



Democracy Lighthouse Digest

Edited by Leo Shanahan

INTRODUCING

The Democracy Lighthouse Digest

Launched in May 2024, the Democracy Lighthouse appeared during a period of mounting anxiety and widespread political unrest about democracy's future. Funded and supported by the Toda Peace Institute, the Democracy Lighthouse has since then aimed to be an independent beacon and distributor of information on the global subversion and renewal of democracy.

The threats confronting democracies are evidently becoming more dangerous and intractable. Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, rearmament in Europe, terrible wars in Sudan, Myanmar and Palestine, big power rivalries, the threats posed to democracy by the Trump administration in the United States, the repression of public protests against the abuse of power in countries such as Argentina and Serbia, and weakened judiciaries in Israel, Hungary, Mexico, and Türkiye are just some of the many challenges facing democracies everywhere. In this fast-changing and turbulent context, the Democracy Lighthouse has expanded its remit beyond its founding focus on platforming the hundreds of organisations and networks engaged in advocating for democracy. Our platform has added a range of new features, including interviews featuring the work of activists and scholars, latest book reviews, and publications by our Global Challenges to Democracy group. As part of this expansion, we have launched the Democracy Lighthouse Digest, a newsletter that provides monthly updates on our group's work.

This edition of the Democracy Lighthouse Digest includes the latest publications from our research team. It also includes Azmi Bishara's book 'Arduous Paths: On the Theory and Practice of Democratic Transition,' and concludes with a commentary from Larbi Sadiki fifteen years on from the Tunisian Revolution.

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[DEMOCRACY LIGHTHOUSE](#)



Party Like Mamdani

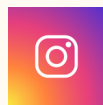
BY DEBASISH ROY CHOWDHURY

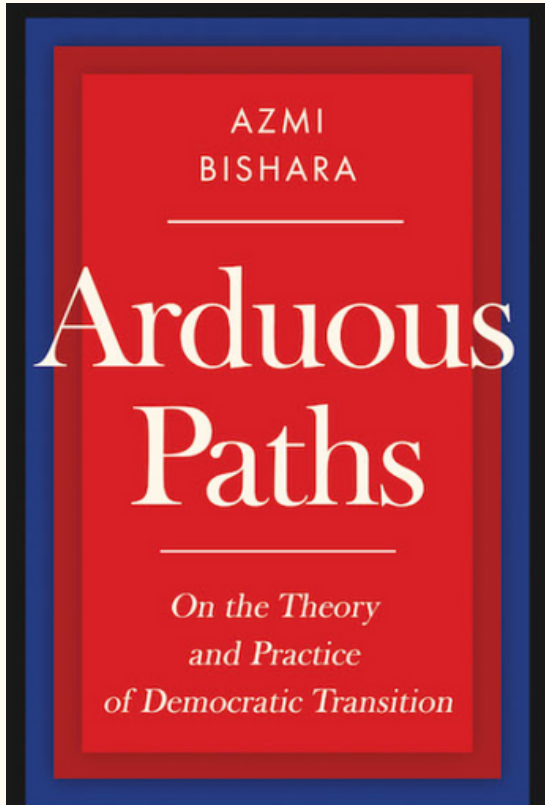
Roy Chowdhury discusses the important lessons that the New York mayor-elect's campaign masterclass has for India's flailing democracy, particularly its ineffectual opposition parties that have failed to mount any meaningful pushback against Modi's monopoly over power in more than a decade.

[READ FULL ARTICLE](#)

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Arduous Paths is published by Hurst and is available to pre-order for USD90.

elsewhere, offers a detailed analysis of modernisation and democracy transition approaches, and draws upon empirical evidence from the modern Middle East.

Bishara analyses and evaluates the outcomes of transition experiences in those Arab countries that have experienced revolutions and popular uprisings, and he illustrates how and why —despite the centrality of the demand for democracy across the region during the past two decades — transitions to democracy failed in some cases, and never happened in others. He concludes by offering the reader a distinctively Arab region interpretation of the field of democratic transition studies.

FROM THE SHELF

Arduous Paths: On the Theory and Practice of Democratic Transition

BY AZMI BISHARA

Azmi Bishara is among the Arab world's most prominent scholars. His *Arduous Paths* builds on his sizeable body of previous work on democracy through the lenses of civil society, religion and secularism, populism and sectarianism.

Arab transition to democracy scholarship is regarded in some quarters as excessively theoretical, too reliant on imported data, and uncritical of concepts of democratisation. Bishara's approach is different. While his research is situated within a critical theoretical framework, he directly engages with the day-to-day concerns of contemporary Arab societies. He tests theories, highlights the lessons to be learned from democratic transitions

Beyond Intractability “Big Picture Series”

Heidi and Guy Burgess, members of the Democracy Lighthouse research group, recently launched their “Big Picture Newsletter Series.” Its aim is to highlight the key ideas that they have been developing in recent years related to democratic erosion and what is to be done to prevent it. The Burgesses want to show how these ideas fit together to form a cohesive world view of how to help people, both in the United States and in other developed democracies, to get themselves out of the civic mess that they find themselves in. Fifteen articles are planned for the series with the first six now available on the Beyond Intractability Substack platform, available at the link below.

[READ THE SERIES HERE](#)

Democracy Watch

Tunisia: A Revolution Redux?

BY LARBI SADIKI

Is Tunisia on the cusp of a new wave of uprisings and perhaps a future revolution? Is the political scene set for a return to dissent and protest? These are the main questions that seem to beguile students of democratic transition in the region.



Larbi Sadiki is a Tunisian writer, academic, and political scientist.

The ‘Arab Spring’

Fifteen years ago, on 14 January 2011, Tunisians and Arabs at large experienced a euphoric moment. Opponents of dictator Zinealabidine Ben Ali peacefully occupied the Bourguiba Boulevard and surrounded the Interior Ministry Building. They sent a resounding revolutionary message to Ben Ali: “Dégagé”. Within hours, Ben Ali was ousted and not even the ‘deep state’, of which he was a key architect, could save his rule.

The rest was history, or so it seemed. There followed the birth of a regional ‘Arab Spring’. Like falling dominoes, neighbouring dictators were ousted in a sequence of similar uprisings – in Egypt, then in Libya, Yemen and, a year ago, in the Syrians’ overthrow of the 53-year-old Assad dynasty – a republic of fear akin to Gaddafi’s in Libya and Saddam Hussein’s in Iraq. In a region bound together by ancient traditions, a shared religion of Islam, postcolonial yearnings and a common language among nearly 450 million Arabs living in 22 states, the ousters saw the creation of democratic constitutions, free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections, and a thriving and expanding civic space.

Counter-Revolution

Until July 25, 2021, the day President Kais Saied issued an emergency declaration firing the prime minister, suspended the parliament and assumed all executive power in a ‘self-coup’, Tunisia was the only fledgling democracy that survived the tumult, violence, coups and social upheavals of the Arab uprisings. It was a promising democratic experiment unprecedented in the Arab region. But now things appear to be headed in the opposite direction. Not a single country from a total of 22 states qualifies as a “democracy” – even by minimalist standards. The whole Arab region is gripped by what is known today as counterrevolution (al-thawrat al-mudadda).

Tunisia is no exception. President Kais Saied has twice been elected democratically, but what the Tunisian case makes clear is that democracy can be unreliable and bring to office rulers who grow insecure and are willing to use non-democratic means to reproduce their stranglehold over power. This is where Tunisia stands today. Although thousands of civilians from all walks of life and political backgrounds demonstrated against the ‘self-coup’ in front of the National Assembly, President Saied has become increasingly reliant on excessive controls.

His regime has practically criminalised all opposition activities. With the detention on December 5, 2025, of Najib Chebbi, head of ‘Jabhat Al-Khalas’, the National Salvation Front coalition, all formal opposition to the regime is now eliminated. Islamist leader Rachid Ghannouchi and many of his Ennahda colleagues are in prison. So is Abir Mousi, who heads the Free Destour Party. Like other figures, she was sharply critical of President Saied’s policies.

In 2023, dozens of prominent figures, from the left, the Destour party, liberals, and Islamist politicians, were jailed as part of an infamous “conspiracy case”. The prison sentences ranged from 13 to 66 years. They were handed out to all kinds of opponents, from the ranks of politicians (e.g. Khayam Turki, Sayyid Ferjani, Ghazi Chaouachi, Ridha Belhaj, and Chaima Issa, who was sentenced to 20 years jail this month) to civil society activists and even to figures from the business sector (e.g. Kamel Ltaif). Civil society and media activists continue to risk charges under Law 54, which criminalizes ‘fake news’. Defendants’ lawyers have been challenging the accusations of conspiracy, viewing it to be unfounded and simply intended to eliminate all opposition. But the wave of arrests and detentions since the ‘self-coup’ has included the sacking of 57 judges. In a sign that the clampdown can touch anyone, prominent human rights lawyer Ayachi Hammami is also behind bars.

Echoes of 2011

Our world, including democratic countries, seems to be experiencing a new wave of autocratisation and democratic erosion. In the Tunisian case and elsewhere, autocratisation has features such as these: concentration rather than diffusion of power; assaults on dissent and opposition; shrinking civic space and political pluralism; and arbitrary laws against free speech, independent social media and free access to information. The resulting poor-quality governance and low institutional performance are inimical to economic performance and overall developmental growth, including the delivery of social justice policies and effective anti-corruption strategies. Despite lower inflation and higher growth in 2024, unemployment remains high, ranging from 16% in the big cities and more than 20% in the country’s south.

Little wonder that today Tunisians are rekindling their passions for their ‘hijacked’ revolution. After the latest arrests and prison sentences, the public discourse in Tunisia is once again defining prisoners of conscience as martyrs of justice. In the minds of many people who today oppose repression, even if they disagree with the views of some of the detainees, the detained opposition figures and human rights activists have become iconic figures. The detainees are furnishing the Tunisian political landscape with a renewed imagery: the struggle for democracy and the moral symbolism of rejecting a return to autocratic rule.

Both the resistance and the current adverse economic, social and political conditions may well be a positive opportunity for the ruling political class. The regime could facilitate a decompression by freeing all political prisoners. This in turn would create an opportunity for reconciliation through a series of national dialogues, perhaps with inputs from the Tunisian quartet which received a Nobel Prize in 2015. A democratic and collaborative reset of politics in Tunisia would then become possible, so proving that it is never too late for the regime to reach out to the opposition in a spirit of national unity, political resilience and mutual tolerance.

Thank you for your support in 2025

In 2025, the Democracy Lighthouse expanded its remit beyond its founding focus on platforming the hundreds of organisations and networks engaged in advocating for democracy. Our platform has added a range of new features, including interviews featuring the work of activists and scholars, latest book reviews, and publications by our Global Challenges to Democracy group. Thank you to everyone who has participated in interviews, published their own work, or stayed updated with the work that the Democracy Lighthouse is doing. In 2026, we are looking to build on this work, and we will be providing several updates on new projects at the beginning of next year.