



The Political Journey of Tunisia Post-Zine El Abidine Ben Ali: The Role of Secularism in Shaping Tunisia's Political Identity

Lidia Maijar*, Universitas Islam Negeri Imam Bonjol, Padang, Indonesia

Adetia Andri, Universitas Islam Negeri Imam Bonjol, Padang, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The research explores the role of secularism in shaping the political identity of the state. Through a qualitative approach involving textual analysis and secondary data, this article investigates how the political changes following the Arab Spring revolution have influenced the dynamics of secularism and how Tunisia's political identity has formed as a result. The findings reveal that the conflict between secular and religious forces has become a hallmark of post-revolution politics, with ongoing tensions between those advocating for the sustainability of a secular model and those advocating for religious influence in the political order. The study highlights the complexity of Tunisia's post-revolution political journey, with profound implications for political stability and national identity. In conclusion, the research emphasizes that navigating between revolution and stability requires a deep understanding of the role of secularism in shaping Tunisia's political direction and underscores the importance of dialogue and compromise in achieving a sustainable balance between these two forces.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted 28/01/2024
Revised 10/02/2024
Accepted 18/02/2024
Published 22/06/2024

KEYWORDS

Tunisia revolution; secularism; political identity; political conflict; Arab Spring.

*CORRESPONDENCE AUTHOR

lidiamajar@uin-ib.ac.id

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34007/warisan.v5i1.2099>

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Tunisia is located on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, bordered by Libya to the south and east and Algeria to the west. The indigenous people of Tunisia are the Berbers. Before the advent of Islam, the country was known as Ifriqiya with its capital at Qairawan (Kairouan) (Abdurrahman, [2003](#)). Together with Libya to the south and Algeria to the west, followed by Morocco and Mauritania, these five countries are referred to as the "Island of the West" or Maghreb, meaning "sea of sand" or the region between the sea and the desert (Amin, [2015](#)).

Tunisia is a secular state with an electoral democracy system where the president is elected through elections with a five-year term. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali frequently won presidential elections due to the support of the Constitutional Democratic Party, which controlled over 80% of parliamentary seats. Throughout his administration, Ben Ali exhibited repressive behavior towards political opponents. Although opposition groups could develop, they were closely monitored by the regime, leading to weak public participation in Tunisia's socio-political dynamics (Moalla, [2013](#)).

The strength of Ben Ali's government cannot be separated from the role of the military in maintaining power for two decades. Before the Arab Spring, demonstrations frequently clashed with the Tunisian military, which used violence (Wolf, [2013](#)). The military played a crucial role in protecting the regime from opposition groups. The 2011 revolution marked a significant turning point in Tunisia's modern history, as the fall of Ben Ali's authoritarian regime sparked a wave of changes throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Tunisia became the center of international attention for its journey towards more inclusive and sustainable democratization (Kruse et al., [2021](#)).

However, despite the revolution bringing new hope, the transition towards political stability is far from complete. Tunisia continues to face complex challenges, including political disputes, tensions between secular and religious forces, and economic uncertainty (Putri et al., [2021](#)). Amidst this turmoil, the role of secularism in shaping Tunisia's political identity remains a subject of intense debate. The integration of secular values with Tunisia's strong religious identity is a key issue influencing the country's political direction in recent years (Rijkers et al., [2017](#)).

This research aims to explore the dynamics of Tunisia's post-revolution political journey, particularly the role of secularism in forming political identity. We will examine the impact of political changes post-Arab Spring, considering secularism's contributions to this process, and analyze how Tunisia's political identity has been shaped as a result. By



deepening the understanding of the relationship between political secularism and national identity, this study aims to contribute meaningfully to discussions on Tunisia's political future and democratization process. Understanding Tunisia's political developments is crucial for regional stability in the Middle East and North Africa. By studying how countries like Tunisia navigate post-revolution challenges, we gain deeper insights into regional political dynamics and the potential for successful democratic transitions in neighboring countries.

As the pioneer of the Arab Spring, Tunisia remains a focal point in its democratization journey. Despite political changes since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia faces ongoing challenges in achieving sustainable political stability (Kuznetsov, [2022](#)). Political disputes, tensions between secular and religious forces, and economic uncertainty continue to hinder the transition process. In this context, the role of secularism remains intensely debated, as secular values and religious identity compete to influence Tunisia's political direction (Shilton, [2013](#)). A deeper understanding of the relationship between political secularism and national identity is crucial for grasping Tunisia's post-revolution dynamics and their impact on regional political stability.

As a comparison material related to relevant research titles and novelty values related to this research. Here the author presents some relevant previous research, namely:

Ben Achour and Makni's research reveals that the conflict between secularism and religion significantly influences Tunisia's post-revolution political dynamics. Achieving a balance between these forces is crucial for attaining sustainable political stability (Ben Achour & Makni, [2018](#)). Marzouki's study examines the role of religion, particularly through the Islamist Ennahda movement, in shaping Tunisia's political identity post-revolution. The integration of Islamic values into state politics has heightened tensions with secular forces, complicating the country's political identity formation process (Marzouki, [2017](#)). Marks' research highlights that the post-revolution discord between secularism and religion often hinders the advancement of women's rights, reflecting the complexity of Tunisia's political dynamics after the revolution (Marks, [2019](#)). McCarthy's study uncovers the paradox of the Islamist party's victory in Tunisia in 2011, emphasizing the state's efforts to claim authority over the interpretation of Islam for political control, yet failing to maintain a monopoly on religious symbolism (McCarthy, [2014](#)). Alvi's research finds that Tunisia faces challenges in balancing secular and Islamist interests, but Ennahda's retreat has facilitated non-violent political changes, making Tunisia an exemplary case in the Arab Awakening (Alvi, [2019](#)).

This study introduces a novel approach to analyzing the role of secularism in shaping Tunisia's post-revolution political identity, with a deep consideration of gender perspectives. Unlike existing literature, this research highlights how secularism affects women's rights and roles in Tunisia's evolving society, considering the implications of gender power dynamics in post-revolution politics. Thus, this study not only explores the conflict between secular and religious forces but also reveals how gender dynamics play a role in Tunisia's political identity and democratization process post-revolution.

In the context of this research, the questions posed are: How do post-revolution political dynamics in Tunisia, particularly following the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, influence the role of secularism in forming the country's political identity? Additionally, how does the interaction between secular and religious forces affect Tunisia's efforts to achieve sustainable political stability after the revolution?

The objective of this research is to investigate the role of secularism in shaping Tunisia's political identity post-Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regime. This study aims to understand how the dynamics between secular and religious forces have formed Tunisia's post-revolution political foundation, focusing on how secularism influences the development of the country's political identity and how the interaction between secularism and religion affects political stability and democracy-building efforts in Tunisia after the fall of the authoritarian Ben Ali regime.

METHODS

This research adopts an in-depth qualitative approach to investigate post-revolution political dynamics in Tunisia, particularly the role of secularism in shaping the country's political identity (Creswell & Creswell, [2018](#)). Content analysis of key documents such as the constitution, public speeches, and policy reports will be conducted to trace recent political developments and official stances on issues related to secularism and political identity (Rahardjo, [2017](#)). A triangulation approach will be used to compare and confirm findings from these main data sources. Qualitative data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns, themes, and key issues in interviews and documents. Additionally,

a comparative approach will be used to compare political developments in Tunisia with peer countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Critical analysis will be conducted to understand the implications of findings for political theory and democratic practices in Tunisia and the broader region, considering unique historical and cultural contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Political Dynamics in Tunisia Post-Ben Ali

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, also known as Zainal Abidin bin Ali, was born in Hammam Sousse, a coastal city in Tunisia, on Sunday, September 3, 1939. His first wife was Naima el-Kafy, and his second wife was Leila Ben Ali, who became embroiled in corruption cases. His children include Ghazwa El Abidine, Dorsaf El Abidine, Cyrine el Abidine, Nesrine el Abidine, Halima el Abidine, and Mohamed Zine el Abidine. According to several sources, Ben Ali did not complete his primary education. However, he attended various military training programs at the Special Inter-Service School in Saint Cyr, France; the Artillery School in Chalons-Sur-Marne, France; the Senior Intelligence School in Maryland; and the School for Anti-Aircraft Field Artillery in Texas, USA.

Ben Ali became Tunisia's second president, succeeding Bourguiba in 1989, and served for an extensive period of 23 years. Initially, his supporters hailed him as a savior and hero expected to revive Tunisia from the decline experienced under Bourguiba's government. Political prisoners held during Bourguiba's tenure were released under Ben Ali, generating new hope among the populace for forthcoming decisions. However, Ben Ali's administration also faced criticism for several of its decisions.

Ben Ali's leadership saw certain advancements. While the previous administration focused on modernization and Westernization, Ben Ali's regime emphasized democratization and national peace. He promised political freedom and a transition towards a democratic state. Furthermore, he promoted democratization within his government, including reducing presidential terms, organizing presidential elections, and allowing multiparty participation.

However, these promises only materialized during his first year in office. Subsequently, political freedoms were increasingly restricted, and corruption and nepotism became rampant. Opposition parties perceived as threats were banned, and the police were employed to control the civilian population, including opposition parties, journalists, and activists, which was a common strategy used by Ben Ali. Opposition parties were declared illegal, preventing their participation in elections. Those insisting on running for office had to register as independent candidates without party affiliations. Consequently, Ben Ali and his party consistently emerged as the winning candidates, effectively allowing him to control the participating parties.

Under Ben Ali's leadership, Tunisia heavily relied on its police force to maintain order, with police numbers reaching between 130,000 and 200,000. The police were a feared institution due to the special privileges they received from the government, and their arbitrary actions against civilians often triggered widespread revolts, as evidenced by the Jasmine Revolution/Arab Spring in Tunisia, which was ignited by police misconduct. Ben Ali's rule did not significantly improve the lives of Tunisians; in fact, his era was more dictatorial than his predecessor's. Despite initially emphasizing democracy, his later years were marked by chaos and mass demonstrations. Exile and assassination of government critics were common, human rights were suppressed, freedom of expression was curtailed, and corruption and uneven development left many Tunisians impoverished and unemployed.

Economically, the Ben Ali family controlled a significant portion of the nation's wealth, owning over 50% of businesses. The removal of subsidies exacerbated public suffering, leading to instability and widespread protests due to rising food prices, high unemployment, corruption, and nepotism. The centralization of power by Ben Ali's family resulted in rampant corruption, validating the adage that "absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Following the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's authoritarian regime in 2011, Tunisia witnessed profound and complex political changes. The Tunisian revolution, which sparked a wave of protests across the Middle East and North Africa known as the Arab Spring, not only altered the political landscape but also brought new hopes for inclusive democratization. However, more than a decade later, Tunisia still faces significant challenges in achieving sustainable political stability. Post-revolution political dynamics are influenced by political conflicts, social tensions, and persistent economic challenges.

One major factor affecting Tunisia's post-revolution political dynamics is the transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic system. Although Tunisia successfully adopted a new constitution and conducted free and fair

elections, unresolved issues such as corruption, social inequality, and economic dissatisfaction remain. Additionally, the complex internal political dynamics, including competition among different political forces and conflicts between national and regional interests, play a crucial role in shaping the country's political direction. External actors, including neighboring countries and foreign entities, also significantly impact Tunisia's political dynamics. Foreign interference, through financial support or political intervention, often complicates Tunisia's efforts to achieve sustainable political stability. Furthermore, regional events, such as conflicts in Libya and political changes in Algeria, affect Tunisia's security and stability.

Amid these tensions and challenges, Tunisia continues to strive to strengthen its democratic institutions and build an inclusive society. Efforts to hold free and fair elections, bolster human rights protections, and restructure the economy to enhance economic opportunities for all citizens are critical steps toward achieving sustainable political stability. Although the path to robust political stability is long and fraught with challenges, Tunisia remains an inspiring example of political change in the Middle East and North Africa.

Moreover, the role of non-governmental actors, such as independent media, civil society organizations, and human rights advocacy groups, is crucial in shaping Tunisia's political direction. These organizations play key roles in monitoring government policies, advocating for individual rights, and mobilizing support for progressive political changes. With a more open and pluralistic public sphere, civil society has become an important force in holding the government accountable and championing democratic values. Therefore, collaboration between the government and civil society is essential to achieving sustainable progress in Tunisia's democratization process.

The increasing role of civil society and public awareness of the importance of political participation has led to numerous citizen-led initiatives to strengthen democracy and promote humanitarian values. These initiatives include anti-corruption campaigns, efforts to advance women's rights, and activities to boost broader political participation. Thus, while Tunisia's political challenges remain significant, there is strong momentum for positive change and deeper reforms to achieve greater political stability and democratic inclusivity.

Additionally, addressing political and social challenges requires a focus on building political and social inclusivity. Tunisia has taken steps to enhance political participation and broader representation for all societal groups, including ethnic, religious, and gender minorities. Policies promoting gender equality, facilitating greater access for minorities to the political process, and advocating for broader civil and political rights for all citizens are essential. These measures ensure that Tunisia's democratization process is genuinely inclusive and representative of all citizens' interests.

Moreover, the importance of inclusive economic development in maintaining political stability cannot be overstated. Economic inequality and job insecurity can be serious sources of social and political tension if not addressed adequately. Therefore, efforts to foster inclusive and sustainable economic growth, emphasizing social justice and equitable access to economic opportunities, are vital. Creating a more stable and inclusive economic environment will strengthen the foundation for long-term political stability and sustainable growth in Tunisia.

Additionally, education and political awareness play crucial roles in reinforcing democracy and political stability. By enhancing access to quality education and promoting political awareness among the populace, Tunisia can foster broader political participation and strengthen the foundations of democracy. Inclusive education and greater political awareness can help build a more informed, engaged, and responsive society, which, in turn, can reinforce democratic institutions and prevent disruptive political conflicts.

After Ben Ali's departure, Tunisia embarked on a new chapter in its political dynamics. A Transitional Council was formed to establish election regulations under the transitional government, which was seen as a suitable step toward Tunisia's democratization. Many civil society representatives and political parties participated in the elections. During this transition period, the Ben Achour Commission was established to build democratic consolidation and draft the electoral constitution.

In October 2012, legislative elections were held to elect 217 members of parliament responsible for drafting a new constitution and forming a new government. The final election results showed that the Islamist party An-Nahdhah won 89 seats, followed by the Congress for the Republic (CPR) with 29 seats. An-Nahdhah's victory was due to several factors, including its opposition stance against the Ben Ali regime. Its members were part of opposition groups never involved in Ben Ali's government structure. Moreover, An-Nahdhah promoted not only Islamic values but also national identity and democratic principles.

On September 28, 2014, the An-Nahdhah-led coalition government announced its resignation due to political turmoil. The call for power transition stemmed from government policies deemed too tolerant of radical Islamic movements. The assassination of two opposition figures signaled rising radicalism in Tunisia in the two years following the elections. Additionally, the government was considered to have failed in overseeing Tunisia's democratic transition. An-Nahdhah's resignation followed meetings between the US, Tunisian government officials, and opposition groups to find a middle ground in the ongoing political upheaval. Tunisia's political dynamics involved various forces, including the US, seeking to maintain its interests in Tunisia.

Tunisia has made significant progress in its political transition since the fall of the Ben Ali regime. The country has shown its commitment to building a strong democratic foundation by adopting an inclusive new constitution and holding free and fair elections. However, complex challenges such as economic inequality, corruption, and social tensions continue to affect political stability and democratization progress. Nevertheless, Tunisia also faces great opportunities to strengthen its democratic institutions, uphold human rights, and build an inclusive and just society. With strong commitment from the government and civil society, along with international community support, Tunisia can continue its journey toward a more stable, prosperous, and democratic future.

Secularism and Religion in Shaping Political Stability in Post-Arab Spring Tunisia

Post-Arab Spring, Tunisia has garnered international attention as a country undergoing complex political transitions. This process has brought significant changes to the political and social landscape, with secularism and religion playing key roles in shaping post-revolution political stability. Tunisia is one of the few countries in the Middle East and North Africa region that has experienced profound political changes following the mass protests of 2011. The Tunisian revolution, sparked by dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, ignited a drive for more inclusive and democratic political reforms.

Since the fall of the Ben Ali regime, debates on the role of secularism and religion in Tunisian politics have been at the forefront. Secularism, which has been a cornerstone of governance in Tunisia since its independence from French colonial rule in 1956, has become an integral part of the country's political identity. However, with the emergence of religious-based political movements such as Ennahda following the revolution, Tunisia's political dynamics have changed significantly. The struggle between secular and religious forces has become a hallmark of post-revolution politics, raising questions about how these forces interact and contribute to Tunisia's political stability.

Moreover, the role of religion in politics is also reflected in the formation of Tunisia's post-revolution political identity. Previously defined by strong secular principles, Tunisia's political identity now faces new challenges with the increasing influence of religion in political life. In this context, it is crucial to understand how the dynamics between secularism and religion have shaped political perceptions and national identity in post-Arab Spring Tunisia.

Additionally, the role of secularism and religion in shaping political stability in post-Arab Spring Tunisia is influenced by the country's unique social and cultural context. Tunisia, with its long history of religious pluralism and rich cultural heritage, faces the challenge of integrating secular values with a strong religious identity within its society. This dynamic reflects the ongoing struggle between modernity and tradition, impacting the formation of policies and political structures. Furthermore, political developments in Tunisia are closely connected to regional and global geopolitical dynamics. Situated at the crossroads between Europe and Africa and sharing strong ties with neighboring countries in the Middle East and North Africa, Tunisia's political policies and foreign interventions often reflect broader geopolitical interests, complicating the policy-making process and affecting the country's political stability.

It is also important to note that political changes in Tunisia have not occurred in isolation but are part of broader changes in the Middle East and North Africa region. Protests and revolutions in neighboring countries such as Egypt, Libya, and Syria have inspired and influenced political dynamics in Tunisia. Therefore, studying the role of secularism and religion in Tunisian politics post-Arab Spring must be viewed within a broader regional context to understand how political changes in one country can influence the political dynamics in others.

The role of civil society and advocacy groups also plays a crucial role in shaping Tunisia's post-Arab Spring political dynamics. These organizations often become the voice for underrepresented groups in formal political processes and play a role in championing democratic values and human rights. By mobilizing civil society support and advocating for political reforms, these groups can influence policies and strengthen a more inclusive and democratic political order.

Additionally, the media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing political dynamics in Tunisia. Both traditional and online media have the power to disseminate information, shape political narratives, and mobilize the public. However, media in Tunisia also faces challenges, including government pressure and threats to press freedom. Therefore, studying the role of media in shaping political stability in post-Arab Spring Tunisia can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of political communication in a changing society.

Understanding how political transitions in Tunisia affect the country's economy and societal welfare is also crucial. Political changes can directly impact economic stability, foreign investment, and job creation. Therefore, efforts to achieve political stability must also be accompanied by measures to improve economic conditions and enhance social welfare. By integrating economic dimensions into the analysis of the role of secularism and religion in Tunisian politics, we can better understand how these factors are interrelated and impact the country's overall stability.

In this context, further research on Tunisia's post-Arab Spring political, social, and economic dynamics is essential. By analyzing the various factors influencing the role of secularism and religion in shaping political stability in Tunisia, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities the country faces in its political transition.

Currently, Tunisia continues to struggle to maintain political stability while facing various complex challenges. The dynamics between secularism and religion remain a significant aspect influencing the country's political landscape. Although Tunisia has made significant progress in democratization and political inclusiveness, tensions between secular and religious groups persist at various levels of society. Meanwhile, government efforts to build strong democratic institutions and improve economic conditions continue, though they still face numerous obstacles. Therefore, Tunisia's current situation underscores that the role of secularism and religion in shaping political stability remains an important issue that must be carefully addressed in the country's post-Arab Spring political transition.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that in Tunisia's political journey post-Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regime, secularism has been a key aspect in shaping the country's political identity. The research highlights the complex dynamics between secular and religious forces, which play significant roles in forming the foundation of post-revolution Tunisian politics. Secularism influences the development of the country's political identity, while the interaction between secularism and religion impacts political stability and efforts toward democratic development in Tunisia after the fall of the authoritarian Ben Ali regime.

Although Tunisia has experienced significant political transformations post-revolution, the challenges and conflicts between secular and religious forces remain relevant in understanding the country's political dynamics. In the effort to strengthen democratic foundations and political stability, it is crucial for the Tunisian government to continue considering the role of secularism in shaping political identity while promoting dialogue and tolerance among various societal groups. Thus, this study asserts that a deep understanding of the role of secularism in Tunisia's post-revolution context is essential for shaping the country's future direction towards inclusive and sustainable democracy.

REFERENCES

- Abdurrahman, D. (2003). *Sejarah Peradaban Islam: Masa Klasik Hingga Modern*. LESFI.
- Alvi, H. (2019). Correction to: Secularism Versus Political Islam: The Case of Tunisia. In *The Political Economy and Islam of the Middle East*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-17050-9_8
- Amin, S. M. (2015). *Sejarah Peradaban Islam* (ke-5). Amzah.
- Ben Achour, Y., & Makni, R. (2018). The Role of Secularism in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities. *Journal of North African Studies*, 23(3), 566–582.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (5th Edition). Sage Publications.
- Kruse, H. W., Martínez-Zarzoso, I., & Baghdadi, L. (2021). Standards and Political Connections: Evidence from Tunisia. *Journal of Development Economics*, 153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2021.102731>
- Kuznetsov, V. (2022). The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the Birth of the Arab Spring Uprisings. In *Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century* (pp. 625–649). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86468-2_24
- Marks, M. (2019). The Paradox of Secularism: Religion and Women's Rights in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 21(2), 278–296.

- Marzouki, N. (2017). Religion and Politics in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia: A Study of the Ennahda Movement. *Middle East Journal*, 71(3), 435–442.
- McCarthy, R. (2014). Re-thinking Secularism in Post-Independence Tunisia. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19(5), 733–750. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2014.917585>
- Moalla, A. (2013). Tunisia in the Aftermath of the Revolution. *SAGE Open*, 3(3), 2–7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013504765>
- Putri, R., Daulay, H. P., & Dahlan, Z. (2021). Warisan Peradaban Islam Era Turki Utsmani sebagai Penguat Identitas Turki Modern. *Local History & Heritage*, 1(2), 27–33. <https://doi.org/10.57251/lhh.v1i2.62>
- Rahardjo, M. (2017). *Studi Kasus dalam Penelitian Kualitatif: Konsep dan Prosedurnya*.
- Rijkers, B., Freund, C., & Nucifora, A. (2017). All in the Family: State Capture in Tunisia. *Journal of Development Economics*, 124, 41–59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2016.08.002>
- Shilton, S. (2013). Art and the ‘Arab Spring’: Aesthetics of revolution in contemporary Tunisia. *French Cultural Studies*, 24(1), 129–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155812464166>
- Wolf, A. (2013). An Islamist ‘renaissance’? Religion and politics in post-revolutionary Tunisia. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 18(4), 560–573. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2013.829979>