Political Crises, Democratic Backsliding and SDGS in Tunisia: Challenges, Implications, and Pathways to Progress

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex relationship between political crises, democratic backsliding, and sustainable development in post-revolution Tunisia. Politics in Tunisia has maintained an active movement between democratic progress and institutionally fragile periods since 2011. The 2019 presidential victory of Kais Saied became the starting point for authoritarian power consolidation into 2021 that caused damage to institutions, reduced civil freedoms, and extended socio-economic problems. The study goes into great detail about how the current political unrest slows down progress on important Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDGs 8 (Decent Work), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 11 (Sustainable Cities), 12 (Responsible Consumption), and 16 (Peace and Justice). A mixed-methods approach is used to combine SDG Index data with economic data and feedback from Arab Barometer Wave VIII participants and Wave VII survey respondents. The indicators we looked at show that a loss of democracy has negative effects on development. For example, unemployment rises, public trust falls, and decentralization slows down. At the same time, environmental governance falls. The report also outlines potential choices for turning the trend around, including domestic institutional reform, international cooperation, civil society action, and policy designs grounded in international best practices. The study ends by emphasizing that despite the ongoing political uncertainty, Tunisia is still able to catch up with sustainable development through participatory, transparent, and evidence-based governance.

Keywords: Democratic Backsliding, Political Crises, Sustainable Development, SDGs

Introduction

Tunisian post-revolutionary history since 2011 is the story of the dynamic balance between the early democratic gains and the incremental undermining of the latter. In spite of the extent of the post-revolutionary decade invested in the construction of democratic institutions and the entrenchment of a new constitution, entrenched political divisions and chronic economic disproportions halted the next steps (Govantes & Hernando de Larramendi, 2023). The root cause of the disagreements is conflicting ideologies, with some holding beliefs in a secular state while others hold beliefs in the necessity of a religious identity, and strong leadership has, in most cases, been undermined by the capacity of this ideological divergence to cause gridlock (Ridge, 2022). The 2019 presidential election that put Kais Saied into office was the tipping point.

Saied's unorthodox style coup, initiated in July 2021, formally terminated Tunisia's democratic experiment, rather than what some people had first hoped was a resolution to people's outrage. The coup, dubbed a coup d'état elsewhere, has seen the early and dramatic breakdown of human rights, as delineated in Human Rights Watch's 2025 World Report in the form of mass detention, incarceration of political leaders and journalists, and blanket suppression of freedom of

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expression. This political crisis was accompanied by a weak economic performance in Tunisia, with the growth of GDP falling to 0.4% in 2023, as predicted by the African Development Bank Group, coupled with drought and poor domestic demand. The Tunisian political crisis has, to a certain important degree, affected sustainable development goals along with other sectors, with long-term consequences. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) context is the extent of influence by allowing actual social, economic, and environmental concerns to be tackled (Ishac, 2019). It is a description of how development and politics are interconnected. The article explains the political and economic crises listed in the 2019 electoral turn, then Saied's authoritarian turn, and discusses the impact of such democratic setbacks on the most fundamental SDGs and, more generally, those targeting justice, good governance, and economic development. The paper also considers how sustainable development in this new and vastly different political and economic environment can be encouraged, and it draws some lessons from similar international experiences to give some guidance on how to manage Tunisia's very uncertain future.

Literature Review

Relationship between Political Crises, Democratic Backsliding, and Sustainable Development

The development of scholarly debates about the relationship between sustainable development and political crises, i.e., governmental instability, mass protests, and institutional breakdown, among others, is taking shape. According to Huntington (1968), the lack of governance capacity can actually weaken governance sides and also disrupt the continuity of policy, which will contribute to the socioeconomic deterioration. Recurring political turmoil destroys citizen trust, disincentivizes long periods of investment, and impedes reform of development (Solimano, 2005).

Democratic backsliding is defined as a sometimes-accompanying political crisis of the gradual erosion of democratic norms and institutions. It includes the weakening of checks and balances, repression of political opposition, and curtailment of civil liberties (Pisciotta, 2023). Backsliding undermines the rule of law, as well as inclusive governance, and this erodes the two pillars that are key components of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. In fragile democracies where these dynamics are common, the concentration of power is usually in the executive's hands against all the transparency, accountability, and participatory policymaking processes that translate into development outcomes below the optimal level.

Empirical work shows that political instability and authoritarian tendencies decrease state effectiveness in the management of public goods, combat inequality, and basic services such as education, health, and others (Schäfer, n.d.). In discussing these challenges in relation to Tunisia, it serves as a clear case of economic stagnation, deteriorated governance, and public disenchantment that continue to thwart the nation's aspiration to realize sustainable development and recovery through a coordinated and complementary process of economic governance and development.

Relevance of SDGs as a Measure of Sustainable Development

In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were the most comprehensive and globally recognized means of measuring quick progress towards sustainable development by all United Nations member states. There are in all 17 goals and 169 targets in the SDGs, which are meant

to be covering economic prosperity, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and institutional integrity.[2] This framework allows for comparable benchmarking through the use of the SDG Index and Score that have been developed by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) together with the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

SDGs are integrated systematically across the diverse cross-cutting issues, including governance (SDG 16), economic growth (SDG 8), inequality (SDG 10), and sustainable urbanization (SDG 11), to achieve holistic assessment. Although GDP or other such one-dimensional measures are different, SDGs would track the well-being and the condition of resilience on multiple dimensions (Sridhara et al., 2023). In the context of political volatility, their global and national indicators are highly specific on the successes and deficiencies of political decision-making, which can be used very usefully by political decision-makers. SDG metrics lend themselves to showing the power of the interaction of democratic backsliding's governance failures—including other political, economic, and social factors—with broader development outcomes.

Research Gap

Although there has been a great deal of scholarly work around political transitions and subsequent sustainable development in emerging democracies, there has been very little research that draws out the specific triadic relationship between crises in politics, democratic backsliding, and SDG implementation as it applies to post-revolutionary North African states. Although most of the analyses provide an economic depiction of the regime change or institutional transformations, there is little discussion of the impacts of democratic regression on the overall ability of the state to meet SDG targets.

Tunisia's special trajectory—respected at one moment as a paradigmatic case of democratic transition after 2011 and now in autocratic regression—provides rich ground to examine how violations of democracy contribute to the defeat of development aspirations. However, it is necessary to evaluate the manner in which political volatility and deteriorating rule of law have contributed to the evolution of Tunisia's SDG performance, both through quantitative and subjective indicators (e.g., Arab Barometer surveys).

Research Problem

While studies have done some work to understand the impact of political crises on development outcomes, there has never been much that specifically embraces the confluence of political crises, democratic backsliding, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which the current research sets out to fill this gap. For instance, Solimano (2005) demonstrated the role of political stability in promoting economic growth and social development yet did not specifically connect this dynamic with the SDG framework and explore the cumulative effects of this in post-revolutionary states. Like Pisciotta (2023), Pisciotta (2023) focuses on the political structural factors shaping democratic erosion but did not explore the ways in which such political change would impact SDG implementation or public service delivery. Current research has not focused on a case-specific investigation of the ways that prolonged political unrest, combined with democratic regression, directly affects SDG performance in transitional democracies. The analysis requires an integrated approach that combines governance indicators, public

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[2] Albakjaji, M. (2025). Sustainable Development Goals in International Law: A review of challenges in Implementation and Integration. Journal of Posthumanism, 5(2), 1284–1295. Link

perceptions, and SDG data in order to assess how democratic backsliding affects the progress in achieving development goals. This study uses Tunisia as a case study to address a specific gap in the partnership between politics and development.

Methodology

Quantitative Component

Drawing from international datasets (Tunisia's SDG Index Score and Rank (SDSN), World Bank GDP per capita trends, UN Statistical Performance Index, and progress on poverty, unemployment, and education, among others), the quantitative analysis is conducted. These measures are meant to look at whether progress or decline is being made on a set of relevant SDGs over time, focusing on the post-2011 period.

Qualitative Component

The qualitative part involves applying a content analysis of Arab Barometer Waves VII (2022) and VIII (2024) to assess public perceptions regarding governance, inequality, corruption, and public services. The secondary sources also include academic research, human rights reports, and policy documents. Combined, these perspectives provide direction in the matter of how political processes influence the implementation of and public perceptions about sustainable development.

Findings

Part I. The Interplay Between Political Crisis and the State of SDGs in Tunisia

Political or institutional vacuums cannot allow development processes that lead to economic growth and social well-being. A key dimension of Weber's elements of modernity is the establishment of strong institutions, continued economic progress, and subsequent social advancement, which are dependent on political stability (Solimano, 2005). On the contrary, political crises characterized by rapid, often involuntary shifts in political order or governance can be very disruptive of institutional effectiveness and continuity within development (Huntington, 1968).

Tunisia is a positive example of how political instability hampers the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Following the 2011 revolution, Tunisia moved toward democracy for the first time. However, despite the poor economic situation and government failure, the political polarization and socio-economic inequality continued, which contributed to institutional deadlock and further grew public disillusionment (Arab Barometer, 2022). Substantially, President Kais Saied's self-coup in July 2021 had concentrated executive power, suspended parliament, and severely eroded democracy, instituting it and rendering governance capacity even more susceptible (Narain, 2023).

This democratic backsliding has obviously harmed Tunisia's SDG progress, which is recorded in steadily declining performance. The economic stagnation, the weakening of public services, and the loss of institutional accountability that followed this political upheaval (Saks et al. 2021) were direct results of it. Regression or stagnation can be confirmed by the quantitative indicators, for instance, GDP per capita and SDG Index Scores. Citizen perception surveys, qualitatively, are indicated to have seen diminished trust in institutions, inequality on the rise, and a decline in the overall quality of citizens' living conditions (Arab Barometer, 2024).

Tunisia's case represents a clear association with political crisis, democratic erosion, and undermined sustainable development. It brings out the point that stable governance and strong democratic institutions are necessary for SDG realization. Understanding these kinds of connections empirically, through the combination of quantitative data and qualitative knowledge, helps to provide valuable input for how to strategize for 'developmental resilience' in the face of ongoing political uncertainty.

The Roots of Tunisia's Political Crises and Failure at Democratization

The democratic advancements of Tunisia after the 2011 revolution were a shining light for the Arab world. The country must fight enormous challenges because of the national political crises that have halted the advancements toward democracy. In this essay's more detailed analysis of these crises, it emphasizes changes in leadership, continuous confrontations between secularists and Islamist factions (Somer, 2017), and disagreements on basic issues, primarily the place of religion in government. The years after the revolution presented Tunisia with a very volatile political environment. Frequent elections and controlled changes of the heads of government became a common scenario. This repeated swapping of power has come at a political cost to the stability of the nation (Paciello, 2011). Recurrent elections are what define democracy, and democracy does exist, but in certain situations, politics remain unstable as per the speed with which these regimes and governments swap over.

The highest cause for political instability was the extensive difference in ideologies between secularists and Islamists. The secularist camp, including some members of the Nidaa Tounes party, predominantly focused on politics and religion being distinct and the state being more secularized. Islamist forces, who were largely represented by the Ennahda party, were of the opinion that Islam needs to play an even greater role in political life. In addition, the ongoing tensions and fragmentation as a result of the ideological differences have hampered the achievement of political stability. The influence of religion in government became a major issue in the political arena in Tunisia. The problem still continued even after the Ennahda party's first-time softness and its yielding to a power-sharing agreement with secular actors (Govantes & Hernando de Larramendi, 2023). Elite polarization was the dominant driving force behind the derailment of the Tunisian democratization process. The PDL's role was most specifically instrumental. The politicization of foreign policy issues at the strategic level created an exclusionary politics that brought back existing cleavages, and the PDL's continued delegitimization of democratic institutions created the conditions for President Saied's anti-democratic interferences (Rivera-Escartin, 2023).

The Transition to Democracy Itself Wasn't Straightforward

Tunisia needed to reinvent its democratic institutions, including a new constitution, following the revolution. Government and law problems were discussed and addressed in the long and contentious process of constitution-making. Though a source of political instability, it was a necessary prerequisite to determining the destiny of the nation. Inability to provide governance, which is central to the effective application of development plans and programs, is brought about by the dynamic political environment (Ruiz-Campillo et al., 2022). Inability to address critical issues and to revise long-term policy can be a result of constant change in government leadership, and this can also result in institutional inexperience and memory loss. There have also been other economic problems in Tunisia other than these problems.

Social unrest and civilian grievances have been aggravated by economic disparities and large-scale unemployment. These economic problems have tended to manifest themselves politically, leading to hostilities as well as demonstrations. Though hard to sustain, political instability can be cited here as not precisely Tunisia's own doing. As a crisis-ridden region, internal issues of the country have further been complicated by the impact of mounting crises affecting neighboring countries like Libya. Altogether, conflict between secular and Islamist forces as well as disagreements over the role of religion in politics have been characterizing Tunisia's democratic transition. Environmental uncertainty for sustainable development has been triggered by a failure to come to an agreement on such very issues, leading to political instability. Political instability, as a complex phenomenon, requires combined and holistic solutions (Govantes & Hernando de Larramendi, 2023). The decline of the Tunisian Democratic Party was not immediate or sudden but was a process in progress, a step-by-step erosion triggered by the populist instinct of President Saied. (Huber, D., & Pisciotta, B.) Mass polarization and institutional vulnerabilities created the structural conditions necessary for the systematic weakening of institutions and the repression of the opposition, allowing authorization to be realized (do Céu Pinto Arena, 2024).

It is also important to mention that generalized disengagement was one of the determining features of the collapse of Tunisian democracy. After the 2014 compromise, which temporarily stabilized the transition process, the crisis of representation settled in and caused generalized citizen disengagement from conventional politics and a generalized lack of trust towards the political elite. (Ridge, 2022; Koehler, 2023) Kais Saied exploited this "vacuum state" to promote his populist, anti-establishment agenda. Saied's movement, led by desperate citizens, ultimately dismantled democratic institutions, suspended the elected parliament, centralized power, suppressed opposition, and eroded the independence of central institutions.

Part II: Analysis of Political Instability's Effect on the State of Development in Tunisia: SDGs Under Review

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer Tunisia an effective framework for monitoring, following, and reacting to the development imperatives (United Nations, 2023). The 17 SDGs adopted in 2015 contain 169 specific targets aimed at improving the quality of lives for people, increasing economic growth, and promoting environmental sustainability. The success of Tunisia in attaining such global understanding illustrates its conformity to the UN development agenda, which calls for policies of inclusivity in the diverse range of issues running from equity to infrastructure, peace, and livelihoods. The steps and solutions that are considered quantifiable and not qualitative should be considered in Tunisia's progress towards achieving SDGs. On the macro level, there are indicators available such as the SDG Index score, GDP per capita, and UN Statistical Performance Index (United Nations, 2023; Merry, 2019). On the contrary, citizen perception surveys such as Arab Barometer make a big contribution to understanding the individual experience and expectation of compromise with instability.

Since the revolution of 2011, Tunisia's performance on the SDG Index has continued to decline. In 2010, Tunisia ranked number 48 among 162 countries but at 76 in 2021. The SDG Index Score of 65.6 in 2010 dropped to 61.1 in 2021, with a decline observed in key indicators as shown. And both of these slumps are consistent with intermittent political instability and institutionally weakened frameworks—each of which discourages policymaking and resource allocation. Even more evidence of the economic cost of insecurity is provided by GDP per capita

paths. In 2010, Tunisia's GDP per capita was $3,842 and had not risen to $4,082 by 2020 (WITS, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Despite democracy following the revolution, the country never really resolved the political uncertainty, stabilized leadership, or clarified its economic agenda—all of which discouraged investment, innovation, and long-term growth.

Tunisia's statistical capacity, one of the mainstays of SDG performance measurement, also weakened. In 2010, the UN Statistical Performance Index (which tracks the ability of a country to produce timely and useful statistics) fell from 73 out of 100 to 51 in 2021 (United Nations, 2023). Such weakening is revealing of the problems of evidence-based policymaking, especially in contexts of poor governance. Institutions can at least monitor resource allocation, measure attainment, and correct shortfalls, but they do not have the metrics to measure development progress.

Goal 1: No Poverty

Across the board, performance in reducing poverty has been mixed. The poverty rate in line with Tunisia's national poverty line fell from 20.5% in 2010 to 15.2% in 2015 and again rose to 16.6% in 2021 (World Bank, 2023). As long-term poverty reduction is still far from achieved, COVID-19 influences socioeconomic effects, political instability, and biochemical vulnerability. All of that has kept economic vulnerability up for the time being (World Bank, 2023; Poverty and Inequality Platform, 2025). Another sign is declining economic security—namely, unemployment rates, which rise from 13% in 2010 to 16% in 2023 (Belgacem & Vacher, 2023). The situation is not job-friendly, as structural gaps have been created in the labor market, the policies are lacking in coherence, and public investment has been uncertain. In terms of development priorities and social protection program implementation, political instability provided a distraction from them. This meant social protection programs were squeezed, and financial inclusion and income equality gains were lost.

The Arab Barometer VII (2022) survey testifies to the common discontent with the economy. Approximately 77% of Tunisians described their economic situation as "bad" or "very bad," citing fear of declining purchasing power and restricted job opportunities. Moreover, in Arab Barometer VIII (2024), 81% of the participants considered themselves economically insecure, which confirms the quantitative finding that political crises hampered poverty reduction.

Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being

There has been fiscal irresponsibility as well as political instability, curtailing positive effects on health outcomes. The government spent less on health, from 5.4% of GDP in 2010 down to 4.5% of GDP in 2020 (World Bank, 2023). The evidence of lower expenditure has displayed itself in poor quality of services, poor staffing, and low access, particularly in poor and rural areas. Access to health care given by World Bank indicators was poor, as the 4.61 performance score of the year 2019 decreased to 4.38 in 2021 (World Bank, 2022). In 2014, Tunisia adopted a decentralization strategy in order to improve healthcare equity, but its implementation has been delayed or blocked by the regular government reshuffles and diminished ministerial power (Giusti & Persiani, 2024). Much of the existing reforms eroded away after 2021 thanks to Saied's centralization, leaving the health sector vulnerable.

Arab Barometer surveys also point in the same negative direction. In 2022, 72% were not content with health services, and 67% indicated that corruption in the health sector was an inhibitor to obtaining quality treatment. In 2024, opinion did not shift, as over two-thirds of Tunisians

reported that they lacked faith in public health centers. These qualitative findings accompany the quantitative measures of deterioration in the health status of Tunisia.

Goal 4: Quality Education

Tunisia's educational outcomes have backslid since 2011. Net primary school enrollment fell from 98.3% in 2010 to 97.2% in 2020, while secondary school net enrollment dropped from 72.4% to 61.2% over the same period (United Nations, 2023). Out-of-school rates remain significant, particularly at the secondary level, projected at 6.4% by 2030 (UNESCO, 2023).

Arab Barometer VII (2022) revealed that 69% of Tunisians were dissatisfied with the quality of education. In the 2024 wave, 73% cited the lack of alignment between education and job market needs as a primary concern. This discontent mirrors Tunisia's stagnant performance on SDG 4 and reflects the failure of political leadership to prioritize educational reforms amid ongoing crises.

Goal 5: Gender Equality

Gender equality was a strong starting point in law and women's representation in Tunisia. In terms of education and health, UN Women (2021) show that the Gender Development Index is at 93.1%, with the Global Gender Gap Index ranking at 64%, or proportionately equal balanced access. However, significant imbalances persist in political empowerment and economic participation at the basic levels. The 2014 constitution and 2017 election law emphasized women's equality, and the nation had 31 percent women Assembly members and 47 percent Council members following the 2018 election (Union, 2019; UN, 2018). In 2022, a new election law replaced gender quota provisions with proportional representation instead of single-member constituencies, reversing their gains (HRW, 2022). President Saied's policy change has reduced women's representation in public life. In the absence of legal mechanisms for promoting gender equality, the gains made on SDG 5 on leadership and decision-making roles had been hard-won by Tunisia but stand in danger of being lost.

Qualitative evidence attests to these reverses. Arab Barometer VII (2022) only recorded 38% of Tunisians believe women enjoyed equal political rights. The figure declined to 31% in 2024, which showed growing public awareness of declining gender equality. This qualitative trend agrees with the quantitative regression in Tunisia's political empowerment indices.

Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Goal 8 is dedicated to long-term economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. This goal has not been achieved in Tunisia due primarily to economic mismanagement and political instability that have eroded investor confidence and postponed reform. The biggest concern remains that of youth unemployment.

GDP growth, a measure of economic prosperity, has been weak. After slow post-revolutionary recovery, GDP growth slowed abruptly—falling to 0.4% in 2023—due to chronic drought, inflation, and external shock crises (African Development Bank, 2023). According to Arab Barometer Wave VIII (2024), just 20% of Tunisians think the government is really generating job opportunities. More than 60% are annoyed with economic opportunities, which indicates that people are fed up with the state's failure to provide in terms of employment, income security, or economic development. The inability of Tunisia to advance towards SDG 8 indicates a pressing need for structural reforms, labor market restructuring, and investments in areas such

as technology, agriculture, and green industries.

Tunisia's political instability continues to put pressure on its labor market. Its unemployment rate increased from 13% in 2010 to 16% in 2023, while youth unemployment has been over 36% (World Bank, 2023; ILO, 2023). Informal employment represents over 30% of total employment, which further undermines job security and social protection.

Arab Barometer VIII (2024) reveals widespread public discontent with economic opportunities. Nearly 82% of the citizens interviewed indicated that employment opportunities worsened in the past decade. In the 2022 survey, 67% referred to economic conditions as the country's most critical problem. These perceptions confirm that political instability has impeded SDG 8 progress.

Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities

SDG 10 is trying to eliminate inequalities between and within countries. Tunisia, in that it has some degree of progress in access to gender and education, continues to be plagued by extreme regional, socioeconomic, and institutional disparities. The interior and the South are lagging behind the coast, particularly in infrastructure, health, and employment. The Gini coefficient of income inequality in Tunisia is always high, with the richest 20% of citizens earning more than 45% of income and the poorest 20%, 7% (World Bank, 2023). The taxation system and social protection programs are not adequately redistributive, and government expenditure is unbalanced towards urban regions.

Arab Barometer (2022) cites 84% of Tunisians as considering inequality as a "very serious problem." Civilians largely attribute the causes to nepotism, corruption, and regionalism. Political instability has then entrenched such cleavages since governments lacked the mandate and stability to implement certain anti-poverty and redistribution policies. Secondly, Tunisia does not have a fully-fledged, integrated social safety net to support the most needy components of society, including the jobless, people with disabilities, and rural poverty. Absent the strict reformation of fiscal policies, enhancing regional equity, and reforming public institutions, there will be negligible progress for SDG 10.

Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

Tunisia's city population has always increased, and nearly 70% of it currently lives in cities. Growth, however, has not been accompanied by sustainable urbanization or even balanced coverage of services. SDG 11 deals with making cities safer, more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable—something Tunisia has yet to accomplish. Mass transport systems are inefficient and poorly funded, particularly in inner cities. Municipal waste management remains poor; 5% of the waste can be recycled, and illegal dumping grounds and open dumping remain rampant (UN-Habitat, 2023). Poor and middle-class citizens do not have adequate low-income housing schemes.

More notably, the decentralization process—based on enabling localities—was derailed in 2021 when President Saied dissolved elected municipal councils. The action short-circuited local self-rule and reversed advances in participatory city government since the implementation of the 2014 Constitution. Arab Barometer (2024) noted that fewer than 40% of Tunisians are satisfied with urban services like sanitation, transport, and housing. The majority feel disconnected from local decision-making. Tunisia will reach SDG 11 gradually and erratically until democratic

local institutions are restored and loopholes in services are closed.

Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

SDG 12 requires sustainable consumption and production patterns. Tunisia heavily depends on fossil fuels, with renewable energy sources contributing only 3% towards energy consumption (IEA, 2023). Energy consumption inefficiency, unsustainable food cultivation, and inefficacious recycling practices all negate environmental sustainability. The country is beset by increasing water shortages, poor waste management, and industrial pollution. The state intervention has been disorganized with irregular implementation and public-private partnerships. While the National Energy Transition Plan had established targets for green energy uptake, this has been halted due to political instability and lack of funds.

Arab Barometer VIII (2024) registers widespread citizen anxiety over environmental matters—over 80% of Tunisians perceive pollution and natural resource management as threats to public health and national well-being. The ability of the state to respond is, however, constrained by institutional flaws and competing agendas. SDG 12 attainment needs Tunisia's stronger regulatory frameworks, green technology investments, and public awareness through education and incentives. There needs to be a concerted effort by ministries, municipalities, and civil society to move towards a circular and resource-efficient economy.

Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

Tunisia's political trajectory has most clearly jeopardized Goal 16—peace, justice, and well-functioning institutions—of all the SDGs. Following the revolution of 2011, Tunisia was celebrated as a model of Arab democratic transition. But in recent years, there has been a precipitous reversal. In 2021, President Saied dissolved parliament and assumed full executive powers, circumventing key institutions such as the judiciary and the electoral commission. Subsequent decrees have curtailed civil liberties, stifled freedom of the press, and criminalized the opposition. These actions are a significant setback to democratic governance and institutional integrity.

The Rule of Law Index rating for Tunisia decreased from 0.54 in 2015 to 0.49 in 2023, and its Freedom House rating decreased from "Free" to "Partly Free" (World Justice Project, 2023; Freedom House, 2023). Human rights organizations report increasing instances of arbitrary arrest, unjust trials, and intimidation of opposition politicians and journalists. Arab Barometer (2024) confirms a significant decline in the confidence of citizens: only 24% believe in the judiciary and even less in parliament and political parties. Moreover, 94% of Tunisians are certain that corruption is deeply rooted in state institutions. SDG 16 is most critical—without institutional stability, justice, and transparency, it is almost impossible to progress on any other goal. Restoring confidence, safeguarding judicial independence, and ensuring civic freedoms need to be the highest national priorities if Tunisia is to recover its democratic equilibrium and return to sustainable development.

PART III. Potential Pathways to Progress for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals Despite Current Political Instability

Tunisia, with a very unstable political landscape since 2011, is indeed a threat to accomplishing sustainable development. However, there are ways that such pathways toward sustainable progress through action in these areas could be realized through domestic reforms, international

collaboration, institutional strengthening, replication of successful international initiatives, and involving civil society with private sectors as well as citizens.

Domestic Reforms and Institutional Strengthening

To stabilize Tunisia and have a conducive environment for sustainable development, an overhaul is needed inside. Among the immediate attention required is towards governance, economic policy, and the independence of the judicial system. Through a taxation system reform aimed at improving revenue generation and extra fiscal stability, which will directly reduce poverty, create more infrastructure, and provide more social services, this process addresses SDGs 8 and 10 (Economic Growth and Reduced Inequalities) (Becheikh, 2021). It is of paramount importance to improve the administrative effectiveness and transparency. According to the Arab Barometer Wave VIII (2024), 94 percent of Tunisians believe that corruption is widespread in government institutions and is an inevitable roadblock in the equitable distribution of resources and a system of good governance. Tunisia can greatly strengthen its institutional capacity to achieve sustainable outcomes from this by addressing the issue through stronger anti-corruption measures, including transparent regulations, digital governance, and strengthened accountability mechanisms. Judicial independence is equally important, and it has to be strengthened. The rule of law relies on an independent judiciary to protect citizens' rights and institutional integrity that is key to ending SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Consequently, judicial reforms are crucial if we aspire to regain public trust and have a transparent and fair governance system.

The Importance of International Assistance and Cooperation

Participation in international collaboration is an important form of support on the pathway to Tunisia's sustainable development aspirations amidst political uncertainty. Steer clear of reliance on acquiring technical assistance, capacity building, and financial resources necessary for development initiatives (Dridi, 2021) by linking up with organizations such as the World Bank, UN agencies, and bilateral donors. There is a need for Tunisia to strategically align international aid with nationally identified priorities in order to guarantee coherence in developmental strategies. Such management of the aid is incredibly sophisticated, and, amidst the elimination of duplications and optimal use of the aid, pertinent domestic reforms and institutional building are required (Nchofoung et al., 2022). Economic revitalization, inequality reduction, and promoting resilience to socio-economic and environmental shocks should be the main foci of the collaborative framework.

Successful International Initiatives as Models

Sustainable development is replicated based on successful international practices, providing Tunisia with valuable blueprints for development. Tunisia's high youth unemployment rates, exceeding 36 percent (Bank, 2019; ILO, 2023), and a struggling job market mean that there is a pertinent model in South Korea's targeted employment generation programs, which effectively reduced youth unemployment. Finland's education system demonstrates that plenty of corporations can make a child's education an incredibly effective learning environment if its teachers are trained well, its access is equal, and its curriculum is modern. The fact that Tunisia faces numerous educational challenges, such as irrelevant curricula and poor quality of teachers, makes it possible to apply these practices to advance the human capital and compensate for inequalities (UNESCO, 2023; Arab Barometer, 2024). Also, sustainable management, known in Costa Rica, can help in the transition to renewable energies and sustainable resource

management and help address SDGs 11 and 12 relevant to the theme of environmental concerns in Tunisia (IEA, 2023).

Engaging Civil Society, Private Sector, and Citizens

Eradicating political instability in a country is only achieved through sustained active citizen participation, CSOs, and private enterprises that play a vital role in economic development. However, trust levels of citizens in CSOs in Tunisia have generally been moderate (around 40% confidence) but very important in advocacy, accountability, and social justice (Arab Barometer VIII, 2024). Capacity building, through a clear legislative framework and international networking, will particularly empower these entities to play a role of much greater magnitude in delivering SDGs.

The creation of jobs, innovation, and investment in sustainable practices are equally critical and just as important as the involvement of the private sector. The adoption of responsible business practices and initiatives that promote green investments would encourage economic resilience and directly meet economic and environmental goals (SDGs 8 and 12). When government capacities are limited due to a period of instability, it becomes much more important for enterprises to be engaged with government service provision, and this is also what public-private partnerships aim at. Accountability, transparency, and patient practice are best realized through citizen engagement, which is vital. Tunisia's youth, shown in the Arab Barometer (2022, 2024) to be disengaged and disgruntled from formal politics, do not seem to be very politically engaged. Reengaging citizens and coupling it with SDG 16 to help to strengthen civic education, facilitate citizen participation mechanisms, and use digital platforms to reinforce SDG 16.

Addressing Climate and Environmental Challenges

Climate change is very serious for Tunisia, which has to deal with it as much as possible in sustainable development actions. According to the results of the Arab Barometer VIII Survey (2024), more than 92 percent of Tunisians feel the daily effects of scarcity of water, and 84 percent suffer from extreme temperature variations that make people more vulnerable. To mitigate these impacts, national plans should integrate comprehensive climate adaptation and mitigation measures. Tunisians are in favor of governmental actions against environmental problems such as promotion of renewable energy, pollution control measures, and improvement of waste management (Xira Ruiz-Campillo et al., 2022). A resilient public health improvement, a sustainable economic opportunity baking, baked into these environmental policies, simply to a level of their prioritization.

Domestic inclusive reform, international cooperation, and a participatory social effort are needed for Tunisia's political landscape to properly work; it is complex. Regardless of its political uncertainties, Tunisia can create viable pathways for sustainable development through economic diversification, incentive-based institutional transparency, environmental sustainability, and the application of international best practices. When combining these efforts with addressing immediate socio-economic and governance challenges, this recognizable path exists in Tunisia, which can serve to drive forward and achieve the SDG commitments and a sustainable future for its citizens.

Conclusion

The study reveals the strong link between Tunisia's political instability and its efforts toward the

achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Main findings reveal that some quantitative indicators, such as education access and gender development score, indicate modest progress, while 'broad-based' analysis shows that some of the biggest criteria, like poverty reduction, healthcare access, economic growth, institutional trust, and urban sustainability, are either stagnant or regressed. The research reinforces the utility of the SDGs in both development benchmarking and providing diagnostic capacities to assess the political health of a nation. This paper illustrates how democratic transition and institutional erosion, which are taking place in Tunisia (particularly in the post-2019 period of democratic backsliding), directly obstruct developmental progress by evaluating Tunisia's SDG performance before and after the 2011 revolution.

Most importantly, qualitative aspects from Arab Barometer surveys are incorporated, thus providing a richer perspective. State-reported indicators of selective progress convey a picture that could be more disillusioning, in citizen terms, with public services, governance, and opportunity. Indeed, this contrast emphasizes that public perception and lived experiences are key inputs in the real testing of the impact of political crises on development outcomes. In the end, this highlights the importance of the SDGs as a gauge for both developmental and democratic performance. The author urges new political commitment, institutional reform, and citizen participation to take place to change Tunisia's development path from the one that first emerged with its democratic awakening.

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