

Interim Report for *Arab Nationalism and State Formation: the Maghrib Experiences*,
IDE-JETRO, 2019.

Chapter 3

Preliminary Study on Regional Inequalities in Tunisia: Demography of Tunisia in the Early 20th Century

Shinwoo KIM

*Ph. D. Candidate, Graduate School of Global Studies,
Sophia University, Japan*

Abstract

This paper studies the demography of Tunisia in the early 20th century using population censuses and statistics published in the French protectorate era (1881–1956) as preliminary research on regional inequalities in Tunisia. Regional inequalities, especially imbalanced development and the privileges of those in the coastal area, are one of the greatest challenges of the country. Many studies have focused on regional inequality since Tunisia's independence. Most conclude the main cause was development policies, but the origins of regional inequalities remain ambiguous. When, where, and how were these inequalities created, developed, and changed? The population censuses show that distribution was relatively balanced in the early protectorate era, but this changed gradually as people began to concentrate in and around the capital, Tunis. Particularly in the 1930s, the demography of Tunisia changed swiftly; therefore, observing the regional population patterns of that era serves as key material for understanding the origin of regional inequalities in Tunisia.

Keywords

Tunisia, Regional Inequality, Demography, French Protectorate

Introduction

This paper observes the population distribution and growth of Tunisia in the early twentieth century using population censuses and statistics as a preliminary study of regional inequalities in Tunisia. In 2010, the so-called Arab Spring began in Tunisia where politics and the economy were relatively stable compared with other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries. However, the escalation of socio-economic inequalities became an important impetus behind the popular uprisings. In Tunisia, the inequality between the centre and the periphery appeared as a spatial inequality. The regional disparity is called the Two Tunisias problem, essentially a division of the country into rich and poor areas (Bousnina 2012). In general, regional disparities in Tunisia are explained as the inequality between the coastal and inland regions by littoralization¹. Sometimes, the problem is explained as the inequality between the south and the north, and other times between east and west or urban and rural. Many politicians, including all the presidents who served after the independence from French colonial rule, are originally from the coastal area or the capital, Tunis. The majority of better educational and work opportunities are also concentrated in these areas. It is well known that the Arab Spring was triggered by an event that occurred in the governorate of Sidi Bouzid, a marginalized inland area. Many studies have focused on the situation of regional inequality after the independence in 1956 and explain its main cause as development policies; however, some questions remain. Was the regional structure of the colonial era different from the current situation? When, where, and why did this regional inequality form, and how was it transformed or fixed? What kinds of inequalities that existed then still exist now? To answer these questions, the French protectorate era (1881–1956) should be observed because the economic unbalance and some inequalities between the centre and the south were already apparent during the protectorate era (*Bulletin économique et social de la Tunisie 1955*). Also, the independent Tunisian government recognized these regional disparities between the coastal zone and others (interior, central and south) and regarded them as obstacles to national development in the decennial development plan that was published in 1962. Besides, ‘the pre-colonial economy was a decentralized, integrated system. It linked the countryside to rural villages and towns’ and ‘rural towns had once served as important market centers for vibrant interior trade’, but ‘colonial expropriation shifted these markets to urban areas, which caused the rapid depopulation and devastated these rural

¹ The coastal areas have benefited from the economic investments and infrastructures during the course of national development, which began in the colonial era (Belheldi 1999).

economies’ (Chomiak 2017:6). Thus, studying the regional structure and inequality during the protectorate era will be helpful for understanding the origin and transformation of current regional inequalities in Tunisia.

1. Statistics of Tunisia during Protectorate Era

Demography is a condensation of various social and economic indices, and ‘inequality refers to the dispersion of the distribution over a population of any of the rewards and status distinctions conferred by a society on its members such as income, wealth, level of living, leisure, prestige, fare, or life chances’ (Duncan 1969:361). ‘Not only do social stratification processes often help to explain or to predict the sorts of outcomes in which demographers have traditionally been interested, but demographic factors can also have major consequences for social stratification’ (Sakamoto and Powers 2005:386). Thus, as a preliminary study on regional inequalities in Tunisia, this report observes and summarizes the demography of Tunisia—including regional population distribution and population growth of local and European citizens—in the early twentieth century using population statistics.

[Table 1] Nation Categories in the Censuses

Census Year	Title	Category
1911, 1921	The State of Population (European and Indigenous)	French, Italian, Maltese, Spanish, Greek, Other Europeans, Muslim, Jewish
1926, 1931, 1936	The State of Civil Population (European and Indigenous)	European Population (French, Italian, Maltese, Spanish, Greek, Other European), Muslim Population (Tunisian, Algerian, Moroccan, Sudanese, Syrian, Tripolitanian, Other nationality), Jewish Population (Tunisian, Algerian, Moroccan, Syrian, Tripolitanian, Other nationality)
1946	The State of Population	European Population (French, Italian, Maltese, Other European), Tunisian Population (Muslim, Jewish), Diverse
1956	The State of Population	Tunisian (Muslim, Jewish), Muslim not Tunisian (Muslims of Algeria, Other Muslims), Europeans (French, Italian, Others)

Source: General Statistics, Annual Statistics, and Censuses

The modern census of Tunisia commenced in 1891 as part of the report sent to France (*Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1891*) even though it only counted the number of French settlers. Tunisians (called *indigènes*

by the French) were counted for the first time in the 1911 Census. The National Institute of Statistics of Tunisia (INS), established in 1969 by the independent government, regards the 1921 census as the first census of Tunisia. Since then, there have been twelve censuses: 1921, 1926, 1931, 1936, 1946, 1956, 1966, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2004, and 2014. In this report, seven censuses from 1911 to 1956 are mainly used, as well as *Statistique Générale* (General Statistics, 1913–1936) and *Annuaire Statistique* (Annual Statistics, 1940–today), which include plenty of information not only on the demography, but also important social and economic indices such as education, health, transportation, and exportation that are useful supplements to the censuses.

Moreover, in the context of regional disparities in academic or policy fields in Tunisia, the generally used concept of regional blocks are based on the census categories utilized since the 1984 census: Grand Tunis, Northern East, Northern West, Central East, Central West, Southern East, and Southern West. This concept was created after the independence, but for better understanding and comparison with the current situation, it will also be used in this paper.

[Table 2] Regional Block and the Governorates

	Present Census	Census during French Protectorate ²
Grand Tunis	Tunis, Ariana, Ben arous, Manouba	Tunis, (Tunis Suburbs ³)
Northern East	Nabeul, Zaghouan, Bizerte	Grombalia (Nabeul), Zaghouan, Bizerte
Northern West	Béja, Jendouba, Le Kef, Siliana	Béja, Medjez-el-Bab (Part of Béja), Teboursouk (Part of Béja), Souk el-Arba (Jendouba), Tabarka (Part of Jendouba), Le Kef, Mactar (Siliana)
Central East (Sahil)	Sousse, Monastir, Mahdia, Sfax	Sousse, Sfax, (Mahdia ⁴)
Central West	Kairouan, Kasserine, Sidi bouzid	Kairouan, Thala (Kasserine),
Southern East	Gabès, Médenine, Tataouine	Djerba (Part of Médenine), Gabès, Gafsa,
Southern West	Gafsa, Tozeur, Kébili	Tozeur, Southern Territories

Source: General Statistics, Annual Statistics, and Censuses

² I added current name and range of governments in parentheses to understand how the administrative districts changed.

³ From the 1946 census

⁴ From the 1946 census

2. Local Population during French Protectorate Era

During the entire French protectorate era, the majority of the population living in Tunisia was still Tunisian (around 90% of total population). There were Muslim and Jewish populations from other Arab countries, mainly North Africa. For example, in the 1936 census, there were 2,335,623 Muslims (2.99%) and 59,485 Jewish (0.44%) who were not Tunisian nationals. Thus, observing the regional distribution of local population and its growth will be helpful in providing an overview of the demographics of French protectorate Tunisia.

According to historical estimates, the population of Tunisia showed little to no change from AD 1–1800 because of political instability and natural disasters such as droughts and epidemics (Tabutin et al., 2002). Population fluctuated around 800,000 (Maddison, 2007). The Tunisian population grew 1.4 times from 1800–1850; 1.5 times from 1800–1900; 2 times from 1900–1950; 2.7 times from 1950–2000; and 1.1 times from 2000–2015. As shown in Table 3, the local population increased since the late 1920s, and the average annual population growth rate was 2.18% between 1926–1931, 1.56% between 1931–1936, and 2.21% between 1936–1946. This rapid population growth is due to natural increases supported by the decline in mortality and the improvement of sanitation systems (Huetz de Lemps 1958:273).

[Table 3] Local Population and Average Annual Growth Rate (AAGR)

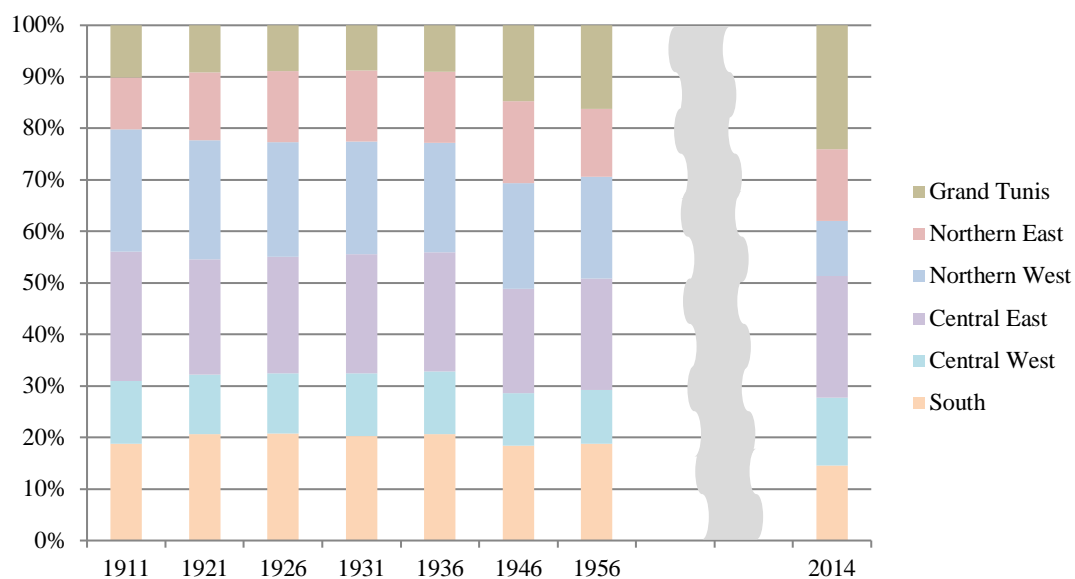
	1911	1921	1926	1931	1936	1946	1956
Population	1,790,611	1,937,824	1,986,427	2,215,399	2,395,108	2,991,403	3,527,845
AAGR	-	0.79%	0.50%	2.18%	1.56%	2.21%	1.65%

Source: General Statistics, Annual Statistics, and Censuses

Observing the population distribution by regional blocks (Figure 1) reveals an interesting fact. In the 1911 Census, Grand Tunis comprised 10.17% of the population, Northern East (9.99%), Northern West (23.77%), Central East (25.05%), Central West (12.20%), and South (18.81%). These proportions changed in the 2014 Census to Grand Tunis (24.7%), Northern East (13.96%), Northern West (10.66%), Central East (23.58%), Central West (13.11%), and South (14.62%). The Northern West, which is one of the most marginalized areas today, was the demographic centre during the early protectorate era along with the so-called *Sahil*, the Central East. Conversely, the population proportion of Grand Tunis increased by 10% between 1911 and 2014, and the Northern West's decreased more than 10%, while the proportion of the Central East

changed very little. At the demographic level, the Northern West’s population shrank while the capital’s got larger. At the policy level, in general, the concentration of investment in the *Sahil* area and links with nearby areas are considered to be the main reason for social inequality and regional disparities (Belhedi 1999). However, at the daily life level, the population concentration in the capital and the metropolitanization, including the Northern East, are other major reasons contributing to the disparities. The total population distribution of Grand Tunis and the Northern East is almost 40%.

[Figure 1] Population Distribution by Regional Blocks



Source: General Statistics, Annual Statistics, and Censuses

At the governorate level (Table 4), local population proportion of Tunis was still large throughout the protectorate era: 1911 (10.17%), 1921 (9.09%), 1931 (8.89%), 1936 (8.78%), 1946 (8.20%), and 1956 (16.27%); however, there were other large cities in various areas. Cities in Sahil comprised a large portion of the total population; Sousse comprised 10–15% and Sfax ~10%. The historical capital, Kairouan, in the Central West, was also a large city in the early 20th century: 1911 (6.84%), 1921 (7.09%), 1926 (7.11%), 1931 (7.33%), 1936 (7.07%), 1946 (6.01%), and 1956 (5.78%). In the Northern West area, there were several governorates comprising 3–4% of the population, among them the largest city was Le Kef. Le Kef comprised 7.30% of the total population in 1911; however, the proportion kept decreasing: 1921 (5.95%), 1926 (6.03%), 1931 (5.90%), 1936 (5.71%), 1946 (5.36%), and 1956 (7.39%). In the South,

Gafsa was the largest city and host the phosphate mine, with the population proportion of around 5%. Also, the Southern Territory, which was partially a military area, also comprised 7–8% of the total population.

[Table 4] Local Population of Some Large Governorates

		1911	1921	1926	1931	1936	1946	1956
GT	Tunis	182,141	176,110	176,572	194,575	216,475	245,371	574,080
NE	Grombalia	82,300	104,919	114,994	129,054	136,954	203,887	234,063
NE	Bizerte	96,518	114,604	117,909	131,421	146,731	212,554	229,899
NW	Le Kef	130,700	115,228	119,736	130,753	136,880	160,217	260,772
CE	Sousse	281,029	260,520	274,622	305,573	327,182	254,308	435,094
CE	Sfax	167,554	173,491	175,966	206,508	225,475	276,269	327,601
CW	Kairouan	122,529	137,414	141,236	162,336	169,250	179,894	203,978
S	Gafsa	80,385	105,686	113,112	118,255	130,566	147,771	255,637
Entire Tunisia		1,790,611	1,937,824	1,986,427	2,215,399	2,395,108	2,991,403	3,527,845

Source: General Statistics, Annual Statistics, and Censuses

*GT=Grand Tunis, NE=Northern East, NW=Northern West, CE=Central East, CW=Central West, S=South

[Table 5] Average Annual Growth Rate in Grand Tunis and Northern East

	1911-21	1921-26	1926-31	1931-36	1936-46
Tunis	-0.34%	0.05%	1.94%	2.13%	6.85%
Grombalia	2.42%	1.83%	2.30%	1.19%	3.93%
Bizerte	1.71%	0.57%	2.17%	2.20%	3.66%

Source: General Statistics, Annual Statistics, and Censuses

Observing the average annual population growth by governorate (Table 5) reveals that the population of Tunis and the Northern East started increasing in the middle of the 1920s. Their annual growths were over 2% in this period, especially between 1936–1946; the annual growth of Tunis (including the suburban areas) was 6.85%, Grombalia (3.93%), and Bizerte (3.66%). This population growth is due to social increase⁵, meaning there were internal migrations toward the capital and its

⁵ According to the general statistics, for example, between 1936–1946, total increases of Muslim population of Tunis were 187,130, among them, 169,369 were social increases (immigrants from other governorates) while only 17,761 were natural increases. In Grombalia, there were 27,134 natural increases and 33,782 social increases, and in Bizerte, there were 23,813 natural increases and

neighbouring cities. This was already ‘a problem of the exodus of the rural people towards the urban centres’ (*Bulletin économique et social de la Tunisie* 1955:30).

3. European Population during French Protectorate Era

The European population grew from about 8,000 in the 1830s (Issawi 1982:83) to Italians (11,000), Maltese (7,000) and French (700) in 1881 (*Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1906*:382). As (Table 6) shows, the proportion of European population comprised 7–8% of total population and changed very little. During the protectorate era, the European population did not occupy all of Tunisia, but it is easy to determine how their impact was strong. Eighty-five per cent of the Europeans who lived in towns held one-fifth of the cultivated land, and they owned all the large industrial, commercial, and financial enterprises (Issawi 1982:83). Also in Tunisia, as well as in Algeria and Morocco, ‘it was the scene of “demographic” as well as “economic” colonization in which foreigners provided not only the bourgeoisie but workers and farmers as well’ (Issawi 1982:81). In this section, we will review the European population separately from the local population to best understand the precise regional demographic character in the colonial era.

[Table 6] European Population and Proportion

	1911	1921	1926	1931	1936	1946	1956
European	148,476	156,115	173,281	195,293	213,205	239,549	255,324
All nations	1,939,087	2,093,939	2,159,708	2,410,692	2,608,313	3,230,952	3,783,169
European (%)	7.66%	7.46%	8.02%	8.10%	8.17%	7.41%	6.75%

Source: General Statistics, Annual Statistics, and Censuses

Table 7 shows the European population by regional blocks and indicates that most of the European population inhabited Grand Tunis. Between 1911–1956, the European population in Grand Tunis increased 1.75%, Northern East (1.53%), Northern West (0.61%), Central East (0.69%), Central West (0.68%), and the South (0.96%). Also, 32.97% of the population of Tunis was European in 1911, 1921 (34.63%), 1926 (37.01%), 1936 (38.01%), 1936 (38.24%), 1946 (26.82%), and 1956 (23.25%). Around 10% of the Northern East population was European.

35,565 social increases. In several governorates in the west and south, the net social changes were minus, meaning there were more emigrants than immigrants.

[Table 7] European Population by Regional Blocks

	1911	1921	1926	1931	1936	1946	1956
Grand Tunis	89,594	93,302	103,727	119,311	134,054	161,922	173,887
Northern East	18,424	24,179	26,580	29,895	34,690	36,252	34,935
Northern West	16,143	15,287	16,638	17,414	15,422	14,112	15,101
Central East	17,414	15,980	17,327	19,318	20,116	19,858	22,666
Central West	1,819	1,684	2,153	2,445	2,284	1,957	1,725
South	5,082	5,683	6,856	6,910	6,639	5,448	7,010
TOTAL	148,476	156,115	173,281	195,293	213,205	239,549	255,324

Source: General Statistics, Annual Statistics, and Censuses

In the early protectorate era, Italians maintained numerical superiority, and the ‘pattern of large French commercial ventures with few settlers and small Italian holdings farmed by their owners heightened concerns in Tunis and Paris about demographic imbalances in the protectorate and stimulated efforts to attract French *colons* (settlers)’ (Perkins 2004:48). However, after the 1930s, French population rose rapidly, and ‘lots of parts are naturalization of Italians and Maltese and some Jewish’ (Huetz de Lemps 1958:276).

In 1911, 51.92% of the total French population inhabited Grand Tunis, 1921 (52.11%), 1926 (52.31%), 1931 (52.95%), 1936 (54.94%), 1946 (63.06%), and 1956 (64.13%). On the other hand, 64.76% of the total Italian population inhabited Grand Tunis in 1911, 1921 (64.67%), 1926 (65.14%), 1931 (68.27%), 1936 (71.19%), 1946 (74.89%), and 1956 (78.15%). Also, in 1911, 9,501 Italians settled in Northern West (2.15% of the regional population) and 8,585 Italians settled in Central East (1.84% of regional population). By 1946, there were only 4,263 Italians in Northern West (0.68%) and 4,548 in Central East (0.72%). In contrast, the French population increased in those areas. It is not certain whether it was demographical changes or the effect of naturalization of Italians into French, but it serves as a clue for understanding the changes of regional structures during the protectorate era. It is clear that there were many Europeans in Tunis, both French and Italian, and Tunis was a multinational city during the entire protectorate era. In 1911, 8.8% of the Tunis population was French and 20.99% was Italian. These increased each census: 1921 (10.54% and 20.35%), 1926 (13.25% and 20.73%), 1931 (15.42% and 19.83%), 1936 (16.94% and 19.15%), 1946 (15.04% and 10.54%), and 1956 (15.47% and 6.99%).

[Table 8] French Population by Regional Blocks

	1911	1921	1926	1931	1936	1946	1956
Grand Tunis	23,904	28,385	37,148	48,412	59,373	90,792	115,712
Northern East	7,563	10,867	12,703	16,311	20,908	23,668	27,436
Northern West	6,062	6,329	7,636	9,242	9,030	9,456	11,510
Central East	5,622	5,548	8,691	11,183	12,248	13,987	17,967
Central West	858	913	1,256	1,719	1,672	1,621	1,532
South	2,035	2,434	3,586	4,560	4,837	4,453	6,283
TOTAL	46,044	54,476	71,020	91,427	108,068	143,977	180,440

Source: General Statistics, Annual Statistics, and Censuses

[Table 9] Italian Population by Regional Blocks

	1911	1921	1926	1931	1936	1946	1956
Grand Tunis	57,042	54,836	58,117	62,246	67,125	63,611	52,291
Northern East	10,014	12,097	12,867	12,716	13,060	11,781	7,047
Northern West	9,501	8,266	8,522	7,615	5,931	4,263	3,172
Central East	8,585	6,597	6,506	6,342	6,491	4,548	3,827
Central West	837	639	722	565	470	213	118
South	2,103	2,364	2,482	1,694	1,212	519	455
TOTAL	88,082	84,799	89,216	91,178	94,289	84,935	66,910

Source: General Statistics, Annual Statistics, and Censuses

Conclusion

This is a brief, introductory study of Tunisia's regional populations to determine the regional structures during the French protectorate of Tunisia, some which may have affected the country's recent regional disparities. Nonetheless, it provides significant insights. First, in the early era of the protectorate, demographically middle-sized cities were scattered around the country, while most of the population is now concentrated in the capital and coastal area. Second, there were great changes in the 1930s, including rapid population growth, population concentration in the capital and the Northern east area, and proportional changes of settlers' nationalities. To understand current regional inequality and its changes in Tunisia, further research should focus on the social transformations and regional structure during the 1930s using other socio-economic variables.

References

- Belhedi, Amor. 1999. "Les disparités spatiales en Tunisie, état des lieux et enjeux." *Méditerranée*, 91, pp. 63-72.
- Bousnina, Adel. 2012. *Le littoral et le désert tunisiens: développement humain et disparités régionales en Tunisie*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Chomiak, Laryssa. 2017. "Tunisia: The Colonial Legacy and Transitional Justice.", CSVR Report.
- Duncan, Otis D.. 1969. "Inequality and opportunity." *Population Index*, n.35, pp. 361-366.
- Issawi, Charles Philip. 1982. *An economic history of the Middle East and North Africa*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Huetz de Lemps, Alain. 1958. "La situation économique de la Tunisie." *Cahiers d'outre-mer*. 43, pp. 272-290.
- Maddison, Angus. 2007. *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective/ Historical Statistics*. OECD.
- Perkins, Kenneth. 2004. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sakamoto, Arthur and Daniel A. Power. 2005. "Demography of Social Stratification." *Handbook of Population*, Poston Jr. et al. eds. Ch. 13, pp. 383-416.
- Tabutin, Dominique, Vilquin Eric, Biraben Jean-Noël, 2002. "L'histoire de la population de l'Afrique du Nord pendant le deuxième millénaire.". Document de travail, Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut supérieur d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art, Université catholique de Louvain.
- Bulletin économique et social de la Tunisie. 1955. June.
- Dénombrement de la population européenne civile en Tunisie au 15 décembre 1911.
- Dénombrement de la population civile européenne et indigène en Tunisie au 6 mars 1921.
- Dénombrement de la population civile européenne et indigène en Tunisie au 20 avril 1926.
- Dénombrement de la population civile européenne et indigène en Tunisie au 22 mars 1931.
- Dénombrement de la population civile européenne et tunisienne en Tunisie au 12 mars 1936.
- Statistique Général de la Tunisie.1913–1936.
- Annuaire Statistique de la Tunisie.1940–1956.