ميكام
مركز ميريان
للدراسات المتقدمة
في المنطقة المغاربية
MECAM
Merian Centre
For Advanced Studies
In The Maghreb
MECAM Papers

Youssef Cherif

Tunisia and Ghana: Parallel Histories, Diverging Democracies

MECAM Papers | Number 17 | June 10, 2025 | https://dx.doi.org/10.25673/119137 | ISSN: 2751-6474

Ghana and Tunisia have often been framed as beacons of democracy in their respective regions. However, as Ghana's democracy matured over decades, Tunisia's experiment remained fragile and ultimately collapsed. This paper examines how historical trajectories, leadership choices, regional influences, and economic challenges shaped their democratic paths, offering lessons on the risks of democratic backsliding.

- Ghana transitioned to democracy in the 1990s, a period of global democratic expansion, allowing its institutions to consolidate. Tunisia's transition in 2011 occurred at a time of global democratic retreat, making consolidation more fragile.
- Tunisia's highly centralised state struggled with democratic governance, while Ghana's weaker state and decentralised and adaptable system facilitated political accommodation and institutional endurance. Respective French and British colonial legacies made a difference, too.
- In terms of external support, Ghana benefitted from ECOWAS' strong democratic norms, whereas in the case of Tunisia, the Arab Maghreb Union – ECOWAS' North African counterpart – remained politically paralysed. Tunisia's post-2011 reliance on fragmented international aid and support created conflicting incentives, unlike Ghana's relatively stable foreign partnerships.
- Both countries have faced severe economic crises, fuelling public disillusionment with democracy. Tunisia's economic crash, driven by high debt and inflation, led to democratic erosion. Ghana's current economic instability poses a similar risk to its democratic stability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Tunisia's democratic failure serves as a warning to Ghana: democratic survival is never certain. Ghanaian policymakers must address institutional weaknesses, economic instability, media polarisation, and rising disillusionment to prevent democratic backsliding.

WHY COMPARE GHANA AND TUNISIA?

What makes democracies endure, and why do some falter despite initial promise?

This paper is rooted in personal observations: as a researcher from Tunisia with extensive knowledge of its political landscape, I have visited Ghana multiple times and was struck by both the similarities and contrasts between the two countries. These reflections took shape following discussions at the MIASA (Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa) Conference in December 2024 in Accra, where the question of governance in Africa was widely debated. The case selection is not arbitrary: Both Tunisia and Ghana were labelled "beacons of democracy" by the West, making them useful cases for examining democratic resilience and failure. The two countries experienced similar independence trajectories, had strong founding leaders with comparable biographies, and evolved in instable neighbourhoods.

As a disclaimer, the precolonial and colonial history of the two countries, as well as their social and economic structures, are very different. It should also be noted that the paper does not accept the framing of "beacon of democracy" uncritically; instead, it analyses whether this label held up over time and why democracy proved more durable in Ghana than in Tunisia. Additionally, the unconventional contrasting of Tunisia with Ghana allows for new insights into democratisation in Africa by juxtaposing a North African and a West African case.

STRUCTURAL SIMILARITIES

Tunisia and Ghana evince several similarities. They both gained independence in the late 1950s and were shaped by charismatic founding leaders. Habib Bourguiba led Tunisia to autonomy from France in 1956, and Kwame Nkrumah pushed Ghana out of the British realm the following year. The presidents who had the most lasting impact on Ghana and Tunisia after their founding leaders, Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings in Ghana and General Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, were military men who resorted to populism and alternated between socialism and liberalism. In the 1980s and 1990s, the two countries were the poster children for the International Monetary Fund in their respective regions. Nevertheless, between 2011 and 2021 they became two examples of successful democratic transitions.

Their position in their respective regional orders is also similar. Algeria, on Tunisia's western border, has a military-led regime that was at war with Morocco in the 1960s. Algeria also went through a decade-long civil war ending in 2002. Libya, on Tunisia's eastern border, was ruled by the army and paramilitary forces until 2011. It went to war with Chad from 1978 to 1987 and had skirmished with several regional and global powers since the 1970s. Between 2011 and 2020, Libya sank into civil war. Hence, Tunisia's neighbours have long histories of military conflict and authoritarian governance. Ghana's regional context in West Africa has also been marked by civil wars, coups, and instability. Nigeria, the regional hegemon, experienced a civil war in the 1960s, several instances of localised civil strife that continue today, and three decades of military rule that ended only in 1999. Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone endured devastating civil wars and a series of coups between the 1980s and 2010s, whereas Mali and Burkina Faso have struggled with growing jihadist insurgencies after a series of coups and long histories of civil unrest and regional wars. Out of this tumult in both regions, Tunisia and Ghana emerged largely unharmed.

STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES

There are major differences between Tunisia and Ghana that may explain why they reached such different outcomes in democratisation. Ghana is larger than Tunisia and richer in natural resources (Ahlman 2023). Tunisia has had a centralised bureaucratic

state for centuries. Its political system was deeply shaped by French direct rule and modernisation policies under the protectorate, and its state apparatus was strengthened under Bourguiba and Ben Ali (Anderson 1986). Ghana's state institutions, while weaker, had mechanisms of political accommodation. The country inherited a British system that relied more on indirect rule and traditional authorities. After independence, Nkrumah's early centralisation attempts were checked by regional elites, military interventions, and later decentralisation policies (Afolayan 2013). But whereas Tunisia had a centralised and stable authoritarian regime under Bourguiba and his successor Ben Ali, Ghana experienced repeated coups and instability until the 1990s. And whereas Ghana flirted with short democratic intervals during its authoritarian period, Tunisia had always been ruled by strongmen until the advent of democracy in 2011.

Rawlings vs. Ben Ali: Leadership and Democratisation

Rawlings staged a classic coup, in 1981, and Ben Ali took the presidency through a constitutional one, in 1987. Both presented themselves as sons of the people, coming from modest backgrounds and distancing themselves from old elites, though both retained elements of existing power structures during their mandates. Both used populist rhetoric and policies to consolidate legitimacy, such as fighting social injustice or adopting anti-imperialist discourse (Gyimah-Boadi and Rothchild 1982). Both followed a neoliberal economic agenda. However, there were also striking differences between the two characters: Rawlings embraced democratisation when liberal democracy was on the rise globally, in the 1990s (Haynes 2024). Ben Ali, who had at that time just conquered supreme authority, consolidated authoritarianism instead of democratising. He missed the wave of democratisation and went ahead with authoritarian control. In other words, Rawlings built a neoliberal democracy, and Ben Ali a neoliberal autocracy. Therefore, when Rawlings left power, his apparatchiks had gradually accepted the idea of democratic life and were full actors in the democratic game. In Tunisia, democracy started when Ben Ali was toppled, not under his rule. Ben Ali's clique and extended beneficiaries of the regime, moreover, saw the transition as a loss of privileges and a chaotic situation. They played the counterrevolutionary card for most of the decade that followed the fall of their leader, thus contributing to democratic erosion.

The Timing of Democratic Transitions

The Ghanaian democratic transition started when liberal democracy became globally dominant, at the end of the Cold War. Relatively free local elections were organised in 1988, but the official starting date of democracy in the country is the year 1992, a few months after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. By 2001, Ghana had achieved its first peaceful transfer of power, when Rawlings retired and his chosen successor lost the election. Ghana's democracy has persisted since, despite economic and governance challenges (Haynes and Kumah-Abiwu 2024). The Tunisian transition that lasted from 2011 to 2021, by contrast, occurred when global democracy was in decline and authoritarianism was resurging. The democratic system, therefore, lacked deep institutional roots and was fragile when crises hit. Democratic consolidation was much harder to achieve in the case of Tunisia compared to Ghana (Linz and Stepan 1996).

There are two main arguments to be made here, the first being about timing and why it matters. Ghana's transition to democracy was like a skilled surfer catching the perfect wave, moving with the global tide of democratisation. It went through the process almost unscathed and got all the support and attention needed from abroad. There were no major threats outside either, since dictators were falling, not emerging. Tunisia caught the wave when democracy was in decline, and as anti-democratic elements were consolidating locally and across the world, leaving it to flounder as global enthusiasm for democracy

faded. Moreover, and this is the second argument, Ghana's democracy had had time to mature, so when global democracy began to decline around 2010, it had enough checks to sustain itself. Tunisia's democracy, however, was too young and unstable.

External Actors

On a regional level, Algeria and Nigeria play significant roles in North and West Africa, respectively (Kim 2022). Nigeria's political struggles and economic influence have affected Ghana's stability. But the fact that the country was on its way to becoming a civilian democracy in the 1990s had a positive impact on Ghana's democratic transition: the hegemon next door had no objection to Ghana democratising. Algeria, however, follows a nationalist, military-controlled governance model wary of democratic systems, especially when they are seen as backed by the West. Nurturing a democratic regime under the watchful eye of Algiers was not easy for Tunis. Diplomatic tensions were high, especially in the years 2011–2013, and Algerian aid, while vital, remained limited during the decade in which Tunisia was the sole Arab full democracy.

Since the Tunisian transition happened during the Gulf Cold War, Tunisia found itself prey to the warring authoritarian factions of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Saudi Arabia and the UAE versus Qatar and its ally Turkey (Lynch 2017). The GCC conflict involved diplomatic and economic pressures, military threats, and media influence. It impacted several Middle Eastern and North African states, Tunisia being one of them. The latter's proximity to Libya made it even more important in the geopolitical game being played out. The GCC countries were important donors who played a role in economic investment – but not in strengthening democratic institutions, rather the contrary. Ghana experienced nothing of the sort.

In terms of regional institutions, at the time of its democratisation Ghana belonged (and still belongs) to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a well-functioning body whose backing was important to maintain Ghana's stability and democracy and to create economic opportunities. Tunisia, on the other hand, was (and still is) a member of the Arab Maghreb Union, a structure that was paralysed because of disagreements between North African leaders. Ghana was part of an economic ensemble, Tunisia was alone.

When it came to the global arena, Ghana received substantial aid from the United States, the United Kingdom, and other donors from the early 1990s on to consolidate its democracy. And as it built its democratic foundations in the 1990s and early 2000s, there were no major proponents of authoritarianism in the world. Unlike Ghana, Tunisia's foreign support was fragmented. Financial aid from the European Union (EU) was divided between democracy promotion and migration control. Tunisia did, indeed, receive substantial aid from the G7 democracies and the African Union, but it was inconsistent, conditional, and insufficient to stabilise its new system. Additionally, some European donors, such as France and Italy, doubted Tunisia's ability to democratise. Moreover, with the vast increase in both migrants to Europe and terrorist attacks in the Mediterranean region from approximately 2015 on, the EU's enthusiasm waned.

SHARED CHALLENGES

There is a sense of déjà vu here: Tunisia was once seen as a democratic success story, just like Ghana is today. Tunisia was also described in the past as a beacon of democracy and hope. A democracy is a democracy until it is not. Ghana has a consolidated democratic system, built over a long period of time, but until when?

Both Ghana and Tunisia are experiencing significant economic challenges. Ghana's public debt was at 92.7 per cent of its GDP by 2022. Tunisia's was at 81 per cent in 2023. In Ghana, inflation worsened from 31.5 per cent in 2022 to 40.3 per cent in 2023, driven

mainly by higher food prices and currency depreciation. In Tunisia, inflation remains under 10 per cent, but the country faces recurring shortages of staple foods such as bread, sugar, and milk. Currency depreciation, however, is affecting both countries equally. The Tunisian dinar lost more than 50 per cent of its value against the US dollar in the decade of democracy (2011–2021). The collapse of the Ghanaian cedi was more sudden: it lost over 50 per cent of its value between January and October 2022. The two countries are coping with elevated fiscal deficits, putting a strain on public finances.

Both Tunisia and Ghana struggle with political disillusionment, in part because of these economic difficulties. In 2024, 82 per cent of Ghanaians believed their country was heading in the wrong direction (Afrobarometer 2024). Between 2011 and 2021, surveys showed a steady decline in Tunisians' faith in democracy (Afrobarometer 2021; Pew Research Center 2014; IRI 2021). Overall, Tunisians and Ghanaians doubt that democracy can solve their economic problems. They are frustrated with democracy, institutions, and political parties. In the face of this, it is no wonder that Ghanaian observers rang the alarm bell when Burkina Faso's young putschist leader Ibrahim Traoré got a "resounding ovation" in Accra in January 2025 (Adu 2025).

Another important factor to note when comparing the two countries is corruption. The perception of corruption fuels disillusionment with politics. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Ghana's rank dropped from 52nd (scoring 3.5 out of 10) in 2000, when Rawlings was still president, to 68th (4.1/10) in 2010, a decade after he left, when the country was considered a full democracy. Its rank decreased further, to 73rd (4.3/10) in 2021 and then to 80th (4.2/10) in 2024, when the latest general elections took place. Tunisia's rank was 32nd (5.2/10) in 2000 during the Ben Ali dictatorship, 66th (4.3/10) in 2010 right before the Arab Uprisings, and 70th (4.4/10) in 2021, right before the authoritarian turn (Transparency International 2025). In the public perception, elected officials are seen as self-serving rather than as reformers despite the democratic change over time. This has led to the discrediting of democratic elites and created a wall between those elites and their electorate.

Then, there is the issue of violent extremism. Both Tunisia and Ghana face jihadist threats on their immediate borders as well as their own territory. In Tunisia, jihadists staged a series of attacks in the years 2011–2021 that created the public perception that democracy brought with it extremism and terrorism. Ghana, so far, has been spared. But its neighbours Burkina Faso, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire have suffered several terrorist attacks in the past decade. The risk of contagion is high (De Bruijne, Courtright, and Ellis 2024). If the threat intensifies, security and military forces would want to impose more restrictions on liberties and have the final word. Public opinion, especially in the age of social media, might accept it.

Finally, both Ghana and Tunisia have dynamic media and social media landscapes that, while maintaining a vibrant public discourse, are also susceptible to misinformation and disinformation. Political parties employ disinformation tactics to influence public opinion. Supporters utilise news websites and deploy cyber activities to promote their candidates and sow confusion. While specific instances of foreign state actors such as Russia and China directly disseminating disinformation in Ghana are not extensively documented, there is a broader concern about foreign entities exploiting Africa's media landscape to further their interests. In the case of Tunisia, a multitude of foreign actors have been implicated in disinformation campaigns, including the Gulf countries, Turkey, and Egypt. All these players, local and external, are intoxicating public opinion and amplifying the issues mentioned throughout this paper, undermining democracy and its proponents.

LESSONS FOR GHANA

Ghana's democracy is resilient but fragile. Tunisia was once seen as a democratic beacon, just as Ghana is today. But where are those hopes and hyperbolic praises now? Democratic success is not just about holding elections; it depends on economic performance, security, governance, and institutional strength. Economic crises, corruption, insecurity, and youth disillusionment weaken democratic resilience. This paper serves as both an analysis and a warning – rather than a prophecy – about the fragility of democratic gains.

Tunisia is not a faraway European democracy, but an African country with lots of similarities to Ghana. Ghana's democracy has endured longer than Tunisia's, but its survival is not guaranteed if it does not address its structural problems by strengthening its independent institutions, maintaining economic stability and peace, monitoring disinformation and misinformation, and preventing political disillusionment from causing systemic collapse.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adu, Patrick K. (2025), *A Resounding Ovation: What Ibrahim Traoré's Reception Reveals About the Youth's Perception of Leadership*, WACSI, 10 January, https://wacsi.org/a-resounding-ovation-what-ibrahim-traores-reception-reveals-about-the-youths-perception-of-leadership/ (06.03.2025).

Afolayan, Gbenga Emmanuel (2013), The Democratization Process in Ghana: Key Issues and Challenges, in: United Nations (ed.), *Democracy in the South: Participation, the State, and the People*, 116–136, https://doi.org/10.18356/6c1065f3-en (06.03.2025).

Afrobarometer (2021), *Tunisia Round 8 Summary of Results*, 28 October, https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/summary-results-afrobarometer-round-8-survey-tunisia-2020-0/ (06.03.2025).

Afrobarometer (2024), *African Youth are Committed to Democracy but Express Greater Dissatisfaction than their Elders, Afrobarometer Inaugural Flagship Report Reveals*, 12 August, https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/african-youth-are-committed-to-democracy-but-express-greater-dissatisfaction-than-their-elders-afrobarometer-inaugural-flagship-report-reveals/ (06.03.2025).

Ahlman, Jeffrey (2023), *Ghana: A Political and Social History*, London: Zed Books.

Anderson, Lisa (1986), *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

De Bruijne, Kars, James Courtright, and Grace Ellis (2024), *A Beacon of Democracy? How Hyper-Political Competition Increases the Risk of Violent Extremism in Ghana*, Clingendael, CRU Report, July, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/ghana-beacon-democracy (06.03.2025).

Gyimah-Boadi, Emmanuel, and Donald Rothchild (1982), Rawlings, Populism, and the Civil Liberties Tradition in Ghana, in: *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, 12, 3/4, 64–69.

Haynes, Jeff (2024), Revolution and Democracy in Ghana: The Politics of Jerry John Rawlings, London, New York: Routledge.

Haynes, Jeff, and Felix Kumah-Abiwu (2024), *Looking Back at Three Decades of Ghana's Democracy*, Africa at LSE – LSE's Engagement with Africa, 10 January, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2024/01/10/looking-back-at-three-decades-of-ghanas-democracy/ (06.03.2025).

IRI (2021), *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Tunisia. September 24 – October 11, 2020*, Center for Insights in Survey Research, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020-10_iri_tunisia_report_-_final.pdf (06.03.2025).

Kim, Jiye (2022), Between a Regional Hegemon and a Middle Power: The Case of Nigeria, in: Gabriele Abbondanza and Thomas Stow Wilkins (eds), *Awkward Powers: Escaping Traditional Great and Middle Power Theory*, Singapore: Springer, 221–241.

Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan (1996), *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lynch, Marc (2017), *The Qatar Crisis, Project on Middle East Political Science*, POMEPS Briefings 31, October, https://pomeps.org/the-qatar-crisis-pomeps-brief-31 (17.09.2022).

Pew Research Center (2014), *Tunisian Confidence in Democracy Wanes*, Report, 15 October, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/10/15/tunisian-confidence-in-democracy-wanes/ (06.03.2025).

Transparency International (2025), *Corruption Perceptions Index 2024*, https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024 (10.04.2025).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Youssef Cherif is a political analyst and researcher specialising in International Relations, with a focus on North and West Africa. He is a PhD Researcher at Leiden University and holds an MA in IR from King's College London and an MA in Classical Studies from Columbia University. He is the Director of Columbia Global Center Tunis. He has been actively engaged in comparative research on political transitions in the region. His work examines democratisation, social movements, and the role of external actors in shaping governance outcomes.
He has been involved with MECAM via co-organising and attending conferences, as well as contributing to discussions on political and societal transformations in the region. In addition to his research, he regularly engages with think tanks, media outlets, and academic institutions on issues related to democracy, social movements, and regional security.

E-mail: yc2514@columbia.edu
Website: https://globalcenters.columbia.edu/content/youssef-cherif

IMPRINT

MECAM Papers are published by MECAM, which is the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb – a research centre for interdisciplinary research and academic exchange based in Tunis, Tunisia. Under its guiding theme "Imagining Futures – Dealing with Disparity," MECAM promotes the internationalisation of research in the Humanities and Social Sciences across the Mediterranean. MECAM is a joint initiative of seven German and Tunisian universities as well as research institutions, and is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology, and Space (BMFTR).

Editor: Dr. Maria Josua

Editorial Department: Petra Brandt, Meenakshi Preisser

Merian Centre for Advanced Study in the Maghreb (MECAM)
27, rue Florian, ISEAHT – Borj Zouara 1029 Tunis, Tunisia
https://mecam.tn
mecam-office@uni-marburg.de

With funding from the:
Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space