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INFORMATION FOR THE PEOPLE:
TUNISIA EMBRACES OPEN GOVERNMENT, 2011 – 2016

SYNOPSIS

In January 2011, mass demonstrations in Tunisia ousted a regime that had tolerated little popular participation, opening the door to a new era of transparency. The protesters demanded an end to the secrecy that had protected elite privilege. Five months later, the president issued a decree that increased citizen access to government data and formed a steering committee to guide changes in information practices, building on small projects already in development. Advocates in the legislature and the public service joined with civil society leaders to support a strong access-to-information policy, to change the culture of public administration, and to secure the necessary financial and technical resources to publish large quantities of data online in user-friendly formats. Several government agencies launched their own open-data websites. External pressure, coupled with growing interest from civil society and legislators, helped keep transparency reforms on the cabinet office agenda despite frequent changes in top leadership. In 2016, Tunisia adopted one of the world's strongest laws regarding access to information. Although members of the public did not put all of the resources to use immediately, the country moved much closer to having the data needed to improve access to services, enhance government performance, and support the evidence-based deliberation on which a healthy democracy depended.

INTRODUCTION

Secrecy was the watchword in Tunisia's government during the 23-year reign of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. "Government propaganda said, 'We are transparent and open,'" noted Nejib Mokni, a lawyer who began working for the Tunisian prime ministry in 2005. But in reality, he explained, the principle of secrecy was ingrained in the culture of administration as well as in public service law and the penal code.

Many Tunisians could name the people who belonged to the country's tight leadership circle, but they knew little about what actually happened inside the halls of power. For example, the public had limited access to information about how government formulated policy, how much the government earned from oil wells and mines in poor rural areas, or how ministries used tax revenues. Nor could entrepreneurs gain easy access to the rules and procedures for starting a business. Even signing up for basic services was hard.

Policy conversations took place behind closed doors, and decisions typically benefited members

of Ben Ali's family. When the president's son-in-law purchased an automobile dealership in 2004, the rules soon changed to allow the business to import more cars. When a private school tried to compete against a school founded by the president's wife, the government imposed regulations that forced the new private school to shut down temporarily. In highly regulated parts of the economy, the small number of firms connected to the president's family accounted for as much as 55% of net profits, and the many other companies in the same sectors barely broke even.1 Security forces protected the regime's policies by suppressing political dissent and punishing citizens who spoke out against the ruling party.

After popular protests unseated Ben Ali in January 2011 and launched a wave of uprisings across the Middle East, politicians became more responsive to citizens' demands, and advocates of transparency worked to overturn policies of administrative secrecy. Tunisia started to redefine the relationship between citizens and the state. Interim leaders dissolved parliament, called for new elections, and began work on a new constitution.

The transitional government of Beji Caid Essebsi, who became interim prime minister a month after Ben Ali fled the country, scrambled to respond to popular sentiment. "There was a demand for transparency and accountability," recalled Mokni, who worked in the office of the prime minister's legal adviser. With unemployment at more than 18% in 2011, economic grievances dominated protesters' complaints.2 But citizens also railed against corruption and favoritism. Tunisians commonly used the Arabic word *wasta* to refer to the use of nepotism and cronyism to derive jobs, contracts, or benefits from the state. The 2011 Arab Barometer survey conducted shortly after the revolution reported that 62% of Tunisian respondents said that obtaining a job through such connections was "extremely widespread" and 68% saw corruption in state institutions and

agencies.3 Dissatisfaction was especially strong among Tunisians living outside coastal population centers, where the poverty rate was twice that in large cities and the extreme poverty rate was more than seven times as great.4

Fortuitously, circumstances outside Tunisia were pushing the country in the same direction because the revolution took place amid a growing global movement toward open government. With the widening recognition that citizens had a basic right to know what their government was doing, the number of countries with access-to-information laws was increasing every year.5

Mokni and other officials in the legal adviser's office took the first step toward giving citizens the right to access more information. Drawing partly on models used in other parts of the world, they drafted the text of a decree that established citizens' right to access to administrative documents produced by the executive branch of government. The 2011 access-to-information decree "was part of a pack of projects related to the political aspects of the democratic transition, about how to pass from a despotic regime to a regime oriented toward openness in dealing with society," said Kheireddine Ben Soltane, legal adviser to the prime minister.

Shortly afterward, the prime minister's office formed a steering committee that included representatives from the National Institute of Statistics—an agency that developed demographic, social, and economic data under the supervision of the Ministry of Development and International Cooperation—along with the legal adviser's office, the administrative reform office in the prime ministry, the finance ministry, and the national archives. The committee began to make plans for transforming the *theory* of open government into *practice*. Committee chair Fares Bessrour—a government auditor who had briefly headed the prime minister's e-government unit before becoming director general of administrative reform—had to figure out how to build collaboration and draw Tunisia into the global open-government conversation.

THE CHALLENGE

At the time of Tunisia's revolution, government information was still a scarce commodity among citizens of countries in North Africa and the Middle East. In 2007, Jordan had become the first country in the region to pass access-to-information legislation. "It was an incredibly weak law," said Toby Mendel, a consultant to Tunisia's prime minister and the founder and director of the Canada-based Centre for Law and Democracy, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that promoted freedom-of-information legislation. The Jordanian law gave government too much leeway to deny citizens' requests for information; it lacked an access-to-information oversight body that was independent from the government; and it did not include procedural details essential to make the system work. The region's other countries—mostly monarchies or one-party states—had made even less progress.

Because Tunisia had no parliament to vote on legislation in early 2011, changing access-to-information rules required only a presidential decree that had the force of law. Mokni's office had reached out earlier to Mendel for advice and assistance, and after consulting broadly within the government, Mendel helped Mokni's office produce a text that became the first step toward greater transparency. The draft decree established a citizen's right to access documents related to the executive branch of government. The president issued the access-to-information decree in May 2011.[6]

Although Tunisia shared some of the problems that vexed its neighbors, the country enjoyed advantages that eased the drive toward transparency and cooperation between citizens and government. An important factor was the presence of civil servants who supported greater transparency and openness in government.

Legal adviser Mokni said a younger generation of government employees had started to chip away at the culture of secrecy even before the 2011 revolution. Connected to the outside world through the Internet and social media, they valued transparency and had achieved minor successes in opening up government by, for example, creating a more transparent process for registering corporations, an e-government platform offering access to certain government services, a website providing information important to investors, and a website to collect public comments on legislation drafted by the government before bills went to parliament. But until the ouster of Ben Ali, any initiative that might have affected high-level decision making was doomed by lack of political will, Mokni said.

Two other favorable factors for Tunisia were a relatively high level of education and media use. The adult literacy rate in 2011 was 78%—higher than Egypt (72%), Yemen (64%), and Morocco (56%).[7] Internet access in Tunisia was steadily growing, meaning that more citizens could use data if the government published it online. In 2011, 39% of citizens used the Internet, up from 17% in 2007, only three years earlier.[8] After the revolution, a burgeoning free press provided a market for information.

Crucially, Tunisia soon established an elected parliament that was no longer beholden to the wishes of an autocratic regime. The transitional government dissolved the previous parliament and scheduled elections in October 2011 for a National Constituent Assembly. The assembly, which served as a transitional legislature and was responsible for drafting a new constitution, gave Tunisian citizens greater voice in the policy-making process than they had under Ben Ali.

Those factors inspired hope among liberal-minded Tunisians that the country would make progress in opening the government to public scrutiny. But translating the decree into action required ingenuity as well as coordination across government to bolster capacity, create online open-data websites, and develop systems for gathering and storing information. Further, the proactive disclosure of information would be meaningless unless citizens actually downloaded and used data. Building public awareness was key.

The prime minister's steering committee, with Bessrour at its helm, had to contend with deeply

rooted challenges. Most ministries and agencies had neither policies nor procedures for responding to queries from members of the public nor a culture of proactively sharing information with citizens. Even the flow of data between government offices was slow, with each ministry guarding its work instead of collaborating with others. Open government required a new way of doing business. Changing mind-sets and teaching new procedures to civil servants, many of whom had operated for years under a system that valued secrecy, would be difficult. Overall, the government was "very hierarchical, very conservative, and closed," said Karim Belhaj, president of the Tunisian Association of Public Auditors.

Mokni said the extent of internal resistance to new ways of working varied from ministry to ministry and from department to department. Although some civil servants understood the need for change in post-revolution Tunisia, others did not immediately accept the need for openness and accountability. Most had built their careers during the Ben Ali government, working under strict regulations about privacy and confidentiality. For many state employees, uncertainty about shifting rules and new power structures bred wariness. Overcoming that challenge required new guidelines and new principles. "There were problems of communication, sensitization, and training," Mokni said.

Advocates of open government also worried that the transparency initiative might falter while national leaders were focusing on navigating a restive postrevolution environment and moving the country toward new elections. The decree was only the first step in a lengthy process. The government and incoming parliament had to work on legislation to strengthen the decree and to enshrine in the new constitution the right to information. Keeping the project on politicians' agendas was essential.

Because the government changed five times in the succeeding three years, the frequent turnover in ministerial posts added to the

difficulties of maintaining a sharp focus on transparency issues. With the attention of leaders fractured, champions of change had to come from within government offices. The steering committee had to assemble a coalition to push for new governance statutes as well as effective implementation of existing laws.

Developing the capacity to reach the citizenry presented another challenge. "Open data means that data is available and in a standard format that can be used by others," said Mouna Zgoulli, central director of information diffusion and coordination at the national statistics institute. Proactively sharing information required not only easy-to-follow online guidance, but also access to large data sets in user-friendly formats. There was some know-how about how to create such websites, but it was scattered across ministries. The statistics institute had pioneered this type of data access in 1999, but on a limited scale. In the prime ministry there was also an e-government unit, established in 2005 to provide online access to such services as university registrations, tax declarations, and applications for public-sector jobs. Khaled Sellami, who had been instrumental in bringing the Internet to Tunisia in the 1990s and had become head of the office three weeks before the revolution, was an important resource.

The final hurdles were building public awareness of the right to access information and cultivating demand for government data. Jazem Halioui, a Tunisian Internet entrepreneur, said Essebsi's original access-to-information decree had stunned many because no one outside the top levels of government knew it was coming: "It was a complete surprise to me and many other people. It was a gift from the skies," Halioui said.

Still, most Tunisians remained unaware of the opportunities open government could bring. immediately after the revolution, civil society was not well organized around the issue. As officials within government took the lead in developing an access-to-information regime, citizens had to come together to influence government and ensure the legal framework was responsive to the needs of the Tunisian people.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

Responding to those challenges required action from people in many parts of both government and civil society. No single office or individual had a mandate to lead the whole campaign, although Bessrour's steering committee provided general direction and was mandated to track progress.

Because the concepts of transparency and openness were novel to many in Tunisia's government, it was important to get them understood and accepted from the start. Mendel and staff from the World Bank convened instructors at the National School of Administration, a government-run training institute, to explain the provisions of the 2011 decree. The school then added an access-to-information module to the curriculum.

Ben Soltane, the prime minister's legal adviser, organized additional preparatory workshops for officials in several ministries. "It was not easy to change the mentality of the administration and establish the general principle of access to information," he said. Later, in May 2013 and again in 2014, Ben Soltane, Bessrour, and Mendel conducted a seminar for the access-to-information officers from all ministries on how to implement the access-to-information decree and guidelines.

The development of standards and procedures to implement the access-to-information decree took place after the first classes and workshops. In late 2011, Ben Soltane's team focused their attention on that crucial step. Drawing on Mendel's help, Mokni and Chahreddine Ghazala, both of them from Ben Soltane's office, took on primary responsibility for drafting the guidelines.

Access-to-information systems had two main elements. The first was supply-driven disclosure—meaning, proactively publishing information in a useful format. Given limited resources, it was impossible—in the short term—for most parts of government to publish all the data that citizens had a right to see. Because many agencies had primitive websites or no Internet presence at all, Mokni and Ghazala could not be too ambitious. The guidelines required each agency to have its own website before May 2013 and to publish certain information on that website, including the agency's responsibilities and organizational structure, decisions and policies of importance to the public, contact information for civil servants responsible for processing access-to-information requests, legal texts governing the agency, and a list of forms and specifications related to the provision of services. Ben Soltane's team took international standards into account as they developed those provisions.

Mokni and Ghazala focused on setting forth very basic expectations for all agencies to meet. The guidelines contained no provisions about the way that agencies should build their websites and did not aim to standardize agencies' content management systems or file formats. Many agencies were starting from square one. The guidelines said the e-government unit in the prime ministry could later develop more-specific criteria for putting information online.

The second element of an access-to-information system was demand-driven disclosure, or rules covering responses to citizens' requests for information. Such demand-driven disclosure did not require a large amount of money or specific technical skills, and the guidelines were specific about ways agencies should receive and respond to information requests. The team created a model information-request form and set standards for processing the forms. The guidelines also underscored the decree's 15-day deadline for responding to most requests and established an appeals process for denied requests, including a provision to take disputes about release of data to an administrative court.

The guidelines also included rules about interpreting the decree—how civil servants should interpret their open-data obligations in the context of existing laws that applied to personal data, secrecy, and related matters. "We had the

new decree, but there were many texts that contradicted it," Mokni said.

Mendel met with officials from different ministries to discuss their specific responsibilities under the new rules, including requirements that each unit appoint a dedicated access-to-information officer who would play a crucial role by shouldering most of the responsibility for deciding each agency's response to requests for information. Such an arrangement reduced demands on rank-and-file civil servants, who no longer had to worry about whether they could answer questions without violating restrictive public rules regarding the confidentiality of official information.

Ghazala and Mokni consulted with the access-to-information steering committee to ensure support for the new rules throughout government. Mokni said the steering committee generally accepted their proposals. Hamadi Jebali, who became head of government (the new name

for the prime minister) in December 2011 after the elections, issued the guidelines in May 2012.

Mokni and the legal adviser's office then developed a detailed action plan that used the 2011 decree and the 2012 guidelines to lay out clear instructions for civil servants throughout government. The plan detailed "what each office had to do to be fully in accordance with the decree," Mokni said. It divided the guidelines into implementable actions and required every ministry and agency to perform several important tasks, including appointing an access-to-information officer, publishing information request forms on its website, posting essential information online by May 2013, preparing an agency-specific implementation plan, designing a manual for the processing of information requests, establishing a mechanism to handle complaints from people dissatisfied with the responses to their requests, reporting progress quarterly to the prime ministry, and creating

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Box 1. Open

Public engagement was an important element of open government. In October 2011, Internet entrepreneur Jazem Halioui reached out to Mabrouka M'barek, a newly elected member of parliament who represented Tunisians living in North America. Together with Tunisian blogger Houssein Ben Ameur, the group of three shared a concern for increasing public participation in Tunisia and wanted to start a conversation among Tunisians about how to open up governance. Halioui, Ben Ameur, and M'barek worked with a small network of Tunisians—most of whom had experience abroad or in the information technology sector—to create a Facebook page called OpenGovTN for sharing ideas and coordinating actions. The group had two goals: to include the principle of open governance in the constitution and to promote access to information, public participation, and open data in government.

The group's membership grew to comprise 34 members of parliament from all major parties, members of civil society groups, and thousands of interested citizens. An early and active member of the OpenGovTN network was Hatem Ben Yacoub, a Tunisian expatriate engineer and e-government consultant who in 2009 began meeting with government officials to share ideas during his frequent trips home. After the revolution, Ben Yacoub contributed to OpenGovTN members' efforts such as urging parliament to publish more information about its votes, legislation, and meeting minutes. He also offered to help ministries develop their open-data systems.

In March 2012, OpenGovTN published a short electronic book called *Open*, which Halioui said was the first Arabic-language book on principles of open governance. As citizen interest grew, civil society groups began to ask for information on such topics as the amount of money the government earned from the oil and mining industries and the cost of government subsidies for staple foods and fuels.

educational outreach programs to enhance public understanding of the right to information.

The action plan gave the prime minister's office the specific responsibility for proactive disclosure of data with the e-government unit. The plan tasked the office with providing technical assistance for agencies, developing criteria for the publication of administrative documents, and creating a national open-data portal in collaboration with the ministries. That portal would be a central source of information and statistics from across government and public agencies.

To oversee information requests, the action plan also called for setting up an independent commission—a body that Mendel considered vitally important even though the 2011 decree did not stipulate its creation. The commission would design a model protocol for handling those responsibilities, make decisions regarding appeals and complaints from citizens, develop a database of information requests throughout government, and lead communication. The action plan assigned the legal adviser's office the job of preparing the legislation required to set up the new institution.

The prime minister issued the action plan in July 2012. At that point, the action shifted to Bessrour's Directorate General of Administrative Reform, which managed the civil service. Implementation would be the directorate's responsibility.

Meanwhile, as citizens embraced the idea of access to information and open data, a civil society coalition formed and began to publicize the principles of open government. (Text box 1)

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Developing and implementing open-data policies required cooperation by a diverse group of officials and citizens. Tunisian civil society and international organizations helped government offices fill capacity gaps.

The emergence of a strong civil society coalition helped keep transparency on the government's agenda even as national crises consumed attention. Tunisia had seven governments from January 2011 to August 2016, and with each new government, there rose the risk that progress would freeze as civil servants spent weeks educating new ministers about open government and Tunisia's commitments to international donors.

Action plan implementation

The Directorate General of Administrative Reform began to coordinate implementation in 2012. Its director, Bessrour, organized quarterly small-group meetings for access-to-information officers from more than 20 ministries to discuss problems and share solutions. He tried to instill a sense of competition among the officers to motivate progress. But despite Bessrour's attempts to implement the action plan, progress on the plan and the quality of reporting were uneven across the government. Some ministries or agencies submitted incomplete progress reports by listing, for example, only requests the information officer had fulfilled. Others failed to submit any results to Bessrour's office, even if they had released information during the reporting period. Some agencies did not appoint access-to-information officers or replace officers who had left their positions.

Bessrour sought help from the steering committee, which he chaired. A 2012 directive from the prime minister turned the steering committee into a formal body tasked with following up on implementation of the 2011 decree and the action plan. Bessrour used the committee as a forum to discuss concerns about failure to comply with the action plan. The committee could also provide technical assistance by helping ministries create dedicated offices to support their access-to-information officers. The steering committee could not order any agency to take a specific action, however.

Part of the problem lay in keeping open government on ministers' agendas. A weak economy, militant activity in parts of the country, and a growing crisis in neighboring Libya were a few of the many problems Tunisia's leaders faced

in 2012. Ministers tended to put little effort into holding agencies accountable for fulfilling their access-to-information obligations.

The low levels of compliance also reflected Bessrour's relatively weak position as head of the Directorate General of Administrative Reform. Although his directorate was part of the prime ministry, the law still vested political authority in the presidency, and the prime minister had little clout over ministries. Bessrour could not directly sanction offices that fell short of their action plan goals or failed to submit reports. "It was not an easy task," Mokni said. "Bessrour didn't have the required means, and a large number of public entities were covered by the decree of 2011."

Leading the way: Early adopters

Publishing data online depended heavily on the initiative of information officers and people working within each agency or ministry. The National Institute of Statistics, which became the first government agency to develop its own open-data website after the revolution, was a case in point. Although the institute had developed an online presence in 1999, its website initially provided only basic countrywide economic and social data in text format. The relatively small scope and the lack of downloadable data sets made it difficult to find specific information and conduct analysis. In some respects, the office was better placed than any other to take the lead in open government because it was mandated to collect and maintain important social and economic information and because it participated in annual meetings of the United Nations Statistical Commission, which had become the base for a global professional community. The National Institute of Statistics also partnered with Eurostat, the European Commission's statistics office. Zgoulli, the institute's central director of information diffusion and coordination, had participated in international working groups that set standards for data presentation and statistics and led the open-data project.

Individual initiative and energy were still crucial for generating the momentum to reach project goals. Zgoulli said that in 2010, prior to the revolution, she and several colleagues had "wanted to reinforce the website as a platform for dissemination of information and to maximize the access of citizens to information." They began to standardize the variables in the surveys used to gather data, and they had converted all existing data into XML (Extensible Markup Language), from which it was possible to export into any other file format.

As political change swept across the country, Zgoulli said, making more data accessible helped address the transparency concerns the revolution had laid bare and bolstered the institute's credibility. But it took time to win allies in an agency in which workers were accustomed to decades of secrecy and tight control.

Zgoulli's team told their colleagues that proactive disclosure and a culture of openness would enhance the organization's reputation and even reduce workloads. If data were easily available, Zgoulli said, fewer people would need to contact the institute with personal requests for information.

For the institute's open-data project to be a success, however, information had to flow efficiently and automatically from the institute's various departments to a central database. Achieving that goal required a new information system, staff training, and some website redesign, but Zgoulli had only four employees to work on the project. Additional capacity soon materialized when the African Development Bank offered to help Tunisia become the pilot in a project to increase statistical capacity across African governments. The bank provided software that enabled users to search statistical and census data, create data sets on the website, and export the information in a variety of document formats. Tunisia's site went online in 2013, and a year later, after the publication of new census data, the site contained more than 80 categories of information.

Challenges remained, however. The laws governing the collection and dissemination of national statistics restricted access to certain data.

Another problem was, "When the statistics institute speaks about 'business,' we don't have the same definition as the customs, tax collection, or social security agencies," Zgoulli said. Her team had to compare the data from different agencies, merge them into a single data set, and then make sure the data complied with international standards. "It's a lot of work for us," she said. "There is cooperation, but we haven't achieved harmony." She also cited lack of qualified personnel in other agencies as a major difficulty.

To improve coordination, Zgoulli favored a legal change that would make the institute independent of the Ministry of Development, Investment, and International Cooperation and would give it the authority to set data management guidelines for public agencies. However, that change did not materialize.

Another early adopter was, surprisingly, the Ministry of Interior. Considered a symbol of police repression and secrecy under the Ben Ali regime, it was the first ministry to launch an open-data website, which went online in 2013. The site provided data on criminal charges, border crossings, the issuance of identification cards, traffic safety, and other areas of the ministry's responsibility, all of them downloadable in open-source formats. The proactive release of information online caught the rest of the government by surprise, although some types of information, especially about police functions, were not parts of the package.

Supporting the ministries

Even though projects like the statistics institute's open-data site evolved independently, Bessrour's team tried to encourage similar activities across the government. Letting agencies build on what they had was one part of the strategy to win adoption, but that approach created a longer-term coordination problem.

Sellami's e-government unit offered assistance on ministry-level initiatives. For example, by helping agencies adopt standards for publishing metadata and providing technical

advice on building open-data websites, the team tried to lower the costs of reaching action plan goals.

Further, as each ministry or agency created a website, the e-government team also developed plans for a central open-data portal—data.gov.tn—as called for in the action plan. Sellami invited an official from Kenya, which had embarked on its own open-data project, to visit Tunis and share that country's experience.[9] This project was challenging because standards, operating systems, and software varied across ministries, thereby frustrating efforts to create a unified system for the entire government. It was difficult to share information across platforms or house files in a central government database as envisioned by the action plan.

Nonetheless, Sellami's office was able to launch the data.gov.tn site in late 2012. The initial version simply provided access to documents or data sets that ministries had submitted to the e-government unit. A user could select a category such as regional development, social affairs, or water resources and choose from a small number of files available for download. Examples included annual expenditures on social security or spreadsheets containing information on development spending by region. The site did not provide large data sets in user-friendly formats. And instead of providing direct access to statistical data, the site designers simply included a link to the statistics institute's own site.

The staff in Sellami's office aimed to eventually create a fully integrated site that would allow access to information from across government. Information from ministries and agencies would flow into a central database, where businesses, civic groups, individual citizens, or government employees could browse to find what they needed. Ministries that did not host their own data could choose to host data on the central government website. But the project developed slowly, however. The e-government team had few people and little money, and quickly found itself overstretched. Sellami could spare only one technician in the office to develop the

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portal. And because the e-government unit lacked the funds to support other open-data projects, it could not provide any financial incentives for ministries to collaborate or deliver on their commitments. Tunisians were stuck with the basic version of the site until the e-government unit could acquire additional resources.

The e-government team presented the project to the African Development Bank, which agreed to fund an outside company to build the site and an information system to connect ministries and agencies to a central open-data portal. In 2014, Deloitte, a UK consulting firm, won the contract, and the e-government unit expected the site to launch in 2017. (Text box 2)

Box 2. The Town of Sayada Embraces Open Data

Shortly after Ben Ali fled Tunisia in early 2011, the coastal town of Sayada, near the city of Monastir, was grappling with a challenging transition that opened the door to new approaches to governance. Local government officials had abruptly resigned in the upheaval, and residents of the community of 15,000 had formed a special committee to handle local affairs.

Greater citizen involvement quickly came to the fore. Nizar Kerkeni, a resident of Sayada and an assistant professor of information technology at the University of Monastir, suggested the municipality post on its website certain official documents, including meeting minutes, reports, and budgets. Kerkeni had been involved in a broad movement supporting the use of free, open-source software. Lotfi Farhane, who headed the town's special committee, supported Kerkeni's open-data idea and encouraged the project.

Because the municipal government's small staff lacked the technical capacity or interest to pursue the project, Kerkeni offered to host the site himself and serve as its administrator. He built a basic website by using free, open-source content management software, and in January 2012, he began posting documents in both open-document and Microsoft formats. Municipal employees simply sent him the files by e-mail, and any user with Internet access could get information about the activities and expenditures of the local government—something that was impossible before the revolution. Kerkeni said there was only one document he could not post on the site: a contract that had been the subject of an ongoing legal case.

Usage was difficult to track, but Kerkeni said he observed citizens approach the municipality's office with files they had printed from the website to support a request or complaint. In 2013, Kerkeni cofounded a civil society organization called the Clibre Organization for Free Culture, which took over the responsibility to pay for and manage the open-data site.

The site produced an unexpected result. People who came from Sayada but lived abroad used the site to keep track of affairs in their hometown and learn about its struggles after the revolution. When a network of Sayada natives saw that the town could not afford to purchase vehicles, it pooled money to purchase a garbage truck and several cars for the municipality.

Sayada's open-data site suffered from a local political dispute involving a regional labor union that led to Farhane's resignation in 2015. He had been a champion of the project, and Kerkeni said the publication of documents became less regular after Sayada's departure, although budget data were still posted regularly.

Eager to share Sayada's experience with other local government officials in Tunisia, Kerkeni and local civil society activists organized an event in late 2013 called Sayada Opens its Data. Although a number of open-government advocates, including members of the OpenGovTN network, attended, no public officials showed up. As of 2016, Kerkeni said he had not heard of any other local government implementing an open-data project in Tunisia. However, he stressed that the project could be replicated easily elsewhere in the country because of the abundance of young people with basic computer skills and the low cost of hosting an open-data website.

Joining the effort: Three ministries go online

As the e-government unit tried to coordinate open-data initiatives and as pressure built for greater public access to government information, officials in three other ministries followed the example of the interior ministry and started their own projects. For each, capacity was a significant issue with regard to both money and people.

Ministry of Finance

At the finance ministry, internal advocates of open government had begun to make data available soon after the revolution. The ministry's information technology personnel had digitized the budget process and improved the flow of information prior to 2011, with the goal of quickly responding to budget-data requests from other parts of government.

The ministry's public website featured primarily news about the minister, however, and fell far short of providing significant information on government financial matters. The publication of budget and spending information would enable civil society groups, businesses, international development agencies, and citizens to clearly see how the government was raising and spending public funds. Users could check whether government spending was in line with government officials' stated policy goals. And if citizens could easily discern how much the government was spending on projects that affected their lives and communities, they could more easily hold their government to account.

Aicha Karafi, director- general of the finance ministry, saw an opportunity. "Just after the revolution, some people no longer wanted to pay their taxes because they no longer trusted the government," she said. "We had to do something to establish this trust." Before the revolution, citizens were in the dark about government spending. Karafi and her colleagues thought that a more transparent budget would remove an important barrier between citizens and government. They convened a small group to create a plan of action. Assad Khalil, the director of information- technology services at the

ministry, invited the International Budget Partnership, a United States-–based NGO, to advise them about how to improve transparency.

Posting the government budget online was a first step, but even that small step presented big challenges. Karafi's group initially made the 2011 budget available in pdf (Adobe portable document format) files that collectively amounted to hundreds of pages. For civic leaders, journalists, and ordinary citizens, that format made the budget hard to understand or use. "This was a leap forward in open-budget data in Tunisia, but civil society wanted more," Khalil said. Civic groups such as OpenGovTN asked for budget information in an open format in order to facilitate reuse and analysis via third-party computer applications. But the finance ministry wanted to go further. Karafi wanted to use data visualization to turn the rows and columns of a spreadsheet into an online experience that allowed Tunisians to easily comprehend how the government was raising and spending money, ranging from general categorizations to specific expenditures by public agencies.

For help, Karafi and her colleagues approached the World Bank, which shortly after the revolution had expressed interest in a project to make budget data more accessible and useful. Consequently, the World Bank made the development of an open-budget platform a part of its loan package to Tunisia. The World Bank also contributed a software tool called Boost, a dynamic spreadsheet program that other countries had used for their open-budget projects.

To oversee implementation and expand the reforms, the ministry formed a commission that included specialists in budgeting, public finance, information systems, and auditing. The commission set goals and standards for digitization of data that existed either on paper or in incompatible formats.

Public consultation was a key part of the process. Employees from the ministry's IT department began to meet with civil society representatives and the media to find out how an open-data website could serve the needs of

citizens and organizations. Among other things, the meetings pinpointed the need for a glossary to help users understand data definitions. There was also strong interest in information on government subsidies.

Organizational culture within the ministry initially slowed the effort to meet the goals the commission had set. "We gave computers to people and trained them on how to collect the information and put it in the database," Karafi said. But changes in data processing routines often required changes in work habits and mindsets among ministry employees, a sensitive issue for veteran workers who had to accommodate new ways of doing things. "They didn't refuse, but they were afraid," she said.

To build internal support, Karafi's team invited ministry employees to workshops to demonstrate how the new procedures would simplify their work. The team highlighted how the automatic updating feature that a central database made possible would save employees time in other aspects of their work. Importantly, "We also reassured them that they would keep their jobs," Karafi said.

The team developed a user interface that was accessible, flexible, and easily understood. The platform provided users with year-to-year budget data in multiple formats: machine-readable data from all budgets since 2008, pdf files of each agency's budget, and interactive tools to help citizens explore budget data.

One part of the site, called Where the Money Goes, displayed the annual budget in colored blocks that each represented a function or service, with the size of the block proportional to the amount allocated. Clicking one of the blocks displayed a new set of blocks with more-specific details on expenditures in that area. The intuitive format made it possible for users with no financial experience to quickly and easily find data on budget allocations and expenditures. The ministry launched the new public site in late 2015 under the Arabic name Mizaniatouna (our budget).[10]

Ministry of Energy and Mines.

Meanwhile, at the Ministry of Energy and Mines, officials began to discuss the creation of an open-data website in 2014. At the time, much of the ministry's data was either confidential or shared only with other government agencies or industry professionals. The issue was politically sensitive because the oil and mining industries operated mainly in poorer areas of southern Tunisia, and residents claimed that their communities did not share adequately in the tax revenue the government received from the businesses. One active civil society organization, the Tunisian Coalition for Transparency in Energy and Mines, demanded the release of financial data related to contracts awarded to mining and oil companies.

Kais Mejri, a lawyer who joined the civil service in 2000, headed the ministry's governance unit and supported publication of the data. Such a step would both address public demand and make it easier to share information with ministry staff. Mejri also hoped Tunisia would sign on to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, a global standard for open and accountable management of oil, gas, and mineral resources. Putting more information online would bring Tunisia closer to that standard.

With a small team and no funding to hire new employees or buy software, Mejri had to find resources to make the website a reality. He turned to members of the OpenGovTN group for expert advice and encouraged the ministry to use CKAN, an open-source data management system that governments around the world used for creating public open-data websites.

Additionally, Mejri looked to examples from Tanzania, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France to refine his vision of the ministry's open-data site. The final proposal was a modified version of the CKAN platform that displayed visually appealing graphs—rather than a mass of numbers—when users logged on. It also identified more than 150 data sets on oil production, energy consumption, carbon

emissions, and other subjects for inclusion. Mejri also planned to eventually automate the entry of new information directly onto the site.

Volunteer technical assistance came from civil society activists like Hatem Ben Yacoub, a Tunisian expatriate engineer and e-government consultant who in 2009 began meeting with government officials to share ideas during frequent trips home. Help also came from IT students at universities; from the Natural Resource Governance Institute, a United States–based NGO that organized workshops that would increase the technical capacity of Mejri's staff; and from Open Knowledge International, a United Kingdom–based nonprofit network that advocated the cost-free sharing of information.

Adopting CKAN to manage all information in one system triggered some internal resistance because the change required new policies and procedures regarding how ministry employees stored and shared data. Mejri launched a communications blitz to win internal support. "We tried to market the platform as a tool for the administration, not just something dedicated to the citizens," Mejri said. He organized training sessions in the ministry and emphasized that although the new procedures might be burdensome at first, they would ultimately lighten workloads and reduce the loss of information.

Mejri's efforts came at a crucial time. In June 2015, a new wave of protest swept Tunisia under the slogan "Where is the oil?" Citizens in southern cities near oil fields wanted to know more about the oil being extracted, how much money the government took in, and how it distributed that funding. Those citizen concerns added pressure to complete the site.

There were many ways the project could go awry. To ensure the completed site would not break, Mejri recruited help from civil society and universities to conduct a stress test and security audit.

The site's launch helped meet protestors' demands. However, the site lacked one content element the public wanted: the contracts between the government and resource-extraction companies. Mejri had focused on putting all publicly available information online, but neither the ministers involved nor state-owned oil and mining companies had agreed to make contracts available.

In 2016, after the launch of the open-data website, civil society members—including Mohamed Ghazi Ben Jemia of the Tunisian Coalition for Transparency in Energy and Mines—called on Minister Mongi Marzouk, who had taken office in January of that year, to make the contracts public. Marzouk, whose background was in information technology, supported the measure, and Mejri's team posted the contracts on the site later that year.

Ministry of Culture

The culture ministry, too, created its own open-data site. Because of its policy scope, the ministry was not central to core economic activity nor to safety, work permits, or other essentials. The ministry provided grants for cultural centers and activities and kept track of the production and consumption of books, films, and other cultural products. But during Tunisia's years under dictatorship, citizens had viewed the ministry as "corrupt, opaque, and self-serving," according to journalist Sarah Souli; and suspected ministry officials of nepotism, funneling grant money to favored recipients, and misuse of public funds.[11] The ministry's new leaders wanted to revamp its public image.

Saloua Abdelkhalek, the ministry's deputy director for organization and method, was responsible for the open-government program. In late 2012, she had a small group of three or four people to work with her on the project. The group looked to the experiences of other culture ministries, in such countries as Finland and France. Ben Yacoub, the OpenGovTN member who had worked with Mejri, arranged for the Ministry of Energy and Mines to share its experiences with the culture ministry.

Abdelkhalek's small team spent the first nine months training and educating ministry staff about the open-data initiative. As with other

ministries, changing mind-sets and building skills were challenging tasks. First, Abdelkhalek engaged the offices within the ministry that were most enthusiastic and then moved on to those that were more resistant. During roughly two years, her team collected information from all offices within the ministry, structured that information in open-data formats, developed the website, and ensured that data flowed freely among offices. Most ministry employees did not know how to move information from Word formats into HTML or comma-separated-values format, so Abdelkhalek's team took on those tasks. The Tunisian e-Governance Society, an NGO, trained additional personnel to help.

The ministry's site went online in 2016 and included basic information about budgets, award programs, and culture-linked commerce. Abdelkhalek's team placed a premium on responsiveness and decided to publish any information that three or more citizens requested.

Abdelkhalek wanted the ministry site to use the same CKAN content management system utilized by the Ministry of Industry (which consolidated with the Ministry of Mines and Energy in 2016) so as to ensure compatibility and interoperability. She drew on help from other parts of the government and from civic groups to build that capability, gradually moving to put the new system in place.

Maintaining momentum

High-level support was crucial for the open-data initiative to flourish. In 2012, Sellami attended a World Bank–organized conference in Brazil to discuss the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multilateral initiative that advocated the adoption of open-government principles. He quickly became convinced that membership in the partnership would bolster and sustain political support for greater transparency. Joining the organization would also increase Tunisia's international recognition and access to financial or technical assistance for open-government projects. The government agreed to apply for membership.

Tunisia joined the partnership in January 2014, and OGP affiliation provided additional impetus, coordination, and monitoring capacity to support open-data efforts. Joining the OGP required government to work with civil society in order to create a two-year national action plan to implement concrete commitments, conduct annual self-assessments, and submit to an independent review every two years. Sellami chaired a joint steering committee consisting of five representatives of government and five civil society representatives. The committee solicited hundreds of proposals from citizens and government and narrowed the list down to 20, including an improved open-data portal, building civil servants' capacity to implement open governance, an open-budget system, and an open-data platform for mining and oil extraction.

Many of the commitments in the action plan involved projects that had been discussed or initiated earlier, such as the Ministry of Energy and Mines' open-data project.

The joint OGP committee coordinated and tracked the progress of projects throughout the government. Committee members met monthly with representatives of ministries and agencies included in the action plan and issued a public statement after every meeting. Each meeting provided a forum for leaders of government units to report on progress and request advice or technical assistance from the head of government or from another unit.

Raising awareness and building usage

Any open-government initiative depended on public awareness and engagement, especially on private entrepreneurs' and civic innovators' development of apps that transformed data into practical tools. If people did not use the services and information made available, the programs would have little or no impact except to make some types of intergovernmental operations easier and faster.

The statistics institute became a model for building relationships and usage. Before the 2014 census, Zgoulli's group met with journalists,

professors, and civic leaders and asked them what information they wanted and which format would be most helpful. "We used these needs to elaborate our dissemination strategy," Zgoulli said.

In response to the ideas offered, the institute broadened its outreach through workshops with universities and civil society groups. For each of Tunisia's 24 governorates (administrative regions), the institute published brochures describing available information and ways that citizens could find and use the data along with a four-page glossary explaining each statistical indicator used.

Other ministries followed suit. For example, Mejri of the Ministry of Industry, Energy, and Mines participated in training sessions with journalists, civil society members, and members of parliament to talk about the ministry's website and data on natural resource use. Eventually the finance ministry also advertised the information available on its website.

The public's use of the information request system, as well as the open data, increased slowly. Tunisian NGO iWatch set up a website, ma3louma.org, to help citizens who were having trouble getting the information they wanted from government. iWatch recruited Tunisians around the country to file requests for information. "We told people if they don't get access to the document they want and don't have a lawyer, we'll give them one," said iWatch parliamentary lobbyist Aly Mhenni. The NGO followed up on all requests and posted the progress of each request online. By 2016, iWatch had handled more than 100 cases through this service but reported that the ministries and agencies had fulfilled only 12 requests; information officers were still processing requests in the majority of cases. One problem was lack of knowledge in government offices about their responsibilities under the law, Mhenni said.

Legislating information access

Although Essebsi's 2011 decree gave citizens the right to access official information and although the guidelines and action plan had laid out the responsibilities of civil servants and officials, the legal framework for open government remained relatively weak in relation to the international standards promoted by organizations such as Toby Mendel's Centre for Law and Democracy.

First, Tunisia lacked an independent commission to oversee the development, maintenance, and improvement of public access to information. Second, a long list of exceptions gave the government considerable leeway to deny requests. Third, although the decree had the force of law, it did not have the approval of Tunisia's elected parliament. And fourth, the decree provided no strict sanctions for civil servants who failed to comply with requests for information.

In March 2013, the office of the legal adviser worked with the steering committee to create a new law that the head of government could submit to parliament. Legislation would not only buttress the concept of access to information but also give political parties an opportunity to discuss and debate the issue in parliament. The drafters consulted regularly with the steering committee and similar statutes in South Africa, the United Kingdom, Mexico, and India.

Mokni and other officials said that any access-to-information law should also create an independent commission providing an avenue to appeal unfulfilled information requests and avoid a cumbersome judicial process. Citizens would be more likely to pursue appeals if they did not have to spend time and money navigating the courts. In addition, such a commission could monitor public agencies' compliance with the access-to-information law, and commission members would have the power to issue sanctions for noncompliance. The standards created by Mendel's organization emphasized that the commission be independent from government so that it could make impartial decisions about information requests.

By June 2013, Bessrour's office had put a draft of the law online for public consultation.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Political upheaval and civil unrest delayed parliamentary approval of Tunisia's access-to-information law for more than three years. The month after Bessrour posted the draft law, a gunman assassinated Mohamed Brahmi, a left-leaning opposition politician. The event aggravated existing tensions between the ruling coalition, led by the Islamist Ennahda party, and the opposition. Protesters filled the streets, and many opposition politicians put aside their work in the legislature to join the protests, demanding that parliament dissolve and the government resign. Work on the new constitution stopped.

Although Bessrour's office submitted the draft law to the council of ministers for approval in August 2013, the council, consumed by the national crisis, took no immediate action.

In October, four civil society organizations intervened and mediated political talks between the two sides. Under the terms of the resulting deal, the assembly agreed to resume its work and to appoint a new prime minister to run the government. That month, Bessrour's office resubmitted the law to the council of ministers.

In December, the parliament refocused its efforts on finalizing the new constitution, and thanks in part to advocacy by the OpenGovTN network, Article 32 of the constitution approved in January 2014 enshrined access to information as a fundamental right of Tunisian citizens.

"Constitutionalization of this right was an important step," Mokni said. And any rules or laws that contradicted the right of access to information "were now in contradiction with the constitution."

A few months later, Tunisia secured a $250-million World Bank development policy loan contingent on finalizing the access-to-information law, and the council of ministers finally sent the draft law to parliament.[12]

Following adoption of the constitution and the election of a new parliament (known after December 2014 as the Assembly of Representatives of the People) later in the same year, the parliament's rights and liberties committee took up the draft law in May 2015. Civic groups, which had gained strength since the revolution, began to lobby the committee to strengthen the draft legislation.

Mokni, who left his position in the legal adviser's office in 2013 to work for the Tunisia office of British NGO Article 19, brought international experts to Tunisia to discuss the law. He wanted to ensure the list of exceptions was as short as possible.

IWatch, the local Transparency International affiliate, was also concerned that the proposed law contained too many broad exceptions. The draft legislation stated that public bodies could withhold information that "could be harmful" to: the confidentiality of deliberations; national defense; foreign policy; state security; monetary, economic, and financial policies; the administration of justice; the prevention of crime; individuals' fundamental rights and freedoms; and several other categories.[13] Mhenni wanted the law to permit public authorities to withhold information only when its release would explicitly harm a narrowly defined set of state interests.

The parliamentary committee listened. It cut the list of exceptions to include only national security, public safety, and international relations and sent the bill forward in June 2015. But the government withdrew the proposed legislation the next month, citing concerns about a too-narrow list of exceptions and lack of proper safeguards for sensitive information.

The steering committee reframed the exceptions once again, giving the government more freedom to refuse requests for information that officials felt could harm the interests of the state. But when the head of government returned the draft to parliament in August, Mhenni and other civil society representatives, including journalists' unions, found it unacceptable.

In early 2016, the proposed law went to a consensus committee, which became the focus of intense scrutiny by media and civil society. The consensus committee for any piece of legislation consisted of the members of the relevant parliamentary committee, representatives of the

ministry that had ownership of the proposed law, and other interested members of parliament. Such committees were not part of the formal legislative process but had evolved as a way to iron out disagreements before any final vote.

Mhenni and other civil society representatives met regularly with sympathetic members of the consensus committee to review the law as it underwent final revisions. The Union of Parliamentary Journalists and the national journalists' syndicate held a press conference urging the committee to adopt a law with minimal exceptions to the right of access to information. Civil society groups launched an online campaign to put public pressure on the consensus committee members.

Three days of discussion yielded a compromise. Mokni said the solution was to model the exceptions after Article 49 of the new constitution, which defined general conditions in which limitations on constitutional rights and freedoms were permissible. The final text in the draft said the authorities could deny access-to-information requests only if release of that information could damage public security, national defense, international relations, or certain individual rights.

Government, parliament, and civil society also agreed that the compromise should include a "harm test" provision that required ministries and agencies to consider the potential costs of sharing certain information against the value of doing so. The independent commission would apply the same test in case of an appeal. Mhenni said the harm test allowed for the narrowest possible understanding of the exceptions because the commission could choose to grant requests in those categories if it deemed the harm to be minimal.

The legislation passed in March 2016 and had a one-year implementation deadline that required the head of government to take several steps by March 2017, including appointing a commission to create a strategy for improving access to

information, to oversee the government's access-to-information activities, and to adjudicate complaints from citizens whose information requests had been denied. The commission included both government representatives and civic leaders.

ASSESSING RESULTS

With the adoption of the 2011 access-to-information decree, Tunisians for the first time gained the power to request data from their government. Government officials, members of parliament, and civil society groups all contributed to creating guidelines, developing a constitutional amendment, and enacting a new law, adopted by parliament in 2016, to further define and enhance access to information.

The Centre for Law and Democracy rated Tunisia's right-to-information law as 11th best in the world and commended its broad scope and limited exceptions. The NGO's few criticisms focused primarily on the lack of specific legal sanctions for institutions that systemically failed to comply with the law and the lack of legal immunity for members of the oversight commission.[14] (Text box 3)

Putting the new law into practice was no simple exercise. Zgoulli of the national statistics institute said the government lost focus on implementing the original action plan when it began drafting the new legislation in 2013. Progress on the development of information systems, on training, and on building public awareness was slow. "I am not sure that all the people really understood the big work that had to be done," she said.

Limited awareness of the access-to-information decree and the subsequent law among civil servants was a persistent obstacle. "We don't need to only appoint an officer in charge of access to information," said Belhaj of the public auditors association. "We also have to make all the officers aware that a citizen has the right to ask for information."

Nonetheless, several government departments built their own open-data websites and made a substantial volume of information available to Tunisian citizens. The statistics institute presented a wealth of demographic data as well as economic data on industry, agriculture, and other sectors. The finance ministry, which had not published budget data prior to 2011, made its data usable by citizens who had no technical knowledge. The industry ministry, which consolidated with the Ministry of Energy and Mines in 2016, enabled open access to concession agreements contracts. The interior ministry and culture ministry also created open-data sites.

Karafi of the finance ministry said that the open-data project improved internal operations. "In working on the state budget, we adapt the budgets of 24 ministries," she said. "That used to be done manually, but now a machine does it." The open-data platform eliminated problems with information redundancy between offices in the ministry and made it easier to search for specific pieces of budget data.

In 2017, Tunisia's national open-data portal remained a work in progress. Much of the data available on the portal was outdated. A 2017 study from the University of Pardubice in the Czech Republic ranked 70 national open-data portals based on their technical dimensions, ease of access, level of communication with users, and characteristics of the data set. Tunisia's data.gov.tn site ranked second to last.[15]

Nevertheless, civil society groups capitalized on published information to hold the government accountable for irregularities. When citizens came to iWatch to report potential acts of corruption, the organization used the access-to-information decree to determine the facts of the case. In one instance iWatch also issued a request for the text of a controversial arbitration agreement between the country's post-revolution Truth and Dignity Commission and a relative of former president Ben Ali who had profited under the old regime. "We took [the commission] to court," Mhenni said. "The court gave us the right to have it."

Box 3.
The Global Right to Information Rating

The Centre for Law and Democracy and Access Info Europe jointly created a scoring system to comparatively assess legal frameworks around the world with regard to the right to information. The center's ranking system relies on indicators in seven different categories: Right of Access, Scope, Requesting Procedures, Exceptions and Refusals, Appeals, Sanctions and Protections, and Promotional Measures. As of 2017, Tunisia ranked among the strongest right-to-information legal regimes in the world. Following are the top 20 countries as of April 2017.

1. Mexico – Score: 136
2. Serbia – Score: 135
3. Sri Lanka – Score: 131
4. Slovenia – Score: 129
5. India – Score: 128
6. Albania – Score: 127
7. Croatia – Score: 126
8. Liberia – Score: 124
9. El Salvador – Score: 122
10. Sierra Leone – Score: 122
11. South Sudan – Score: 120
12. **Tunisia – Score: 120**
13. Maldives – Score: 116
14. Azerbaijan – Score: 115
15. Antigua – Score: 113
16. Kenya – Score: 113
17. Macedonia – Score: 113
18. Ethiopia – Score: 112
19. Nicaragua – Score: 111
20. Moldova – Score: 110

Source: Global RTI Rating, http://www.rti-rating.org/country-

Overall public awareness remained low. Mhenni said Tunisia had no tradition of access to government information, and few citizens knew they had acquired the right. "Even the media, which can use the law to access information, don't use it," Zgoulli said. Belhaj said citizens lacked trust in government, and people were not aware of "success stories" in which citizens asked for important information and received it.

Utilizing published government data was "the most important thing," Belhaj said. "We have to show people that the use of this information can help transparency and hold government accountable." In 2015 and 2016, the OpenGovTN network teamed with Sellami's e-government unit and other organizations to host an event called Apps for Democracy, which presented awards to young programmers who had developed new applications utilizing data from the statistics institute, the ministry of industry, or government offices. But as of 2017 there were few Tunisian examples of successful citizen-led projects to reuse official data.

The government did not post information on the total number of requests for information submitted to access-to-information officers across all ministries. The statistics institute alone recorded more than 500 requests for information in both 2014 and 2015. Most ministries found that citizens submitted no more than a handful of requests for information to their access-to-information officers. The culture ministry received only five inquiries the first year and eight the next. After passage of the access-to-information law in March 2016, requests for information from the culture ministry rose. Requests made in the first six months following the law's passage matched the total number received up to that point. Abdelkhalek of the culture ministry ascribed the new interest to the publicity that surrounded the access-to-information law.

Some ministries and agencies reported promising data on the number of users accessing open-data websites. The statistics institute's open-data site received more than 5,700 hits per month, although the majority of users were located outside Tunisia, Zgoulli said. The industry ministry received about 115 visitors a day, Mejri said, although again, about half were from outside Tunisia. Visits increased after the oil and mining contracts went online in 2016. The finance ministry reported that its website usage numbers were small, but as of late 2016, the ministry had not conducted an outreach program to educate citizens about the open-budget site.

Abdelkhalek said the move toward greater transparency fostered people's trust in government. "When we diffuse information in public, that leads to a decrease in protests and fewer doubts from people using government services," she said. "When they see that everything is open, they don't suspect corruption." She also said open data gave civil servants a greater sense of accountability to citizens.

REFLECTIONS

As of 2017, Tunisia was the only country in the Middle East and North Africa region with a functioning access-to-information system. Efforts in several other countries had failed due to lack of government interest, political crises, or both.

Following 2011's antigovernment protests in Morocco, King Mohammed VI sought to assuage public disaffection by appointing a commission to draft a new constitution that included the right to access information. Consultations on an enabling access-to-information law began in 2013, and the proposed legislation passed through the lower chamber of parliament. However, in 2017, the bill remained stuck in the second chamber of parliament because of opposition from the government, said Nejib Mokni, who tracked the progress of the Moroccan law through his work at Article 19.

Yemen adopted an access-to-information law in 2012 in part with support from the US Department of State and the International Research and Exchanges Board, a United States–based nonprofit committed to international education in academic research, professional

training, and technical assistance.16 The Centre for Law and Democracy rated the legislation highly, citing the law's broad scope and limited exceptions as positive aspects.17 But by 2014, Yemen was engulfed in a war and never implemented the law.

In Egypt, following the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, a constituent assembly produced a new constitution that included the right to information. Government officials, members of parliament, civil society representatives, and international experts began to write access-to-information legislation. Mendel said a June 2013 government draft was "progressive" and relatively strong,18 but a coup the next month prevented its passage or implementation.

In January 2017, Lebanon's parliament passed an access-to-information bill. Civil society groups first presented the bill to parliament in 2009 and worked with members of parliament to develop the legislation and secure its eventual passage.19 As of 2017, Lebanon appeared to be the only Arab state with the potential to join Tunisia as an access-to-information success story in the Arab region.

Tunisia's open government initiative succeeded for several reasons. The 2011 revolution created a moment of opportunity. Leading members of the Ben Ali regime who benefited from a lack of transparency left the government in 2011. And, a new parliament was responsive to public concerns without any vested interests in the old regime's restrictions on sharing information.

Fabian Seiderer, a senior public-sector management specialist at the World Bank who was part of the bank's team in Tunisia, said it was vital to initiate reforms quickly after the 2011 revolution. Waiting until a new government came to power after the October elections could have made the process more difficult. Experience had taught Seiderer that the window for implementing politically difficult changes to administrative practices after regime change was 6 to 12 months.

The presence of internal champions of reform in various agencies was another reason

Tunisia succeeded. The ministries of industry and culture as well as the statistics institute benefited from dedicated personnel who believed in transparency and were determined to secure the political support and resources necessary to implement open-data projects. Those reformers sometimes had to pursue projects without top-level backing. They had to engage with their superiors to educate them on the importance of open government, legal requirements, obligations under the Open Government Partnership, and agreements with international donors. And the message had to be repeated whenever there was turnover among ministers.

Aicha Karafi and Assad Khalil, members of the finance ministry's open-budget team, and Kais Mejri, who led open-data efforts at the Ministry of Industry, Energy, and Mines, stayed focused on goals through multiple governments. They harnessed external financial and technical assistance to achieve objectives despite limited support from within their ministries. These champions valued transparency and wanted to bolster the credibility and reputation of their ministries both within Tunisia and abroad. Their individual commitments to open government may have been as important as official decrees or regulations in providing citizens with information.

When government reformers communicated the benefits of open data to their colleagues, the emphasis was on improved efficiency. "It is a tool whereby a ministry can collect data in one single platform and then do all of its visualizations and analysis directly on the platform," Hatem Ben Yacoub of the OpenGovTN group said. "Instead of working with Excel sheets in each department, the data is centralized in one place, and employees will be able to do their jobs much better."

International donors and NGOs not only assisted in agencies' access-to-information efforts but also helped civil servants keep open government on politicians' agendas. The World Bank included provisions regarding development of the legal framework and the creation of an open-budget website in its development policy

loans, which were important sources of financial support in the years following the revolution. The bank had also introduced Tunisian officials to Toby Mendel, the Canadian adviser who helped Tunisia draft its legislation. Other organizations provided financial assistance or training for specific aspects of agencies' open-government projects.

Tunisia also benefited greatly from an independent parliament. Civil society groups enjoyed influence in the legislative process and lobbied members of parliament to keep as narrow as possible the exceptions to the right to information. Although the parliament was at times slow to act on legislation, in the end it approved a law that earned international acclaim.

Civil society gradually became a stronger force for change the years following the revolution. In the immediate aftermath of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's departure from office, there was no strong civil society presence in Tunisia working on access-to-information issues; such work was done mainly in the offices of the president and the prime minister. But as the open-government movement grew, state employees turned to civil society groups for technical guidance on open-data projects; and parliament began to respond to civil society demands for greater openness.

Proactively publishing information and giving citizens the right to request information from the government did not unleash the pent-up public demand that some proponents expected. Although Tunisia made significant progress on the supply side of the information equation, gains were lean on the demand side. Mendel acknowledged this concern but said the priority had been to take advantage of the window of opportunity the revolution presented in order to develop the legal framework. Citizen demand would grow once citizens understood their new rights and began to exercise them, and by 2017, such progress was apparent.

Ben Yacoub acknowledged that while much of the data might be useful or interesting to only a small group, that group was an important one. "There are citizens active in civil society who are interested in data," he said. "There are businesses using the data." Civil society groups even helped spread information to other government officials who previously did not know how to access useful information. "When the ministry of finance published the budget of the municipalities for the first time, we found that people in government were asking us for the link," Ben Yacoub added.

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