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HISTORY 2026 EDITION

# PROTEST AND CHANGE

COURSE COMPANION



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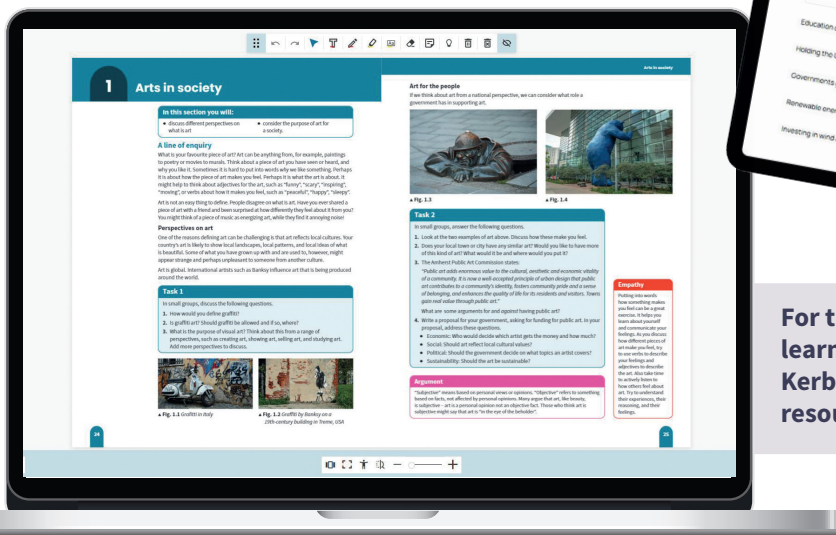
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# Contents

**Guide to Paper 1** ..... **iv**

**How to use this book** ..... **ix**

## **Focused study 1: Feminism in the United States (1960–1979)**

**Unit 1.1** What led to the emergence of protest movements? ..... 3

**1.1.1** Reactions to domesticity, including participation of women  
in the workforce ..... 6

**1.1.2** Impact of changing access to contraception ..... 17

**1.1.3** Influence of early feminist literature ..... 24

**Unit 1.2** How did the protest movement challenge authority? ..... 37

**1.2.1** Protest and activism ..... 39

**1.2.2** Role of groups including the National Organization  
for Women (NOW), the National Women’s Political Caucus  
and organizations affiliated to the Women’s Liberation Movement ..... 51

**1.2.3** Role of mass media ..... 62

**Unit 1.3** What changes did the protest movement achieve, and with what limitations? ..... 71

**1.3.1** Political and legal changes, including Title IX (1972)  
and *Roe vs Wade* (1973) ..... 73

**1.3.2** Economic changes, including equal pay and employment rights ..... 87

**1.3.3** Experiences of marginalized women, including African American  
and working-class women ..... 93

## **Focused study 2: Revolution in Tunisia (1989–2015)**

**Unit 2.1** What led to the emergence of protest movements? ..... 111

**2.1.1** Repression and censorship by the Ben Ali regime ..... 114

**2.1.2** Failed economic reform and unemployment ..... 134

**2.1.3** Influence and spread of revolutionary ideas ..... 146

**Unit 2.2** How did the protest movement challenge authority? ..... 159

**2.2.1** The December Revolution ..... 161

**2.2.2** The Ennahda Party and Nidaa Tounes ..... 175

**2.2.3** Role of social media ..... 184

**Unit 2.3** What changes did the protest movement achieve, and with what limitations? ..... 201

**2.3.1** Political and legal changes, including the ousting of Ben Ali  
and the 2014 Constitution ..... 203

**2.3.2** Social changes, including youth radicalization and terrorism ..... 221

**2.3.3** Role and status of women ..... 232

**Index** ..... **245**

**Answers** ..... **[www.oxfordsecondary.com/ib-hist-support](http://www.oxfordsecondary.com/ib-hist-support)**

## 2.1.1 Repression and censorship by the Ben Ali regime

### Key concepts

#### Cause and consequence

- How did Ben Ali's repression and censorship of dissent contribute to the outbreak of protests in 2010–2011?

#### Continuity and change

- To what extent did Ben Ali's policies of repression and censorship represent a continuation of past authoritarian practices in Tunisia, and in what ways did they change?

#### Perspectives

- How did Ben Ali's regime justify its repression and censorship to domestic and international audiences?

#### Significance

- How significant was the role of repression and censorship in the emergence of protest movements?

### Key terms

**Coup d'état:** A French term that literally means a "blow of state", used to refer to a sudden and sometimes violent change in government or leadership.

**Pluralism:** A political philosophy that holds that, within a liberal democracy, power should be shared among a variety of groups and not by one single elite or group of elites.

**Authoritarianism:** A political system where power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader or small group and political and individual freedoms are limited.

**Cronyism:** Favouring friends, political allies or business associates by giving them jobs, contracts or influence, regardless of merit.

### ATL Approaches to learning

#### Thinking skills

Review the timeline on page 112 to answer the following questions.

1. What patterns do you notice in Ben Ali's election results between 1989 and 2004?
2. How did the 2002 constitutional referendum change Tunisia's political situation?
3. What event in 2008 foreshadowed the Tunisian Revolution?

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali came to power in a popular bloodless **coup d'état** on 7 November 1987. Ben Ali positioned himself as a reformer, promising "change" and a new era in Tunisian history, including political **pluralism**, freedom of speech and economic reforms.

Despite a promising start, by 1989, there were indications that Ben Ali might not fulfil his promises. His 23 years in power were marred by increasing **authoritarianism**, rampant corruption, **cronyism** and economic inequality. Ben Ali's failed economic reforms have long been seen as the most significant factor leading to the widespread protests in Tunisia in 2010–2011. Tunisians seemed willing to ignore the general repression by the regime in return for economic prosperity. However, this prosperity was short-lived, vulnerable to economic and political events taking place elsewhere and failed to materialize for all Tunisians, especially those living in rural and marginalized areas.

Tunisia suffered from high unemployment rates, rising costs of living, and increased political repression. All of this contributed to increased frustration and disillusionment, especially among young people. **Neoliberal** economic reforms that aimed to strengthen the private sector encouraged corruption and **nepotism**, which were key factors in the emergence of protests across the country in 2011.

Other factors contributed to creating the necessary revolutionary climate. Tunisia had a long history of organized protest, through labour and union activities. Artists and intellectuals found creative ways to resist repression and censorship in order to criticise the regime, and high literacy rates—as well as a modern, secular education system—promoted critical thinking and political awareness. Finally, innovation and new technology provided a useful tool for communicating dissent and mobilizing protestors. The regime's harsh treatment of political opposition meant that when the time came, the opposition was united against Ben Ali.

## Key terms

**Neoliberal:** A political and economic ideology/philosophy that promotes free markets, deregulation (removing restrictions on businesses and financial markets), privatization and a reduced role for the state in the economy along with an increased role for the private sector.

**Nepotism:** The practice of favouring relatives or close associates by giving them jobs, promotions or special privileges.

## ATL Approaches to learning

### Thinking and self-management skills

Historians study the cause, consequence and significance of historical events. They often have different perspectives on historical events.

1. As you read through this unit and come across events that you think are causes for the emergence of protest movements in Tunisia, organize them into a table using the following headings: Long term, Short term.
2. Add a section to your table to note down the consequence of each cause or event. Consider how they led to the emergence of protest movements.
3. Finally, decide on the overall significance of each cause and consequence. How important a role did it play in the emergence of protest movements? Was it a spark, a key event or a related event.

Event/Cause	Time frame (Long term/Short term)	Consequence	Significance
High youth unemployment	Long term	Led to frustration and hopelessness among educated but jobless young people	Key event
Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation	Short term	...	....

## Ben Ali's personality and rise to power

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was born into a humble family in 1936. When he was a teenager, he was expelled from secondary school for supporting Bourguiba's independence movement. He never completed his secondary school education and did not earn a professional qualification after leaving school. While state propaganda later claimed he was an active participant in the nationalist struggle, his actual role was limited. His rise to power was largely due to his loyalty to Bourguiba's regime rather than any revolutionary credentials.

## ATL Approaches to learning

### Research skills

Carry out some online research on Ben Ali and his rise to power. Take notes under the following headings:

1. Military and security background
2. Political advancement
3. Exploiting Bourguiba's declining health
4. Other factors



▲ **Figure 2.1** A supporter waves the front page of a newspaper announcing the appointment of Ben Ali as the new President of Tunisia, underneath a picture of Habib Bourguiba, 7 November 1987

Ben Ali joined the Tunisian military in 1958 and was groomed as a future leader in the army receiving training at elite French and US military academies, specializing in military and police intelligence. His expertise in security operations helped him rise quickly through the ranks, leading to his appointment as Director-General of National Security in 1977. In 1986, he became Interior Minister and in October 1987, he was appointed Prime Minister.

Ben Ali's rise to power was in many ways a surprise. He was a political outsider. He had a military background and lacked a political support base. His power base was in the Interior Ministry and security apparatus and not in the ruling Destourian Socialist Party (PSD) or government bureaucracy. On a personal level, he lacked Bourguiba's charisma, intelligence, oratory skills and historical credentials as a popular independence leader. He was often described as dull, uncharismatic and a faceless bureaucrat.

Ben Ali was appointed prime minister and party secretary-general in October 1987, becoming President Bourguiba's right-hand man and the regime's Number 2. This culmination of powers, as both prime minister and leader of the PSD, allowed Ben Ali to do what no one had been able to do—remove Bourguiba, the “Father of the Republic” and president for life, from power (Figure 2.1).

#### **Habib Bourguiba (1903–2000): Tunisia's first post-independence leader**

Habib Bourguiba was Tunisia's popular independence leader, nicknamed “Al Mujahid Al Awal”, or “the first among the fighters”. From a young age, he displayed a sharp intellect and a deep sense of nationalism. He was a charismatic and pragmatic strategist who believed in mass mobilization and direct political action. In 1934, he broke away from the traditionalist Destour Party to form the Neo Destour Party, which played a central role in Tunisia's independence struggle. Upon Tunisia's independence in 1956, Bourguiba became the country's first prime minister under the newly established constitutional monarchy, with Muhammad VIII al-Amin as king. However, he quickly consolidated power, abolishing the monarchy in 1957 and declaring Tunisia a republic. He then assumed the role of the country's first president, positioning himself as the architect of modern Tunisia.

### **The 7 November *coup d'état***

On 7 November 1987, Habib Bourguiba, the now ageing dictator who had ruled Tunisia since independence from France in 1956, was quietly ousted in a bloodless *coup d'état*. On the night of 6 November, a small group of party and military officials, including Prime Minister Ben Ali, had a panel of seven doctors sign a statement declaring Bourguiba no longer physically or mentally capable of carrying out his duties. Ben Ali, who had only been appointed a month earlier to the post of prime minister, was now the legal successor to Bourguiba.

Bourguiba spent the rest of his life under house arrest until his death 13 years later on 6 April 2000.

Ben Ali, eager to highlight to domestic audiences and international observers the legality of the *coup d'état*, announced that Bourguiba's removal from power was based on Article 57 of the Tunisian Constitution. However, Ben Ali did not follow the constitutional procedure for presidential succession. Article 57 states that the President of the Chamber of Deputies should become the interim president. However, Ben Ali, as prime minister, took power directly, bypassing this step. Ben Ali and his allies—a small group of senior members of the Tunisian military and security services who supported him—presented medical reports declaring Bourguiba medically unfit without a formal ruling from the Constitutional Council. A 45–60-day election period was required for a new president, however, Ben Ali immediately became president, with no interim leader and no early election. By invoking Article 57, Ben Ali framed the transition as a necessary emergency measure due to Bourguiba's declining health.

Ben Ali's immediate actions on taking power seemed to reflect a true commitment to the start of a new era. He described his coming to power as a historic change, portraying himself as a modernizer and reformer and gaining Tunisian and international support as a result (Figure 2.2).



▲ Figure 2.2 President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali poses for an official photo in front of the Tunisian Flag, 1987



### Source skills A

#### An extract from a speech to the Tunisian Parliament by President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on 7 November 1987 after President Habib Bourguiba was declared unfit to govern.

"Fellow citizens

Our people has reached a degree of responsibility and maturity where every individual and group is in a position to constructively contribute to the running of its affairs, in conformity with the republican idea which gives institutions their full scope and guarantees the conditions for a responsible democracy, fully respecting the sovereignty of the people as written into the Constitution. This Constitution needs urgent revision. The times in which we live can no longer admit of life presidency or automatic succession, from which the people are excluded. Our people deserve an advanced and institutionalized political life, truly based on the plurality of parties and mass organizations.

We shall be soon putting forward a bill that will concern political parties and another concerning the press, which ensure a wider participation in the building up of Tunisia and the strengthening of her independence in a context of order and discipline."

#### Questions

1. What criticisms of Bourguiba does Ben Ali make in this speech? Use evidence from the source to support your answer.
2. Referring to the source, what reforms does Ben Ali promise?

**Discussion**

Is the claim that Ben Ali's rise to power was a surprise to the Tunisian people accurate?

Do you have a different perspective after examining his rise to power?

## Ben Ali promises change and reform 1987–1989

There was much hope in this early period that Ben Ali was going to deliver on his promises. Reforms were introduced that seemed designed to appeal to both the regime's elites and opposition groups. Political exiles were encouraged to return to Tunisia and were promised a more open political process. Thousands of political prisoners were freed in 1988 and exiled opposition figures were encouraged to return home.

### ATL Approaches to learning

#### Thinking and communication skills

Create a table and organize your notes on Ben Ali's reforms under the following headings as you read through these sections:

Reforms	Nature of the reform	Reform's influence on democratization in Tunisia
State party (PSD)		
Voting system		
Treatment of opposition		
Dealing with members of the old regime		
Human rights		
Constitutional amendment		
Relationship with the UGTT		
Women's rights and <b>secularism</b>		

#### Key term

**Secularism:** The separation of religion from civil affairs and the state so that no single faith controls or influences the state.

### Initial attitude to Islam and Islamic political groups

Ben Ali was aware of the power religion had to shape public opinion and wanted the Islamist opposition on his side. In an effort at appeasement, Islam would be given its place in society, but its power would be limited. Immediately after the *coup d'état* on 7 November, he declared Islam the state religion, he allowed the Islamic call to prayer to be broadcast on TV and Radio, and in March 1988 he went on a highly publicized pilgrimage to Mecca.

### Ben Ali promises human rights and political freedoms

Ben Ali was keen to show his commitment to freedom and human rights, and to distinguish himself from Bourguiba. He abolished discredited and unpopular institutions such as the State Security Court and Public Prosecutor, and central figures of the previous regime were sent to prison. A new constitutional court was set up in 1987 to make sure new legislation was in

line with the Constitution. In 1988, Tunisia became the first Arab state to ratify the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and in 1989, the Arab Institute for Human Rights was established. Ben Ali promised to extend civil liberties as well as allowing some media criticism, and some modifications were made to the press code to make it less restrictive. On 4 July 1988, Ben Ali introduced a constitutional amendment that formally abolished the presidency for life. It limited the presidential term in office to a maximum of three five-year terms and introduced an age restriction of 70 for anyone running for the presidency.

Ben Ali launched a programme of national reconciliation. This was an effort to reduce political tensions and include former opposition groups in the political process. In April 1988, a new law was passed that established the legal basis for a multiparty **political system**. This opened the political arena to opposition and helped to widen Ben Ali's support base. As a result, six opposition parties were granted legal status but parties organized along religious, ethnic or regional lines were excluded. The first multiparty parliamentary elections since 1981 were held in April 1989 and 76% of eligible voters turned up at the ballot box.

## Neutralizing the unions

Ben Ali sought to gain support from and control over the **left-wing** Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT). Bourguiba had repressed the UGTT in his final years and it had been greatly weakened. Three prominent figures from the UGTT were elected as lawmakers for the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) in the 1989 elections in an attempt to **co-opt** the UGTT.

## Changes to the ruling party, the PSD

Ben Ali introduced significant changes to the Destourian Socialist Party (PSD). The party had been sidelined under Bourguiba. Ben Ali, however, attempted to gain support from the PSD elite by promising to restore the party to its rightful place within the political decision-making process.

## Aspects of the previous regime that Ben Ali tried to preserve

Despite introducing these changes and reforms, Ben Ali showed that he was determined to preserve core aspects of the previous regime, such as the **secular** nature of the Tunisian state and the pre-eminence of state law over religious law. He was committed to the equality of men and women before the law and the unity of the state and party. Ben Ali continued with Bourguiba's secular legacy and saw himself as protecting women's rights from Islamic fundamentalism. He introduced electoral gender quotas and, by 2010, women made up 28% of parliamentary deputies, a number higher than any other Arab country and more than some Western countries (Figure 2.3).

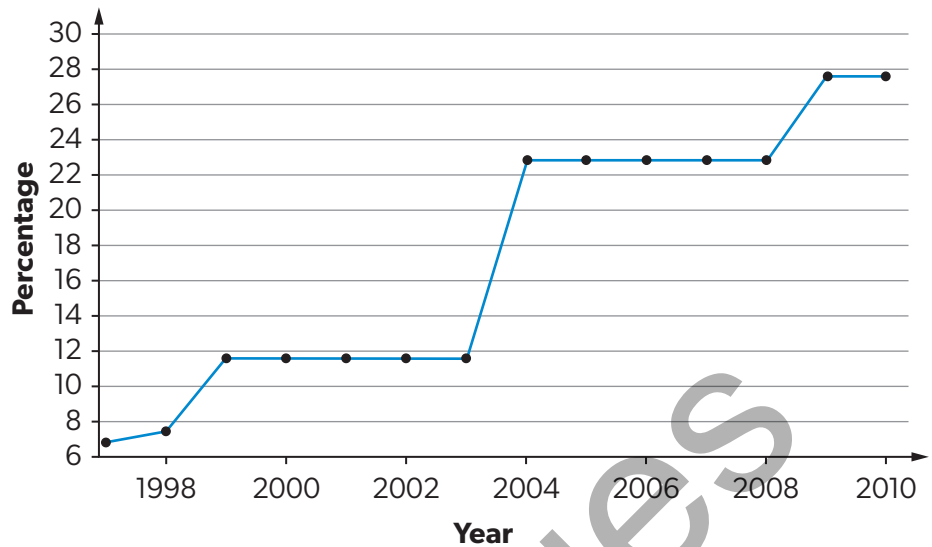
### Key terms

**Political system:** The way a country or society organizes and runs its government. It includes the rules, institutions and processes that decide how power is used, how leaders are chosen and how laws are made and enforced.

**Left wing:** Left-wing ideas generally support social equality, government action to reduce inequality and progressive change. Right-wing ideas usually emphasize individual freedom, free markets, tradition and limited government involvement in people's lives and the economy. Most political views fall somewhere along the spectrum, not just all the way left or all the way right. There are also more extreme ends called the far-left and the far-right, which advocate for very radical or revolutionary changes.

**Co-opt:** To take over or neutralize a movement, idea or opposition, often by absorbing its leaders or language while maintaining the original power structure.

**Secular:** Not connected with spiritual or religious matters.



▲ **Figure 2.3** Tunisian women’s increasing participation in parliament 1997–2010  
 Source of data: World Bank Open Data

## Ben Ali’s consolidation of power and establishment of one-man rule

### ATL Approaches to learning

#### Thinking and communication skills

As you read through this section, make notes under the following headings:

- Political control: How did Ben Ali consolidate his power? How did he legally weaken opposition?
- Repression: How was violence or the threat of violence, including the use of security forces, surveillance and the police, used to consolidate and maintain control?
- Censorship: How did the state control media and **civil society**?
- Propaganda and cult of personality: How was Ben Ali portrayed in the media?
- Economic policies: How did Ben Ali maintain legitimacy and consolidate his power through economic growth?

### Key term

**Civil society:** Civil society refers to organizations, institutions and individuals that serve the public’s needs but operate outside of governmental and corporate sectors.

### Source skills B

An extract from *Ben Ali’s Tunisia: Power and Contention in An Authoritarian Regime* (2023) by Anne Wolf.

“In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the architects of 7 November relied on three principal strategies to legitimize their assumption of power. First, they quickly organized grassroots rallies in favor of the new powerbrokers to suggest their takeover enjoyed widespread support. Second, they propped up the political credentials of the new president,



Ben Ali, by propagating the myth that he **evinced** a long history of party activism, even though this was not the case. Third, and most important, they put forth a **correctivist** frame to enhance their takeover's popular appeal, including to party followers."

### Questions

1. What does the author identify as the three main strategies used by Ben Ali to legitimize his power?
2. When was Wolf's book published? How might the date of publication influence its interpretation of Ben Ali's rule?



### Source skills C

#### Questions

1. Why would Ben Ali want to have his picture taken with Bourguiba in 1999 (Figure 2.4)?
2. Who might this picture appeal to?
3. How would this picture help consolidate Ben Ali's position in 1999?
4. What aspects of this image might have been used as propaganda by Ben Ali?

In just two years, Ben Ali was able to consolidate his power, weaken opposition and establish personal rule. The Socialist Destourian Party, known by its French initials (PSD), was renamed the Constitutional Democratic Rally, known by its French initials (RCD). Ben Ali was the only candidate to run for president in the 1989 elections and had gained personal control over the RCD, despite having a limited background in the party. He was a military man, but he did not use force to consolidate his power. He presented himself as a political reformer, following a "correctivist" strategy and correcting Bourguiba's mistakes. He facilitated a makeover of the renamed party through the appointment of new figureheads who were favourable to the new regime, starting at the **grassroots** of the party all the way up to senior representatives. This allowed Ben Ali to promote changes to party rules and practices and ultimately establish his one-man rule.

Ben Ali separated the position of prime minister and party secretary. Political control and strategic guidance of the state party were assumed by the party chairman—Ben Ali. The day-to-day management of the party was assigned to a new secretary general who, in contrast to the previous regime, would not have a Cabinet position. As a result of these changes, Ben Ali weakened the links between party and the state and also united control of both organizations in his hands.

Key changes to the PSD included renaming it (to become the RCD), restructuring the party's organization and becoming its leader. Ben Ali reshuffled the party's central committee with the aim of removing the old leaders who opposed his reforms. According to official data, party membership rose from 900 000 in 1987 to 1.5 million in 1989. Ben Ali replaced the previous regime's elites and Bourguiba cronies with his own loyal supporters so he could build up his own support network.

### Key terms

**Evinced:** Clearly showed or revealed something.

**Correctivist:** A political or ideological stance focused on correction aimed at adjusting past mistakes, whether in governance, ideology or social structures.



▲ **Figure 2.4** President Ben Ali visiting former President Bourguiba at Monastir, May 1999, a few months before the October 1999 elections

### Key term

**Grassroot:** A movement, initiative or an activity that emerges from the local or community level, rather than being directed by centralized authorities, political leaders, elites or large institutions.