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From Arab Spring to Open Data: The Shifting Landscape of Open Government in Tunisia

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Abstract. This study explores the evolution of open government in Tunisia by mapping scholarly literature published between 2011 and 2025, coinciding with the country's accession to the Open Government Partnership. Using bibliometric analysis with VOSviewer, the research examines review articles retrieved via Publish or Perish and indexed in Google Scholar, focusing on transparency, public participation, and accountability. The analysis identifies three thematic clusters: fiscal transparency and access to information, public participation and democratic innovation, and institutional accountability and digital governance. These clusters reflect the priorities of both government and civil society, while highlighting Tunisia's role as the first MENA country to join the OGP. Findings reveal that academic discourse has shifted from exploratory studies after the Arab Spring to more consolidated analyses of implementation and institutionalization. Nonetheless, challenges remain, including institutional fragmentation, political instability, and limited civic capacity to influence policymaking. This study contributes by providing a systematic overview of research trends and thematic priorities, and by offering policy-relevant recommendations. Strengthening open data practices, promoting substantive citizen participation, and enhancing accountability through independent oversight and integrated digital governance are proposed as key strategies to advance democratic governance in Tunisia and the broader MENA region.

Keywords: Open Government; Open Government Partnership; Tunisia

Introduction

Open government, which emphasizes accountability, transparency, and public participation as essential tenets for bolstering democratic legitimacy and institutional trust, has become a major paradigm in governance reform globally in recent decades (Grimmelikhuijsen & Feeney, 2017; Harrison & Sayogo, 2014; Shao & Saxena, 2019). A larger movement in public governance that emphasizes transparency, cooperation, and creativity in state management is the foundation of the idea of open government (Gil-Garcia et al., 2020; Safarov, 2019; Zhao et al., 2022). According to A. Meijer et al.,

(2012) open government includes the establishment of interactive forums where individuals may actively engage in the formulation of public policy, going beyond the simple disclosure of information.

According to a paradigm created by Wirtz et al., (2020), open government is a digital-political ecosystem that involves the private sector, civic society, and government in the creation of public value. Open government can therefore be viewed as both normative and instrumental: normative in that it upholds democratic principles like accountability, transparency, and participation; and instrumental in that it has the ability to improve public service innovation, policy efficacy, and public trust in institutions (Aboalmaali et al., 2020; Afandi et al., 2024; Khurshid et al., 2022).

By giving member states a forum to pledge to implement tangible changes that improve transparency and public participation in public affairs, the Open Government Partnership (OGP), which was established in 2011, has played a significant role in furthering these ideals (Open Government Partnership, 2023a; Wang & Shepherd, 2020; Wirtz et al., 2019). Following the Arab Spring, which emphasized calls for more inclusive and transparent governing systems, discussions on open government gathered steam throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Moon, 2020).

Being the first MENA nation to join the OGP in 2014, Tunisia is frequently presented as a regional pioneer (OECD, 2016). Since then, the nation has made a number of pledges to improve information availability, budgetary transparency, and citizen involvement methods. However, a number of obstacles stand in the way of Tunisia's adoption of open government principles, including as political unpredictability, institutional fragmentation, and a lack of citizen power to influence policymaking (Kausch, 2021a).
Research especially focusing on Tunisia is still fragmented, despite the fact that the worldwide academic literature on open government has continued to grow. Without offering a thorough overview of more general research trends and topic concerns, existing studies often focus on case-based reforms such budget transparency or participatory processes (H. Ben Slimane & Mezghani, 2020). Because of this, there is still a lack of scholarly knowledge on the conception, discussion, and analysis of open government in Tunisia.

By mapping important concerns pertaining to open government in Tunisia using bibliometric analysis, this work aims to close this gap. This study adds to academic knowledge and policy discussions by methodically examining academic literature produced between 2011 and 2025 in order to identify recurring themes, research clusters, and emerging trends. In addition to presenting insights for academics, decision-makers, and civil society actors looking to improve accountability,

transparency, and participation in the nation, the results are intended to give a systematic knowledge of how open government has been researched in Tunisia.

Research Methods

This study employs a bibliometric analysis to map the key issues related to open government in Tunisia. Bibliometric analysis serves to measure, analyze, and visualize the body of scholarly literature within a particular field of knowledge (Kulsum et al., 2022). This method enables researchers to identify research trends as well as the evolution of relevant topics (Donthu et al., 2021; Gaviria-Marin et al., 2019; Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020). The research data were obtained from scholarly literature indexed in Google Scholar using the Publish or Perish software, limited to review articles. The literature search was conducted with keywords representing the core principles of open government—transparency, public participation, and accountability—each combined with the country name Tunisia. The dataset was restricted to review articles published between 2011 and 2025, coinciding with the emergence of the Open Government Partnership.

The retrieved literature was exported in RIS format and subsequently managed in Mendeley for duplicate removal, metadata completion (including keywords), and topical relevance screening in accordance with the research focus. The next stage involved bibliometric analysis conducted with VOSviewer, with the following settings: type of analysis—co-occurrence; unit of analysis—keywords; and counting method—full counting. This technique facilitated the visual mapping of relationships among keywords, thereby enabling the identification of central themes in the literature on open government in Tunisia.

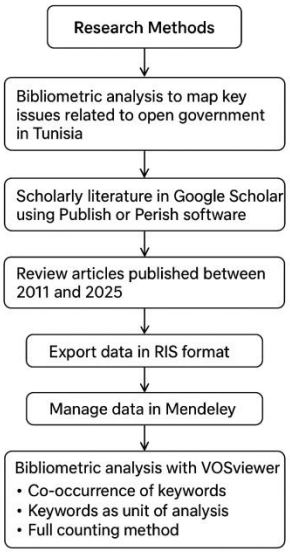

Figure 1. Research Method Flowchart
Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

Result and Discussion

The discussion section contains findings and discussion. The findings section contains analysis based on the research questions posed. The discussion section contains an understanding of the findings and a dialog of the findings with theory or other-related research. For conceptual articles, this section contains a description of the analysis, including the author's argumentation, the logic offered by the author, and criticism from the author. This section must contain the author's position on the topic raised. (Calibri 12, space 1.15)

The exploratory stage of openness discourse following the Arab Spring is reflected in the relatively small number of publications on open government in Tunisia during the early period (2011–2014), with just one to three pieces published year. While technological factors like fiscal transparency or digital involvement were not yet well-known, research at this time was primarily concerned with political transition and desires for democracy. The quantity of articles has greatly grown after Tunisia formally joined the OGP in 2014.

Publications reached five to eight pieces annually during the expansion period (2015–2017), with subjects broadening to cover the implementation of the right to information law, budget transparency, and citizen involvement methods. The peak was reached between 2018 and 2020, when there were 12 to 15 publications annually. This increase accompanied the consolidation of research on digital governance innovation, fiscal accountability, and the assessment of participatory systems, as well as the growing worldwide interest in Tunisia's governance changes. Digital technology adoption was further boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which also enhanced research on online involvement and ICT-based public service delivery.

The number of publications tended to decrease after this high, ranging from seven to thirteen articles annually between 2021 and 2025. The evaluation of implementation, the durability of the change, and local government involvement within the decentralization framework became the main areas of research interest. This fall may be seen as a move away from the initial optimism and toward more skeptical thinking, especially when it comes to domestic political issues, bureaucratic capacity limitations, and institutional fragmentation.

Overall, Chart 1 shows that Tunisia's open government research development has been cyclical, starting with exploration, growing quickly after 2014, reaching its peak between 2018 and 2020, and then entering a phase of consolidation and topic diversification. In Tunisia, where reformist enthusiasm has frequently been met with the reality of political instability and insufficient institutional capacity, these dynamics are a reflection of the country's shifting political landscape.

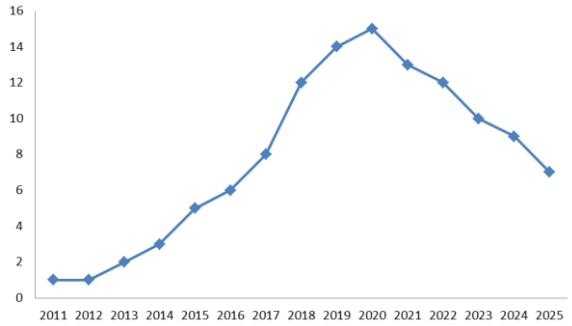

Chart 1. Number of Tunisian Open Government Publications
Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

The co-occurrence map (see Figure 2) highlights three interrelated conceptual blocks—(1) fiscal transparency and access to information, (2) public participation and democratic innovation, and (3) institutional accountability and digital governance—whose configuration aligns with the evolution of open government discourse documented in both global and regional literature. The transparency cluster (access to information, right to information, open budget) reinforces findings that identify public access to fiscal data and freedom of information laws as the foundation of public accountability (Harrison & Sayogo, 2014; OECD, 2016). In the Tunisian context, this focus reflects budget reform initiatives and advocacy for the right to information in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, although implementation has often been hindered by technical capacity gaps and bureaucratic fragmentation (H. Ben Slimane & Mezghani, 2020; Kausch, 2021b).

In line with Meijer et al. (2012) and Howard & Hussain (2013), who see technology as a facilitator of deliberative spaces, the participation cluster—public participation, digital participation, citizen consultation, and democratic innovation—emerges as a complementary dimension. Online participation and consultative forums not only increase citizens' access to information but also change the way the state and civil society interact. However, the map's strong correlation between participation and transparency indicates that meaningful, usable data is typically necessary for effective participation; in the absence of structured, machine-readable data (such as open budgets), participation runs the risk of becoming tokenistic, a problem also noted in field studies on Tunisia (Kausch, 2021b).

To achieve the normative objectives of open government, the third cluster—institutional accountability, digital governance, e-government, and public oversight—highlights the significance of strong institutional frameworks and monitoring systems. According to Wirtz, Weyerer, & Rosch (2020), open government is a digital-political ecosystem. The co-occurrence map shows that the advantages of participation and transparency are unlikely to compound into significant accountability in the absence of

integrated digital services and strengthened oversight institutions. While technology might speed up changes, empirical research in the MENA area shows that if capacity-building policies and governance reforms are not implemented alongside it, it may also make inequality worse (Khurshid et al., 2022).

Methodologically speaking, the mapping results further support the usefulness of bibliometrics in locating conceptual connections and recurrent themes (Gaviria-Marin et al., 2019). The creation of theme hypotheses, such as the one that information availability mediates the link between budget reform and the caliber of public engagement, is made possible by keyword co-occurrence. These hypotheses may subsequently be verified using qualitative or mixed-methods research. However, it is crucial to acknowledge a limitation: the map represents trends in scholarly production, or the topics that scholars write about, rather than necessarily field realities; in other words, clusters may be impacted by publication language, journal indexing distribution, or disciplinary preferences (Donthu et al., 2021).

This mapping recommends an integrated approach from a policy perspective: governments and donors should balance funding for data provision (transparency), the creation of meaningful participatory mechanisms (beyond formal consultation), and institutional reforms that improve accountability and oversight. Programs to improve data literacy in civil society and harmonize inter-agency procedures must be combined with technical interventions (such as open data portals and e-procurement); this advice is also supported by OGP reports and OECD analyses of Tunisia's experience (OECD, 2016; Open Government Partnership, 2023b).

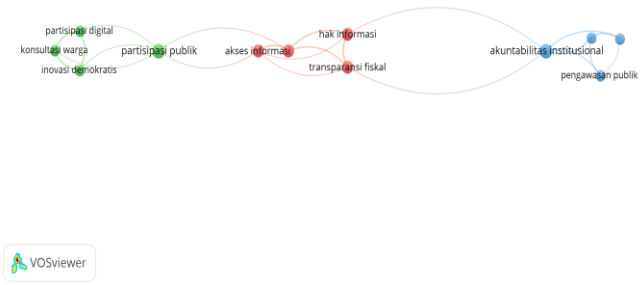

Figure 2. Co-occurrence map
Source: Developed by the authors (2025).

The Government of Tunisia is currently focusing on several policy areas (Open Government Partnership, 2023b). First, promoting financial transparency. This commitment seeks to enhance state financial transparency through the development

of the open budget portal *Mizaniatouna*, in accordance with Organic Budget Law No. 15 of 2019, which emphasizes performance-based budgeting with more detailed and accessible data. Additionally, a simplified and easy-to-understand citizen's budget will be made available, including disability-friendly formats, along with automatic access to monthly, quarterly, semi-annual, and interim budget execution reports.

This effort is expected to address existing weaknesses in transparency instruments, particularly delays in the publication of reports and the limited public use of available data. By introducing new mechanisms, the commitment will strengthen accountability, combat corruption and misuse of public funds, and provide civil society with more practical tools to monitor budget formulation and execution. The project is supported by funding from the World Bank for the development of the new portal and by the OGP Civil Forum for the drafting of an inclusive citizen's budget.

Second, an electronic system for water use payments. This commitment focuses on developing an online information system to facilitate the collection and monitoring of public water resource usage fees. The system will cover payment processes, monitoring of users' financial and technical status, and information exchange between departments within the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources, and Fisheries. By adopting the principles of transparency and accountability, this service aims to simplify procedures for citizens, strengthen the right to information, and ensure the protection of personal data in accordance with Organic Law No. 63 of 2004.

The system is designed to resolve longstanding issues such as difficulties in tracking payments across 24 governorates, delays in updating records, lack of clarity in traditional payment methods, and the issuance of new permits despite outstanding arrears. By providing up-to-date and transparent statistical data, the system will reinforce public governance, increase state revenue, enhance efficiency and integrity in the water sector, and improve relations between government and water users. The program is supported by GIZ (German Agency for International Cooperation).

Third, improving the application process for water use licenses. This commitment aims to develop an electronic information system for managing claims and permits for the exploration and use of public water resources, replacing traditional administrative procedures based on physical documentation and direct communication. The system is expected to accelerate responses to permit applications, facilitate file tracking, protect applicants' personal data, and improve transparency and access to information. In doing so, it seeks to resolve existing problems, such as delays in document circulation across governorates, difficulties in tracking files, slow response times, limited human resources, and the high costs of conventional methods.

The implementation of this system will strengthen public sector integrity, modernize governance, and reduce the potential for corruption in water resource management.

Furthermore, it will improve administrative efficiency and effectiveness, provide practical solutions to licensing challenges, and facilitate multilateral interdepartmental participation. As a result, the quality of public services will improve, citizens' access to information will be guaranteed, and water resource management will be more transparent and accountable. The program is supported by GIZ.

Fourth, creating a public projects and reforms observatory. This commitment seeks to establish a Public Projects and Reforms Observatory with four main components: mechanisms for data collection and validation, evidence-based analysis, a digital platform for data sharing and processing, and a collaborative space through workshops and training. The observatory will focus on two types of projects: public projects in the Jendouba region—which ranks low on the regional development index—and national projects related to waste management, which have significant social, economic, health, and environmental impacts. In the future, the experience of this observatory will serve as a basis for expanding its coverage to all regions and public programs in the country.

By consolidating public project and waste management data into a single open digital platform, the observatory will make such information available to government, civil society, the media, and citizens alike. This will enhance transparency, improve monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and expedite project completion with greater efficiency. Moreover, training and workshops will empower stakeholders to make scientific and modern use of data, enabling more accurate and accountable decision-making. The program is supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Solidar Tunisia, and the National Democratic Institute.

Fifth, automatic publication of information. This commitment aims to strengthen the role of the Access to Information Authority in monitoring, evaluating, and ensuring compliance by nearly 5,000 public institutions with their obligations for automatic disclosure under Organic Law No. 22 of 2016 on Access to Information. This effort includes the development of evaluation methodologies, an electronic system for monitoring and follow-up, and a mechanism for periodic evaluations usable both by the authority and by information officers within each institution. In doing so, institutional websites will ensure more consistent publication and updating of information, in line with legal requirements and public transparency standards.

Through this system, the Access to Information Authority will be able to produce more accurate statistical data, reduce the number of complaints and lawsuits, and reinforce institutional compliance with disclosure obligations. For citizens, this mechanism will facilitate access to public information, enhance participation in policymaking, and strengthen trust in public administration. Furthermore, this transparency-based governance reform will ensure that institutional websites meet international technical standards. The project is supported by the Go Act Association.

Sixth, strengthening the availability of open data. Tunisia's Open Public Data initiative aims to strengthen the availability of open government data by ensuring that datasets are provided in open, accessible formats to improve governance, foster innovation, and generate socio-economic benefits. This commitment includes the development of a public data inventory system linked to a web-based national data registry, the formulation of a national strategy to encourage the use of open data, and the design of an evaluation methodology to assess program implementation and outcomes. These efforts align with Government Decree No. 3 of 2021 on open public data and build upon projects initiated since 2012.

Through this new framework, public institutions will be encouraged to inventory and disclose their data, while citizens will have the opportunity to participate in setting priorities for data publication. In this way, the initiative will strengthen public sector transparency and accountability, expand civic participation, and create opportunities for innovation and economic growth through data utilization. The program is supported by the Open Government Support Program in Francophone African Countries (PAGOF2).

Seventh, making environmental data available. This commitment focuses on environmental data openness as part of the Ministry of the Environment's digital transformation roadmap and the implementation of Government Decree No. 3 of 2021 on Open Public Data. Planned steps include inventorying data held by the ministry and its affiliated agencies, identifying priority datasets for publication, developing a work plan for open data in the environmental sector, and redesigning the Ministry of the Environment's open data portal.

By opening environmental data, the public will gain a better understanding of ecological challenges, support the formulation of relevant policies, and promote more effective environmental protection measures. Researchers, professionals, and citizens will also be able to use this open data to develop applications and innovative solutions that enhance environmental awareness and governance. This commitment reinforces transparency, accountability, and civic participation, with funding from the Ministry of the Environment's budget.

Eighth, promoting open government at the local level. This commitment seeks to encourage the implementation of open government initiatives at the municipal level by engaging selected municipalities in a participatory process similar to the OGP's national-level approach. Activities will include evaluations of past experiences, workshops to share best practices, training for municipalities in open governance, communication and public engagement, and support in drafting and implementing local action plans. Each municipality will thus be able to develop commitments tailored to its needs and characteristics, while strengthening proximity between administration

and citizens through the establishment of joint committees comprising local government and community representatives.

This initiative is expected to foster reforms more relevant to local needs, improve the quality of public services, and broaden citizen participation in oversight and decision-making. By adhering to the principles of transparency, accountability, participation, and information technology use, the commitment will strengthen local governance based on open government. The program is supported by GIZ, with reference to the administrative division established by Decree No. 589 of 2023.

Ninth, participation of youth and women at the local level. This commitment focuses on empowering youth and women in various regions of Tunisia to play a more active role in decision-making, reform processes, and the articulation of their needs and aspirations. It will be implemented through local development projects involving youth, women, local governments, and various stakeholders. In addition, sustainability mechanisms will be established, such as partnership agreements between target groups and local authorities, as well as regular meetings with decision-makers, thereby institutionalizing youth and women's participation.

Through a participatory co-creation approach, this commitment is expected to build trust and accountability between citizens and government, strengthen youth and women's capacities in local governance, and enable them to design and implement projects that address community needs. The result will not only create spaces for expression but also reinforce a culture of participation, accountability, and collaboration in development. The program is supported by GIZ.

Tenth, activating digital participation mechanisms. This commitment aims to strengthen digital public participation in Tunisia through the development and use of two national portals: *e-Participation* (www.e-participation.tn) and *E-Citizen* (www.e-people.gov.tn). Planned measures include drafting an action plan to promote digital participation, conducting comparative studies of international best practices, enhancing portal features, and providing training and awareness campaigns for both citizens and public officials. A dedicated communication plan will also be developed to promote the E-Citizen portal among government and civil society actors, alongside a publication space for online consultation results that can inform policymaking.

This initiative is expected to increase citizen and institutional use of digital participation portals and broaden access for citizens across regions—including the diaspora—to engage in public affairs and decision-making. In doing so, citizens will not only be able to submit complaints or proposals but also monitor government policies and programs. This commitment reinforces the principles of participation and transparency, with funding from the OECD (for the first sub-commitment) and the NDI (for the second).

Eleventh, a cross-sector corruption risk management methodology. This commitment seeks to guide several ministries in developing corruption risk management policies in strategic sectors such as public water ownership licensing (Ministry of Agriculture), fuel management and revenue collection (Ministry of Transport), medical equipment procurement (Ministry of Health), and military health services (Ministry of Defense). The methodology is designed to ensure that sectoral working teams understand, apply, and develop action plans to mitigate corruption risks, which can later be expanded to other sectors.

This approach strengthens the integrity and effectiveness of public services by providing a practical tool based on performance indicators for preventing, monitoring, and evaluating corruption risks. Following a successful pilot in the health sector, the methodology has demonstrated its ability to identify risks, assess probabilities, and build institutional safeguards against interference and misuse. This commitment aligns with the principles of transparency, accountability, and participation, and is supported by UNDP through the Regional Center for Anti-Corruption and Promoting Integrity in Arab Countries.

Twelfth, training modules on integrity and anti-corruption. This commitment focuses on developing online training modules on integrity and anti-corruption for civil servants, as part of the national e-learning project for public officials developed in collaboration with Korean partners. The modules will be designed with support from the General Directorate of Governance and Anti-Corruption under the Prime Minister's Office. The objective is to strengthen the capacity, skills, and performance of civil servants nationwide, provide equal opportunities for training, standardize understanding of integrity, and support digital transformation in human resource management.

Through this platform, public officials will have flexible access to training without geographical constraints, enhance their awareness of the importance of integrity, and benefit from international best practices in governance and corruption prevention. This commitment is expected to improve the quality of public administration's human resources, strengthen transparency, and support more effective public service delivery. Funding is provided by the PAGOF2 program.

Thirteenth, developing a guide for improved governance of associations. This commitment aims to strengthen the governance of associations as key civil society actors by producing a practical guide to help them comply with legal and best practice standards, particularly in the field of taxation. The guide will address associations' needs related to administrative and financial management, social security, task allocation, personal data protection, access to information, and the prevention of money laundering and terrorist financing. With this approach, associations are

expected to operate with greater transparency, accountability, and participation in public life.

The implementation of the guide will simplify administrative and fiscal procedures, such as tax registration, financial reporting, employee management, and cash and bank account management. This will help associations avoid legal difficulties while strengthening their institutional capacity to contribute to social development. Supported by the OECD and the IFADA Center, this commitment reinforces the principles of transparency, participation, and accountability in the sustainability of civil society organizations.

Fourteenth, digitizing administrative services for investors. This commitment focuses on simplifying and harmonizing investment procedures by redesigning investment service workflows through digitalization. The goal is to provide investors with fast, transparent, and consistent services, while strengthening interagency coordination. In the medium term, this effort will lead to the establishment of a unified investment platform integrating various administrative services, thereby improving the business climate, encouraging investment, and attracting more investors.

By developing a more open and integrated platform, the system will allow for automatic data exchange between stakeholders, expedite file processing, and reduce both costs and waiting times for investors. Furthermore, embedded tracking and transparency mechanisms will enhance the integrity of public services, increase interagency accountability, and place investors at the center of service delivery. The project receives technical support from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (BERD).

Fifteenth, digital inclusion for people with disabilities. This commitment focuses on drafting a national digital accessibility plan for persons with disabilities in Tunisia, by establishing a single reference framework in the form of technical standards to be applied in the development of public digital services and online platforms. The objective is to ensure that all segments of society, including persons with disabilities and the elderly, have inclusive access to public services, in line with the digital transformation agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This effort also seeks to improve Tunisia’s ranking in the Digital Accessibility Rights Evaluation Index, thereby enhancing its global competitiveness in digital accessibility.

Through this commitment, the government seeks to bridge the digital divide by ensuring that public portals, online services, and government platforms comply with robust international accessibility standards. This will expand the participation of persons with disabilities in accessing public services, reinforce transparency by ensuring equal opportunity, and promote social inclusion. The program is supported

through technical cooperation with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the implementation of open government in Tunisia since its accession to the OGP in 2014 has expanded considerably, yet continues to face significant challenges. The bibliometric analysis reveals three dominant clusters of research—fiscal transparency and access to information, public participation and democratic innovation, and institutional accountability and digital governance—that reflect the reform priorities of both government and civil society. Research trends further indicate a strong correlation with the country's post–Arab Spring political transformations, particularly in terms of consolidating transparency, participation, and accountability.

Nevertheless, the gap between normative commitments and practical implementation remains evident, driven by institutional fragmentation, political instability, and limited capacity within civil society. Tunisia must therefore reinforce the consistency of open data publication, promote more substantive citizen participation, and strengthen accountability through independent oversight bodies and integrated digital governance. These findings contribute not only to the academic literature on open government but also provide policy-relevant recommendations for advancing democratic governance in Tunisia and the broader MENA region.

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