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The Illusion of the Tunisian Exception: Civil Society and Democratic Transition**

أوهام الاستثناء التونسي: المجتمع المدني وامتحان تجربة الانتقال الديمقراطي

Abstract: Tunisia's democratic transition has attracted considerable scholarly attention, and is often portrayed as a notable exception. However, the reversal of most democratic gains in the decade following the 2011 revolution has called this narrative into question. This study deconstructs the notion of Tunisian exceptionalism through a critical examination of civil society, tracing its role from the pre-revolutionary period through the democratic transition, and up to Kais Saied's 2021 coup. The study shows that Tunisian civil society contributed to the derailment of the democratic transition in three ways: first, by exacerbating Islamist-secular polarization, resulting in a fragmented "two-headed" civil society; second, by becoming an extension of political parties; and third, by encroaching on the role of the state, undermining its legitimacy and effectiveness in the public sphere.

Keywords: Tunisia; Democratic Transition; Exceptionalism; Civil Society

الملخص: ظلت تجربة الانتقال الديمقراطي في تونس مثار اهتمام الباحثين، وقد عدّها بعضهم استثناءً دالًّا. غير أنّ المآلات التي عرفتها التجربة لاحقًا مع الانقلاب على جل المكتسبات التي راكمتها البلاد خلال ما يناهز عقدًا من الزمن على اندلاع الثورة التونسية عام 2011 وضعت تلك الأطروحة موضع شك. تُفكك هذه الدراسة مقولة الاستثناء التونسي استنادًا إلى دراسة منزلة المجتمع المدني بدءًا من مرحلة ما قبل الثورة التونسية، ومرورًا بمرحلة الانتقال الديمقراطي، وانتهاءً بالانقلاب الذي قاده قيس سعيّد عام 2021، وتبيّن الدراسة أنّ المجتمع المدني التونسي ساهم في تعطيل مسار الانتقال الديمقراطي من خلال ثلاثة طرائق: تعزيز الاستقطاب الإسلامي-العلماني إلى حد ظهور مجتمع مدني بـ «رأسين»، وتحوّل منظمات المجتمع المدني التونسي إلى أذرع سياسية للأحزاب، وتغوّل دور المجتمع على حساب الدولة وسلبها شرعيتها وفعاليتها في الفضاءات العامة.

كلمات مفتاحية: تونس؛ الانتقال الديمقراطي؛ الاستثناء؛ المجتمع المدني.

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Introduction

For nearly a decade, many scholars regarded Tunisia's democratic transition as an exception in a regional context where other Arab revolutions faltered early, descending into civil wars or military coups that crushed aspirations for freedom and democracy. These failures also dashed the optimistic view that the Arab revolutions had finally dispelled the thesis of Arab democratic intractability, premised on a belief that Arab-Islamic culture and its underlying social structures are inherently incompatible with democratic values.

Since 25 July 2021,[1] however, amidst a burgeoning populism, the very notion of a Tunisian exception has come under question. The swift dismantlement of the institutions of the democratic transition following the coup against the 2014 Constitution presented an opportunity to reconsider the praise lavished on the unique Tunisian experience. In the end, Tunisia's trajectory closely resembled that of other Arab countries: the democratic transition was disrupted, political forces that did not believe in democracy assumed power, and society's inability to defend its experiment led to its surrender. This assertion contradicts the conclusions in most studies of the "Tunisian exception", which have emphasized the long history of Tunisian political elites, the modernity of the state, the dynamics of consensus among political parties, and its extraordinary civil society, which, even under authoritarian rule, carved out a significant space for rights and freedoms that successive political regimes had not dared to challenge.

This study deconstructs the Tunisian exceptionalism thesis and the mythologization of Tunisian civil society, exposing their weaknesses by examining civil society's position and its role in derailing the democratic transition. Eschewing culturalist approaches that frame "Islamic despotism" as an intrinsic value, this deconstruction does not assume that Tunisian society is structurally incapable of democratization, which merely restates the thesis of democratic intractability. Instead, we should ask: What explains the ease with which the institutions of the democratic transition were dismantled? What explains the feeble resistance to authoritarianism, the surrender of Tunisian elites, the revival of a culture of fear, a renewed aversion to public affairs, and the return to a place that elites believed they had definitively left behind?

Answering these two questions helps in grasping the various manifestations of the failure of the Tunisian revolution since the 2019 elections that brought President Kais Saied to power, among them the curtailment of individual and collective freedoms and the retreat from a political and institutional legacy of parties, unions, and representative bodies that date back to the early 20th century. Moreover, the economic malaise that accompanied the democratic transition – recession, sluggish growth rates, rampant unemployment, rising prices, and deteriorating services[2] – cannot reliably explain the failure, especially given the growing demand for Saied's brand of populism and authoritarianism. The same economic and social conditions persist today and have even worsened under his rule, including shortages of staple food items, such as cereals, sugar, and oil, rising unemployment rates, and a growth rate that dipped to 0.4% in 2023.[3]

I will similarly avoid the socio-culturalist approach, which perpetuates the notion of Arab democratic intractability by rendering it an inherent quality, thereby ignoring the intricate dynamics of Arab societies,

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[1] Scholars disagree over how to label this event. Some refer to it simply as a coup, while others insist it is more precisely a constitutional coup. In my opinion, the discussion extends beyond the legal and constitutional foundations of President Kais Saied's actions. Beginning on 25 July, he instituted a series of measures that enabled him to abolish the 2014 constitution, dissolve the government, dismantle the Supreme Judicial Council, and suspend most of the independent constitutional bodies. He further monopolized power, dismantled the institutions of the democratic transition, and began formulating a political system based on a "grassroots structure" and the exclusion of mediating bodies, parties, organizations, and associations. All of this took place amid an authoritarian populist discourse that derailed the country's democratic transition, however flawed.

[2] In the first six months of 2013, Tunisia experienced shortages of several staple foodstuffs, including bread, milk, sugar, and tea. Prices rose to unprecedented levels, and hundreds of vital medicines became unavailable. Despite this, virtually all demonstrations came to a halt.

[3] "La croissance économique au quatrième trimestre 2023," *Statisques Tunisie*, accessed on 26/8/2024, at: https://tinyurl.com/y457jtyk

the significant transformations they have experienced, and the role of various actors within them. Instead, I turn to political values, examining the convictions of civil society actors – organizations, associations, and political elites, whether partisan or otherwise – to assess the depth of their belief in democratic values through their responses to specific events: elections, conflicts, disputes, and initiatives. Tunisia underwent a democratic transition without democrats,[4] including within civil society organizations and associations. Accordingly, the Tunisian cultural, intellectual, and political incubator is so atrophied that it is incapable of embracing and consolidating democracy, whether at the level of values (due to historical reasons rooted in the contexts of political modernization and state building, specifically the post-independence state) or of practice (due to the rampant mutual antagonism among most political actors who shaped the post-revolutionary political landscape).

This paper deconstructs the notion of Tunisian exceptionalism and assesses the extent to which it was embodied in the realities of Tunisian political life during the decade 2011-2021. To this end, I first offer an analysis of the theory of Tunisian exceptionalism itself, unpacking its foundations using Tunisia-focused research. I then examine Tunisian civil society as an ostensible incubator of democratic values and practice. This civil society confronted the dual challenge of managing the democratization process and securing the transition, while simultaneously functioning as a political agent deeply embroiled in the political conflict. In this context, I highlight the role of civil society organizations in thwarting the democratic transition.

Exceptionalism and the Tunisian Exception: Deconstructing the Myth

The failure of the Tunisian revolution is neither unique nor rare in modern political history. Many revolutions and democratic transitions had similar, if not worse, outcomes. As scholars often emphasize, democratic transitions rarely follow a linear path. Instead, they typically unfold along winding trajectories and often stumble. At times, revolutions end up where they began, culminating in the inescapable resurgence of tyranny in various forms. The French Revolution is the example *par excellence* of such contradictory – as well as thrilling, strange, and disappointing – outcomes. All these fates are contained within it, for both its supporters and opponents, and it has left political scientists and historians perplexed for generations.[5] In such complex and entangled processes, national specificities – political culture, the character of actors and elites, and entrenched social forces like the social classes and political formations that sustained the *ancien régime* – have a profound impact on the historical outcomes of societal change or political transition. They influence alliances, guide the trajectory of events, and define pivotal turning points, imbuing them with their lexicons and perceptions. Many analyses, and even political theories, take this broadly sketched framework when explaining revolutions and transitions, though they acknowledge that exceptions exist. For nearly a decade, the Tunisian revolution reinforced the paradigm of Tunisian exceptionalism.[6] Numerous scholars and experts saw Tunisia's success as a manifestation of this exceptionalism, so extraordinary within an Arab-Islamic environment long marked by failed attempts at democratic transition.

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[4] Was the democratic transition democratizing? What was the place of democracy in it? Answers to these questions have varied, particularly that some observers believe that democratic values and culture were atrophied, which led political initiatives to prioritize governance and gain power at the expense of consolidating democracy in educational curricula, culture, and institutions. Two important sources enrich a consideration of this question, each taking a different perspective and treating a different time. See: Vincent Geisser & Amin Allal, *Tunisie, Une démocratisation au–dessus de tout soupçon* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2018); Ghassane Salame, *Démocraties sans démocrates: Politiques d'ouverture dans le monde arabe et islamique* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), pp. 142-143.

[5] See: Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (London: Harvard University Press, 1986); Michel Camau, *L'exception Tunisienne: Variation sur un mythe* (Paris: IRMC, Karthala, 2018).

[6] See: Michel Camau & Vincent Geisser, *Le syndrome autoritaire: Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003).

In keeping with the critical approach outlined above, we must return to the historical roots of the idea of exceptionalism, as formulated by Alexis de Tocqueville in his excursus on the peculiar qualities of the American democratic experiment.[7] Tocqueville regarded the American iteration of democracy as one-of-a-kind, the product of a local, idiosyncratic history shaped by waves of immigration since the 17th century by diverse groups seeking "a land of justice and goodness". He emphasized this particularity, viewing American history and the social engineering that underpinned it, the ways of thinking and living, the reactions shaped through socialization and daily conduct, the structure of local governance, and the unleashing of individual initiative, as features that distinguished Americans and rendered their political life and pioneering democracy unique. Indeed, Tocqueville considered the United States as the only democracy in existence during his time.

I explicitly exclude what first comes to mind when "state of exception" is invoked. Since the writings of Carl Schmitt, the concept in political science has come to denote a temporary – though potentially prolonged – suspension of the constitution, laws, and legislation that govern political life. While this meaning is important for understanding the outcomes of the Tunisian democratic transition, an exception (or exceptionalism) as used in this study refers to the unique characteristics of societies that are attributable to singular, essential traits that put them outside the norm. Exceptionalism in this sense has been elaborated within the social sciences and anthropology, where some civilizations, societies, and faiths have been cast as sources of exception. Islam, for example, has often been viewed as an impediment to the spread of democratic values in the countries that embraced it.

As used here, Tunisian exceptionalism refers to the idea that Tunisian society is unique in its cultural and political history; it is history that has rendered Tunisia an exception. This paradigm of exceptionalism was cited extensively before the Arab revolutions of 2010-2011 to understand the region's ostensible imperviousness to democratization. The Arab exception, which posits that Arab countries are congenitally unsuited to democracy, rests on the premise that European and American democratic models represent the norm, and that any deviations from these models are mere exceptions whose genuine democratic nature remains suspect.[8]

In the post-revolutionary phase in Tunisia, beginning in late 2010 and early 2011, the idea of a Tunisian exception was rediscovered and valorized to explain the success of the country's democratic transition. In line with this approach, Tunisian exceptionalism became a historical fact and an unassailable proof during the transitional phase in 2012 and 2013 and beyond. Tunisia was a "beacon"[9] in the darkness that had descended upon most other Arab states such as Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria.

For its proponents, Tunisian exceptionalism rests on a set of arguments, many of which were cited in the pre-revolutionary period as evidence of its exceptionalism to the rule (i.e. the broader Arab context). These include the resilience of Tunisia's civil society, its long-standing constitutional heritage, the modernity and democracy of its political elites and their capacity for consensus, the breadth and enlightenment of its liberal middle class, its moderate Islamist movement, and its republican, non-politicized army.[10] Other arguments,

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[7] See: Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique, souvenirs: L'ancien régime et la révolution* (Paris: éd. Robert Laffont/Bouquins, 1986).

[8] Michel Camau, "Globalisation démocratique et exception autoritaire arabe," *Critique internationale*, vol. 1, no. 30 (2006), pp. 59-81; Nicolas Guilhot & Philippe C. Schmitter, "De la transition à la consolidation: Une lecture rétrospective des democratization studies," *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 50, no. 4-5 (2000), pp. 615-632; Diane Ethier, "L'imposition de la démocratie a-t-elle été l'exception ou la règle depuis 1945?," *Études internationales*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2000), pp. 313-339; Alfred Stepan & Graeme Robertson, "An Arab More Than a Muslim Electoral Gap," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2003), pp. 30-59; Sanford Lakoff, "The Reality of Muslim Exceptionalism," *Journal* of *Democracy*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2004), pp. 133-139; John Waterbury, "Democracy Without Democrats? The Potential for Political Liberalization in the Middle East," in: Ghassan Salame (ed.), *Democracy without Democrats: The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 23-47.

[9] Yadh Ben Achour has examined some aspects of this exception; see: Yadh Ben Achour, *Tunis: Thawra fī Bilād al-Islām* (Tunis: Dar Saras, 2017).

[10] Mohamed Nachi, *Socio-anthropologie des cultures arabo-islamiques, sociologie de la "révolution" tunisienne. L'exception tunisienne: Vers un "compromis historique?"* (Liège: Presse universitaires de liège, 2015).

which I have excluded from this analysis, contend that its exceptionalism stems from a "Tunisian genius" and a particularity deeply rooted in the ancient history of its people, even before they became Tunisians. These arguments lean more on myth than on history, with some even tracing Tunisian exceptionalism back over 3,000 years to the civilization of Carthage and its unique legacy.

Tunisia has been viewed as a double exception because its democratic transition culminated, albeit minimally, in the establishment of an actual democracy. Through numerous free elections, it achieved the peaceful transfer of power and, both in legislation and in practice, upheld the separation of powers, at least for a limited period. This resulted in a significant liberalization of the public sphere.[11] In addition – and of particular concern in this study – Tunisia stood out as the only Arab country to have successfully navigated its transition, in contrast to the failure of other Arab experiences, until outcomes subsequently changed.[12]

In keeping with this reverential view, Tunisia was often given a special status, embodied in the term "Tunisian exception". While Tunisian society endured various forms of authoritarianism under President Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987) and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011), there were multiple signs that the country possessed the potential for a smooth transition to democracy, despite the regimes' lack of receptivity to any form of democratic openness. These indicators include political pluralism, a climate conducive to public freedoms (albeit limited), and an entrenched struggle for human rights.

The social modernization the country has undergone since the establishment of the independent state, the economic liberalism it has embraced since the 1970s, and the expansion of its diverse national economic fabric, as well as the growth of a middle class and a modern elite of university graduates, are socioeconomic indicators that, according to classical modernization theory, suggest it was "inevitable" that Tunisia enter the stage of democracy. In contrast, research and studies that reeled off these indicators denied their presence in other Arab countries. Tunisia was thus cast as an exception, uniquely combining all these attributes in a way unmatched elsewhere in the Arab world.

But the dream of democracy was never realized. In fact, the country experienced occasional, baffling setbacks after brief periods of democratic openness, which were limited both in duration and impact. Accordingly, the notion of the Tunisian exception, when measured against the broader Arab norm, seemed more like a historical paradox. Tunisia had seemingly met all the preconditions for democratization, most importantly a period of economic and social maturity presumed to be conducive to, and capable of embracing democracy.[13]

Though important, this thesis is far from enjoying scholarly consensus. Many scholars, such as Michel Camau, have sought to refute it by demonstrating the fallacy of Arab exceptionalism, particularly in a global context marked by the diffusion of democracy. In fact, some latch on to this context to argue that the Arab world remains an exception because it maintains, "strangely", various forms of authoritarianism.[14]

The truth, however, is that Arab authoritarianism is not an exception to the globalization of democracy. Citing the Arab world's failure to produce democratic systems often relies on treating it as a homogeneous unit composed of identical authoritarian regimes, which is inaccurate. Furthermore, there is no scientific

[11] Other aspects of Tunisian exceptionalism have been explored in the writings of some Tunisian sociologists who theorize a Tunisian character with a set of specific traits. For Mahmud al-Dhawadi, for example, this character is "combative" and "unreconciled with its language" and religious symbols, while for Moncef Wanas, it is conciliatory and easily appeased. For both, this personality is distinct from that of other Arabs, based on the idea of a "base personality". This articulation of exceptionalism takes on a socio-anthropological dimension that is not subject to historical periodization or chronology and is quasi-essentialist. See: Moncef Wanas, *al-Shakhṣiyya al-Tūnisiyya: Muḥāwala fī Fahm al-Shakhṣiyya al-ʿArabiyya* (Tunis: al-Dar al-Mutawassita, 2010); Mahmud al-Dhawadi, *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Tūnisī wa-Iḥtiḍānuhū li-Maʾziq al-Istilāb: Iʿāqat al-Lugha wa-Irtibāk al-Huwiyya* (Tunis: Mujamaʿ al-Atrash, 2019), p. 231.

[12] Nicolas Beau & Dominique Lagarde, *L'exception tunisienne. Chronique d'une transition démocratique mouvementée* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), p. 197.

[13] Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, "Développement et démocratie: L'exception tunisienne," *L'année du Maghreb*, no. 3 (2007), pp. 427-455.

[14] Camau, "Globalisation démocratique et exception autoritaire arabe," p. 59.

evidence that authoritarianism is inherently Arab, let alone an essential, fixed characteristic. As Camau contends, this belief is not only intellectually and morally flawed: it is a stigmatizing attitude, especially when authoritarianism is explicitly labelled as "Arab".

In contemporary political life, the norm is democracy or the pursuit thereof. The exception is authoritarianism, which has "no essential Arab origin". The idea of an Arab exception

> stems from a set of sociohistorical assumptions, similar to those that posit the existence of rigid, immutable social structures inclined toward authoritarianism, or a religious doctrine that endorses and justifies authoritarianism. The exception has nothing to do with Arabs; the enormous repressive capacities of Arab political regimes would not have been possible without the support of Western powers intent on securing their security interests, coupled with the weakness of popular resistance … Democracy is a norm shared by most Arab peoples, and they yearn for it, but in their own way, harbouring reservations about democracy being a Western evangelizing mission.[15]

Camau believes that the same applies to Tunisia, as I will discuss later, and ultimately asserts that there is no Tunisian exception. The dynamics of democratization and its failure are attributable to sociohistorical causes determined by a set of factors, such as the contexts and identity of elites and actors, their status and positions, and the strategies that produced those attitudes and practices.

How to Dismantle the Myth of Tunisian Exceptionalism?

An exception breaks a rule without completely negating it. A rule typically refers to a set of patterns that regularly recur whenever the same conditions and contexts exist.[16] Much research on the political situation in the Arab world emphasizes the region's ability to reproduce and perpetuate the same patterns, consistently demonstrating its inability to produce successful democratic experiments. This body of research concludes that the failure is neither incidental nor contingent, but structural and fixed. Regardless of variables, the rule is that an entrenched inwardness precludes any possibility of democracy.

This thesis seemed to be further buttressed by the early failure of the democratic transitions following the Arab Spring revolutions, most of which quickly devolved into civil war and widespread violence. In his analysis of the relationship between the rule and the exception, Azmi Bishara asserts that the "riddle of the exception", whether in Arab states or Tunisia specifically, resolves itself once we understand and analyse the various complex elements. As he writes: "Arab exceptionalism has nothing to do with the absence of conditions for democratization and everything to do with the presence of conditions for brutal authoritarianism, including the willingness to use maximum force and a complex interplay of external and regional factors".[17]

Analyses that rely on the idea of exceptionalism to explain social and political experiences like transitions often overlook the historical contexts and mechanisms that give rise to such idiosyncrasies, the competing social forces and their means of conflict resolution, and the various forms of arduous compromises and concessions. Exceptionalism, in this sense, spares us the effort of considering these complex issues and dimensions. After all, an exception is an extraordinary situation, a deviation from an order governed by precise rules that determine how things function and how they are categorized.

The pillars of Tunisian exceptionalism, however, remain deeply entrenched. It is supported by a set of arguments that confer upon it a degree of legitimacy, especially when viewed in contrast to the failure of other Arab revolutions. Some analysts thus attribute the success of the Tunisian revolution to the country's

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ivan Ermakoff, "Epistemologie de l'exception," *Sociétés plurielles,* no. 1 (2017).

[17] Azmi Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī: Dirāsa Naẓariyya wa-Taṭbīqiyya Muqārina* [*Democratic Transition: A Comparative Theoretical and Applied Study*] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2020), pp. 229-259.

venerable constitutional legacy, while others explain the delayed revolutions in other Arab states by pointing to the novelty – or complete absence – of their constitutional experience.[18]

Revolutions are epic affairs, and their disappointments or failures are the stuff of myth and legend. To understand the Tunisian revolution and its outcomes, it is therefore necessary[19] to demystify the narratives that have been embedded in the scholarly discourse around the revolution and the country's transition. As with all myths, the narratives they engender provide answers that quickly become axiomatic and unquestioned unless mainstream hypotheses are proposed and examined.

The way to conduct a demythologized analysis of the success of Tunisia's democratic transition is *not* to treat it as an exception to the rule. Rather, it should be approached as a historical experience with its own particularity and singularity, distinct from exceptionalism in the essentialist sense. An exceptionalist interpretation does not trace revolutions, transitions, and their outcomes back to contextual specificities that shaped them. Instead, it affirms an essentialism grounded in metahistorical qualities that demonstrate the intrinsic uniqueness of a people or nation. Certainly, analyses of democratic transitions have often acknowledged the particular conditions inventoried by Tunisia-specific analyses. I believe, however, that drawing more fine-tuned connections is necessary to understand the particularities. Generalization risks overlooking facts obscured by the encomiastic discourse that has persisted in Tunisian history since the mythologization of Bourguiba as an exceptional leader.

Numerous organizations lauded Tunisia's exceptional success story after 2011. Even rigorous scholarly writings were not immune to the allure of this mystique, though it gradually dissipated after the dissolution of parliament, the repeal of the 2014 Constitution, and the subsequent seizure of absolute power by Saied. These panegyrics incontestably inflated the importance of Tunisian exceptionalism, often attributing it to the same factors (which are questionable in the first place) championed by the Bourguibist narrative: a harmonious society, universal education, a middle class, civil society, emancipated women, and so on, as Camau has argued.[20] Yet, as we pause at the roles played by actors who contributed to the thwarting of the experiment, we may be spurred to the antithesis of glorification.

Deconstructing the notion of the Tunisian exception first requires abandoning its mythology and approaching the constituent elements of the Tunisian revolution and the subsequent democratic transition as a historical experience shaped by the interplay of various success factors. My focus in this paper is limited to the myth of civil society, which serves as a useful lens to assess the solidity of other arguments for exceptionalism, for instance, the role of Tunisian elites, the long-standing constitutional heritage, and so on. The civil society thesis is a fitting choice, as it is grounded in the assumption that Tunisian exceptionalism was manifest during the democratic transition. Civil society brought together many Tunisian political and civic leaders, played a decisive role in key turning points and milestones of the transition,[21] and was central to the positions, analyses, and practices adopted by Tunisian political elites during the transitional process.

Moreover, civil society played a key role in drafting the 2014 Constitution and building constitutional institutions. It capitalized on the transitional climate and the struggle to guide its outcomes, while, in my view, clearly being alert to all the practices that facilitated the collapse of the experiment. This community benefited from a climate of freedoms and liberal, open-minded laws,[22] under which it witnessed tremendous quantitative growth. Political and civil elites – including civil society elites themselves – assigned it multiple

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[18] Choukri Hmed, "Au-delà de l'exception tunisienne: Les failles et les risques du processus révolutionnaire," *Pouvoirs*, vol. 156 (2016), pp. 137-147.

[19] Camau, *L'exception tunisienne*, pp. 14-16.

[20] Ibid., p. 22.

[21] Hammadi Redessi (ed.), *La transition bloquée* (Tunis: Diwen Edition, 2021).

[22] Rafaâ Ben Achour & Sana Ben Achour, "La transition démocratique en Tunisie: Entre légalité constitutionnelle et légitimité révolutionnaire," *Revue française de droit constitutionnel*, vol. 4, no. 92 (2012), pp. 715-732.

roles, most notably, at least symbolically, the task of preventing the country from spiralling into civil violence and of "preserving the gains of modernity".[23]

The Role of Tunisian Civil Society in the Democratic Transition

Most democratic transitions have relied on civil society, which plays an indispensable role as an incubator for democratic and civic practices. However, in many other cases, it has contributed to the failure of the transition and exacerbated the internal conflicts that have engulfed societies. In some instances, civil society has disrupted transitions, and its various formations or components, such as associations, clubs, bodies, elites, and alliances, have been implicated in civil wars. To understand these complex and contradictory roles, it is necessary to abandon the "church of civil society": the vision of civil society as a sacrosanct entity or a magic wand capable of resolving all dilemmas, while ignoring the complexity of issues, the importance of contexts, and the strategies, attitudes, and positions of the various actors involved.

Civil society remains conceptually vague, but two major approaches stand out in efforts to define it and assess its significance. The first defines civil society in opposition to the state and sometimes even to the government, drawing clear boundaries between the two. In this view, civil society is the space encompassing associations and institutions like families, businesses, organizations, and associations, that facilitate the meeting of individuals to pursue their shared goals and projects independent of the state. The second approach is more cautious about establishing such a dichotomy, acknowledging the overlaps between the public and private spheres. It recognizes that, just as the state needs civil society, the latter requires government, law, and the state through legislation, oversight, funding, and operation.[24]

When employed in analysis, the concept of civil society entails significant theoretical complexity, even when it comes to Western European societies. Beginning in the 18th century, and for decades thereafter, civil society was viewed as synonymous with the state, particularly in social contract theories. By the late 19th century, however, this meaning gradually evolved and civil society came to be viewed as distinct from – and often in tension with – the state, defending an independent space for individuals and groups. This understanding remains popular today, emphasizing a space "in the form of civic associations and institutions operating in the public sphere, outside the state and the economy. … Civil society as we mean it today evolves within this order, becoming a public sphere within the state in its broadest sense and a sphere independent of the state in its narrowest sense". Despite the importance of these distinctions, emphasis on the role of civil society in democracy and democratic transitions has emerged only recently.[25]

Civil society, especially in Western societies and specifically in the urban spaces arising from the ashes of feudalism, encompassed new social classes striving to carve out their own space, free from the pressures and strict controls of feudal society. This is the historical context in which the concept of individual and collective freedoms emerged, and which would later be gradually codified. From its earliest stages, civil society functioned as a space of liberation, linked to the emergence of the bourgeoisie and its moral and social traditions. It became a sphere of independence for new actors and included various associations:

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[23] Mohamed Zied Chamsi, "Consensus et démocratie en Tunisie," PhD dissertation in law, jointly supervised by Cote d'Azur University and Sousse University (Tunisia), Centre for Studies and Research in Administrative, Constitutional, Financial, and Fiscal Law (Nice), 22 December 2023; Hédia Brik Mokni, "L'exercice des libertés politiques en période de transition démocratique. Cas de la Tunisie," PhD dissertation, DESPEG, CERDACFF research unit, Cote d'Azur University, 7 September 2016.

[24] François Rangon, "Société civile: Histoire d'un mot," in: Jacques Chevallier, François Rangeon & Philippe Dupire (eds.), *La société civile, [Texte imprimé]: [Rapports du colloque]/ [Organisé par le] Centre universitaire de recherches administratives et politiques de Picardie, [Amiens, 25 octobre 1985]* (Paris: P. U. F., 1986), p. 9.

[25] Azmi Bishara, *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Madanī: Dirāsa Naqdiyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2018), p. 66.

organizations, parties, and movements that operated within the public sphere. These social forces sought to maintain their independence from the hegemony of the formal political sphere, pushing the state to recognize their presence and consult them. Over time, in various contexts, they compelled the state to take their views into account, and, indeed, were able to influence the official political sphere.

If the bourgeoisie was the decisive factor behind the emergence of civil society in Western Europe, then the intelligentsia and elites more broadly have played a similarly formative role in its development elsewhere in Europe and beyond. In the democratic transitions of Eastern Europe, such as in Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria, the role of civil society was determined by the capacity of democratic forces, particularly elites, to mobilize effectively in contexts where the state respected the public sphere and allowed for civil society's autonomy. Civil society's impact was also contingent on its ability to reshape itself and instil democratic values within its constituent components.[26]

To understand the position and roles of civil society during periods of democratic transition, and specifically in the Tunisian experience, I lean toward the first definition, provided that we expand beyond such components as associations and organizations and include forums, collective initiatives, and even some social movements. These actors often formed close alliances with entities both within and outside civil society, including political parties. New entities and methods of activity emerged, such as coordinating bodies, forums, and initiatives. These are issues to which we will return below, especially as they reflect civil society's capacity for innovation and self-organization during this period. Indeed, at times, civil society seemed to operate entirely outside the state.

During the revolution and subsequent democratic transition, civil society in Tunisia acquired such stature that, at times, its leverage undermined the state and surpassed its authority. This prompted calls to restore the prestige or stature of the state (*haybat al-dawla*), a theme that featured prominently in the political agenda of figures like President Beji Caid Essebsi (2014-2019). The demand, implicitly rejecting the period of Ennahda's governance, intensified with the rise of the Nidaa Tounes party in 2014.[27] President Saied later used the same slogan to call for the elimination of all "mediating bodies", including civil society groups and non-governmental organizations, as imminent threats to the unity of the state.[28]

Civil society has played multiple roles in democratic transitions, perhaps most importantly shaping the public sphere and preparing it for citizen participation, expanding the scope of freedoms and rights, fostering democratic values, and integrating new social groups into the transition. Nevertheless, a set of complex issues is often overlooked, chief among them the nature of civil society itself and the extent of its own democracy, the contradictions that divide it, the relations of dominance within it, and its relationship with the political community. These issues typically determine the outcomes of the democratic transition itself.[29]

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[26] Michael Bernhard, "Civil Society and Democratic Transition," *East Central Europe: Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 108, no. 2 (Summer 1993), pp. 307-326.

[27] The Tunisian political literature does not offer a precise meaning for "state prestige", but it generally refers to the restoration of state authority after a period in which its ability to carry out its decisions and compel citizens to comply with them has been compromised. It refers to the state's ability to command a greater measure of fear, respect, and appreciation. In revolutionary contexts, it indicates a significant degree of veneration for state symbols, specifically its senior officials, and obedience to their orders. In this sense, "state prestige" has begun to assume serious concrete dimensions that threaten public and even individual freedoms, especially with the issuance on Law 54/2022. See: "Law 54/2022 of 13 September 2022 on the suppression of crimes involving information and communications systems," Dcaf – Centre for Security Sector Governance, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: https://tinyurl.com/tk448kah

[28] A key slogan in Beji Caid Essebsi's 2014 presidential campaign was the restoration of the stature of the state, which had been weakened and had lost authority vis-à-vis protest movements and a strong civil society. The security vacuum, too, fostered a climate conducive to challenging the state and disobeying its authority. President Kais Saied, for his part, implicitly viewed civil society as a competitor of the state, a factor that weakened it, and a barrier to the extension of state authority. He thus adopted adversarial positions toward associations and organizations. For more, see: *Azmat al-Ajsām al-Wasīṭa: Dirāsāt fī al-Ḥāla al-Tūnisiyya* (Tunis: Centre for Strategic Studies on Arab North Africa, 2023).

[29] IDES Research Group, "Société civile et démocratisation: Une étude comparative au nord et au sud," *Revue Tiers Monde*, vol. 2, no. 178 (2004), pp. 443-464.

Since its establishment,[30] Tunisia's independent Supreme Authority for the Realization of the Revolution's Objectives, Democratic Transition, and Political Reform sought to liberate the public sphere, seen as essential for the formation of civil society and the launch of civic initiatives. One of its earliest acts was the issuance of the civic associations law,[31] a milestone in the development of post-revolution Tunisian civil society. The law eliminated Ministry of Interior and broader government control over the establishment of associations and NGOs. No longer requiring a prior permit, associations could be created through a simple notification process. This ended executive interference and transferred jurisdiction to the courts in cases of legal violations.

In addition to facilitating fundraising, including access to foreign funding and programmes to support the administrative capacities of association staff, the law sparked a proliferation of civic associations operating in numerous fields: rights and liberties, development, social and charitable services, women, youth, vulnerable groups, and racial and ethnic minorities. These associations benefited from limited public funding and far more extensive foreign funding, which played a tangible role in steering the agendas that subsequently determined civil society's activities and struggles.

The remarkable proliferation of civic associations[32] required financial and administrative expertise to attract donors and to design and implement projects aligned with precise objectives and conditions. However, this growth did not take place in isolation from political society and its conflicts and intense rivalries. As a result, civil society was unable to build its own stronghold and maintain its independence, thus failing to insulate itself from many of the dysfunctions that plagued political society.

The growth in the number of associations, whose activities were very broad, coupled with the political stakes for both civil society and political actors, transformed civil society into a vast arena for conflict and, occasionally, violent struggle. This unfolded against the backdrop of a shifting civic landscape. Some associations and organizations began operating as consultancies, completing numerous studies within short timeframes by recruiting academic researchers for their staff or scientific councils, a condition sometimes imposed by funders. Others morphed into "protest minorities" highly capable of disruption, while still others employed de-escalation, conflict avoidance, and mediation skills to resolve volatile social issues when the political community failed to do so.

The mining basin,[33] for example, stands as a key site where several organizations, including the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the Tunisian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LTDH), and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), were transformed into mediators between the authorities on the one hand, and protesters, angry citizens, and sit-in participants on the other. Through these new roles, many of these organizations amassed significant symbolic capital, gaining prestige and legitimacy. In some instances, this meant the ejection of the state from crucial spaces and the erosion of its legitimacy. It also entailed an extortionary dynamic in which the state was compelled to return favours (*le contre-don*), alongside the formation of a civic patronage machine that flourished within and around civil society.[34] Armed with capacities, resources, knowledge, and skills, civil society imposed itself across most

[30] The authority was created a few weeks after the fall of the Ben Ali regime pursuant to Presidential Decree 6/2011. See: "Presidential Decree 6/2011 issued on 18 February 2011 on the Supreme Body to Accomplish the Revolution Goals, Political Reforms, and Democratic Transition," Dcaf – Centre for Security Sector Governance, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: https://urls.fr/wb25Ru

[31] "Law 88/2011 dated 24 September 2011 on Assemblies Organization," Dcaf – Centre for Security Sector Governance, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: https://urls.fr/uOGNy

[32] There are an estimated 25,048 civic associations in operation. See: Centre for Information, Training, Studies, and Documentation on Associations, accessed on 26/8/2024, at: https://tinyurl.com/2xx74hjf

[33] Tunisia's mining basin, which produces some 95% of the country's phosphate, experienced near total paralysis during the decade-long transition, at significant financial cost to the country. Strikes and protests in the region, which entailed the destruction of equipment, received the unconditional support of civil society, particularly the UGTT and the LTDH.

[34] Some people broke with associations and organizations that developed a bad reputation due to luxury hotel meetings, paid junkets, and cronyism.

political arenas: from the constitution to draft laws, development plans,[35] local decisions, and ministerial programmes. It often acquired decision-making authority, appointing and dismissing officials, directing public funding, dictating priorities and development projects, and even influencing prosecutions, particularly through the use of knowledge accumulated in empowerment training programs.

Civil society practices became an obstacle to the establishment of ground rules for political actors. The parameters of the political calculus were unclear, especially since civil society was an uncontrolled variable that could not be accounted for based on the rules of political action. Despite this, the enterprising spirit of Tunisian civil society continued to captivate scholars, some of whom considered it a decisive factor explaining Tunisian exceptionalism. This was not new; it dates back to the 1980s. In a chapter devoted to the new state and the emergence of civil society, Muhammad Abd al-Baqi al-Harmasi traced the formal birth of civil society in Tunisia to the 1970s, following two decades of the haphazard "state-ification" of society. The state's failure to resolve acute economic and social problems fostered an environment conducive to the emergence of a civil society that sought to end state dominance, capitalizing on the frustration of post-independence aspirations. For him, this marked the beginning of a firmly rooted heritage of civil society.[36]

Some scholars push this origin further back, noting that modernization in the early 20th century, even before the formation of the Tunisian nation-state, spurred the formation of associations, parties, and unions that defended marginalized groups such as workers, women, and the needy. These writings point to Tunisia's first labour union, formed in the 1920s,[37] followed by the first human rights association in the Arab and African worlds in the 1970s.

Tunisian civil society incontestably helped the country avert deeper tensions and resentment following the assassinations of 2013[38] by bringing together various factions in a national dialogue, for which it received the Nobel Peace Prize. Nevertheless, these epic achievements masked fatal flaws, including sharp internal divisions and political manipulations. It is no exaggeration to say that civil society became an extension of political parties, especially amid repeated and intense episodes of polarization. It also reproduced and fuelled polarization, adopting double standards on several issues and, in many cases, abandoning its core principles of citizen equality and partisan neutrality.[39]

Despite its shortcomings, there is no denying that civil society achieved numerous gains between 2011 and 2021, significantly expanding the scope of individual and collective freedoms. However, many civil society practices that became widespread ultimately derailed the democratic experiment. Civil society split into two camps in the first weeks after the regime's collapse, reproducing, with clear political implications, the deep divisions that had plagued Tunisian society since the 1970s: one, a "leftist" civil society presenting itself as the voice of modernity, enlightenment, and democracy; the other, a conservative civil society presenting itself as the guardian of national identity and authentic values.[40]

When acts of terrorism erupted, the second type of civil society faced prosecution for alleged links to terrorism financing, leading to the closure of numerous associations as terrorist groups were dismantled.

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[35] Hatem Kahloun, "La société civile tunisienne à l'épreuve de la participation: Mobilisation, pression et compromis autour des projets de développement urbain," *Insaniyat*, no. 90 (2020), pp. 99-120.

[36] Muhammad Abd al-Baqi al-Harmasi, *al-Mujtamaʿ wa-l-Dawla fī al-Maghrib al-ʿArabī* (Beirut: CAUS, 1987), p. 133.

[37] For more details, see: Karay al-Qasantini, *al-Jamʿiyyāt bayn al-Taʾṭīr wa-l-Tawẓīf* (Tunis: Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Manouba, 2009).

[38] It is widely believed that the Quartet (UGTT, LTDH, the Tunisian Bar Association, and the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts) sponsored the 2013 national dialogue and so prevented the country's slide into civil war. This idea has been widely disseminated by Tunisian and international media and political discourse that implicitly argues for the inflation, and even mythologization, of the Quartet's role, particularly when these discourses invoke this as the reason that the Quartet was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.

[39] Some analyses of the cleavage in civil society trace it to the early independence era, when all organizations and associations with some cultural or social ties to the old regime were abolished under the influence of modernization and the ideology of power. The rift was also manifested in the measures that abolished the system of Islamic endowments and suspended the activities of all associations and organizations with the word "Islamic" or "Muslim" in their names, including women's associations and most charitable associations.

[40] Kahloun.

Leftist civil society, in turn, benefited greatly from this shift, expanding into what appeared to be the sole authority on many issues. The country reverted to a single, unitary civil society, and diversity disappeared in activities and programmes specific to women, youth, and the media. The Tunisian democratic transition thus featured a dual-headed civil society locked in internal conflict, only to culminate in a homogenized civil society that contracted after the 2021 coup.

In many respects, civil society operated through open alliances between associations and organizations on one hand, and (particularly leftist) parties excluded from power through elections on the other. At times, the boundary between civil society (associations and organizations) and political society (parties and organizations) was virtually indistinguishable. During the transition, civil society members and their affiliates, supporters, and backers, devised new political practices to counter their rival, the Ennahda Movement. These efforts were implemented through coordinating bodies that brought together political parties, associations, organizations, and national figures. Known by various names, including "initiatives", these bodies went beyond merely challenging the political decisions and projects of successive governments, and also engaged in electoral politics. In addition, they staked out positions on the national dialogue, the constitution, elections, and even the stances of foreign countries. Through these associations and organizations, a broad spectrum of the Tunisian left embedded itself in civil society, using it as a platform to reopen political fronts and compensate for its poor electoral performance, such as in the 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections, where the left collectively secured less than 1% of the seats in the House of Representatives.

The Role of Civil Society in Thwarting the Democratic Transition

During the war that engulfed several Balkan states in the early 1990s, a number of Serbian intellectuals, along with associations and NGOs, supported President Slobodan Milošević (1991-1997), justifying his atrocities and portraying him as a national hero defending values worthy of their support. Some had no qualms about associating themselves with his violations, while others struggled to defend democratic values, rights, and freedoms.[41] In other cases, civil society has fuelled social polarization to the point of threatening widespread sectarian, ethnic, religious, or political violence. In numerous contexts, civil society has proven hostile to democracy and the upheavals it entails. In his assessment of civil society in Africa, Michael Edwards emphasized a puzzling fact: "Internally, it is clear that civil society is not always a source of support for democracy and peace".[42]

Robert Putnam's idealized portrayal of a healthy civil society as the key to democracy, shaping the climate most conducive to the development of its norms and practices, and fostering mutual trust, solidarity, and values of tolerance and pluralism, has continued to inspire scholarly analyses of the roles of elites and civil society.[43] In contrast, John Keane, drawing on cases in which civil society was implicated in ethnic cleansing, violence, and xenophobia, asserted: "All known forms of civil society are plagued by endogenous sources of incivility".[44] Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, much of civil society in Eastern European countries retreated and was confined to "religious and sectarian enclaves".[45] This development bears strong resemblance to the Tunisian case, where a "religious" civil society emerged, composed of associations and organizations focused on charitable work and religious advocacy.

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[41] Roberto Belloni, "Civil Society in War-to-Democratic Transitions," in: Anna K. Jarstad & Timothy D. Sisk (eds.), *From War to Democracy: Dilemmas of Peacebuilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 182-210.

[42] Michael Edwards, *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Madanī: al-Naẓariyya wa-l-Mumārasa*, Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Qadir Shahin (trans.) (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), p. 66.

[43] Robert. D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 43.

[44] Cited in Belloni, p. 187.

[45] Gediminas Lankauskas, "Société civile religieuse et 'effondrement moral' de la nation lituanienne," *Anthropologie et Sociétés*, vol. 32, no. 1-2 (2008), pp. 173-191.

These caveats about the nature of civil society should be borne in mind. Tunisian civil society, through practices that took root during the transitional period, reinforced the societal divide, until alarmingly profound fractures threatened civil war – not so different from what occurred in other Arab countries just weeks after their revolutions. The Tunisian experience of democratic transition thus reveals a deeply divided, partisan, and dogmatic civil society with a tenuous democratic culture. During the transition, it expanded as the state weakened, relinquishing some of its functions and proving incapable of fulfilling others. If Tunisia had previously suffered from the state's dominance over society,[46] in the post-revolution period it suffered from civil society's encroachment upon, harassment of, and even curtailment of the state. Genuine fear emerged for the state itself, given the growth of supra- and sub-national tendencies and the ferocity of terrorist groups that exhausted and damaged the state apparatus.

In democratic transitions, and even in established democracies, elections serve to structure the political community to build a political hierarchy among the various parties, which can then be translated into binding rules for political action. In Tunisia, however, the common rules in democracies were disregarded. Actors from outside the political sphere, notably civil society organizations, groups, and activists, emerged as powerful players with a remarkable ability to disrupt political life. This effectively rigged the political game, which began to operate under rules that deviated from core democratic practice based on election results and the weight they confer.

While electoral winners expected reactions from the political opposition, they did not anticipate the opposition of civil society, which was often fiercer than that of opposition parties themselves. In many instances, political forces that lost at the ballot box aligned themselves with a civil society that won politically, with the latter acting as a proxy opposition on behalf of its political allies. This inversion of roles precluded the establishment of political rules essential for binding consensus among voters and political actors. The proliferation of coordinating bodies and coalitions attested to this dynamic. Many political parties waged their political and ideological battles under cover of civil society, and leftist parties ultimately transformed civil society into a fortress hostile to alternative ideological and political convictions. Identity-based exclusion was rampant within civil society and extended beyond Ennahda or any other party. The flurry of competing statements and internal conflicts within prominent associations and organizations reflected a broader sectarian culture.[47]

Before the revolution, associations and organizations were reluctant to partner with political parties, emphasizing their independence. However, during the democratic transition and amid escalating political polarization between the two major camps, numerous attempts were made, finally in vain, to mitigate the unchecked antagonism between political parties and associations to confront those who governed during this period. According to Hatem Nafti,[48] civil society was hollowed out – emptied of its commitment to civil democratic struggle – through prolonged attrition, distracted by ideological battles waged for the benefit of political parties.

Larry Diamond argues that civil society's role in democratic transition should focus on fostering a political environment where all actors learn from one other, and where mistakes are seen as opportunities

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[46] al-Harmasi, p. 133.

[47] The LTDH exemplifies an association that political parties vie to control and exploit in line with their own partisan visions and priorities. After its conference in October 2016, the LTDH saw a wave of defections that nearly paralyzed the organization after the Workers' Party and the Democratic Patriots Party were accused of dominating it. This spurred some members to leave the association, including Vice-President Messaoud Romdhani, who resigned on 9 December. See: "Nāʾib Raʾīs al-Rābiṭa al-Tūnisiyya li-l-Difāʿ ʿan Ḥuqūq al-Insān Masʿād al-Ramaḍānī Yuʿlin Istiqālatahu," *Jomhouria*, 9/12/2016, accessed on 12/6/2024, at: https://bit.ly/3RXMvl:h. The General Union of Tunisian Students is another case in point. As a result of persistent internal conflicts, it saw, in recent years, the concurrent leadership of two secretaries-general, each vying for legitimacy – a conflict that undermined its influence and ability to mobilize students to defend their causes. "Sectarianism", as I use it here, refers to political behaviour that privileges the special interests of political groups within civic or mass organizations, overtly or covertly, over the collective interest, which should ostensibly prevail.

[48] Hatem Nafti, *Tunisie: Vers un populisme autoritaire* (Paris: Riveneuve, 2022).

to further consolidate democracy.[49] This, however, does not apply to Tunisian civil society during its transition, and historical evidence indicates this is no accident. From its early beginnings in the waning years of Bourguiba's rule and throughout the entirety of Ben Ali's rule – a period spanning over five decades – civil society was a refuge for leftist political currents in particular. These groups were among the first to intensively engage in the public sphere emerging under the shadow of the single-party system and the security and judicial persecution of leftist political opposition.

Civil society associations and organizations, even those established by secular liberals, provided a space in which leftist political currents thrived as they fought the political and human rights battles that they could not wage under the banner of their parties. Left-leaning civil society in Tunisia took shape in the 1970s amid a climate of fear and persecution that targeted politicians affiliated with underground parties and organizations. Stealth thus became central to its political culture and practice. The small number of civil society associations in that era represented a haven and strategic option for these secret organizations, which managed to infiltrate the former and thus operate openly. For these activists, independence meant, above all, independence from the ruling party, whose members were forbidden from joining them by various means including violence. As a result, the highest steering bodies of the LTDH, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), and the UGTT had no members affiliated with the ruling party, except in rare cases that occurred at the time of foundation or were resolved during an acute crisis with the regime. After the revolution, however, this separation became increasingly blurred. It was no longer unusual to find leaders of these associations declaring their partisan affiliation; they even ran for elections on lists that tacitly expressed their parties' positions.[50]

Much of civil society was not engaged in democratic struggles before the revolution due to the steep political cost imposed by the authoritarian police regime. For three decades the UGTT, for example, remained silent in the face of human rights-related, legal, and constitutional violations under Ben Ali that affected elites across the political spectrum. Instead, it focused on securing the social demands of its working- and middle-class constituents. It was a partner in the social peace embedded in a broader socio-political contract. Periodic negotiations typically resulted in quasi-automatic wage increases, with the amounts determined by expert committees from both the UGTT and the government, further consolidating the social peace.

However, rapidly changing political dynamics at the climax of the revolution compelled the UGTT to abandon its longstanding defensive silence. Once it joined, it actively fuelled the revolution and soon came upon a decisive point of no return. After the revolution, the union challenged the rule of the Islamists and their allies. Under the slogan of "regaining its national role", it waged what it called a "war of attrition" by launching an unprecedented series of strikes that debilitated the economy and the state's ability to manage the acute social crisis. As former UGTT Secretary-General Houcine Abassi admitted: "We never let Ennahda catch its breath".[51]

The LTDH was similarly criticized for its selective defence of victims, ignoring Islamists' plight under the Ben Ali regime. While the revolution revitalized the organization, after the July coup it remained reluctant to defend dissidents, particularly former government officials and the opposition figures during the transitional decade.

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[49] Larry Jay Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2008), pp. 4-17.

[50] During the internal electoral conferences of the LTDH, the National Bar Association, and the UGTT (for the latter, especially elections in the major sectoral unions for education, transportation, and health), the influence of parties can be gauged by the number of seats they win on internal leadership bodies.

[51] "Amīn ʿĀmm al-Ittiḥād Yaʿtarif: Lam Natruk al-Islāmiyyīn Yartāḥūn!," *Meem Magazine*, YouTube, 2/5/2023, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: https://bit.ly/3xPlfyt

Reflecting similar sectarian attitudes, the ATFD engaged in bitter conflicts with Islamists after the revolution, flooding the feminist political and civic landscape with endless demands and protests. Its radical feminist campaign was part of the strategies adopted by civil society during the transitional decade to thwart and exhaust the government. While the political left and its deployment of organizations to open new opposition fronts against the new rulers (Islamists and their allies), Islamists pragmatically turned to charitable organizations, hoping it would yield electoral gains. However, their charitable work soon came under suspicion, and they were accused of accepting foreign funding, financing terrorism, and engaging in money laundering to support political operations.

Regardless of the accuracy of such allegations, broad swathes of the public, under the influence of the media, came to believe these activities were indeed happening and widespread. Perceptions hardened into convictions, and following the July coup, Islamists lost their already weak and inexperienced civil society infrastructure, which was rapidly dismantled. In contrast, leftist civil society, taking advantage of the gradual disappearance of its opponent, rallied behind President Saied in the lead-up to the coup. Numerous statements supporting Saied's measures were issued, with occasional hints of the need to restrict the president's authority, return to the constitutional path, and set a timeline for ending exceptional measures.

The climate of frustration and disappointment served as an incubator for civil society movements. Young people, frustrated by the meagre economic and social returns on the democratic transition, joined social protest movements that freed them from hierarchical party structures, discipline, prudence, and all the organizational rituals and routines. These movements provided a space for youth to express their frustrations, exert pressure, and protest, but they were not immune to manipulation, especially when leftist civil society allied with these movements.

As many civil society activists morphed into the leaders of these movements, an organic alliance emerged between the opposition, protest movements, and civil society. The alliance took institutional form in various initiatives and coalitions, often characterized by revolving-door coordinating committees that acted in tandem to exhaust those in government. The disappearance of protest movements after the 25 July coup suggests that their demands and the "noble causes" they championed over the previous decade, such as unemployment, regional inequality, violence against women, and police abuses, were not the sole or objective drivers of their fierce mobilizations. These issues acquired even greater salience after the coup. Yet movements like *Manish Mesameh* (I Will Not Forgive), *Wein al-Betrol?* (Where's the Oil?), and *al-Kamour*[52] have disappeared.

Pointing to the enervation of civil society after 25 July,[53] Hatem Nafti writes that it was "an indispensable actor during the decade of 2011-2021, but it witnessed a sharp division following the approach taken by Kais Saied. It suffices to point to three cases that bear witness to this: the Tunisian General Labor Union, the Tunisian League for the Defence of Human Rights, and social movements".[54] For similar reasons, civil society was not opposed to Saied's actions when he announced his coup; its reaction was, in fact, mostly lacklustre. Many associations and organizations expressed understanding of the measures taken, especially given the muddled positions of the UGTT, the LTDH, and the Bar Association, which hoped to be involved in managing the "corrective" phase. Civil society's failure to preserve and protect the transition discredits its image as a bulwark against any deviation from or reversal of the transition.

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[52] Al-Kamour was a protest movement that emerged in the far south of Tunisia (the Kamour region, Tataouine) to defend the region's rights to petroleum resources. After managing to shut down the oil fields for a prolonged period, it disappeared when Saied rose to power in 2019 and many of the movement's leaders became supporters of the president.

[53] Numerous protest movement leaders became supporters of President Saied, either after the 2019 elections or the coup of 25 July 2021.

[54] Nafti, p. 279.

Following the July coup, several civil society organizations rushed to support Saied, urging him to proceed with his "political project". While occasionally offering financial support, many channelled harsh criticisms at what they called the "Black Decade". Some 50 women and human rights organizations and associations, which were active during the transition in the form of a consultative force that was heeded by most governments, backed the coup. Yet, these same organizations had monopolized civil society under the banner of "modernity and civilization", ostensibly giving voice to the "aspirations of Tunisian society", and had reaped the benefits of the country's democratic transition: unconditional freedom, massive financial and logistical capacities, and an unprecedented media presence that enabled them to contribute to decision-making and form lobbying networks.

Conclusion

The democratic experiment in Tunisia has offered a valuable, if imperfect, classroom, one not free of mischief on part of students and teachers alike. But the hopes pinned on the transition were dashed when that classroom was shuttered and all involved were expelled. Tragically, the political actors in power misjudged and squandered the opportunity. Meanwhile, their opponents adopted strategies to exhaust and thwart them in the long term. Civil society continued to operate with the logic and reflexes of the pre-revolutionary era: stealth, attrition, and ideological siege. Its lexicon remained fixed, and its visions virtually unchanged. It failed to grasp the transformative potential of the democratic transition and the imperative of building consensus, cultivating shared convictions, and fostering political coexistence. Instead, it continued to view those who governed as illegitimate usurpers. Accordingly, civil society did not bridge the divide between rivals nor inculcate the values of democracy, pluralism, and coexistence in its members and the general public. On the contrary, it deepened the social rift that divided Tunisian society into two opposing camps. The social fabric, now torn apart by hatred and resentment, will be difficult to mend, which creates fertile ground for populism.

The failure of the democratic transition in Tunisia exposes the weak theoretical and procedural underpinnings of the Tunisian exception. Over the course of a decade, civil society, despite its celebrated image, proved not to be a reliable evidentiary pillar supporting the exceptionalism theory and its explanatory validity. My deconstruction of the myth of civil society has shown that the essentialist conceptions of Tunisian exceptionalism cannot grasp or explain the rapid collapse of the transition and the institutions, values, and legislation it produced. Drawing on a set of hypotheses, I examined the extent to which civil society actors fuelled conflicts and disputes and expanded exclusionary spaces, rendering it impossible to find common ground in a transitional context that demanded tolerance and coexistence.

For its part, political society, while it successfully forged political alliances among various actors, albeit fragile, neglected to build bridges with civil society. This sowed the seeds of the transition's eventual demise. Insofar as it culminated in a regime of authoritarian populism that dismantled the gains of the transition and returned the country to its pre-revolutionary starting point, the Tunisian democratic transition can hardly be considered exceptional.

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