

Tunisia's integrity challenge

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Tunisia's integrity challenge | Picture for Tunisia's Integrity Challenge

More than seven years after the revolution that toppled President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia is still beset with numerous tensions. These bubbled to the surface in January 2018 with protests against unpopular tax measures and corruption. As in 2001, Tunisia's young people embody the revolt and fight against corruption that has become endemic in the country. Their angry slogans express the disappointed hopes of a nation that rose up against a dictator and his abusive regime.

After the 2011 revolution, Tunisia experienced renewed democratic momentum. A new constitution came into effect in 2014, that acknowledges the universal principles of freedom and parity, guarantees individual rights and liberties and recognises the youth as the lifeblood of the nation-building process. In 2014, Tunisia's nine leading political parties, as well as its trade unions and business organisations singled out the fight against corruption as one of the six pillars of the Carthage Declaration, which forms the basis for the national unity government that came to power in 2016.

Rooting out corruption is a priority. In Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index, Tunisia ranks 74th out of 180 countries, gaining only a single point since 2012. The non-governmental organisation estimates that corruption costs Tunisia 2% of its GDP, equal to an annual loss of US\$1.2 billion.

Young people are the most likely to encounter corruption in all its forms. Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer found that in 2013, 27% of people under 30 worldwide had paid a bribe in the previous twelve months. The OECD's report *Youth in the MENA Region: How to Bring Them In* stresses that young people in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have less confidence in their governments' ability to meet their needs than in previous generations.

The Tunisian authorities are not immune to this problem. This is notably due to massive unemployment, affecting nearly two out of five Tunisians, according to a 2015 OECD report on investing in youth (see references).. Rising prices make social mobility even more difficult. Corruption exacerbates this: it prevents the optimal use of resources, reduces opportunities for growth and development, and impacts not only people's relations with public institutions but also the quality of the services provided. Small-scale corruption, involving small sums of money, is widespread in the lower levels of the administration, as reported in a survey by the Tunisian Association of Public Controllers. Some 70% of respondents interviewed by this association think that small-scale corruption aids everyday interactions. Among the youngest (18- to 25-year-olds), 75% share this opinion.

To young people in the MENA region, corruption—and government responsibility—is the biggest issue facing their country, even bigger than the economy and jobs challenge.

The Tunisian government has taken steps to shore up integrity in the public sector by strengthening the institutional and legal framework. Legal measures include creating the National Office for Combating Corruption and the Truth and Dignity Office, whose remit was extended to include corruption cases in 2014.

The code of conduct for Tunisian public officials and law on whistleblowing and whistleblower protection, both prepared with the support of the OECD, are also helping to strengthen the culture of integrity. This creates a legal framework that

is further bolstered by the freedom of information law. There is also a bill that is currently going through parliament on the declaration of assets and illicit gains.

Young people in Tunisia have taken to the networks and organisations of civil society to fight the scourge of corruption. Movements and associations including Al Bawsala, I Watch Tunisia and Menich Msemeh blaze with the passion of Tunisia's young people who are denouncing corruption and promoting transparency and accountability, in both theory and practice.

It is now time to go further and stamp out corruption. There needs to be greater public involvement, especially among the younger generation. The OECD Recommendation on Public Integrity stresses the importance of transparency and the engagement of all actors at every level in the governmental decision-making process. The young citizens of Tunisia should be informed, consulted, and encouraged to take part in formulating public policies and evaluating government action.

Many such initiatives have been taken. In its report, *Open Government in Tunisia*, the OECD draws attention to the steps taken by the government and civil society in this field. These initiatives should be encouraged and embedded in a systematic approach with the aim of including young people in the design, monitoring and evaluation of public decisions. It is important to create mechanisms to encourage young people to report violations of integrity more systematically. As suggested in the regional report *Youth Engagement and Empowerment in Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia*, networks of schools, youth centres and cultural organisations can play a critical role in raising young people's awareness, and helping them take a firm stand against corruption.

The OECD supports its member and countries from the MENA region in implementing public policies that consults with and involves citizens, notably young people, in this fight for integrity. The means are many and varied, from the promotion of measures supporting an open government, the citizen consultation and participation practices, to the implementation of the principles of freedom of information, the promotion of open data and the establishment of monitoring agencies (especially within local public organisations).

If it is to be successful, Tunisia's democratic, pluralist experiment—the first in the MENA region—must be supported by sustained action against corruption, with young people driving this change. But young people must be empowered. The future of the country depends upon it.

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