



Essays on the Revolution in Tunisia

Kasper Ly Netterstrøm

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to
obtaining the degree of Doctor of Political and Social Sciences
of the European University Institute

Florence, July 10

European University Institute
Department of Political and Social Sciences

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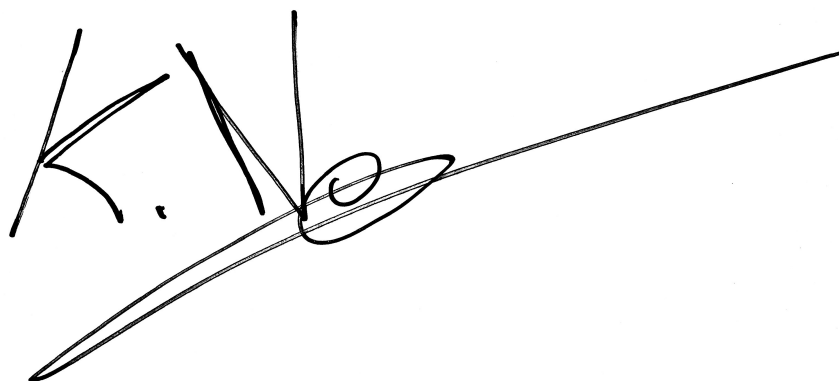
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I confirm that chapter four was jointly co-authored with Mr. Teije Hidde Donker and I contributed 50% of the work. The chapter has been published in Middle East Critique February 2017.

I confirm that chapter two draws upon an earlier article I published in Journal of Democracy in October 2015.

I confirm that chapter three draws upon an earlier article I published in The Middle East Journal in the summer 2016.

Signature and date: June 14 2017

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Ly Netterstrøm', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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Abstract

The Tunisian Revolution and constitutional process constitute the first successful indigenous democratization process in the Arab World. In this article based thesis the historic event is analysed and discussed in relation to the established theories of democratization. The thesis contains four different articles. The first focuses on why the Tunisian Islamists accepted the country's new constitution despite the fact that it contained principles that were in opposition to some of their previous Islamist beliefs. The second centres on the role of the Tunisian General Labor Union. It seeks to explain why the union could play such a crucial role in the revolution and constitutional process despite the fact that its leadership had close connections to the previous regime. The third article looks into how the Tunisian religious sphere changed as a result of the revolution. The fourth article tries to answer why the revolution came to be understood as a conflict between "Islamists" and "secularists" through an analysis of the conflict between the Islamists and the Tunisian General Labor Union. Finally, in the last chapter the state of comparative politics is discussed in relation to the conclusions of the different articles.

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1 Introduction to the Tunisian Revolution

The Tunisian Revolution was a watershed event in world history. Tunisia is not a huge country and its geopolitical influence is limited, but its revolution set about a series of uprisings throughout the Arab World that changed the region forever. Additionally, the constitutional process that followed in Tunisia established a democratic political system. Although fragile and young, it still is a model for the wider Middle East and to this day the only functioning Arab democracy. This thesis will dig into the transformation that has occurred in Tunisia and explain the most important elements of this revolution.

The present thesis is an article based thesis. It is made up of four different articles that each has its own contribution. The thesis therefore does not have the structure of a classic monograph with a theory chapter, methods chapter, analysis and so forth. Each article is a study of its own. However, the four articles all address elements of the Tunisian Revolution and constitutional process, and the process of democratization is the overall theme of the dissertation. In this first chapter, I will therefore discuss the Tunisian Revolution in relation to the established theories of democratization.

The second chapter is made up of the article “The Islamists’ Compromise in Tunisia” originally published in the fall issue of *Journal of Democracy* 2015.¹ The article puts the compromises made by the Islamist Ennahda party in the constitutional process into perspective and argues that the existing literature on Islamist parties must be revised. The article has been slightly updated to take into account Ennahda’s congress in 2016. The third chapter is the article “The Tunisian General Labor Union and the Advent of Democracy”, which has been published by *The Middle East Journal* in the summer 2016.² The article focuses on the important role played by the General Tunisian Labor Union in the revolution and constitutional process. Theoretically, the article questions the conceptualisation and assumptions of the literature on civil society and social movements. The fourth chapter describes how the state-religion relationship changed

¹ Kasper Ly Netterstrøm, "The Islamists' Compromise in Tunisia," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (2015).

² Kasper Ly Netterstrøm, "The Tunisian General Labor Union and the Advent of Democracy," *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 3 (2016).

throughout the revolution's different phases. The paper has been published by the journal *Middle East Critique*. The fifth chapter is constituted by the article "The Islamist and Secularist Divide: the Case of the Conflict Between Ennahda and UGTT". This unpublished work analyses the reasons why the revolution and constitutional process became an ideological clash between secularism and Islamism. The sixth and last chapter will provide a general conclusion to all the four articles. Instead of focusing on a specific element of Tunisia's revolution, as it is done in the four articles, the final chapter tries to answer the question why the social sciences had difficulty predicting and analysing the Tunisian Revolution, and what the field can learn from this experience.

1.1 Origins and Development of the Revolution

The riot that broke out the 17th December 2010 was not the first in Tunisia and the mechanisms that fuelled the riot can be traced back at least a decade. The regime Ben Ali put in place in the early 90's was not built purely on repression. First of all, Ben Ali's party, *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (RCD) had a social base among large segments of the population. The continuation of Bourguiba's peculiar mix of nationalism, directed market economy and secularism *à la tunisienne* (see section 4.2.2) remained a popular political platform. Second, in the 1990's the Algerian Civil War, which opposed the military and Islamists, loomed large in the minds of Tunisians and gave the regime the possibility to gain legitimacy from cracking down on Islamists and presenting itself as the bulwark against an "Algerian scenario" on Tunisian soil. Third, the economic growth that Tunisia saw throughout the 90's and early 00's were seen as the fruits of the regime's firm hand and liberal economic reforms. Incomes grew and the middle class could enjoy relatively good life quality, provided that they refrained from expressing any political opinions. Fourth, given Ben Ali's background in the security services, the regime had initially a strong control of the country's security apparatus, especially the police forces. It ensured that any opposition was always eliminated at the earliest stages before it even came close to posing a threat to the regime. Tunisia was in that sense a liberal authoritarian state *par excellence*.³

³ See Béatrice Hibou, *The force of obedience : the political economy of repression in Tunisia* (Cambridge; Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2011).

1.1.1 The Erosion of Ben Ali's Regime

Ben Ali's regime was gradually undermined as the years of dictatorship went on. First, the RCD became increasingly an empty shell, which sole project was to keep the president in power and provide benefits for those in his inner circles. The social base that in Bourguiba's days had represented large parts of the population slowly but steadily disappeared.⁴ Second, the security argument gradually lost its value as the Algerian Civil War embedded out and the threat from an Islamist insurgency seemed more distant. Third, the Tunisian economy was hit hard by the global recession in 2008. Meanwhile, the clientelism of the presidential family became increasingly brutal and extreme, which scared off foreign investments. The most important consequences of this was an endemic unemployment, especially among the young – and politically conscious – university graduates. Fourth, Ben Ali relied over the years increasingly on the presidential guard, a small elite unit of about 5.000 men, for his security. This regiment was given extensive benefits, which produced distain among the rest of the police forces. The armed forces were already been marginalised in Bourguiba's era, but became even more so under Ben Ali. He starved the military financially causing distress and animosity among the officer corps.⁵

To sum up, throughout Ben Ali's years in power the input legitimacy that the RCD provided eroded and simultaneously the most important sources of output legitimacy, economic growth and the provision of security, disappeared. Meanwhile, the regime did not manage to hold on to the strong control of the security apparatus. At the outbreak of the revolution the regime therefore was in an extremely weak position.⁶ It is not for nothing that the *Wikileaks cables* also testify that the American officials in the country did consider the regime to be quite weak.⁷

⁴ *Soulèvements populaires en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient (IV): La voie tunisienne* (Bruxelles: International Crisis Group, 2011), 9.

⁵ Hicham Bou Nassif, "A Military Besieged : The Armed Forces, the Police and the Party in Bin Ali's Tunisia, 1987-2011," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 1 (2015): 73.

⁶ Vincent Geisser and Eric Gobe, "Des fissures dans la "Maison Tunisie"? : le régime de Ben Ali face aux mobilisations protestataires," *L'année du Maghreb L'année du Maghreb*, (2007).

⁷ U.S. State Department, 2008. "Troubled Tunisia: What should we do?," search.wikileaks.org.

However, it is not only these structural elements that played a part, there were clearly also important processual factors in play. First of all the uprising in the Gafsa mine district in south eastern Tunisia in 2008. Even though it did not receive much international media coverage, the Gafsa uprising had an enormous impact on the 2011 revolution. It was led by the local section of UGTT in the town of Redeyef, lasted several months and posed a serious threat to the regime. The police forces managed to encircle the riots and limit the information the rest of the country received from the area. By isolating the protest movement the regime could slowly strangle it. UGTT and other activists drew important lessons from this experience. It showed that the regime could be challenged, but that in order to succeed, the protests and the police's repression would have to be communicated to a wider audience. Only this way, would more people become engaged.⁸ Another important factor was the fact that the major Tunisian opposition parties had already back in 2005 met in exile and discussed the most controversial issues that had to be addressed in case Ben Ali's regime were to fall. The meetings, known as *collectif du 18 octobre*, also resulted in a memorandum of understanding between the parties.⁹

1.1.2 The Revolution Breaks Out

This brings us to the outbreak of the revolution itself. The classic media narrative starts with the poor and impoverished fruit seller, Mohamed Bouazzi that sets himself on fire in front of the local municipality in protest against the confiscation of his fruit wagon.¹⁰ This is true, but the important thing to note is the chain of events that follow. Bouazzi's self-immolation starts spontaneous local protests, because the frustration with economic conditions and the regime's corruption is shared by the entire town in Sidi Bouzid. Especially the young unemployed men. Local union activists provide assistance and organisation, they upload videos of the protests on the internet media and

⁸Amin Allal and Vincent Geisser, "Tunisie : "Révolution de jasmin" ou Intifada ?," *Mouvements : des idées et des luttes*, (2011). *Soulèvements populaires en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient (IV): La voie tunisienne*, 3.

⁹Wajdi Limam and Mathilde Zederman, "Les leçons du Mouvement tunisien du 18 octobre, de l'unité contre la dictature à la lutte pour la sauvegarde de la démocratie," *Huffington Post Maghreb*, 30 March 2016.

¹⁰Robert Worth F., "How a Single Match Can Ignite a Revolution," *The New York Times*, January 21st 2011. For a deeper discussion of the motivations behind his self-immolation see Banu Bargu, "Why Did Bouazizi Burn Himself? The Politics of Fate and Fatal Politics," *Constellations* 23, no. 1 (2016).

telephone local union leaders in the neighbouring towns with aim of making them start similar protests. The uprising therefore quickly spreads.¹¹

Within a few weeks the riots has spread from Sidi Bouzid to the neighbouring towns of Thala, Regueb, Menzel Bouzaine, and Kasserine.¹² Simultaneously, the leadership of UGTT also starts to tilt into the opposition camp under the pressure from the base (see section 3.5). The leadership gives green light to a series of regional general strikes that helps extent the riots to the big coastal cities. The 12th January a major strike is held in Sfax, which marks a turning point in the uprising. From then on the regime is no longer able to control the situation. Ben Ali tries with several TV-addresses to calm down the protesters, but his desperate appearances only give the impression that the regime is crumbling. In his last address he even switches to Tunisian dialect instead of Standard Arabic. On January 14th the general strike in Tunis spurs massive demonstrations and in the turmoil Ben Ali leaves the country. At no point throughout the revolution does the regime succeed in mounting an effective pro-regime demonstration. Tellingly, January 14 the general secretary of RCD, Mohammed Gheriani, organises a demonstration in favour of the regime. However, the demonstration is quickly outnumbered and the participants simply end up joining the anti-regime protesters and their “Ben Ali dégage” slogan.¹³

It is important to underline that no political actor expected Ben Ali to leave power so suddenly. The events that followed must therefore be understood in light of this general confusion. Nobody acted according to a plan, the country was in a political void, and everybody had to improvise. After Ben Ali’s departure, the premier minister Mohammed Ghannouchi took over as president after he live on television the night of 14 January reported Ben Ali’s flight. He made here reference to the constitution’s article 56, which states that the president can delegate his functions to the premier minister in case of absence. However, the constitutional council met the following day January 15 and declared that the vacancy was permanent. This meant that the chairman of the parliament, Fouad Mebazza, was to assume the presidency, as it is stipulated in the

¹¹Choukri Hmed, "Réseaux dormants, contingence et structures. Genèses de la révolution tunisienne," *Revue française de science politique* Vol. 62, no. 5 (2012).

¹²Yasmine Ryan, "The Massacre Behind the Revolution," *Al Jazeera* 2011.

¹³ *Soulèvements populaires en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient (IV): La voie tunisienne*, 9.

constitution's article 57.¹⁴ A characteristic element of Tunisia's revolution was, thus, that already from its first moments the political actors wanted to remain within a constitutional order and conduct the changes according to legalistic principles.

The next months following Ben Ali's exile were characterized by a struggle between the remnants of the regime and the continued popular protests. A key debate was here whether to organise swift presidential elections or to change the entire system before democratic elections could take place. This was not only a struggle between regime and opposition. Ahmed Najib Chebbi, a long time dissident, favoured swift elections, because he stood to benefit from it, whereas some politicians that enjoyed close connections with the regime tilted into the maximalist camp in order to boost their oppositional credentials.¹⁵

The decisive factor became here the formation of the *The Council to the Protection of the Revolution* a coalition of opposition parties, labour unions and other civil society groups. This body considered itself the rightful voice of the revolution and functioned in many ways as a shadow government in this critical period. Under the weight of the continued pressure from the two major sit-ins, known as Kasbah I and II, the government dissolved the RCD party February 21 and Ghannouchi himself resigned February 27. This paved the way for the maximalist transition strategy that the protesters had been demanding. On March 3 the president announced elections for a constituent assembly on July 24, and although the elections later on had to be postponed till October 23 for logistic reasons, this plan was accepted by most political fractions.¹⁶

In the attempt to avoid any re-emergence of a strong executive, the elections were conducted with a strong proportional system. Additionally, the dissolution of RCD meant that the traditional Bourguibist political current in the country did not have a

¹⁴ Yadh Ben Achour, "The Tunisian Revolution in its constitutional manifestations - The first transitional period (14 January 2011 - 16 December 2011)," in *The process of the constitution*, ed. UNDP(2016).

¹⁵ The position of the chairman of UGTT, Abdesalem Jrad, can for example be seen in this light.

¹⁶ Choukri Hmed, "Le peuple veut la chute du régime" ^a Situations et issues révolutionnaires lors des occupations de la place de la Kasbah Tunis, 2011," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 211/212, (2016). Sami Zemni, "The Extraordinary Politics of the Tunisian Revolution: The Process of Constitution Making," *Mediterranean politics* 20, no. 1 (2015).

political platform. These two elements played into the hands of the Ennahda party, which was legalised March 1 2011. Throughout the years of dictatorship the party had kept the party organisation in exile and simultaneously underground networks in the country. It was thus possible for the party to establish a functioning party organisation with local sections all over the country within a few months. Something that no other party could match. Moreover, the party leadership had in its exile in London cultivated strong ties to other Islamist movements, foreign governments and could therefore benefit from generous donations in these critical months before the constituent elections. On top of this, the party also enjoyed a lot of popular sympathy for its resistance to Ben Ali. This meant that Ennahda outperformed all other parties and raffled 37 pct. of the votes in elections the 23rd October 2011.¹⁷

1.1.3 The Constitutional Process

Ennahda entered afterwards into a coalition with two other parties, the Arab nationalist *Congrès pour la République*, founded by long-time dissident Moncef Marzouki, and the smaller centre-left party Ettakatol. This government, known as the *Troïka*, would govern Tunisia until the summer 2013. The constituent assembly was suppose to govern the country while at the same time elaborate a new constitution. Concerning the constitution, there were serious differences between Ennahda and the opposition parties. How to refer to Islam in the constitution, freedom of consciousness, the limits of freedom of speech, and whether a presidential or parliamentary political system should be installed. All issues that caused conflicts not only between the parties, but also within them. The Ennahda leadership had to spend much time arguing with its base over these issues (see section 2). Furthermore, various ministers in the government lacked political experience and struggled to engage with the administration and interests groups. For Ennahda the nomination of ministers from the exile milieu also created tension among the members of the party who had remained in Tunisia under the dictatorship.

Simultaneously, the period that the *Troïka* government presided over was marked by a high degree of instability, politically as well as economically. The revolution and the following chaos plunged the economy into recession, and insecurity was rising as Ben

¹⁷ Alia Gana, Gilles Van Hamme, and Maher Ben Rebah, "Géographie électorale et disparités socio-territoriales: les enseignements des élections pour l'assemblée constituante en Tunisie," *L'Espace Politique*, no. 18 (2012).

Ali's security apparatus was dismantled. The revolution also caused an explosion of social protests and a massive increase in strikes. Clashes between Ennahda supporters who regarded the strikes as an attack on the government, and members of UGTT did occur at several occasions, most notably December 4th 2012 in front of UGTT's headquarters (see section 5.5).¹⁸

The period also saw the emergence of radical salafist milieus in hundreds of Tunisian mosques (see section 4.3). A cinema showing the French cartoon *Persepolis*, in which God is shortly depicted, was attacked by salafists, as was an art exhibition in La Marsa.¹⁹ As a response to the movie *Innocence of Muslims* a large crowd attacked the American Embassy and school in Tunis the September 14 2012.²⁰ This salafist extremism culminated with the assassination of Chokri Belaïd February 6 and Mohamed Brahmi July 25 2013. Already after Belaïd's murder did the opposition call for the instauration of a technocrat government, citing the government's inability to curb the religious extremism. Premier minister Hamadi Jebali himself supported such a solution, which brought him at odds with the Ennahda party. He was therefore replaced by Ali Laayedh March 13 2013.²¹

After Brahmi's death did these calls, however, take on a larger scale. Sit-ins were organised in front of the Constituent Assembly. The opposition boycotted the sessions in the parliament and as a consequence the chairman of the parliament Mustapha Ben Jaafar brought the constitutional process to a halt. The summer of 2013 plunged the constitutional process into a severe crisis that threatened to bring the democratisation process to an end. The military coup in Egypt against the Muslim Brothers July 3rd, contributed to a radicalisation of the opposition's demands and the division of the country into two deeply opposing camps. The government and its supporters, mainly the Ennahda electorate, who claimed the electoral legitimacy from the 2011 elections and wanted to maintain status quo despite the social unrest. On the other hand, the National Salvation Front that regrouped several opposition parties, most importantly the neo-

¹⁸ Thierry Brésillon, "Le bras de fer entre Ennahdha et l'UGTT dégénère place Mohamed Ali," *Rue 89*, 5th December 2012.

¹⁹ "Une chaîne tunisienne attaquée par des islamistes pour avoir diffusé Persepolis," *Le Monde*, October 9 2011. "Violences en Tunisie contre une exposition controversée," *Le Figaro*, (2012). *Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge* (International Crisis Group, 2013).

²⁰ Thierry Brésillon, "Assaut contre l'ambassade US à Tunis : au cœur du « gâchis »," *Nowel Observateur*, (2012).

²¹ Thierry Brésillon, "Tunisie : après son départ d'Ennahdha, Hamadi Jebali s'explique," *Nowel Observateur* 2014.

Bourguibist Nidaa Tounes and the leftist Popular Front, which called for the resignation of the government and the dissolution of the constituent assembly.²²

To solve the crisis UGTT assembled the most important members of civil society, UTICA, The Bar Association and the Tunisian Human Rights League and invited the political parties to dialogue meetings. The solution proposed by the quartet, as it became known, was to keep the constituent assembly intact, but that the Troika was replaced with a neutral technocrat government so that the political parties could focus on finishing the constitution.²³ Despite heavy resistance from the Ennahda base this solution did, after much deliberation, succeed in the end. This enabled the passing of the constitution January 27 2014. The new constitution established the Second Tunisian Republic and paved the way for new parliamentary and presidential elections. Both elections were successfully held in autumn 2014 after which Tunisia has been considered a democracy by most scholars and international observers.²⁴

1.2 The Revolution and Democratization Theory

The instauration of democracy in Tunisia remains exceptional in the Arab World. Iraq did indeed hold free elections after the American invasion, but not only was this process imposed from abroad, it also rapidly descended into ethnic strife and chaos. Tunisia is the only case of indigenous democratization in the Arab World. In this section, I will assess how the existing literature on democratization explains the Tunisian case and whether or not the literature is in need of revision.

1.2.1 Modernization Theory

Democracy has always been a topic in political thought from Aristotle and onwards, but it is only with the behavioural revolution in social science in the 1950's and 1960's that the process of democratization really became theorised. The dominant theory at that

²² *The Constitution-Making Process in Tunisia - Final Report* (Atlanta, Georgia: The Carter Center, 2014), 27-29.

²³ Sarah Chayes, *How a Leftist Labor Union Helped Force Tunisia's Political Settlement* (Washington, 2014).

²⁴ The most iconic think tank in terms of democracy promotion, Freedom House, thus categorised Tunisia as "Free" in its annual report of 2015. "Freedom in the world 2015 : the annual survey of political rights and civil liberties", Freedom House.

time was the modernization paradigm in which democratization was seen as an automatic consequence of the socio-economic development of society. Roughly speaking, if the economy grew and the level of education rose, then democracy would come more or less by itself. In modernization theory democracy was a matter of social conditions, not a process in its own right. This is seen most clearly in Seymour Lipset's work on the requisites of democracy.²⁵ The democratic success in Tunisia does give some credit to the conditions that modernization theory highlights. The fact that Tunisia has a relatively educated population has without doubt helped facilitate democratization. Most parts of society has been able to follow and understand the political debate via newspapers and television.²⁶ When it comes to the economy, the link is more complex. Tunisia is a relative developed economy, which might have made the demand for democracy stronger. However, it was the economic crisis that partly set off the uprising. In this aspect, the Tunisian case points more in the direction of the relative deprivation thesis.²⁷ It was not the level of economic development that mattered, but the sudden decline that spurred the political protests.

Another element related to economic development is the role of the middle class. It is seen as a moderating force in modernization theory against extremist values and as the social basis of democracy. Here, the Tunisian case also seems to contradict the theory. The Tunisian revolution was primarily driven by poor and unemployed in the interior regions of the country. The involvement of the middle class at the later stages of the uprising was decisive, but the middle class was not a driver in the democratization process. In fact in many ways the Tunisian middle class seemed quite reluctant to embrace democracy, because they feared that it would bring Islamists to power. The calls for abolition of the constituent assembly in the crisis in 2013 were also largely a middle class phenomenon, again motivated by animosity towards the Islamists.

²⁵ Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959).

²⁶ Tunisia expanded the access to secondary and higher education in the 1990's, so that in 2009 enrollment in secondary education was 89 percent and 34 for higher education. See *The Unfinished Revolution: Bringing Opportunity, Good Jobs and Greater Wealth to all Tunisians* (Washington: The World Bank, 2014), 37, Development Policy Review.

²⁷ See for example Iain Walker and Thomas F. Pettigrew, "Relative deprivation theory: An overview and conceptual critique," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 23, no. 4 (1984).

1.2.2 Samuel Huntington's view on Democratization

A very important dissident to Modernization Theory in the post-war decades was Samuel Huntington. He wrote in 1968 *Political Order in Changing Societies*, which now enjoys the status as a classic. Huntington looked at many of the newly independent states, and asked why modernization and democratization often ended up creating instability. For him the answer was to be found in the political institution building, which modernization theory had neglected. Modernization was not a linear process, but worked in different ways. If the popular masses entered the political process before the appropriate institutions were in place, it would result in increased struggles between social groups, *praetorianism* as Huntington termed it. It was therefore important that democratization only happened when a strong state apparatus was in place, otherwise it would trap these countries in a state of chronic instability.²⁸

The Tunisian case does give some credit to this emphasis on political order. In many ways, Bourguiba's nation-building followed Huntington's recipe for democratic success. First authoritarian modernization and nation-building, and only at later stage democratic participation. If one compares Tunisia to for example Libya or Syria, it is exactly this element of nation and state-building that stands out. Bourguiba succeeded in destroying the remnants of tribal identities. Berbers and regional cultural differences were all socialized into the same Arab-Tunisian *Tunisianité* through the education system and administrative integration.²⁹ The Tunisian state, although its bureaucracy at times can seem Byzantine, enjoys today a strong legitimacy in the society and its decisions and laws are generally enforced.

However, the "enlightened authoritarianism" of Bourguiba did not produce democracy. It produced another autocracy, that of Ben Ali. A regime that again created widespread clientelism and corruption.³⁰ The clientele networks surrounding Ben Ali gradually undermined the legitimacy of the state and its institutions, and thus the very nation-building project Bourguiba had initiated. Whereas the education system for example was a driver for national integration under Bourguiba, the constant corruption surrounding

²⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political order in changing societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). Francis Fukuyama, "Samuel Huntington's Legacy," *Foreign Policy*, (2011).

²⁹ See for example Clement Henry Moore, *Tunisia since independence : the dynamics of one-party government* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).

³⁰ See Steffen Erdle, *Ben Ali's 'New Tunisia' (1987-2009) : a case study of authoritarian modernization in the Arab world* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2010).

exams and university enrolments under Ben Ali weakened the idea of Tunisian nationhood and the state's legitimacy. Had the Revolution not occurred, the legitimacy to which Huntington would ascribe Tunisia's success, might have evaporated by the corruption surrounding Ben Ali's presidency. The Tunisian case thus shows both the strengths and the limits of Huntington's famous argument. Huntington was right in pointing out that modernization was not a linear process, but he forgot that the same thing can be said of state-building. A strong state might be necessary to overcome tribal, clientele, or ethnic identities which in the long run favours democracy. But, the establishment of a strong state requires centralization of power, which again can lead to clientelism and personal forms of governance.

1.2.3 Marxist and Class based explanations

Another important theoretical school on democratization has been the tradition of neo-Marxist and class based explanations, sometimes referred to as the "social forces" school. This body of theory is normally dated back to Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, and his explanation of the development of fascism, democracy and communism.³¹ Moore's main idea is, roughly speaking, that a strong bourgeoisie is necessary for the establishment of democracy, and that a landed aristocracy is the greatest hindrance. This has later on been modified by Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyn Huber and John Stephens in their seminal work *Capitalist Development and Democracy*,³² which puts more emphasis on the role of the working class and tones down the role of the bourgeoisie. Ruth Collier has again nuanced this standpoint, by localising different paths to democratization where the role of classes differ.³³

Common to this body of theory is, however, that it is not modernization in itself that causes democratization, as Modernization Theory suggests, but the class conflicts resulting from modernization. How does the democratic success story in Tunisia compare to this class perspective? As explained above, the Tunisian middle class was not a driver for democratization, because of its fear of the Islamists. But it is also hard to

³¹ Jørgen Møller and Svend-Erik Skaaning, *Democracy and democratization in comparative perspective : conceptions, conjunctures, causes and consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 109.

³² Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyn Huber, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³³ Ruth Berins Collier, *Paths toward democracy : the working class and elites in Western Europe and South America* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

single out another social class as the cause of democratization. The vindications of the initial uprising were not about democracy, but more fuelled by poor living conditions and unemployment. UGTT played an important role both in the uprising and in the constitutional process (see section 3), but it does not make it possible to qualify the Revolution as a product of the working class. The uprising was not a class conflict. It was not the aristocracy against the bourgeoisie, or the working class held down by both of them. Ben Ali's regime might have appeased the middle classes, but it did not represent them. The clientele nature of Ben Ali's entourage had alienated most segments of society by the time of the revolution. The uprising itself did only pit the majority of society against a small elite surrounding the president.

If we widen the scope a bit and look at the entire constitutional process, the class perspective is equally problematic. The dominating cleavage in this process was clearly the Secularist/Islamist divide (see section 5), and the conflicts surrounding the role of Islam in the constitution (see section 2 and 4). This was an identity conflict that cannot be reduced to class interests. For example, Ennahda enjoys a strong middle class support, and the so-called secular and leftists parties, also enjoy strong support among the poorest segments of society.³⁴ Class differences might play a role in Tunisian politics in the future, but the Revolution itself is hard to understand in these terms.

1.2.4 Transitology

Instead of the structural focus found in Modernization Theory and class based explanations, democratization studies in the 1980's shifted to a focus on the transitional process itself and the interests of the actors. Two important developments were here crucial. The first is the empirical development in the late 1970's and 1980's. After some years of relative stability, democracy started to take root in new regions and countries. Latin America and Southern Europe became within these two decades almost entirely democratic, and in contrast to what the theory predicted, the very process of democratization seemed important. In contrast to popular uprisings or war-induced democratisations, these new waves of democratizations were characterised by a large number of negotiated transitions. The most iconic one being the end of the Francist

³⁴ For example Ennahda received a large share of the votes in 2011 in all parts of the country. See Gana et al., "Géographie électorale et disparités socio-territoriales: les enseignements des élections pour l'assemblée constituante en Tunisie."

regime in Spain, where moderates on both sides negotiated the transition.³⁵ The second development was the publication of the collective work *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, edited by Guillermo O'Donnell, Phillip Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead.³⁶ Despite being a collection of single case studies of the newly democratized nations and the fact that it did not present a coherent theory, the general conclusion had a massive theoretical impact. For the first time the process itself became a factor in determining the success and failure of democratization. Politics became the centre of attention instead of being an epiphenomenon as in modernization theory. The anthology brought a new focus on the strategies and interests of political elites. The most important thing, according to the transitologists, was the possibility of establishing a pact between moderate elements of the regime and the opposition. Alternatively, that the regime itself had an interest in opening up the political system. Popular mobilisation was viewed with suspicion and only thought to create unstable democracies with no respect for political rights. The mobilisation of the working class was also seen through the prism of a challenge to the democratic institutions, not as something that could help put them in place.³⁷ Civil society was not forgotten by the transitologists. But it was more conceptualised as single issue and human rights movements, as well as artistic expressions and critique. And most importantly, civil society was seen as something that would emerge *after* the political opening. When it had emerged it could push for an expansion of democracy and human rights, but it could not bring about an opening of the regime in the first place.³⁸

Looking at the Tunisian Revolution, the transitology paradigm does not fare well. Contrary to its expectations, no cracks in the regime occurred before the revolution. The fact that the poor and marginalised, helped by union activists, brought about the revolution has not resulted in peronist-style personalistic leadership, as transitology would predict. In fact Tunisia's democracy might suffer from the other extreme, a

³⁵ H. J. Wiarda, "Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, and Comparative Politics: "Transitology" and the Need for New Theory," *East European Politics & Societies East European Politics & Societies* 15, no. 3 (2001): 499.

³⁶ Guillermo A. O'Donnell et al., *Transitions from authoritarian rule* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

³⁷ Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from authoritarian rule : Tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins, 1986), 60.

³⁸ Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from authoritarian rule : Tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins, 1986), 55.

chaotic and uncontrollable parliament.³⁹ The Tunisian case is, here, very different from the South American cases on which transitology was initially built.

Concerning civil society, Tunisia saw an explosion of organisations after the revolution, which did contribute positively to the constitutional process and functioned as a check on the politicians. One can for example highlight the work of Al-Bawsala that monitored the sessions in the constituent assembly and was instrumental in informing the public on the issue.⁴⁰ However, the most important civil society organisations in the constitutional process, the four members of the quartet, all existed prior to 2011. There existed a civil society in Tunisia under Ben Ali, and it did not emerge because of “an opening” by the regime. The civil society created— to a large extent – the opening themselves.

Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz have argued that the reason why the classic regime bargaining situation, so central to transitology, did not occur in the Tunisian was due to the *sultanistic regime*, i.e. the personalistic character of the regime. Stepan and Linz also highlight the *collectif du 18 octobre* and the existence of a “political society” that was ready to take over after the revolution.⁴¹ The personalistic elements of Ben Ali’s regime is evident and the existence of contacts between the political parties might have contributed positively to the constitutional process. But, both points are meant to save the elite centred analysis of transitology. The truth of the matter is that the bottom-up character of the revolution and the importance of the established - and sometimes regime affiliated - civil society organisations are poorly understood through the lens of transitology.

1.2.5 Islamism, Secularism and Democracy

Another important theoretical discussion related to democratization in the Middle East is the role of Islam. The fact that the Middle East lagged behind other regions with more or less similar economic development, such as Latin American, Eastern Europe and Sub-

³⁹ The government of Habib Essid which was formed after the 2014 elections did, for example, fall due to lack of confidence from the parliament. Frédéric Bobin, "Tunisie : Habib Essid n'est plus premier ministre," *Le Monde*, July 30 2016.

⁴⁰ Nicole Rowsell, "Tunisia: Foundations of Democratic Compromise," *Adelphi Series* 55, no. 452 (2015): 28.

⁴¹ Alfred C. Stepan and Juan J. Linz, "Democratization Theory and the Arab Spring," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2013).

Saharan Africa, led some scholars (and many politicians) to conclude that Islam was the obstacle. This argument can be found in different versions. The most hard-line is made by classic Orientalists such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington for whom Islam is a political religion with its own legal corpus, *Sharia*, that makes it impossible to establish democracy in the region.⁴² The argument does also surface in the debate about whether Islam needs “an enlightenment” or “reformation” in order to make democracy possible. A softer version of this culturalist argument is that the role of religion in society should be limited and a clear institutional separation between religion and state must be put in place before a genuine democratization can take place.⁴³ Some scholars do not regard Islam as a religion as the problem, but have pointed instead to the strong Islamists movements in the region. If democratic elections are held, goes the theory, Islamists will only use the elections to achieve power and once it has happened they will use it to install an Islamic state and put an end to democracy.

Regarding the Tunisian Revolution, the arguments made in the debate about Islam and democracy come relatively short. Some might argue that the modernist reforms of Bourguiba in the 1960’s constitute a secularization process, and the reasons why Tunisia succeeded is to be found here. An argument that is closely related to Huntington’s view of modernization, as discussed above. Here, it is important to stress that many of Bourguiba’s reforms in the religious field, such as the confiscation of the religious foundations and closing of the semi-autonomous Zaytuna University, destroyed independent civil society networks and strengthened the autocratic character of the state. Furthermore, Bourguiba never separated Islam and the state. Both Bourguiba and Ben Ali kept Islam within the state and used religion to govern (see section 4.2.2 and 3.2.2).

When it comes to the role of Islamist parties, the fear presented in the literature did also not materialize. Ennahda and the opposition had serious disagreements over what role the constitution should ascribe to Islam. However, the debate was never about a separation of state and Islam or not. Nor did Ennahda push for the instauration of a theocracy. No political actor wanted one of these extremes. The debate was about the

⁴² Bernard Lewis, *The political language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 1. Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 29.

⁴³ The best review of this debate is found in Frédéric Volpi, *Political Islam observed : disciplinary perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

degree of importance given to Islam within the framework of a democratic state (See section 4.4).

It is true that freedom of conscience and the absence sharia in the constitution were hard for many Ennahda supporters to accept (see section 2.5), but this does not mean that Ennahda as a party was a problem in the democratization process. The fact that the party was able to compromise and engage with its members helped bring a large conservative segment of the society into the democratic camp. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that Ennahda consistently supported the democratically elected constituent assembly throughout the constitutional crisis in the summer 2013. Some of the non-Islamist opposition parties at the time, in contrast, flirted with the idea of dissolving the assembly. Something that would have brought the democratic process to an end. Hence, the arguments about Islam as a hindrance to democratization do not find much support in the Tunisian case.

1.3 Interviewing in a Revolutionary Process

Qualitative interviews have been the main source of material for this thesis. It is therefore necessary to elaborate on how exactly the interviews were conducted. My interviews are what the literature would describe as “semi-structured interviews”. Each time I did an interview, I prepared a script with multiple questions and elaborated a clear plan for the interview, but I was always willing to divert from my prepared questions if something interesting came up in the interview session. I did also adapt my interview guide from interviewee to interviewee as my research evolved and the interviewees differed. Where it was possible I gave my interviewees a chance to comment on the interpretations I made of the events that we discussed. If I cited the interviewees directly I always asked for their permission and checked whether they agreed with the exact quote.

Concretely, I began my investigation with a field trip in March 2014. On this trip I interviewed Sahbi Attig who at the time was head of Ennahda in the parliament, and Abou Yareed Marzouki, who despite not being officially a member of the party, served in the first Ennahda government. I interviewed former deputy minister Houcine Jaziri, Ahmed Labadiedh a member of the executive bureau of the party and a former executive

member, who had quit the party (and remains anonymous). In May 2014 I did another round of interviews where I interviewed local Ennahda leaders from several provincial towns, as well as Meherzia Labibi, who at the time was vice-chairman of the parliament, and Abdelhamid Jlassi who headed the party's campaign. In July 2014 I switched to focus more on UGTT. My interviews started with Anouar Ben Kaddour, a member of UGTT's executive bureau and the Tunisian labor union historian Ridha Tlili (the son of Ahmed Tlili, the chairman of UGTT 1956-63). Followed by interviews with Abdelsalem Jrad (chairman from 2000-2011), Mohamed Bourgdhiri who heads the regional office in Ben Arous, and several ordinary UGTT members. I did also an interview with the co-founder of Ennahda Abdel Fattah Mourou where I discussed the conclusions drawn from my previous trips. In September 2014 and in January 2015 I did two long stays in Tunis and continued interviewing UGTT members. This time focused on the relationship between UGTT and Ennahda. A key person was here Mohamed Gueloui – both a senior member of Ennahda and active in UGTT. He helped me get in contact with other Ennahda members in UGTT. I also interviewed Belgacem Ayari, Mohamed M'Salmi, and Mouldi Jendoubi – all members of UGTT's executive bureau, and Mohamed Chebbi the head of the regional office in Ariana and Sami Souhli from the public health federation of UGTT. In addition to this, I also interviewed members from the UGTT section in Tunis Airport, at some call centres and at a factory outside Ben Arous.

My last field trips in spring and autumn 2015 concentrated on regional offices of UGTT, especially Kasserine and Ariana, and the port of Tunis, which was used for chapter five. The most important interviewees were, this time, Anis Khadimi the head of UGTT's section in the port and Abdelkarim Harouni, the former minister of transportation in the Ennahda government. These two represented each side in the conflicts described in the chapter. I also interviewed Kamel Saad and Sami Tahrir, other members of UGTT's executive comité, and Nidal Battini, Harouni's former advisor. As well as Riadha Saidi, former advisor in the Troika government and Khalil Zaoui who was minister of social affairs. During many of these trips I also consulted some Tunisian journalists who had followed many of the events closely. Most importantly Thameur Mekki (independent journalist, affiliated with *L'Orient 21*) and Mohamed Ben Salah, who used to be the editor of UGTT's newspaper *Chaarb*. It is important to emphasise that I returned to many of the interviewees several times with additional questions and to discuss my conclusions. I

did for example three interviews with Mohamed Ali Bourgdhiri, Anis Khadimi, and Mohamed Gueloui. And two with several others. Sometimes to get to the interview I had to spend hours following and waiting for the interviewees. I attended several UGTT rallies, had lunch with Ennahda and UGTT members and walked around Radès port whole days just to get in touch with people. I even spent a night in Abdel Fattah Mourou's house watching a movie with some of his friends from the party. These extra interview activities were both a necessity in order to get access to the right people, but it also helped in the interview session itself. The interviewees I returned to and had spent time with opened up much more and was willing to go beyond the more scripted political speeches that others would present if I only had a 30 minutes interview session with them.

I would not qualify the time spent with the interviewees as proper ethnographic work, as I have not used this information directly as documentation. I always relied on the interviews and documents to underpin my arguments. But these experiences did inform my reflection and understanding of the actors and my research question in a larger sense. For example, the time spent with Ennahda members made me realise how present the persecution under Ben Ali was in the minds of many of them. They very rarely talked about ideology when I was with them. But the dictatorship would always come up.

The same thing with UGTT. I remember particularly an incident with Anouar Ben Kaddour. The interview was quite formal and centred on the political process, but afterwards he insisted on showing me a little photo he kept near his desk. Taken after the Black Thursday riots in 1978 it showed him visiting his father in the hospital. Besides being a strong testimony of a warm father and son relationship, it was also telling of how he perceived his and UGTT's role. He clearly saw UGTT's struggle in a longer historical perspective, and on a personal level his motivation was also deeply intertwined with the wish of continuing his father's work. Similarly, spending time with Anis Khadimi in the port of Radès quickly complicated my impression of the UGTT-Ennahda conflict. Khadimi wears a Salafist inspired beard and considers himself a Salafist, but is immensely loyal to UGTT and its history. The first thing he told me when I went to see him was the story about how Mohamed Ali Hammi and the dockers founded the first Tunisian labor union during the French protectorate.

A recurrent problem with my interviews are that many of them were not about events that unfolded at the exact time of the interview. They were mostly about events one or two years back in time. In the case of the UGTT chapter and the descriptions of Ben Arous under Ben Ali, it was around ten years. It is clear that these statements and interviews cannot be taken as objective facts of history, the hindsight and the interviewees' attempts to portray themselves in good light must be taken into account. Many of the members of UGTT had for example a strong tendency to overstate their resistance to Ben Ali's dictatorship, play down cooperation and generally portray UGTT's role in a more positive light. For the Ennahda members it was mostly a problem that they did not admit to have shifted ideological positions. They would at the beginning always try to claim that the current compromises had always been their policy.

It is not possible to completely see through this aspect, but I did my best to always compare the interviews with other documents, newspaper articles and contrasting statements from other interviews. I did this both in the process of analysing the interviews, but also in the interview session itself. For example with Ennahda members, I would for example bring up previous statements from Rachid Ghannouchi or something similar to avoid the initial struggle over whether they had changed position or not. We could instead go directly to a discussion of why the party had changed. With UGTT, reminding members that UGTT officially supported Ben Ali in his different parade elections could make them reflect about the nature of resistance and cooperation within UGTT, instead of simply portraying UGTT as pure resistance as some would do. That being said, the bias of hindsight cannot completely be overcome, of course. The articles presented in this thesis are a product of interpretation, and at the end of the day, I had to judge which interviewees' statements, I believed, best reflected the story at hand.

A particular problem for me was the fact that I do not master Tunisian Arabic to a level of conducting long and detailed interviews. This was generally not a problem with the vast majority of interviewees, because they spoke French very well. To compensate for the lack of precision and the missing translations of the many cultural meanings specific words can carry, I always indicated in the beginning of the interview that if they did not find the right word in French they should try to say it in Arabic. I do know some Arabic and I had studied carefully the specific words related to our discussions such as "constitution", "freedom of conscience" etc. This helped overcome some of the

misunderstandings that can arise when interviewees have to express themselves in another language. Another issue related to the language problem is the fact that French in Tunisia is often seen as an indicator of a higher social class, good manners and education. In a few situations with Ennahda members who spoke French with difficulty and who apologised for their accent, I made a point about emphasising that French was not my native language either and I tried to make fun of my own pronunciation. I am not sure if it worked, but it was my way of trying to remove the social stigma of not mastering the language and putting us on an equal footing. Again, the bias of the language barrier cannot be completely surpassed, but I was always very aware of this aspect and tried to make up for it as best I could.

1.3.1 Documents

The documents used in the thesis can be grouped into two categories. On one hand newspaper articles from the Tunisian and international press. Regarding the first, the Tunisian website turess.com has been very useful in finding old newspaper articles related to my topics. However, newspaper articles in Tunisia has to be treated with a certain caution. Under Ben Ali the Tunisian press was controlled extremely tight by the state and all articles predating 2011 thus portray events through the eyes of the regime. Also after the revolution did this servility towards the state continue, after all many of the journalists remained in place. Now it was just the state and the neo-bourguibist Nidaa Tounes party that the press catered to. I therefore always tried to look both into the old pre-revolution newspapers and some of the new internet based newspapers such as nawaat.org and Huffington Post Maghreb. Another important cleavage in Tunisian press is of course the one dividing Arabic and French newspapers. I tried to make up for my inability to read Arabic by getting help from other scholars, so that my research did not exclude this important part of Tunisian society. I used assistance from Tunisian friends, and most importantly did my co-author on the third article (chapter four) Teije Hidde Donker survey many Arabic Tunisian news sources for me.

The second group of written sources are internal documents of Ennahda, UGTT and the ministry of religious affairs. I have not done a complete survey of all the documents produced by these organisations, because such documents are not available to the public. The summaries of the internal meetings of Ennahda and UGTT during and after the revolution remain classified. But I did obtain and use some documents with the help of

my interviewees. This includes UGTT documents about when specific internal elections took place, and Ennahda documents about the party's position vis-a-vis UGTT for example.

1.3.2 Concepts and Language

This thesis contains a number of recurrent concepts that are key to the argumentation and therefore deserve a few comments. The events leading to the overthrow of Ben Ali has been given many names in academia; Arab Spring, uprising, revolt, revolution, rebellion. I use the words uprising, revolts and rebellion to this specific period in Tunisia from December 2010 to the 14th January 2011. *Arab Spring* is used for all the uprisings that happened in Arab countries throughout 2011. When I write *the constitutional process* it refers to the time from the end of the revolt against Ben Ali to the adoption of the new constitution that legally establishes the institutions of the new regime. The word *revolution* is sometimes also used for the entire period, i.e. the revolt plus the constitutional process. I do also use the word *transition* sometimes, but only when it is in relation to the literature on democratization to which this word is associated. I have preferred to use the word *revolution* in general instead of *transition*, because it only means a major process of change. It does not explicit what kind of change and it is also not limited only to politics. Whereas *transition* implies a very specific end goal, liberal democracy, and is centred on political change. Tunisia ended up becoming a liberal democracy, but nobody knew it at the time and, even though Tunisia drew upon lessons from outside, the Tunisian experience was very much an indigenous process. The word *transition* carries to much a legacy of Western democracy promotion to reflect this indigenous dimension.

The word *democracy* is also used commonly throughout the thesis and here implies liberal democracy in its everyday use, what Robert Dahl termed “polyarchy”.⁴⁴ The thesis thus takes as point of departure how democracy has been formulated within the liberal tradition. Other definitions of democracy – such as economic or more participative versions – can be just as legitimate, but it has been a priority to write in an intuitively understandable language, and such definitions would complicate that. I do also use the word *democratization* recurrently throughout the thesis, but mostly in discussions about democratization theory.

⁴⁴ Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

Islamism is another key word throughout this dissertation. I explain in more detail in chapter two, but it suffices here to say that the word is applied as a reference to a distinct ideology. Not to Islam as a religion or Islamic culture in a general sense. I also mention the fact that Ennahda is today to be regarded as a *conservative* party. I explain it in chapter two, but just to be clear; the term conservative is understood as a political view that takes the existing norms and values in society as the point of departure, in contrast to political views based on a predefined ideology such as Islamism or communism.

Secularism is another key term that often invokes a slight confusion. As José Casanova has brilliantly pointed out, the term can both refer to the process of religion losing influence in society, the privatization of religion, and the separation of religion and politics.⁴⁵ I use the term mostly in chapter two in the sense of separation of politics and religion, but not in a dichotomous way. As pointed out at length in chapter four, Tunisia has never experienced a complete separation of state and religion, nor are any of the main political actors stating it as an objective. I use it as a matter of degree to argue that Ennahda's acceptance of the constitution and principles such as "freedom of consciousness" have resulted in a process of secularization. This is because Ennahda has accepted that certain political principles are not dictated by religion. Not that religion and state have been separated. Generally, it has been my objective to show that the question of secularization is very complex in the Tunisian context, as seen in chapter four, where I describe how all political actors have used religion in one form or another.

In chapter five, I use the word *secularists* as a reference to certain people, even though these people might not want a complete separation of religion and politics. This is because the term in Tunisian political discourse has come to signify a certain political segment that want religion to play a less important role than do e.g. the Islamists. In discussions about the Islamist/secularist divide during the Tunisian revolution, I am therefore obliged to use the term in order to refer to one of these political camps. Even though one of the aims of the chapter is to show that this cleavage is about many other issues than religion, I am still forced to use the categories in order to be able to write about it in a meaningful way (see chapter five).

⁴⁵ José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

2 The Islamists' Compromise in Tunisia

Abstract

By voting for the Tunisia's new constitution in January 2014, the Islamist party Ennahda accepted many principles that were in contradiction with Islamist ideology. Most importantly, the party accepted the principle of freedom of consciousness and the absence of a reference to Sharia. This paper argues that, contrary to many theories in the field, the Islamists conceded solely out of necessity. However, after the concessions the leadership of the party uncovered new interpretations of Islam and Islamism in order to persuade the party members to support the constitution. This way, the Islamists unwillingly brought about a secularization of the political sphere in Tunisia.

2.1 Ennahda's Concessions

In the fall 2014 Tunisia successfully completed a parliamentary and a two-round presidential election and less than two months later a new government coalition was formed with the participation of a broad spectre of the political parties. This makes Tunisia the only country to have turned the Arab Spring uprising in 2011 into a real transition to democracy. Behind this success story lies a two and a half year long constitutional process that followed the fall of Zine El Abedine Ben Ali, the country's dictator for 23 years. This was a hard process with many crisis and interruptions. At several points, it looked impossible to bridge the different opinions in the constituent assembly, but in the end compromise did prevail and the new constitution was passed the 26th January 2014.⁴⁶ The most remarkable in this long turbulent process was the fact that the big Islamist party, Ennahda, supported the new constitution, despite the fact that it contained many principles it had previously opposed.

Article 2 in the constitution states that Tunisia is a "civil state" (*dawla al-madaniya*) a strong protection against religious interference in the state. Women's rights have a prominent position in the constitution, not only guaranteeing the established rights, but also obliging the state to further develop the position of women in the country. The constitution includes the entire universal human rights, many of which are in opposition to Islamic jurisprudence. But most importantly, the constitution does not include a reference to sharia and it grants the right to freedom of consciousness (*hurriet al-damir*). By only referring to the "teachings of Islam" (*ta'alim al-Islam*) and not "sharia", the

⁴⁶ For more information about this process see section 1.1 and for example *The Constitution-Making Process in Tunisia - Final Report*.

constitution effectively excludes any legal role of the Islamic religious corpus. Freedom of consciousness is a genuinely revolutionary concept in the Muslim World. Instead of simply a collective right for groups to practice their faith, also known as freedom of worship, freedom of consciousness grants the right to every individual to choose his or her faith, to be an atheist, Christian and to leave Islam. Something that is strictly condemned by traditional Islamic ulemas and Islamist ideologues alike.⁴⁷ In sum, the constitution is on many points in almost complete contradiction with the original Islamist ideology of the Ennahda party. As the chairman of Tunisia's Higher Commission of Political Reform that was in charge of writing the constitution, Yadh Ben Achour, put it:

*"It is the great paradox. These modernist achievements have been won even though the Islamists were in the majority in the assembly"*⁴⁸

How come Ennahda accepted these secular principles in the constitution? For a long time the studies of Islamism have focused on the evolution of these parties' ideology and political behaviour. Ennahda's acceptance of the constitution is one of the most remarkable examples of such a transformation. During the dictatorship, Ennahda was torn between exile, imprisonment and underground activity, struggling to survive. When the revolution happened, these different elements came suddenly together and had to face very crucial ideological questions.

The Tunisian constitutional process is, in that regard, interesting for the study of change within Islamist parties and the underlying causes for it. In this paper, I will therefore critically review the literature on moderation of Islamist parties, examine the mechanisms of the Tunisian case and finally outline what the field can learn from the Tunisian experience. The article is primarily based on interviews with leading Ennahda cadres, local members, and people who had to deal with Ennahda during the constitutional process. Ennahda's evolution as a party is an on-going process, but this article focuses on the constitutional process and it does not include any further development.

⁴⁷ Marie Verdier, "La liberté de conscience est révolutionnaire pour un pays musulman", *La Croix*, 26th January 2014.

⁴⁸ Mandraud, Isabelle (2014), "La liberté de conscience, principe inédit dans le monde arabe", *Le Monde*, 30th January 2014.

2.2 The Paradigm of Islamist Moderation

Islamism, as an ideological ideal type, was constructed by French political scientists in the 1970's as a response to the Iranian revolution and the growing Islamic activism at the time. At that time movements like Ennahda did not refer to themselves as "Islamist", they called themselves "Muslim". With time the term moved from the academic literature and Western media to the actors themselves, who have adopted the term. Ennahda, for example, refers to itself as an Islamist party today.⁴⁹

Islamism has become a reference to the political philosophical tradition started by Jamal al-Din Al-Afgani, Hassan al-Banna, Mawlana Mawdudi and others in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It is also a reference to the political movements who have carried on this ideological position, most importantly the Muslim Brotherhood and its different sections and sister parties throughout the Arab and Muslim World. Islamism is the idea that Islam is not just a religion, but also a political ideology. It is the belief that all aspects of society can be organised according to the fundamental texts of Islam. As one can speak of a "socialist economy" or a "liberal economy", Islamists believe that there is also an "Islamic economy". Likewise, an Islamic education policy, social policy, environmental policy etc. No matter the issue, "the solution is Islam", as the famous slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood put it. This solution is – in theory – always based on an interpretation of the Quran and the practice of the first four caliphs. Islamism rejects the actual tradition of government within the Islamic World such as the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. They are dismissed as "unislamic". Islamism is therefore not a conservative ideology, which takes the existing society as a model, but an *a priori* ideology that wants to transform society according to a set of predefined ideas. In this regard, Islamism has many similarities with Socialism and Communism.⁵⁰

2.2.1 Islamism in Social Science

As an object of social science, the debate initially centred on how to perceive these movements and parties. Scholars of the Orientalist school and neoconservatives put

⁴⁹ For a thorough discussion of the origin of the term "Islamism" see Roy, Olivier (2001): "Les islamologues ont-ils inventé l'islamisme?", *Esprit*, August-September (8-9).

⁵⁰ See for example Olivier Roy, *The failure of political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 35.

forth a view of Islamist parties as genuinely undemocratic and unable to reform. As Bernard Lewis famously described Islamists participation in elections:

*“For Islamists, democracy....is a one-way road on which there is no return, no rejection of the sovereignty of God, as exercised through His chosen representatives. Their electoral policy has been classically summarized as “One man (men only), one vote, once”.*⁵¹

On the other hand, scholars who viewed Islamism as a form of identity politics, such as Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, portrayed the phenomenon more nuanced and positive.⁵² In the French debate, these positions were represented by Gilles Kepel’s view of Islamism as a radical movement versus Francois Burgat’s claim that Islamism was to be understood in light of the struggle against colonialism and the authoritarian regimes in the region.⁵³ It is also worth noting that this discussion has not been limited to the academic sphere. In the political circles of Western capitals, the question of the “true motives” of the Islamist parties has been a recurrent topic in relation to the choice of Middle East strategy. The question is also still to this day a part of the political debate in the home countries of Islamist parties. Many of the protests against the Ennahda led coalition in Tunisia were, for example, fuelled by a fear among the Tunisian opposition that Ennahda wanted to establish an Iranian style theocracy.

As a consequence of the successful integration in Turkey of the AK Party, which has roots in Islamism, and the democratization agenda put forward by the US government after 9/11, the academic debate has in recent years moved on. Instead of a discussion of the “nature” of Islamism, the academic debate has turned to a focus on how Islamist parties and movements can become more moderate. This has sparked a whole new field of studies that analyse the different factors that might change the behaviour of Islamist parties. Scholars such as Vali Nasr and Fareed Zakaria have emphasized economic development, and others, Stathis Kalyvas for example, have stressed organizational

⁵¹ Bernard Lewis, *The crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 112.

⁵² Dale F. Eickelman and James P. Piscatori, *Muslim politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁵³ See for example Gilles Kepel, *Jihad : expansion et déclin de l'islamisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003); Francois Burgat, *Face to face with political Islam* (London; New York; New York: I.B. Tauris ; In the U.S. and Canada distributed by Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

structure.⁵⁴ But, the most prominent theory within this moderation paradigm has been the “inclusion-moderation hypothesis”. Popularized to a large extent thanks to Jillian Schwedler’s seminal work *Faith in Moderation*. According to this hypothesis, inclusion in the political process will have a moderating effect on Islamist parties.⁵⁵ The literature on Islamist moderation includes many different studies, both in terms of methodology and their conclusions. However, a certain amount of common concepts, internal discussions and explanations have emerged⁵⁶, and it is therefore my opinion that one can talk about a “Paradigm of Islamist Moderation”.

An important feature, which many studies in this paradigm share, is the distinction between tactical and ideological moderation (sometimes also referred to as “behavioural moderation” and “substantial moderation”). Tactical moderation is moderation only for tactical ends and is only concerned with the means to achieve power, whereas ideological moderation is a process by which the parties genuinely change ideology. Islamists might adopt new policies and leave the ideology intact, or they might revisit their ideology and as a consequence formulate new policies.

For most studies within the moderation paradigm, the concept of *political learning* is also very important. The idea that Islamist movements go through a learning process that lead to a revision of their ideological positions. There is some divergence on what the precise mechanisms consist of. Jillian Schwedler highlights the party’s internal decision making process and debate, whereas Berna Turam, for example, stresses everyday interactions with other political parties or organisations.⁵⁷ But, common to this body of theory is the fact that moderation is a somewhat deliberate process. The reference is not invoked directly, but there is an almost Habermasian conception of value change. The

⁵⁴ See Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza (2009), ‘Forces of Fortune: The rise of the new Muslim middle class and what it means for our world’, (New York: Free Press), Zakaria, Fareed (2004), ‘Islam, Democracy and Constitutional Liberalism’, in Caraley, James Demetrios ed., ‘American Hegemony: Preventive War, Iraq and Imposing Democracy’, (New York: The Academy of Political Science), and Kalyvas, Stathis (2000), ‘Commitment Problems in Emerging Democracies: The Case of Religious Parties’, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 32

⁵⁵ Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in moderation : Islamist parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵⁶ Manfred Brocker and Mirjam Künkler, *Religious parties and the inclusion-moderation thesis* (London: Sage, 2013).

⁵⁷ See Turam, Berna (2007), ‘Between Islam and the state: the politics of engagement’ (California: Stanford University Press).

Islamists make up their mind in a neutral sphere and then *afterwards* make a political move. The ideological evolution happens outside the realm of politics.

2.2.2 Problems with Moderation Theory

It is important to emphasize that the moderation paradigm, in many ways, has succeeded in going beyond the dichotomous understandings of Islamism, which previously dominated the debate. It has opened for a discussion of the inner workings of Islamist parties, the causes of ideological reform, and contributed with valuable policy advice. However, the literature also has some recurrent problems. The close relationship with democracy promotion in the Middle East has given the literature a strong normative bias and produced some problematic conceptualisations.

First, the very concept of moderation is normative. To be “moderate” does not make sense in itself. One is only moderate in relation to something else, and that “something else” is rarely made explicit in the moderation literature. Most studies of Islamist moderation discuss in detail the different factors leading to moderation, but spent little space defining what it means to be “moderate”. Many studies present only an operational definition of moderation and do not discuss the normative content of the concept. Others do state how they define moderation theoretically, but fail to discuss critically the employment of the term itself. This is obvious if one looks at the different definitions of moderation put forth in the field. Jillian Schwedler, who has led the debate on Islamist, defines moderation in as “a move away from exclusionary practices”. A similar approach is found in a study on the Moroccan Justice and Development Party by Eva Wegner and Miquel Pellicer. Here, it is defined as “increasing flexibility towards core ideological beliefs”.⁵⁸

Both definitions replace moderation by another relational concept. “Flexibility” or “moving away from exclusionary practices” do not bring us much further than moderation. These definitions have the same implicit normativity as moderation. If Islamist movements became more violent than what their initial ideological position

⁵⁸ See Wegner, Eva and Pellicer, Miquel (2009), 'Islamist moderation without democratization: the coming of age of the Moroccan Party of Justice and Development?', *Democratization*, 16 (1), 157-75, and Schwedler, Jillian (2007), 'Democratization, Inclusion and the Moderation of Islamist Parties', *Development*, 50 (1), 56-61.

would predict, and thus more “flexible”, would it then count as “moderation”? Or if Islamist movements do not regard jihadi groups as illegitimate, and thus move away from “exclusionary practices”, are we then to consider that an act of “moderation”? In her study of Islamist movements in Jordan, Janine Clark avoids this pitfall and defines instead moderation in terms of ideological content. It is simply “greater acceptance and understanding of democracy, political liberties, and the rights of women and minorities.” An approach which is even more clear in Suveyda Karakaya and Kadir Yildirim’s comparison between moderation of Islamist and Communist parties. Here moderation is simply defined as “change in positions on democracy, the economic system, and the political role of Islam”.⁵⁹

Studies that use content based definitions, like the two presented here, are more honest about the normative nature of the concept. The normativity is more explicit. However, if moderation is simply another word for “more democratic” or “more secular”, why do we need the term in the first place? If the term is perfectly interchangeable with a reference to “democracy”, why not simply use that term? The employment of “moderation” does not inform a study, it only serves to blur its normative character. “Moderation” does not have an analytical function, besides serving as a value judgement. There is nothing wrong with analysing how Islamist movements can become, let’s say, more democratic or secular, but then this should be clearly stated and not hidden behind the vague concept of “moderation”.

The second problem with the moderation paradigm is the distinction between tactical and ideological moderation. Despite its intuitive appeal, this distinction risks distorting our understanding of Islamist movements. By having a sharp distinction between tactics and ideology, ideological moderation becomes the only true form of “moderation”. If the Islamists do not engage in internal philosophical debates and afterwards revise their political programme, we cannot consider them as having “moderated”. If they make concessions out of pragmatism and political necessities, these concessions are necessarily viewed as tactics and therefore superficial and temporary. In the eyes of moderation

⁵⁹ Clark, Janine A. (2006), 'The Conditions of Islamist Moderation: Unpacking Cross-Ideological Cooperation in Jordan', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 38 (4), 539-60, and Karakaya, Suveyda and Yildirim, A. Kadir (2013), 'Islamist moderation in perspective: comparative analysis of the moderation of Islamist and Western communist parties', *Democratization*, 20 (7), 1322-49.

theory, Islamists, who have made tactical concessions, will revert to previous political positions once they have the chance. In that sense, the moderation paradigm falls back into the previous discussion on whether Islamists have a hidden agenda or not. The problem is that most often political compromises and concessions *precede* ideological evolution. Islamist movements may make concessions against their will, purely for tactical and pragmatic reasons, but once these compromises have been made, they might affect the ideological position of the Islamists. By distinguishing very sharply between *tactical* and *ideological* moderation, the effect of political compromises on Islamist movements is neglected. An exception to this tendency is Carry Wickham's brilliant study of the Egyptian Wasat party. Wickham demonstrates how concessions made for tactical reasons over time end up influencing the party's initial ideological position. Thereby breaking down the sharp distinction between tactical and ideological moderation.⁶⁰

The third problem with the moderation paradigm is that power is solely treated as a political *means*. The reason why Islamists want power is to implement their political programme. This is, of course, true to some extent. However, the motivations to achieve power are for most political actors – be they Islamist or not – much more diverse than simply implementation of an ideological programme. For the study of Islamism, focusing solely on power as a means makes it hard to explain why Islamists sometimes do not act according to their ideology. If ideology is seen as the only motivation, concessions and compromises are necessarily regarded as “temporary” or “tactical”, otherwise scholars cannot explain the contradictory actions.

2.3 Predisposed to Compromise?

After the review and critique of the moderation paradigm, we can now turn to the Tunisian case. According to the moderation paradigm, a certain ideological learning process should have preceded the Islamists acceptance of the secular principles in the constitution. Was this the case? If one ask the Islamists themselves, they will certainly give a positive answer. They will say that they already in the 1980's were committed to

⁶⁰ Wickham, Carrie Rosefsky (2004), 'The Path to Moderation: Strategy and Learning in the Formation of Egypt's Wasat Party', *Comparative politics*, 36 (2), 205.

the values of democracy, freedom and human rights. Likewise, they will emphasise their pragmatism and experience in working with other parties.

This is not completely wrong. Since the founding of Mouvement de la Tendence Islamique (MTI) in 1981, the predecessor of Ennahda, legal recognition has been the party's main objective - not an Iranian style revolution. The party has also been able to reform itself. For example, it strongly opposed Bourguiba's Personal Status Code, which gave women new rights and demanded in 1985 a referendum on the subject.⁶¹ But, in 1990 the party accepted the Personal Status Code in anticipation of free elections during the short lived political opening after the fall of the country's first president, Habib Bourguiba.⁶² Ennahda also participated in *Mouvement de 18 octobre* in 2005, a common platform of Tunisian opposition parties united in protest against Ben Ali's regime.⁶³ Ennahda has experience in working with other parties and a history of compromise and pragmatism.

However, this is a proof of Ennahda's ability to adapt to different political realities – not of an ideological commitment to freedom of consciousness, abandonment of sharia or the other controversial issues in the constitution. In fact, if one looks at the writings of Ennahda's leader Rachid Ghannouchi, it is not the case at all. In the very book that many members of Ennahda refer to in order to justify the party's commitment to democracy, *Public Liberties in The Islamic State*, Ghannouchi takes a clear stand *against* freedom of consciousness. He writes that to leave Islam, also known as apostasy, is a crime:

*"...apostasy is a crime (...) related to the preservation of Muslims and the structures of the Islamic state against enemy attacks (...) It is a political crime comparable in other regimes to a crime of leaving by force the state's rule and attempting to destabilize it. It should be addressed using appropriate measures, proportionate to the importance and the danger that it represents."*⁶⁴

⁶¹ Kenneth J. Perkins, *A History of modern Tunisia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 172.

⁶² Alaya Allani, "The Islamists in Tunisia between confrontation and participation : 1980-2008," *The Journal of North African Studies* 14, no. 2 (2009): 263.

⁶³ Limam and Zederman.

⁶⁴ Ghannouchi distinguishes between two different views on apostasy. One school that considers it a religious offense that should be punished with the death penalty and another school, to which he belongs, that sees it as an attack on the public order. Rached Ghannouchi, *Al-Hurriya al-'Ammah Fid-Dawlah al-Islamiyyah* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḡdah al-ʿArabīyah, 1993), 50.

Likewise, sharia is an essential part of Ghannouchi's vision of a so-called Islamic democracy. Even though Ghannouchi imagines a system of competitive elections, sharia is still the foundation of the political order. The role of the elected government is simply to deliver interpretation, *ijtihad*, of the sharia and to make legislation for the areas that sharia does not cover. Ghannouchi does not advocate full fledged democracy, but only a limited democracy of what is not already laid out in the sharia.⁶⁵ Interviews with local Ennahda representatives confirm the same picture. Most members wanted desperately to have a reference to sharia in the constitution, and freedom of consciousness was something the party deeply opposed – members and cadres alike. Ennahda's concessions in the constitutional process cannot be explained in terms of ideology.

Ennahda officials might today frame the compromises as in concordance with Islamist ideology and their previous statements. Like any other political party, Ennahda tries to portray its political trajectory as coherent and logical. But it remains a fact that, exactly like the party in the early 1990's changed its attitude to the Personal Status Code, so did Ennahda in the constitutional process change its position on sharia and freedom of consciousness. We must therefore go beyond the Islamists' own justifications.

2.4 The Party Leadership and its Interests

To understand what drove Ennahda to accept the secular principles in the constitution, we need to look at what it actually means, when one discusses "Ennahda" as an actor in the process. We need to look at the party's organisation. The Ennahda party was initially in the 1970's a religious movement, only in the early 1980's did it also become a political party. For that reason and due to the Islamist belief that religion should dictate politics, the leader of the party, Rachid Ghannouchi is a religious authority *and* a political leader at the same time. Over the years and in exile, Ghannouchi has managed to further refine this role. His extensive writings on Islam and Islamism are widely read within the circles of Islamist philosophy. The members of the party consider him an important religious authority and his works are generally venerated and followed. Other members of Ennahda's leadership are also seen as an authority on religious questions. The co-

⁶⁵ For a detailed analysis of the political thought of Rachid Ghannouchi see Tamimi, Azzam (2001), 'Rachid Ghannouchi : a democrat within Islamism' (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

founders of the party Abdel Fattah Mourou and Abdelmajid Najar enjoy a somewhat similar status, but Ghannouchi's status is far more important.

Another specificity of Ennahda is the party's strong internal discipline. There can be divisions and fierce discussions inside the party, but once a decision has been reached, the members tend to follow and defend the party's position - as if it were their own. The party's schooling of the members and the formative experience of fighting the dictatorship has created a veritable *esprit du corps*.⁶⁶

The overlap between political and religious authority in combination with the strong party discipline creates a rather elitist organisation. The party has formal democratic structures; an assembly, a governing council (*Majlis shura*), a political bureau, and an elected president (sheik). However, the status of Ghannouchi as a religious authority and his role as the historic leader of the party enables him to get his will no matter the opinion of the *majlis shura*. The majority of the members in the council might disagree with him, but they have really no possibility of sanctioning him or blocking his decision, if he really insists. There is therefore a lot of power concentrated in Ghannouchi's person and in the people working close to him. This is the leadership of Ennahda.

The members are important, because they represent and spread the party's message in local neighbourhoods and towns all over the country. The leadership also needs to take the members into account when decisions are taken to minimize internal discussion and maintain the party's strong cohesion. But, the important initiatives and the decisions originate with the leadership. To understand why Ennahda conceded during the constitutional process, one must therefore look at the leadership's interests and perception of the situation right after the fall of Ben Ali and the elections in 2011.

Ennahda won 37% of the votes in the election of the constituent assembly, winning seats in all of Tunisia's diverse region, and emerged as by far the strongest and only true mass party of the country.⁶⁷ No other party came close to match Ennahda's organisation and

⁶⁶ For further reading on Ennahda under Ben Ali's dictatorship see Maryem Ben Salem, 'Le militantisme en contexte répressif - cas du mouvement islamiste tunisien', Phd thesis, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne

⁶⁷ Gana et al., "Géographie électorale et disparités socio-territoriales: les enseignements des élections pour l'assemblée constituante en Tunisie."

professionalism. However, the landslide victory was misleading in terms of the Ennahda's actual political position. The leadership knew that, despite Ben Ali and his family had left the country, many structures of the former regime remained intact. The leading positions within the state, secret services and the police were still held by allies of the former dictator. Any disruption of the constitutional process or a general sentiment of political instability could bring the former regime back onto the political stage. As Abou Yareed Marzouki, one of the advisors to premier minister Hamadi Jebali in the first Ennahda led government, put it:

*“The security services, the ministries, the media. All these people from the former regime were still there. Nominally we had the power, but in reality they were in control.”*⁶⁸

It is important to keep in mind that after the fall of Bourguiba in 1987, Tunisia also experienced initial steps towards democracy before Ben Ali tied his grab on power and persecuted the Islamists. Having experienced this, the leading Ennahda cadres were extremely aware of how fragile the situation remained despite the electoral victory. The military coup in Egypt during the summer 2013 further galvanized this fear of a counter revolution.

Second, the Ennahda leadership knew that the more secular oriented parts Tunisia's civil society would do everything to block the party's Islamist influence on the constitution. Especially, the general labour union, *Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (UGTT). Having played a crucial role in the struggle for independence and in the toppling of Ben Ali, the union enjoys enormous respect in Tunisian society. With chapters and local members all over the country, the union was by far the best organised political entity in the country after the revolution. The leadership of Ennahda knew that if UGTT organised strikes and threw its weight behind an opposition to the Ennahda-led government, it could halt the constitutional process.⁶⁹

Third, besides the fears of the former regime and the secular opposition, the Ennahda leadership also saw a huge self-interest in making the constitutional process work. The

⁶⁸ Interview with author 2nd of May 2014 in Menzel Bourguiba, Tunisia.

⁶⁹ For an account of how the relationship between UGTT and Ennahda actually played out during the constitutional process see Hèla Yousfi, *L'UGTT, une passion tunisienne* (Sfax: Med Ali Edition, 2015). See also section 5.4.

leadership was extremely confident that it would be the big winner of democratic elections in the country. This assumption was not just built on the result of the 2011 elections. The leading cadres, including Ghannouchi, saw the gains from democracy in a much longer historical perspective. In their view, the modernisation and secularisation process installed by Habib Bourguiba after the country's independence, and to a certain extent continued under Ben Ali, was a foreign element in Muslim Tunisia.⁷⁰ The modernisation process was only a product of brute force. If the dictatorship was to be permanently removed and people to chose freely, Tunisia would automatically drift back towards its Islamic identity – and elect Ennahda as the leading party.

For these reasons, the leadership of the party saw a huge interest in passing the constitution. The leadership wanted, of course, to make as big an Islamist imprint on the constitution as possible, but its reservation price was in reality extremely low. The leadership was, behind the theatre of negotiations, always ready to compromise. However, for the local members of Ennahda, the perception of the situation was very different.

2.5 A Two Front Battle

As mentioned above, many members of the party – including leading cadres – wanted a clear reference to sharia. Either in the constitution's first article or in the preamble. If the party's Islamist ideology should have any meaning, the Quran's God-given law had to be mentioned in the country's founding document. Several demonstrations in favour of sharia were held in the capital by Ennahda's supporters and other Islamists groups. On the question of freedom of consciousness the pressure from the party members were even bigger. To put in the constitution the right to leave Islam, something a vast majority of Islamic jurists regard as strictly forbidden, was beyond their understanding. Especially in light of Ennahda's victory in the elections.

⁷⁰ When describing Bourguiba as *secular*, it is important to keep in mind that it does not mean that he removed or separated Islam from the political sphere. Bourguiba reinterpreted the religion to serve the nationalist and modernist state building project. For further information on Bourguiba and his heritage see Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Habib Bourguiba, la trace et l'héritage* (Paris: Karthala, 2004). See also section 4.2.2.

In the parliament the party could theoretically – with the help of some smaller Islamist leaning parties – obtain a very slim majority for a reference to sharia and reject freedom of conscience, but the party could not get the two-thirds required to pass the entire constitution. A tough stand on the issues could therefore endanger the entire constitution. Furthermore, both a rejection of freedom of conscience and a reference to sharia could scare Tunisia's Western allies and foreign investors. Especially, the country's vital tourist industry was dependent on Tunisia being portrayed in a positive light – and not as an extremist country. As stated before, the secular oriented civil society would also mobilize and the risk of a counter revolution increase, if Ennahda took a tough stand on the issues. The leadership therefore came to the conclusion that it was better to avoid the confrontation and concede. In order for the constitution to pass, it was necessary to give in.

The leadership thus saw itself fighting a two front battle. On one hand securing the biggest Islamist imprint as possible, while still keeping the constitutional process going, on the other hand the party struggled to convince the party members that they had to accept principles that were in opposition to the party's original ideology. In order to persuade the members, the leadership toured the party's many different regional and local offices to talk to local members. The arguments delivered were generally mixed. Sometimes the leadership simply neglected the concessions, sometimes they emphasised the role of civil society and the fact that the Tunisians would reject any modernist tendencies despite its place in the constitution. Most prominent, however, were new liberal interpretations of Islamism and Islam itself. The following speech delivered by Ghannouchi in the midst of the constitutional process is an example of this:

"It is not suitable that Islamists and Muslims in general fear that freedom would harm Islam. The greatest danger to Islam would be the absence of freedoms and the unavailability of sufficient guarantees for the freedom of conscience, the freedom of expression, the freedom of belief, the freedom of movement, and all social freedoms."⁷¹

His religious authority, as well as other Islamic philosophers within the party, were used to convince the members that the compromises were perfectly Islamic. Sharia was turned

⁷¹ The speech was given the 19th July 2013 at the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy in Tunis.

into a question of values, and not of legal norms, thereby justifying only having a reference to “the teachings of Islam” in the constitution’s preamble. Freedom of consciousness was related to the general importance of freedom in Islam, as seen in the quote above. The party also held meetings uniting the different sections of the party to discuss the issues thoroughly and to achieve a common understanding before making the actual concessions with the other parties. This helped calming down the members, but it was still a hard job the party’s local leaders to explain the concessions. As an anonymous local leader of Ennahda put it:

*“It created a lot of problems in the party. A lot of members were angry. (...) To leave Islam is forbidden. Ghannouchi suggested a new interpretation of Islam on this subject. One which is very different from Islamic law. (...) Our role as party activists was to be in contact with the local members and explain them the new interpretation. We managed to convince many members.”*⁷²

One can question the different arguments used to persuade the members, but the result in itself is quite impressive. Coming back from exile and clandestinity, Ennahda managed to change very essential elements of its political ideology in a relatively short time and create a genuine support for the new constitution among its members.

2.6 Beyond Ideology

Having examined Ennahda’s concessions, it is possible to sketch some general lessons from the Tunisian experience. When studying Islamist parties and movements, power must not simply be regarded as a means to implement an ideological programme, as many studies on Islamist moderation do. Islamists have other motivations to achieve power that are sometimes more important than ideology. In the Tunisian case, it was not internal debates, socializing with other parties or other kinds of learning prior to the political decisions that was decisive. The reformulation of Ennahda’s ideology was driven by political calculations to achieve and maintain power. In the interests of the party’s overarching goals, some elements of the Islamist ideology had to be left behind. Sharia had to be abandoned and freedom of consciousness had to be accepted. The party made

⁷² Interview with author. Interviewee prefers to be anonymous, but the identity is known to the author.

the compromises out of necessity, and only *afterwards* did it develop an ideological explanation for it.

Furthermore, the way the members came to this new understanding was not by a neutral learning process. It was primarily an exercise in power and persuasion by the leadership. The party leadership saw an interest in abandoning sharia and accepting freedom of consciousness and used therefore all its means of influence to persuade the members. If it had been a bottom-up decision, in which the members were free to debate the question without any pressure, the constitution would never have been accepted. One can thus put it the following way, the Islamists did not *learn* a new point of view, the leadership *took* a new point of view and *pressured* the members to do the same.

This focus on power and political calculations must not be confused with “tactical moderation”, as it has been discussed above. Ennahda made the concessions out of necessity, but it does not make them more temporary or superficial. First of all, now the leadership has convinced its members that freedom of consciousness and the absence of sharia are perfectly compatible with Islam. It has become a part of the party’s ideology. Second, the pressure to abandon sharia and accept freedom of consciousness is constant. If Ennahda wants to compete in future elections, it needs to appeal to the voters in the political centre. Reintroducing sharia or attacking freedom of consciousness would be rather counterproductive for such a purpose. To sum it up, there is not a “hidden agenda”, only adaptation to political realities. Seeing Islamist parties as driven by political calculation and not exclusively ideology means that Islamist parties can *genuinely reform themselves*.

Here, it is important to stress that focusing on political calculations is not the same as portraying the Islamists as only interested in power simply for the sake of power. Rejecting the moderation paradigm’s focus on ideology must not lead to simplistic Machiavellianism. To understand how Islamist parties evolve, we must look at the diversity of motivations and personal trajectories that inform the Islamists’ actions. For Ennahda, the experience of dictatorship is crucial. Exile and imprisonment left a lasting fear and distrust of the state among the leading Ennahda cadres. For many of them, to achieve power was not so much a question of being able to govern, but of *survival*. Having a share in the power was for Ennahda the only guarantee that they would not be

persecuted once more. Furthermore, power also represented a way to be *recognised* by the Tunisian establishment. Ever since the party's founding, Ennahda's followers have been excluded from the official history of Tunisia and treated as backwards and inferior. To achieve power would reverse this image and make them a legitimate part of Tunisian society. On top of these more noble motivations, personal ambitions of some leading members of Ennahda certainly also played a role. We have to keep all these different motivations in mind when we study Islamist parties – and not exclusively look at ideological statements. Only then are we to understand why and how Islamist parties transform themselves.

2.7 An Unwilling Force of Secularisation

Concluding this paper, I would like to make a few comments on the relationship between religion and politics in the Ennahda party, and how the role of Islam in the party's programme might evolve as a consequence of the constitutional process. As mentioned above, Ennahda has an overlap between religious and political authority. However, contrary to the original intention, it is not religion that determines politics in the Ennahda party. It is the other way around. Politics not only trumps religious dogmas, politics determine the very interpretation of the religion itself. When the Ennahda leadership faced the difficult balancing act between making the necessary compromises in the constituent assembly and explaining the concessions to the members, the religious authority of the leadership was used to make the members fall into line. Islam became a political instrument for the leadership.

Because the Ennahda leadership needed its members to accept freedom of consciousness, the abandonment of sharia and other secular principles, the leadership put forth an interpretation of Islam that supported such concessions. The strategic calculations of the Ennahda leadership thus generated an ideological change among the members of the party. The process changed how many members of the party understand what it means to be an Islamist and a Muslim. Further research and surveys are needed to measure the dimension of this value change. But, the sheer fact that the party is still united and supportive of the constitution bears witness to the transformation that has occurred. The constitutional process has adapted Tunisian Islamism to the institutions of modern democracy and in that sense brought about a secularisation of the political

sphere in Tunisia. For the reasons explained above, the party will not question the constitution. As Meherzia Labidi, a leading member of Ennahda and former vice-president of the constituent assembly, expressed it:

*"You know what we did with the constitution? We closed the debate on the political model. The acceptance of the constitution, especially article six on freedom of consciousness and article two on the civil nature of the Tunisian state, put an end to the discussion of the role of Islam in state affairs."*⁷³

2.7.1 Ennahda in the Future

Ennahda's acceptance of the constitution buried the idea of building a fundamentally different society. The process also shifted the party's focus away from the predefined ideas of Islamism to increasingly seeing the *existing* Muslim values in the Tunisian society as the point of departure. Ghannouchi's response to the Muhammad cartoons published by Charlie Hebdo is in that sense revealing. He supported censoring them in Tunisia, because of the trouble it could cause in the society. But he also affirmed that Muslims living in France should accept them because, there, such cartoons are a part of the society. "What is accepted in one society, can be refused by another", as he put it.⁷⁴ An argument that reveals a strikingly conservative view, and is in almost complete contradiction with the universalism found in original Islamism. The acceptance of the constitution has not just cemented Ennahda's support for democracy, it has also transformed the party from an Islamist into a conservative party. This evolution was concluded when the party at its 2016 congress decided to abandon the term "Islamist" and instead name its ideology "Muslim democracy".⁷⁵ A term that directly refers to the political tradition of Christian democracy that flourished in the post-war decades. This party family was known to be informed by Christianity, but only as a matter of conservative values. They never sought to legislate with the Bible.

A similar position can be expected of Ennahda in the future. Islam will probably be articulated in terms of "identity politics", not so different from how religion is used by many right-wing parties in today's Europe. The party will single out policies that

⁷³ Interview with author in the Tunisian constituent assembly the 9th of September 2014.

⁷⁴ Olivier Ravanello and Rached Ghannouchi, *Au sujet de l'islam* (Paris: Plon, 2015), 31.

⁷⁵ Monica Marks, "How big were the changes Tunisia's Ennahda party just made at its national congress?," *Washington Post*, May 25 2016.

highlight Muslim identity, but it will not be something that challenges the political order. Ennahda might push for a more Islamic oriented education system, higher taxes on alcohol or a foreign policy centred on relations with Muslim countries. But the policies will be formulated *within* the democratic institutions. Just like the Christian Right contest free abortion, but never questions the American constitution. Ennahda may engage in “culture wars” over the definition of Tunisian identity, but the principles of liberal democracy will be left in peace.

3 The Tunisian General Labour Union and the Advent of Democracy

Abstract

The Tunisian general labour union, UGTT, played a major role in the Tunisian revolution and in the following process of democratisation. This paper seeks to explain why the union was capable of taking on this role in light of the fact that the union before the revolution cooperated with and was heavily infiltrated by Ben Ali's regime. By describing the internal struggles in UGTT during the dictatorship the article claims that UGTT always contained both resistance and compliance. This duality made it possible for the organisation to survive authoritarianism and also be a credible player in the transition to democracy. The article shows, in contrast to the dominant theories within democratisation studies, that a regime affiliated civil society organisation can play an important role in a process of democratisation.

3.1 Introduction to UGTT

Before the Tunisian revolution, almost the entire body of literature on civil society in the Middle East came to the same conclusion: There was no such thing as an independent civil society. In their influential article on the persistence of authoritarianism in the region Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger for example stated that besides the Islamists “there are absolutely no social forces with significant organizational capacities that could be said to be independent from their respective regimes...”.⁷⁶ This was also the case when it came to labour unions, as Eva Bellin wrote in her study on the robustness of authoritarianism: “Labour unions [in the Middle East] are empty shells”.⁷⁷ With a few exceptions this was also the case within the - relatively small field - of studies on Tunisia. In her important work on the mechanisms of repression under Ben Ali's dictatorship, Béatrice Hibou described Tunisia's civil society as co-opted and the Tunisian general labour union, *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT), as “an

⁷⁶ Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger, "Waiting for Godot : Regime Change without Democratization in the Middle East," *International Political Science Review* 25, no. 4 (2004): 386. Steven Heydemann portrayed the civil society in the Middle East in a similar vain in his famous report "Upgrading authoritarianism in the Arab world", Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

⁷⁷ Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative politics*. 36, no. 2 (2004): 139. Asef Bayat also estimated that labour unions in the Arab World had been “decapitated and de-proletarianized” Asef Bayat, "Activism and social development in the Middle East," *International journal of Middle East studies*. 341, (2002): 7.

intermediary and, often, a pure and simple appendage to power".⁷⁸ However, the revolution and the political process that followed proved that this was not the case.

Labour union activism was a major and decisive element in the Tunisian revolution. The spontaneous revolts that erupted after the suicide of the impoverished fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi were given a professional organisation by the assistance of union members around the country. The offices of UGTT functioned as meeting points and a refuge for the protesters. There, banners could be made and the strategy of the demonstrations freely discussed. Likewise, the general strikes held in the second biggest city, Sfax, and in the capital Tunis brought the revolution from the interior of the country into the big coastal cities.⁷⁹ The very demonstrations that on January 14th forced the president Zinedine Ben Ali to flee the country departed from the headquarters of UGTT.⁸⁰

After the fall of Ben Ali, UGTT also played a leading role together with other civil society organizations in pushing for the resignation of the rest of Ben Ali's government and the beginning of a constitutional process.⁸¹ In 2013 when this same constitutional process was at the brink of collapse after the assassinations of the two left-wing politicians Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi, UGTT stepped onto the political scene once again. In collaboration with other leading civil society organisations, it held talks with the different political parties and drafted a road map for finishing the constitution. The plan worked and the new democratic constitution was passed by an overwhelming majority in the constituent assembly the 26th January 2014.⁸² A contribution that was awarded the Nobel peace prize in October 2015.⁸³ The aim of this article is not to give an

⁷⁸ Béatrice Hibou admits that the base of UGTT remained "uncontrolled", but she does not attribute any importance to this. Hibou, 124-127.

⁷⁹ Michele Penner Angrist, "Understanding the Success of Mass Civic Protest in Tunisia," *The Middle East Journal* 67, no. 4 (2013): 559.

⁸⁰ Another demonstration was also held near the metro station "République" that joined UGTT's demonstration on Avenue Habib Bourguiba. See Michaël Béchir Ayari, Vincent Geisser, and Abir Krefa, "Chronique d'une révolution annoncée," *L'Année du Maghreb*, no. VII (2011).

⁸¹ This is the process that is known as the Kasbah I and Kasbah II sit-ins. See Hmed, "Le peuple veut la chute du régime" ^a Situations et issues révolutionnaires lors des occupations de la place de la Kasbah Tunis, 2011."

⁸² Chayes.

⁸³ Mathieu Galtier, "Prix Nobel: Pourquoi le "quartette" tunisien a été récompensé," *Liberation* 2015.

exhaustive account of UGTT's role in the revolution or its involvement in the constitutional process.⁸⁴ The article will touch upon these events, but the objective is instead to go a step back and explain *why* the labour union was able to take on this role in the first place. Why was it possible for an organisation that had strong ties with Ben Ali's regime to suddenly emerge as a force for democratization? How could an "appendage to the regime", as Hibou described it, suddenly be one of the main drivers in dismantling that same regime? According to this article, the answer to these questions is that resistance to and co-operation with the regime existed side-by-side in the union throughout the dictatorship. This made it possible for UGTT to survive under Ben Ali, play a role in the revolution and the political process that followed. This article also shows that, contrary to what most of the literature on democratisation claims, regime affiliated civil society organisations can play an important role in a country's democratization process.

The following sections will describe some concrete examples of internal struggles and tensions in the union. These examples are important, but they are not chosen because they were *the* most important. Nor because the described events in themselves had a causal effect on, for example, the outbreak of the revolution. It is for other studies to decide which episodes that had the largest impact or to judge the causal relationship between them. The function of the examples is to demonstrate the mechanisms and dynamics in the relationship between UGTT and the regime. It is also worth mentioning that it is beyond the scope of the article to look into how UGTT compares to other state affiliated organizations and to what extent the described dynamics are unique to the union. The article relies primarily on testimonies from around 30 union members who were active in UGTT under Ben Ali, but secondary literature and official documents have also been used. The persons interviewed range from the former general secretary to ordinary members.

⁸⁴ For such an account see Yousfi.

3.2 UGTT and the State

In order to understand UGTT's role in the revolution and the democratisation process it is necessary to take a look at the union's history and relationship to the state. Under the French protectorate (1881-1956), the first unions were organised as sections of the Socialist and Communist unions in France, *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) and *Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire* (CGTU). Most of the members were French and Italian workers. Tunisians could join, but were generally discouraged by the dominance of French and Italian language and the focus on European political issues, such as the struggle against fascism. The unions did also not address the problems specific to Tunisian workers and the fact that they earned considerable less than their European co-workers.

In December 1924, Mohammed Ali Hammi and Tahar Haddad in 1924 founded a distinctly Tunisian labour union, *Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (CGTT). The CGTT had a dual objective to represent not just the working class, but also a nationalist cause. El Hammi and Haddad set up the union to support a strike by the workers in the Port of Tunis and precipitated strikes by workers in other sectors such as the tramway workers, but the colonial authorities shut down the union in February 1925.⁸⁵ The idea of a Tunisian labour movement was, however, taken over by Farhat Hached, who in 1946 left CGT and founded UGTT. This time, the majority of Tunisian workers joined and the union soon started to organise demonstrations and strikes against the colonial authorities. In 1952 when the Neo-Destour party was repressed, UGTT temporarily became the main political movement working for independence. This was also the reason for the assassination of Hached by a French right-wing group in 1952.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ In 1937-38 CGTT experienced a short revival, but this time a conflict with the nationalist Neo-Destour party led to its demise. For a thorough account of the early history of the Tunisian labour movement see Juliette Bessis, "Le mouvement ouvrier de ses origines à l'indépendance," *Le Mouvement Social* 89, no. October-November (1974).

⁸⁶ The circumstances surrounding the assassination of Farhat Hached was for many years unclear, because the French archives remained classified. In 2013, however, the French president François Hollande handed over the files to Hached's family and it has now been clarified that the assassination was committed by the French right-wing group *Main rouge* and that the French secret services also were implicated. See Mélissa Barra, "Farhat Hached, symbole de la lutte social et de l'émancipation tunisienne", *rfi.fr* (accessed 17th November 2015).

3.2.1 UGTT under Bourguiba

UGTT's role in the struggle for independence and the fact that it organised around 150.000 members at that time, made it one of the most important organisations in the new independent Tunisian republic. Aware of this, Bourguiba and the Neo-Destour party sought immediately after independence to get control of the union. A key element in this strategy was the undermining of the powerful general secretary, Ahmed Ben Salah. This was done by instigating a split in UGTT with the help of Habib Achour, who was opposed to Ben Salah and his attempt to play a more direct role in national politics. It resulted in Ben Salah's resignation and the appointment of Ahmed Tlili, who was more in line with the party. In the following years UGTT became subordinated to the party, but at the same time the party appropriated the union's political programme. Ben Salah himself was integrated into the government and from 1961 he served as minister for planning and economy. In this position he implemented an economic program based on collectivisation and state-guided industrialization, ideas which to a large extent came from UGTT and the economic report he had delivered to the union's congress in 1956.⁸⁷ As a consequence, the state owned enterprises' share of the economy rose from 1.8 pct. in 1961 to 33.7 pct. in 1970. However, the reforms did not produce the expected results, and in the agricultural sector they were opposed by both small and large landowners. This resistance, and the fact that some leaders in the Neo-Destour party feared that Ben Salah was becoming too powerful, led to his fall in 1969.⁸⁸

Bourguiba fired him, halted the socialist reform program and switched instead to a much more liberal economic policy in line with the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund. This shift changed the role of UGTT from being an appendix to the Neo-Destour party to a more oppositional role. Under the leadership of Habib Achour in the 1970's, UGTT became a refuge for opposition to the government's economic policies and demands for more democracy in the country. Bourguiba and the Neo-Destour party tried to reassert their control over the union, which led to strong tensions between UGTT and government. The conflict culminated the 26th January 1978, when

⁸⁷ Moore, 83.

⁸⁸ Clement Henry Moore, *Politics in North Africa: Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970).

UGTT called a general strike against the government. This strike quickly took on a more political dimension and evolved into a major revolt against Bourguiba's regime.⁸⁹

The strike was violently repressed by both police and military units on the order of Ben Ali, who at the time was head of the directory of national security. His direct implication in the repression of "Black Thursday", as it became known, would later influence the relationship between his regime and UGTT. On one hand, UGTT suffered heavy losses during the repression. Dozens of demonstrators died and hundreds of union members were imprisoned and subject to torture – including future union leaders like Ismaïl Sahabni and Abdesalem Jrad.⁹⁰ On the other hand, the regime's violent repression also turned out to be counter-productive. The strike was dissolved but the use of violence escalated the conflict and brought the regime's legitimacy into question

3.2.2 UGTT under Ben Ali

When acceding the presidency in 1987 Ben Ali therefore made sure not to engage in any direct confrontation with UGTT. He never attempted a broad crackdown as he did with the Islamist Nahda party in the beginning of the 1990's. Instead he tried to control UGTT by integrating it into the state in a way that resembled Bourguiba's strategy in the years following independence. Ben Ali formalised the meetings that had existed since the 1970's between the government, UGTT and the Tunisian conference of industries, *Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce de de l'artisanat* (UTICA). In regular triennial meetings the three parties negotiated wage increases and other economic policies. UGTT was also included in different government bodies such as the Economic and Social Council. This gave UGTT a partial responsibility for many economic decisions and made it harder for the union to put forth radical economic demands – and any kind of critique of the regime.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Emma Murphy, *Economic and Political Change in Tunisia from Bourguiba to Ben Ali* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Macmillan ; St. Martin's Press, 1999), 80.

⁹⁰ The death toll still remains an object of controversy and ranges between 46 and 140 according to the sources. Marguerite Rollinde, "Les émeutes en Tunisie: un défi à l'état?," in *Emeutes et mouvements sociaux au Maghreb: perspective comparé*, ed. Didier Le Saout and Marguerite Rollinde (Paris: Karthala, 1999). See also Issa Ben Dhiaf, "Chronique politique. Tunisie.," *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord* 16, (1978).

⁹¹ Delphine Cavallo, "Trade Unions in Tunisia," in *Political Participation in the Middle East*, ed. Ellen Lust-Okar and Saloua Zerhouni (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008).

Meanwhile, Ben Ali also skilfully infiltrated UGTT's internal structures. At the congress of Sousse in 1989, UGTT's left-wing was anxious about the growing presence of Islamists in the union's internal structures. Playing on this fear, Ben Ali managed to rally the left-wing around his own candidate, Ismaïl Sahbani, for the position as general secretary in exchange for excluding the Islamists from any influence. As soon as Sahbani was installed as general secretary, he removed the supporters of the former general secretary, Habib Achour, and replaced them with people loyal to him and Ben Ali's regime.⁹² Many members of the union's left-wing thus helped install the authoritarian leadership of Sahbani that they later came to oppose and fight against.

Under Sahbani, the majority of regions were aligned with the national executive bureau and loyal to the regime.⁹³ This could function in different ways. Some regional general secretaries were openly members of Ben Ali's ruling party and some even members of the parliament. If direct political affiliation was not present, the regime had other ways to influence the leading members of the union. The regime offered special services to union leaders. This could be tax exemption when buying a car or a house. Or a promotion of a relative in a state owned company. Another example is the manipulation of high school exams. If a leading member of the union had a son who did not get the grades to enter medical school, for example, the regime could "fix it" and secure a place for him anyway. These favours offered to the members were all registered and turned into future means of blackmailing. In case the union leader did not comply to a specific request, the regime could threaten to expose his corruption. This way, the regime was able to ask important services of leading members of the union once in a while. It could be to exclude a specific member, vote for a particular candidate, stop a strike or provide intelligence to the regime. All this made it possible for the regime to influence the different levels of the union. Sahbani's leadership also relied on the support of these regime loyal union leaders. Especially the many general secretaries in the regions with close connections to the

⁹² Sami Zemni, "From Socio-Economic Protest to National Revolt: The Labor Origins of the Tunisian Revolution," in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution. Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, ed. Nouri Gana (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 137.

⁹³ This and the following section are based on interviews with different anonymous unions leaders and Mohamed Laroussi Ben Salah as well as Erdle, 208; Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Le syndrome autoritaire : politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003), 220.

regime assured him a firm grip of the administrative commission, which is the union's most important governing body.⁹⁴

Some sectors remained defiant of Sahbani and the regime. For example, the federations of primary, secondary and higher education, the postal services and the public health sector.⁹⁵ The distinction between loyal and resistant sections of the union should not be taken too far, however. Every section of the union had to cooperate with the regime somehow, because the solution to most local problems were found in some kind of cooperation with the regime. For example, if someone was unjustly fired in a public company, it was necessary to have good contacts in the regime to get him reinstated. On the other hand, even the most corrupt and regime friendly union leaders had to provide some kind of benefits to the workers in order to keep their position. This meant that they in some situations could be found working against the interests of the regime.

3.3 Resistance in UGTT under Ben Ali

The union's affiliation with the regime was not a passive process, nor a stable equilibrium. The lines between those sectors and regions that were more anti-regime and those which were more pro-regime shifted over the years. Sometimes the regime gained ground, sometimes the more resistant milieus did. In this section, I will describe some of these internal struggles, more precisely the turbulent election in the regional chapters in Ben Arous and Kairouan in 2000 and 2003, as well as the opposition to the privatisation of Tunisair in the years leading up to the revolution. As stated in the introduction, these examples are intended to give a sense of how the internal struggles in the union worked.

3.3.1 The Case of Ben Arous

Some members described the change in Ben Arous as a "small revolution", because it was the first time under Ben Ali that the union's left-wing managed to get hold of one

⁹⁴ Under Sahbani UGTT was made up of 24 regional unions and 48 federations regrouping the different sectors, all headed by a 9-member executive board Erdle, 209. The administrative commission is composed of the general secretaries of the regions, federations and the 13 members of the national executive board Yousfi, 249.

⁹⁵ For example, the teachers' union protested the "political reasons" behind the "arbitrary and excessive" firing of their colleagues, see Florence Beaugé, "Trois enseignants en grève de la faim à Tunis depuis près d'un mois," *Le Monde*, December 12 2007.

the major industrial regions in the country.⁹⁶ Several multinational companies are located in Ben Arous, which is home to the country's biggest port and therefore has a very large regional chapter of UGTT. Throughout the 1990's the position as head of this regional chapter of UGTT was held by Habib Attig, who also represented the ruling party, RCD, in the Tunisian parliament. Inside UGTT he was known as one of "the generals", because of his close relationship with general secretary Sahbani. Despite opulent speeches about the working class, his main interest was to keep a good relationship with the regime. He did occasionally help a union member who had a problem with their employer, but if the regime asked for a favour it trumped the interests of the workers.

For this reason, a group of six members of the executive bureau in Ben Arous led by Belgacem Ayari filed a request to remove Habib Attig as general secretary in June 2000. Out of the 9 members of the bureau, exactly six were needed to overthrow an existing general secretary. However, Attig's close connections with the regime meant that the request faced several obstacles. First of all, general secretary Sahbani tried to block the vote. Here, Ayari and his supporters were lucky that their request coincided with an internal power struggle in the national executive bureau. Sahbani had around this time lost his close relationship with the presidential palace, because Ben Ali judged that he had become too powerful.⁹⁷ Simultaneously, Abdesalem Jrad, an influential member of the executive bureau and in charge of interior rules in UGTT, saw this as an opportunity to weaken Sahbani and ultimately replace him as general secretary (which would happen on September 21). Jrad therefore used his position as responsible of the union's internal rules to pressure Sahbani to hold the vote, which solved the problem for Ayari and his allies.

Another obstacle was that the police could possibly arrest one of the six members for a minor issue to ensure that they could not show up and vote for the resolution. Furthermore, there was also a fear that one of the six members, who had economic issues with Habib Attig, could be persuaded to change his mind if he was offered a bribe of an appropriate size. To avoid police intimidation and to make sure that no one changed his mind, Belgacem Ayari rented in secrecy a house in Cité Olympique – a residential neighbourhood in Tunis. Here, the six members of the executive bureau in

⁹⁶ The following description of the events is based on interviews with current and former leading members of UGTT Ben Arous.

⁹⁷ Erdle, 211.

Ben Arous spent the fifteen days that had to pass from the request was filed to the day of the vote. They only left the house at night to make a few phone calls to their respective families and to Jrad in order to remain informed about the situation. Meanwhile, the police was in vain searching several hotels in the tourist areas of Hammamet and Sousse in the belief that they were hiding here. On the day of the vote, Sahbani had assembled a group of thugs outside UGTT's headquarter at Mohammed Ali Hammi Square to scare the group from entering. But ordinary members from Ben Arous also showed up to protect Ayari and the rest of the group. The vote was therefore held and Ayari became general secretary instead of Attig. The struggles did continue, however. Still after the election Ayari was harassed by the police and his family received deaths threats. Attig stripped the regional office's bank account, stole the keys to the buildings as well as the general secretary's car. Only after Sahbani himself was removed by Jrad did the threats and intimidations stop. Afterwards, the regional office started to commemorate the repression of unions members in 1978. The portrait of Ben Ali was removed and replaced with one of the Egyptian left-wing singer Sheik Imam. It became also possible to talk more freely about politics in the region's offices. These small steps made UGTT Ben Arous known in UGTT as more left-leaning and anti-Ben Ali.

3.3.2 The Case of Kairouan

The change in Kairouan in 2003 has many similarities with the one in Ben Arous.⁹⁸ From the early 90's the region was governed by Sghair Saïdane who, exactly like Attig, was a member of RCD and the Tunisian parliament. He managed to get elected three times in a row as general secretary by issuing false union memberships to local peasants and paying them to attend the regional congress and vote for him. A practice that was accepted because of his close affiliation with the regime. However, over the years Saïdane became increasingly corrupt and autocratic, so much that he also became unpopular among the more regime friendly members of the executive bureau. This was exploited by Houcine Abassi (now general secretary of UGTT), who at the time was a ordinary member of the regional executive bureau in Kairouan. He managed to assemble a majority of the executive bureau behind a resolution to change the general secretary, using exactly the same procedure as in the case of Ben Arous. In this case the procedure was even more necessary, because it was the only way to avoid Saïdane's electoral fraud

⁹⁸ This paragraph is mostly based on an interview with Tarek Messai, deputy general secretary in UGTT regional chapter in Kairouan.

at the congresses. Jrad, however, now general secretary, was not keen of this change. He could easily control Saïdane, but Abassi might be more difficult. He therefore tried to drag out the process in the hope that the police and the ruling party in the meantime would find a way to keep Saïdane in place. In the case of Kairouan, the police focused its attention on Abdelhamid Charfeddine, one of the members of the executive bureau, who was a member of RCD and used to be very close to the regime. He had switched side and joined Abassi's camp. Because the proposed change was in between the regular congresses, the vote had to take place in UGTT's headquarters' in Tunis. If the police – or RCD for that matter – could find Charfeddine and either change his mind or block him from attending the meeting, Saïdane would be able to stay.

The police therefore searched Charfeddine's house and blocked the main road from Kairouan to Tunis in an attempt to catch him. However, Charfeddine, Abassi and the other members who wanted to topple Saïdane had already left Kairouan. Not by the main northern road to Tunis, but through one of the southern roads – the opposite direction of Tunis. From here, the group took a long detour into the interior and less policed areas of Tunisia, before they finally headed towards Tunis. After having spent the last night before the vote hiding in Abassi's son's apartment in Tunis, the group was picked up by three cars driven by UGTT members from Ben Arous, who showed up to make sure that they arrived safely to the headquarters. Having seen the persistence of Abassi's group, Jrad did not try to block the vote, but accepted the result and even congratulated Abassi with his new position as general secretary of UGTT Kairouan.

3.3.3 The Case of Tunisair

The conflict regarding Tunisair was a more classic labour dispute compared to the intra-chapter disputes in Ben Arous and Kairouan.⁹⁹ The government wanted to split Tunisair in smaller companies and privatise them one at a time. This would enable the president's family to buy up the different companies and gradually get control of the country's airline industry. Throughout the 90's, the local section of UGTT in the airport was led by Moncef Ben Romdhane, a man with good relations with the regime and on who the company and the president's family could count on for an acceptance of the plans.

⁹⁹ The following description is based on interviews with general secretary of UGTT Ariana, Mohammed Chebbi and Ben Miled Elyes, deputy general secretary of UGTT's section in Tunisair.

However, the workers in the airport were infuriated by the perspective of being removed from the mother company and lose the status and job security that it guaranteed. They therefore mobilised in spring 2003 to remove Ben Romdhane and elect a new executive bureau of the airport's section of UGTT.

The national executive bureau faced, here, cross pressure from the members and the presidential palace. Jrad therefore decided to change the place of the congress to the national headquarters in Mohammed Ali Hammi Square in the centre of Tunis instead of the regional headquarters in Ariana, which would have been the norm. On the day of the vote, union members loyal to Jrad (most probable from the transport sector, which Jrad used to represent) guarded the streets leading up to the headquarters. They intimidated the members who had shown up and managed to scare a large number of them from attending the election. As a result, less than the required 51 percentage of the electorate were present and the election was postponed by a week. Exactly during this week, more precisely April 3 2003, Ben Romdhane signed an agreement that accepted the government's plans of initiating the split up and gradual privatisation of the company. When the airport workers a few days later elected a new leadership of their union, the regime had already obtained what it wanted.

However, this did not stop the resistance of the airport workers. With a new more anti-regime leadership in place, the union started to employ strikes to protest against the plans. The tactic was usually to announce the strikes and then call them off as soon as a new round of negotiations with the company was obtained. The following meetings were used to drown the government's plans in an endless number of technical details - and thereby slow down the entire process of privatisation. The regime, of course, was aware of the obstruction of its plans. To offset the opposition, Tunisair offered members of the union's executive bureau lucrative early retirement schemes. The members could quit the job several years before the age of retirement with full pension as long as they left the union. A move that proved to be quite successful. Several members of the executive bureau accepted the offer and it almost provoked a re-election of the entire bureau. This way the struggle between the workers and the regime went on all the way up to 2010. That year, the local leadership became too radical in its protests and came into direct

conflict with UGTT's national executive bureau and Jrad. Hereafter, the local union leader was replaced by Jrad's own son, Samir Jrad, and thus brought into line.¹⁰⁰

3.3.4 The Dynamics of Resistance

The described events give a sense of how the struggles inside UGTT worked. As explained in the previous section, Ben Ali and his regime were afraid of being involved in a direct confrontation with the union. The regime could therefore not be too harsh and visible in its involvement. It could not simply arrest members of the union directly or cancel elections, for example. It would create a backlash of resistance against the regime. The interference had to play out under the radar. The techniques of blackmailing and corruption were therefore preferred, even though the police and secret services sometimes also played a part. The regime did usually not violate UGTT's internal rules, even though it did not have the slightest respect for the "spirit" in these democratic procedures. Obvious violations of the rules would expose the regime's involvement. This restricted and disguised interference gave union members the possibility to push back the infiltration if they could circumvent the regime's different tricks and make the interference visible. This is why it made sense for Abassi to take a different road to Tunis or for Ayari to hide in a secret house for two weeks. By doing so they placed the regime in a situation in which it could only use brute force to stop them, which it could not do without exposing its involvement. Had the regime not had to consider the exposure of its infiltration and its overall relationship with UGTT, it could simply have arrested the union members right away and falsified the elections.

The same kinds of struggle between higher and lower levels of the union were also present in the important uprising in the mine district around Gafsa in 2008 and in the 2010 revolt in Sidi Bouzid, which evolved into the revolution. The revolt in Gafsa was a product of unemployment and poverty, and it also involved other organisations such as *Union des diplômés chômeurs* (the union of unemployed graduates), but in the beginning the Gafsa revolt sprang out of an internal conflict in UGTT. Amarra Abassi, who was general secretary of the Gafsa region, was a character very similar to Attig and Saïdane.

¹⁰⁰ However, after the revolution the whole process was reversed. In the immediate chaos following the toppling of Ben Ali, the government signed an agreement that reintegrated the different companies into Tunis Air once again. Lebur Célia and Mehdi Michbal, "Tunisair navigue à vue," *Jeune Afrique*, 10th June 2014.

Member of RCD and the parliament – and highly corrupt. It was the fact that he and his office had been involved in “fixing” the recruitment competition for the Gafsa Phosphate Company that started the protests. Similarly, it was the active participation of the local UGTT office in Redeyef under the leadership of Adnan Hajji that helped organise and spread the revolt.¹⁰¹ Jrad and the national executive bureau did initially not support the protests, but regions such as Kairouan and Ben Arous set up committees of solidarity and opened their doors to the protesters. It was this internal pressure that forced Jrad to change UGTT’s approach and start to help the prisoners and other victims of the revolt.¹⁰²

In Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, it was not an internal conflict that was at the origin of the protests as in the Gafsa revolt, but a conflict quickly emerged between the local members and the national executive bureau over whether to support the revolt or not. While the leadership remained cautious (see 3.4), local members of UGTT acted completely independently and not only joined the protests, but helped organise and spread them to other parts of the country. The years of internal struggles – and especially the quarrels in relation to the Gafsa revolt - had taught many local union members that it was better to act independently than to wait for instructions from above.¹⁰³

3.4 The Complicity of the Leadership

As has been clear in the description of the internal struggles of UGTT, the local members did not only struggle with the representatives of the regime – in the form of the police and other state agencies – most often their struggle was with the leadership of their own organisation. Here, the opinions differ among many ordinary members of UGTT on how to perceive the leadership’s role. Ismail Sahbani was in 2001 sentenced to 13 years in prison because of financial malpractice and misconduct, and most members

¹⁰¹ For further information on the Gafsa revolt, see Larbi Chouikha and Eric Gobe, "La Tunisie entre la "révolte du bassin minier de Gafsa" et l'échéance électorale de 2009," *L'année du Maghreb*, (2009). and Karine Gantin and Omeyya Seddik, "La révolte du "peuple des mines" en Tunisie," *Le Monde Diplomatique* 2008.

¹⁰² Interviews with former members of UGTT’s administrative commission.

¹⁰³ See for example Hmed, "Réseaux dormants, contingence et structures. Genèses de la révolution tunisienne."

do generally consider him corrupt and very dependent on Ben Ali's regime.¹⁰⁴ Jrad, however, is to this day a much more contested character among the union members. Many cadres affirm that Jrad brought more freedom to the regional and local levels. Unlike under Sahbani, the regions and local sections enjoyed a certain degree of independence and some of the leaders close to the regime were removed. UGTT did not stage a campaign in support of Ben Ali in the parade elections in 2004 and 2009, but solely stated its support in official communiqués. On the other hand, Jrad and the national executive bureau never challenged the regime and questioned Ben Ali's authority. As has been described above, the leadership's repression of rebellious union's members often functioned as a complement to the regime's use of the police or secret services.

To what extent was the leaderships compliance a strategy to survive in Ben Ali's dictatorship and to what extent was the leadership an ally of the regime? In many situations Jrad officially agreed with the regime, but sent different signals to union members. The former editor of UGTT's newspaper *Chaab*, Mohamed Laroussi Ben Salah recalls how Jrad used to deal with complaints about articles that had crossed the strict lines of censorship. He would act very surprised when talking to the president or a representative of the palace. Then he would immediately phone Ben Salah and give him a pompous speech about the interests of the country and the disgrace his articles had caused. But the same day, Jrad would pass by his office and tell him to continue as if nothing had happened – the call was intended for the police who tapped the phone. Similar episodes occurred in relation to some strikes. Jrad denounced the strikes officially, but gave his acceptance under the table.¹⁰⁵

But Jrad did also genuinely cooperate with the regime. He sometimes turned to the regime to deal with opponents inside UGTT. At the congress of Djerba in 2002 an overwhelming majority of the union members voted to limit the number of terms for members of the executive bureau, including the general secretary, to two consecutive

¹⁰⁴ The reason why Sahbani's corruption was exposed is related to the fact that he lost confidence of the presidential palace, as mentioned in the previous section. Sahbani was pardoned and released after having served only two years of his prison sentence. See Khaled Boumiza, 2011. "Tunisie: Ismaïl Sahbani mettrait-il le feu à ce qui reste de la poudre d'une UGTT assagie?," *African Manager*, (accessed 20th November 2015).

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Mohammed Laroussi Ben Salah

mandates.¹⁰⁶ Ever since this article 10 in UGTT's statute was passed, Jrad began to work for its removal to make it possible for him to continue as general secretary. In this struggle Jrad turned to the regime to side line defenders of the article. One of the more spectacular incidences, was when Jrad and his allies in 2008 staged a public campaign against the general secretary of the region of Tunis, Taoufik Touati, who was critical of the leadership and who wanted to keep the article. The regime controlled newspapers ran stories about financial fraud in the region and accused him of having an affair with a female member of the region's executive bureau.¹⁰⁷ The police also intimidated supporters of Touati, who showed up at one of the region's congresses.¹⁰⁸ Likewise, the leadership's role in the revolution is also questionable. The different communiqués did not denounce the protesters (as they did in the case of the Gafsa revolt), but nor did they pronounce any explicit critique of the regime. They tried to be something in between. The communiqué sent out the 28th December 2010 illustrates this:

*"The executive bureau of UGTT, conscious of the responsibility of the organisation and its national and social role, rapidly rushed to steer the events through a systematic intervention of the general secretary in which he cooperated with the different levels of government to free those who had been arrested in the regions after the events. The executive bureau welcomes the favourable responses of government which has given permission to liberate the majority of the prisoners"*¹⁰⁹

The leadership did not call for a general strike. Only after intense pressure from the lower levels did the administrative commission grant the permission to the regions to organise their own general strikes (which started the series of strikes that culminated in Sfax the 12th and in Tunis the 14th January 2011). Simultaneously Jrad met Ben Ali the 13th in the presidential palace and the leadership sent out text messages to union members saying that they should not go to the streets the 14th, but "strike at home". There was a tactical element in this. The leadership had to show that it was trying to calm down the members in order not to get into a direct conflict with the regime. Some members also state that the leadership sent opposite signals to the lower levels.

¹⁰⁶ This rule was also passed as a subtle way to protest Ben Ali's never ending presidency.

¹⁰⁷ "Tunisie - UGTT : la "chasse aux sorcières" se poursuit," *Business News* 2009.

¹⁰⁸ This piece of information is mainly based on an interview with Radhi Ben Hassine, a former member of the executive bureau in the region Tunis. Ben Hassine formed afterwards a network of union members who were opposed to the leadership under the name "la rencontre syndicale démocratique".

¹⁰⁹ Cited from Yousfi, 85. Translated from French.

It is important to keep in mind that no one expected Ben Ali to flee the country so quickly.¹¹⁰ The regime brutally cracked down on the protests and showed no sign of giving up. In case the regime managed to stay in place it might be a good choice not to close the door completely to Ben Ali in order to protect the union's organisation. Even if the agenda was to topple the regime a gradual increase in the protests may also have been the wisest move to keep the pressure on the regime. It was essential that the protests constantly increased and not collapsed as could have happened if a massive protest wave did not have any effect. Furthermore, it was also a matter of personal safety. If the union went too far too quickly in its opposition, the members of the executive bureau's own lives would be at risk.

However, one might also see in these moderate steps, not a support for Ben Ali, but perhaps a fear of what the revolution would bring. After all, the members of the national executive bureau at the time must have known that the fall of the regime would necessarily also cast doubt on their own positions. The many internal struggles that over the years had put them on top of the organisation had also brought the leadership many enemies at the regional and local levels – and they could be expected to exploit the revolutionary moment to get back at them. Even if the cooperation with the regime under Ben Ali had been purely tactical, it might still be compromising in a post-revolutionary phase where all authorities are put into question. The line between the leadership's tactical cooperation with the regime and a genuine reluctance or hesitance towards the revolution is therefore immensely fluid.

3.5 The Dialectics of Resistance and Complicity

Having described the resistance inside UGTT and the leadership's cooperation with regime, I will now explain how the two tendencies interacted. Here, we also see the reasons why the union could play a significant role in both the revolution and the following process of democratisation. Jrad tried to keep good relations with the regime

¹¹⁰ According to a statement by Ben Ali delivered through his Lebanese lawyer it was not his plan to leave Tunisia the 14th January, but only to accompany his family to safety in Saudi Arabia and return the same day. However, the pilot ignored his orders and left the airport without him. See H el ene Sallon, "La fuite de Ben Ali racont e par Ben Ali," *Le Monde*, 14th January 2014.

and the lower levels of the union. But, the intermediate cadres also tried to please the union's leadership and their own members at the same time. The tension between complicity and resistance trickled down through the organisation and was constantly negotiated at each organisational level. Many cadres had to practice a degree of double discourse to cooperate with Jrad and the leadership while still appearing to be on the side of local members' demands and anti-regime sympathies. As Mohammed Chebbi general secretary of the region of Ariana recalls it:

When Jrad wanted to stop a strike I tried to say no, but if he really pushed I gave in. In order to keep the umbrella of UGTT. It was not easy to strike under Ben Ali. (...) When I talked to the local members I gave them the speech Jrad had given me, but I did not put too much effort into convincing them.” (Interview with author).

The position seems incoherent, but it was exactly this ability to send mixed signals and hedge one's bets that made it possible for UGTT to survive the dictatorship and be a part of the political transition. It is important to remember that organised political opposition was not tolerated under Ben Ali. Parties, like the Islamist Nahda party, were persecuted and forced to either hide underground or to live in exile.¹¹¹ But the particular negotiated relationship between UGTT and the state made it possible for the union to exist in this environment. The cooperation assured the union's survival and by doing that the cooperation also secured an organisational space within which the members at the lower levels could practice a resistance to the regime. The members had to struggle with higher levels of the organisation and police intimidation could occur, but they knew that as long as their activities took place within UGTT there was a limit to the regime's repression. UGTT's status and relations with regime protected them.

On the other hand, the fact that union members remained mobilised and tried to push the leadership to oppose the regime also delivered a certain alibi for the leadership. In dealing with the regime, the national executive bureau could always point to the union members resistance in order to explain why they could not give in to the regime's

¹¹¹ There existed a number of legal opposition parties within Tunisia under Ben Ali, but they were mostly facade parties set-up to give an impression of pluralism. The only exception was PDP, which did host some genuine opposition to the regime. For more information on the opposition under Ben Ali see Camau and Geisser, *Le syndrome autoritaire : politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali*, 227. For an account of the Islamist Nahda party's under Ben Ali see sections 2.3 and 5.2.

demands. That way, the resistant members gave the leadership leverage towards the regime. One of the best illustrations of this is fact that UGTT's offices functioned as safe havens for the protesters during the revolution. The regime was afraid of ruining the relationship with the union's leadership if it gave orders to search the buildings. At the same time Jrad and the executive bureau could claim that they were forced to let the protesters use them because of the pressure from the members. The two different sides of UGTT came together and formed a paradoxical equilibrium that kept the offices as safe havens while not breaking the ties with the regime. The leadership's compliance and the resistance of the members conditioned one another and made it possible for the union to play a major role in the revolution.

After the fall of Ben Ali, this combination of having both cooperated with and opposed the regime gave UGTT an advantage compared to other political actors. The organisation's structure survived the dictatorship, and it had as well an alternative elite that was ready to take over in the post-revolutionary period. The dissident milieus in UGTT had a strong popular legitimacy after the revolution, because of the struggles with the regime and the union's leadership. The revolution put an end to Jrad's ambitions of changing article 10. This meant that 10 out of the 13 members in the executive bureau, who had already served two terms at the time, were obliged to quit. At the congress of Tabarka in December 2011 a whole new leadership made up of the union's left and anti-Ben Ali wing took over. Houcine Abassi, who had fought with Saïdane in Kairouan replaced Jrad, and people like Sami Tahri and Anouar Ben Kaddour from the union's politicised and left-wing federations of secondary and higher education became members of the executive bureau.¹¹² Compared to the rest of the political landscape after the revolution the new leadership of UGTT had a unique combination of experience and legitimacy. The political parties had legitimacy from their years in opposition, but lacked practical experience of working with the state apparatus. Whereas, the remains of the ruling party had experience *ad nauseam*, but did not have the slightest popular legitimacy. These circumstances explain to a large extent why UGTT was able to play such an important role in the process of democratisation that followed the revolution.

¹¹² Yousfi, 149.

3.6 Civil Society and Democratisation

Having outlined why UGTT was able to play a role in the revolution and the following constitutional process, I would like to make a few comments on what the literature on democratisation can learn from the case of UGTT. Since the publication of the hugely influential *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* the study of democratisation has been dominated by an elite centred approach.¹¹³ Largely inspired by the development in Southern Europe and Latin America, the transition paradigm has focused mainly on how divisions inside authoritarian regimes lead to democratic openings. "...We assert that there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirectly – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself", as Phillippe Schmitter and Guillermo O'Donnell proclaimed it.¹¹⁴

In reaction to the elitism of the transition paradigm there has been an attempt to give civil society a more prominent position in the literature. Especially scholars of social movements have pushed this agenda. Charles Tilly and Sydney Tarrow, for example, have emphasised how the democratisation of Western Europe to a large extent was a product of social movements' pressure on the states to open up the political system.¹¹⁵

However, since the literature is primarily a product of a Western political context, where the state does not control civil society, civil society has been regarded as something that only emerges *outside* the political system and separate from the state.

The focus of the literature has therefore been on the injustices that mobilize citizens and the socialisation process that takes place inside the movements. Only at a later stage has the interaction with the state entered the analysis. Originally, this has been in the form of electoral laws and party structures that affect the success of social movements.¹¹⁶ In the field of democratisation studies, the interaction with the state has been analysed in a

¹¹³ O'Donnell et al.

¹¹⁴ Guillermo A. O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, "Opening Authoritarian Regimes," in *Transitions from authoritarian rule*, ed. Guillermo A. O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Lawrence Whitehead (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 19.

¹¹⁵ See for example Charles Tilly, *Social movements, 1768-2004* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004); Sidney G. Tarrow, *Strangers at the Gates: Movements and States in Contentious Politics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹¹⁶ See Hanspeter Kriesi, "Political Context and Opportunity," in *The Blackwell companion to social movements*, ed. David A. Snow, Sarah Anne Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004).

similar way by looking at small openings in the authoritarian regime that makes it possible to organise protests and spread a message. However, this creates a tautological conundrum for the study of social movements in democratisation processes. If social movements need an *initial* opening of the regime in order to play a role, then social movements cannot be the root cause of democratisation.¹¹⁷ Only some kind of transformation of the regime can be the root cause and then the analysis falls back into the transition paradigm's focus on the elites in the authoritarian regime. The social movements scholars have thus only been able to nuance or amend the elitist transition paradigm – not to replace it.

The case of UGTT provides in this regard an interesting contribution to the study of democratisation. The relationship between UGTT and the state points directly at the problem with the current literature. It shows that mobilization and interaction with the state cannot be analytically separated in an authoritarian context. The two entities were completely intertwined in Tunisia under Ben Ali. It was not UGTT versus the state, but multiple struggles inside the organisation between different degrees of regime affiliation and resistance (as well as other political cleavages). But despite this blurred nature of UGTT, the union still constituted an important opportunity to engage in political activity for many people in an otherwise strictly controlled and surveyed authoritarian context.

Some might claim that UGTT's close affiliation with the state automatically excludes it from being categorised as a proper social movement or civil society organisation. This saves the theory, but leaves us without any explanation of the nature of popular contestation in Ben Ali's Tunisia and the role it played in the transition to democracy. Furthermore, it leads to an absurd search for a pure and independent civil society, which never existed.¹¹⁸ Instead, it is my opinion, that the studies of democratisation should revise its assumptions on what makes up a social movement and civil society. It is

¹¹⁷ In a standard textbook on democratisation, Natalia Letki describes that "...*formel civil society associations are usually absent in authoritarian regimes, their functions are performed by protest movements.*" Natalia Letki, "Social Capital and Civil Society," in *Democratization*, ed. Christian W. Haerpfer et al. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹¹⁸ The European Union's neighbourhood program is to a certain extent an example of such a quest for a pure civil society. See Andrea Teti, "Democracy Without Social Justice: Marginalization of Social and Economic Rights in EU Democracy Assistance Policy after the Arab Uprisings," *Middle East Critique* 24, no. 1 (2015).

perhaps time that the field starts to include regime affiliated organisations and study the actual relations between individual activism and the regime.

This would not compromise the importance of civil society and social movements. On the contrary. The study of state affiliated organisations makes it possible to overcome the elitist focus of the transition paradigm. Looking at such organisations and their internal fractions permits to establish popular contestation as a root cause for the fall of authoritarianism. In Tunisia no preliminary opening of the regime took place. It was popular protests, which local and regional sections of UGTT helped orchestrate, that led to the fall of the regime. It proves that civil society organisations can bring about revolutionary change even in the most co-opted and authoritarian contexts.

4 The Tunisian Revolution and Governance of Religion

Abstract

How has the Tunisian revolution and subsequent political transition influenced the relationship between state power and Islam? The following article aims to provide an in-depth and historically informed analysis of these relations through an exploration of one specific case: The attempts by successive minister of religious affairs to reform state's management of Tunisian religious institutions after January 2011. The article builds on multiple fieldwork visits to Tunisia by both authors, in addition to an extensive set of primary and secondary sources. We find that relations between state and religious authority have changed considerably throughout the 2011-2015 period, and that a wide variety of actors, interests and political conflicts intersected with the question of state-religion relations. The fact that non-Islamist actors played such a crucial role in shaping governance of the Tunisian religious field underlines the necessity for scholars to give more attention to the role non-Islamist actors play in shaping the institutionalisation public religion in Arab and Muslim Majority countries.

(co-authored with Teije Hidde Donker)

4.1 Governance of Religion in Tunisia

How has the Tunisian revolution and subsequent political transition influenced the relationship between state power and public Islam? The following article aims to provide an in-depth and historically informed analysis of these relations through an exploration of one specific case: The attempts by successive Ministers of Religious Affairs to reform state's management of Tunisian religious institutions after January 2011. In doing so, we hope to provide a better understanding of the ways in which political struggles relate to state's governance of public Islam in Muslim majority countries.

For several decades the relationship between Islam and politics has been a dominant topic within Middle East Studies, Political Science, and Sociology. Many of these studies focus on political Islam or Islamism. For good reason: Many relevant political actors—from Al-Qaida to the Muslim Brothers—have been informed by some type of Islam inspired political ideology and define themselves as Islamists. At the same time, though, the focus on political Islam has lead to a neglect of other ways that Islam and politics interact. First, Islamists are not the only political actors whose political actions are informed by religious sentiments. Many Arab nationalists leaders in the post-

independence period—such as Gamal Abdel Nasser—have used religion to legitimize their political standpoints.¹¹⁹ The current Tunisian President Béji Caïd Essebsi, from the nationalist and originally anti-Islamist Nidaa Tounes party, has likewise refused to decriminalise homosexuality because it would be against ‘religion, costumes and Arab traditions’.¹²⁰ Islam is a source of political motivation for a multitude of political actors—not exclusively Islamists.

Second, and more important for this article, scholars in the social sciences tend to overlook the other direction in which Islam and politics interact: how general political struggles shape practical arrangements between state power and religious institutions in Muslim majority countries. There is an extensive literature on formal management of religion around the globe, for instance comparing degrees of state-religion separation between countries. This literature includes scholarship on the governance of institutionalized religion in the Muslim world. But, as they often build on cross-national comparisons, these contributions tend to compare state management of public religion as a relatively static issue and tend to neglect the dynamic nature of these arrangements. They tend to neglect how these relations change and how struggles regarding, for instance, state control over preaching in mosques, curricula of religious education and management of religious appointees interlink with other social, economic and political struggles.¹²¹

There are some exceptions to the above observation. Historians working on the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire explore struggles over the governance of religion, but usually not much further than the mid twentieth century and the Turkish revolution.¹²² Another noteworthy exception is Malika Zeghal’s work on state and religious institutions

¹¹⁹ Malika Zeghal, "Religion and politics in Egypt : the ulema of al-Azhar, radical Islam, and the state (1952-94)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, no. 3 (1999): 371-399.

¹²⁰ Monia Ben Hamadi, "Tunisie: Béji Caïd Essebsi s'oppose catégoriquement à la dépenalisation des pratiques homosexuelles," *Huffington Post Maghreb*, 6th October 2015 2015.

¹²¹ Jonathan Fox, *A world survey of religion and the state* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹²² One can mention for example Jonathan Porter Berkey, *The formation of Islam : religion and society in the Near East, 600-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

in the Middle East.¹²³ However, taking into account the quantity of studies produced in sociology and political science on the topic of political Islam, there is remarkably little research on how political struggles interlink with questions of governance of public religion in different Arab states.

In this paper we try to make up for this deficiency and show the importance of researching relations between state management of public Islam and political reform. Tunisia constitutes a uniquely interesting case in this regard. It is only the Arab country that managed to transform the 2011 uprising into a transition to democracy and it is also one of the countries in the region where relations between state power and Islam became part of a public debate. With this in mind, this article revolves around subsequent attempts by post-revolutionary Ministers of Religious Affairs to reform state management of religious institutions in the country. Such an exploration can provide us with an understanding of how political struggles within a democratisation process relate to reforms of state-religion relations that goes beyond the Tunisian case and is applicable to other Arab and Muslim majority countries.

The article builds on multiple fieldwork visits to Tunisia by both authors, in addition to an extensive set of primary and secondary sources. Fieldwork visits to Tunisia took place in May and October 2015 including interviews with (aids to) former Ministers of Religious Affairs, representatives of unions, mosque Imams and Islamist groups and parties. In total 25 individuals were interviewed. Secondary sources include French and Arabic local newspapers. Some of these were obtained during fieldwork, but most were collected using a digital archive of Tunisian newspapers.¹²⁴ Primary documents were collected either digitally or onsite from the relevant (state) organizations. The article is structured as follows. We start with an extensive exploration of the historical development of relations between state power and religious institutions in Tunisia. Subsequently we discuss the post-revolutionary development of these relations, and their related political struggles, through the terms of four Ministers of Religious Affairs

¹²³ See for example Malika Zeghal, "Public institutions of religious education in Egypt and Tunisia," in *Trajectories of education in the Arab world : legacies and challenges*, ed. Osama Abi-Mershed (London: Routledge, 2010). Malika Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam : les oulémas d'Al Azhar dans l'Égypte contemporaine* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1996).

¹²⁴ This digital archive can be found at www.turess.com.

between January 2011 and the end of 2015. In the conclusion we outline some of the analytical insights that can be drawn from the Tunisian case.

4.2 History of Islam and State in Tunisia

Tunisia was, as most of the Arab world, under formal Ottoman control from the mid sixteenth century until the late nineteenth century. Although the province had a substantial level of independence, the relationship between religious and political authority was very much shaped by Ottoman influences. Religious sharia law (in both a maliki and hanafi versions) was applied alongside the corpus of law based on edicts of Ottoman sultans (*kanunname*). The *beys* appointed the scholars at the Zaytuna university-mosque and the grand-mufti. They officially also held the final word in disputes between religious dignitaries and the ruler.¹²⁵ However, in practice the ulema did enjoy a semi-autonomous status: Their social prestige and the fact that many of the ulema also occupied important positions in Sufi orders gave them authority to occasionally oppose political initiatives.¹²⁶

In the late nineteenth century, with increasing competition from European powers, the great reformist premier minister Khayr al-Din Pasha implemented a number of reforms that also affected the religious establishment. In 1874 the habous council was founded as a public organization managing religiously owned lands. At Zaytuna, in 1875, modern subjects such as logic, literature and astronomy were introduced, and the teaching reorganised into structured diplomas. At the same time the supervision of the professors increased, which indirectly gave the state a bigger role in the administration of the university. In the same year he also founded a new educational institute, the Sadiki College, that was to teach foreign languages such as Italian and French in addition to modern sciences.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Knut S. Vikør, *Between God and the sultan : a history of Islamic law* (Oxford [England]; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-70. Robert Brunschvig, "Justice religieuse et justice laïque dans la Tunisie des deys et des beys, jusqu'au milieu du XIXe siècle," *Studia Islamica* . 3, (1965).

¹²⁶ Arnold H. Green, "Political Attitudes and Activities of the Ulama in the Liberal Age: Tunisia as an Exceptional Case," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7, no. 2 (1976): 213.

¹²⁷ Nouredine Sraieb, "Khéridine et l'enseignement : une nouvelle conception du savoir en Tunisie," *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, (1992): 206.

4.2.1 State and Islam under French Rule

After the first World War, when a Tunisian anti-colonial movement emerged, the French authorities actively sought to obtain the support of the ulema and the religious establishment to curb nationalist sentiments.¹²⁸ This was done by keeping sharia courts in place and making alliances with important ulema families. These attempts were aided by the fact that the ulema were already sceptical of the nationalists—represented by the Neo-Destour party—because of its modernist tendencies and often French educational background of its members. Additionally many of the Neo-Destourians had attended the Sadiki College and French Universities. This was also true for Habib Bourguiba, who would become Tunisia's long time ruler. It did not help that many of the members of the Neo-Destour party came from peasant families (mainly from the Sahel) in contrast to the ulemas Tunis-bourgeoisie background. An example of this conflict was the famous naturalization crisis of 1932-34 where Bourguiba and the Neo-Destourians argued that Muslims, who had obtained French citizenship were apostates and could not be buried in Muslim cemeteries, as opposed to the grand-mufti and sharia courts that sanctioned such burials.¹²⁹ In effect, the majority of the ulema provided tacit support for the French authorities in an attempt to safeguard their position in Tunisian society.

Despite the conservative nature of the Tunisian class of ulema, the period also saw modernist voices emerging from the Zaytuna milieu. The Zaytuna graduate Tahar Haddad published in 1927 an important work on the birth of the Tunisian labor movement and its founder Mohammed Ali Hammi. Later on, in 1930, he wrote his now famous *Our Women in the Islamic Law and Society* in which he proposed a new progressive interpretation of the sharia that argued for female education, women rights and a ban on polygamy. The book was widely condemned by the ulema at the Zaytuna. In a special session the Zaytuna ulema went as far as forbidding him to take his final exam and stripping him of all his degrees.¹³⁰ Another mentionable figure was Tahar Ben Achour. In his job as professor at Zaytuna, during the early 20th century, he wrote an extensive

¹²⁸ Green, "Political Attitudes and Activities of the Ulama in the Liberal Age: Tunisia as an Exceptional Case," 239.

¹²⁹ Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *Divided rule : sovereignty and empire in French Tunisia, 1881-1938* (2014), 131.

¹³⁰ Nouredine Sraïeb, "Contribution à la connaissance de Tahar El-Haddad, 1899-1935," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, (1967).

exegesis of the Quran and tried to bring about a new method of interpretation that allowed for greater flexibility of Islamic scriptures in relation to modern issues.¹³¹ However different, all these actors—from Khayr al-Din Pasha to the nationalists, Zaytuna ulema and modernists—were active to redefine the position of Islam in public life in a changing Tunisia.

4.2.2 State and Islam under Bourguiba

After independence Bourguiba and the Neo-Destour party sought, in order to solidify their control over the country, to gain control over and weaken Islamic institutions in the country. First, the modernist Tahar ben Achour was assigned as Dean of the Zaytuna mosque-university. Second, the sharia courts were abolished at the expense of a unified civil law modelled on the French *code civile*. A personal status code was implemented that broke with traditional Islamic law, but that had received crucial support from Zaytuna's newly assigned dean. Furthermore the *habous* councils, the most important source of income for the ulema, were nationalised. After Tahar ben Achour retired as dean in 1961, the Zaytuna mosque-university was subsequently turned into a school of theology at the Faculty of Letters at University of Tunis.¹³²

What was left of religious activities in the country were placed directly under the control of President Bourguiba.¹³³ Five years later it was decided to establish a 'mufti of the republic' that would be directly responsible to the Prime Minister, and serve as replacement for Zaytuna's authority on Islamic issues.¹³⁴ In 1967, a more formalized directorate for religious affairs opened to manage religious affairs in the country. All in all, these reforms placed the state fully in control over the Tunisian religious sphere. The role of the ulema therefore changed fundamentally. Teachers and graduates of Zaytuna found work within the newly established Faculty of the Theology or as teachers of religion in primary or secondary education: both part of a new secular educational

¹³¹ Moustapha Achour, "Tahar Ibn Achour, Chevalier de la libération et de l'illumination", The International Solidarity Movement

¹³² Zeghal, "Public institutions of religious education in Egypt and Tunisia," 5.

¹³³ "A Historical Overview of the Administrative Management of Religious Affairs in Tunisia ", Ministry of Religious Affairs.

¹³⁴ Malika Zeghal, "Etat et marché des biens religieux : les voies Égyptienne et tunisienne," *Critique internationale*, (1999): 84.

structure.¹³⁵ Zaytuna and its graduates seemingly lost their status and role as interpreters and guardians of Tunisian Islam and social identity.¹³⁶

It is important to emphasise that Bourguiba was concerned with empowering the state over the religious sphere, not with eliminating Islam as such. The 1956 constitution for example enshrined in its very first article that 'Tunisia is a free, independent, and sovereign nation, *whose religion is Islam*, Arabic its language and its form of government republican'. Bourguiba explicitly rejected Mustapha Kemal Atatürk's muscular secularism. He thought that his nationalist and modernist project was best achieved without breaking with Islam, but by modernizing Islam from within through his own personalistic leadership. As he proclaimed in a speech in 1960 'As the Head of a Muslim state, I may also speak in the name of religion'.¹³⁷ The constitution's mentioning of Islam as state religion while proclaiming the regime republican, thus, perfectly reflected Bourguiba's intermingling of Islam and modernist state-building. In the first decade after independence, Bourguiba really did try to use his position to push the limits of *ijtihad* and sought to discourage fasting during ramadan, the use of veil and limit the Aïd Kebir offerings.¹³⁸ With their financial and institutional position dismantled, the Zaytuna ulema would prove unable to mount effective (future) opposition to any of these attempts.

When, in the 1970s, Bourguiba silently put an end to the most modernist interpretations of Islam and gradually opted for a more conciliatory stance it was in large part due to the fact that his regime faced a serious Communist opposition, and not a Zeytuna one, as the promulgation of Islamic values was seen as a way to counter the Communist threat. The working hours during Ramadan were changed in order to facilitate fasting, the government handed out small allowances to the poor to enable them to buy a sheep for *Aïd Kebir*, and the consumption of alcohol was limited during Islamic holidays.¹³⁹ Furthermore, the government established the *Association pour la Sauvegarde du Coran* (the

¹³⁵ Zeghal, "Public institutions of religious education in Egypt and Tunisia," 9.

¹³⁶ For more information on these reforms see Yadh Ben Achour, "Islam perdu, Islam retrouvé," *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*; XVIII, 1979, (1980); Moore, *Tunisia since independence: the dynamics of one-party government*.

¹³⁷ Moore, *Tunisia since independence: the dynamics of one-party government*, 57.

¹³⁸ Franck Frégosi, "La régulation institutionnelle de l'islam en Tunisie : Entre audace moderniste et tutelle étatique," *CNRS Université Robert Schumann*, (2004): 7.

¹³⁹ Franck Frégosi, "La régulation institutionnelle de l'islam en Tunisie : Entre audace moderniste et tutelle étatique," *CNRS Université Robert Schumann*, (2004): 13.

Association for the Protection of the Quran) as an association to promulgate and discuss Islamic values. At the same time though, state management of the religious sphere further developed: with the directorate for religious affairs expanding its management of mosques, control over Imams, and funding of religious positions. As an Islamist opposition emerged in the late 1970s¹⁴⁰ and state repression increased under the last years of Bourguiba rule, this directorate was placed within the Ministry of Interior.¹⁴¹

4.2.3 State and Islam under Ben Ali

When ascending the presidency in 1987, Zinedine Ben Ali did not hold the same kind of legitimacy as Bourguiba had done due to his role in the independence movement. With this in mind, Ben Ali found Islam to be useful tool to gain popular legitimacy. The five daily calls for prayers were introduced in TV and radio, and Ben Ali gave the official communication of the presidency a much more pious style.¹⁴² In addition to these symbolic gestures, Ben Ali also implemented some administrative reforms of religious institutions: A university for religious studies was founded in 1989 bearing the name of the Zaytuna mosque, the directorate for religious affairs was detached from the Prime Minister's office and turned into an independent ministry in 1991.¹⁴³ Ben Ali also reorganised and enlarged the High Islamic Council, which had been established a few years before. Twenty-five Islamic scholars were given a consultative role on laws and decisions that had a relation to Islam. Likewise, the office of the Mufti was expanded and placed under tripartite control consisting of the President, Prime Minister and President of the Parliament.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ It should be noted that many members of the previous mentioned *Association pour la Sauvegarde du Coran* would constitute the first generation within the Tunisian Islamist movement. For an in-depth discussion of this period, see François Burgat, *L'islamisme au Maghreb : la voix du Sud : (Tunisie, Algérie, Libye, Maroc)* (Paris: Karthala, 1988).

¹⁴¹ "A Historical Overview of the Administrative Management of Religious Affairs in Tunisia ".

¹⁴² Frégosi, "La régulation institutionnelle de l'islam en Tunisie : Entre audace moderniste et tutelle étatique," 17.

¹⁴³ "A Historical Overview of the Administrative Management of Religious Affairs in Tunisia ".

¹⁴⁴ Yadh Ben Achour, "Politique et religion en Tunisie," *Confluences Méditerranée* Printemps, no. 33 (2000); Mohamed Kerrou, *Public et privé en islam : espaces, autorités et libertés* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose : Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain, 2002).

Whereas Bourguiba used religion with the aim to forge a nation, Ben Ali used religion to help legitimise his 'National pact' and the regime he established. But both aims, in the end, meant that Islam had to be subordinated to and controlled by state authorities. The establishment of the Zaytuna university enabled better control over graduates of the former Zaytuna university-mosque, which had gained a degree of influence in Tunisian primary and secondary education.¹⁴⁵ The Mufti and the members of the Higher Islamic Council as well as local imams were surveyed and controlled by the state.¹⁴⁶ Ben Ali never tolerated any kind of independent manifestation of religion and brutally persecuted Ennahda, the leading Islamist movement in the country. Despite the fact that the Ministry of Religious Affairs was responsible for religious institutions, it was in many instances the Ministry of Interior that held control in practice: It was the police and secret services that ensured the loyalty of imams and surveyed the sermons that were delivered in mosques.¹⁴⁷

Until the 2011 revolution, Tunisian religious institutions were therefore intimately linked to the state apparatus. The specific usage of Islam could change, but Islam never departed from the role as legitimisation of state authority. It was this logic that would be questioned following the revolution of 2011.

4.3 State and Islam After the 2011 Revolution

We can discern a number of phases in the development of state management of religious institutions following the Tunisian revolution. First, the period running from January 2011 until the first months of the Tunisian Troika government's rule (spring 2012) was marked by revolutionary chaos and a breakdown of state authority. This is followed by a phase where both political and religious mobilization became more organized. At this stage, during the rule of the interim Troika government, there was an attempt to institutionalize a degree of self-regulation for Islamic actors in the public sphere. The succession of the Troika government by the technocrat government in January 2014, and especially the subsequent national unity government of February 2015, marks a period in which more direct state control returned. These developments can be traced through the

¹⁴⁵ Zeghal, *Public Institutions of Religious Education in Egypt and Tunisia*, p.9.

¹⁴⁶ Frégosi, "La régulation institutionnelle de l'islam en Tunisie : Entre audace moderniste et tutelle étatique," 19.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with a clerk at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Tunis, September 12, 2015.

tenures of the Ministers of Religious Affairs between January 2011 and 2015: Laroussi Mizouri, Noureddine Khademi, Mounir Tlili and Othman Battikh.

As we will see, the views and actions of these ministers provide a guide to explore the more general development of changing relations between state power and religious institutions in the context of the post-2011 political transition. These ministers were active in, and constrained by, a context that consisted of many more actors: Zaytuna, for instance, reemerged as an institutional embodiment of national religious education.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, the various (interim) governments, an emerging activist religious sphere, public political polarisation, Tunisian unions and—last but not least—increasingly fragmented Islamist and Salafist movements provided an ever changing backdrop against which these ministers were active.

4.3.1 Minister Laroussi Mizouri and the First Essebsi Government

From the uprising that led Ben Ali, his closest families and his aides to leave the country, to the two consecutive sit-ins of Kasbah I and Kasbah II (end of January-March 2011) protesters' demands changed from calling for jobs and an end to corruption, to demanding a transformation of the entire political system.¹⁴⁹ In this context, many challenged the authority of the state, the police and the Ministry of Interior. This applied especially to the latter two that had been the bedrock of Ben Ali's regime. It meant that in the immediate aftermath of the Tunisian revolution social stability and state authority broke down. The period was marked by a stark increase in strikes—especially wildcat ones—and impromptu neighbourhood security groups formed in the wake of the revolution, or so-called *Ligues des Protection de la Révolution* that evolved increasingly into partisan gangs. It was a period of post-revolutionary instability. In the middle of this instability a transitional government under the leadership of Caid Essebsi drafted an electoral law for elections of a to-be-formed National Constituent Assembly (NCA) that would be tasked with drafting a new Tunisian constitution.

¹⁴⁸ Next to the formal religious educational institute, Zaytuna also reemerged as a collective identity build on a Tunisian religious authority: in essence as a collective of independent ulema that received their religious education at Zaytuna. This can for instance be observed around the Charter of Zaytuna Ulema (*Mithaq Ulema Tunis*) published in December 2012 by the late Zaytuna scholar Kamaladdin Jaid.

¹⁴⁹ Eric Gobe, "Tunisie an I : les chantiers de la transition," *l'Année du Maghreb*, no. VIII (2012).

During this transitional government (January 17, 2011-December 24, 2011) Laroussi Mizouri was assigned as Minister of Religious Affairs. He was not in the position to stop the state's loss of control over mosques and imams in the country. Strict supervision over the religious sphere collapsed. It coincided with a general 'amnesty' of political prisoners, which was extended to Islamists in February 2011.¹⁵⁰ It meant that all types of Islamist currents were present within Tunisian public life—in a suddenly unregulated religious sphere.¹⁵¹

This situation had an immediate effect on religious institutions in the country. On one side the legitimacy of regime supported Imams could, and in many cases was, questioned by mosque congregations. Some accounts state that in the immediate aftermath of the revolution nearly half of the 3,000 mosques in the country had their Imam removed by popular demand.¹⁵² These imams were replaced by a wide variety of actors, including some from Islamist and Salafist movements.¹⁵³ Some of them also took a more general and active stance in Tunisian public life, meaning that semi political meetings at mosques also became more widespread.¹⁵⁴ One, later infamous, example of an independent imam being appointed by popular demand is that of the Lakhme mosque (one of the main mosques in Sfax) where Ridha Jaouadi was chosen as Imam. For twenty years he had been barred from preaching due to the 'political' nature of his sermons.¹⁵⁵ Another infamous examples would be Houcine Laabidi who took over as Imam and president of the Zaytuna mosque in Tunis. Both actors followed very different approaches: Laabidi attempted to reconstitute the authority of the traditional ulama in Tunisian society, while Jaouadi argued for an empowered revisionist Islam in Tunisian public life. But both would become infamous as embodiments of an activist styled religious authority that had

¹⁵⁰ Fadhel Altashi, "The most Important Implications of the General Amnesty (Arabic)," *al-Chourouk*, (2011).

¹⁵¹ Teije Hidde Donker, "Re-emerging Islamism in Tunisia: Repositioning Religion in Politics and Society," *Mediterranean Politics* 18, no. 2 (2013).

¹⁵² Interview with an advisor to Nouredine Khademi, Tunis, November 14, 2015.

¹⁵³ Monica Marks, "Youth politics and Tunisian Salafism : understanding the jihadi current," *Mediterranean politics*. - 18, no. 1 (2013).

¹⁵⁴ Slim al-Qasmatini, "Shaykh Rached Ghannouchi at the Sidi al-Lakhmi Mosque in Sfax: we are at the building stage, there is no doubt the mosque will return to have a role in society," *al-Wasat al-Tunisiya*, (2012).

¹⁵⁵ Husayn Trabelsi, "The Lakhme Mosque Welcomes Shaykh Ridha Jaouadi As Its New Imam (Arabic)," *al-Hiwar*, (2011).

previously been repressed. Especially Jaouadi proved immensely popular but also incited polarization: being known for using religion to discredit his detractors among various public organizations and more than once skirting dangerously close to *takfirism*.

4.3.2 Minister Nouredine Khademi and the Troika Government

In the elections for the NCA in autumn 2011, the Islamist Ennahda Movement emerged as the country's dominant political party with 37 percent of the votes.¹⁵⁶ It subsequently formed a government coalition with the Arab-nationalist CPR party and the Social democratic Ettakatol: the so-called Troika government. The Troika government faced two main tasks. First, it had to draft a new constitution and, second, steer the country through the unstable post-revolutionary period. During this time debates in society and politics became increasingly polarized along 'Islamist' and 'non-Islamist' lines as the country continued to be destabilized by strikes, occasional violent demonstrations and an imploding economy.

One of the main issues that emerged early in this political process was the place accorded to Islam in the new constitution. Ettakatol and other modernist leaning parties rejected any mentioning of sharia in the constitution, and preferred only mentioning the country's Islamic and Arab heritage. The Islamist Popular Petition Party demanded that the constitution stated that 'Islam was the main source of legislation'. The Ennahda leadership was in the beginning hesitant to pronounce itself on the issue, conscious of the skisma between the party's base, the political realities of the assembly and how sharia would be perceived internationally. Initially Sahbi Attig, the party's leader in parliament, came out in favour of mentioning sharia. But, in the end, Ghannouchi settled the issue with his support for keeping article 1 as it was in the 1959 constitution—which states that the country's religion is Islam—forgoing a direct mention of sharia in the constitution and settling with a reference to *ta'alim al-Islam* (teachings of Islam) in its preamble.¹⁵⁷

Regarding state management of religious institutions, such as mosques, there were also disagreements. Most of the non-Islamist parties wanted a tight state control that

¹⁵⁶ Gana et al., "Géographie électorale et disparités socio-territoriales: les enseignements des élections pour l'assemblée constituante en Tunisie," 18.

¹⁵⁷ Malika Zeghal, "Constitutionalizing a Democratic Muslim State without Shari'a," in *Shari'a Law and Modern Muslim Ethics: The Religious Establishment in the Tunisian 2014 Constitution*, ed. Robert W. Hefner(2016). See also section 2.1.

explicitly sought to drive out any Islamist or Salafist tendencies within mosques. Ettakatol argued for a hands off approach regarding political control of the religious sphere.¹⁵⁸ Ennahda was before the revolution a strong critic of the state-controlled Islam of Ben Ali and Bourguiba. In fact opposition to the state's strict surveillance of the religious actors was one of the party's *raison d'être*. As we will see below however, as the chaos of a completely free religious sphere unfolded, the party adapted its position.

The above issues were reflected in the tenure of Nouredine Khademi, the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Troika government. As a former preacher in the important al-Fatih Mosque in Tunis, he was a respected Islamic actor. As minister he faced a balancing act in redefining the relation between state power and public religion in the country. In a February 2012 interview regarding some shaykhs that declared liberal behavior of Tunisian women to be un-islamic, he stated that: 'It is the ulema alone that are qualified to make fatwas because of their scholarly credentials in the study on the foundations of Islamic sharia', and subsequently stating that 'they are the only ones qualified to be active in these topics, and the ministry chooses its preachers on the basis of [these] scholarly capabilities and knowledge.'¹⁵⁹ In other words, he tried to balance the demands for more religious freedom, while still retaining state control as demanded by opposing groups. The result was an attempt to create a self-governing religious sphere under state tutelage.

This proved, however, difficult to put into practice. Khademi proposed a new independent Council of Religious Elders (*Haya ahl al-Dbiker*) that was imagined to be an institution manned by senior religious figures tasked to mediate conflicts within the Tunisian religious sphere, and between the religious sphere and the state. When this initiative was blocked at the NCA, he tried to initiate a similar (but monthly) Forum of Moderation (*Muntada Wasati*) which was subsequently also blocked in the NCA.¹⁶⁰ He also founded a public religious school that should have been at the basis of state accredited imams and preachers in the future Tunisia. This in turn set up a conflict with the UGTT related National Union for Mosque Employees. The organization had become increasingly vocal in arguing for the reinstatement of pre-revolution preachers

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ "We Will Work to Develop Religious Speech to Strengthen the Moderate Tunisian Personality (Arabic)," *Babnet Tunisie*, February 13 2012.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with an advisor to Nouredine Khademi, Tunis, November 14, 2015.

and imams; arguing that the appointment of ‘revolutionary’ imams had led to uncontrollable situations in Tunisian mosques.¹⁶¹ There was another initiative to reform the management of the yearly Hajj and Umra (June 2013) through the creation of a public agency that would replace *Société des Services Nationaux* (SNR), a private company founded by Ben Ali that manages Hajj visits in the country.¹⁶² It resulted in a conflict over the control of this multi-million dollar industry. Looking back, one of top advisors of Khademi noted that ‘all of these did not see the light of day. And the topic remains unchanged until today. [...] None of the institutional initiatives succeeded.’¹⁶³

The only topic in which Khademi was relatively successful was rebuilding state recognition of newly appointed Imams: Imams that had been appointed by popular demand and not by ministerial fiat. For instance the earlier mentioned Ridha Jaouadi of the Lakhme mosque in Sfax received formal recognition as imam on the first of January 2012, a mere six days after Khademi became the Minister of Religious Affairs. Additionally on May 12 of that year Khademi together with ministers of education, higher education and Rached Ghannouchi signed a memorandum of understanding outlining the position of the Zaytuna mosque-university as an independent religious educational institute in Tunisia.¹⁶⁴ Concurrently the Imam and president of the educational council of Zaytuna, Houcine Laabidi, declared that education would soon return to the mosque-university. Summarized, beyond (but in direct relation to) the legislative discussion on the position of religion in the to-be-drafted Tunisian constitution, a struggle took place over reforming practical relations between state power and religious institutions in the country. Whereas initiatives from the ministry of religious affairs were mostly blocked, retroactive state recognition of a newly independent religious sphere was, initially, more successful.

¹⁶¹ R. Boukriba, "The Union of Mosque Employees Demands the Resignation of Khadmi (Arabic)," *Attounisia*, November 1 2012; M. Bouazizi, "A Cry of Distress from the Mosques: a Hundred Mosques Under the Control of Salafists and the Ministry of Religious Affairs is Complicit (Arabic)," *Al-Chourouq*, November 2 2012.

¹⁶² "Khademi holds President of the Republic Responsible for Problems with the Umra (Arabic)," *Masdar al-Youm*, June 13 2013. "Khademi in Saudi Arabia for the last Preparations for the Hajj (Arabic)," *Masdar al-Youm*, September 10 2013.

¹⁶³ Interview with an advisor to Nourredine Khademi, Tunis, November 14, 2015

¹⁶⁴ "The Educational Board of the Zaytuna Mosque Declares that Traditional Zaytuna Education will Return (Arabic)," *Attounisia*, May 13 2012.

Throughout the period of Troika rule, Tunisian Salafist activism and religious extremism became more pronounced. The war in Syria attracted thousands of young Tunisian men and various art exhibitions—judged by some to contain contributions that were offensive to the prophet—were attacked: The art exhibition in Abdeliya Palace the June 11, 2012, and the October 9, 2011, attack on the television station that aired Persepolis were two examples.¹⁶⁵ In addition, on September 12, 2012, the American Embassy and School in Tunis were attacked by angry mobs in protest against the American movie *Innocence of Muslims*. The two political assassinations of Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi in 2013 further added to the climate of political insecurity and rising fear of violent Salafist activism.¹⁶⁶ Also Ennahda, which initially tried to frame itself as a political representation of all Islamist tendencies in the country, was as a result of the heated political climate forced to shift strategy. Following the 2012 and 2013 attacks, it gradually adopted a tougher stance vis-a-vis Salafist groups.¹⁶⁷ After the Troika government agreed to resign in October 2013, as part of the deal struck in the road map negotiations with Tunisia's most influential civil society groups, this stance became more pronounced as Ennahda started to prepare for the upcoming elections in which one of the main themes were bound to be the fight against terrorism.

In the final stages of drafting a new constitution, state control over mosques became part of a discussion regarding freedom of consciousness and religion. The Article in the constitution that dealt with these issues, Article 6, turned into one of the most contested in the entire constitutional drafting process. The Article grants the right to freedom of consciousness and defines the role of the state as protector of the partisan neutrality of mosques. The Article caused a major debate inside the Ennahda party and the NCA more generally.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, in the final days of the constitutional process a new angle

¹⁶⁵ Malika Zeghal, "Competing Ways of Life: Islamism, Secularism, and Public Order in the Tunisian Transition," *Constellations* 20, no. 2 (2013); "Une chaîne tunisienne attaquée par des islamistes pour avoir diffusé Persepolis; "Violences en Tunisie contre une exposition controversée."

¹⁶⁶ *Tunisia: Violence and the Salafî Challenge*; *ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ AFP, "Entre les mouvements sociaux et la manipulation politique, la Tunisie au bord de l'effondrement!," *Huffington Post Maghreb* 2013.

¹⁶⁸ Monia Ben Hamadi, "L'article 6 de la Constitution: Le péché originel," *Huffington Post Maghreb* 2014.

emerged in this debate, because Habib Ellouze, considered to be on Ennahda's right-wing, accused a member of the left-wing opposition of *takfir*, not being a proper Muslim. Bearing in mind the assassinations of Belaïd and Brahmi, this caused outrage among the opposition and was followed by a demand for a constitutional ban of calling someone *takfir*. In exchange for this ban the opposition accepted a clause that said the state would protect 'sanctities'.¹⁶⁹ The Article ended up being vaguely articulated in an attempt to satisfy all parties in the NCA:

*The state protects religion, guarantees freedom of belief and conscience and religious practices, protects sanctities, and ensures the neutrality of mosques and places of worship away from partisan instrumentalisation. The state undertakes to disseminate the values of moderation and tolerance and the protection of the sacred, and the prohibition of all violations thereof. It undertakes equally to prohibit and fight against calls for Takfir and the incitement of violence and hatred.*¹⁷⁰

Concerning state's management of religious institutions, what exactly 'neutrality from partisan instrumentalisation' meant remained unclear. This ambiguity provided the context for a range of conflicts as state management was reformed in practice. Following the May 12, 2012, statement on the independence of the Zaytuna mosque-university mentioned above, Houcine Laabidi wasted no time to implement his vision of founding a new Islam based educational system throughout the country: thereby reconstituting Zaytuna as national religious educational institute.¹⁷¹ It brought Laabidi in direct, and immediate, conflict with the ministry of education as he challenged the state's authority in the educational sector. Throughout the next year there were attempts to reach a negotiated deal between Khademi, the ministry of education and Laabidi. All failed.¹⁷²

It should also be noted that in 2013, as a part of the struggle over the status of imams, a new labour union was established: the *Organisation Tunisienne du Travail* (OTT).¹⁷³ One of the founders was Ridha Jaouadi; one of the Imams that gained formal recognition through Khademi. The OTT was explicitly more Islam oriented and positioned as direct

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ *Constitution of the Tunisian Republic* 2014.

¹⁷¹ Interview Houcine Laabidi, Tunis, October 10, 2012.

¹⁷² "Ministry of Religious Affairs: Houcine Laabidi Understands the Zaytuna Educational Agreement as a Blank Check for State Independence," *African Manager*, August 8 2012.

¹⁷³ "The Formal Declaration for the Founding of the OTT (Arabic)," (Organisation Tunisienne du Travail 2013).

opponent to the UGTT.¹⁷⁴ Its establishment thereby constituted a move of an activist Imam into union activism. Also within politics the creation of the OTT caused tensions. Many members of Ennahda had for years felt that they had been sidelined in the internal elections of UGTT, and saw the creation of a new labour union as the only way to make their voices heard.¹⁷⁵ However, the Ennahda leadership never supported the new union. The party also had members who felt genuinely attached to UGTT's historic role in Tunisian society and the leadership was sceptical about the creation of a parallel independent 'Islamist' entity which the leadership did not control. Most Ennahda members therefore did not join OTT and the union never gained the general popular support its founders had envisioned.¹⁷⁶ As we will see below, however, the union did manage to establish itself as a particular voice in public debate regarding the question of mosques' independence.

Summarized, we can observe how attempts by Nouredine Khademi to implement a type semi-independent religious sphere in practice laid the basis for a myriad of interconnected conflicts as a multitude of actors attempted to define the relationship between state power and religious institutions. His attempts intersected with a conflict between 'Islamists' and 'non-Islamist' political parties and unions, entrenched interests within state institutions, and with those Islamist activists, especially Salafists, that did not recognize any type of state tutelage at all. But despite these tensions (and failures) they still constituted novel attempts at reforming relations between the Tunisian state and the religious sphere.

4.3.3 Minister Mounir Tlili and The Jomaa Government

In the summer 2013, following the assassinations of Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi, an opposition boycott of constituent assembly sessions brought most of its work to a standstill. Both Ennahda supporters and the opposition subsequently organised sit-ins in support and against the Troika government. In this polarized context the UGTT, in addition to three other leading civil society organisations, put itself

¹⁷⁴ "Our Position Regarding Neutrality Of The Mosque (Arabic)," (Organisation Tunisienne du Travail 2014).

¹⁷⁵ Bunjah, "Founding Conference In Sfax Of The Tunisian Organization For Work (Arabic)," *al-Tunisiya*, (2013).

¹⁷⁶ Interview with one of the founders of OTT, Mohamed Boukhari, Tunis, January 23, 2015.

forward as a mediator and proposed a road map to solve the conflict.¹⁷⁷ It suggested the continuation of the NCA but led by a technocrat government that should work toward new elections. After initial strong resistance from Ennahda members, Rachid Ghannouchi and the Ennahda leadership reluctantly agreed in October 2013. As result the Troika government was succeeded by a technocrat interim government (January 29, 2014 until February 6, 2015) led by the former minister for Industry, Mehdi Jomaa.¹⁷⁸

In his technocrat government, Jomaa appointed Mounir Tlili as minister for religious affairs. At the beginning of his tenure Tlili stated that there would be no state supervision of sermons and that he would ensure the independence of the religious sphere, thereby mirroring earlier remarks by Khademi.¹⁷⁹ But as the debate around state control of mosques became increasingly one about national security, he met regularly with representatives of the Ministry of Interior and his statements began to change. He complained about the lack of direct ministerial control,¹⁸⁰ began to argue that the religious sphere should be seen as a state provided public service and that the Ministry of Interior needed a free hand in addressing any type of security issue in Tunisian religious institutions.¹⁸¹

This change was reflected in the reaffirmation of state control on religious institutions in the country. Within three months Tlili complained openly about Laabidi's and Zaytuna's intransigence and started to move more aggressively to bring mosques across the country under state control.¹⁸² Increasingly also, this reaffirmation was not driven by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but by the Ministry of Interior: It manifested itself through increased surveillance of mosques, supervision of mosque sermons and state

¹⁷⁷ The others being UTICA, The Bar Association, and the Tunisian Human Rights League. See Yousfi.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. Chayes.

¹⁷⁹ "This is the Position of the Minister of Religious Affairs Regarding Unifying Sermons in Mosques! (Arabic)," *Hakaek Online*, February 4 2014.

¹⁸⁰ "Minister of Religious Affairs: Tunisia is an Islamic Country and Takes Everyone into Account (Arabic)," *Hakaek Online*, March 9 2014.

"Minister of Religious Affairs Defends Imam of the Lakhme Mosque (Arabic)," *Al-Jarida al-Tunisiya*, March 9 2014.

¹⁸¹ Afaaq Al-Souhaili, "Soon Mosque Affairs will be a Public Service (Arabic)," *Attounisia*, (2015).

¹⁸² F. Laabidi, "Minister of Religious Affairs: We Fired Nine Radical Imams... and Zaytuna is Uncontrolled (Arabic)," *Al-Jarida Attounisi* March 9 2014.

involvement in the accreditation of imams.¹⁸³ An imam working at the Ministry of Religious Affairs during this period, recalls how the development was felt in some mosques:

*The police would arrive with a new imam appointed by the ministry for the Friday prayer. Sometimes there were discussions between salafists and the police. The police would note down the people who had opposed the imam and interrogate them. Sometimes it was also necessary for the police to escort the new imam for several weeks before he was accepted.*¹⁸⁴

The above also applied to mosques and Imams previously recognized by Khademi, such as Ridha Jaouadi. Though not directly challenging these Imams, the Jomaa government attempted to increase financial control over these mosques by closer supervision of related charitable associations.¹⁸⁵ At the same time, Zaytuna's Laabidi apparently felt increasing pressure from the state as he publicly declared that the Jomaa government was planning to storm his mosque—a statement that proved unfounded.¹⁸⁶ In the final days of his tenure Tlili would proudly state that he, together with other ministries, had at least cleaned up the chaos left by his predecessor and brought most of the mosques under the control of the state. Only the likes of Ridha Jaouadi were still in their mosque and Zaytuna was still not brought under state control but, as he mentioned, this was something he had to leave for his successor.¹⁸⁷

4.3.4 Minister Othman Battikh and The National Unity Government

On July 6, 2012, in an attempt to rally the countries' non-Islamist forces as counterweight to the dominance of Ennahda in the constituent assembly, the former prime-minister Béji Caïd Essebsi had founded Nidaa Tounes (Call for Tunisia). The party quickly succeeded in regrouping opposition forces around a political platform build on Bourguibist nostalgia, critique of the Troika government, reclaiming *le prestige de l'état* and a tough anti-terrorism agenda. Already during the political crisis in the summer 2013

¹⁸³ "Exclusive: Ministers of Interior, Justice and Religious Affairs will meet Today about the Mosques (Arabic)," *Al-Chourouk* February 5 2014.

¹⁸⁴ Interview with authors, Tunis, September 12, 2015.

¹⁸⁵ "Decision to Dissolve the Lakhme Association in Sfax. (Arabic)," *African Manager* November 30 2014.

¹⁸⁶ "Houcine Laabidi: Mehdi Jomaa gave the Order to Storm the Zaytuna Mosque (Arabic)," *Assabah*, June 27 2014.

¹⁸⁷ Al-Souhaili, "Soon Mosque Affairs will be a Public Service (Arabic)."

Nidaa Tounes was regarded as one of the main opposition parties. It was in part due to secret meetings between Essebsi and Ghannouchi that a deal regarding the technocrat government proved possible.¹⁸⁸

In the parliamentary elections of October 2014, Nidaa Tounes won 38,2 percent of the votes and became the country's leading political party. Ennahda came second with 31,3 percent.¹⁸⁹ Despite the fact that the campaign had revolved around the conflict between the two parties—Ennahda had for instance been portrayed as having connections with Salafist groups and being too passive with regards to the jihadist insurgency in the south-eastern region of Kasserine—the distribution of seats in the new assembly forced them into a coalition. The resulting national unity government was formed in January 2015. Subsequently, the animosity between the two parties, and especially their leaders, decreased. At a spring 2016 Ennahda conference, in which the party declared to much fanfare that it would abandon the term 'Islamist' and instead refer to itself as 'Muslim Democrat',¹⁹⁰ Essebsi also spoke as a gesture of appeasement between the two political rivals.¹⁹¹

In this national unity government the former Mufti of the Republic Othman Battikh was appointed as the new Minister of Religious Affairs (February 2015–January 2016). Whereas his predecessor, Tlili, was mostly moved—or forced—by pragmatic considerations, Battikh and his associates developed a clearer ideological legitimation for state control over mosques: Proper partisan neutrality, as defined in Article 6 of the newly ratified constitution, could only be guaranteed by the Tunisian state, as the Tunisian state embodied the sole institutional representation of a Tunisian nation. A top advisor to the minister stated in an interview with one of the authors that it was important that 'laws are implemented properly to ensure that mosques remain accessible to all [social] sides.' Thereby clarifying that 'regarding the state and religion. It is a public

¹⁸⁸ Frida Dahmani, "Que se sont dit Rached Ghannouchi et Béji Caïd Essebsi à Paris?," *Jeune Afrique*, August 20 2013.

¹⁸⁹ Charlotte Bozonneti, "Tunisie : net recul des islamistes aux élections législatives," *Le Monde* 2014.

¹⁹⁰ At the congress Ennahda also decided to split its activities into two. One focusing on politics and another one focusing on preaching. See "The Final Declaration To The Tenth General Conference Of The Ennahda Movement (Arabic)," (Ennahda Party, 2016).

¹⁹¹ "Coup d'envoi du dixième congrès d'Ennahdha: Béji Caïd Essebsi parmi ses alliés," *Huffington Post Maghreb*, (2016).

service supervised by the state.¹⁹² In other words: The mosque belongs to god, but the state is the only neutral actor capable of supervising it.

This position was also reflected in complaints from ministry employees at the time regarding the lacking Islamic credentials of many Imams and preachers in the country. From their perspective only those that had credentials from religious education at *secular Tunisian universities* could be recognized as religious actors.¹⁹³ The Islamic educational institute initiated by Khademi was closed because it was deemed unnecessary.¹⁹⁴ In line with this approach, the ministry started to provide ‘advisory topics’ to preachers on what they could (or should) preach during Friday sermons.¹⁹⁵ When asked about supervising Imams' sermons, the above quoted advisor to Battikh continued to state that Imams were ‘of course’ free to choose any topics they wanted. But that ‘when you provide that freedom, it comes with a type of trust from the state.’ He continued:

*We visit these preachers [during their sermons]. So any time one deviates from what is normal, starts preaching non-religiously or when he starts to preach in a partisan or ideological way: We extend an invitation [to come to the ministry] and we discuss the issue with him so that he will return to the mainstream. And if he doesn't—we let him go. We will appoint another Imam. That is the state policy on this topic.*¹⁹⁶

It was thus the state that got to decide what was permissible speech in mosques, and it was the state that had the power to enforce its decision. Whereas the question of practical governance of the religious sphere during the Troika government was relatively contested, as Khademi tried to establish a more self-governing model, in the context of Ennahda's competition with Nidaa Tounes and fear of being associated with

¹⁹² Interview with an advisor to the Minister Othman Battikh, Tunis, November 18, 2015.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. Debates on the position of informal mosques in the Tunisian Islamic sphere are therefore deemed irrelevant: without state recognition a mosque is perceived as non-existent.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. The first advisory topic, and related letter as send to preachers, was shown to one of the authors the next day.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

extremism,¹⁹⁷ Othman Battikh's approach of full state control was much less so. It was telling that Sahbi Attig, MP for Ennahda, in a debate in the parliament 30th November 2015, complained to Othman Battikh that the state was not active *enough* in the religious sphere: 'You are not present in the media, we want that you engage with the youngsters. We want a religious discourse from you that combat what the terrorists diffuse. Where is our Malikism? We have to strengthen our balanced and moderate speech.'¹⁹⁸

The practical implications of the new approach, and its political support, would become clear soon enough. Ten days after taking office, Battikh stated that problems with Zaytuna would soon be resolved. A court case followed and Laabidi was forcefully removed from his mosque within weeks.¹⁹⁹ The Friday after his ouster, on 3 April 2015, Othman Battikh led the prayer at the Zaytuna mosque—with an overwhelming police presence to provide security.²⁰⁰ Another example was Ridha Jaouadi of the Lakhme mosque in Sfax. In July 2015 eighty members of parliament demanded resignation Ridha Jaouadi because of his radicalizing discourse.²⁰¹ The UGTT demanded his ouster for years and in June 2015 the head of Ennahda in Sfax argued that if Ridha Jaouadi would get his way, he would effectively create a religious autocracy.²⁰² His only remaining institutional supporters were Islamic oriented NGOs and the OTT. It all ended up with Ridha Jaouadi being expelled from his position by Othman Battikh in September 2015.

The popular opposition to the last decision proved immense. For weeks the mosque would remain closed as it proved impossible to assign a new Friday Imam without causing a popular uproar among the mosque's congregation. Multiple large protests were organized in the city.²⁰³ Interestingly, all those involved would accuse their opponents of

¹⁹⁷ See for instance "The Final Declaration To The Tenth General Conference Of The Ennahda Movement (Arabic)."

¹⁹⁸ "Marsad.tn," Al Bawsala (Tunisian think tank).

¹⁹⁹ "The Judge Rules and Laabidi Refuses to go... When is the Conflict over Zaytuna Going to End?," *Attounisia*, March 26 2015.

²⁰⁰ "The Ministry of Religion Leads the Prayer at Zaytuna today (Arabic)," *al-Chourouk*, (2015).

²⁰¹ "Tunis: 80 Representatives from the Parliament Sign a he Petition Demanding the Removal of the Imam of the Lakhme Mosque Ridha Jaouadi (Arabic)," *Babnet*, July 23 2015.

²⁰² Interview with senior member Ennahda, Sfax, June 12, 2015.

²⁰³ "Tunisie: manifestation contre le limogeage contesté d'un imam de Sfax," *Nouvel Observateur*, October 21 2015.

instrumentalizing mosques for partisan gains. Those around Battikh would argue that Khademi—although not formally affiliated to Ennahda—had been trying to politicize the religious sphere by opening it up to all kinds—and specifically Ennahda related—Islamist movements.²⁰⁴ Those around Khademi would argue that the resurgence of state control under Battikh was a way to implement a political project over the heads of Imams and their mosques.²⁰⁵ The episode ended with Othman Battikh being replaced and returning to his previous position as Mufti of the Republic in January 2016.²⁰⁶ Though his replacement was not necessarily due to this specific case, it does seem there was limited support for the type of top-down state control of the religious sphere as proposed by Othman Battikh.

4.4 Conclusive Remarks

In the midst of the debate about Islam in the Tunisian constitution, the French magazine *Télérama* interviewed Amira Yayaoui, the leader of the NGO Al Bawsala that surveyed the constitutional process. The journalist asked why Tunisia did not separate state and religion. The answer was clear:

*'French laïcité is absurd for everyone, except for you [French journalists]! Here, laïcité is only defended by a tiny elite, who are anxious of seeing a popular assembly with big veiled women and badly dressed men with obscure accents.'*²⁰⁷

The answer reflects the fact that the dispute over public Islam in Tunisia has never been about whether Islam should be part of the state or not, but rather about the nature of its involvement. This is also true if one takes a longer historical perspective. The traditional ulema bourgeoisie, Bourguiba and the Neo-Destour, the Islamists in Ennahda, and the Salafists after the revolution: all attempted to reshape the relation between the Tunisian state and Islamic institutions in the country.

²⁰⁴ "Sfax: Jaouadi Leads The Worshippers In The Lakhme [mosque] And The Friday Prayer Returns To The Great Mosque (Arabic)," *al-Chourouk*, September 18 2015.

²⁰⁵ Interview with an activist Imam, Sfax, November 20, 2015.

²⁰⁶ "Ridha Jaouadi Reacts To Change Of Othman Battikh: Finally The Mufti Of Ben Ali Is Gone (Arabic)," *Attounisia*, (2016).

²⁰⁷ Lucas Armati, "Laïcité: Le Grand Flou Tunisie," *Télérama* 2015.

As we showed in the article, the Tunisian revolution and subsequent political transition similarly reflect this struggle. The post-revolutionary social and political chaos made it possible for local preachers to take over mosques during Laroussi's tenure. As the political transition took shape, Khademi initially tried to institutionalize an independent religious sphere under state tutelage. Tlili's term, then, was marked by pragmatic considerations regarding security, resulting in tighter control over public religion. Finally, with the victory of Nidaa Tounes in the 2014 elections, and the formation of the national unity government, the road was paved for Othman Battikh and his more overt ideological justification for state control.

We also saw that practical attempts at reforming relations between the state and Tunisian religious institutions intersected with a number of other conflicts present at the time: Recognizing Imams that took over mosques after the revolution set off a conflict with the UGTT; providing more independence to the Zaytuna mosque-university in 2012 set off a conflict over religion and education; discussion over increasing supervision of mosques intersected with discussions over the position of security services in a new Tunisia more generally; the creation of the Islamist oriented OTT by Ridha Jaouadi in effect meant that the struggle over the mosques became part of an inter labor union competition. Last but not least, the general political discussion about the position of Islam in the constitution became the defining political cleavage in the constituent assembly.

In the introduction we criticised the preoccupation with Islamists in studies on the interaction between Islam and politics in the Middle East. Our study shows that focusing on practical state management of religious institutions provides a good antidote to such a preoccupation. Through such an approach it becomes clear that the use of Islam is not exclusive to Islamists, and that Islamists are less specific from other actors than often portrayed. It also becomes evident that the political struggle over how relations between the state and public Islam should be institutionalized is always embedded in a variety of more general political struggles. This was true with Ennahda embracing tighter state control of religion in the context of electoral competition with Nidaa Tounes. But it was also true regarding the role non-religious actors, such as labor unions, played in shaping state-religion relations. As such it shows, first and foremost, that scholars in the social sciences should give more attention to practical struggles over reforming relations

between state power and public religion, and the broader social and political context in which Islam and politics interact.

5 The Islamist/Secularist Divide: The Case of the Conflict Between Ennahda and UGTT

Abstract

The Tunisian Revolution began as a riot fuelled by poverty and marginalization, yet the conflict that came to dominate the revolutionary period from 2011 until the new constitution in 2014 was the cleavage between “Islamists” and “Secularists”. This article traces the origins and reasons for this ideological cleavage by focusing on the conflict between The Tunisian General Labour Union, UGTT, and the Ennahda party which has roots in Islamism. The article goes into depth with two local conflicts and unravels how ideology was almost absent at the local level, but became present as the conflicts became nationalised. The article criticises the view that ideology is only a matter of political belief and discusses instead the different dimensions and alternative uses of ideology.

5.1 From Revolt of the Poor to Clash of Ideologies

The 17th December 2010 spontaneous riots erupted in the town of Sidi Bouzid in response to the self-immolation of, the now famous, Mohamed Bouazizi. From here the demonstrations spread to the neighbouring towns of Kasserine, Regeub and Thala and evolved into what we now call the Tunisian Revolution. These revolts were almost entirely motivated by poverty, unemployment, and a sense of marginalisation by the political system. Sure, they were also fuelled by outrage against the rampant corruption of the political system, and later on when the Revolution reached the big coastal cities, democracy and political freedom also became part of the revolutionary chants. But, in its outset and origin, the Revolution was a *revolt of the poor*.²⁰⁸ However, after the revolution the political focus quickly shifted to the conflict between Islamists and Secularists. From the moment the Islamist Ennahda party won the elections to the constituent assembly 23rd October 2011 till the Islamist-led government stepped down 9th January 2014, the revolution was a fierce ideological battle over the place of Islam in the country's constitution and politics. Instead of poverty and distribution, the all structuring cleavage

²⁰⁸ For an analysis of the early days of the revolution see Hmed, "Réseaux dormants, contingence et structures. Genèses de la révolution tunisienne." Choukri Hmed, ""Si le peuple un jour aspire vivre, le destin se doit de répondre" : apprendre devenir révolutionnaire en Tunisie," *Les Temps modernes.* -, (2011). Zemni, "From Socio-Economic Protest to National Revolt: The Labor Origins of the Tunisian Revolution."

became Islamists versus Secularists.²⁰⁹ As Malika Zeghal wrote in her important analysis of the revolution:

*“As early as Spring 2011, the ideological polarization between the “Islamist” and the “secularist” camps was playing out in a public debate, and the “Islamist” and “secularist” categories were endowed with a significant political role. The two “camps” built up a representation of each other through a mirror effect that distorted a complex reality by stereotyping it.”*²¹⁰

One of the most important expressions of this ideological conflict in Tunisia was the conflict between the governing Ennahda party and Tunisia’s General Labor Union, *Union générale du tunisienne du travail* (UGTT). Throughout the constitutional process, Ennahda blamed UGTT for orchestrating strikes and demonstrations in order to sabotage the government and ultimately to overthrow it, whereas UGTT accused Ennahda of monopolizing power and trying to Islamize the state. The two organisations also confronted each other in the 2013 constitutional crises, when Ennahda initially refused to engage in the road map negotiations led by UGTT.

In this article, I will investigate why the revolution became politicized around Secularism and Islamism when the revolution initially was fuelled by very different concerns. I will do this through an analysis of the conflict between UGTT and the Ennahda. More precisely the paper will examine two strikes where the two organisations collided. The two strikes that I investigate in detail in this paper are not representative of all strikes that happened throughout this period. Between 2011 and 2014, 1941 registered strikes took place according to the Ministry of Social Affairs.²¹¹ It is therefore beyond this paper to give a comprehensive account of all social unrest during this period. What is essential, here, is the mechanisms by which the local strikes became part of the national political agenda, and how they became understood as a struggle between Islamists and secularists. This is the object of research. Further research must determine to what extent these dynamics are present in other strikes that occurred at the time. Two conflicts treated in the paper take place in the port of Radès and in Tunisair. In Radès the conflict

²⁰⁹ See for example Zeghal, "Competing Ways of Life: Islamism, Secularism, and Public Order in the Tunisian Transition." Zemni, "The Extraordinary Politics of the Tunisian Revolution: The Process of Constitution Making."

²¹⁰ Zeghal, "Competing Ways of Life: Islamism, Secularism, and Public Order in the Tunisian Transition," 265.

²¹¹ *Social Statistics (in Arabic)* (Tunisian Ministry of Social Affairs, 2014), 7.

culminated in a wildcat strike in the summer 2013. In the case of Tunisair the conflict had more the form of a series of smaller disruptions. Disruptions that led to a sense of permanent instability in Tunis-Carthage Airport at the time.

5.2 The Islamist/Secularist Divide in Tunisia

Before we go into the concrete conflict and the two cases, it is necessary to look into the origins of the terms “Secularism” and “Islamism” in a Tunisian context. Islamism as a political ideology started to take root in Tunisia in the 1970’s. In the milieu around the *Association pour la sauvegarde du Coran* figures such as Rachid Ghannouchi and Abdel Fattah Mourou met and took the first steps to the creation of an Islamist movement in Tunisia. Something that became official with the creation of the *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MTI) in 1981.²¹² Meherzia Labidi, now a prominent MP for Ennahda, recalls the intellectual inspirations at the time: “*There was an enthusiasm for the Iranian revolution. I remember I was a student at the time. Of course I was fascinated! Many people in my generation also read the books of Hassan Al-Banna and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood*” (Interview with author).²¹³

The term “Islamism” was originally used by mostly French academics in an attempt to describe the increasing Islamic activism in the 1970’s. Initially, the Islamists understood themselves simply as devout Muslims. However, in time the term “Islamism” moved from the academic and analytical sphere to also being used by the “Islamists” themselves.²¹⁴ One of the things that the Islamists argued against was the reforms instituted by Bourguiba in the 1960’s. The way the government had seized control of the important Zaytuna mosque university, abolished the religious habous foundations and introduced of a personal status code that conflicted with a traditional reading of Islamic law.²¹⁵ Despite the Islamists assertion that these reforms were an “attack on Islam”, Bourguiba never tried to separate Islam from the state. He tried instead to integrate and

²¹² Burgat, *L'islamisme au Maghreb : la voix du Sud : (Tunisie, Algérie, Libye, Maroc)*, 213.

²¹³ Meherzia Labidi also stated that later on they became much more interested in their own Tunisian Islamic legacy especially figures such as Tahar Ben Achour and she does not support the Iranian regime in anyway today.

²¹⁴ Olivier Roy, “Les islamogues ont-ils inventé l'islamisme?,” *Esprit* August - September, no. 8-9 (2001). See also section 2.2

²¹⁵ Some modernist Zaytuna graduates such as Tahar Haddad did in fact suggest a similar reading of the Islamic tradition, but this was a minority. See for example Sraïeb, “Contribution à la connaissance de Tahar El-Haddad, 1899-1935.”

use it his nation-building project, as he before independence had used it in his fight against the French colonial authorities. Bourguiba did in the 1960's promote avant-gardist interpretations of Islamic norms. He did for example discourage the use as the veil and the Ramadan (the first with some success, the latter a complete failure). However, he always did these reforms with reference to Islamic scriptures. Being the head of the state he thought to be entitled to interpret Islam, and regarded his role as in line with previous Islamic reformers. Furthermore, he actually reversed many of the most modernist readings of Islam in the 1970's. He did for example introduce financial assistance to Aïd Kebir and aligned working hours in the public administration with Friday prayer.²¹⁶

Despite the fact that Bourguiba never implemented a separation of Islam and the state, the Tunisian Islamists in their opposition to the regime always defined him as "secularist". Rachid Ghannouchi for example repeatedly argued that Bourguiba sought to "unravel [Tunisia] from Islam and its tradition".²¹⁷ Also, Ben Ali's regime was characterised as such even though one of the most obvious changes after Ben Ali seized power 1987 was a more visible Islamic discourse and support of Islamic institutions.²¹⁸ According to Ghannouchi, Ben Ali was not just "secular", it was also secularism that was to blame for the regime's corruption. "*The stripping of the state from religion would turn it into a mafia*", as he put it.²¹⁹

The reason UGTT was seen as part of the "secular camp" can be traced back to the 1970's when UGTT constituted the most important opposition to Bourguiba's regime. After being aligned with the regime in the 1960's, UGTT became under the leadership of Habib Achour in the 1970's gradually more independent and critical of the regime's economic reforms. It culminated in 1978 when a general strike was brutally repressed in 1978, later known as "Black Thursday". In this conflict between the regime and UGTT, the Islamists sided with the regime. They feared Tunisia would fall under Soviet

²¹⁶ Frégosi, "La régulation institutionnelle de l'islam en Tunisie : Entre audace moderniste et tutelle étatique," 14.

²¹⁷ Lotfi Hajji, "Pour une relecture critique de la relation de Bourguiba à l'islam," in *Habib Bourguiba: La trace et l'héritage*, ed. Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser (Karthala, 2004), 57.

²¹⁸ Franck Frégosi, "Les rapports entre l'islam et l'Etat en Algérie et en Tunisie : de leur revalorisation à leur contestation," *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord* . -, (1995): 112.

²¹⁹ Zeghal, "Competing Ways of Life: Islamism, Secularism, and Public Order in the Tunisian Transition," 265.

influence, which would endanger the practice of Islam. In a declaration entitled “Before the Iron Curtain Falls” in the magazine *Al Maarifa*, the Islamists described UGTT and the leftists as “a call to strip the nation of its Arab and Islamic identity, and to remove its history”.²²⁰

This stance was never forgotten by the leftist leaders in UGTT, and laid the ground for bitter animosity between Ennahda and the union (and the left more broadly). In 1980’s this conflict was visible in the competition between the leftist student union *Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie* (UGET) and the Islamist student union *Union générale tunisienne des étudiants* (UGTE). Both trying to achieve the dominance of the universities..

5.3 Ben Ali, UGTT and Ennahda

When Ben Ali came to power in 1987, he adopted two different strategies towards UGTT and Ennahda. Having himself experienced the political chaos in the late 1970’s, where UGTT and the state was in conflict, Ben Ali adopted a strategy of appeasement and co-optation of the union. He sought to avoid any direct conflict with the UGTT.²²¹ In contrast, Ennahda was brutally repressed. In the shadow of the Islamist insurgency in Algeria, Ben Ali banned the party and gave decades long prison sentences to the members who had not managed to escape. The animosity between UGTT and Ennahda made many leftists and UGTT members turn a blind eye to the persecution. Simply because they regarded Ben Ali as a lesser evil than the Islamists. This stance and the fact that UGTT to some extent became co-opted by the regime in the 1990’s made many Islamist see UGTT as a part of the regime. For them, they were both an expression of the same “authoritarian secularism”.

5.3.1 Radès under Ben Ali

The port of Radès is the biggest container port in Tunisia and more than 300.000 containers pass by here every year, amounting to 90 pct. of Tunisia’s import and exports. Ben Ali’s regime was very aware of the critical importance of the port. It therefore did its utmost to control the site and keep tight control with *Société tunisienne d’accronage et de manutention*, STAM, and *Compagnie Maritime de Consignation*, CMC, which are the two

²²⁰ Burgat, *L’islamisme au Maghreb : la voix du Sud : (Tunisie, Algérie, Libye, Maroc)*, 217.

²²¹ See section 3.2.2

companies that run the port. This was done by ensuring that the head of the local chapter of UGTT, Nouridienne Louati, was closely affiliated with the regime. He was therefore offered several promotions in exchange for his loyalty. Second, the salaries of the workers were, compared to other unskilled jobs in Tunisia, extremely generous. On top of this, there existed a system of payment for extra hours that were distributed not just for having worked longer hours, but also as a gift for being loyal to Louati. Many workers received extra hours that amounted to more than the double of the salary without having worked the actual hours.

It is hard to say anything precise about it, but everybody interviewed in relation to the port confirm that illegal transactions do take place and constitute a source of revenue for people on different levels in STAM and CMC and that before the revolution members of the presidents family were heavily implicated in this traffic. The French geographer Adrien Doron estimates that it was possible to make an illegal container pass through the port for the price of around 10.000 euros.²²² In sum, although the security apparatus of Ben Ali was present in the port, the control of the port of Radès was ensured by extremely generous benefits distributed via mechanisms of clientelism. The regime bought Louati, who again bought the workers he needed to control the port.

5.3.2 Tunisair under Ben Ali

In the national Tunisian Airlines, which is exactly like STAM and CMC, a state owned company, the situation under Ben Ali both had similarities and differences compared to the port of Radès. As a public company the workers in Tunisair enjoy for Tunisia quite good conditions. Job security, stable salary and pension. However, since 2003 there has been a constant struggle over the status of the airlines. The successive governments of Ben Ali wanted to privatise the company in order to make it possible for the president's family to take over the private ownership of the company. The local chapters of UGTT regrouping the different professions in the airport fiercely opposed these plans and used strikes and negotiations to slow down the process. The regime therefore pursued its agenda gradually by splitting up the company in different parts that each could be sold off individually. During the last decade before the revolution the catering, handling, technical services and IT-service were thus separated from the mother company. Each

²²² Adrien Doron, "De la marge au monde : la structuration mouvementée d'une place marchande transnationale à Ben Gardane (Tunisie)," *Les Cahiers d'EMAM*, (2015).

time the local union leaders sought to keep the workers as integrated with Tunisair as possible and keep as many of their rights as possible. The restructuration of Tunisair in the years leading up to the revolution brought together a struggle for the personal status of workers with a more general political resistance to the corruption and increasing influence of the president's family.²²³

5.4 Ennahda and UGTT in the Revolution

Ennahda and UGTT were both on the same side when Ben Ali's regime started to crumble in December 2010. UGTT's lower levels played a crucial part in organizing some of the initial demonstrations and later on the big general strikes in Sfax and Tunis the 12th and 14th January 2011.²²⁴ Many Ennahda cadres participated in the demonstrations, but the party as a organisation was not able to do so after years of repression.²²⁵ After Ben Ali's escape to Saudi Arabia this corporation became more formal as both organisations took part in the two sit-ins in the centre of Tunis, known as Kasbah I and Kasbah II. These sit-ins put pressure on the remnants of Ben Ali's regime and forced the resignation of premier minister Mohammed Ghannouchi and his government. During this period *The National Council to the Protection of the Revolution* (NCPR) was founded with the purpose of pushing for elections of a new constituent assembly that could elaborate a new constitution and the instauration of a completely new regime.²²⁶ Although, they might have been some suspicion among Ennahda members and UGTT activists in the sit-ins, the two organisation worked together in the NCPR and shared the same goal.²²⁷

5.4.1 The Revolution in Radès and Tunisair

The revolution meant both in the port of Radès and in the airport big changes. In the port of Radès, the workers who had not been favoured by Louati, seized the opportunity to overthrow the leadership of the local section of UGTT and call for elections of a new

²²³ See section 3.2.2

²²⁴ See section 3.5 and 1.1

²²⁵ It has also been suggested that the party's absence was a deliberate choice in order not to scare non-Islamist demonstrators away.

²²⁶ See also section 1.1

²²⁷ Hmed, "Le peuple veut la chute du régime" *Situations et issues révolutionnaires lors des occupations de la place de la Kasbah Tunis, 2011*, 89.

leadership. The clientele system that had been thriving for years under Ben Ali, thus, came to a sudden end. In Tunisair the local chapters of UGTT took advantage of the weak position of the government after the revolution and forced the government to sign an agreement the 3rd of February 2011, which reintegrated all the different companies that Ben Ali had cut out of Tunisair, back into the mother company. The decade long attempt to privatise Tunisair was thus reversed within a few weeks.²²⁸

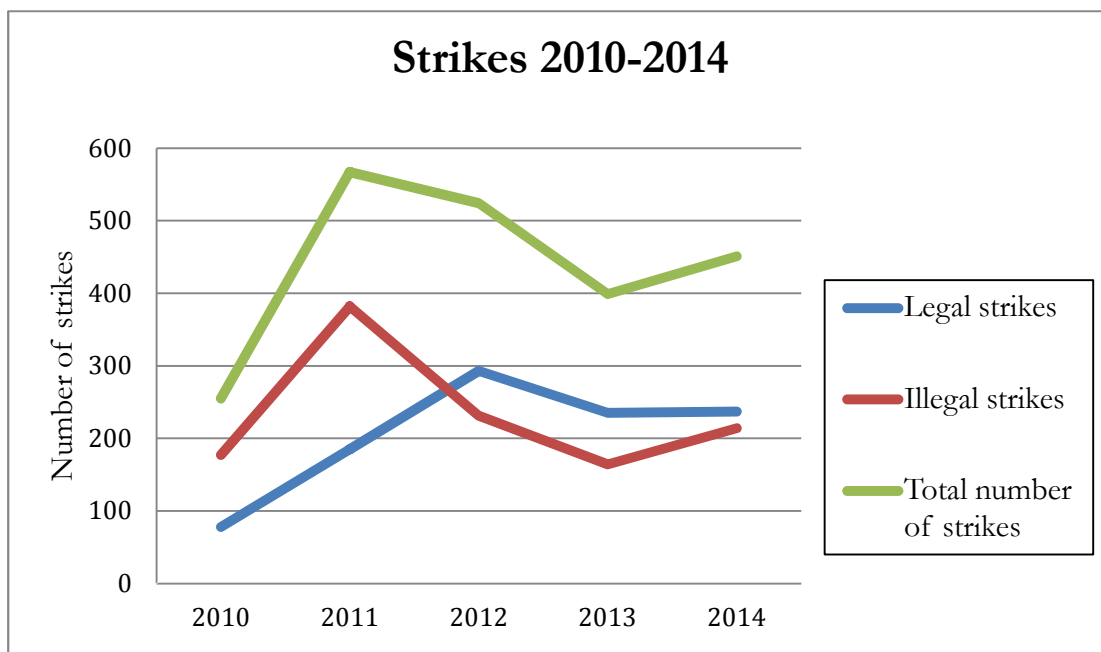
5.5 The Troïka Government

In the elections to the constituent assembly 23rd October 2011 Ennahda won a landslide victory and emerged as the largest party in the country.²²⁹ The party went therefore on to form a government with two smaller parties *Congrès Pour la République* and *Ettakatol*. After the formation of this “Troïka government”, the divisions between UGTT and Ennahda started to appear. After the revolution Tunisia saw more than a doubling of the number of strikes. From 255 in 2010 to 567 in 2011 (see chart below). Especially the number of illegal wildcat strikes went up – from 177 in 2010 to 382 in 2011. The days of strike equally increased from 74.763 in 2010 to 309.343 in 2011.²³⁰ This sudden rise in strikes and labour market unrest created a sense of instability that fell back on the government and left the popular impression that the party was unfit to rule. Ennahda activists therefore became increasingly critical of UGTT. When municipal workers went on strike in February 2012 and piles of garbage bags accumulated in the streets, some Ennahda activists put the garbage bags in front of UGTT’s offices and staged an anti-UGTT demonstration at Place Mohammed Ali in front of UGTT’s headquarters in Tunis.

²²⁸ François Duclos, "Tunisair réintègre ses filiales, dont Sevenair," *Air Journal* February 7 2011.

²²⁹ Gana et al., "Géographie électorale et disparités socio-territoriales: les enseignements des élections pour l'assemblée constituante en Tunisie."

²³⁰ *Social Statistics (in Arabic)*, 7.



Source: Tunisian Ministry of Social Affairs: Social Statistics 2014.

In the summer 2012 riots broke out in Sidi Bouzid with protesters calling for jobs and regional development.²³¹ Again in November 2012 a similar wave of demonstrations appeared in Siliana, here, more directly aimed at the Ennahda appointed governor.²³² In both cases UGTT supported the protests, and especially in the case of Siliana, helped organise them. The conflict between the two organisations reached a first climax the 4th December 2012 on the anniversary of the assassination of Farhat Hached, where supporters of Ennahda and UGTT confronted each other in violent clashes at Place Mohammed Ali.²³³

Another dimension to the animosity was the fact that many Ennahda cadres wanted to pursue liberal economic reforms. Many inside UGTT feared for that companies such as STAM and Tunisair would be at risk of being sold. Whether this was due to an attempt to cut down the networks inside the state that had ruled Tunisia under Ben Ali or a general belief in liberal economic doctrines is hard to tell. However, due to the party's coalition partners, especially Ettakatol, it was not possible to directly pursue an agenda of

²³¹ Taoufik Ben Brik, "La deuxième révolte de Sidi Bouzid," *Slate Afrique*, (2012).

²³² Thierry Brésillon, 2012. "Émeutes à Siliana, le chaudron social tunisien explose," *Tunisie libre*, Nouvel Observateur, (accessed 29th November 2012).

²³³ Brésillon, "Le bras de fer entre Ennahdha et l'UGTT dégénère place Mohamed Ali."

privatisation. Instead, it was up to the individual ministers to take smaller steps. As Riadha Saidi, economic coordinator of premier minister in the Troika government, put it:

“The context was not for privatisation. Our coalition partners did not allow that. We were bound to take a step by step approach.” (Interview with author).

In the domain of transportation, this task was accredited to Abdelkarim Harouni. He was a senior Ennahda activist and he had made his career in the Ennahda party by being one of the founders and also first chairmen of the Islamist student union, UGTE. Here, he took active part in the political infights in the 1980's with the leftist student organisation UGET. Many people on the Tunisian left and in UGTT, for example Mohammed Ali Bourghiri the general secretary of UGTT Ben Arous, had already encountered Harouni in student politics in the 1980's. Harouni was as many other senior Ennahda members imprisoned in 1992 during Ben Ali's general crackdown on all forms of Islamist opposition. He spent 16 years in prison, some of them in solitary confinement.²³⁴ Harouni had therefore a deep distrust of both the left and anything related to Ben Ali's regime.

5.5.1 The Troika and Radès

In order to better control the situation in the port of Radès, Harouni fired the CEO put in place by the transitional government right after the revolution and replaced him with Anouar Chaibbi, a lower ranking marine engineer in STAM's bureaucracy. Chaibbi was not directly active in the Ennahda party, but he was clearly a supporter and knew many senior members of the party. The sudden jump to the position of CEO of the entire company was by Harouni justified as a kind of reparation for Ben Ali's repression of the Islamists. Under Ben Ali, people with Islamist sympathies, if they were not already incarcerated, as minimum never got promoted. Chaibbi's promotion was therefore simply a way to give Chaibbi the position he would have earned himself, if it was not for Ben Ali's regime. As Harouni put it:

²³⁴ Frida Dahmani, "Tunisie : qui est Abdelkarim Harouni, nouveau président du conseil de la choura d'Ennahdha ?", *Jeune Afrique*, June 13 2016. Marsad.tn, 2016. "Profile of Abdelkarim Harouni."

“He [Chaibbi] was pushed aside under Ben Ali. We made the revolution to give a chance to those who had been repressed. (...). We found many competences that had been pushed aside, and others took their place” (Interview with author).

When in place Chaibbi took a very political approach to the management of the port, probably encouraged by Harouni himself. The entrance exam which was established after the revolution was ignored, and instead Chaibbi recruited large amounts of workers directly through personal contacts. There is some discussion on what basis the workers exactly were recruited. Some members of UGTT claim that they were recruited directly through the Ennahda party’s local offices, while others claim that it was more on the basis of personal connections to Chaibbi or to favour the poor neighbourhoods near the port to increase the party’s popularity in these areas. Whichever story is correct, the common dominator is that the workers Chaibbi recruited had a political function. To tip the balance among the workers away from the local chapter of UGTT and into being more loyal directly to him. From 2010 to 2012 the number of workers thus went up from 450 to 900, according to UGTT’s registration.

5.5.2 The Troïka and Tunisair

In Tunisair, Harouni accepted the 3rd of February agreement concluded after the revolution and he did not seem to resist the local UGTT chapter’s different demands for being reintegrated into the company. However, he sought instead to favour the emergence of new private companies and open up the Tunisian market to foreign competitors. During the short lived transitional government after the revolution, a new company called *Syphax Airlines* headed by the Ennahda affiliated business man Mohamed Frikha was accorded an authorisation to operate. Originally, the authorisation was limited to the airport of Sfax, Tunisia’s second largest city, but Harouni expanded the authorisation to also include Tunis-Carthage and permitted the airlines to also fly on some of Tunisair’s most lucrative routes such as Tunis-Paris. Harouni also attempted to open up negotiations with the European Union concerning an open skies agreement, and on a trip to Qatar in 2012 he signed a memorandum of agreement about an intention to open up the Tunisian airspace to Qatar Airways.

5.6 The Reaction of UGTT

After the assassinations of the two left-wing parliamentarians Chockri Belaïd and Mohammed Brahmi in February and July 2013, new tensions emerged between UGTT and Ennahda. Belaïd and Brahmi had close ties to many of members of UGTT's executive bureau and the brutality of the political assassinations alarmed the union. Always having perceived itself as a national movement, UGTT began to push the formation of a new government in order to end the political unrest in the country. This was fiercely resisted by most Ennahda members, who saw UGTT's actions as a coup and even the return of the former regime.²³⁵ In order to pressure Ennahda to begin negotiations, UGTT started to organise demonstrations against the government in the summer 2013. The demonstrations continued until Ennahda finally accepted to negotiate and agreed to step down in October 2013.

5.6.1 UGTT and Radès

After the revolution brought an end to the old leadership of the local UGTT section in Radès, Anis Khdimi was elected a chairman. Khdimi is an observant Muslim with a Salafist inspired beard, which in the beginning led many people to suspect him of being affiliated with Ennahda. However, Khdimi had also worked his entire life in the port – just like his father did – and had a strong connection to UGTT. He therefore quickly became very critical of Chaibbi's many unregulated recruitments and saw it as an attempt to undermine UGTT's presence in the port. Additionally, he also feared that the numerous recruitments would be a financial burden that could endanger the entire company, and thereby the established workers jobs. Khdimi and Chaibbi therefore quickly came into conflict and had many harsh exchanges. Chaibbi tried different tricks to provoke a re-election of the local UGTT chapter to get rid of Khdimi. Chaibbi sent a group of his loyal workers (and probably also people from outside) to occupy the regional office of UGTT in Ben Arous in an attempt to force them to hold a re-election. He also transferred supporters of Khdimi to other ports in Tunisia in order to isolate him.

²³⁵ The question of electoral legitimacy is debatable. Ennahda surely was democratically elected, but the constituent assembly was only suppose to govern one year and the assembly had therefore exceeded its term. It can therefore also be argued that the country in reality was in constitutional no man's land.

These different tricks did however prove quite counterproductive. Mohamed Ali Bourghdiri who was the general secretary of UGTT Ben Arous and the one who had to the mandate an eventual re-election did not give in to the intimidation. On the contrary, Bourghdiri was an openly declared supporter of the leftist *Charb Shabiya* party and he had always despised Ennahda and their supporters since his involvement in student politics in the 1980's. For him Chaibbi's management of the port was also national politics and a struggle against the Islamist government. Bourghdiri was, however, also aware that his role as regional general secretary did not authorise him to do anything purely for political reasons. He could only oppose Chaibbi insofar he violated strict rules regarding the union's members. Chaibbi's regulatory manoeuvres thus constituted the perfect excuse for Bourghdiri to play a more active role in the conflict and mobilise the workers against Chaibbi. As Bourghdiri described it himself:

"It gave me the opportunity to infiltrate the hearts of the workers in Radès. Before that most of them did not know my name or the regional office of UGTT. But when they saw that I spoke out against Chaibbi's tricks, they saw that I was useful. They began to call and to show up in my office. We are with you, and against those dirty people', they told me". (Interview with author).

The position of the national leadership of UGTT was again different. Even though, many members of the executive bureau deeply despise the Ennahda party, the leadership's role was mostly one of trying to calm down the workers. In the summer 2013, Chaibbi publicly accused the workers in Radès of theft and corruption in the newspaper *Sabah*, which further strengthened the opposition against him among the workers. Without any warning the port of Radès went on strike from the 7th to 11th July 2013. Here, the national leadership represented by Kamal Saad played a conciliatory role by trying to negotiate between the local chapter of UGTT, the regional office in Ben Arous and Harouni and Chaibbi on the other hand. The national leadership was very well aware that it could not support a demand to change a CEO, because it would be overstepping the mandate of the union. At the same time a strike in the port that would cost Tunisian businesses billions of dinars was not good for UGTT's public image. However, the national leadership was unable to control or convince the workers in the port to return to work without a clear guarantee that Chaibbi was replaced. The whole affairs therefore

ended after five days of strike with Chaibbi's resignation. The heavy costs was too much for premier minister Ali Larayedh, who ordered Harouni to fire Chaibbi.²³⁶

5.6.2 UGTT and Tunisair

In the months following the revolution, several minor strikes and demonstrations were held by the local chapters of UGTT Tunisair to make sure the agreement about reintegration the different sub-companies was respected. In everything from dress to the monthly payslip the local unions fought to have the same logo and name as Tunisair in order to maintain the pressure and make sure that the reintegration really did take place. Simultaneously, the authorisation of Syphax and the plans for liberalising the Tunisian airspace opened up another struggle for the local chapters of UGTT in the airport. These initiatives were viewed as the mirror image of Ben Ali's privatisation strategy. Just like Ben Ali's gradual division of the company, the authorisation of Syphax and especially the open skies agreement with Qatar was seen as a hidden way to force Tunisair into competition and pave the way for an eventual sale. The local chapters therefore did everything they could to stop Syphax from getting a foothold in Tunis-Carthage Airport. The workers refused to handle the company's aircrafts and also in some incidences blocked the runways. Demonstrations were also organised in front of the ministry of transportation to protests against Harouni's intention of concluding an open skies agreement with Qatar Airways.

The regional office of UGTT in Ariana to which Tunis-Carthage Airport belongs, did like the regional office in Ben Arous, also have a more political vision of the conflict. The general secretary Mohammed Chebbi was convinced that Ennahda wanted to eliminate UGTT, so that the Islamist party could be the only mass organisation in the country. But just like Bourghdiri, Chebbi was very conscious that purely political strikes were not a good idea. As he explains:

"We have to remember that there are also many local members of UGTT who are supporters of Ennahda. We need to get them on board as well. We have to convince them. We need to always have concrete demands to convince them. I am aware of that. When they join me it is not to go against the government, even though my idea is that" (Interview with author).

²³⁶ Najeh Jaouadi, "Qui payera la facture?," *Réalités*, July 17 2013.

With Tunisair the national leadership was worried about the agenda of privatisation, and especially an eventual weakening of UGTT's strong position inside the state owned enterprises. But as in the case of Radès, when it came to the concrete cases the leadership often played more the role of finding a compromise. A different element in the airport compared to the port was the emergence of new unions. Although Ben Ali's regime allowed the establishment of the alternative union *Confédération générale des travailleurs tunisiens* (CGTT)²³⁷, they were in practice not able to work under the dictatorship. When this suddenly became possible after the revolution, CGTT, tried to establish itself in the airport by outbidding the demands and methods of UGTT. CGTT organised several strikes and demonstrations only with the aim of being recognized by Tunisair as a negotiating partner. This new competition made it difficult for UGTT to compromise, because it suddenly had to be aware of not losing members to CGTT.

5.7 UGTT and Ennahda's Different Struggles

After having examined the two conflicts throughout the revolution and constitutional process, a few general remarks can be made about Ennahda and UGTT's behaviour. Generally, UGTT's involvement in the two conflicts was quite reactive. The conflicts sprang out of local demands and problems, and the union's different levels were gradually drawn into them. The national political dimension was not present at the outbreak of the conflicts, but only entered when the higher levels of the union got involved. In both cases the regional level was the most openly political. Perhaps because the regional level was detached enough from the local conflicts to also have the national political struggle in mind, but at the same time not responsible for that national level. It was therefore more easy at this level to be openly political. At the national level the leaders had to take into account how the entire organisation was viewed in the eyes of the Tunisian public and to maintain good relations with the government. The national leadership could therefore not take such a clear political position, even though they might have wanted to.

²³⁷ CGTT is the same as the very first union founded by Mohamed Ali Hammi and Tahar Haddad in 1924, but otherwise there is no connection between the two unions.

Ennahda was after the revolution deeply affected by the years of persecution and exile, and they tended to view the political situation in light of this experience. This meant a strong suspicion towards the state and organisations such as UGTT that to some extent had been affiliated with it. Many of their actions were determined by a desire to make up for past injustices committed against them – as it is seen with the employment of Chaibbi. His employment was a product of national political calculation as were many of Harouni's manoeuvres. He was wanted to exercise and maintain control over the vital transport sector. However, Harouni and Ennahda never tried to Islamize the organisation of the port and the airport. Or anything else for that matter. At no time did Harouni or Chaibbi look to Islamic scriptures for guidance in their management. The only ideological element that can be said to be present was the wish to open up the two markets to new companies, but that was more a reflection of economic liberalism than Islamist ideology.

The ideological discussions about the place of Islam in the country's constitution that dominated the constitutional process were absent in two conflicts. The eventual reference to sharia, freedom of consciousness, human rights and gender equality brought about a discussion in the media about Islamic and secular principles at the time. But none of the workers or leaders questioned ever mentioned these debates. It is important to stress again that the two conflicts examined in this paper are only a little fraction of the hundreds of strikes that occurred during the constitutional process. Some of the strikes had more clear political motives. In 2012 a general strike in Jendouba had as an explicit demand that a faculty of medicine was to be allocated to the town (sic). Slim Tissaoui who was general secretary of UGTT in the region at the time was later named governor of Siliana by the Nidaa Tounes government, which won the elections against Ennahda in 2014. Also some of the strikes in the Gafsa region targeted explicitly the Ennahda party and can be considered political.²³⁸ But many strikes were, just as the conflicts presented above, not very political. And certainly not concerned with the ideological debate about the role of Islam in the constitution. As Khalil Zaouia, minister for social affairs at the time, expressed it: *"Freedom of conscience, Sharia, women's right. All these ideological debates did not play any role in the strikes. The only question from the constitutional*

²³⁸ "Entre les mouvements sociaux et la manipulation politique, la Tunisie au bord de l'effondrement!," *African Manager*, 19th May 2016 2013. "Grève générale : suspendue au Kef, maintenue à Jendouba," *Leaders*, 19th May 2016 2012.

debate that did receive some attention from UGTT's members was the question of a right to strike." (Interview with author).

5.7.1 Politicizing the Conflicts

However, when interviewed about the conflicts both sides portray the conflicts as a part of the larger national political struggle between UGTT and Ennahda. And relate them to the constitutional process that took place at the time. Commenting on the strike in Radès, Harouni himself explains: *"The strike was right after the coup in Egypt. There were people here who thought; "let's make something similar here". They start by putting pressure on the governors, after that the CEO's like Anouar, and then they go for the entire government"* (Interview with author). This view was also reflected in an intervention Ghannouchi did in 2012. Here, he stated that: *"UGTT has become a political entity, which seeks to overthrow the government".*²³⁹

Leaders of UGTT framed the conflict in similar terms. In 2012 Kacem Afaya, a member of the executive bureau of UGTT said that: *"There is major risk that Ennahda becomes the new RCD in religious disguise. I think that Ennahda wants to maintain its power at any cost. Dominant in the assembly, this party will install a parliamentary regime that gives it all powers. Ennahda practices a double discourse, but the civil society is strong enough to block some of its initiatives. For example with regards to sharia."*²⁴⁰ In an interview Sami Tahri, member of the national executive bureau and responsible for communication, explained that the social unrest during the transition the following way: *"Ennahda choose to put their most anti-UGTT people in charge of the sectors that are the most organised – like Harouni in charge of transportation. They tried to isolate UGTT several times and to create a public sentiment against UGTT, especially on the social media."* (Interview with author). On both sides the strikes were interpreted as a struggle over the future fate of Tunisia, and linked to the on going constitutional process.

Having looked at the origins of the examined conflicts, the subsequent question evidently becomes why such a discursive discrepancy emerges. Why did the actors put forth political and ideological arguments when they had to explain the events? It is methodologically difficult – if not impossible - to determine exactly why some actors choose to conceive and portray a conflict in a particular way, but some hypotheses can

²³⁹ "Rachid Ghannouchi: L'UGTT veut la chute du gouvernement à tout prix," *Tuniscope*, April 7 2012.

²⁴⁰ Yousfi, 190.

be put forth. First, for some like Harouni and Boughdiri, the conflict was seen as the extension of their political fights in the 1980's student politics. Both highlighted in the interviews several times that they knew each other from student politics. The conflict thus became a replay of their personal ideological struggles of their youth. Second, for Ennahda the history of persecution also contributed to a more ideological view of the conflict. In order to survive prison and persecution, it was for many Ennahda activists a necessity to stick to a very ideological – if not utopian – political belief system in order to justify their sufferings to themselves. As one Ennahda activist put it: “In prison you need a dream – not policies”. Coming out of prison and exile and being suddenly thrown into the political power, many political problems were logically understood in ideological terms. Third, both parties had a certain interest in portraying the conflicts in ideological terms. For Ennahda an ideological explanation removed the attention from their own mismanagement and responsibility. Both internally to galvanize their supporters, but also when they had to explain their government record to the general public. Likewise with UGTT, regarding the strikes as part of a greater national struggle made it difficult to criticise the content of their own demands and the instability that their strikes inflicted on the country. Being part of a national struggle, removed the focus from the actual demands. Fourth, explaining the events as Islamists versus Secularists fitted much better into the public debate after the revolution and made it also probably easier to get across in the media, where focus was on this divide.

5.8 Why Secularism versus Islamism

Why the Tunisian Revolution ended up as a bipolar struggle between Islamists and secularist cannot be reduced to a simple causal factor, and the two conflicts studied in this paper are, as has been emphasized above, just two out almost 2000 strikes that occurred in this period. However, they still reveal certain truths about the way politics became structured after the Arab Spring. The crucial element here is the misconception of the terms “Islamist” and “secularist” within the study of the Arab Spring. In political science and in much of Middle East Studies these terms have often been taken as purely an expression of the actors *motivation*. This is seen most clearly in some of the discussions related to neo-orientalist assertions about the incompatibility of Islam and democracy. But

also the literature on Islamist moderation see these ideological positions as exclusively motivation.²⁴¹

Anthropological and micro-sociological studies regard ideology rightly as a simplification and point to the complexities of the actors motivations. An example of this has been Asef Bayat's work on the Arab Spring. With terms such as "non-social movements" and "quite encroachment" Bayat has sought to describe political action at the very lowest level – far from the ideological debates. Looking at how poor people in Middle Eastern cities for example illegally tap into the electricity network, Bayat argues that although not consciously political, these actions do have political consequences and should therefore be included in our analysis.²⁴² However, there is one element that this bottom-up perspective cannot account for, and that is the discrepancy between the anthropological description and the prevailing political interpretation of the events. If the origin of the Tunisian Revolution is to be found in small scale actions, often motivated by poverty and desperation, why do these events end up being interpreted in terms of grand scale ideological struggles?

Much of the answer to this question is to be found in the practical usage of ideology in politics. Ideology is not simply an expression of motivation or a philosophical belief system. In practice, ideology functions in several different ways. First of all, ideology is also a *label*. When the regional leaders of UGTT played up the conflicts as a struggle against the "Islamists" or when Ennahda called Bourguiba "secularist" it was not simply a description of the motivations of their adversaries. The debates about how to interpret the Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring, more broadly, are not separate from the political struggles that take place on the ground. Political actors describe themselves and their opponents in ideology terms, not to properly describe their intention, but to *strategically* portray them in a certain way. It can shore up support from the base, install fear in swing voters and delegitimise enemies depending on the situation.

²⁴¹ See section 2.2.

²⁴² Asef Bayat, "Life as Politics How Ordinary People Change the Middle East", Stanford University Press; Asef Bayat, *Post-Islamism : the changing faces of political Islam* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Bayat, "Activism and social development in the Middle East."

Second, ideological denominations are also a matter of *convention*. It is characteristic in Tunisia that the political camp that was labelled “secularist” did not want to separate religion and the state, and the so-called “Islamists” in the Ennahda party did not want to create an Islamic state. Both camps, however, still referred to each other in those terms. Because ideological categories are, just as language in general, not just about the content or original meaning, but about what you usually say. So also with the political cleavage in the Tunisian revolution. Despite the revolution originating in more materialist and distributive conflicts, the pre-existing political cleavages going back to the early days of the republic and especially the tumultuous 1970’s had already shaped the mental compass of the many actors. This was clear in how Harouni and Bourgdhiri saw the conflicts through their experience in the student unions in the 1980’s.

Thirdly, ideology is also an *identity*. When Ennahda members have spent years in prison, because of their political ideology it is not easy to disregard. Even though they may compromise and completely change the content of the category, it may still be hard to abandon the ideological denomination. After all, they sacrificed their life for it. In many ways, it would have served Ennahda well to distance itself from Islamism as an ideology already from the beginning of the revolution, because the content of their position would have allowed it, so to speak. However, we had to wait until 2016 for the party to replace Islamism with “Muslim democracy”. The same goes for the secularists. Essebsi has clearly stated that he is against the repeal of the ban of homosexuality. It is against Arab culture and Islam, as he says. Not very secular, if one was to follow a rigorous definition. However, Essebsi identifies with the legacy of Bourguiba and the progressive reforms in the 1960’s. In his struggle with Ennahda he both identifies himself and is identified by Ennahda as such. Same goes for UGTT. The union organises imams and other religious officials alongside its other members, and it has never advocated a separation of state and Islam. What makes UGTT part of the “secular camp” is the long time opposition to the Ennahda dating back to “Black Thursday” in 1978. The social sciences tend to forget these other aspects of ideology. Instead they take ideological denominations at face value. This leads to an analysis in which conflicts are defined in terms of ideological incongruences and political action only motivated by attempts to implement belief systems. As we see it in the many studies that portray the Arab Spring as a struggle between Islamists and secularists. In order to avoid these misconceptions it is necessary to be aware of the multiple dimensions of ideology in politics.

6 Conclusion

The four articles presented throughout this thesis have all pointed to several weaknesses in political science and, especially, comparative politics and democratization studies. In this final chapter, I will address these weaknesses in a more comprehensive way. The principal theoretical findings from the thesis's articles will be summarized, and the reasons for the failings of the existing literature will be debated.

6.1 Tunisia's Revolution in Four Articles

All four articles in this thesis not only seek to answer an empirical question about the Tunisian Revolution and constitutional process, they also engage with established political science theories. Chapter one, explained why Ennahda accepted the constitution, despite the fact that many of its principles ran against the party's original Islamist ideology. The findings presented in chapter two contradicted some of the assumptions of the literature on Islamist Moderation. The debate has been juxtaposing scholars who saw Islamist concessions as purely tactical against scholars who saw it as the product of internal debate and deliberation. As it is pointed out in chapter two, Ennahda's transformation shows that the relationship between ideology and interests is much more complex. The Islamist leadership may compromise for strategic reasons, but the leadership has to simultaneously convince the base, which brings about ideological change throughout the organisation. The motivations for compromise also turned out to be much more diverse than interests or ideology. The Islamists' motivations were a mix of longing for recognition, fear of renewed persecution, and personal ambitions.

Chapter three outlined why it was possible for UGTT to play a major role in the revolution and constitutional process despite the fact that the organisation enjoyed close ties with the former regime. The answer was found in UGTT's ambiguous position vis-à-vis the state. The union always contained both regime loyalists and dissidents, and the leadership enjoyed strong ties with the regime while maintaining the organisation's independence. This meant that the union survived the dictatorship and could play a credible part in the revolution and constitutional process. These findings call into question the conceptualisation of civil society within democratization studies, especially the transitology literature. Instead of transitology's expectation that civil society emerges

from scratch after a democratic opening, the study finds that a strong civil society can emerge from regime affiliated organisations. Instead of the dichotomous reading of civil society as either independent or co-opted, the study shows that civil society organisations can contain both elements at the time.

Chapter four describes the evolution of the Tunisian religious sphere during the Revolution and constitutional process. It outlines how the religious monopoly of the state broke down in the aftermath of the revolution, and how the new democratic regime gradually has tried to recapture the religious field. The article shows that the Islamic institutions were more an arena of political in fights than a power broker that could influence the political process. It also made it clear that the debate on Islam and democracy has to be turned on its head. Islam did not influence or alter democratic principles, but democratisation did change the governance of Islam.

Chapter five investigates the reasons why the Tunisian Revolution and constitutional process was perceived as a struggle between Secularists and Islamists. The two conflicts, which the article focuses on, were primarily driven by local issues. But, they were politicised by both political camps and portrayed as an Islamist/Secularist struggle. The study shows that the literature on the Arab Spring often has an overly ideological reading of the events, because they take ideological labels at face value. The article emphasizes the fact that ideology often has other meanings that are more tied to histories of political conflicts and conventions than actual political beliefs.

Additionally, as pointed out in section 1.2 the theories of democratization did also not fare well when one looks at the Tunisian Revolution and constitutional process in its entirety. The revolution was not driven by growth in prosperity and an affluent middle class, as modernization theory would predict. Nor was the revolution set in motion by some kind of class struggle as Marxist inspired explanations would have it. The elitist focus of transitology also turned out to be rather useless in the face of the Tunisian Revolution. No initial opening of the regime happened, no negotiation between moderates on both sides. Samuel Huntington's long view on state building and democratization can be said to have some truth to it, although also this argument is debatable (see section 1.2.2). Overall a rather poor record for the established theories in the field.

6.2 The Problems of Comparative Politics

It is important to emphasise that revolutions and political transitions are highly complex phenomena and almost impossible to foresee, and it is normal that theories are revised when such critical events happen. Furthermore, also post-factum it would be unrealistic to demand that theories within the field would be able to account for everything that happened in this period. Theoretical explanations are always approximations, they never explain a case 100 pro cent. However, the extent of the failings that have been summed up in this thesis exceeds the normal margin of error. They point not just to the need for an amendment of established theories, but to a more structural problem in the very production of knowledge within comparative politics. In this section, these problems will be discussed.

6.2.1 Dichotomous Concepts

One of the most central problems in comparative politics is the way concepts are used and constructed. Every student of political science is compelled to read Giovanni Sartori's classic "Comparing and Miscomparing", in which the fundamentals of the comparative method is laid out. The key argument of Sartori is that in order to test hypothesis in social life, it is necessary to form clear concepts that can function as variables in different cases. He warns of the dangers of *concept stretching* and *degreism*, where concepts are taken to have different meanings or only seen as a matter of degree. Instead, Sartori calls for clear dichotomous concepts that can be used to construct variables and test hypotheses. Without dichotomous concepts, no variables. Without variables, no tests. Dichotomous concepts are thus intrinsically tied to the ambition of aligning social science with the experimental method used in natural sciences. Sartori's essay has been debated, but mostly in the form of refinement of the original argument or it has been hold up to criticise the proliferation of new less rigorous concepts in political science.²⁴³ Some scholars have called for a need to treat democracy as a degree instead of a dichotomy, but the basic tenets of Sartori's approach has not been questioned.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ David Collier and James E. Mahon, "Conceptual "Stretching" Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis," *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 4 (1993).

²⁴⁴ David Collier and Robert Adcock, "Democracy and Dichotomies: A Pragmatic Approach to Choices about Concepts," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, (1999).

It is my argument that many problems with comparative political science can be traced to Sartori's quest for dichotomous and scientific concepts. The problem is that they do not produce sound knowledge. They tend to skew analysis towards clichés and broad empty generalisations that makes the field overlook important aspects of social life. Take the case of UGTT studied in chapter three. Most studies of the Middle East before the Arab Spring were full of assertions of the lack of civil society in the Middle East.²⁴⁵ The authoritarian state was all dominant and only Islamist movements could challenge them. The reason for this analysis was the fact that the field was operating with a dichotomous concept of civil society as either free and independent or non-existent. This led to the conclusion that no civil society existed before the revolution and that it suddenly, out of nowhere, appeared after the revolution. UGTT's political position in Tunisia before the revolution was extremely ambiguous. It was in many ways tied to the regime, which would disqualify it as a civil society organisation, yet there were also situations where it acted in opposition to it. And it is exactly this *ambiguity* that a dichotomous concept cannot account for. Other examples, not discussed in this thesis, suffer equally from this "dichotomous concept syndrome". Tribal societies for example are in the literature either perceived as tribal or non-tribal. But what if tribal identities only occasionally play a role? The same can be said of the Sunni/Shia conflict in Iraq and Syria. Was it always there or did it suddenly emerge with the wars? Probably the identities existed before, but in a complex intertwining with other loyalties. We can only account for these phenomena if we are able to identify ambiguous positions and identities.

6.2.2 Missing Subjectivity

Another problem with concepts in comparative politics is that life experience, motivations and the subjectivity of the actors are left out. This is of course done to make social phenomena more comparable and subject to tests, as pointed out above. However, omitting actors' experience and personality, do perhaps lead to clarity, but only a fictional one. This was clear in the Islamist Moderation Paradigm. This literature is built on the assumption that it is possible to identify the exact variables that would make Islamist parties to moderate and transform into democrats. There are two major problems with this. First, this creates an incentive to only look at objective evidence such as institutional constraints, financial resources, organisational structure, and official ideological

²⁴⁵ See section 3.

statements. The fact that Ennahda had been persecuted, imprisoned and desperately were seeking recognition and guarantees of security was for example hard to fit into the Islamist moderation paradigm. Second, even if such studies manage to turn more hermeneutic evidence, such as personality or life experience, into variables, it would still be too static and inflexible to account for the decisions of political actors. An obvious example, here, is the comparison between the Egyptian Muslim Brothers and the Ennahda party. Both parties share the same ideological background and history of persecution. Both parties won the elections after the revolution and formed a government after the revolution. However, Ennahda's leadership always understood their situation as very weak, despite the electoral victory, and therefore did not try to monopolize power or implement any radical reforms. They simply were too afraid that it would provoke a backlash from its adversaries in the state and civil society. Even after the constitution was passed, Ennahda did not put up a candidate for the presidential elections.²⁴⁶ In contrast, the Egyptian Muslim Brothers overestimated their political position and quickly tried to monopolize power, which led to a major backlash. Additionally, they were unable to adapt their Islamist positions to the new political realities.²⁴⁷ Of course, one can ascribe some of these differences to structural elements, but much of it has to do with the leadership's interpretation in the two parties. Political actors can experience the exact same things, but interpret them in completely different ways. A theory of political action must therefore include this subjective element. Otherwise, comparative politics is taken by surprise each time "factor X" does not lead "actor Y" to perform "action Z".

6.2.3 Interaction Between Concepts and the Field

A third problem with the classic conceptualisation in comparative politics, is that scholars tend to forget the interaction between academic concepts and the political sphere. Secularism as well as Islamism are for example academic concepts, and their meanings are tight to theoretical debates. However, these concepts are also used in the political sphere by politicians to portray and position themselves. When scholars forget this double use of concepts and take labels such as "Islamist" and "Secularist" at face

²⁴⁶ "Tunisie: Ennahda n'aura pas un candidat à la présidentielle," *Huffington Post Maghreb*, September 7 2014.

²⁴⁷ See for example Ashraf El-Sherif, *The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's failures* (Carnegie Endowment for International, Peace, 2014).

value, it leads to a misreading of the events and overemphasis on ideological differences. A stream of articles has thus been published on the divisions between Islamists and secularists during the Tunisian constitutional process. But, as has been outlined in chapter five, these conflicts were much more complex and did not have much to do with whether the state and Islam should be separated. Another example is the word “Islamist” itself. It was originally constructed in academia, but came to be used by Islamists groups themselves and often redefined by adding adjectives to it resulting in word pairs such as “moderate Islamists” or “democratic Islamists”.²⁴⁸ Thereby changing the meaning of the initial concept. This sort of conceptual history, common in history for example, is rarely done in comparative politics, and many political nuances are therefore lost in the analysis.

6.2.4 Macro Bias

A fourth problem with the way conceptualisation is done in comparative politics is that it unavoidable has a bias towards macro variables. In order to conduct comparative analysis one is always led to look at big structural differences. What is the role of the army? Is there a vivid civil society? What are the interests of the regime? These are the questions that the comparative approach leads one to look at. These questions are perfectly valid and might bring valuable information to the different cases. The different role and strength of the army in Tunisia and Egypt is for example very important for the understanding of the outcome of the revolution in the two countries.²⁴⁹ The same holds true with many other aspects of the Arab Spring. Daniel Brumberg’s analysis of the structure of the previous regime and how it determined the evolution of the uprisings in the different Arab countries is another good scholarly work that looks at overall structures.²⁵⁰ However, very often the key to understanding the evolution of such fluid moments as revolutions is to look *within* the macro structures. It is not so much the overall role of the army structurally and historically speaking as what is going on in the chains of command in the exact pivotal moments of the revolution. The same with civil society. It is not whether there is independent civil society or not, but more what is going

²⁴⁸ The biography of Rachid Ghannouchi is for example called “a democrat within Islamism” Azzam Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi : a democrat within Islamism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁴⁹ See for example Zoltan Barany, “The Role of the Military,” *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 4 (2011).

²⁵⁰ Daniel Brumberg, “Transforming the Arab Worlds Protection-Racket Politics,” *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (2013).

on inside civil society organisations. By focusing too much on the macro structures, comparative politics risks not seeing critical evolutions that might cause larger structural change in the long run.

6.2.5 Normative Blur of Democratization Studies

Besides the conceptual problems of comparative politics, the Arab Spring has also made visible some problems related to the normative character of democratization studies and particularly transitology. The field has been motivated by a desire to spread democracy, and the academic discipline of democratization studies is intimately linked to democracy promotion in the world. However, this normative outset can sometimes skew the academic analysis. First, the definition of democracy in democratization studies remains closely tied to liberalism also in an economic sense and it favours some actors over others in the analysis. It creates an overly focus on human rights groups and single issue civil society organisations at the expense of broad class based organisations. Many of the struggles that UGTT fought against, privatisation and liberal reforms, as seen in chapter three, were not exclusively economic. They were also political and expressed a resistance to the regime.

However, this is hard to grasp through the lens of transition literature in which trade unions and class based organisations are often seen as dangerous for the democratization process. In his essay on civil society Larry Diamond, thus, describes the forces that stand to loose from a democratic transition: “*Old, established interests that stand to lose from reform tend to be organized into formations like state-sector trade unions*”.²⁵¹ Similarly, Guillermo O’Donnell and Phillippe Schmitter write that “*...the greatest challenge to the transitional regime is likely to come from the new and revived identities and capacity for collective action of the working class and lower-ranking, often unionized, employees*”.²⁵² Democratization studies lack a way to incorporate protests against unemployment and rising food prices, to give an example, into an analysis of democratization. Such protests are often seen as purely economic, or simply described as “spontaneous”, because the actors do not formulate the demands in the lingua of liberal democracy as human rights groups do.

²⁵¹ Larry Jay Diamond, "Toward Democratic Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 3 (1994): 12.

²⁵² O’Donnell and Schmitter, 52.

Second, the universal character of democratization studies does also come with some intrinsic problems. This is not to say that every culture has in own form of “democracy” that would be to revert to vulgar culturalism. Democracy has a content and there are elements that need to be in place in order for scholars to label it as such. However, there might be elements that the political actors in a certain country might do in a certain way and constitutional questions that are more important to some countries than others. By operating with a fixed toolkit for establishing democratic institutions, democratization studies somehow deprives the country of the intellectual ownership of the process. This is of course most visible when the ideas of democratization studies are put into practice by the different democracy promoting NGO’s and developments agencies, but it is also visible in the academic field. When democracy is only a question of implementing already existing principles, the importance of discussing the very fundamentals of democracy within the country’s specific context is neglected. The debates in the Tunisian constituent assembly addressed several central principles of modern democracy; the role between state and religion, freedom of speech, separation of powers etc. All principles that have been settled long time ago in other parts of the world. But, it was extremely important for the popular support for democracy that they were “re-invented” again in the Tunisian context. Something that might be overlooked if one only has the theoretical models of democratization studies in mind.

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