



The Jasmine Revolution

Tunisian Media Freedom Road in Five Years

Author: Sondes Ben Chagra, Co-author: Mohammed Al-Azdee, PhD

Global Media and Communication Studies Program, College of Public & International Affairs, University of Bridgeport

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of the Tunisian media freedom road since the 2010 revolution and contrasting it with the past situation. Five years have so far passed since the Jasmine Revolution that sparked the tsunami called the Arab Spring. Tunisian media have been playing a key role in the country's transition to democracy and in shaping Tunisia's image on the national stage and international arena. We hypothesize that in these five years, the Tunisian media scene has witnessed an unprecedented mutation, from 'Not Free' to 'Free,' media in Tunisia are trying to find their path to freedom. The analysis considers secondary qualitative data collected from international organizations and research centers reports.

Key Questions

- How are Tunisian media digesting their newfound freedom?
- How did the media mindset evolve through the five years that followed the end of the despotic Ben Ali's regime?
- Are media in Tunisia on the right track to freedom?



Main Arguments

Before the Revolution

- Tunisians were voiceless, governed by useless laws and corrupt administration.
- Ben Ali was listed as one of the "10 Worst Enemies of the Press" by the Committee to Protect Journalists.
- Reporters Without Borders named him as a leading "Predator of Press Freedom."
- The media largely served the ruling party.
- The lack of pluralism in broadcast ownership, and the presence of censorship have led Tunisians to turn to satellite channels, to the Internet when possible and to word-of-mouth to be informed about what was happening in their country.

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- The Revolution triggered a series of regional events that gave rise to the Arab Spring.
- One of the main triggers of the revolution was social media.
- Online reports by citizen journalists, were taken up by the international media.

After the Revolution

- The media play a central role in the transition to democracy and strengthening civil liberties and political rights.
- The World Press Freedom Index for Tunisia went from 164 in 2010 to 126 in 2015.
- Freedom in the World survey for Tunisia went from 'Not Free' up to 2011 to 'Free' by the end of 2015.
- The new government proclaimed complete freedom of information and expression as a fundamental principle.
- The Tunisian media field was in bloom.
- January 2014, a new constitution was adopted.
- The 1975 press code was amended.
- While the new press code was widely regarded as a step toward increased press freedom, the ambiguity of the language still poses potential risks to the work of journalists and media outlets.
- Signs of regression in terms of freedom of expression have emerged.
- The judiciary functions with legal uncertainty regarding press freedom, enforcing both the new press code and the repressive Ben Ali-era penal code.

- Although the media are seen to have improved in some ways since the revolution, Tunisians remain skeptical about the overall trustworthiness of the information they get through the media.
- The society is progressively going back to its old habits of relying on friends and family to get information (Trusted by 77%).
- Tunisians shop around in order to piece together stories.
- There is a relatively low level of skepticism about online sources overall.
- The overriding feeling is that some media are taking their new-found freedom a step too far and that "they misunderstand freedom."
- About the concept of honest reporting, most Tunisians think that "it is not the right time."
- 92 % of Tunisians consider 'improvement in economic conditions' the top priority for the future of their country.
- 'Freedom of expression' ranked 5th in a list of 9 priorities.
- 'Uncensored media' ranked 7th out of 9.
- 'Uncensored access to the Internet' is the least important priority.

Conclusion

- Several factors did impact and compromise the evolution of freedom of expression and the media in Tunisia following the revolution.
- At a time when the country is transitioning toward a democratic regime, an honest and objective media reporting is needed.
- The risk of a return to old practices remains high.
- Terrorism is also a new addition to Tunisian's concerns. Tunisia used to be a safe country where any form of radicalization is forbidden by law. The terrorism threat in the country is in part due to the newly earned democracy and freedoms.
- Looking at the global picture with on one hand, the

boiling society; unemployment, raising inflation and poverty and on the other hand, terrorism threats and the geopolitical situation; at the end of the day and knowing what we know, one might wonder, is the timing of Tunisia's media freedom right? Will it contribute to adapting the Tunisians to digest the new democracy? Or will it deepen the hole of chaos in which the region is being pushed?

This study will be expanded in the future to consider primary qualitative data obtained through interviews with Tunisian journalists and textual analysis of Tunisian media content.

References

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- **Tunisia: Freedom of Expression Under siege** (IFEX-TMG)