

**Nonviolence and the 2011 Tunisian Uprising:  
The Instrumental Role of the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT)**

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In partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Political Studies

University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon, SK  
2014

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## **Abstract**

Beginning in December 2010, Tunisian citizens used techniques of protest, resistance and intervention in a struggle for freedom from the systems that had for decades denied them agency, autonomy and dignity. As a result of their resistance, in January 2011 the Tunisian people successfully deposed the authoritarian president Ben Ali after 23 years in power. Though this movement began spontaneously and operated without designated leadership, the role of the national labor union - The Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) - was vital in mobilizing and directing the uprising.

This thesis will interpret the events of the 2011 Tunisian uprising through the framework of civil resistance, as defined by Gene Sharp and Hardy Merriman. Through the use of political defiance and noncooperation, civil resistance employs nonviolent tactics to challenge and remove entrenched political leaders and systems. This study will analyze the Tunisian uprising and the role of the UGTT in the movement using three indicators of civil resistance success: unity, strategic planning, and nonviolent discipline.

Despite sporadic incidents of violence, this thesis asserts that the 2011 Tunisian uprising successfully enacted nonviolent civil resistance, and the implementation of nonviolent political action has made the establishment of a genuine and lasting democracy a real possibility for the future. The UGTT were invaluable in the 2011 uprising as facilitators and collaborators with the Tunisian people, and currently function in a pivotal nonpartisan and objective intermediary political role. Though the outcome remains uncertain and the conclusion of the revolution in flux, the 2011 Tunisian uprising has set an example and a precedent for civil resistance to the rest of the world.

## **Acknowledgements**

The completion of this thesis was made possible by the support and assistance of many individuals.

Professor Jeffrey Steeves, thank you not only for being my supervisor and helping me select this amazing topic, but for your inspiring lectures and courses over the years. You are a brilliant teacher and I am so fortunate to have studied this extraordinary continent under you. Professor Simonne Horwitz, you have challenged the way I think and look at the world and taught me to see Africa in a new way. Thank you for your support, critique and encouragement.

To the members of my thesis committee, Professors Hans Michelmann and Donald Storey, as well as the external examiner Maurice Labelle, thank you for the time, questions and wisdom you have lent to this thesis. Thank you to the Department of Political Studies and the generous opportunity of the Graduate Teaching Fellowship.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the warm and gracious Tunisians who so willingly shared their time and their hearts with me. Thank you for your kindness and honesty, and for inspiring the world (and me!) with your courage and discipline. You are amazing people and your country will always hold a special place in my heart. Thank you to Dr. Larbi Sadiki for making this fieldwork possible and facilitating a wonderful experience in Sousse.

Above all, thank you to Brad. Throughout my classes, thesis research and writing, and fieldwork, you have offered your complete support, patience, and encouragement. You are amazing.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

“One conclusion only can be drawn: the prince must have the people well disposed toward him; otherwise in times of adversity there is no hope.”

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

“I therefore had to disobey the British law because I was acting in obedience with a higher law, with the voice of my conscience.”

Mahatma Gandhi

### **1.1. Introduction**

Since December of 2010, a wave of revolutionary demonstrations and protests has spread throughout the Arab world. Touted as the event which “triggered an Arab political tsunami” (Sadiki, 2011c), the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a young Tunisian fruit vendor, not only overtly expressed the prevalent feelings of frustration amongst disempowered youth in the region, but his self-suffering set the tone for the determined and diffuse value of nonviolence throughout the protests. Unlike classic revolutions, these social movements are “nonviolent, anti-utopian, based not on a single class but on broad social coalitions, and characterized by the application of mass social pressure—‘people power’—to bring the current powerholders to negotiate” (Nepstad, 2011). After less than a month of calls to “*Dégage!*” (Leave!), the Tunisian president Zine El Abdine Ben Ali fled the country and ended his twenty-three year rule.

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), issues such as ineffective and corrupt government, dire economic conditions, raging unemployment, and shameless disparities of wealth have thrust civil society into contentious political action.<sup>1</sup> Bouazizi symbolized a dramatic portrayal of the struggle not just for material means, but the

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<sup>1</sup> For this thesis, contentious politics is defined as “public, collective making of consequential claims by connected clusters of persons on other clusters of persons or on major political actors when at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a third party to the claims” (McAdam et al, 2009: 261).

desperation for recognition, justice, and respect of young people whose “exclusion was also felt in terms of morality and citizenship” (Hibou, 2011: xvi). The implications and ramifications of what has been dubbed the “Arab Spring” continue to be revealed, as new protests, elections, and parliamentary changes unfold each day, as Arab citizens struggle to free themselves from the systems that have for decades denied them agency, autonomy and dignity (Tripp, 2013: 17).

## **1.2. Civil Resistance**

It is not the intent of this thesis to analyze the vast range of academic work on social movement theory and contentious politics.<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this research, the most applicable lens through which to interpret the events of the 2011 Tunisian uprising is through the framework of civil resistance, as defined by the seminal work of Gene Sharp<sup>3</sup> and the principles developed by Hardy Merriman.<sup>4</sup> Also called nonviolent struggle, direct action, people power, political defiance, and civic mobilization, civil resistance is “a way for ordinary people to fight for their rights, freedom and justice without using violence” (Merriman, *Civil Resistance*: 3). Using techniques of protest,

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<sup>2</sup>Theoretical material consulted to seek context for this research included the Political Opportunity Model, Rational Choice Theory, Culturalist/Framing perspective, and Social Movement Theory (Morris, 2000; Press, 2006; McAdam, 2009; Wiktorowicz, 2004; Snow, 1999; Freeman, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Sharp is the world’s foremost expert on nonviolent revolutions, founder of The Albert Einstein Institution, a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the study of nonviolent action, Professor Emeritus of political science at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, and three time Nobel Prize nominee. He is known for his extensive writings on nonviolent struggle, which have influenced numerous resistance movements around the world, including the Arab Spring (Arrow, 2013; Flintoff, 2013; The Albert Einstein Institution).

<sup>4</sup> Merriman is Vice President and Director of Content Development at the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, an independent nonprofit educational foundation that studies and develops grassroots movements, and Institute Director of the James Lawson Institute, an eight-day intensive program for North American organizers and activists. Merriman worked for three years under Sharp at the Albert Einstein Institution and has edited and coauthored many works on civil resistance (International Centre on Nonviolent Conflict, August 16 2013).



resistance and intervention, this nonviolent action engages in conflict in a context that is outside normal political, economic or social behavior (Merriman, 2009: 17). During the nonviolent struggle for independence in India, Gandhi termed this type of protest 'Satyagraha': "Truth (*Satya*) implies Love, and Firmness (*Agraha*) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force...that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or Nonviolence" (2002: 77).

Civil resistance is essentially based on the principles of political defiance and noncooperation; or, as Sharp defines it, "people do not always do what they are told to do, and sometimes they do things that they have been forbidden to do" (2005: 40). This theory asserts a pluralistic view of power, whereby the majority of decision-making happens within the government, while non-governmental groups use their resources to exercise influence. This type of power-sharing "sees governments and other power-holding systems as being broadly dependent on the people's compliance or acquiescence" (Merriman, *Civil Resistance*: 5). Authoritarian regimes require a greater exertion of power in controlling their subjects than other types of government, and therefore require and, in fact, depend on more predictable and widespread loyalty and obedience from individuals, organizations and institutions (Sharp, 2012: 31). Machiavelli wrote that "a wise prince will think of ways to keep his citizens of every sort and under every circumstance dependent on the state and on him; and then they will always be trustworthy" (1992: 30). In such a way, control is maintained through the systems of the state - the police, military, judiciary, bureaucracy - and the people must obey laws and participate in the economy - go to work, pay taxes, buy local items; meanwhile, social

services must be provided, communication and transportation must be maintained, and so forth.

Civil resistance organizers are mindful of the need for the cooperation of ordinary people to maintain the function of these systems, and therefore “develop strategies to shake that support and make the status quo difficult to maintain” (Merriman, *Civil Resistance*: 7). In other words, “if people do not obey, rulers cannot rule” (Merriman, 2009: 18). Power, therefore, is not inherently fixed, but instead is tenuous, its stability entirely dependent upon a widespread willingness to consent to and obey a ruler. When enough people refuse to continue their cooperation with a dictator, the system becomes too costly to sustain and therefore must change or collapse.

Through resistance, entrenched sources of power can be reallocated to people’s movements. One important way in which this can be accomplished is through shifts in loyalty or obedience patterns. In order to be successful, both regimes and resistance movements depend on civil society organizations or state institutions as pillars of support; thus, “successful nonviolent movements take actions to strengthen and expand their own pillars of support and to undermine and shift the loyalties of their opponent’s pillars of support” (Merriman, 2009: 21). This theory applies to defections in the support of powerful officials, who may not support the resistance movement, but prefer to distance themselves from the autocrat in order to be positioned favorably should he fall (O’Neil, 2011). Through analysis of 323 violent and nonviolent campaigns between 1900 and 2006, nonviolence theorists Stephan and Chenoweth assert that “resistance campaigns that compel loyalty shifts among security forces and civilian bureaucrats are likely to succeed...nonviolent campaigns are more likely [than violent resistance] to

produce loyalty shifts” (2008: 42). If enough of an opponent’s sources of power rescind, whether or not he is persuaded will make little difference (Merriman, *Civil Resistance*: 13).

Over 200 different tactics of nonviolence have been identified; the choice of which to employ depends on the situation, capabilities, and objectives of the movement. Merriman states that the first step of civil resistance is to build the capacity of ordinary people by implementing low-risk tactics “directed at local issues that resonate with a broader public...with these successes, the movement showed the power of civil resistance and quickly acquired national attention and following” (*Civil Resistance*: 8).

Resistance performances establish a set of “repertoires,” which

accumulate information about the political opportunity structure: The recent record of a particular performance tells potential claimants and objects of claims about the likely outcomes of different strategies, the likely opponents and coalition patterns, and the feasibility of coordinated action. For that very reason, governments and other major political actors regularly exert control over various known performances, attempting to prescribe some, tolerate others, and forbid still others (McAdam, 2009: 264-5).

How resistance is organized and which tactics are feasible and preferred is determined by a number of factors, including: the level of social organization, such as availability of telephones and public transportation; the character of the regime and the availability of political actors for contention; and the areas of the system of domination, which may be the law, the family, the economy, the state, a construct of culture and ideas, or a mixture of any or all of these (McAdam, 2009: 264-5; Tripp, 2013: 177).

Nonviolent civil resistance is not to be confused with passive resistance, as it is not just action “without using violence,” but strategically using *nonviolence* (de la Rubia, 2011). As defined by Martin Luther King Jr., nonviolence “is not a method of stagnant

passivity and deadening complacency. The nonviolent resister is just as opposed to the evil that he is standing against as the violent resister but he resists without violence. This method is nonaggressive physically but strongly aggressive spiritually” (Crouch, 2011). That said, principled nonviolence is defined by what people do, and not grounded in religious or moral conviction (Sharp: 2005: 19; Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008: 10).

Regimes respond to resistance through various methods of concessions and repressions (O’Neil, 2011), demonstrating that “power and the fight to preserve it can be reduced to the crudest of coercive means. Resistance, having got under the skin of power, symbolically and organizationally, can oblige it to show itself for what it is” (Tripp, 2013: 317). Civil resistance demands a stubborn refusal to cooperate and commitment to resist violent retaliation, regardless of intimidation or provocation. Gandhi wrote that “Non-cooperation is not a movement of brag, bluster or bluff. It is a test of our sincerity. It requires solid and silent self-sacrifice” (2002: 145). In contrast to the “spectacular violence” recently demonstrated in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, in Tunisia the “spectacular violence has been turned against the self through public acts of self-immolation, as signals of defiance and despair on the part of those made powerless by the system under which they live” (Tripp, 2013: 9). In nonviolent struggle, “the cost - in lives, injuries, and destruction - is not paid by the nonparticipants but by those who are waging the struggle” (Sharp: 2005: 384).

Civil resistance is not an easy course of action, nor is it guaranteed to be successful. Merriman argues, however, that there is no guarantee any other course of action will succeed, and nonviolent struggles have seen success 53 per cent of the time compared to a 26 per cent success rate of violent campaigns (Stephan and Chenoweth,

2008: 8). Some argue that nonviolent struggle is slow, while violence is quick, and arguably efficient. History proves this: Gandhi struggle for independence with the British took 25 years and the US civil rights movement lasted 10 years. Yet nonviolent struggle

can lead to more stable and equitable long-term results that benefit all parties of a conflict, improve the odds for reaching negotiations, and lay the groundwork for reconciliation. Even so, much of the research has focused on the actual conflict with an oppressor, as opposed to what might follow it. In the Arab world, relatively little information has been available concerning the next steps in moving from dictatorship to democracy. Still, it is clear enough that some seeds for democracy are actually embedded in the practice of nonviolent conflict itself. And, truth be told: this can be slow (King, 2011b).

The protracted timeframe of civil resistance results from the fact that the ultimate objective is not only to remove the unjust ruler, but also to change the distribution of power in society, establish and maintain a democratic system, use mobilization of institutions to increase their strength and independence, and make the rise of a new dictatorship impossible. A movement's ends - "a freer, better society which benefits everyone" - must be conducive with its means, serving as an example of the ideal, visionary, "utopian" society it seeks to create, and contrast against the repressive regime it seeks to replace (Merriman, *Civil Resistance*: 15). The use of violence "for political purposes ensures that a culture of brutality permeates and pollutes the entire society" (Pal, 2011: 163). Chenoweth and Stephan found that groups that have come to power nonviolently are much more likely to respect democracy and civil liberties than violent uprisings, and even failed nonviolent campaigns produce more favorable long-term results than violent insurgencies (2011). The chosen means of struggle must deliberately avoid the kind of resistance associated with the political organizations of the past if they are to contribute to a change in the distribution of power in the society.

According to Larbi Sadiki,<sup>5</sup> “a revolution defensible by batons and bullets is not worthy of the name ‘revolution’. Revolutions create durability through ethical, legal, democratic and popular means of self-regeneration” (2013c).

### **2.3. Merriman’s Principles of Civil Resistance**

Merriman’s civil resistance framework contends that there are three timeless indicators that can determine the condition and success of a movement: unity, planning, and discipline (2010). It is these three indicators with which this thesis will analyze the 2011 Tunisian uprising.<sup>6</sup>

#### **1.3.1. Unity**

One of the first objectives of a civil resistance campaign must be the development of unity. Nonviolent action is, by its very nature, inclusive and attracts engagement from more heterogeneous groups than violent action. Seldom preexistent, unity must be created by mobilizing a diverse range of individuals - men and women, young and old, students and farmers, rural and urban, proselytes and atheists, rich and poor, the unemployed and factory workers - who may initially have different grievances, around an achievable set of goals (Merriman, *Civil Resistance*: 6). Internal solidarity can be achieved through establishing common purpose, associated designation

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<sup>5</sup> Sadiki is a leading specialist in Arab democratization, opinion writer for Al Jazeera, and author of two books on Arab politics. He has been an academic at numerous universities around the world (Al Jazeera, August 16 2013), and I was fortunate to have had the assistance and accompaniment of Dr. Sadiki in conducting my fieldwork in Tunisia.

<sup>6</sup> For this thesis, I have chosen the term “uprising” to define the social movement in Tunisia, beginning with the self-immolation of Bouazizi on December 17, 2010 and including the ongoing political transition and corresponding social unrest as of February 2014. An uprising is defined as “an insurrection or revolt; an act of rising up” ([dictionary.com](http://dictionary.com)), which I believe is an appropriate expression for the movement. The term “revolution” has frequently been used by scholars and the media, however all of the Tunisians interviewed for this thesis felt that they had not yet witnessed the “radical change” this expression denotes. As such, Tunisians prefer the designation of these events as an uprising, and therefore this term is used throughout this thesis and in other academic work (Achcar and Goshgarian, 2013; Gelvin, 2012; Lynch, 2013).

organization, and collective identity through symbols, slogans, nationalism, and culture, in order that the movement's claims "represent the will and commitment of a majority" (Merriman, *Civil Resistance*: 14). Involvement in resistance is voluntary, and individuals must decide for themselves if they are willing to take risks and potentially break the law (King, 2011b); participants are only willing to make these sacrifices if there is solidarity within the movement.

Nonviolent movements draw their strength from maximum participation; simply put, "numbers matter" (Merriman, 2010). The capacity of a movement to assert its legitimacy and power is proportional to its level of mobilization. The costs of quelling "one or two dozen activists, easily labeled 'extremists', are much lower than repressing hundreds or thousands of activists who represent the entire population" (Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008: 42). Since the variety of tactics can be diverse, a broad range of ordinary people "can become frontline fighters, as opposed to passive observers" (Stephan, 2009: 4). Armed struggles tend to only involve young, healthy males, while nonviolent campaigns have lower moral, physical, informational and commitment barriers to involvement. As a result, Chenoweth and Stephan assert that the average nonviolent campaign boasts over 200,000 participants, roughly 150,000 more than the average violent campaign (2011).

### **1.3.2. Strategic Planning**

As in military or business operations, success is typically not achieved through spontaneous and improvised actions. Rather, success "requires a holistic analysis of the situation in which the nonviolent struggle takes place" (Merriman, 2010). This strategic analysis is achieved by identifying short-, medium- and long-term goals, evaluation of

current conditions and opportunities for action, anticipating possible setbacks and creating contingencies. Upon analysis, tactics should be chosen based on the movement's agency, which are the variables over which a movement has a measure of control, such as strategies, communication lines, coalition building, and capacity to target adversaries. In order to reflect on best practices and failures, it is important to gain knowledge from research or experience of how civil resistance works and a history of past movements. Further, it is crucial that a movement understand its capabilities and limitations. For example, a call for daily mass demonstrations would exhaust participants who are losing income, so often demonstrations are staggered in an effort to maintain some semblance of normal life (O'Neil, 2011).

### **1.3.3. Nonviolent Commitment**

Nonviolent movements should expect that their opponent will counter their demonstrations with violence; historically, this is almost always the situation (Merriman, *Civil Resistance*: 11). However, should a resistance movement retaliate in violence against the police or military, it threatens its legitimacy and effectiveness in several ways. Violence reduces civilian participation, losing the engagement of those who are unwilling to risk in the costly prospect of violence. In a strong patriarchal society, this is particularly important, as many youth live with their parents who would not permit their children to engage in violent confrontation (Jenayak, 2012; Kerkeni, 2012). If a movement is able to unflinchingly uphold its commitment to nonviolence, it is possible to expose or publicize repression through pictures and stories, thereby increasing sympathy and support domestically and internationally, causing the repressive action to backfire. The use of violence reduces international support and the likelihood of loyalty



shifts as it becomes impossible to differentiate between the protagonist and its adversary.

#### 1.4. UGTT

The disintegration of dictatorships is not achieved through the actions of isolated individuals, but through “courageous *mass* application of political defiance by the population and its institutions” (Sharp, 2012: 34). In the case study of Tunisia, the local organization that proffered its support, leadership and mobilization to the 2011 uprising was the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT). According to a self-published booklet,

The UGTT belongs to all the workers without exception. It's their right to express themselves freely concerning the activities of the organization, preserving their love for the nation, the invulnerability of the country, its economic independence, the defense of the personal and public interests, the support of the components of the civil society, equal distribution of wealth and the independence of the trade unionist (Salah and Ayari, 2005: 3).

The right to join unions is protected by the Tunisian Constitution, and as of 2005, the UGTT had 517,000 members (Chekir and Arafoui, 2011: 81).

The UGTT has always had a dual mandate - to advocate for workers' rights and act as a political agent, maintaining a cooperative but autonomous relationship with the ruling party (Glissa, 2012; Hibou, 2011; Tripp, 2013). Oscillating between revolutionary and reactionary periods, the UGTT served as a conclave when political parties were clandestine (Sioud, 2012). As a result of its fearlessness in using its authority to “sound the alarm in delicate situations,” it had been subjected by the regime, as it “represented a potentially competitive force and so needed to be disciplined and controlled” (Hibou, 2011: 249). Recognized by Tunisians as the *only* organization in the country, the UGTT serves as defender, refuge and inclusive house of all people, regardless of membership

(Glissa, 2012; Ihlouka, 2012; Sioud, 2012). As a pillar of support for the people's movement in Tunisia, the role of the UGTT was extensive and indispensable.

### **1.5. Methodology**

This thesis endeavors to sharpen our understanding of the 2011 Tunisian uprising, and specifically the role of the UGTT within the protests and political transition, using insights from Merriman's civil resistance framework. It is important to find a balance in this research between setting a historical context for the uprising, and analyzing the protests and the unique political, social and economic conditions within which they occurred. My intention is not to analyze these factors in depth, but to carefully consider them and note how they have shaped the political environment and the relative understanding and implementation of democracy for Arab citizens.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the nature of these protests and the resulting political change were shaped by the protests and politics of the past. I will analyze both the protests themselves, which are innovative in their origins, dissemination, and nonviolent nature, as well as the role, motivations and characteristics of the UGTT and the individuals involved in the protests.

Much of the study of social movements in Europe, Asia and Africa has been conducted by Westerners, which delineate different values and ways of understanding. In order to properly analyze social movements in the Arab context, research must reflect that the "eyes of the subjects and the researchers don't line up, so the subject's perspective must be addressed" (Kurzman, 2004: 297). Methodologically, this thesis

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<sup>7</sup> For more on Arab democratization, see, for example, Larry Diamond, 2002, "Elections Without Democracy: Thinking about Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 13/2: 21-35; Guillermo O'Donnell, 2007, "The Perpetual Crises of Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 18/1: 5-11; Laurence Whitehead, 2002, *Democratization: Theory and Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Steven Livitsky and Lucan A. Way, 2002, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13/2: 51-65; Thomas Carothers, 2002, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13/1: 5-21.

considers the discourse employed by the actors involved in the Tunisian uprising, in an effort to see beyond any potential bias of past research or media interpretation and hear the voice and experience of the Tunisian people as participants in the uprising and engaged citizens in the 'revolutionized' Tunisia. Thus, it draws on a number of group meetings and interviews conducted in August 2012 in Sousse, Tunisia, with the cooperation of the local chapter of the UGTT. These individuals include union leaders at all levels, UGTT members and nonmembers, students, teachers, and service industry workers. This data will be integrated with a range of primary and secondary sources, including news media, public lectures, and academic books and journal articles.

## **1.6. Organization of Thesis**

The following chapter will provide historical background on Tunisia and the UGTT, with particular attention to the underlying points of contention with the Ben Ali regime which compounded the seeds of rebellion. The third chapter will analyze the protests themselves and the function of the UGTT, specifically applying Merriman's three measures of civil resistance success: unity, strategic planning, and nonviolent commitment. The fourth chapter will explore the aftermath of the uprising, the current political situation, and the pivotal role of the UGTT in post-Ben Ali Tunisia. The fifth and final chapter will outline the flaws of the revolution and conclude with reflections for the future.

## **1.7. Conclusion**

This thesis is important, timely and relevant to our globalized world because it not only allows us to look clearly at the events and issues that continue to unfold daily in Tunisia, but serves as a caution against authoritarian rule, with its frequent

accompaniment of repression, exclusion, and lack of socioeconomic development. The example of the Arab Spring protests could revolutionize the future of contentious political action, which in the past has been characterized by violent rebellions and civil war. With cautious optimism, the 2011 Tunisia uprising demonstrates the 'power of the street' and offers a model for victorious nonviolent civil resistance and a democratic advent in the Arab world.

## **Chapter 2: Political History of Tunisia**

“To preserve the state, [the prince] often has to do things against his word, against charity, against humanity, against religion...he should be ready to enter on evil if he has to.”

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

“God commands you to treat [everyone] justly, generously, and with kindness.”

Qur'an 16:90

### **2.1. Introduction**

Civil resistance does not happen in a vacuum, and movements do not emerge from “fluid, spontaneous, unstructured contexts that thrust marginal individuals into collective action” (Morris, 446). Each Arab country has its own repository of dissidence and its own unique contextual components. This background shapes people’s attitudes towards power and the repertoire of resistance, for

even in those cases where the expectations generated by active resistance have been disappointed, the experience, stories and historical memory of a politics of struggle can lay the groundwork for a cycle of resistance. This is not only virtually impossible to eradicate but may provide the repertoire for new generations of defiance, nurtured by memories that reject and undermine the imaginative dominance of the established political order (Tripp, 2013: 316).

It is for this reason that Tunisia must be examined in the “long dureé” (Sadiki, 2012b).

### **2.2. Colonialism**

In the nineteenth century, European powers became involved in a contest to dominate the Arab region, and the Regency of Tunis paid the price for this unbridled competition. France’s economic penetration ensured its victory as a formal protectorate over the country in 1881 (Abadi, 2013: x). The end of the First World War saw a shift in economic and political conditions which set the stage for Tunisians to struggle for independence. The Great Depression saw a devastating impact on the economy and a number of years of poor harvests. Meanwhile, a new generation of young men returned

to Tunisia from completing their high school or college education in Europe, during which time they had been exposed to left-wing politicians and ideologies. These radicalized youth stemmed from the lower-middle class, making them particularly receptive to egalitarian concepts, and “they naturally regarded themselves as spokesmen of the downtrodden and champions of independence” (Abadi, 2013: 367-8). These young men felt free to express discontent and rage, a vast departure from the old generation of upper-middle-class origin, who were constrained by a code of traditional conduct.

### **2.3. Independence**

Among this new generation was Habib Bourguiba, who formed the Neo-Destour in 1934 in an effort to build a mass-based popular movement for social reform and unify “the oppressed classes behind a strong disciplined organization with a tight centralized hierarchical leadership” (Hazbun, 1994). Born in 1903 in the coastal town of Monastir, Bourguiba was a charismatic and inspirational speaker. The Neo-Destour sought to benefit from the numerous social and political conflicts that erupted during this period of severe economic hardship, embarking on a campaign of civil disobedience against the Protectorate. Though calling for passive resistance, a number of demonstrations turned violent and resulted in deaths and subsequent suppression of the Neo-Destour and its leaders (Abadi, 2013: 370-3).

In 1944, Tunisian activist Farhat Hached broke from the Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (CGTT), which had been created in 1924 by the French protectorate, and established the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT). The Neo-Destour saw the new union as an asset, with its well organized cadres in the public

administration and key sectors of the economy, generating strike action capable of bringing the entire country to a standstill (Abadi, 2013: 402). The Neo-Destour and the UGTT engaged in a mutually beneficial relationship, by which the party exchanged support, political organizers, and resources for the union's decentralized communication and international connections, which provided cover for the party's operations under political repression (Hazbun, 1994). By 1951, the UGTT had become the second most important organization in the country (after the Neo-Destour), boasting 100,000 members whose "strike campaign had become 'a veritable social war against the state' in support of the Neo-Destour's demands for internal autonomy and negotiations leading to independence" (Alexander, 2010: 31-32). The union won a number of civil rights for Tunisian society from the French colonial administration, for example, the right to organize collectively, and encouraged several other North African nations under colonial domination to create independent trade unions of their own. After the arrest of Bourguiba and hundreds of other Neo-Destour leaders in January 1952, Hached directed the leadership of the nationalist struggle through the UGTT, and "saved the independence movement from collapse. In face of the wave of repression – and French Colonialism could, when it felt obliged – reveal its fangs in the nastiest of fashions – it was Tunisian trade unionists – its working class – that stood fast, held their ground and continued the struggle for independence as they say 'on all fronts'" (Prince, 2010). Hached's leadership was short lived, however, as he was assassinated in December 1952 by the French terrorists group 'The Red Hand' (Salah and Ayari, 2005: 9-10).

Though exiled during the Second World War, Bourguiba continued to call upon Tunisians to exploit France's weakening dominance through civil disobedience. Upon

the end of the war, Bourguiba actively engaged France in a protracted bargaining process, the results of which caused a split within the Neo-Destour and between Bourguiba and the radical left-wing leader Salah Ben Youssef. The resulting contest for power throughout the independence struggle was not primarily over ideas and ideologies of competing groups striving to impose their distinct vision for the new state, but over “more basic struggles for simple power and dominance between clans, factions and particularly personalities who often all shared very similar ideological positions and objectives” (Willis, 2012: 49). Clashes between Bourguiba and Youssef were based on jealousy and local divisions and rivalries, which prompted Fallaqa, an anticolonial guerrilla group from the south and border regions, to fight alongside Youssef against France from 1955-6. Youssef and this interior rebellion created a genuine challenge to Bourguiba and his sole claim to leadership, so Bourguiba enlisted the French army and police to quash the rebellion, driving Youssef to Cairo, where he remained until he was assassinated in 1961 (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 21-2).

The dispute with Youssef and the ensuing ‘Youssefist’ rebellion established much of the historical pretext for Bourguiba’s authoritarian leadership style throughout his three decades as president of Tunisia. Bourguiba emerged as the unrivaled leader of the Neo-Destour and engaged in several local and international tours in an effort to raise awareness and garner allies for the Tunisian cause. Though the option to resort to force was not ruled out, Tunisia’s independence was achieved on March 20, 1956 through Bourguiba’s diplomatic approach rather than a dramatic forceful victory (Alexander, 2010: 37).



## **2.4. Bourguiba**

Though Bourguiba expressed a preference for democracy, “Across the newly decolonized world, it was accepted wisdom that only a system based on a single political party could provide the sort of dynamism and direction that could produce the necessary impetus for the kind of social and economic changes needed in many of the impoverished colonial possessions” (Willis, 2012: 121). This mentality was personified in Bourguiba’s leadership. Though the shift to a one-party political system was justified by many other post-colonial authoritarian leaders and exploited as a means of personal enrichment, in Tunisia this institutionalization of personal power was not intended to “benefit Bourguiba as an individual, but one which Bourguiba believed was essential to build a modern and prosperous Tunisia” (Willis, 2012: 51-53). Bourguiba believed that only he had the predestination and charisma to move Tunisia out of its stunted development into a modern nation, and as much as he believed in the Neo-Destour, he remained fiercely committed to his own freedom to maneuver as he liked, refusing to allow any person or organization to limit his capacity to follow his own pragmatic counsel. Said Bourguiba: “The system? What system? I am the system” (Alexander, 2010: 114).

This belief was exacerbated by the ‘Youssefist’ rebellion, which fatally marred Bourguiba’s faith in the rationality and trustworthiness of the Tunisian population. He believed that Tunisians lacked the wisdom and political sophistication to make informed decisions. Bourguiba attributed institutions as responsible for the ‘backwardness’ of Tunisia, and since Youssef had drawn support from conservative Tunisians allied with these institutions, Bourguiba ensured that their participation and power was kept at a

minimum in favor of “a form of authoritarian paternalism that sought to guide Tunisia along a ‘correct path’” (Willis, 2012: 71). The resulting political exclusion was accepted by the majority of average Tunisians, convinced that their interests were best served by accepting and supporting the leadership of the elites, many of whom - particularly Bourguiba - had gained popular legitimacy as a result of their role in the independence struggle (Willis, 2012: 70).

The UGTT was one of Bourguiba’s most important allies in the struggle against both the French and the Youssefists, and Bourguiba made attempts early in his leadership to include them in government through designated seats in the National Assembly and ministerial positions (Alexander, 2010: 38). Bourguiba did not, however, accede to their suggestions for a more socialist development program or their requests for greater participation within the ruling party. Without resorting to more blatant repression, Bourguiba employed his customary strategic people management and co-optation of leadership to keep the UGTT tightly under his thumb (Alexander, 2010: 40).

Throughout his presidency, Bourguiba undertook a staunch and controversial secularization agenda in an effort to further modernize Tunisia. Bourguiba’s “jihad for progress” was in part due to the influence of French secularism he encountered during his studies in Paris, and in part a response to the fact that majority of the country’s *ulema* (religious leaders) had sided with Youssef. The most striking example of Bourguiba’s modernization effort is the Family Code, “the collection of legal statuses that governed matters of marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance, and was traditionally based on Islamic Sharia law...Bourguiba saw the status and position of women as demonstrative of the development and modernity of a society” (Willis, 2012:

74). Established in the 1959 constitution, the Family Code was a dramatic departure from those of the rest of the Arab states, and to this day remains a source of pride and identity for Tunisian people (Glissa, 2012; UGTT Women's Bureau, 2012). Though not a complete digression from Islamic influence within the state, as Bourguiba recognized the difficulty in obtaining public acceptance for such a move, Bourguiba merged Islamic courts and schools into the secular system. While his limits were revealed in his inability to move the population to abandon Ramadan fasting in the interests of economic productivity, average Tunisians began "to feel like strangers in our own country. We had been educated as Arabs and Muslims, while we could see the country being totally moulded in the French cultural identity" (Willis, 2012: 160).

Bourguiba made a number of intentional policy choices which characterize his values and vision. His foreign policy consisted of "progressive, secular social legislation; a decidedly pro-Western foreign policy that rejected communism and pan-Arabism" (Alexander, 2010: 114), thus creating a particularly conflictual relationship with President Nasser of Egypt. In an effort to modernize Tunisia, Bourguiba dramatically expanded educational opportunities and foreign investment. Unlike other charismatic leaders who arose as a result of their military exploits

Bourguiba's charisma derived mainly from decisions that he made as a state builder and diplomat rather than as a military hero...In fact, Bourguiba deliberately left the armed force without any mission to fulfill other than to provide defense against Tunisia's immediate neighbors. Moreover, the tension between Tunisia and its neighbors was neither persistent nor grave enough to justify a large army. The size of the Tunisian army was determined not only by the country's meagre resources but also by Bourguiba's determination to leave the army relatively weak (Abadi, 2013: 435).

Maintaining that the military must remain under civilian control, Bourguiba halted any attempt by the military to interfere in the political realm.

After independence, Bourguiba opted for a market-driven economic development strategy. By the early 1960s, however, it became clear that Tunisia's private sector and existing policies were not providing the anticipated engine for economic growth (Hazbun, 1994). Former UGTT secretary general Ahmed Ben Salah was appointed as minister of the economy in 1961, and for a decade led the nation into a worsening economic state through his ruinous socialist experiment. It was during this period that the Neo-Destour was renamed the Socialist Destourian Party (PSD). Salah's failed strategies and rapid plummet in public opinion reversed the government strategy from "socialism" to a full-bore campaign to liberate the private sector and encourage market-driven growth" (Alexander, 2010: 43). Economic revitalization was fostered under Hedi Nour, who became minister of the economy in 1971, focusing specifically on agriculture, commerce and tourism (Abadi, 2013: 486).

Disillusionment with the socialist agenda, the ideological vacuum created with its abandonment, the void caused by the government's secularization policies, and Bourguiba's failure to alleviate the worsening economic conditions created a fertile landscape for the Islamists to transform vague religious sentiment into a formal organization with a clear political agenda. Beginning in the mid-1960s, the Islamic movement became increasingly involved in social and political activities, often in cooperation with the UGTT. The movement attracted highly educated young men and women who had few prospects of moving up in Tunisian society. Initially motivated by unhappiness with Bourguiba's secularization policies, the movement increasingly addressed declining socio-economic conditions, convinced of the religious imperative of social justice (Willis, 2012: 165).

Public opposition to Bourguiba began initially as a result of the president's heart attack in 1967, after which rival factions began to compete for the presidency. In 1974, Bourguiba declared himself president for life and "began to act even more unilaterally than ever" (Willis, 2012: 51-53), establishing himself as the maker and breaker of careers in a highly personalized style. Manipulating a handful of key individuals, complex issues took on the added dynamics of personal rivalries as Bourguiba frequently circulated senior figures in the regime between positions, never allowing one individual to garner enough support to become a political threat - another leadership quality acquired as a result of his conflict with Youssef (Alexander, 2010: 114). Through shrewd insight into personality and position, Bourguiba was able to establish "carefully cultivated debts of loyalty" and ensure the security of his own position (Willis, 2012: 60-61).

Tunisia benefitted from the high fuel prices of the 1970s, yet despite vast improvement since the Ben Selah era, social conditions worsened for the majority of Tunisians. The gap between rich and poor widened considerably, as "over 20 per cent of the population still lived below the official poverty line. Two-thirds of all males and three-quarters of all females with high school educations could not find jobs. Inflation hovered around 10 per cent...By 1980, the government fund that subsidized bread and other basic consumer commodities ran a deficit in excess of 100 million dinars" (Alexander, 2010: 50). Conditions worsened as the Tunisian deficit climbed from \$354 million in 1980 to \$770 million in 1984. Unable to manage these challenges, the government encouraged emigration and family planning, yet the population grew from four million in 1966 to five million in 1975 and seven million in 1984 (Abadi, 2013: 487).

Uncertain economic conditions prompted strikes and demonstrations, discreetly encouraged both by party officials as a way to create allies to strengthen their succession strategy and opposition leaders eager to see the UGTT distance itself from the government and act as a “a battering ram for political, as well as economic change” (Alexander, 2010: 46-47). Bourguiba dealt with the rare strike or demonstration brutally, and intentionally expanded rural education facilities in order to reduce the number of students available to protest in the capital (Abadi, 2013: 487). Even so, frustrations about economic hardship, the authoritarian government and the decline in Bourguiba’s health created a fertile climate for students and workers sympathetic to leftist ideologies. In an effort to calm tensions, Bourguiba named a new Prime Minister in 1980, Mohamed Mzali, who was mandated to reach out to the opposition and institute incremental political reform. Mzali entered into a bargaining process with the UGTT on several occasions in an effort to co-opt the union and reduce social tensions (not to mention secure his own right to succeed Bourguiba), granting the union greater inclusion in government but doing nothing to address the root cause of the social unrest. When workers rejected a wage agreement made between the UGTT and the government, Prime Minister Mzali “came to see the union as a threat to the country’s stability - and to his own ambitions. In 1984-5, Mzali waged a fierce campaign that split the union, jailed its leaders, and took over its headquarters. Mzali’s crackdown ended the UGTT’s reign as ‘the sole political mediator between the government and the nation’” (Alexander, 2010: 50).

This repression opened the door for a new mediator, as Mzali delivered “a stick to the left and a carrot to the right” (Alexander, 2010: 51). Starting in 1980, the Islamist

party Harakat al-Ittihad al-Islami (Islamic Tendency Movement, or MTI) became politically active and began to advocate for the needs of the most underprivileged (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 15). Taking advantage of its freedom, the MTI created collaborative links with other opposition parties and civil society organizations, including the UGTT. The MTI's rapid growth and increasing strength created a high level of uncertainty for the ruling party, causing Mzali to turn on the Islamists savagely. This change was too late for Bourguiba, however, who replaced him as Prime Minister with Rachid Sfar in July 1986.

Bourguiba became increasingly pertinacious in his campaign against the Islamists, claiming that “The eradication of the Islamicist poison will be the last service I'll render Tunisia” (Willis, 2012: 166). Alexander succinctly summarizes the events of 1987 that preceded the end of the Bourguiba regime: Explosions at four tourist hotels on the coast

provided Bourguiba with the justification for trials that he hoped would culminate in the execution of the top MTI leaders. When the courts did not hand down a sufficient number of death sentences, Bourguiba demanded retrials. This demand came amidst growing concern about his senility. On October 2, Bourguiba promoted Ben Ali to prime minister - Tunisia's third in fifteen months. The same day, he fired a party director whom he had named just three days earlier. The new director served two weeks before Bourguiba fired him, as well. Three weeks later, Bourguiba dismissed two planning and finance officials and accused them of trying to trick him. This erratic behavior, along with his persistent call for retrials that would almost certainly produce serious conflict, convinced many officials that Bourguiba was no longer fit to govern. In early November, police discovered a plot by a clandestine wing of the MTI to assassinate Bourguiba and Ben Ali if they proceeded with the retrials. Bourguiba had ordered those trials to begin on November 9. On the night of November 6-7, Ben Ali assembled seven physicians who attested to Bourguiba's inability to continue to govern. The commander of the National Guard took over the presidential palace. Tunisians awoke the next morning to a new president (2010: 52).

## **2.5. Ben Ali**

Bourguiba's repressive agenda of exclusion towards the Islamists had pushed Tunisia to the brink of civil war, and Ben Ali's 'medical coup' was welcomed by the Tunisian people as it undoubtedly prevented considerable bloodshed (Filiu, 2011: 14). Before his promotion to Prime Minister, Zine El Abdine Ben Ali, born in 1936, was a military officer whose career saw a meteoric rise in part as a result of Bourguiba's progressive paranoia towards upwardly-mobile politicians and the trust in which he bestowed upon Ben Ali as a result of his background in security and intelligence (Willis, 2012: 96). Without a charismatic public reputation or influential patronage links, Ben Ali stepped into a fragile political arena. Given the disenchantment of the country and the proposed threat of the MTI, "Pulling back from the brink with the Islamists, reaching out to the secular opposition, and restoring public support for the government became Ben Ali's top priorities" (Alexander, 2010: 53). In his first year as president, Ben Ali introduced a range of reforms and a calculated public relations campaign. He won broad praise by abolishing the presidency for life and state security court, amnestied thousands of political prisoners, and liberalized the press code. To demonstrate his commitment to liberal democracy, Ben Ali changed the name of the PSD to the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), illustrating that "The language that Ben Ali used to describe the measures was as important as the measures themselves... [Ben Ali] not only talked about multiple parties, competitive elections, and equal rights for women. He also talked about the rule of law and individual rights and liberties, including the right to hold and express opinions that differed from the majority of the government" (Alexander, 2010: 53).



The RCD diligently recruited sections of the population that had become alienated under the Bourguiba regime, particularly “businessmen, intellectuals, professionals, women and the young” (Willis, 2012: 132). Economic performance under the Ben Ali regime was steady, with an annual growth rate greater than four per cent (Abadi, 2013: 511). Characterized by “flexibility, stability, and predictability” (Alexander, 2010: 84), the government’s austerity measures and sound economic policies created conditions for local entrepreneurs and foreign investment which encouraged private initiative and instilled confidence. Implemented in a way that minimized the risk of public dissent, Ben Ali “remained resolutely committed to building an economy that generates growth and jobs through private investment, exports, and deep engagement with the global economy” (Alexander, 2010: 66-67).

This absence of social unrest afforded the government the opportunity to invest heavily in social development, devoting considerable resources to state-sponsored healthcare and education and subsidies for the poor. The crux of this initiative was the National Solidarity Fund, established in 1992 as a

way of drawing the general population into the business of alleviating stubborn pockets of poverty, most of them concentrated in the southern and western portions of the country. Known popularly as ‘26-26’, the number of the post office account to which citizens are encouraged to send donations, the fund reflects what one might describe as ‘compassionate authoritarianism’ (Alexander, 2010: 67).

This investment in human development cultivated the backbone of stability that characterized Tunisia throughout Ben Ali’s leadership, and allowed him to maintain Bourguiba’s tradition of an inexpensive small military primarily concerned with protecting the borders, undeterred by domestic strife (Abadi, 2013: 534).

Ben Ali shared Bourguiba's distaste for union action, stating that "Resorting to strike action, even if it is guaranteed by the law, indicates a lack of efficiency and dialogue, and a deficiency on that level, because, in a democratic society, social peace is a capital imperative towards which all social partners should tend, and the realization of which depends on the degree of efficiency of the dialogue and the mastery of its channels" (Hibou, 2011: 170). Demonstrated in 2000 by the fraud accusations against and forced resignation of UGTT secretary general Ismail Sahbani (Willis, 2012: 244), the trade union leadership was progressively bureaucratized, subordinated and co-opted by the corrupted clientelist networks of Ben Ali and his ruling clique, essentially leaving it "only the functions of an intermediary and, often, a pure and simple appendage to power" (Hibou, 2011: 124-5).

Much as under his predecessor, perhaps no group suffered more greatly under Ben Ali's authoritarianism than Islamists. As the 1989 elections approached, the Islamic party MTI renamed itself Ennahda (Rebirth or Renaissance) and applied to be formally recognized as an official party. Though it did not receive recognition in time for the National Assembly elections in April, it ran candidates as independents in nearly all of the electoral districts; every seat, however, was won by the RCD. This sparked protests and positioned Ennahda as the main opposition force, initiating decades of political exclusion and repression from the regime. In May 1989, Rachid Ghannouchi, Ennahda party leader, left Tunisia for voluntary exile. Ben Ali stated in July of that year, "We say to those who mix religion and politics that there is no way of allowing them to form a political party" (Willis, 2012:167). In 1990-1991, thousands of Islamists were accused of 'terrorism' and arrested (Bahloul, 2012). While it remained a vocal critic of the Ben Ali

regime from abroad and called the people to an 'intifada', by 1992 Ben Ali had rooted out what remained of Ennahda and its threat to his government, "making Tunisia one of the only states in the Arab world in which Islamism had no real institutional or organizational presence" (Willis, 2012: 172).

Since the early 1990s, Ben Ali exploited fears of Tunisia's large Islamist movement, forcing the grudging support of secular democrats who saw Ben Ali as the lesser of two evils (Willis, 2012: 132). Influenced by similar dissension in neighboring Arab states,

the speed and success of the authorities' repressions of Ennahda and the minimal violence that occurred when compared to the attempt to repress the FIS in Algeria actually confirmed the pacific and democratic nature of the movement...many Tunisians, including those in other opposition parties, were unnerved by events unfolding next door in Algeria and chose to side with the regime and tacitly support the repression of the Islamists (Willis, 2012: 174-7).

While Ben Ali had achieved reluctant domestic support in his campaign against local Islamists, he gained international backing after 9/11, as world leaders were eager to demonstrate both their high level of security and their disdain towards Islamism. The al-Qaeda attacks led the Western powers to seek allies in the Arab region to enroll in the 'Global War on Terror', and they were willing to overlook persistent and escalating human rights violations and democratic deficits in favor of tacit support for their 'Crusade' (Abadi, 2013: 522; Bahloul, 2012; Mullin and Shahshahani, 2011: 123). Further, after the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, "The Arab rulers became well versed in their routine 'no alternative' argumentation: towards the West, they posed as the only ones able to deter an Islamist/Jihadi takeover (two distinct notions that became very confused in the mind of foreign decision-makers)" (Filiu, 2011: 76). Ben Ali's 2003 Anti-Terrorism Law impressed the Bush Administration but violated Tunisians' civil liberties;

its vagueness enabled the arrest and torture of thousands of innocent people, solely based on their religious beliefs (Mullin and Shahshahani, 2011: 124).

Yet despite the regime's repression, the Islamist movement continued to grow, fueled by the challenging socioeconomic conditions and 'culture of alienation' among educated, unemployed lower-middle-class youth (Wickham, 2004: 237). Seen as "an indigenously constructed response to the realities of everyday life," the role of Islam amid widespread "deprivation has created a legion of disaffected recruits who seek culturally acceptable explanations that address their marginalization and social anomie" (Hafez, 2004: 63). Professing a 'Midas touch', Islamists claimed increased probability of employment by 50 per cent, provided temporary work for the unemployed, set up Islamic markets in most cities and rural areas, and lowered the prices of basic commodities (Bahloul, 2012). Further contributing to the resurgence of religiosity was the launching of the Arabic news channel Al Jazeera in 1996, and its direct competitor Al Arabiya in 2003. These stations now broadcast 24 hours a day in Arabic, English and Farsi, and houses without running water boast a satellite dish in order to receive news bulletins and live debates promoting Islamic ideology and venerating religious fighters and martyrs (Bahloul, 2012; *Economist*, 2004). The US war in Afghanistan and invasion of Iraq lent greater support and sympathy to Islamists as victims, and in Tunisia, the number of mosques built between 2001 and 2011 was tenfold higher than those built between 1956 and 2000 (Bahloul, 2012).

## **2.6. Contention with the Ben Ali Regime**

### **2.6.1. Freedom of speech**

Though Tunisia has the oldest human rights league in the Arab world, and the government at least tolerated the presence of civil society organizations and newspapers, Ben Ali kept tight surveillance not only “on press activities and any political expression, but also on any potential institutions and places of critical thought and action” (Hibou, 2011: 79). Noam Chomsky said that “Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state;” Ben Ali made use of both propaganda and violence, using ‘freedom of speech’ as a tool to manipulate public opinion (Zaghdoudi, 2012). Civil liberties, especially freedom of the press, expression and association, were suppressed, and critics of the regime were quickly silenced should they express opposition or disapproval (Abadi, 2013: 511). This intimidation kept Tunisians from speaking freely at work, in school, even with friends, threatened by the fear of losing their jobs, going to jail, or worse (Zaghdoudi, 2012). Sharp states that “It is not the sanctions themselves that produce obedience, but the fear of them,” (2005: 34), consequences of which were routinely extended to the family and community of the accused (Jenayak, 2012).

Given that some of the greatest perceived threats to Ben Ali were students and Islamists, they were particularly susceptible targets to his repressive measures. Students were not permitted to meet in groups larger than four people, tanks made regular tours of campuses, and police maintained strict security, monitoring the content of lectures and private conversations. Many students who participated in marches in 2008 were arrested and never seen again; others returned with unfathomable stories of

torture and with scars they wore as badges of honor. Women were required to remove their veils before entering university buildings, Imams' sermons were monitored, mosques were supervised by the police and closed within five minutes after prayers ended, as protests throughout the region typically broke out immediately after Friday prayers (Kerkeni, 2012; Wiktorowicz, 2004: 1).

### **2.6.2. Corruption**

Through his modernization efforts in politics, economics and social development, Ben Ali "constructed a liberal democratic facade over a centralized and insulated technocracy" (Alexander, 2010: 115). Though these reforms established a semblance of "legitimacy, credibility and the imagery of popular participation" (Willis, 2012: 146), in reality the reforms were formulated in such a way as to strengthen the deeply authoritarian state while creating a facade of more change than was actualized. Democratic reform and facile policy initiatives created "a striking example of the institutionalization of the forms of democracy without any of the substance" (Powel, 2009: 194). Ben Ali 'stage-managed' women's rights, disseminating propaganda emphasizing the relatively better status of Tunisian women "as a sort of political hedge fund against national and, above all, international accusations of human rights' abuse" (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 25). Tunisians furtively joked that Ben Ali practiced the politik of the 3F's: females, festivals and football, promoting and investing heavily in these three to distract people from becoming interested in politics (Zaghdoudi, 2012).

After the initial 1989 elections - in which the RCD won 81 per cent of the votes - Tunisians did not vote again until the 1994 legislative elections, for which Ben Ali agreed to modify the electoral rules in an attempt to keep the secular opposition parties

engaged. Setting aside 19 of 163 seats in the Chamber of Deputies for opposition parties (and gradually increasing this number in subsequent elections), Ben Ali successfully divided the opposition parties. This made it impossible for any opposition party to win a majority, contend for the presidency, or pose any real political threat (Alexander, 2010: 63-64). Despite multi-partyism, elections fulfilled the same role as during the single-party era, whereby “the population was still called upon to express allegiance to the candidate chosen by the regime, meaning that elections become in essence about ‘remobilization of allegiance to the state’” (Willis, 2012: 149). Ben Ali and the RCD claimed landslide victories - one Tunisian said the only question was what number comes after the point, after the 99 per cent - prompting accusations of intimidation at the polls, lack of opposition media airtime, failure to distribute voting cards to opposition party members, lack of transparency in vote counting, and falsified results (*Economist*, 2004). Termed ‘election fetishism’, this practice “reduces and sums the democratic game into a single exercise of vote-casting periodically” with no further feedback from the populace or voice or role in public affairs (Sadiki, 2009: 261). Given the circumstances, the majority of Tunisians did not even bother to cast their ballot, knowing that even a vote for the opposition was considered a vote for Ben Ali (Kerkeni, 2012; Zaghdoudi, 2012).

Ben Ali’s party established diffuse and pervasive clientelist networks that were incestuous with the state and indistinguishable from the civil service, “providing jobs, bursaries, administrative facilities, aid of every kind, lodging, banking facilities, and free health and transport passes” (Hibou, 2011: xix). The voracious self-interest and predatory enrichment of the presidential party left all non-members constrained or

excluded from nearly all economic activities and social mobility. Thus, by 1998, RCD membership surpassed two million, most members of which arose out of the desire to simply be 'left alone' (Filiu, 2011: 77). While Ben Ali enjoyed the acclaim of the Tunisian 'economic miracle', boasting a middle class of 80 per cent of the population, this Tunisian bourgeoisie had to join the preeminent presidential party to remain connected to patronage networks that could not be circumvented (Filiu, 2011: 36). The rapid and pervasive expansion of the RCD "led many commentators to argue that Tunisia had succeeded in swapping the single-party rule of the PSD for the hegemonic rule of the RCD" (Willis, 2012: 132).

Under Ben Ali's rule, Tunisia "was like a mafia run state" (Day, 2011b), where corruption was rife and the rampant and shameless excess of the president and his family, as revealed through WikiLeaks, was "breathtaking in its shameless audacity and sheer scale" (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 16; Mullin and Shahshahani, 2011: 124). Unlike the corruption of the Bourguiba era, which was primarily driven by a desire for political control or advancement, Ben Ali's clique has been characterized by rank criminality and personal enrichment (Alexander, 2010: 66). This notorious rapacity

was first and foremost a form of extortion imposed on pre-existing economic activities. The family members composing them essentially the brothers, children, nephews and sons-in-law of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and his wife Leila Trabelsi were never business people, and were never considered as such. They merely took advantage of their positions of power to build up a position where they could accumulate wealth, by monopolizing the role of intermediaries in privatization, in import-export operations, in access to public markets, and in access to information. They also proceeded by intimidation, forcibly obtaining percentages of capital in successful businesses, and they indulged in strategic marriages to broaden their field of intervention (Hibou, 2011: xx).



Under the misnomer ‘economic liberalization’, waves of *infitah* (economic opening) facilitated an unregulated environment for insidious accumulation of power through state penetration and control of the private sector (Tripp, 2013).

Unbridled by conscience, wealthy and powerful elites accumulated wealth with blatant indifference to the collective concerns of less fortunate Tunisians. The practice of inveiglement of wealth was not exclusive to the state but diffuse throughout society as a whole, and while the justice system represented a complementary technique of control, 50 per cent of the economic cases before the courts concerned spoliation (Hibou, 2011: 117; Jenayak, 2012). Even the National Solidarity Fund, the 26/26 charity box, was regularly collected through coercion or ‘voluntary’ contributions in exchange for favorable treatment. These ‘donations’ intended for poverty alleviation were distributed through clientelistic channels and frequently appropriated by Ben Ali (Kerkeni, 2012; Willis, 2012: 241).

Observing both a fall in purchasing power and the ostentation of the ruling clique, corruption trickled down throughout Tunisian society, largely as the only way in which to acquire the income necessary for survival (Rutherford, 2013: 37). Daily, small-scale corruption became normalized and institutionalized, thereby creating a ‘normlessness’ in Tunisian society (Wickham, 2004: 237-8). This ubiquitous corruption established a system of arbitrary coercion and constraint, or ‘incessant interventions’, between the citizens and the state. These interventions operated through systematic demands of the state from a ‘parasitic bourgeoisie’ accustomed to receiving aid, grants, exemptions and ad hoc agreements. These demands were reciprocal, as requests of the state were matched by demands from the state, establishing a security pact between the state and

the people. This extralegal system of mutual dependencies is not only accepted, but often preferred, creating a system that one Tunisian defines as “very beneficial, since nothing is impossible in Tunisia!” (Hibou, 2011: 156-7).

Gandhi wrote that “a citizen who barter with such a [corrupt] state shares its corruption and lawlessness” (2002: 145), essentially becoming a slave to it. Corruption was used as a means of control, whereby the threat of incrimination loomed like a “veritable sword of Damocles” as the corrupt could either be forced to tow the line or fall prey to punishment when their level of power was deemed a threat (Hibou, 2011: 152). In Tunisia, “Corruption protects and includes, it allows people to get involved in business, to succeed, or quite simply to live or survive; but, simultaneously, it disciplines and controls, it normalizes things in the guise of participation in a system of exchange, or privilege, or special favors, which does not embrace merely the ‘great’ but the whole of the population” (Hibou, 2011: xx-xxi).

### **2.6.3. Law and order**

The primary tool used to maintain Ben Ali’s high level of repression and control was the country’s security service, which established a constant and intrusive presence. Employing 120,000 people, the security service was four times the size of the armed forces, comprising a ratio of 1 out of every 85 Tunisians; in contrast, France has the most police in Europe with 1 out of every 265 citizens (Hibou, 2011: 77, 81). This ubiquitous security force had a presence

everywhere in the country, in the regions, in administrative offices, public companies and even in the big private enterprises, on the roads and on public transport, at places of work and in bars and places of relaxation and entertainment, all of these agents are keeping people under surveillance and carrying out a continuous check on citizens, travelers, employees, school pupils,

students, believers, car drivers, readers, parents, consumers, passers-by, lovers and tax payers (Hibou, 2011: 82).

The constant supervision, subordination, and arbitrary threat of punishment became the primary symbol of the political realm “where the proximity and the almost constitutive exchange between violence and right is found” (Hibou, 2011: 84). As one Tunisian said, “When I am born, I learn two things. I learn that I love my mother and that I hate the police” (Zaghdoudi, 2012). In later years, however, Ben Ali asserted his repression increasingly through juridical and economic procedures, employing a broad range of tactics that were less conspicuous and, by their subtlety, all the more powerful. The arbitrary and discretionary character of the laws and decrees “explain the redoubtable efficacy of the juridical mechanisms: this vagueness authorizes all kinds of interpretations” (Hibou, 2011: 99). Ben Ali’s intervention in the juridical system polluted the system; said one Tunisian, “when you are corrupted, you have no credibility to judge other people” (Sioud, 2012).

#### **2.6.4. Wealth disparity**

While Tunisia’s strong economic performance was vaunted as miraculous, distribution of wealth was highly unequal. Into the 2000s, inflation rose at double digit rates, while incomes remained stagnant. Middle class households became poor and those on the edge of poverty helplessly slipped into it (Rutherford, 2013: 37), leaving two classes, “one living in opulence, the other in subsistence” (Sadiki, 2009: 207). This paradoxical distribution of wealth was regionally enforced between the coast and the interior. Born in the coastal city of Sousse, Ben Ali invested heavily in ‘tourism of the sea’, establishing strong development and infrastructure in the region (Man on street, 2012a and 2012b; Usher, 2011: 31). Unlike as in other Arab states with ethnic or

religious minorities, as a predominantly homogeneous nation the Tunisian hinterland minority functions as a national oppressed 'other' (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 27). This wealth and development disparity trapped the interior in a vicious cycle, or "reproduction of generation...Those who are living on the coast, they are producing a generation of lawyers, judges, doctors, engineers; those who are living inland, they are producing a generation of jobless, of beggars, gangsters. It's always this kind of inequality between regions" (Zaghdoudi, 2012).

#### **2.6.5. Education**

Education has long been a development priority in Tunisia. In 1958, education was made open to all children, and in 1991, made free and mandatory (Chekir and Arafoui, 2011: 76). Public spending on education constituted seven per cent of GDP, one of the highest rates internationally (Watkins, 2011), and has accomplished high levels of literacy and formal education (Alexander, 2010, 86). The education system, however, is characterized by low quality, irrelevancy, and inequality based on wealth, gender and region. The obsolete education system uses rote learning to train students for work in the shrinking public sector, neglecting the problem solving and technical skills necessary for the private sector and global markets (Adams, 2011; Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi, 2007). The national curriculum discourages the development of critical thinking abilities, and "does not look favorably upon active participatory citizenship" (Sadiki, 2012c). Ben Ali instituted curriculum that minimized the study of history and propagated his national achievements, in order that Tunisians not have their eyes opened to the dictatorial political regime (Bahloul, 2012; Jenayak, 2012). One Tunisian spoke of a student report on political history of Tunisia, beginning the report on

the November 7, 1987 - the day Ben Ali became president - as though that was the beginning of history (Zaghdoudi, 2012). Further, Ben Ali gradually began corrupting the baccalaureate examinations (mandatory for entry to university) by blackmailing families determined to secure their children's educational future (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 26-7).

#### **2.6.6. Unemployment**

The MENA region's unemployment rates are some of the highest in the world, in some areas reaching 40 per cent (King, 2011a), over half of whom are first-time entrants to the labor market (Ali and Elbadawi, 2002: 183). Many of these new workers are forced into the informal sector, comprising about 35 per cent of employment in the region, where they endure low wages, low productivity and instability (Ali and Elbadawi, 2002: 183). The increased participation of women in the labor force - rising from 22 per cent in 1960 to 32 per cent in 2000 - has exacerbated employment challenges (Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi, 2007). Women face greater barriers to labor market entry, with unemployment rates roughly 50 per cent higher than for males (Watkins, 2011).

Unemployment has an inverse relationship with education levels, with lower rates among those with little or no education, and higher rates for those with intermediate and secondary education (Billeh, 2002: 5). About 55,000 university graduates are seeking first-time employment annually (Alexander, 2010: 85), young people with "meritless diplomas" who have never been taught "how to think, how to create, how to innovate" (Zaghdoudi, 2012). Idealistic naiveté gradually transitions into bitter disillusionment as graduates "just stay at home," unable to find jobs, having been deceived into believing that the education system was "perfect" (Kerkeni, 2012; Mabrouk, 2012).

### **2.6.7. Demographics**

The combination of a dramatic decline in infant mortality and a more gradual fertility decline has created a 'youth bulge' across the MENA region, where one in five people is between the ages of 15 and 24 (Assad and Roudi-Fahimi, 2007). With a youth unemployment rate of 31 per cent (Watkins, 2011), this leaves 600,000 young Tunisians jobless. Demography and the lengthy transition between education and work have profound implications that dramatically alter the social fabric of the Arab world. Masses of youth, striving to transition from childhood to the independence of adulthood, find themselves unable to secure adequate means that would permit them to marry, establish their own households, and start a family (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 15). This period - termed 'waithood' - results in a generation subjected to a debilitating state of exclusion, helplessness and dependency (Dhillon, 2008). These disillusioned, disenfranchised youth create a combustible atmosphere, as "large numbers of young people are much more likely than other demographic cohorts to act on their grievances to try to rectify them, even if this requires large-scale protests and even violence...There was also a general hopelessness that none of these conditions would improve without revolutionary political change" (Haas and Lesch, 2013: 3).

### **2.7. Prior Uprisings**

Though the 2011 uprising was entirely unpredicted and spontaneous, it is difficult to understand and impossible to analyze without some insight into prior riots and demonstrations, which have created a "repertoire of resistance" as a basis for future action (McAdam, 2009; Tripp, 2013). Expressions of fear, resentment, powerlessness and anger have manifested themselves in riots periodically across the region, serving

as pressure valves for socioeconomic frustrations and a means to communicate to those in power that the people had reached the end of their endurance. It was through these demonstrations that Arab masses became citizens and engaged the state (Sadiki, 2012b). Dire economic circumstances forced subjects to measure the consequences of obeying and disobeying, and “if the subjects perceive the consequences of obedience to be worse than the consequences of disobedience, then disobedience is more likely” (Sharp: 2005: 34). State response was generally a mixture of repression and concession, with ambiguous and inadequate outcomes (Tripp, 2013: 136).

Preceding each period of protest was the

introduction of measures, such as the removal or reduction of subsidies, that had an immediate impact on people’s well-being, in a way that the longer-term, structural changes would have yet to show. In many respects, the manner of the government’s introduction of these measures - suddenly, peremptorily and with no prior discussion, let alone consultation - ensured that the protests were not simply targeted at the economic measures themselves. They were also an indictment of the form of authoritarian government itself (Tripp, 2013: 151).

There were a number of factors that culminated to encourage Tunisians to publicly challenge the status quo, including: the adoption of neoliberal social and economic policies (which eliminated the social safety net, threatened employment and increased state corruption); demography (60 per cent of the Arab world was under age 30); increasing levels of education (which politicized youth and increased their inclination to question the government); inflation between 5 and 10 per cent; a fading in remembrance and ignorance of youth with the anti-colonial struggle; and, changes in the regional and international order forced Tunisia out of the insulated environment established by the regime (Alexander, 2010: 45-46; Gelvin, 2013: 243-6; Willis, 2012: 78-9).

These protests have been labeled ‘bread riots’, which is a reductionist label that “downgrades the socio-ideological substance of civic mass action - and its many histories - to a story about mere subsistence” (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 15). Sadiki describes the Arabic term ‘democracy of bread’ as “a tacit pact between ruler and ruled...the obligation to deploy all resources to secure a good living standard for all citizens” (2009: 211). This reciprocal relationship with government represents a holistic view of governance in which the “material and spiritual qualities intertwine: the vote and the bread are not interchangeable; they are essential ‘goods’ for fulfilling political, economic, social, and religious obligations” (Sadiki, 2009: 211). This ‘bread’ includes the provision of publicly subsidized services - education, health care, and a state commitment to secure employment, which is exchanged through a ‘democratic bargain’ with citizens, who in turn offer their political deference. For Arab activists, bread represented freedom and the protests signified the end of the moral economy (Sadiki, 2012a). As a result of changing political factors in the 1970-1980s, social and economic conditions deteriorated dramatically and massive bread riots ensued, a phenomenon that represented not only the lack of material well-being of the people, but a protest against “social inequality, corruption, nepotism, authoritarianism, and regime incompetence... [and] a cry for justice, equality of opportunity, and emancipation from poverty and despair” (Sadiki, 2009: 215-6).

In 1977, student and worker strikes against the erosion of living standards and workers’ rights became increasingly prevalent, and a worker strike in October escalated into a three-day uprising. On January 26, 1978, the UGTT held the country’s first general strike since independence in a protest not just against state policies but a



broader challenge to Bourguiba and the nationalist party (Hazbun, 1994). Called 'Black Thursday', thousands took to the streets and manifestations led to violent clashes, marking the first time that Tunisian security forces fired on their own citizens, leaving 200 dead and 1000 wounded (Abadi, 2013: 500; Alexander, 2010: 47; Clancy-Smith, 2013: 14; Tripp, 2013: 150-1). The UGTT leadership was put on trial for its role in the protests and officials replaced by a more compliant set of party members (Hazbun, 1994). Bread riots erupted once again in 1984 after the government reduced its spending on subsidies in compliance with IMF and World Bank recommendations, effectively doubling the prices of basic consumer goods. Bourguiba sent in both the police and military forces to launch a violent attack, and up to 150 people died. Yet "in a now-familiar pattern, after some days of demonstrations, repression and protest, the president announced the repeal of all price rises, and within a week or so, the protests had ended" (Tripp, 2013: 151).

After the arrest of Ghannouchi in 1987, "MTI activists organized daily, rolling demonstrations. Police would arrive at one location and the protest suddenly would break out somewhere else in the city" (Alexander, 2010: 52). Early 2008 saw significant outbreaks in "the neglected south and interior of Tunisia, where the lack of jobs and opportunities together with the nepotism and indifference to local problems of the local elites and administrations" (Willis, 2012: 243). The public faced increasing economic desperation, while the peaceful avenues to address this - parliament, the press, and the judiciary - were progressively closed off. With few alternatives, Tunisia became dubbed the 'hunger strike' capital of the world (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 24; Rutherford, 2013: 39).

## 2.8. Status Quo

Despite the social turmoil and the common resentment towards the authoritarianism and corruption of Ben Ali, the majority of Tunisians

credit him with giving Tunisia a degree of stability, efficiency, and prosperity that makes it the envy of the region. When they consider the region as a whole, they conclude that their quality of life is higher than their neighbors' and the severity of their authoritarianism is no worse. No opposition party can offer a credible alternative that would improve on the status quo, so many Tunisians have given up on politics (Alexander, 2010: 67).

By presenting themselves as the only alternative to chaos and the masterminds of a degree of security and prosperity, Bourguiba and Ben Ali understood that Tunisia's relative quality of life is underpinned by domestic stability. Both presidents used the elaborate systems of the bureaucratic state to enforce conformity (Tripp, 2013: 312), and the public learned "how to behave in a ritualized context so as to maintain or even improve their social status without thereby accepting or rejecting the rules of the political game" (Hibou, 2011: xvii).

While the proportion under the poverty line shrunk three-fold to just four per cent since the 1980s (*Economist*, 2004), the average Tunisian was too immersed in the quest for livelihood to think politics (Sadiki, 2012b). Measuring the benefits of the status quo higher than the collective costs that a transition would require them to pay, citizens became deeply apolitical and apathetic as tenuous members of the middle class were loath to rock the boat (Alexander, 2010: 123). When confronted with the choice between the RCD and a likely no less corrupt opposition, "most Tunisians make no choice at all. This large-scale abstention from politics makes it very difficult for opposition organizations to muster the following they need in order for reforms that give them a meaningful chance of winning" (Alexander, 2010: 120-1).

Strongly favoring the status quo, the government set the content and pace of reform, which has been pragmatic and deliberate, emphasizing rationalism, negotiation and rule-making and shunning violence and revolutionary change. Since the struggle for independence, the public has demanded reform, not revolution, and, as such, “Tunisia’s basic political and economic order has never experienced a violent or revolutionary transformation that redistributed political and economic power in a fundamental way” (Alexander, 2010: 111). Resilience and continuity became fundamental characteristics of the political structures across the Arab region, but much lay concealed beneath the facade of prescribed consensus and fatalistic populations.

## **2.9. Conclusion**

It is interesting in hindsight to review the predictions of Alexander: “Since the early 1990s, it has been common to hear Tunisians and others suggest that change will become more likely if the economy deteriorates...the economy would decline and people would become less willing to tolerate Ben Ali’s authoritarianism and more willing to support opposition movements” (2010: 121-2). Though accurate on this point, Alexander also states that “If Tunisians have never changed president or ruling party through violence, neither have they changed them through ballot box. They are not likely to do so any time soon” (Alexander, 2010: 36). Even political theorists had no idea that unrest lurked just under the surface, ready to emerge less than a year later.

## **Chapter 3: The Uprising**

“A certain prince of our own time, whom it is just as well not to name, preaches nothing but peace and mutual trust, yet he is the determined enemy of both; and if on several different occasions had he observed either, he would have lost both his reputation and this throne.”

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

“All revolutions are impossible, until they become inevitable.”

Leon Trotsky

### **3.1. Introduction**

Though the Arab Spring protests took the world by surprise, their emergence was not entirely spontaneous. Bock explains the importance of underlying conditions, or grievances,<sup>8</sup> in laying the foundation upon which a conflict can be built. In order to result in confrontation, “that foundation is usually combined with some sort of political action that fosters discontent and channels that discontent to bring about either violent or nonviolent change” (2012: 24). This political action is called a ‘precipitating event’, which is a catalytic instance that has significant symbolic potency, and is “viewed as the tip of the iceberg of a larger threat” (Bock, 2012: 19). Previously in Tunisia, this has been a change in economic policy, such as a removal of a subsidy, exacerbating the underlying conditions of poverty and exclusion.

In 2010, however, the precipitating event was the self-immolation of 26-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi. From Sidi Bouzid, a southern city with a 30 per cent unemployment rate (Gelvin, 2013: 238), Bouazizi was “a serious man who had one dream - to work, buy a car and build a house” (Cornwell, 2011). As the story goes, Bouazizi was a fruit

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<sup>8</sup> “A grievance is when those of an in-group perceive that they are victims of discrimination, prejudice, and injustice and feel collective frustration and anger toward those of an out-group who are seen to be sustaining these inequitable conditions by their hold on power or are simply seen as benefiting from that inequity” (Bock, 2012: 24).

vendor constantly facing harassment from the local police because he did not have the money to purchase a license or pay the requisite bribe. On December 17, a confrontation with a female police officer, Faïda Hamdi, resulted in the confiscation of his cart and scales. When he begged for their return, Hamdi slapped Bouazizi in the face, the ultimate insult in a patriarchal Arab community. When he was dismissed as he tried to retrieve his items from the local police station, Bouazizi went to governor's office and set himself alight. Within hours, 4000 shocked and empathetic people had gathered in protest, as "Bouazizi's death became a potent symbol of an ordinary individual who struggled to make a living under President Ben Ali's corrupt regime" (Day, 2011a). As images and video of Bouazizi's self-immolation - and the violent police repression of the Sidi Bouzid uprising - spread throughout the country, so too did the mass demonstrations and calls for political change.

Bouazizi's death was not the first incident of political suicide in Tunisia; the magnitude of socioeconomic depravity created a pervasive sense of hopelessness and fostered a "culture of suicide" (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 16). A 1998 study showed that 15.1 per cent of burn admissions to a major hospital in Tunis were "suicide by fire," and there were at least two other cases of self-immolated in southern Tunisian cities earlier in 2010 (King, 2011a). Gandhi speaks to the use of self-immolation "in order to rouse local consciousness or conscience" (2002: 259), yet these other acts of desperation failed to produce comparable results.

So why did Bouazizi's hopelessness and injustice become the "slap heard round the world?" Bock refers to fundamental indicators as 'oily rags' and precipitating events as a 'spark'; the oilier the rags, the more likely a single spark is to produce an explosive

situation (2012: 39). Since 2008, grievances had been worsening, frustration and resentment had been intensifying and protest movements had been developing in cities such as Gafsa, Kasserine and Benguerdane. Mass acts of resistance do not occur out of nowhere, but develop from the synthesis of long-simmering resentments and a random catalytic event that “resonates because the ground has been prepared through stories, poems, songs and a wide array of local acts of defiance and resistance, unseen by the authorities and by outside observers” (Tripp, 2013: 5). Hibou explains the contingency of the events:

If Ben Ali’s departure was made possible by protests occurring in Sidi Bouzid (and not by those in Gafsa or Benguerdane), this was simultaneously because there was an effect of accumulated bitterness and frustration, because certain gestures appeared indecent (such as the visit paid by Ben Ali to the sick bed of Mohamed Bouazizi) and because police violence at peaceful demonstrations and even at funeral processions for the victims of the repression was fierce...The revolt that was transformed into a political change was a perfect example of the ‘singular randomness of events’: the crack in the wall that all these untimely gestures and actions opened up was less the result of a decision properly speaking - police repression - than of the unexpected and non-programmed action of human beings, of the life of conflicts and the reversal of relations of force, of the unforeseen, of the indefinite nature of things, of the ‘insolence’ of daily life, and of the ambiguity of words and deeds (2011: xvi).

Unlike the recurrent bread riots of the past, the protests following Bouazizi’s suicide had both critical mass (as had been seen before) *and* a tipping point of socioeconomic exasperation (Sadiki, 2012a). Explained one Tunisian, “there were very bad conditions, very high rate of unemployment, a lot of poverty, lack of development in many regions - especially in Sidi Bouzid and the interior regions. So, this situation was explosive...and it exploded” (Sioud, 2012).

### **3.2. Merriman's Principles**

Further, unlike the protests of the past, the 2011 uprising achieved its goal in removing an entrenched dictator from power. Applying Merriman's civil resistance framework, the three indicators - unity, strategic planning, and nonviolent commitment - explain why this movement was successful where those of the past had failed.

#### **3.2.1. Unity**

Tunisia is a country of relative homogeneity. Self-identifying as a part of the Arab nation, Tunisians, for the most part, share a common religion, culture, language, food, clothes, song and heritage (Bouzakoura, 2012; Kerkeni, 2012; Man on street, 2012b; Sioud, 2012). Though there is some diversity among the people, there is also tolerance; women wearing the hijab and those wearing miniskirts can sit together at a café (Man on street, 2012b). This *égalité* (equality) was instrumental in establishing the necessary unity and mobilization of diverse groups of people in the 2011 uprising. Despite their varied backgrounds and membership in social strata, Tunisians rallied together against “dismal prospects of unemployment and marginalization” (Tripp, 2013: 93). Through communal acts of solidarity, Tunisians “sustained by equality as protesters shed secondary identities and blended into a unique display of one-ness as re-imagined free and equal people” (Sadiki, 2013a). According to one Tunisian, this unity created an “epic moment” where all Tunisians felt ownership of the country; to participate “was a dream. All of us...c'était beau. C'était très très bien” (Bouzakoura, 2012).

The Tunisian population is 98 per cent Muslim (Central Intelligence Agency, August 20 2013), yet Islam played no role in the demonstrations that swept the country. Though many were pious Muslims or devout believers, participants “were incensed,

desperate, disgusted, revolted, ashamed, or even furious, but they were not religiously motivated” (Filiu, 2011: 22). Rather than the Muslim Brotherhood slogan ‘Islam is the solution’, the streets were filled instead with chants of ‘Tunisia is the solution’ (Filiu, 2011: 23). In part, the lack of Islamic sentiment was as a result of decades of exhaustive religious repression, but despite the cruelty to which Tunisians had been subjected, the resistance movement against Ben Ali arose “not because he betrayed Islam and its values, but because he shamed the nation and humiliated its citizens” (Filiu, 2011: 24). In the movement’s favor, the lack of Islamic dimension in the protests unwittingly eliminated any religious division or animosity, both domestically and internationally. Having paid the price of the ‘divide and rule’ tactics of the past regimes, the Tunisian civil resistance movement was characterized by inclusive diversity.

The solidarity, egalitarianism, and sheer mass of the protests strengthened the morale of the protestors (Jenayak, 2012; Sharp: 2005: 387). Under a dictatorship, the population often

becomes weak, lacks self-confidence, and is incapable of resistance. People are often too frightened to share their hatred of the dictatorship and their hunger for freedom even with family and friends. People are often too terrified to think seriously of public resistance. In any case, what would be the use? Instead, they face suffering without purpose and a future without hope (Sharp, 2012: 5).

In these circumstances, it is pivotal not to necessarily to change the hearts of the oppressors, but change the hearts of the oppressed, who must refuse to passively submit to the dictator by withdrawing their cooperation and obedience (Sharp, 2012: 27). Having witnessed the uprisings of the past, which resulted in arrest, torture or death of participants, Tunisians had to be willing to take on risks and feel confidence in the effectiveness of the movement (Rutherford, 2013: 40).



This confidence grows from courage, which only develops as a result of unified mobilization. This casting off of or controlling fear, according to Sharp, is a prerequisite for civil resistance, as cowardice and nonviolent struggle do not mix. In order to experience freedom, “it is necessary to behave like free people” (2005: 369), thus destroying the power dictators wield over the population through threats and violence. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first post-colonial Prime Minister of India, and the united mass of Indian protestors claimed “a sense of freedom and a pride in that freedom. The old feeling of oppression and frustration was completely gone...What did we care for the consequences? Prison? We looked forward to it; that would help our cause still further” (Sharp, 2005: 370). Gandhi wrote that to offer Satyagraha, participants must believe themselves strong, creating a virtuous cycle of exponentially gaining strength and thereby becoming more effective (2002: 78). Impoverished Tunisian youth in the south, who had been “living afraid” (Kerkeni, 2012), were the first to demonstrate courage publicly, as they felt they had nothing to lose (Jenayak, 2012). This set an example for the rest of the country, as more and more people for whom fear had been a lifelong companion were able to bravely unite together. The culmination of the nation-wide “evaporation of fear” (Tripp, 2013: 5-6) was the call to UGTT call for a general strike on January 14, where masses rallied in Tunis and throughout the rest of the country; that same day Ben Ali fled (IUF, 2011; Solidarity Centre, 2011).

### **3.2.2. Unity and the UGTT**

According to Sharp, the disintegration of dictatorships can not be achieved by isolated individuals, who may be capable of witnessing or participating but have minimal impact. Civil resistance requires “courageous *mass* application of political defiance by

the population and its institutions” (2012: 34). It is through the mobilization of mass action through organizations, or “pillars of support,” where power operates and can be mobilized. These pillars of support are able to concentrate and magnify the power of the individuals who work within or alongside them (Merriman, 2009: 21). The UGTT was able “to mobilize and politically induct the protesters into how to protest peacefully” (Glissa, 2012). Under the umbrella of the UGTT, all manner of revolutionary forces, figures and politicians against the regime could gather, regardless of their political or religious affiliation (Bouzakoura, 2012).

Upon the self-immolation of Bouazizi, the protests began in the south of Tunisia on December 17, but it wasn’t until December 25 that the uprising spread north to the capital Tunis. This delay essentially created two phases within the uprising, and a division between the protest demands of the rural poor and the urban elite. Initially, the goals of the marginalized hinterland were economic: employment, increased wages, decreased inflation (Mabrouk, 2012). Popular slogans such as “I am life, I am death” - suggesting that under the current economic conditions the two were indistinguishable - convey the desperation and deprivation of the impoverished (Mabrouk, 2012). The protests and complaints in the south resonated with the residents of the north, causing

flashes of recognition elsewhere, making people realize that they are experiencing a similar kind of domination. The familiarity of the predicament and the feeling of common cause can create the organizational and imaginative underpinnings of resistance...it is when people realize not only that they suffer a common predicament but also that they can have an impact by acting together that a powerful moment of open collective resistance can be created (Tripp, 2013: 15).

This concept has been termed “shared awareness,” which is “the ability of many different people and groups to understand a situation, and to understand who else has

the same understanding” (Bock, 2012: 239). The demands for inclusion, dignity and respect were universal among a generation subjected to police violence, media censorship, corruption, and inequality on a daily basis, regardless of region or social status (Hibou, 2011: xvi).

The subsequent engagement of the coastal cities added a political dimension to the protests (Sioud, 2012). This shift caused a break from the bread riots of the past in that it sought not just a change of policy, but a change in regime (Glissa, 2012). Rather than simply demands for *khobza* (bread), symbolic chants were for “Bread and water and no Ben Ali” (Sioud, 2012). The collaboration (or, arguably, appropriation)<sup>9</sup> of educated intellectuals and human rights advocates - individuals who have traditionally represented Tunisia’s opposition - contributed their valuable experience “building organizations, formulating a message, and navigating Tunisia’s authoritative labyrinth” (Alexander, 2010: 122-3). Slogans of the protest became more strongly and eloquently phrased, using first term Arabic verbs which signified not a request, but an order (Bouzakoura, 2012; Sioud, 2012). The popular use of the French word “*Dégage!*” (Go!) - a foreign word not known or pronounceable by many in the south -

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<sup>9</sup> Said one Tunisian, “If you said “bread and water and no Ben Ali,” then you change totally from the beginning of the revolt to the event in the end. Because at the beginning, I want a job. I want a job, I want my dignity, I want I want I want. And then if you said, “bread and water and I don’t need Ben Ali,” this means you don’t even need a job. It’s that Ben Ali go away, and the job maybe I will wait for it...if I wanted to talk about someone who is very poor, I say, this guy is only living by bread and water. It means that’s the lowest standard of living you can have in Tunisia. Only bread and water. Even now, some people, some family in Kasserine, they are living by bread and water only. That’s the poorest that you can have. It means, bread and water and no Ben Ali, it means I want the poorest life, only that Ben Ali’s going. Okay, so Ben Ali left, you said you want the poorest life. Now you have the poorest life, and those people who are living the poorest life, they go to the street again, they want to get money. So you see, I feel that this slogan “Bread and water and no Ben Ali” is not a popular one, it’s not coming from the people. It’s coming from the intellectual to show that democracy is better...I remember one philosopher said, you can’t think with empty belly, or stomach. You can’t. Intellectuals, they have money, that’s why they can think and they can say “bread and water and no Ben Ali.” But people who are living in this, really living in this situation, it’s really hard for them” (Zaghdoudi, 2012).

illustrates the shift in representation of the movement (Zaghdoudi, 2012). It is the coalition of these two populations that made substantive change possible (even inevitable); one Tunisian explained that the south was like the engine, and the elites were the oil (Glissa and Agrebi, 2012; Jenayak, 2012; Zaghdoudi, 2012).

It is through the unification of the UGTT that the union was able to define the terms of protest and frame the issues. Merriman states that

different audiences have different aspirations, and therefore successful nonviolent movements work to develop and communicate a vision that is inclusive of the aspirations of different groups in society. Movements that are able to interweave these aspirations into an inclusive, unifying vision are more likely to achieve mass participation and to undermine the loyalties of its opponent's supporters. The more inclusive a movement's vision is, the more people it can attract, and the more likely those people are to participate and take action on the movement's behalf (2009: 24).

The UGTT created not only an egalitarian, democratic setting within which people could participate, but also framed the demands of the protest. Having struggled as an organization under the regime's oppression similar to Tunisian individuals, the UGTT sought to free itself and the country as a whole from the systems that denied them agency, autonomy, and dignity (Tripp, 2013: 17). Under the guidance of the UGTT, the two distinct groups became unified in their efforts to produce both a more accountable government and a more equitable economic order (Tripp, 2013: 136).

Yet there was an absence of consensus within the institution of the UGTT, whose "leadership is indisputably integrated into the process of disciplinary normalization, but whose base does not seem so docile and easy to control," creating "an unstable cohabitation between a neutralized leadership and an uncontrolled base" (Hibou, 2011: 127). The agenda of neoliberalism and privatization in the 1990s eroded the rationale for corporatism, and expanded the schism between union leaders and members. As

workers felt their rights encroached and their work conditions deteriorate, the complicit union leadership became themselves the target of a revival in organized collective protest (Tripp, 2013: 137). Sharp notes that it is common to find that

Power relationships similar to those in political societies with state structures exist in other hierarchical institutions as well, which also derive their power from the cooperation of many persons and groups. Consequently various forms of dissent, noncooperation and disobedience may have important roles to play when members of such institutions have grievances against the people who direct or control those institutions (2005: 30).

The leadership and former secretary general of the UGTT were widely known to be “not clean,” acting as corrupt servants and allies of Ben Ali (Mabrouk, 2012). As a result, the important role of the UGTT in the 2011 uprising was not on the part of the leadership, but as a result of the authentic “grassroots” support and engagement of the union members (Bouzakoura, 2012).

Despite the reluctance of the leadership to embark on action and the prior oppression of the union by the regime, the UGTT structure and web of trade unions created diverse power centers which, when mobilized, represented a formidable and diverse opposition (King, 2011a). Merriman states that “it is the people in a society who are the agents of change and that structural change is created from the ground up. They are not waiting for a person to lead them, because they understand that most government and corporate leaders will not take the lead to do what is right” (2008: 242). In this corrupt organization, many union leaders opted for positions at the lowest echelon of the UGTT hierarchy in order to remain active and less conspicuous to the regime and bureaucracy (Bouzakoura, 2012). It is through this genuine grassroots mobilization that the UGTT produced solidarity, meaning and emotion among Tunisians, regardless of union membership (Glissa and Agrebi, 2012).

### **3.2.3. Strategic Planning**

Merriman states that “good decisions are rarely made spontaneously,” and successful civil resistance is not accomplished through chance or ambition (Civil Resistance: 15). In order to accomplish its ends, civil resistance requires “a strategic plan that is designed to move from the present - in which the goal is not achieved - to the future - in which it is achieved” (Sharp: 2005: 366). Sound strategic planning and implementation allowed protesters to navigate the complexities of multiple levels of political, civic and religious leadership, utilize technology to communicate and mobilize, anticipate potential challenges and reactions, and stifle activists whose violence threatened the movement (Bock, 2012: xv).

Strategic nonviolence involves adaptation to new tactics that defy government restriction in an effort to keep the opponent off balance (Merriman, 2009: 28). With innovation and ingenuity, the use of technology has continually afforded new capabilities and circumstances to civil resistance movements. In the 1970s, the xerox machine and cassette were the technological mediums of protest (Sadiki, 2012a). The crux of power of the authoritarian state - “centralization, control, surveillance, censorship - goes against the grain of information technology and the age of information and of democracy” (Sadiki, 2009: 249). Cyberspace, and the resulting ‘cyber-dissonance’, “makes the technologies of protest increasingly difficult to police or prescribe...the historical monopoly of information by regimes is being broken due to the empowerment of non-state users of the new technologies” (Sadiki, 2009: 240-1). In an effort to evade police repression, the Internet became a weapon of the weak (Mabrouk, 2012) and a

“resource that many have acquired and deployed to fight back against the systems that seek to silence them” (Sadiki, 2009: 247).

Though virtual information evaded and eroded the authoritarian state, online censorship was standard in Tunisia. In 2008, the government imposed a news blackout following riots in Gafsa, and Facebook was banned for ten days after information critical of the regime was circulated (Filiu, 2011: 46, 49). Following the politicization of social networking sites in late 2010 under the rallying hashtag *Sidibouزيد*, Facebook, Twitter and, in some areas, the Internet as a whole were shut off for days, and hundreds of personal pages and websites shut down. Cyber-activists responded in kind, and on January 3, 2011 launched “Operation Tunisia”, hacking and defacing all government websites. On January 6, the regime retaliated by arresting several bloggers and applying heavy repression from security forces in the defiant city of Kasserine. While this resulted in dozens of casualties, the effort to quell the protest backfired, as “images of state violence, disseminated through the Internet, exacerbated the protest as far as Tunis and its suburbs” (Filiu, 2011: 50).

Called the ‘Facebook Revolution’, the role of the Internet in the Arab Spring uprisings was extensive, irrefutable and contentious. The use of new technologies has made accessible a level of collaboration and coordination never before possible, and afforded alternative communication and strategizing which benefited the movement in several ways. Cyberspace has produced an egalitarian environment where diverse individuals can identify with one another, connecting people through “solidarities that were inconceivable in the past because of distances and borders” (Sadiki, 2009: 246). The emergence of the Internet in the Arab region has opened new doors and created

new opportunities for dissidents to “seek meaning, expression and citizenship in ‘virtual reality’” (Sadiki, 2009: 244). It is through this virtual identity and ‘citizenship’ that Arab youth gained exposure to the need for freedom of speech, association and the press, in addition to the individual freedoms denied them. Cybercafés became not only venues for online activities, but collective meeting places (Filiu, 2011: 45) as “the new age of information technology both informed Arab youth of the ills of society and gave them tools with which to address those ills” (Deeb, 2013: 71).

The Internet spread the message of the uprising as more people were made visually aware of the level of violence of which the regime was capable (Jenayak, 2012). Electronic media transformed atomized subjects into collective actors through crowdsourcing - the process of compiling information through text messages, pictures, video feeds and other virtual information to provide an overall understanding of an unfolding situation (Bock, 2012: 122). The photos of Bouazizi alight or a video of a child shot by police in Kasserine immediately went viral and served as a catalyst to spread the burgeoning insurgency of the south (Mabrouk, 2012). In addition to disseminating images and videos uploaded by ordinary Tunisians, the Internet created the solitary space for mass distribution of hip hop and rap music. The impact and popularity of rappers such as Tunisian El Général was acknowledged but underestimated by security forces, who banned him from making CDs or performing concerts. In December 2010, El Général recorded and posted his song “Rais Lebled” on YouTube (El Général, 2010), receiving thousands of downloads and becoming the anthem of the Tunisian uprising:

Mister President  
Your people are dead  
So many eat from garbage  
Look at the country



So much misery and no place to sleep  
I am speaking on behalf of the people  
Who are suffering under your boot  
(Filiu, 2011: 440)

As his popularity instantly grew, El Général was under watch by the security forces, and was arrested on December 24. As increased demonstrations called for his release, after three days of interrogation, the rapper was set free (Walt, 2011).

The immediate and global spread of information through the Internet dispersed communication beyond the Tunisian border and citizens. Live streaming visual testimony informed the world of both the magnitude of popular dissent and the brutal repression of the regime. The Internet creates a medium of “self-representation” with which “these movements can communicate with the world directly, giving their own side of the story of their stand-off with their regimes” (Sadiki, 2009: 248). Knowing that his orders and actions were being broadcast and scrutinized by “hundreds of millions of electronic eyes and ears” (Bock, 2012: 105) created a level of accountability and political constraint that forced Ben Ali to lessen the prerogative of the security services and to offer political concessions to pacify the masses. His efforts - such as his December 28 hospital visit to Bouazizi and his January 13 announcement that he would not run in the 2014 elections - were met with hope from the minority of optimists and contempt from the formidable majority (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 17; Kerkeni, 2012).

It would be inaccurate to assert that the social media was the central force behind the Arab Spring movements. Access to the Internet in the Arab world is neither universal or equitable. Mobile phones were originally used as status symbols in the region, and even in 2011, just 566 of every 1,000 Tunisians were mobile phone users, compared to a rate of 785 in OECD countries (Filiu, 2011: 45). Initially, only those in the

bourgeois class with the means to pay used social networking sites (Sadiki, 2012b), and while 60 million users are connected to the Internet in Arabic (Filiu, 2011: 34), just one in three Tunisians use the Internet (King, 2011a). Yet the Western media have overemphasized the role of social networks in the Arab Spring, as it was both trendy and easier to document than less virtual, more subversive forms of protest (Filiu, 2011: 56). Though it is beneficial, technology itself does not cause political change and is most effective when “combined with sophisticated strategy and effective organizing” (Bock, 2012: xiii). While the Internet was neither the catalyst nor the sole organizational framework of the protests, social networks contributed to establishing a “community feeling of shared grief and aspiration...exposing the lies and crimes of the ruling regime...[and] helped to bring down the wall of fear” (Filiu, 2011: 56). Rather than establish a ‘Revolution 2.0’, the Internet has instead added an innovative means to generate organization to the civil resistance toolbox.

#### **3.2.4. Strategic Planning and the UGTT**

Much like the Internet, the UGTT did not start the uprising, but it served as the only organizational force to support the movement. The influence of the UGTT as a mobilizing body in an otherwise leaderless movement is based on the union’s active political role in Tunisia. For decades, the UGTT has been the sole counterweight to the ubiquitous RCD presidential party. Ben Ali understood that the UGTT represented a potential source of political opposition, but was under the impression that he had effectively neutralized the threat (Willis, 2012: 243).

With the uprising’s spontaneous emergence and lacking an official opposition to manage the resistance movement, coordination emerged from the UGTT, a local and

dispersed organization already mobilized for action (Benin, 2011: 26; Tripp, 2013: 91). After the violent uprisings in the southern districts in 2008, regional UGTT leadership became increasingly involved in the recurring tensions and willingly lent its full support to the initial protests in late December 2011 (Filiu, 2011: 68). Local chapters “successfully organized a series of rolling and expanding strikes that helped push the protests out of the interior to the towns and cities of the north and the coast” (Willis, 2012: 243). While strikes were designated on specific dates, people joined mass protests when they were not scheduled to strike. Ben Ali’s mandated school closure was an effort to prevent students from protesting, but instead relieved students of the responsibility of academic work and enabled them to become more involved in the movement (Ihlouka, 2012).

Though the sheer mass of public support lent the movement credibility, demonstrators “rarely produce new governments themselves. They need *organizations*” (Alexander, 2010: 117). Under Ben Ali’s hegemonic rule, the UGTT served as “the first organization in Tunisia, the oldest organization in Tunisia...the *only* organization” (Glissa and Agrebi, 2012). Through its leadership and organization, and as a result of its prior knowledge and experience with effective protesting, the UGTT defined the terms of protests, developed a grand strategy for the civil resistance and oversaw its implementation. In the early stages of protest, many people were afraid to participate, but courage was acquired through the success of the UGTT in gathering people, and confidence in the size, history, and political power of the UGTT in the achievement of the movement’s goals (Glissa and Agrebi, 2012; Jenayak, 2012). The UGTT was able to create a safe and supportive physical and social environment for manifestations

(Zaghdoudi, 2012), and chose when to attack to minimize risk and sacrifice (Mabrouk, 2012). Across the country, UGTT headquarters provided a location for people to mobilize and gather for marches and demonstrations (Bouzakoura, 2012; Jenayak, 2012). Before the protests, some students had only heard of the UGTT but did not know who they were; after their role in the movement, however, every Tunisian now knows who they are and trusts them and their work (Brahim, 2012; Glissa and Agrebi, 2012; Jenayak, 2012; Kerkeni, 2012).

### **3.2.5. Nonviolent Commitment**

Though dictators always have superiority in the means of violence, it is imperative for civil resistance participants to remain steadfastly committed to nonviolence. Sharp states that “nonviolent discipline is a key to success and must be maintained despite provocations and brutalities by the dictators and their agents” (2012: 49). It is through the use of democratic, peaceful, and participatory means of protest that participants demonstrate the type of society for which they strive (Bouzakoura, 2012). The greater the nonviolent adherence of the participants, the greater the chance of movement success and the lesser the likelihood of the post-revolutionary state descending into chaos or allowing a rise of a new authoritarian leader (Sharp, 2012: 423). By confronting the state violence with peaceful means, “the Arab uprising offers a unique way to get out of the patriarchal mould, its frustrating fatalism and its vendetta-style cycles, that have plagued local politics” (Filiu, 2011: 59). It is through asymmetrical conflict, with the combatants fighting by contrasting means, that “a unified, well-planned, and disciplined movement holds the upper hand” (O’Neil, 2011) and a new balance of power is created.

‘Civilian jihad’ is a term coined by Iraqi author Khalid Kishtainy, and is “a form of political struggle whose ‘weapons’ include boycotts, strikes, protests, sit-downs, humor, and other acts of civil disobedience and nonviolent defiance” (Stephan, 2009: 1). The use of this method of protest is a dramatic departure from the armed conflicts and tensions that have hitherto marred the region, and the multifaceted rationale is worth brief analysis. Following independence, Bourguiba underwent a thorough disarmament campaign, revoking all weapons used against colonial forces. Since then, the only arms in Tunisia were in the army, and the only weapons available to the masses were sticks and knives, creating a powerful deterrent for waging violent conflict (Ihlouka, 2012; Kerkeni, 2012; Mabrouk, 2012).

The size and function of the Tunisian military was an important component in the implementation of nonviolent resistance. According to civil resistance theory, one of the most important pillars of support for an opponent is the military; as long as they remain supportive of the dictatorship and willing to brutally crush dissent, it is near impossible for revolutionary forces to achieve their objectives (Sharp, 2012: 101). Yet in countries where the military was made up of the dominant ethnic group - such as Tunisia and Egypt - the military could anticipate that they would remain in power after a regime change, and the incentive to support the current regime until the bitter end was far lower (Haas and Lesch, 2013: 4). Further, such soldiers, regardless of their weapons and orders, were human beings and - more importantly - Tunisians, “men of the country,” who were loyal to Tunisia and sympathetic to the revolutionary cause (Mabrouk, 2012). Mouldi Jendoubi, the second-ranking leader of the UGTT, had confidence that, just as

Ben Ali did not acquire power through a military coup, the military would remain “from the people and for the people” (Kirkpatrick, 2011).

Though the armed forces were kept intentionally small by both Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the backing of the 35,000-strong military was a defining component in the movement (Filiu, 2011: 21). It was the loyalty shift of General Rashid Ammar, head of the Tunisian army, that dramatically tipped the balance when he took the side of the people and refused to follow Ben Ali’s January 9 orders to shoot the protesters (Deeb, 2013: 71). By refusing to fire on their fellow citizens, the military essentially removed all barriers between the president and the hundreds of thousands of protesters in the streets (Tripp, 2013: 91).

Another contributing factor to the nonviolence of the resistance was the Tunisian people themselves, who self-identify as peaceful and pacifistic (Kerkeni, 2012; Man on street, 2012a; Zaghdoudi, 2012). Despite the Western portrayal of Arabs as “violent fundamentalist fanatics”, the 2011 civil resistance movement defies this stereotype and conveys that “these are peaceful people, just like any other, with the same needs, aspirations, fears and desire for freedom and democracy; people that need and long to have a dignified life” (de la Rubia, 2011). During the protests in Syria, Yemen and Egypt, the people shouted “*Silmiyya!*” (Peaceful!), but this “slogan was never chanted here in Tunisia because it wasn’t an option to be any other thing than nonviolent. It wasn’t an option actually, everyone believed it should be like that. It was coming from the street, from the people themselves” (Bouzakoura, 2012). Rather than a choice, nonviolence is a Tunisian norm,<sup>10</sup> and a deep source of pride for Tunisian people (Bouzakoura, 2012)

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<sup>10</sup> “Norms are the beliefs, attitudes and values that make up the culture of a community and define the range of behavior that is normally acceptable” (Bock, 2012: 86).

In part this is as a result of the education system mentioned in chapter 2, which ingrained tolerance and compliance from a young age. But largely this is the strong positive influence of Islam, the very word of which is derived from the Arabic word *silm*, which means “reconciliation, peace, submission and deliverance” (Pal, 2011: 14). Pal explains how the five pillars of Islam uniquely prepare Muslims for nonviolent action:

First, Muslims are willing to disobey injustice since they obey only Allah. Second, Muslims are courageous since they fear only Allah. Third, Muslims possess enormous self-discipline because of their rituals like Ramadan. This can come in very handy in nonviolent protests. Fourth, the concept of a Muslim community is very strong (‘Hold fast all together by the rope which God stretches out for you and be not divided among yourselves,’ says the Qur’an 3:103). This can enable them to resist oppression together. And, fifth, Islam is action oriented, which can be channeled into nonviolent action (2011: 16-17).

Islamic values such as social justice and self-sacrifice, coupled with moderation and sober judgement that comes from abstaining from alcohol, create an ideal social setting for civil resistance (Kerkeni, 2012; Sec Gen of UGTT Sousse, 2012; Zaghdoudi, 2012). Given these contributing factors, the Tunisian regime was “not defeated with weapons or confrontation, but rather with hugs and open hands” (de la Rubia, 2011).

It must be noted, however, that the protests themselves were not entirely peaceful or without sporadic violent incidents. Sharp observes that, in some cases of civil resistance, limited violence is inevitable, as compounded rage may take advantage of a period of volatility to explode into violence, or “certain groups may be unwilling to abandon violent means even though they recognize the important role of nonviolent struggle” (2012: 50) In these circumstances, it is “necessary to separate the violent action as far as possible from the nonviolent action. This should be done in terms of geography, population groups, timing, and issues” (Sharp, 2012: 50). In particular, the city of Kasserine experienced the most violent incidents; one Tunisian attributes this to

the prevalence of hashish and proximity to the Algerian border (Zaghdoudi, 2012). This region boasts a strong value of community “like a reflex,” and an equally strong hatred for the police; therefore a cycle of revenge and retaliation reciprocate the violent actions of the security forces. Yet in some cases, the martyr reparations offered as compensation by the government to the families of victims of the uprising were manipulated, and it is impossible to discern if those injured or killed were as a result of the protests or other incidents that were misreported in order to receive government compensation (Zaghdoudi, 2012).

Despite scattered violence from the protestors, the uprising in Tunisia was, as the Dalai Lama stated, in accordance with the principles and tradition of nonviolence “without a single shot from the demonstrators,” despite provocation and hundreds of ‘martyrs’ (Dhardhowa, 2011). Amnesty International reported that “security forces used disproportionate force to disperse protesters...some protesters were shot from behind, indicating they were fleeing. Others were killed by single shots to the chest or head, suggesting deliberate intent to kill” (MacDonald, 2011). In many areas, the police did not use violence because they were vastly outnumbered, but such was not the case in the early protests in the south. The security force intentionally escalated the conflict and engaged in widespread looting and arson (Filiu, 2011: 62; Sioud, 2012). Ironically, this only served to increase the resolve and solidarity of most of the people, who, assisted by the UGTT’s coordination, banded together in vigilante neighborhood watch committees armed with rocks and sticks (Filiu, 2011: 68, 78; Kerkeni, 2012).



### **3.2.6. Nonviolent Commitment and the UGTT**

Despite the corruption and co-optation of the UGTT leaders by the presidential party, the UGTT was granted authority and leadership by movement participants not solely because it was the only organization in Tunisia. The UGTT was allowed to play a role in the movement because it serves as an organizational example of the type of society the protesters sought to establish (Ajmi, 2011; Magid, 2012). The oldest, largest and most powerful trade union in the MENA region, the UGTT's revolutionary background as a powerful force in the anti-colonial movement and past uprisings lent the union credibility and experience in the struggle for justice. One UGTT member compared the UGTT to a machine: once it is started, it cannot be turned off, and when fixed in her objectives to protect her members, you cannot stop it (Mabrouk, 2012). The UGTT's strength "comes not merely from its active participation in the national struggle, but also from its reformism, which confirms on it a certain flexibility and a remarkable capacity to adapt to variations in historical circumstances" (Hibou, 2011: 226). As a result of its constant efforts to achieve freedom and democracy, and its important role in the 2011 uprising, the UGTT has been praised by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) as a model worth emulating by labor organizations around the world ("ITUC Backs People's Revolution", 2011).

Further, the UGTT espouses the very values which were lacking in Ben Ali's government: democratic elections, transparency, freedom of speech, and equality (Glissa and Agrebi, 2012). One such value reenforced through the local chapters of the UGTT was the commitment to nonviolence, as "no one has ever muttered a word referring to armed resistance against the regime to achieve the rights of the

workers” (Bouzakoura, 2012). Since independence, all the revolutionary activism inside the union has been nonviolent, and its representation compelled the people to abstain from violence (Glissa, 2012). The UGTT, therefore, did not need to issue a formal statement encouraging nonviolence, but did issue statements condemning the violence of the police (Glissa and Agrebi, 2012; Ihlouka, 2012). The physical proximity of the UGTT headquarters in Sousse - just across the street from the police station - led to constant confrontation, given that the UGTT office was the rallying point for local marches and demonstration. The movement’s alignment with and supervision of the UGTT demonstrated that “preventing violence at a local level can make it possible to bring about change at a macrolevel” (Bock, 2012: 124).

## **Chapter 4: Political Changes in Post-Uprising Tunisia**

“And it is worth noting that nothing is harder to manage, more risky in the undertaking, or more doubtful of success than to set up as the introducer of a new order. Such an innovator has as enemies all the people who were doing well under the old order, and only halfhearted defenders in those who hope to profit from the new.”

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

“Taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what people fear most.”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

### **4.1. Introduction**

The Tunisian civil resistance movement was not concluded with the departure of President Ben Ali on January 14, 2011; in reality, this marked just the beginning. For Tunisians who sought fundamental change, the real challenge lay in “trying to maintain the kind of momentum that had initially shaken the status quo, forcing change where none had been offered” (Tripp, 2013: 13). Demanding the complete eradication of the old ruling party, the UGTT led thousands in protests and called for a general strike on January 22, achieving a response much greater and more diverse than that from just union members (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Through the application of political pressure from both the UGTT and the masses in the spirit of civil resistance, the Tunisian public laid siege to Casbah Square and other public sites around the country “to protest any and all attempts by the ancien regime to steal back the revolution” (Usher, 2011: 32). This ‘second revolution’ was able to dissolve the former presidential party, legalize banned parties, amnesty political prisoners, and force the resignation of cabinet members and the Ben Ali-appointed Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi (Coker, 2011).

This transition, which Sadiki described as “smooth, orderly, consensual, legal - rational every step of the way” (2012d), has not been without its challenges. According to Sharp, civil resistance does not ensure that “when a specific dictatorship is ended, all

other problems will also disappear. The fall of one regime does not bring in a utopia. Rather, it opens the way for hard work and long efforts to build more just social, economic, and political relationships and the eradication of other forms of injustices and oppression” (2012: xxii). Since the overthrow of Ben Ali, Tunisia has seen four interim governments, and deadlines for finalizing a draft constitution and holding elections have been repeatedly postponed (Amara, 2013c and 2013e). The ‘nonviolent’ commitment of the movement has deteriorated with attacks on foreign embassies, street battles between hardline Islamists and their opponents, and the assassination of two opposition politicians (Schemm, 2013). Throughout, the UGTT has maintained its dedication to nonviolence and has been instructing people on how to protest peacefully and in an orderly fashion (Ajmi, 2012). In an effort to reduce violence, the UGTT Executive Board urged the transitional government “to provide people with accurate information on the organized looting and the attempts to sow terror among citizens, and on urgent measures to be taken to protect the security of persons and families” (“UGTT Executive Board...”, 2011).

Success in civil resistance must be measured not only by whether the primary objective of the conflict was achieved, but also the process of overcoming future challenges and achieving additional objectives in improving human society, including “creating and enriching the forms of democratic control, political freedom, popular participation, and social and economic justice” (Sharp, 2005: 507). Given the deterioration of the peaceful, popular uprising and the perpetual political challenges that linger in Tunisia, one must ask, “What did the 2011 uprising accomplish?”

## 4.2. Freedom of Speech

The most important - and arguably, sole - improvement that has resulted from the uprising is the disappearance of fear and emergence of freedom of speech; all Tunisians interviewed for this thesis were unanimous on this point. During the protests following the departure of Ben Ali

some Tunisians stopped to enjoy the first fruits of their new government. A crowd gathered outside a bookstore window to gawk at previously banned books, including Islamist tracts and a scathing biography of the former first lady, Leila Trabelsi. Cafe patrons listened, rapt, to news reports of the revolt from the pan-Arab network Al Jazeera, which had been banned from such public sites. Tunisian state television mixed official announcements with talk shows with opposition leaders and angry person-on-the-street interviews (Kirkpatrick, 2011).

After having suffered under decades of oppression and exclusion, public and private spaces have been transformed, and likewise have transformed the way in which people perceive power. This is imperative in “opening up a space that may help to prevent resistance from becoming so like the power with which it is intimately entwined that it ends up reproducing many of its most oppressive features” (Tripp, 2013: 315).

It is in this realm of imagined possibility, free from the exclusions of the old order, that resilience and strength is manifest:

The truly popular - in both senses - nature of the revolution has given a sense of ownership and involvement to the ordinary population that will push it to avoid being fully marginalized again from political life as it was during the previous fifty years. It is this popular mobilization, particularly of the youth, that could be the most important legacy of the Tunisian revolution, and its continued engagement will be the test of the long-term success of the revolution and indeed the longevity of the post-revolutionary political system put in place (Willis, 2012: 338).

The knowledge and skills gained through the struggle establish unequivocal psychological results, creating confidence and empowerment among the formerly oppressed and powerless, and teaching them that if they act together, the weak can

become strong. Successful application of civil resistance “can help citizens become free, organized, disciplined, courageous, and capable of instituting a democracy and of defending it when needed” (Sharp: 2005: 429). While some celebrate that Tunisians are now “undoubtedly reveling in the rosy dawn of a new, liberated nation” (Day, 2011b), many are asking, “What did we do? Because until now we don’t see anything tangible, you know, after the revolution. Just words and words. The only thing that we gained is the freedom of speech. That’s it. We don’t see anything” (Berkeni, 2012).

#### **4.3. Economy**

While the uprising has ushered in a new political realm and open dialogue, economic conditions - the original impetus for the protests - have only worsened. The average Tunisians have paid a high cost as fuel prices have repeatedly risen and income taxes have been raised to fund state subsidies like milk and food, the prices of which have also increased (Amara, 2013d). Episodes of violence have hindered tourism, which accounts for seven per cent of the country’s GDP and 400,000 jobs (Torchia, 2013). Many businesses and hotels that were affiliated with Ben Ali and his family have now closed, their owners fled, leaving thousands jobless (Glissa and Agrebi, 2012). Perpetual strikes have paralyzed economic production, trade and economic growth have declined, and foreign investors are avoiding the unstable region (Schemm, 2013).

The hope of better living standards after the fall of the Ben Ali regime has been shattered for the impoverished hinterland, as the current national unemployment rate of 17 per cent masks regional discrepancies (Amara, 2013b). The current unemployment rate in Tunis is seven per cent, while the south - the region in which the protests began -

has yet to enjoy the fruits of its catalyst role in the Arab Spring, with rates of 30 and 40 per cent in Sidi Bouzid and Gafsa, respectively (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 22; Usher, 2011: 33). Several Tunisians expressed that “the situation before Ben Ali went away wasn’t that bad - I’m talking about the society, not the politics. Maybe there are many unemployed and economic lacks, but the situation now is worse than it was before” (Jenayak, 2012; Berkeni, 2012; Ryan, 2011a). In other words, if the genuine desire was “Bread and water and no Ben Ali,” the movement has accomplished all its goals (Zaghdoudi, 2012); though due to food shortages and erratic water service, even basic subsistence is insecure (Sioud, 2012).

For its part, the UGTT has made strides to increase employment and job creation, striving to be proactive with employment training and communication (Glissa, 2012). The UGTT has also repeatedly called for strike action against business owners in an effort to improve working conditions and increase wages to match inflation rates and alleviate the economic challenges of struggling labourers (Mabrouk, 2012). For some, this represents a new-found sense of entitlement, as workers did not strike for salary increases under Ben Ali’s rule. Though this was in part because of strict repression of strikes, this was in part out of fear, as the majority of factories were owned by members of Ben Ali’s clique. Now, frequent strikes paralyze the already faltering economy. According to a Tunisian graduate student who wrote her Master’s thesis on the subject of the UGTT’s strike action, “the UGTT should know that the public interest is more important than the employee’s rights. I know they have rights. They will gain them, but just for the time now, they have to work. Not to stop the work process. They discourage foreign people to make business in our country” (Kerkeni, 2012). A one day strike in July

2013 cost the economy over \$400 million, caused the stock market to plunge and reduced the dinar to a historical low against the dollar and euro (Amara and Heneghan, 2013; Reuters, 2013). Said then-Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali in May 2012, “We don’t need so-called ‘social negotiations’ or pressure to approve wage increases; at the moment we have other priorities” (IOUs, 2012). One UGTT leader argues, however, that the campaign against the union and blame for the economic situation is the effort of the government to force the UGTT to “knuckle under because it’s the only organized opposition” (Yousfi, 2012).

#### **4.4. Rights**

One of the primary goals of the 2011 uprising was the achievement of freedom, equality and rights. Sharp asserts that freedom won through civil resistance can be lasting if maintained by steadfast people (2012: 123). Freedom, however, “is not something that rulers ‘give’ the population. The degree of freedom within a society is achieved through the interaction between society and government” (Sharp: 2005: 36). While there have been tangible gains in many areas, some of the rights that have been gained have been at the expense of others. For example, Muslims have gained religious freedom from the repression they endured under Ben Ali, while those who are not Islamic feel they are being forced by the newly-appointed Islamic government to conform to religious rules. Said one non-practicing Muslim, “We fought with them to help them express their religion freely, and then they want us to do the same thing, to follow religious rules” (Jenayak, 2012). Principles such as wearing the hijab, observing Ramadan fasting, and regular mosque attendance have been major points of contention, and many Tunisians fear that any policy surrounding these issues may not



only threaten their rights, but also the waning tourism industry on which one in five jobs in Tunisia rely (Usher, 2011: 32).

Cultural relativism creates a paradox of rights within the globalized Arab region. The “classic” view of resistance claims that the Tunisian people are victims of discrimination and an imposed set of beliefs by the hegemonic authority of the state. But throughout the MENA region, the defenders of these “traditional” practices considered by many to be oppressive or prejudiced are themselves valiantly resisting domination from a larger hegemonic power of Western imperialism. Liberalism, secularism and capitalism seek to marginalize and erode customary beliefs and the values they represent. This creates

two registers of resistance. One draws upon universal principles of citizens’ rights to fight against the discriminatory practices of social institutions and the laws of the state. The other portrays any such campaign as part of a larger imbalance in a world where the Western power works against the identities, religions and cultural traditions of Muslims, Arabs or other subordinated peoples (Tripp, 2013: 178).

This East versus West dichotomy of values convolutes the debate and struggle for liberty in this disparate context. Even language indicates a cultural disconnect, as Arabs use the word “virtue” rather than “freedom”. The term “freedom” exists in Arabic only in reference to the freedom of a slave, and the word otherwise has no presence in Islamic political theory, while “virtue” refers to God’s law as the law of the land, subject to human moralism and input (Sadiki, 2012a).

One particular point of contention is the issue of women’s rights, which both scholars and Tunisian women feel “constitutes the single most important issue facing Tunisian state and society” (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 26). While Tunisians celebrate the progressive Family Code legalized in 1957, loopholes in the legal text, regional

inconsistency in the application of law, and the absence of legal means of redress leave women vulnerable to unequal treatment (Chekir and Arafoui, 2011: 73-75). Inequality in literacy, educational attainment, health care, poverty, employment and household income exists between genders and is exacerbated by region, as those who suffer the greatest discrimination are poor, rural women and girls (Chekir and Arafoui, 2011: 88). The gap between supposed legal protection and the actual enjoyment of rights has “effectively meant one set of rules for the elite and one set of rules for everyone else” (Tripp, 2013: 178). Further, the small gains women have made are in peril with the submitted draft constitution, which threatens to revoke many of their rights. These suggested legal changes are in direct contradiction to the terms of the protests in which women demanded jobs and democracy, but they are now excluded from the new political realm and told to stay at home<sup>11</sup> (UGTT Women’s Bureau meeting, 2012). One constitutional draft proposal included an article that defined women as “complementary” to men, rather than equal (Fordham, 2012). Across the country, women saw this as a warning sign of the imposition of Sharia law, and successfully protested for a change in the language of this article (ANSAméd, 2012). Yet the struggle for women’s rights, even among Tunisian women, is controversial, as there is a wide discrepancy regarding which rights are “right” (Ryan, 2011b).

Even if, when completed, the new constitution affords progress in women’s rights, a societal change in gender roles is difficult, as these roles are experienced in a less visible realm, off-limits to public authorities. Families serve as a “microcosm of society” (Chekir and Arafoui, 2011: 88), and it is within this realm that “the hierarchy of

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<sup>11</sup> Ennahda party leader Ghannouchi reportedly stated that “one way to reduce unemployment among Tunisian men is to keep Tunisian women at home” (Usher, 2011: 32).

the genders is rigorously and sometimes violently maintained...['Family'] allows the creation of a world in which gender hierarchy can be maintained and in which performances are learned, monitored and played out in a closed or guarded sphere" (Tripp, 2013: 179). In order to have an impact on the unequal power structure between genders, civil resistance must go beyond government policy and address

the root of social gender prejudices...These forms of resistance are created by changing the structures of power that discriminate against and oppress women. But they go further, trying to change the underlying attitudes, rationales and justifications that keep such forms of unequal power in place. This is effectively an assault on the imaginative aspects of hegemonic power. It is a 'war of position'...The targets will be complacent or permissive social attitudes that permit, even applaud, gender discrimination, often held by people who are nevertheless active in resistance to oppression in other spheres (Tripp, 2013: 178-81).

Thus, pervasive progress in women's rights demands more than just inclusive policy but a dramatic shift in values and the understanding that "the diminution of the rights of some can diminish the rights of all" (Tripp, 2013: 314).

There is reason to believe that the process of this shift is underway, as women have begun to be publicly recognized for their important role and work within Arab society. One of three women to receive the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize was Yemeni women's rights activist Tawakul Karman, honored for her "non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work" (Al Jazeera and agencies, 2011). This "feminist touch to expand the club of female laureates, especially from the Third World" acknowledges that women are equal, valuable and determined participants in "the struggle against the ills of poverty, autocracy, inequality and war" (Sadiki, 2011a). In March 2013, the 13th World Social Forum was held in Tunis, the first ever to be held in an Arab country, where the theme

was 'dignity', as inspired by the Arab Spring movements. The forum had 30,000 participants from 127 countries, and featured an opening ceremony with only women participating "as a response to the rise of conservative religious governments as well as the patriarchal systems around the world" (Flaherty, 2013).

The UGTT has played an important role in protecting the rights of Tunisians, framing which rights to change and which to protect. The UGTT Women's Bureau seeks national dialogue to create a constitution with twin tracks, which both adds new rights which have not been legalized, and safeguards those which women seek to protect (UGTT Women's Bureau meeting, 2012). That said, gender equality within the union is far stronger in theory than in practice. Though 49 per cent of union members are women (Glissa, 2012), the UGTT "has a tradition of neglecting women" (Chekir and Arafoui, 2011: 77). Women are underrepresented in leadership positions - in 1946, Cherifa Messaadi was the first and to date only woman ever elected to the executive board of the UGTT (Chekir and Arafoui, 2011: 77), illustrating that "the world of trade unions is a man's world and while women have been let in, it is only as auxiliaries and not as person in charge. This means, for example, that those who are open to electing women are, however, not willing to support and vote for them as members of the executive board. There is a reason why no woman sits on the executive board" (Chekir and Arafoui, 2011: 87). Many women in the union believe that men are better able to protect their interests, and as a result women are often not present, engaged or at ease during meetings (Chekir and Arafoui, 2011: 86).

#### 4.5. Government

While the process of civil resistance is challenging, it was only after the exit of Ben Ali that the difficult and substantial work really began. There are a number of factors that complicate the process of state-building after the disintegration of a dictatorship. The very socioeconomic factors that spurred the protests in the first place - youth demographic bulges, high rates of unemployment, poverty - continue to create highly unstable and violence-prone environments. One scholar notes that “If cleaning up sewer systems could prevent more deaths than all the physicians in the world, then perhaps reforming the social, economic, and legal institutions that systematically humiliate people can do more to prevent violence than all the preaching and punishing in the world” (Bock, 2012: 81). Further, “authoritarian regimes that crushed independent sources of power, thereby preventing the creation of a thriving civil society, inhibited widespread respect for democratic principles and political pluralism, and prevented the creation of democratic institutions and leaders, often greatly handicap future efforts at state building, sometimes for generations” (Haas and Lesch, 2013: 4). Society must remain diligent to prevent the rise of a new oppressive regime out of the chaos of the collapse of the old one (Sharp, 2012: 116). This is surprisingly common, as a 2005 study of 67 countries trying to transition from authoritarian regimes found that only half were deemed “free” a generation after the transition began (Haas and Lesch, 2013: 5). Should this be the case in Tunisia, the 2011 transition “will come to be seen, like the *changement* that Ben Ali heralded when he replaced Bourguiba in November 1987, as a temporary and aberrant interruption to a broader and more profound political pattern of control and centralization of power” (Willis, 2012: 338).

By the end of 2011, fundamental political change appeared to be a genuine probability in Tunisia. Within weeks after Ben Ali's January 14 departure, the political landscape was completely transformed, with the dissolution of the RCD and the engagement of significant numbers of youth who had been active in the movement creating many new political parties specifically appealing to the youth of the country (Willis, 2012: 152). While many of these new parties were populist, such as the Popular Manifesto, with its simple message of social justice (Sadiki, 2011c), these groups failed to pose a real challenge in competitive elections against the old elite or Islamists (Haas and Lesch, 2013: 5).

After decades of banishment, Ennahda party leader Rachid Ghannouchi returned to Tunis two weeks after the ouster of Ben Ali, and by March 1 the party received official recognition from the interim government. Many Tunisians were wary of the intentions of the Islamists, given that they did not actively participate in the demonstrations - besides through *dawa* (proselytizing) - but were the only ones to call the political change a "revolution" (Bouzakoura, 2012; Ihlouka, 2012; Zaghdoudi, 2012). According to Tunisians, Islamists - and Ennahda specifically - "have nothing to do with the revolution. They are completely disconnected" (Ryan, 2012). Liberal and secular elites remain paranoid of Islamists, anticipating that once in power, they would impose Sharia law, ban alcohol, enforce the veil and destroy tourism; women distrust their legislation on polygamy, equal pay, and rights to abortion (Usher, 2011: 32).

#### **4.6. Elections**

The October 23, 2011 elections were a monumental event in Tunisian history, as citizens "voted to endorse the revolution - to rationalize it, as it were" (Sadiki, 2012d).

More than 100 political parties ran in the election, creating a complicated landscape within which many exercised their right to vote for the very first time (AFP, 2011). Elections were tightly guarded and observed by more than 40,000 police and soldiers and over 600 international observers, including the former US First Lady Rosalynn Carter, who reported “high participation of women and sweeping tolerance for long hours queuing to vote” (King, 2011a). One Tunisian student described the election as “unforgettable, very nice, amazing. Everyone was happy” (Kerkeni, 2012).

The election was not, however, entirely legitimate; despite election regulations, the illiterate were not allowed help in casting their ballots, and voter registration was inconsistent. Only seven per cent of young people were registered to vote, again a glaring example of their exclusion from tasting the fruits of the resistance movement which they championed. Regional disparity was also manifest in the elections. In the southern city of Kasserine, “the international media captured an image and a message from a group of women most of whom wore head scarves. ‘We are from the south and we want to vote,’ they declared. But no one had informed the women that they had to first register in order to cast a ballot; they were turned away from the polling station housed in a local school, denied a vote” (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 26). Though it was reported that the election had a 91 per cent voter turnout (Gelvin, 2013: 238), only 53 per cent of the total electorate voted in the October elections (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 25).

#### **4.7. Ennahda**

The resulting election of Ennahda, with 41 per cent of the vote (King, 2011a), speaks less to the popularity of the party than to a number of other contributing factors. In the post-Ben Ali frenzy, Ennahda had a number of advantages, not the least being

that they were previously organized, as opposed to the 100 brand new parties, who may have been capable of mobilization for mass demonstrations but unable to operate an effective political campaign (Haas and Lesch, 2013: 5). Ennahda used propaganda to capitalize on the revolutionary fervor (Bouazza, 2013), gaining political leverage through the “heroism and martyrdom” of their banishment and imprisonment. After decades of religious oppression and political exclusion, many were looking for an alternative to secularism - an ‘anti-Ben Ali’. Tunisians were “thirsty for religion, thirsty for some right man leadership, to lead us” (Brahim, 2012), and thus Ennahda’s doctrine garnered trust from the masses because of the religious values they espoused (Ihlouka, 2012).

#### **4.8. Political Islam**

The reality, however, has confirmed the fears of the masses: Tunisia has shifted from a secular dictatorship to a theocratic dictatorship (Ihlouka, 2012). Since the election, the Islamists have been accused of ‘double-speak’, with a moderate platform in public but radical stance in the mosques (AFP, 2011; UGTT Women’s Bureau meeting, 2012). According to all those interviewed for this thesis, Islam does not have a modernist agenda, but serves as a threat to the status quo and Ennahda’s program for the nation denotes regression rather than progress (Alexander, 2010: 121; Ihlouka, 2012; Zaghdoudi, 2012). Ennahda has been accused by the population and the opposition of employing undemocratic measures to institutionalize their hard line agenda, creating policy that reflects the influence of Salafists, who have infiltrated some segments of government and persistently push their fundamentalist ideology (Clairoux, 2013). Islam does not offer either a blueprint of government or a viable solution for the unabated socioeconomic challenges, and its place in Tunisia’s public life remains



contentious and unresolved. The election of Ennahda has opened the door for previously subjugated and silent Islamic groups to express their rights and opinions, which has only served to exacerbate the contentious relationship with leftists, often leading to violence (Kerkeni, 2012).

The hard-fought-for freedom of speech has become jeopardized, as “secular elements of the society are frightened to speak openly of the government policies or about the influence of the Salafists” (Clairoux, 2013). On February 6, 2013, these fears were realized, as opposition leader Chokri Belaid was assassinated - the first political assassination in Tunisia since independence (Torchia, 2013). Belaid led the Democratic Patriots’ Party, which was a part of the twelve-party organization of left-secular opposition parties called the Popular Front (BBC, 2013a). Though his party had received little electoral support, Belaid’s fierce criticism of the Islamist-led government since the election had a wide following (Amara, 2013a). Despite pleas from the government and world powers, Belaid’s death intensified hostilities between the secularists and Islamists as both sides engaged in “tit-for-tat type muscle-flexing” through violent protests across the country in the days that followed the assassination. According to Sadiki, the people of Tunisia

partly seemed not to be ready for revolution. Not for lack of agency, passion, or worthiness. Rather, for the absence of mutuality of acceptance of difference. Had it not been for this absence, "rationalising" revolution via sustainable democratic reconstruction would have been smooth sailing. Belaid is only a metaphor for a mind-set that was doggedly antipathetic to Islamist difference just as Abou lyadh<sup>12</sup> is a metaphor for a political paradigm that is opposed to secularists and secularism. The difference, of course, is that Belaid fired words, whereas Abou lyadh's followers display violence tendencies to harm people through carnage - if

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<sup>12</sup> Abou lyadh is the Salafi leader of the Islamist militant group Ansar al-Sharia accused of the assassination of Belaid and Brahmi; Ansar al-Sharia is also responsible for bombing the US Embassy in Tunis in September 2012 (BBC, 2013c).

given a chance - not verbiage. It is the stolen generation that forget how to be demotic, argumentative, dialogical and thus missed on the democratic learning curve. Translated into Tunisia of 2013, the deficiency exacted on this generation accounts for the mutuality of exclusion Islamists and secularists, and so-called "revolutionaries" and "anti-revolutionaries" exchange as insults not only to one another, but also, and above all else, to the revolution to which they owe the freedom of ruly and un-ruly behaviour today (2013b).

Up to 1.4 million Tunisians participated in Belaid's funeral and subsequent manifestations, demonstrating widespread disdain for the Ennahda party (Delmas, 2013). Four Tunisian opposition groups, including the Popular Front, pulled out of the national assembly and seconded the calls of the UGTT for a general strike (Al Arabiya, 2013).

In an effort to calm the unrest, Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali proposed a non-partisan technocratic cabinet to run the country until the next elections (Amara, 2013b). This proposal was rejected by senior Ennahda leaders, who felt his plan represented "a coup against electoral legitimacy" (Sadiki, 2013c). This rejection caused Jebali to resign, and forced "Tunisia's political elite into a scramble for answers and solutions to the deadly impasse engulfing the birthplace of the Arab Spring" (Sadiki, 2013d). Jebali was replaced as Prime Minister by Ali Larayedh on February 22, 2013 (Amara, 2013d) who was, upon his appointment, given a two week deadline to establish a government program to appease the massive unrest. Intended to serve until the next elections (expected before the end of 2013), the new government is led by the Ennahda party, backed by the centre-left Ettakatol party and the secular Congress for the Republic - the same three parties that formed the previous government, just with a different share of seats (RT, 2013). In this *troika* agreement, Ennahda conceded to entrust key ministerial positions to independent candidates (Al Jazeera and agencies, 2013), perhaps passing

on the “poisoned chalice” to other parties in an effort to promote positive results in the Islamist’s favour in the next election (Sadiki, 2013d). Upon this agreement, Larayedh pleaded with Tunisians to “be patient. The road to democracy is long” (RT, 2013).

Less than six months after Belaid’s death, on July 25, 2013, opposition leader Mohamed Brahmi was assassinated. Born in Sidi Bouzid, Brahmi was the founder and leader of the People’s Movement party, a member party of the Popular Front (CBS, 2013). The suspected killer was not only the same gunman as killed Belaid - a Salafist linked with al-Qaeda - but even used the same gun. The blatant connection between the two assassinations and the state’s lack of intervention was seen by many as a powerful metaphor of the government’s overarching failure and ineptitude (Gall, 2013). While Ennahda condemned the killings, but the public accused the government of being too lenient in its treatment of Islamist extremists, even fomenting violence (Bouazza and Schemm, 2013b). Emboldened by the July 3 ouster of Morsi in Egypt, the entire country came to a standstill for days, all flights were cancelled, and the UGTT called for a general strike to free people up to participate in protests across the country calling for the government to resign (BBC, 2013b; Delmas, 2013). Six opposition parties, representing 42 seats, withdrew from the National Assembly, calling for the replacement of the coalition government with a nonpartisan unity government (Bouazza and Schemm, 2013a). Amid the resulting political crisis, the Constituent Assembly suspended any headway on the new constitution - originally expected to be completed by end of 2012 - for over a month (Amara, 2013g).

Some scholars believe that the most important battles in this tumultuous political transition are not between secular liberals and Islamists, but among different types of

Islamists (Haas and Lesch, 2013: 5). Islam is diverse, decentralized, and multi-vocal, “with an incredible range of opinions and controversies that defy any monolithic approach...the establishment of hundreds of diverse regimes under the banner of Islam through the ages, and the incorporation of indigenous customs and traditions, which were thereby ‘Islamized’, nurtured and sustained an uncontrollable kaleidoscope of interpretations and creeds” (Filiu, 18). Local Islamists groups sought to demonstrate their solidarity through a protest in support of Ennahda following Brahmi’s assassination, but instead “they spent most of the time arguing among themselves” (Gall, 2013). Said one Ennahda activist, “People on the left accuse us of being with the jihadists, and the Salafists accuse us of being a party that is not connected to Islam...That makes us happy. It means we are in the middle, where we want to be” (Gall, 2013). Rather than denoting their moderation, this lack of decisive Islamism may in fact be the downfall of Ennahda in the next election. Many Muslims who voted for Ennahda in the previous election feel distrust and disappointment with the party, as it failed to deliver on promises made and have forsaken their pre-election political stance (Amara, 2012a; Brahim, 2012; Jenayak, 2012). Expressing the sentiments of many, one veiled Tunisian woman said, “I don’t trust them. I didn’t, and I don’t, and I will not trust them” (Kerkeni, 2012).

It is in this conflictual climate of political transition that Tunisia remains at a stalemate, its revolution unfulfilled, while “the return from the October 23 vote is minimal if not inexistent” (Sadiki, 2012e). Despite promises - and expectations - of 400,000 jobs, the government is unable to secure international credit or aid due to the perpetual protests, and therefore does not have the capacity to bolster the economy or create jobs

(Mabrouk, 2012; Zaghdoudi, 2012). Ongoing turmoil deters the government from drafting policy reforms or the new constitution; yet even if proposed, the government would face great difficulty in gaining public support in this politically charged atmosphere (Torchia, 2013). Amid repeated calls for the government's resignation, the coalition has, in collaboration with mediators including the UGTT, made concessions in an effort to appease the masses (AFP, 2013a). These concessions include Ennahda's acceptance of the resignation of Larayedh's cabinet, but only after reaching an agreement on the constitution and a timeframe for elections (AFP, 2013b). A one month deadline for the completion of this proposal was set on September 3, and should negotiations fail to meet this deadline, the UGTT has warned that they would hold a press conference "to reveal details about the ongoing negotiations to the Tunisian people" (Slama, 2013).

#### **4.9. UGTT**

With hopes and expectations of the government dashed, the Tunisian people once again look with expectation to the UGTT. As a result of its role in framing the goals of the protests, the UGTT is considered a safeguard for the resistance movement, its values and the democratic process and transition (Glissa, 2012; Sioud, 2012). Following a nonviolent struggle, "the society's independent institutions are also likely to have been strengthened through their roles in resistance. Consequently, they will be more able to function effectively in the future, both in peaceful times and in crises" (Sharp: 2005: 429). After the 2011 uprising, the UGTT is viewed by the Tunisian public as a democratic role model, and it has been entrusted with political accountability and autonomous collaboration (Glissa, 2012).

Despite the efforts of the government, the UGTT did not join the government itself, but approved many of the changes and decisions that have been made since the ouster of Ben Ali (Amara and Noueihed, 2011). Rather, the UGTT maintains its antecedent role as a nonpartisan counterweight to the ruling party, as there is no capable official opposition: “All of the major parties that won close to 20 seats and above in the 2011 elections, have experienced splits, defections, and suffer today from reduced numbers than those with which they entered the Constituent Assembly” (Sadiki, 2012d). In late August 2013, the UGTT offered to mediate the coalition government’s political deadlock, and has since been working alongside other civil society organizations to create a working agreement for political headway (Amara, 2013f).

There are those who believe that the UGTT is being manipulated and increasingly inundated by Islamist union adjuncts and partisan bureaucrats in an attempt to bring the union under state control (Yousfi, 2012). Many feel the UGTT leadership is still a part of the old regime, and is stalling the progress of the counter-revolution (Bouzakoura, 2012). Others feel that the union is too divided, with its roles as government opposition, defender of workers, job creation, constitutional input, and democratic watchdog, not to mention over-saturation of members, and is therefore unable to perform its mandate effectively (Glissa and Agrebi, 2012). Despite these opinions, the UGTT remains committed to “stand alongside civil society and the Tunisian people in all their diversity, to defend not only the working masses but, above all, the republic and its institutions” (Yousfi, 2012).

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

“Princes become great, no doubt about it, by overcoming the difficulties and obstacles placed in their way.”

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

Barack Obama

### **5.1. Introduction**

Having read extensively about the extraordinary events of the Arab Spring, one expects to arrive in the country and hear stories of a nation unified behind an ordinary but heroic man who instigated a monumental set of events across the entire region. The civil movement spread so rapidly that facts transformed into fable, and the reality is that Bouazizi’s story is less a poignant metaphor and more a media creation manufactured by outsiders (Davies, 2011). Investigations were launched into the highly contested events, revealing that Bouazizi was not in fact the unemployed college grad he had been rumored to be, but had instead dropped out of high school in order to help support his family (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 22). Witnesses claim that Bouazizi was never slapped, and may have even started the quarrel or made derogatory remarks to the female police officer Hamdi (Jensen, 2011; Zaghdoudi, 2012); still others say he poured gas on himself as a threat and set himself alight by accident while lighting a cigarette.

Bouazizi’s mother - called “the only winner of this revolution” - has been the subject of extensive criticism. After she received compensation from both Ben Ali and countless news media for interviews, she dropped all charges against Hamdi and abandoned Sidi Bouzid for an upscale Tunis suburb (Day, 2011b). After her release from prison, Hamdi describes herself as a scapegoat and victim of injustice, who was only doing her job.

She states that the myth of her slapping Bouazizi is “impossible because I am a woman, first of all, and I live in a traditionally Arab community which bans a woman from hitting a man” (Day, 2011a). No longer considered a ‘national hero’, memorials to the “martyr” have been defaced or torn down, illustrating the sentiment that “Bouazizi is not our hero. He’s your hero” (Jensen, 2011).

## **5.2. Challenges**

Said one Tunisian, “If I’m joking with my friends, I say that our revolution started with the wrong story, that’s why we got the wrong revolution” (Zaghdoudi, 2012). A revolution is defined as “a rapid, fundamental, and violent change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activities and policies...A complete revolution, however, also involves a second phase: the creation and institutionalization of a new political order” (Deeb, 2013: 74-5). Though optimists point out that the country has come a long way from the authoritarian state it once was, there is a prevalent and escalating sense of disillusionment and frustration with the current polity (Schemm, 2013). Most Tunisians interviewed refused to even refer to the events of early 2011 as a “revolution”, but instead a “popular uprising”.<sup>13</sup> The lingering socioeconomic problems and sense of malaise are to be expected, however, as “Revolutions are not meant to be neat affairs. Quite contrary, the upheavals that follow them are inevitable. Time and time again, history has demonstrated that chaos and disorder are an integral part of

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<sup>13</sup> “What is revolution? Revolution is radical change. We in Tunisia we no longer refer to what happened as the revolution, we just say “the popular uprising”...this cute and romantic idea about the Tunisian revolution is actually inexistent. The revolution is witnessing very difficult circumstances. This image of the revolution has been portrayed by media outlets that I do not consider impartial and independent” (Ihlouka, 2012).



revolution” (Sadiki, 2013e). While the fulfillment of the 2011 uprising remains elusive, nearly three years after Bouazizi unknowingly triggered the Arab Spring, there are a number of characteristics that are worth analysis. These factors - lack of leadership, lack of revolutionary program, lack of democracy - have prevented any substantial change in Tunisia, and as such, “C’est pas un revolution...It could transform into a revolution, but until now it is not” (Bouzakoura, 2012).

### **5.2.1. Lack of Leadership**

Many scholars interpret the lack of leadership of the Arab Spring movements as one of its greatest strengths. In the past, autocrats have been able to ‘behead’ an uprising by imprisoning or killing its leaders. As such, the security state was only able to ‘read’ movement activity in terms of formal organizations and “was therefore blind when faced with the seemingly leaderless protests” (Tripp, 2013: 92). Given this history, the leaderless dynamic of the uprising was not only a political strategy, but a necessity for survival, and considered “the real novelty of the Arab revolution” (Filiu, 56). This has created a civil resistance movement that was leaderless and nameless. While India’s campaign for independence depended on leadership, and, though imprisoned or exiled, the anti-apartheid struggle counted on its leaders, the ‘protagonist’ of the 2011 uprising was the Tunisian people.

Though leaderless movements proved their merit with the successful removal of autocratic despots in the Arab Spring, the analysis of resistance without leadership is unfounded and defies the Western penchant for deifying a ‘cult’ figure. Sadiki notes that the Nobel Prize awarded to Yemen’s Tawakul reduces

a dynamic and multifarious movement into a single locus - Tawakul...This particular Nobel expands the politics of recognition to a single female individual

as well as to an entire movement. But ambiguity is inevitable. For, this recognition through the naming of a single actor oddly enough restricts this very recognition by 'fixing' it in a single person. The elan of moral protest in the case of the Arab Spring is that it has persistently lacked a Che, a Khomeini or an Aung San Suu Kyi. The gain is the plurality embodied in a broad movement driven by ideals not mortals or ideologies. There are thousands of voices from within the Arab Spring that carry on the moral flame of protest against corrupt and authoritarian political elites. They are all Tawakul. The nobility of the struggle waged by all these free Arabs is not up for grabs. Nobel or no Nobel, the march for Arab freedom shall stay the course as Bouazizi, Tawakul and others keep on displaying. The nobility of these freedom-seeking acts in a many Tahrir Square as an essence will never be captured any amount of Nobel-ity (2011a).

Defying stereotypes and traditional resistance notions, leaderless movements have prevailed in many states through the Arab Spring by successfully ousting dictators, and setting the stage for democratic transition and constitutional change.

The lack of leadership in the Arab uprisings is based on more than just security concerns. After decades of repression and the “methodical sterilization of the political landscape” (Filiu, 59), Tunisian citizens share suspicion and contempt for authority. After the partisan state strangled any measure of autonomy or organized freedom, ‘leaderless-ness’ has captured the “imagination of the masses more so than the presence of fallible mortals at the apex of power” (Sadiki, 2013e). This was further evidenced by the return to the streets in Egypt and Tunisia in 2013, protesting against the failure of leadership and dissatisfaction with the status quo. Sadiki wrote that this symbolized that “the age of iconic leaders has passed” (2013f). Yet while Merriman warns that over-reliance on leaders carries risks (*Civil Resistance*: 10), many Tunisians feel that the lack of leadership resulted in either everyone considering themselves the leader of the resistance but no one having authority or popular assent, or produced a visionless uprising that has resulted in nothing more than people struggling for their rights (Bouzakoura, 2012; Sioud, 2012).

### 5.2.2. Lack of Revolutionary Program

Further, the lack of leadership illustrates a greater challenge for the fruition of the 2011 Tunisian revolution - the lack of a revolutionary program. Merriman warns against this:

if a movement aims to transform an authoritarian government into a democratic government, the movement may be able to nonviolently coerce its opponent to yield power, but to achieve its objective - democracy - the movement must also have a plan in place for how to manage and legitimize the transition to a new power holder. In such a case, if a movement applies coercive pressure to its opponent but does not have a plan for what to do next, it increases the likelihood that nonviolent coercion will devolve into disintegration (2009: 23).

In this state of disintegration, confusion and order in society breaks down, and the resulting power vacuum can be filled by an opportunist movement or group, as was arguably evidenced in the October 2011 election of Ennahda.

Scholars state that in order for a revolution to be lasting and durable, it must be “self-liberation,” achieved through indigenous empowerment and demonstrating “a lasting capacity of people to govern themselves, to shape their own society, and to act to ensure their freedoms and rights” (Sharp: 2005: 37, 123; Sadiki, 2012a). Successful self-determination requires more than casting off the shackles of the old order, but also its replacement with an alternative reality. Said one Tunisian, “it’s not enough only to get out the dictatorship...and then what? The most important, after getting out the dictatorship, we have to have the alternate. And at the moment we don’t have one...There is no real radical change where you say, “Look, that’s a solution to promote to people” (Zaghdoudi, 2012).

There is a difference between protesting *against* something and protesting *for* something, yet negative identity - self-definition by what who is *not* rather than by what

one *is* - is less difficult than dedicated choice. It is simply much easier to be against than to be for, and in Tunisia, “They protested *against* Ben Ali, not *for* democracy (Zaghdoudi, 2012). As a result, the post-Ben Ali Tunisia is left with a gaping democratic deficit. The impoverished definition of democracy that currently exists in Tunisia illustrates that “democratic development consists of more than topping dictators and holding elections” (Stephan, 2009: 2). In the aftermath of a revolution, it is common for “the coverage to swing between hope and despair: hope that resistance creates a new beginning, ushering in a different, more humane dispensation of power; despair that the apparent victories of the resistance have only dislodged a small fraction of the powerful and left unaffected the habits of power” (Tripp, 2013: 316).

### **5.2.3. Lack of Democracy**

Currently, the political transition remains suspended in a unstable dichotomy between chaos and democracy. According to Sharp, “Liberation should mean that the members of the previously dominated and weak population obtain greater control over their lives and greater capacity to influence events” (2005: 27). The ‘revolution of the youth’ has failed to produce any tangible improvements for the overeducated, unemployed generation struggling to survive (Usher, 2011: 33). Tunisians feel that their first revolution was stolen from them and it is for this reason that the Tunisian people have returned to the streets to see their revolution accomplished. Demonstrations remain common across the country, often resulting in violent suppression from security forces, and many Tunisians have immolated themselves in protest emulating that of Bouazizi (Amara, 2012a and 2013b).

In large part, the fruition of the democratic transition in Tunisia demands a transformation of the economic situation. After the failure to improve conditions with the departure of Ben Ali, the impoverished hinterland has nearly abandoned political aspirations for “local issues of bread and butter,” primarily employment (Sadiki, 2012e). The Egyptian Federation of Trade Unions declared that if the Arab Spring “does not lead to the fair distribution of wealth it is not worth anything. Freedoms are not complete without social freedoms. The right to vote is naturally dependent on the right to a loaf of bread” (Benin, 2011: 27). After the ouster of Ben Ali, it became evident that the socioeconomic problems were largely not a product of his autocratic rule. Now, as is evidenced by the return to the streets, Arab citizens “want an economy and a government that works for the people, and they want to participate in the running of that economy and that government. There is a simple word for that. It’s called democracy” (“Cry Democracy!”, 2011: 11). One Tunisian noted that “The democracy here is culminated in elections,” while in “Canada or France or any European country, there is a minimum of economic development, a minimum of economic equality, of social equality, of education, and then comes the elections. Here, no development, no social equality, no economic equality, people are hungry, people are houseless, and what elections are you talking about?” (Sioud, 2012). Sharp states that “Not all major changes can be achieved in a single struggle...Sometimes, the very fact of negotiating for gains - not losses - is a victory, for it reflects an improved power relationship” (2005: 502). Comprehensive socioeconomic development takes time, or as one Tunisian said, “Democracy is not like a cortisone injection, you know, you put it in and then you’re

okay. It's a process. That's why, even in Tunisia, it's a process. We have first of all to fulfill the stomach, the people, they have to find food" (Zaghdoudi, 2012).

The young people who sacrificed the most for the movement, however, have received only penury and are precariously restless and impatient. Trust in politicians has faded but faith in the resistance has not diminished for youth whose "anger is their power and their rage could be the energy of the future" (Filiu, 42). A Tunisian post-graduate student who conducted research in the interior regions said that, after seeing the hardships and lack of development, if he were in their position, "every day I would be doing a revolution" (Zaghdoudi, 2012). Some scholars recommend a process of conflict transformation, which is "a process that does not necessarily bring resolution of conflict but that develops approaches for dealing with it constructively, with an assumption that conflict is inevitable and not always undesirable but that violent conflict is undesirable" (Bock, 2012: 111). Implementation of such an approach would demand a level of communication and concession between the state and the victims of its inequity that is improbable but not impossible.

Unlike under the Ben Ali regime, the "us and them" divisions of the past are no longer as straightforward. Islamists are considered to have hijacked the revolution and used it to justify their theocratic policies, and in this state,

revolutionary and counter-revolutionary don't mean anything. The government now is the revolution. All people against the government are called counter-revolutionary. So if you are against the government you are against the revolution. Whereas the government has nothing to do with the revolution...who is revolutionary, who is counter-revolutionary? I myself I don't know where I am, in the revolution or the counter-revolution! This is the result of the fact that there is no revolution. We learn from history, from the books, a revolution is led by a revolutionary party with a revolutionary program and popular masses are convinced of this program and they support this party, and this is the leadership of the revolution, it has a leadership. Now, everyone considers himself the leader

of the revolution. Where is the real leader of the revolution? There is no leader because there is no revolution... In Tunisia they made us believe that we were in the middle of a revolution. What kind of revolution? Some people say democratic revolution, people say passion revolution, but here we are. A real revolution is change in the society completely. What has changed now? Ask anyone in the street, 'What is the different from two years ago?' Nothing!... A revolution is for the better, not for the worse (Sioud, 2012).

The recent assassinations of opposition leaders Belaid and Brahmi have intensified the vehemence and determination of those activists who seek to remove the current Islamist government. Under intense scrutiny, the Islamists have “lost the confidence of a large segment of the Tunisian population that took a chance and voted for the Ennahda party during the last constituent assembly election” (Clairoux, 2013). Yet in a democracy, the Islamists can no longer be excluded from power, and the secular political elites must be willing to accommodate the religious movement (“Tunisia’s Challenges,” 2012; Usher, 2011: 32). As was evidenced in the July 2013 ouster of Egyptian President Morsi, to figuratively throw out the water of democratization (the popularly elected leadership) “may not be indivisible from the actual baby: the institutions gained from the revolution...toppling an elected president and scrapping a new constitution will mean Islamists and secularists will be for years engaging each other in tit-for-tat politics, toppling each other's presidents and achievements. This is democratic defeatism” (Sadiki, 2013e).

### **5.3. Reflections for the Future**

The current situation in Tunisia remains open and the establishment of a genuine and lasting democracy is a real possibility. Difficult obstacles remain, however, and divisions between the former beneficiaries of the Ben Ali regime, the Islamists, and the opponents of both prevent any working compromise, consensus or coalition. Further,

disputes on such issues as the nature of the state, the role of religion in society, and guidelines for a new democratic system impede progress (Bock, 2012: 124). Without a “spirit of concord” and a willingness to forego short-term gains in favor of long-term development, the “penultimate cries of the likes of Bouazizi will remain unheeded” (Sadiki, 2012d). Though the final resolution is convoluted and multifaceted, direct progress can be achieved through three important factors - the forthcoming constitution, the intermediary of the UGTT, and the antecedent role of Tunisia in the Arab Spring.

### **5.3.1. Constitution**

In contrast to other democratizing Arab Spring states, Tunisia is the only country to elect the authors of its new constitution, undertaking a process that is protracted but will ultimately secure greater legitimacy. Since its first draft in 2012, the document has been the subject of contestation from both sides of civil society - secularists and hardline conservatives - and has yet to become a proposal to take to the 217-seat Assembly, from which it must achieve a two-thirds majority to pass (Schemm, 2013). As the framework for a truly democratic state, the constitution must be made a priority and set the purposes, limits and role of government, as well as the inherent rights of the people (Sadiki, 2013a; Sharp, 2012: 119). Especially in this transitory stage, liberties can only be assured when they are secured by more than just the ruling president or party. Otherwise,

they are subject to easy change when the president changes, when the governing party changes, or when either simply changes its mind. To be meaningful, basic rights and liberties must be articulated clearly in a constitution that is truly foundational. It must have a legal status that goes beyond a mere legislative act so that it cannot be altered easily by a legislative act. Tunisia’s constitution does not currently enjoy this status. The ease with which the National



Assembly has [changed laws in their favor] illustrate the dangers (Alexander, 2010: 119).

Democracy can only succeed when the constitutional order defines the parameters under which all citizens and government must operate, and the courts must be free to judge all laws in light of this constitution. This creates the framework and sets the precedent for replacing the inequitable system and arbitrary application of laws with “depersonalized, transparent institutions that are beyond the politicians’ easy reach” and “clear and consistently-applied rules of the game” (Alexander, 2010: 88).

### **5.3.2. UGTT**

At the forefront of the ‘second revolution’ is the UGTT, calling people to the streets to demand jobs and working with the government to build the state’s identity, capacity and institutions. Having been the target of violent attacks from Islamists, the union has consistently called participants to calm and strategic collective action (Amara, 2012a, 2012b and 2012c). Of all the Arab Spring movements, the participation and leadership of the UGTT gives Tunisia “the best chance of achieving a viable democracy with a strong voice for working people” (Benin, 2011: 27). To satisfy the popular demands that nourished the uprising requires both political analysis and identification of the forces capable of pursuing change until the realization of its objectives, the bulk of which will be achieved through the democratic forces united inside and around the UGTT (LGO, 2012). The autonomous political role of the union is contentious, however, and by some Tunisians considered “inimical to democratic reconstruction, law and order, and the requirement of sole legal monopoly over use of force by official authorities accountable to democratically elected the administrators and representative bodies,” whereby only the Tunisian electorate should be responsible for determining

who should be in office and parliament through their vote (Sadiki, 2013c). The current political stalemate demands an impartial and formidable intermediary, a role that can only be filled by the UGTT if they are able to avoid polarization through agenda, ideology and partisanship (Sadiki, 2012e).

#### **5.3.4. Arab Spring**

History has seen Tunisia stimulate change and set political precedent in the MENA region: the single party established by Bourguiba inspired other regimes, Bourguiba's secular and nationalist reforms proliferated throughout the Arab world, and the medical coup of Ben Ali and temporary break from authoritarianism inspired a wave of democratic demands in several other African countries (Hibou, 2011: xiv). Tunisians feel enormous pride as the instigators of the 'Printemps Arab' (Bouzakoura, 2012; Glissa and Agrebi, 2012; Kerkeni, 2012), accruing unprecedented international attention and acclaim, and a host of imitators hoping to accomplish the same transformative outcome (Willis, 2012: 334).

Egyptians witnessed meaningful political change achieved through the streets, and were induced to depose the system that had entrenched them in indignity and poverty (Rutherford, 2013: 40-1). Further, the commonality of the Arab people - language, religion, youth, culture, music, histories, political subjection - created semblance and solidarity, and allowed the slogans, chants, and strategic actions to be easily transferred from one nation to another (Tripp, 2013: 6). This ushered in a new paradigm in the Arab world "of a secular, democratic, nonviolent, nonideological society whose citizens are nationalist while maintaining their Arab and Muslim identities. This paradigm...calls for a state that is governed neither by the military nor by religious

authorities, but by civilians freely and fairly elected by the citizens of each country” (Deeb, 2013: 68).

The uprisings in Tunisia created a template of civil resistance within the region, which proffered a lens through which the media gauged all other mass uprisings and a model that youth in other countries sought to replicate, often with very un-Tunisian results (Gelvin, 2013: 239). Multiple acts of self-immolation across the region conveyed the desperation that marked the beginning of the Tunisian uprising (Tripp, 2013: 92), but quickly “the death toll increased dramatically with the repression and the ‘angry youth’ were soon able to claim far too many martyrs” (Filiu, 2011: 38). Despite the optimism created by the Tunisian uprising, 18 months after Bouazizi’s self-immolation, “Libya and Yemen were states in which breakup or total anarchy still remained a possibility, the Egyptian army had yet to abdicate the power it had seized on February 11, 2012, and Syria continued its descent into hell. This is not the sort of scorecard that breeds confidence” (Gelvin, 2013: 240). Success is hardly assured, but with “its small and homogeneous population, educated workforce and vibrant civil society, Tunisia remains the best hope of an Arab revolution minting a durable constitutional democracy out of the debris of dictatorship” (Usher, 2011: 32).

The effects of the Tunisian uprising spread beyond the Arab world, as “The power of the street - buoyed by the instruments and technology of social media - was on full display, knocking out one authoritarian leader after another” (Lesch, 2013: 87). The same issues led to protests in sub-Saharan Africa (Al Jazeera, 2011), and Kalle Lasn, the ‘leader’ of the leaderless Occupy Wall Street movement, stated, “Back in the summer of 2011 we were all talking about what we were going to do...and we were all

inspired by what happened in Tunisia and thought that America was ripe for this kind of rage” (Clancy-Smith, 2013: 27). While its replication has not led to absolute success in all cases, the Tunisian civil resistance movement creates a model worthy of emulation through its unity, strategic planning and nonviolent commitment.

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

The 2011 uprising in Tunisia and the subsequent political situation has been a study in paradoxes: success and failure, progress and regression, change and stagnancy, hope and despair. Though the conclusion of the revolution remains in flux, Tunisians have indisputably broken free of their complacency with the status quo and the barrier of fear imposed by the repressive state (Lesch, 2013: 81). This is a prerequisite to creating and sustaining positive democratic change to transform a nation in which young Arabs take the lead in creating their destiny and their country in such a way that their elders are forced to listen and follow (Khalidi, 2011; Sioud, 2012). The role of the UGTT in this ongoing political transition continues to be paramount and steadfast in maintaining the initial values and terms of the civil resistance movement. We are witnessing history in the making, as “The Arab renaissance is just beginning” (Filiu, 148).

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