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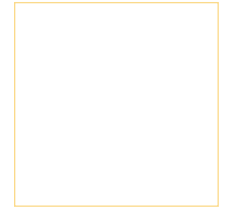
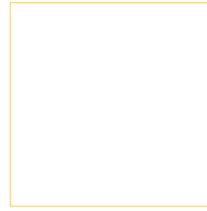
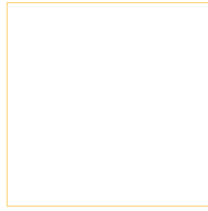
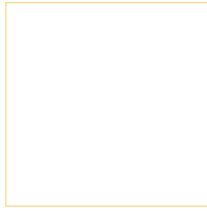
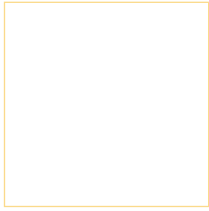
Middle
East
Directions

Tunisia: A conservative revolution?

Nadia Marzouki and Hamza Meddeb

Five years have passed since Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation and Ben Ali's departure, and ambivalence prevails in the representations and perceptions of Tunisia. While the international community celebrates Tunisia as the Arab world's sole example of a successful transition towards democracy, Tunisian citizens are disillusioned with the unfinished democratisation process, sapped by terrorism, unemployment and unrelenting corruption. Putting aside the oversimplistic categories of success or failure, this paper offers a review of the social and political changes that have been achieved since 2011. It contextualises historical developments that have thrown Tunisia into turmoil since the "Arab Spring", in order to give a more accurate picture of specifically the Tunisian trajectory.

It also aims to examine the processes at play behind the redistribution of political power, and the renegotiation of cultural and religious norms, which have been on-going since 2011. The Tunisian revolutionary process is ambiguous, which invites us to take the opposite view of transitology; an approach marked by a unilinear and teleological conception of democratisation processes. This view



began to re-emerge after the “Arab Spring”. The 2011 revolution was undoubtedly ground-breaking as it made unprecedented social and political reorganisations possible. However, it is crucial to understand the enduring influence of structures inherited from the past.

The conference organised by Nadia Marzouki, Hamza Meddeb and Olivier Roy at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies in Florence on 30-31 May 2016 attempted to answer the following questions: to what extent is the Tunisian democratic transition making progress at the expense of the revolutionary demands for dignity and social justice? Is the process best described as a conservative revolution or a counter-revolutionary democracy? Beyond the ‘clean slate’ or the ‘transformation’ rhetoric, could we consider the changes introduced since the 2011 protests as the mere results of internal mutations?

Revolution or “Refo-lution”?

Can the unease experienced in Tunisia in 2011 be considered a revolution or is it what Asef Bayat termed “Refo-lution”? Bayat defines revolution as a “rapid state transformation driven by popular support”. According to this definition, it cannot be said that Tunisia has truly experienced a revolution: state institutions have not been altered, the fabric of the “deep state” (corruption networks, police, bureaucracy, business elites) is still in place, and the new judicial organisations (constitutional court, transitional justice) are yet to be established. In fact, one of the unique peculiarities of the Tunisian revolutionary process is an attachment to state continuity, as shown early on when a majority of politicians resumed reformism as the most legitimate form of politics. This attachment has been a characteristic of Tunisia throughout the course of its history: from the Beylik of Tunis, to the national state after the Independence, all the way to the neoliberal era introduced by the Ben Ali’s regime.

Five years later, the Tunisian state appears both extremely resilient - especially compared to other Arab states that have embarked on revolutionary journeys - and decaying. In fact, factors that all pose substantial challenges to the ideal of state continuity include the expansion of the informal economy and of corruption; the weakening of borders; the proliferation of protest movements,

demonstrations, sit-ins; the take-over of spaces; and strikes. A question remains: how can the singularity of the Tunisian revolution be apprehended? Perhaps it is as a slow and chaotic process of state transformation in which past structures and memories are renegotiated rather than eradicated.

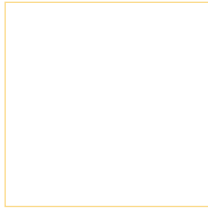
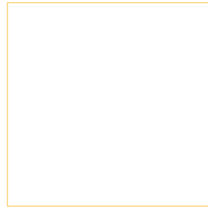
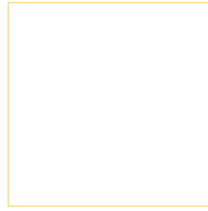
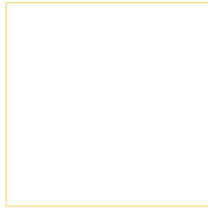
How to compare revolutions?

Despite numerous comparative studies of the different Arab Uprisings, few thoughts have been spared for the conditions of these comparisons. According to Paul Veyne, the point of a comparison is not to determine success or failure, but rather to distinguish and individualise. Following Deleuze, Jean-François Bayart suggested developing the concept of the event, rather than its “essence”. But, in order to grasp the uniqueness of the Tunisian revolution, it is essential to thoroughly understand how it builds into heterogeneous temporalities and memories.

The Tunisian revolution stands halfway between a passive revolution without people (a term coined by Gramsci in reference to the 1879 revolt in Naples) and a conservative restoration. The 2011 upheavals took place in the absence of revolutionary elite that is comparable to the Iranian or the Maoist elites. It was in fact the conservative party, Ennahda, that played a key role in the transition. Could the inclusion of Ennahda’s conservatives help democratisation (Guy Hermet), or instead lead to the reinforcement of authoritarianism or an illiberal form of democracy via the mutual assimilation of former Destourian and Islamist elites?

Is political Islam doomed to fail?

During its 10th Congress in May 2016, Ennahda announced it would drop its “Islamist” label in favor of “Muslim democrats”. Its leader, Rashed Ghannouchi, justifies this evolution in relation to the party leaving the opposition ranks and entering the government. In his view, reference to Islam was necessary when the party, which was unauthorised under Ben Ali’s regime, only existed as a force opposing the dictatorship, in prisons, in secrecy or in exile. After joining and partaking in political life after 2011, reference to Islam for opposition purposes



became redundant. For Ghannouchi, the challenge is no longer to achieve democracy, but instead to reach economic development and stability.

This decision confirms a hypothesis formulated in 1992 by Oliver Roy in *The Failure of Political Islam*, which stated that once in power, Islamist parties would inevitably drop all references to Sharia law or the idea of a religious state. This non-religious character is also a singularity of the Tunisian revolution, even if the non-revolutionary democratic Islamist party played an essential part in the democratic transition. This very distinction sets Tunisia apart from the deeply religious Iranian revolution that had been organised by revolutionary, non-democratic Islamists.

The Tunisian case confirms two arguments developed by Olivier Roy regarding the failure of political Islam and the irrelevance of theological bias, according to which secularisation derives from a reform of theology. It also raises questions vis-à-vis the evolution of the religious field. In Tunisia, setting up kind of Muslim autonomous clerics (via the unionisation of Imams) requires both the State and Ennahda to abandon their monopoly over the religious field. But even if democrat Imams were to institutionalise or gain state employee status, it would not necessarily guarantee the pluralisation of the religious field.

The naturalisation of social and political inequalities

According to Béatrice Hibou, two conflicting conceptions of politics have emerged from the 2011 revolution. Inherited from colonial times, one centralising notion representing order, stable institutions and a prestigious state, disregards social matters as something that should be “managed”. Originating from local, daily and neighborhood concerns, an opposing conception coming to the foreground is that of issue-focused local actions (social movements of unemployed university graduates, debt and access to electricity...). In fact, the structural divide around which the Tunisian post-revolution social and political life is organising itself is not an ideological religious-secular split. It derives instead from a separation based on class and status that pits marginalised populations against the establishment.

It is therefore essential to revisit the categories used to analyse the fights against social and political inequalities since words, labels and classifications are key means of government. How do inequalities continue to be justified years after a revolution erupted for the very sake of dignity and social justice? Is democracy a form of government that contributes to legitimising social injustice?

Similarly to events under Ben Ali, the naturalisation of these inequalities is today one of the most effective ways for injustice to be legitimised. Since 2011, successive governments’ discourses on youth unemployment are enlightening. The “young” are regarded solely as a demographic category, an “age group”. Consequently, connecting economic and social exclusion to economic policies, based on an unequal distribution of resources, is deemed unnecessary since it appears as an unavoidable feature of belonging to a specific demographic. Therefore, this naturalising approach legitimises the different governments’ promotion of a wait-and-see policy, which is based on the illusion that youth unemployment is bound to disband by itself.

The tenants of transitology are fond of a linear and happy vision of time, viewed as a march of progress leading to more public liberties. However, what Tunisians are experiencing in real time falls short of this irenic vision. Instead, time is mainly perceived as a waiting period rather than progress or a plan. Waiting, for jobless people (with or without university education) living in the center and Southern regions of Tunisia or the suburbs of Tunis, refers to the feeling of boredom and the impossibility of projecting oneself towards the future. The unemployed from Redeyef, a city located in the Gafsa Governorate in Southeast Tunisia, complain that every day is a “copy-paste” from the day before¹. The political subjectivities that are taking shape while time is suspended cannot be compared to the mythical autonomous revolutionary actors who are in full control of their destiny, but neither can they be reduced to passive and sleepy consciences. Instead, it is important to understand the relationship between these forms of subjectivity and temporality to fully comprehend what makes this revolutionary process so singular, beyond the opposition between resistance and passivity.

1. Stefano Pontiggia, « Everyday is a copy-paste : waithood among Tunisian men », AllegraLab, 16 April 2016.



Waiting does not only mean boredom or inaction. It is paradoxically a form of action that jobless people in both the interior regions and the state engage in. These are not coordinated actions, but rather occasional operations that use waiting, uncertainty and a “battle of wills” against State-companies and administrations to be given jobs. Making people wait by managing the delay and the uncertainty (offering occasional assistance or favors) is also the main strategy used by the Governorates in lieu of a development policy. Waiting has become “the main feature of specific form of governmentality that manages the life of people excluded from the formal market”².

Is art necessarily revolutionary?

Jocelyne Dakhliya noticed that questions regarding art as a universal and protest language re-emerged during the Tunisian revolution. Many prominent intellectuals (Badiou, Zizek) have been quick to express their enthusiasm for this new leaderless model of revolution, but Tunisian artists, like every Tunisian, have been caught unaware by the course of events. Against the backdrop of the most established artistic milieus keeping quiet about Ben Ali’s wrongdoings, artists who have come into view since 2011 are indeed enjoying new opportunities created by the sudden liberation of public space, but not necessarily as self-proclaimed revolutionary artists. Yet conventional wisdom often mistakes contemporary art for an epitome of revolutionary language. Today, disproportionate expectations are weighing on contemporary art to express what social sciences are failing to vocalise. Is this a form of artistic populism or an over-romanticised imagery of revolution? Many Tunisian artists once close to the regime or at least above partisan politics, are hard-pressed by an international injunction to express the revolution. “Women” and the “young” are the chosen targets of these expectations, themselves based on a myth: art as emancipation. And yet, these requests for political and revolutionary art run counter to the sensitivities that Tunisian artists have expressed since 2011, which focused instead on the individual and on bodies.

The expected transformation of the artistic scene into a secondary political scene is also bringing into light the growing gap between a fondness for so-called emancipative art, and the actual indifference surrounding social and political realities. A good illustration of this gap is the arrest of artists for drawing graffiti supporting “zwawla” (the underprivileged) on the walls of Gabes. Gabes’ underprivileged did not count for much in the sway of public opinion that helped mobilise support for the graffiti artists. This further highlights the contrast between the world’s enthusiasm for a society viewed as “committed to making progress”, and the lack of social mobility for the most marginalised part of the Tunisian youth.

Tunisian democracy: A model or a threat for the region?

Is Tunisia a model or an exception? Can it create a virtuous circle in the region? Or, is the ongoing democratisation process at risk of dwindling because of the spread of violence and instability across the region? Karim Emile Bitar showed that even if the Tunisian revolution has proven the classic domino theory wrong, a phenomenon of contagion has occurred with regard to representations. It symbolises an epistemological break for Arab people. Although the Arab world is going through various stages of counterrevolution and restoration, the revolution has left lasting impacts. Tunisia is not protected from all that, from the disruption experienced across the region. First came the spread of proxy warfare. Northern Africa is now affected by wars by proxy as showed in the Libyan conflict. Then followed the international demands for public order, and for the establishment of a savior, much like what happened in Egypt and in Russia, which materialised in Tunisia with the election of Beji Caid Essebsi, perceived by a large part of the public opinion somewhat of a Cincinnatus. In the end, instability keeps increasing, while the deep roots of insecurity keep being ignored, because of the disregard for the connections between security and economics.

2. Hamza Meddeb, *L'attente comme mode de gouvernement en Tunisie*, in I. Bono, B. Hibou, H. Meddeb, M. Tozy, *L'État d'injustice au Maghreb. Maroc et Tunisie*, Paris : Karthala, 2015.

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Middle East Directions

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