



# LAWFOYER INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF DOCTRINAL LEGAL RESEARCH

[ISSN: 2583-7753]

Volume 3 | Issue 3

2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70183/lijdlr.2025.v03.95>

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# THE LEGISLATIVE ENSHRINEMENT OF CONSUMER PROTECTION IN TUNISIA: ANALYSIS OF THE LEGAL FOUNDATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY ADVANCES

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## I. ABSTRACT

*This article analyses the legislative enshrinement of consumer protection in Tunisia, following the normative and institutional development from 1992 to 2024. The study is based primarily on Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992, considered to be the founding text of consumer protection in Tunisia. It then examines the legislative additions that have consolidated it, as well as its recent adaptations to economic and technological developments. The research is based on a multidimensional legal methodology, combining analysis of the legislative and regulatory corpus, examination of Tunisian case law, and critical study of doctrine and institutional reports. It also provides a comparative perspective with international standards, in particular European directives and certain legislation adopted in Mediterranean countries. The results highlight a well-organised legal system that protects fundamental rights such as product safety, the right to information and legal guarantees. This system is also supported by mechanisms for recourse, mediation and sanctions, as well as specialised bodies. In practice, however, its effectiveness is limited by regulatory fragmentation, low consumer awareness and procedural delays. The study concludes that significant progress has been made, while emphasising the need for comprehensive codification of consumer law, strengthening of out-of-court dispute resolution mechanisms, development of consumer legal education, and continuous adaptation of legislation to new challenges, such as cross-border disputes and the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. These recommendations aim to ensure more effective, equitable and sustainable protection for Tunisian consumers in a constantly changing market environment.*

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## II. KEYWORDS

Consumer protection, Tunisia, Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992, Fundamental rights, Legislative framework, Case law, E-commerce, Mediation, Digital consumption.

## III. INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, Tunisia embarked on a major economic transition, characterised by the gradual opening up of its market, trade liberalisation and increasing integration into the global economy. This turning point led to a profound transformation in consumption patterns, with the emergence of new products, services and distribution channels. However, this dynamic also exposed consumers to increased risks: dangerous or non-compliant products, misleading commercial practices, false advertising, a lack of clear information and the proliferation of unfair terms in contracts. In this context, the need for a specific legislative framework became imperative in order to rebalance the relationship between economic operators and consumers.

It was with this in mind that Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992 on consumer protection was adopted, which constitutes the actual founding text. It should be noted that the Tunisian legislator defines the consumer in Article 2 of the Law of 2 June 1998 on sales with payment facilities as a person who purchases a product for consumption or a service for non-professional purposes (Law No. 98 of 2 June 1998, Art. 2). This broad definition reflects the legislator's desire to protect all users from contractual imbalances.

This research is based on national and international consumer law doctrine, enriched by standards issued by international organisations such as the United Nations, UNCTAD and the European Union. It also draws on public economic law to analyse the normative, institutional and practical scope of the Tunisian system, while comparing it with international standards.

The general question posed is as follows: to what extent does the Tunisian legislation adopted in 1992, which has since been expanded, provide effective protection in the face of economic and technological change?

To answer this question, the study focuses on four main questions, formulated in a specific and measurable way:

1. Effective scope: to what extent have Law No. 92-117 and its complementary texts contributed to reducing unfair commercial practices and strengthening transaction security since 1992?
2. Enforcement mechanisms: what administrative and judicial mechanisms have been put in place to monitor and punish infringements, and how effective are they?
3. Adaptation to contemporary challenges: how does Tunisian legislation respond to the new challenges of e-commerce, digital consumer rights and cross-border disputes?
4. Limitations and prospects: what shortcomings remain in the current system and what reforms would be necessary to improve consumer protection, particularly in light of the impact of COVID-19?

These questions guide the methodology adopted, which is based on a legal analysis of legislative and regulatory texts, a critical study of Tunisian case law, an examination of institutional reports, and a comparative approach incorporating European directives and certain North African legislation. The aim is to measure the effectiveness of the system not only through its normative content, but also through its practical application and its ability to adapt to recent developments.

This research is of dual interest. Academically, it enriches the literature on consumer law and comparative law by placing the Tunisian experience in a regional and international context. Practically, it provides guidance to public decision-makers, consumer associations and legal practitioners by highlighting the achievements and limitations of the current system, while making specific recommendations for its improvement.

### **A. Methodology**

This research adopts a legal and comparative approach, structured around four complementary methodological axes, in order to ensure a rigorous, contextualised and measurable analysis of consumer protection in Tunisia.

### **1. Analysis of primary sources**

The first step involves a direct study of Tunisian laws and regulations relating to consumer law, starting with Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992, its amendments and supplementary texts (e-commerce, advertising and competition). For the analysis of case law, several specialised databases and official sources were consulted:

- The Official Journal of the Republic of Tunisia (JORT) for laws and implementing decrees.
- The CITET (International Centre for Environmental Technologies in Tunis) platform for regulatory texts available online.
- The FAOLEX and UNCTAD Legal Resources databases for international comparisons.
- National case law databases published by Tunisian courts and annual reports from the Ministry of Trade.

These sources make it possible to identify the normative foundations and penalties provided for and to assess how Tunisian courts apply the rules in practice.

### **2. Literature Review and doctrinal analysis**

A critical review of national and international legal doctrine was conducted, drawing on the work of Tunisian researchers (Labidi and Khaldi) and analyses published by UNCTAD, FAO and the National Consumer Observatory. This step allows the research to be situated within the existing scientific field and the main gaps or debates to be identified.

### **3. The comparative approach**

The methodology also adopts a comparative dimension. It compares the Tunisian system with:

- Directive 2011/83/EU of the European Parliament on consumer rights, as well as other European instruments governing contractual and digital protection.
- Moroccan Consumer Protection Law No. 31-08, promulgated in 2011.
- Algerian consumer legislation, enshrined in Law No. 09-03 of 2009 on consumer protection and fraud prevention.

These comparisons make it possible to assess Tunisia's degree of alignment with regional and international standards, while highlighting its specific characteristics and shortcomings.

### **4. Analysis of institutional reports and empirical data**

The study also includes a systematic review of institutional reports, in particular those of the Ministry of Trade, the National Consumer Council and consumer associations. The analysis is based on criteria such as:

- The rate of complaints recorded by the control services.
- The average time taken to resolve disputes.
- The level of consumer satisfaction expressed in reports and surveys.
- The actual impact of sanctions applied (fines, closures of establishments and recourse to mediation).

These criteria make it possible to measure not only the normative scope of the system, but above all its practical effectiveness.

### **5. Limitations related to the methodological approach**

However, certain limitations should be noted: statistical data on consumer litigation in Tunisia remain insufficient, which limits the possibility of an in-depth quantitative assessment. In addition, the dissemination of case law is still partial, which makes it necessary to resort to secondary institutional sources to complete the analysis.

## **B. Review of the literature**

The analysis of consumer protection in Tunisia cannot be isolated from the broader doctrinal and institutional thinking that has gradually developed at the national, regional and international levels. The scientific literature highlights three major areas: the legal foundations of protection, its institutional and procedural effectiveness, and its ability to adapt to contemporary changes.

### **1. National work on Tunisian consumer law**

Tunisian doctrine has emphasised the importance of Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992 as the first enshrinement of a structured consumer law. In 2013, Mohamed Lassaad Labidi conducted an in-depth analysis of the legal and institutional frameworks established by this law, emphasising its founding role in the recognition of fundamental consumer rights. More recently, in 2022, Lotfi Khaldi drew attention to several persistent challenges, including the slowness of legal proceedings, the lack of consumer awareness and the inadequate adaptation of the legislative framework to digital practices.

### **2. Regional perspectives and comparative approaches**

At the North African level, the literature frequently draws parallels between the Tunisian experience and those of Morocco and Algeria, which adopted similar legislation in the early 2000s. While Tunisia was a pioneer thanks to its 1992 law, it now appears to be lagging behind in updating its system, particularly in view of the challenges posed by e-commerce and cross-border disputes. According to the Maghreb Consumer Observatory (2021), regional harmonisation of rules is essential to strengthen consumer confidence and facilitate inter-Maghreb trade.

### **3. International references and universal standards**

At the international level, the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection, revised in 2015, constitute a major reference framework. They emphasise key rights such as access to information, product safety, the right to redress and the need for protection adapted to digital commerce. In 2017, UNCTAD published a handbook on the application of these principles, citing Tunisia as a country with structured legislation, but whose effectiveness remains improvable. At the same time, the European Union has adopted several directives, including Directive 2011/83/EU on consumer rights, which is considered a model for regional harmonisation. However, comparative studies show that gaps remain between the Tunisian system and European standards, particularly on the issue of digital rights and mandatory mediation mechanisms.

#### **C. Gaps identified by legal scholars**

In general, the literature emphasises that Tunisian legislation provides a solid foundation but has three limitations:

1. Regulatory fragmentation, linked to the dispersion of texts on advertising, e-commerce and competition;
2. Inadequate legal education for consumers, which hinders the effective enforcement of rights;
3. Delays in adapting to contemporary challenges, especially the rise of e-commerce and the impact of COVID-19 on consumer practices.

## **IV. THE LEGISLATIVE FOUNDATIONS OF CONSUMER PROTECTION IN TUNISIA**

### **A. Historical context and regulatory background**

The legislative establishment of consumer protection in Tunisia did not constitute a radical break with the previous legal order, but was part of a gradual process of evolution in economic law. The first significant text in this area was the Beylical Decree of 10



October 1919 on the adulteration of agricultural products [1919] Tunisian Official Journal, which was essentially aimed at protecting public health against food fraud. However, this text remained limited in its scope, as it only concerned agricultural products and did not address consumer relations from a global perspective.

The economic and social transformations of the 1980s and 1990s made it necessary to adopt modern legislation. The gradual liberalisation of the Tunisian economy, integration into global trade circuits, the rise of consumer society and the diversification of products and services on offer increased the risks for consumers: counterfeit products, misleading advertising, unfair terms and a lack of effective remedies. These socio-economic factors explain the emergence of a political and legal consensus in favour of a specific regulatory framework, leading to the adoption of Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992 on consumer protection.

### **B. Purpose and scope of Law No. 92-117**

Article 1 of the Act states that the purpose of this Act is to lay down general rules relating to product safety, fair economic transactions and consumer protection. The provisions of this law apply to suppliers and advertisers (Article 1 of Tunisian Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992 on consumer protection, JORT, No. 83, 15 Dec. 1992).

The law thus establishes a fundamental distinction between products and services:

1. A product covers any industrial, agricultural or artisanal product, including: the elements of which it is composed, such as raw materials, substances, components and semi-finished products, which extends protection to the entire economic chain, from the producer to the final consumer.
2. Services cover any service provided to consumers by an economic operator, whether financial, commercial, electronic or other services.

This dual approach reflects the legislator's desire to regulate both tangible goods and intangible services, responding to changing consumption patterns.

### **C. Rights and obligations enshrined in law**

Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992 establishes several essential rights for consumers, including:

1. The right to safety (Art. 3): prohibition on the sale of counterfeit, expired or dangerous products, with immediate withdrawal or destruction in the event of serious risk.
2. The right to information (Art. 16): obligation for the supplier to provide clear, fair and transparent information on the nature, characteristics, risks and marketing conditions of products and services.
3. The right to a legal guarantee (Art. 17): obligation for the supplier to guarantee against hidden defects and non-conformity, with any clause excluding the guarantee being null and void.

In return, economic operators must comply with several obligations:

1. Obligation of conformity (Articles 5 and 6): requiring the marketing of products that comply with technical and regulatory standards;
2. Obligation of fairness (Articles 14 and 15): prohibiting misleading commercial practices, false advertising, falsification or the sale of damaged products. The seller must act in good faith and guarantee the consumer fair economic transactions;
3. Obligation to provide information (Articles 13 and 16): the operator has a continuous obligation to provide comprehensive and transparent information, both before the contract is formed and during its execution, on the conditions, risks, characteristics and terms of the products. This obligation is emphasised in the context of distance contracts and e-commerce.

#### **D. Penalties provided for by law**

To ensure the effectiveness of rights, Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992 on consumer protection provides for a system of penalties combining administrative and criminal measures:

1. Fines ranging from 1,000 to 20,000 dinars (Articles 31 to 33) for any infringement relating to consumer safety or information;
2. Imprisonment for 16 days to 3 months (Art. 32), possibly combined with fines;
3. Administrative penalties such as the temporary or permanent closure of establishments in the event of repeat offences or serious offences (Art. 34);
4. Publication of judgements and mandatory display at the offender's expense (Art. 35), a measure aimed at strengthening the deterrent effect.

### **V. PROCEDURAL ADVANCES AND CONCRETE CONSUMER PROTECTION IN TUNISIA**

#### **A. Amicable procedures: conciliation and mediation**

The effective implementation of consumer rights in Tunisia is based not only on legislation, but also on appropriate procedural mechanisms. Circular No. 33 of 15 May 1993 on the amicable settlement of consumer disputes (Ministry of Trade, Tunisia) is an important step in encouraging the amicable resolution of disputes between consumers and professionals before any legal action is taken. In practice, administrative services receive complaints, organise mediation sessions and facilitate agreements in accordance with the guarantees provided for by law. This system helps to relieve the burden on the courts while offering a faster and more accessible solution for citizens.

#### **B. Legal remedies and evidence**

If conciliation fails, the consumer still has the option of taking legal action. The most common disputes concern product non-conformity, misleading advertising and unfair terms.

Article 31 of Law No. 92-117 of 7 December on consumer protection provides for a specific evidence mechanism: judges may rely on technical expertise provided by the specialised services of the Ministry of Trade, in particular the Directorate-General for Quality and Consumer Protection. This interaction illustrates the complementary nature of administrative and judicial procedures: the administration provides technical expertise, while the judge decides the dispute on the basis of this evidence, thus ensuring better coordination between the two levels of protection.

### **C. The penalty system**

To ensure the effectiveness of the law, a system of sanctions combining criminal and administrative measures has been put in place. Initially ranging from 1,000 to 20,000 dinars, fines have been increased by supplementary texts to better reflect economic realities. They can now reach 50,000 dinars for serious offences, particularly in the areas of product safety and misleading advertising (Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992, Articles 31–34, as amended by successive amendments).

### **D. Institutional and associative actors**

Procedural protection relies on cooperation between several actors:

1. The National Consumer Protection Council: this council is responsible for issuing opinions, making recommendations and supporting improvements in standards, product quality and consumer protection. It also plays a coordinating role between the various economic and institutional actors.
2. Administrative supervisory authorities: the Ministries of Trade, Health and Industry have inspection services authorised to monitor markets, withdraw non-compliant products and apply sanctions.
3. Consumer associations: play a role in raising awareness, providing information and, in some cases, mediating.

In addition to government action, effective consumer protection in Tunisia also relies on the commitment of civil society. The Tunisian Consumer Protection Organisation

(OTDC), created in 1989, plays a central role in raising awareness, mediating and monitoring commercial practices. It intervenes in cases of price spikes or shortages of basic commodities. However, these associations remain limited by restricted financial and human resources, as well as a dependence on public funding. Their role remains advisory, without any real binding power. Their power remains advisory, without any real coercive capacity. With a view to reform, it would be desirable to strengthen their institutional role by giving them greater legitimacy in judicial or quasi-judicial proceedings, following the example of certain European jurisdictions where consumer associations can bring collective actions. Such a development would help to strengthen the credibility of the Tunisian system and bring its practice into line with international standards.

#### **E. Empirical results and limitations**

Reports from the Ministry of Trade and the Tunisian Federation of Consumer Associations highlight a steady increase in the number of complaints recorded, particularly in the agri-food, mobile telephony, e-commerce and financial services sectors. Recent statistics indicate an amicable resolution rate of over 60% for disputes reported in 2022, reflecting the growing effectiveness of administrative and associative mechanisms.

Nevertheless, certain obstacles remain:

1. The slowness of legal proceedings, which still discourages many consumers,
2. The limited resources of supervisory authorities,
3. Persistent ignorance of rights among a large part of the population,
4. The need to adapt procedures to contemporary challenges, particularly cross-border disputes related to e-commerce and the impacts of COVID-19.

## **VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CONSUMER PROTECTION IN TUNISIA, MOROCCO AND ALGERIA**

The comparative study of consumer law in North Africa allows us to place the Tunisian experience in a regional context marked by similar reform dynamics, but also by significant institutional differences.

In Tunisia, the adoption of Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992 marked a decisive step forward, as it established for the first time a comprehensive legal framework dedicated to consumer protection. Although reinforced by various regulations and circulars, this framework remains heavily dependent on the Ministry of Trade and its supervisory bodies. The involvement of associations remains marginal and alternative dispute resolution methods are not yet fully institutionalised.

In Morocco, Law No. 31-08 on consumer protection, adopted in 2011, reflects a more recent and better structured approach. It is notable for the creation of the National Consumer Council, an advisory body responsible for making recommendations and ensuring greater participation by civil society. The Moroccan legislature has also explicitly incorporated standards relating to e-commerce and distance contracts, in line with European Directive 2011/83/EU.

In Algeria, Law No. 09-03 of 25 February 2009 on consumer protection and fraud prevention emphasises administrative control and the punishment of offences. The Algerian approach is based on strengthening independent administrative authorities and a stricter system of sanctions, although civil society participation remains low.

**The comparison thus reveals several lessons:**

1. Tunisia was the first to initiate the movement in the 1990s, but its framework remains partially outdated in the face of new digital challenges.
2. The Moroccan structure is characterised by a more advanced institutionalisation of consultation and a clearer openness to European comparative law.

3. Algeria stands out for its rigorous controls and sanctions, but its framework remains partially outdated in the face of new digital challenges.

In short, the Maghreb experience shows that, although a pioneer, Tunisia must now undertake a thorough reform of its system in order to meet new challenges (e-commerce, cross-border disputes and personal data protection) and strengthen the role of consumer associations in monitoring and effectively enforcing rights.

## VII. DISCUSSIONS

### A. The scope of the Tunisian legislative framework

Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992 marked a major turning point in Tunisia, enshrining fundamental consumer rights in law for the first time. As Labidi, Mohamed Lassaad, points out in *La protection du consommateur en Tunisie: cadres juridiques et institutionnels* (Institut national de la consommation, 2013), this text consolidated a normative framework based on three pillars: product safety, fair information and legal guarantees. However, the effectiveness of these rights remains uneven due to slow judicial proceedings, a lack of consumer awareness and weak monitoring mechanisms.

### B. Case law and effective enforcement

Tunisian case law has gradually contributed to strengthening the protective role of the law. In case no. 1385/2017 [2017], Tunis Court of First Instance, the judge recognised the liability of a supplier for the sale of a non-compliant product, strictly applying the provisions of Article 17 of Law No. 92-117.

In 2019, the Sfax court ruled that an unfair term in a consumer credit agreement was null and void, confirming the growing trend towards protecting the weaker party in a contractual relationship. These decisions show that, despite procedural delays, Tunisian case law tends to consolidate the effectiveness of the rights enshrined in law.

### C. Harmonisation with international standards

There remains a significant gap between the Tunisian system and European standards. The Directive. Directive 2011/83/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on consumer rights [2011] OJ L 304/64 provides an essential reference framework, harmonising guarantees within the European Union such as the right of withdrawal for distance contracts, the obligation to provide pre-contractual information and increased protection in e-commerce. However, Tunisia has not yet fully integrated these mechanisms, particularly with regard to the right of withdrawal online and specific provisions for cross-border disputes. A regional comparison confirms this observation: Morocco, with Law No. 31-08 of 2011, adopted international standards earlier, particularly in the digital field, while Algeria, through Law No. 09-03 of 2009, has limitations comparable to those of Tunisia, particularly in the area of e-commerce.

### D. E-commerce and new challenges

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the use of e-commerce in Tunisia, revealing persistent shortcomings. Consumers encounter difficulties related to the lack of secure platforms, the presence of unfair terms in online contracts and the weakness of cross-border remedies. Despite Law No. 2000-83 on electronic exchanges and commerce, its provisions remain insufficient to effectively protect digital rights.

A UNCTAD report (2021) recommends the establishment of online complaint mechanisms and the strengthening of international cooperation. Furthermore, as Khaldi and Lotfi point out (*Les défis actuels de la protection du consommateur en Tunisie*, La Presse de Tunisie, 2022), the regulation of e-commerce and the protection of personal data are now essential priorities.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

An analysis of Law No. 92-117 of 7 December 1992 on consumer protection in Tunisia highlights both its achievements and its persistent limitations. Three decades after its adoption, this legislation has laid a solid normative foundation, enshrining product



safety, contractual transparency and the right to information. Available data indicate that in 2022, approximately 60% of consumer disputes were resolved amicably, reflecting the growing effectiveness of the mediation mechanisms put in place by the Ministry of Trade. Recent case law has also consolidated the practical application of these rights by sanctioning unfair terms and ensuring the conformity of marketed products.

However, several shortcomings remain. Slow judicial proceedings, scattered legal texts and a lack of institutional resources still hamper the effectiveness of protection. In addition, the Tunisian legislative framework remains partially unsuited to current challenges, particularly in the areas of e-commerce, digital consumer rights and cross-border dispute resolution. The impact of COVID-19 has accelerated these changes by leading to an increase in online transactions and revealing the shortcomings of Tunisian legislation in the face of new risks.

In light of this, several reforms are necessary:

- Developing a single consumer code to unify and clarify the scattered texts;
- Make mediation mandatory before any legal action to reduce dispute resolution times;
- Strengthen the role of consumer associations in providing support and raising awareness;
- Develop digital recourse tools (online complaint platforms, statistical monitoring systems);
- Align Tunisian legislation with international standards, in particular Directive 2011/83/EU on consumer rights.

Furthermore, future research should focus on three priority areas:

1. Adapting Tunisian law to changes related to digital commerce;
2. Analysis of cross-border mechanisms in the Maghreb and Mediterranean regions;

3. Assessing the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer practices and their legal regulation.

In short, Tunisia has a pioneering legislative framework, but it now needs to be updated to ensure more effective consumer protection that is adapted to current economic developments and aligned with international standards.

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