Just over a year since Tunisia's October 23, 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, long lines of patient citizens who emerged beaming from polls last October have given way to new demonstrations and general strikes — this time against the Ennahda-led troika. In the cradle of the Arab uprising, Tunisians are deeply frustrated with the economic and political failure of the government. Today, nearly half of Tunisians feel they are worse off than they were before the revolution, and only 26 percent believe their situation has improved. Despite this, however, our original survey of 1,200 Tunisians conducted between October 10 and November 20 finds reason for optimism.

Tunisia's problems run deep. A December 1 New York Times article, written in the wake of uprisings in the Tunisian town of Siliana in November that led to a five-day stand-off with the government, chronicles the problems: unemployment is up from 13 to 18 percent since the fall of former President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, youth increasingly flow out of universities to find
themselves without work, a constitution is yet to be written, elections are postponed, and local governments remain appointed. Tunisians talk about the disconnect between the government and the people — grumbling that it is no more concerned with daily needs than Ben Ali’s before it. People say that the current government and police are as corrupt as in the past, and express a general sense of insecurity.

And they blame the leaders. Asked to assess the Constituent Assembly, more than 50 percent feel it is doing a poor job, and another 30 percent rating it as fair, while only 1 percent see it as excellent. Voters are slightly more likely to view the assembly positively than people who did not vote on October 23, 2011 — with nearly 49 percent of voters feeling it does a poor job, compared to 56 percent of non-voters. The government fares equally poorly. Nearly half of respondents are very dissatisfied with the government and another 28 percent somewhat satisfied; only 3 percent are very satisfied.

Of course, not all Tunisians see the situation similarly. Tunisians who identify as religious are more satisfied with the government and the transition than those who consider themselves "not at all religious." Of the latter, more than 70 percent see Tunisia as worse off than before the revolution, and more than 85 percent are "very dissatisfied" with the government. Youth, too, are extremely unhappy. Nearly 60 percent of the 18 to 33 year olds are very dissatisfied with the government, compared to slightly more than 41 percent of those 48 to 63 years old. There are also regional differences. Only 26 percent of people in Médenine, where many government officials originate, are very dissatisfied with the government, while more than 73 percent in Ben Arous, in the north near Tunis, are very dissatisfied. In contrast, there is no gender gap in satisfaction with the government — 50 percent of men and 52 percent of women are very dissatisfied — suggesting that cleavages in Tunisia are largely religious and economic.

The cleavage between more and less religious Tunisians is also reflected in support for a leader like Béji Caid Essebsi versus one like Hamadi Jabali. When asked whether Jebali, the head of the government and leader of the Islamist Ennahda, or Essebsi, former prime minister (March to October 2011),* will provide better leadership for the problems that Tunisia faces today: 24 percent chose Jabali, 34.9 percent Essebsi, and 19.5 percent said they would prefer someone else. Support for Essebsi was stronger among more secular Tunisians; support for Jabali was higher among more religious Tunisians.

Despite the discontent, many see Tunisia as fairly democratic. Sixty percent of respondents see Tunisia as somewhat or entirely democratic, compared to one-third who feel it is
somewhat or entirely undemocratic. And here, differences across the population are muted. There is no significant difference in youth's assessment of Tunisia's democratic status. But, more religious Tunisians are more likely to see Tunisia as more democratic: 46.9 percent of non-religious and 57.7 percent of religious see Tunisia as democratic.

Perhaps most importantly, Tunisians support a democratic political framework. Nearly 60 percent want the parliament to play a major role in legislation, compared to slightly over 20 percent preferring a parliament that simply advises the executive and nearly 10 percent who would do without parliament entirely. The vast majority of Tunisians (nearly 80 percent) also agree with the statement, "Democracy has its problems, but it is better than any other form of rule."

And, they plan to participate. More than three-quarters of Tunisians say they plan to vote in the next elections, although many for different parties than in the previous election. Asked, "If there were an election tomorrow, who would you vote for?" Twelve percent say Ennahda, which is about equal to the combined support for all other parties — in total 13.9 percent of respondents. The next most popular party is Nidaa Tounes, which 6.8 percent of the Tunisians support. The vast majority of Tunisians do not have an established party preferences and will decide at some later time which party to support in the election.

Most Tunisians may not see today's government as less corrupt or ineffective than the previous regime, and they are fearful of a growing sense of insecurity. But, they look to new elections to again replace the elites in power. These sentiments are reflected in calls for a second revolution — this time, at the ballot box.

For more information about the survey and for English and Arabic reports, see: http://www.pdx.edu/hatfieldschool/lindsay-benstead

*Correction — The article originally incorrectly stated Essebsi was prime minister under Ben Ali.

Lindsay Benstead is an assistant professor of political science at Portland State University. Ellen Lust is associate professor of political science at Yale University, and Dhafer Malouche is a lecturer at Ecole Supérieure de la Statistique et de l'Analyse de l'Information, Tunis.

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