little choice but to implement neoliberal reforms—their debt to the IMF and World Bank make it nearly impossible to disobey—as of 2018, their debt to the IMF made up over 60% of their GDP. Therefore, the democratically elected government had little choice. Those who were elected were the political elite from the coastal area who had benefited from the former relationship with the IMF. Like many transitioning countries, Tunisia has been indebted to the IMF and World Bank under the guise of democracy promotion through improving the economy. Tunisia's relationship with the IMF and World Bank began in the late 1950s since Bourguiba saw this as a way for the country to gain foreign acceptance after their independence from France. Under this current relationship, the Tunisian government must

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<sup>9</sup> Sadiki, Larbi. “Regional Development in Tunisia: The Consequences of Multiple Marginalization.”: 15.

decrease their public sector and enact free-market policies if they wish to continue to receive funding from the IMF and World Bank. The IMF and World Bank enforce stringent attachments to their aid, requiring the donor country to transition to a capitalist economy. However, these attachments also require the donor country to dismantle some of the most atrocious democratic violations, in Tunisia's case dealing with political corruption. Although these financial institutions claim to act as promoters of democracy, they have worked with many countries under authoritarian regimes, such as Tunisia. Only after democracy became popular, they began to act as democracy promoters. For example, the IMF and World Bank have worked in Tunisia for decades of their authoritarian rule, enforcing a free-market economy while turning a blind eye to egregious human rights violations and economic inequality.

There was a significant discord between what the revolutionaries wanted—an equitable economic system—and the neoliberal system required by the IMF and World Bank. Therefore, if the Tunisian revolution were to address the needs of those who started the revolution fully, the government would not have continued its similar relationship with these Western banks. However, as mentioned earlier, the Tunisian revolution was overtaken by the coastal elite who benefited from these neoliberal policies and relied on their aid; thus, the newly formed Tunisian government continued its relationship with the IMF and World Bank. The democratically elected elite had no ability to sever their ties with these banking institutions. Still, they were also part of the small group in Tunisia that was barely impacted by these neoliberal economic reforms since the former regime had directed all investment and development into their region. Instead, these political elite were most worried about establishing a respected position in Western Society; thus, they embraced neoliberal reform that would solidify their position in the global economic order. The IMF and World Bank were more than happy to continue their relationship with Tunisia after

the revolution; however, they had to adjust their policies, or at least appear to adjust them, to emphasize democratic changes. This change was illustrated through the G-8 Act on the Deauville Partnership with Arab Countries in transition in which western financial institutions and countries agreed to aid countries emerging successfully from the Arab Spring through "stabilization, job creation, participation, governance, and integration." The World Bank reflected a similar sentiment after their 2012 agreement with Tunisia in which they claimed they were focused on "social and economic inclusion" and "voice, transparency, and accountability." However, as political scientist Hanieh points out, this shift was more performative rather than literal as the World Bank continued to enforce privatization and other neoliberal policies.

### **The Truth and Dignity Commission**

The elected officials on the Truth and Dignity Commission were separate from other Tunisian politicians and were solely in charge of the transitional justice process, creating a dichotomy between the Truth and Dignity Commission and other Tunisian politicians. This dichotomy was initially positive. It would enable the Truth and Dignity Commission to operate without political motives; however, this meant that they could not implement anything other than performative acknowledgments and hearings without the Tunisian government's full monetary and legal support. Thus, this aspect of transitional justice in Tunisia meant that the government was not responsible for implementing suggestions it did not wish to undertake. In November 2016, the Truth and Dignity Commission began formal public hearings in which they listened to human rights abuses of women in prison.

Over the next four years, the Truth and Dignity Commission steadfastly worked to locate and identify human rights abuses the past seventy years while also working to promote equitable change for the future of Tunisia. Despite this dedication, the Truth and Dignity Commission's

work did not flow seamlessly; instead, it was marred by interference with the Tunisian government, security forces, and even the International Center for Transitional Justice—a body that agreed to remain neutral. This interference prevented the Truth and Dignity Commission's ability to create change since the International Center for Transitional Justice fueled foreign and public distrust of the process, enabling the government to reject their suggestions somewhat reasonably. The Truth and Dignity Commission was unsurprised but disappointed in the President and Parliament's actions to undermine the transitional justice process since it could threaten their political motives. However, they expressed the most dismay with the International Committee for Transitional Justice actions, which were meant to aid the process, not undermine it. The Executive Summary out of the Truth and Dignity Commission expressed their frustration with the International Committee for Transitional Justice (ICTJ):

. . . [S]ince early 2017, ICTJ country office changed its policy vis-à-vis TDC, as evidenced by the many attempts to interfere with the affairs of the TDC and the attempts to influence its decisions and simmer internal conflicts. Once those conflicts were overcome, the ICTJ Country Director started to play the victims off against TDC and to act as if the Center were a parallel Truth and Dignity Commission. ICTJ became involved in the campaigns aimed to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the TDC, while the campaigns to support the Draft Law on Administrative Reconciliation were underway in September 2017. Moreover, in a statement to the press agencies, ICTJ accused the TDC of failing to fulfill its mandate (2019).

Although the Truth and Dignity Commission did not specify the ways in which the ICTJ tried to interfere with internal affairs, they were obviously significant since they “severed relations” with the ICTJ not long after.



Despite this severed relationship with the ICTJ, the Truth and Dignity Commission continues its work to expose human rights abuses and promote a meaningful transition to democracy. After its close in December of 2018, the Truth and Dignity Commission released an over 600-page report detailing their process, the many cases of abuse they found, and their recommendations, which cannot be implemented without the financial backing of the Tunisian government. The Truth and Dignity Commission concluded its work by acknowledging the systemic and regional inequalities; however, they only called for symbolic reparations, individual monetary reparations, or development, reflecting the individualistic practice of democracy promotion.

Although the Truth and Dignity Report specifically highlighted regions that have been systemically and historically marginalized, their findings refrain from victimizing the entire region, rather specific individuals who come forward with complaints. This individualistic approach was challenged in 2017 when the Regional Labor Union of Siliana submitted a collective complaint stating that the government further harmed the region by its handling of protests and did little to address the region's increasing inequality. The CommissionCommission acknowledged that there had been wrongdoing but only recommended symbolic reparations, failing to create lasting change. The Commission initially expressed strong support in providing monetary reparations and economic restructuring to address economic rights; however, the Tunisian government interfered with their process through neoliberal economic reform and refused to hold the IMF and World Bank responsible. Thus, despite being given the opportunity to acknowledge and promote collective reparations to address one of the most pressing concerns—regional inequalities—the CommissionCommission had little choice but to stick to the status quo.

The refusal to call for collective reparations to dismantle the structures of inequality that enabled these historically marginalized regions to continue to worsen reflects the neoliberal democratic model that relies on individualism, as seen through the Commission's call for individual reparations, as well as through their call for development.

Thus, although the Truth and Dignity Commission may not claim to espouse capitalistic ideas of democracy, their call for development reflects this notion.

### **Role of the Political Elite in the Transition**

While the IMF and World Bank pressured Tunisia to adopt economic liberalization under authoritarian rule, the coastal elite got wealthier. Simultaneously, the interior region suffered, creating an even further divide between the two regions. Writer Safwan Masri argues that Ben Ali's relationship with the IMF and their subsequent economic improvements were not distributed equitably; instead, they benefited only the upper classes of the coast as agricultural economic policy favored the coast, directing all public investment there. On the other hand, the interior regions experienced poverty rates as high as 30%<sup>10</sup>. This divide and the government's hand in furthering this inequity prompted the interior region to become engulfed in a revolution. The revolutionary demands of the south and coast are often simplified and grouped together as a call for democracy; however, this oversimplification fails to recognize the disparities between the two regions and the fact that a call for democratic transition did not begin until protests reached the coast. Similarly, it is crucial to note that revolutionary demands in both regions were shaped by different backgrounds, actors, and the ever-growing socioeconomic disparity between

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<sup>10</sup> MASRI, SAFWAN M., and LISA ANDERSON. 2017. "Prelude to Revolution." In *Tunisia, An*

Arab Anomaly, Columbia University Press, 22–37.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/masr17950.9> (September 11, 2020).

the south and the prosperous coast. Bouazizi's self-immolation was not a call for democracy; it was a call for southern recognition and the opportunity to work and make a living wage. The preceding protests in Tunisia's interior were against the region's socioeconomic corruption and marginalization, and their goals are often summed up as a call for work, freedom, and national dignity. Once the revolution spread up the coast, the interior region's message soon became overtaken by revolutionists on the coast, who began to call for political change and, thus, the removal of Ben Ali. Unlike the revolution in the south, which young unemployed graduates led, the coast's revolutionary demands were led by civil society, opposition parties, and political elites who believed that they would significantly benefit from a democratic transition. Soon, the revolutionary message was overtaken by the coastal political elites who would lead the coming democratic transition, and in turn, the southern revolutionaries lost not only their message but also their influence in the ongoing political transition.

It is crucial to understand the implications the coastal elite had in Tunisia's revolution and subsequent transition to democracy since they have largely remained in control of the government and the transition process. Tunisia was able to transition to democracy through an elite consensus of both Islamists and Secularists who formed a coalition to create a democratic state. This coalition was primarily made up of former politicians under the past authoritarian rule since they had previous political experience and therefore organized enough to win a majority of the seats<sup>11</sup>In an interview with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the former

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Ahmed, Sarah Yerkes, Zeineb Ben, and Sarah Yerkes Yahmed Zeineb Ben. "Tunisia's Political System: From Stagnation to Competition." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/28/tunisia-s-political-system-from-stagnation-to-competition-pub-78717> (September 21, 2020).

president of the constitutional reform body quoted, "The current majority of the coalition is increasingly implicated in the return of the anciens and blatant forms of corruption."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the post-revolutionary electoral process has meant that the political elite would play a larger role in the government formation than the less organized and economically disadvantaged revolutionaries from the interior. The coastal elite, who benefited from the neoliberal policies of the IMF and the World Bank under authoritarian rule, have continued to embrace these policies while turning a blind eye to the revolutionary demands of the south, which still remain unanswered. Once a catalyst for the revolution, the Tunisian General Labor Union has led current nationwide strikes after the IMF and World Bank have required Tunisia to freeze public sector wages.<sup>12</sup> The Tunisian government has condemned these protests and continued to follow the guidance of the persistent banking institutions. While the economic agenda in Tunisia is led by the IMF and World Bank, it is not coincidental that their policy is also bolstered by the coastal elite. It is an economic agenda that benefits both parties involved, "Recognizing the existence of plurality of different accounts of how democracy and capitalism inter-relate is important because it prompts us to question the justifications given for capitalist democracy promotion and reminds us that the promotion of capitalist democracy is not 'natural' but a very specific political and economic project (Kurki 123). Thus, as Kurki points out, democracy promotion through capitalism is not justifiable without first considering how this agenda benefits

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<sup>12</sup> "Tunisia's Powerful UGTT Workers Union Holds Nationwide Strike."  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2019/1/17/tunisia-powerful-ugtt-workers-union-holds-nationwide-strike> (February 4, 2021).

those upholding this agenda, in Tunisia's case, Western financial institutions and the political elite.

It has been almost a decade since the revolution, which, to be fair, is not a significantly long time after a political upheaval; however, who has been in charge of the political process during this time can still have a profound impact on the country's future. During this time, Tunisia has had two presidential elections by the people—Beji Caid Essebsi in December of 2014 and Kais Saied in September of 2019. Despite being elected after Ben Ali's removal, Essebsi had close ties with the authoritarian Bourguiba administration and thus represented both the political and coastal elite. On the other hand, Tunisia's current president, Saied, is the first president not to have ties from past authoritarian regimes and remained largely apolitical, thus not representing the political elite; however, he does represent the academic elite of the coast.

Despite only holding two presidential elections by the people, three other presidents helped lead the transition. The first, Fouad Mebazza, was selected by the Constitutional Council to serve as interim president in January of 2011 until they were able to draft a new constitution and hold elections. The second, Moncef Marzouki, was elected in December 2011 by the Tunisian Constituent Assembly. Marzouki was elected by the Constitutional Council, a democratically elected body made up of 217 Tunisian politicians tasked with forming the new constitution. This group was led by a consensus between three different political parties, one Islamist, Ennahda, and the other two secularist—Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol. While drafting a constitution, the Constituent Assembly also worked towards addressing past abuses by freeing those imprisoned during the revolution and by generating a National Dialogue on Transitional Justice that would ultimately lead to the drafting of the Transitional Justice Law that was passed in December of 2013. After Marzouki, Tunisia was finally able to have a presidential

election through mass suffrage, electing Essebsi. However, Essebsi died while in office in July of 2019, causing Mohamed Ennaceur, President of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People, to step in until they could hold formal presidential elections. Although they represented a range of political parties, all of these men had one thing in common—they are from the wealthy coast. Therefore, the revolution was not only taken over by the coastal elite; they have continued to lead its transition.

The Tunisian government, even with each new election, has continued to remain hostile towards transitional justice. In part, this hostility is because the Tunisian government must figure out how to deal with the past while also creating a future in a completely different direction. However, this hostility can also be explained by the political leaders' close ties to the former regime, meaning transitional justice. An in-depth look and accountability to their past actions could harm their political careers. These politicians are also tied up with the IMF and World Bank, who, although on paper may support transitional justice, advocate for free-market reforms over the human rights of transitional justice. As a result, Tunisia's transitional justice process has been significantly harmed by their government's lack of support.

#### Government Interference with Transitional Justice in Tunisia

The Tunisian government has somewhat obviously harmed the transitional justice process. As political scientist Shannon Green for the Center for Strategic and International Studies Think Tank explains, “challenges were part of a government-managed strategy to undermine the TDC’s work.” Green argues that two main challenges to the transitional justice process are first, the Tunisian government's refusal to provide promised access to presidential records that could be used to study further and prove the past regime's widespread abuses, and secondly, the Economic Reconciliation Law that grants amnesty to former corrupt elite. Green

continues to argue that these two challenges can significantly impact transitional justice by refusing them the ability to study and prosecute those engaged in corruption. Similarly, she argues that it enables these issues to continue and that economic elites do not have to account for the harm they created adequately. These challenges are supported by Tunisian politicians, such as Rached Ghannouchi, leader of Ennahda, who in 2013, before the passage of transitional justice law, argued that he believes that Tunisia must move on from their past and instead work towards creating a better economy that will attract foreign investors. Thus, Green thinks that the Tunisian government played a role in preventing the scope of the transitional justice process in Tunisia and its ability to address economic rights adequately. This argument falls in line with that of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund as well as post-communist theories.

Although the Truth and Dignity Commission was established as an independent body, their power rests in the Tunisian government's hands who is simultaneously indebted to the World Bank and IMF. The Truth and Dignity Commission not only relies on government documents and credentials to investigate past abuses, but they also depend on the Tunisian government for financial backing. For example, the Tunisian government supplies the money for reparations under transitional justice. The Tunisian government originally set aside about ten million dinars, equivalent to \$3,700,000; however, this is not enough to address collective reparations for oppressed regions and has yet to reach any victims.<sup>13</sup> This becomes even more complex when the Truth and Dignity Commission called on France, the IMF, and the World Bank to pay reparations to the Tunisian people for the harms they committed through

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<sup>13</sup> “Tunisia: Struggle for Justice and Reparation Continues for Victims 10 Years after the Revolution.” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/01/tunisia-struggle-for-justice-and-reparation-continues-for-victims-10-years-after-the-revolution/> (January 29, 2021).

colonialism under France and aggressive, free-market reforms that hurt the most vulnerable populations. However, this is almost impossible to be upheld since the Tunisian government is led by economic elites who have signaled a desire to advance their privatization and foreign investment, in which a good relationship with France is required. Similarly, they are dependent on the IMF and World Bank for money and loan forgiveness. As a result, the Truth and Dignity Commission cannot fulfill its mission to root out systemic economic inequality both past and present.

Role of Elite in Transitions and Consensus Building

### **The Role of Western Banking in Tunisia**

The IMF and World Bank did almost nothing to mitigate the economic inequality they have caused throughout their relationship with Tunisia. Since transitional justice often excludes economic rights, they could escape unscathed. Instead, they were able to play a significant role in shaping Tunisia's future, some critics even going so far as to argue that most economic policy out of Tunisia is controlled by these institutions and the Tunisian government can do little since their debt to these banks only grows. Under this critique, this unequal relationship mirrors colonial Tunisia—indebted and dependent on a foreign body with little political say. As mentioned earlier, these institutions are aware of this mistrust between themselves and the Arab countries; however, any action to change this has been merely performative. However, Tunisians are well aware of this performativity and continue to protest these economic policies. For example, one of the most controversial economic policies that spurred significant protest and unrest was the Finance Law of 2018. This law increased the value-added tax by 1%, impacting health services, medicines, restaurants, and professional services, without considering each person's income. As a result, this law further harmed those already struggling with the new high cost of living that is



exacerbated through tax increases on electricity, gas, and oil coupled with a decrease in public subsidies and wage freezes. Along with this, many critics of this law believe that the IMF and World Bank were the masterminds behind this law and that the Tunisian government had very little negotiating power. One Tunisian activist illustrated the dichotomy between their country's relationship with international financial institutions and the revolution, "IFI loans and its associated debt were, in the words of one Tunisian activist, 'not a secondary question to the ongoing social struggles confronting the current Tunisian revolution, but at the heart of the struggle, raising economic, political and social questions that relate to popular sovereignty and foreign control, and how we divide the wealth of the country and achieve rights for all Tunisians'" (Hanieh 120). Thus, many Tunisians believe that their economic rights hinge on their country's relationship with these institutions.

## **Conclusion**

The revolution in Tunisia was started by a want for fundamental economic and human rights. It is a want that every human being deserves and that each governing body—whether it be a transitioning country such as Tunisia, a foreign one such as the United States, or an economic entity such as the World Bank—must uphold or endure the consequences of violating international human rights. Tunisia occupies a painful position, haunted by the pain caused by the former regime while filled with hope for a country that can escape the colonial and capitalistic grasp of foreign powers that wish to dictate their country's future. While there has been a great change since Tunisia's revolution in 2011, the political elite and Western Banking Institutions continue to play a role both pre-revolution and after. They have co-opted the revolution to advance their own economic agenda and, in turn, have undermined and delegitimized the reach of human rights in the transitional justice process. The role of the

political elite in Tunisia played a significant role in enabling both economic and political restructuring to occur simultaneously; however, the IMF and World Bank bear the responsibility for forcing Tunisia to ignore democratic theory and implement economic reform through a shock approach at the expense of the transitional justice process and its work on economic rights violations. This finding illustrates that Tunisia, like other developing countries, has been taken advantage of by Western powers, threatening the fate of their revolution and the livelihood of their people.

Tunisia serves as yet another warning to the dangers of foreign powers and the elite and their creation of policy that does not first address the most atrocious human rights violations. Academic theory on democratization stresses the importance of establishing strong political institutions, public trust, and in regard to human rights, collective reparations to those suffering the most. On the other hand, democracy promotion policy enforced by institutions such as the IMF and World Bank ignore this theory and instead pursue economic reform that benefits themselves. These foreign powers and the elite do not represent the Tunisian revolution—they represent a continuation of colonial control. Transitional justice and human rights groups should not have to deal with the interference of foreign bodies or elites; instead, countries such as Tunisia should be able to hold these groups responsible for the inequitable environment they have created.

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