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## **Divisions within post-2011 Tunisia's secular civil society**

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Popular and academic discourses frame civil society as a key factor that prevented Tunisia from following the unfortunate path of other 'Arab Spring' states. But while such discourses tend to portray it as a monolithic political force, Tunisian civil society comprises a diverse range of different types of actors with different backgrounds, interests, views and approaches towards activism.

Drawing upon interviews with Tunisian activists, this article maps a range of tensions within Tunisian secular civil society along these lines and sets out to explain their origins. Notably, it identifies a generational division between those activists that started to engage in the late 2000s or during and after the 2011 ouster of Ben Ali and those who were already active before. This division is based on a range of factors, including a sense of entitlement to the leadership of post-2011 Tunisian civil society on both sides, a lack of mutual respect for and trust in each other as well as differences regarding practices and priorities of civil society engagement.

Keywords: civil society; democratic transition; NGOization; Tunisia; activism

### **Introduction**

Among the countries that experienced popular uprisings in early 2011, Tunisia is the only one that made significant steps towards a democratic transition. Popular and academic discourses tend to frame civil society as a key factor that prevented the

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country from following the unfortunate path of other ‘Arab Spring’ states.<sup>1</sup> Most prominently, a political crisis in 2013 triggered by the assassination of two left-wing politicians and major public disenchantment with the Islamist-led government has been averted through a civil society-led ‘National Dialogue’. This dialogue was initiated by the Tunisian General Trade Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT), which joined forces with the Tunisian employers’ organization (Union Tunisienne de l’industrie, du commerce et de l’artisanat, UTICA) as well as the Tunisian Human Rights League (Ligue Tunisienne pour la défense des droits de l’Homme, LTDH) and the National Order of Tunisian Advocates (Ordre National Des Avocats De Tunisie, ONAT). Mediating between government and opposition, the quartet facilitated the creation of a technocratic government as well as the development and adoption of a progressive constitution. In December 2015, this ‘National Dialogue Quartet’ was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Discourses on Tunisian civil society sometimes create the impression that it is a monolithic political force. However, case studies of countries’ or regions’ civil society suggest that they often comprise a diverse range of different types of actors with different interests, views on and approaches towards activism. A first dimension relates to Civil Society Organisations’ (CSOs) origin, highlighting differences between local NGOs and international ones (INGOs). Largely originating from the West and informed by its norms and values, INGOs working in non-democratic or transitioning countries have found their legitimacy increasingly challenged.<sup>2</sup> They are contested by authoritarian governments or populations that are concerned about foreign meddling, suspicious of their motives or opposed to their objectives.<sup>3</sup> Such suspicions of, or opposition to, INGOs have also been observed within civil society, creating tensions between local and foreign organisations.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, Keck and

Sikkink's "boomerang effect" suggests that local activists' alliances with INGOs can also function well and work in their favour.<sup>5</sup>

Tensions within civil society may also be linked to their form of organisation and their approach towards foreign funding. There are differences relating to the extent to which and the way in which activists organise themselves, notably between professional NGOs and associations based on membership and volunteering.<sup>6</sup> In that context, Mercer has criticised an increasing "conflation of NGOs with civil society itself".<sup>7</sup> In a similar spirit, an emerging literature questions the "NGOization" of civil society, which involves local associations increasingly turning into or being replaced by professionalised NGOs.<sup>8</sup> As a result, one argument goes, activism is de-radicalised<sup>9</sup>, becoming aligned with donors' preferences<sup>10</sup> and transforming from an idealist calling to a well-paid career choice.<sup>11</sup> Requirements for jobs in the sector then include grant-writing, project management, language skills and the ability to move in elitist settings such as diplomatic receptions. Civil society is thus becoming increasingly detached from the realities and interests of those on whose behalf it claims to act.<sup>12</sup> However, others have pointed to professional and foreign-funded NGOs alleged better ability to successfully advocate their positions while not generally infringing on their independence or even enabling them to become more radical and daring.<sup>13</sup> While the pros and cons of either perspective are up for debate, such debates extend to the practitioner level. There are potential further divisions within civil society based on different views of foreign funding, but also due to the fact that external donors' grant decisions create "insiders and outsiders".<sup>14</sup> In fact, competition for funding and access to policy makers has been found to cause tensions and reduce organisations' ability to maintain unity and work together even if they have similar objectives.<sup>15</sup>

This article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of Tunisian civil society by studying its internal fissures along the faultlines that have been identified in other contexts. In doing so, the article also identifies a further source of friction. In addition to and to some extent transcending other faultlines, there is a generational division between those activists that started to engage in the late 2000s or during and after the 2011 ouster of the Ben Ali regime and those who were already active before. The National Dialogue may be credited with a crucial role in saving the Tunisian transition at one of its most critical junctures. However, it has been criticized for not sufficiently including the new generation of activists that played a crucial role in making this transition possible in the first place.

While young people played a major role in bringing down the Ben Ali regime, post-2011 Tunisian politics is largely dominated by old people. The incumbent president Beji Caid Essebsi won the presidential vote in late 2014 at the rather advanced age of 88 years. Large parts of the governmental and administrative elite belong to a generation that has little in common with the under-25-year-olds that make up for around 40% of the Tunisian population.<sup>16</sup> This dominance of the old generation might be seen as one of the reasons for the youth's limited participation in the parliamentary elections.<sup>17</sup> It might also be understood as a factor that draws many young Tunisians to civil society as an alternative to party political engagement.<sup>18</sup>

Although young people are engaged in civil society, many feel that their structural exclusion extends into this realm. There is a generational gap in post-2011 Tunisian civil society between those activists that have been engaging before 2011 and those who became involved during and after the 2010/2011 uprising. This split is best symbolised by the relations between the LTDH and Al Bawsala, an NGO that monitors the Tunisian parliament and provides citizens with access to information about political

decision-making processes. These two organisations might be considered as key representatives of each generation. While the research for this article was conducted, both organisations were based in the same building in downtown Tunis' Avenue Bourguiba. In order to meet, activists of either organisation only had to go one floor up or down. Yet, representatives from both the LTDH and Al Bawsala said that their interaction remained rather limited<sup>19</sup>, just like interaction between both generations has been more generally.

This article sets out to examine why this is the case. To that end, it starts by exploring the situation of Tunisian civil society under the Ben Ali regime as well as its role in the uprisings that brought it down in 2011. On that basis, it then explores and maps the faultlines existing between the various factions of Tunisian civil society and traces their origins.

### **Before the uprising: civil society under authoritarian constraint**

Since the foundation of the Tunisian Republic, civil society has played a prominent albeit slightly schizophrenic role in the country's politics and society. On the one hand, associational engagement and citizens' mobilisation was explicitly encouraged by Habib Bourguiba, the founding father and first president of the Tunisian Republic. Bourguiba aimed at channelling such engagement towards his 'civilizational' project of modernisation and national development. On the other hand, he made civil society subject to tight state control and thus strongly curtailed its autonomy as well as its ability to contest his regime. Bourguiba's strategy involved the organisation of the countries' major political and social forces into monopolistic corporatist associations geared towards mobilising Tunisians to support his agenda.<sup>20</sup> For example, the founders of the Tunisian National Women's Union (Union Nationale des Femmes de Tunisie, UNFT) were linked to the ruling Neo Dustur party and aimed at educating Tunisian

women about the rights that Bourguiba's progressive 'Personal Status Code' laws gave them.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the UTICA and the Union of Tunisian Farmers (Union Nationale des Agriculteurs Tunisiens, UNAT), which had been founded prior to independence, became a tool to advance the national economy.<sup>22</sup> Bourguiba also subordinated the UGTT, which had been created in 1946 as a trade union but which had also played a key role in the struggle for independence and enjoyed substantial prestige within the population as a result.<sup>23</sup> While these organisations' leadership was usually chosen or manipulated by the regime, the nature of their activities meant that their interests diverged at times from those of the regime. Hence, they were forced into a balancing act between pursuing their members' objectives and those of the regime. In the rare cases in which organisations or their leaders became too potent or too disobedient, the regime reacted swiftly. This happened most notably on 'Black Thursday' in 1978, when a general strike led to a crackdown on the UGTT and a purge of its leadership.<sup>24</sup>

Over time, these corporatist organisations were complemented by government-sponsored non-governmental organisations (GONGO) masquerading as civil society to influence the population according to the regime's interests while pretending towards foreign partners and donors that the political system allowed for civil society engagement.<sup>25</sup> Only a handful of CSOs that existed before 2011 may be considered as genuinely independent. Prior to the 2011 uprising, these CSOs and their activists regularly faced intimidation, harassment and persecution. Their activities would be either ignored or smeared by a media landscape largely controlled by the regime. Some activists would be jailed or forced to operate under ground or from exile.<sup>26</sup> In order to avoid arrest and to ensure their associations' survival, activists resorted to different strategies. A first one involved a certain level of moderation. CSOs experienced internal debates between those activists insisting on maximalists demands and those preferring a

pragmatic approach that involved a certain degree of restraint. A notable example is the LTDH, which was also an umbrella organization that encompassed the activists of various other independent Tunisian CSOs. In the early 1990s, its very existence was at stake as the government had threatened not to renew its accreditation unless it became less aggressive in its campaigning.<sup>27</sup> However, internal trajectories pointed in a different direction as the brief period of openness following Ben Ali's ouster of Bourguiba in 1987 had raised activists' ambitions. A faction around Moncef Marzouki favoured a confrontational approach. A more pragmatist faction emphasized that the survival of the LTDH was crucial. A significant part of the organisation's work was the provision of legal and administrative assistance for political prisoners or victims of police violence. Permanently losing their official accreditation would have jeopardized such activities. The pragmatist faction won the internal debate, turning the LTDH into what one activist criticised as a "toothless organisation".<sup>28</sup> However, as others pointed out, the survival of the organisation provided for a certain degree of continuity. Notably, its continued existence enabled its involvement in the National Dialogue around 20 years later.<sup>29</sup>

The moderation strategy goes hand in hand with a second strategy that might be referred to as division of labour. As a result of the forced moderation of the LTDH, members of the faction around Marzouki created the National Council for Freedoms in Tunisia (Conseil national pour les libertés en Tunisie, CNLT). The CNLT did not manage to obtain legal status but defied its interdiction and became more daring in its activism. Notably, it highlighted the abuse of suspected Islamists and started to publish the names of officials it accused of being complicit in the Tunisian authorities' torture practices. As a result, CNLT activists fell victim to prosecution and harassment including violent attacks by plainclothes police.<sup>30</sup>



The split led to a de-facto division of labour between both organisations. The LTDH continued to help people on the ground while CNLT activists, who remained part of the same social circle, could become bolder without jeopardizing the LTDH's work. Hence the community of Tunisian human rights activist pursued similar ends using different yet complementary means.<sup>31</sup> A similar division of labour evolved between the Tunisian Women's Association for Democracy (Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates, ATFD) and the Tunisian Women's Association for Research on Development (Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement, AFTURD), two influential independent associations engaging for gender equality as well as democracy and human rights more generally. While they had the same agenda and major overlaps in their membership, the ATFD was more radical in its demands and subversive in their activities whereas AFTURD mainly framed itself as a source of expertise.<sup>32</sup>

A third way to wield political influence within the constraints of dictatorship was to draw upon a large or elitist membership base. For example, the UGTT represented up to 750,000 members in a country of around 11 million citizens (Jeune Afrique, December 25, 2012). Prior to 2011, it was the only relatively independent organisation capable of mobilizing large numbers of people for political causes. Depending on its leadership as well as the political climate, the organisation was sometimes closer aligned to the regime and sometimes more critical of it. However, even at times of stronger co-optation by the regime it usually continued to wield some influence. Moreover, the regime's co-optation of the UGTT's executive did not always extend to its local branches. Another prominent force daring to contest the regime was the ONAT. This was partly due to the fact that many activists engaging for democracy and human rights were lawyers. Moreover, as one activist pointed out, their profession

was likely to bring them into conflict with parts of the country's elites, whose respect for the rule of law was limited.<sup>33</sup> While drawing upon a much smaller membership base, the prestige of lawyers as well as the importance of their role in society enabled them to punch above their weight.

A final way to navigate under authoritarian constraint was to obtain foreign support. Local offices of organisations such as Amnesty International were protected by their status as a part of influential global NGOs. Meanwhile foreign development agencies and political foundations could extend some of their autonomy to local partners. Such connections did not formally limit Tunisian authorities' ability to crack down on civil society, but it increased the political costs of doing so and became a factor to be reckoned with. Moreover, Tunisia formally committed to respecting human rights in the 1995 Barcelona declaration between the EU and its Southern neighbourhood. This provided civil society activists with a range of potential European addressees for complaints as well as a legal document on which it could base them.

Despite their ability to manoeuvre within the restrictions imposed by the regime and their willingness to contest it, these independent Tunisian CSOs largely remained on the sidelines during the Tunisian popular uprising that led to the downfall of Ben Ali. Local branches of the UGTT were involved in the mobilisations from the very beginning. Its Sidi Bouzid branch engaged in the initial protests following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi and contributed to their spread.<sup>34</sup> On 28 December, the UGTT section in the Tunisian phosphate mining town Gafsa, which had already experienced major yet unsuccessful protests in 2008 and early 2010, organized an anti-government rally.<sup>35</sup> However, the UGTT's national leadership was very hesitant when it came to choosing sides. On 27 December 2010, six trade unions that were all part of the UGTT staged an anti-government demonstration in front of the UGTT's main seat in

Tunis to express their solidarity with the protest in Sidi Bouzid and to affirm its political goals. However, the UGTT's national leadership denounced all protests and called for a "rational" dialogue between the protesters and the government instead (BBC Monitoring, December 30, 2010). The national executive bureau of the UGTT issued its first explicit statement in support of the protests on 4 January 2011. Only on 11 January, three days before Ben Ali left the country, did the UGTT finally allow its regional unions to call for a general strike.

The ONAT was much less ambiguous. On 28 December 2010, Tunisian lawyers staged a protest in front of the government's palace. In response to the police violence against protesters in general and its own members in particular, ONAT staged a general strike on 6 January 2011 that according to Al Jazeera (on January 6, 2011) was followed by 95% of Tunisia's roughly 8,000 lawyers. The members and volunteers of independent CSOs such as the LTDH or the ATFD joined the protests at different stages but were arguably not among its driving forces.<sup>36</sup> In fact, they were as surprised as the regime<sup>37</sup> and initially insecure what to make of the protests. Instead, new and less organised forms of activism facilitated the uprisings, with bloggers and cyber activists taking the centre stage.<sup>38</sup> Already in May 2010, six young Tunisians had organised a protest called 'Tunisie en Blanc' (Tunisia in White) against internet censorship. Using social media, they asked people to wear white shirts and either protest in front of the Ministry of Technology or simply have a coffee in Avenue Bourguiba. It wasn't a major success, but a valuable experience on how to use the internet for campaigns and protests.<sup>39</sup> In late 2010, a crowd-sourced blog called Nawaat published a range of Tunisia-related US diplomatic cables and translated and disseminated them through social media. These cables, which had previously been published by wikileaks, included extensive analyses of the regime's corruption and nepotism. Once the uprising started,

Nawaat also provided pictures and videos of as well as reporting about the protests. In doing so, the platform helped to connect Tunisian activists with each other as well as with the international community. Such activities helped to further fuel the protests, as did the imprisonment of individual bloggers and artists such as the rapper Hamada Ben Amor, known as 'El Général', whose song 'Rais Lebled'<sup>40</sup> openly attacked the Ben Ali regime and became one of the hymns of the uprising.

### **After the uprising: a divided civil society**

In the aftermath of the Ben Ali regime's collapse, Tunisia saw a substantial rise in civil society engagement.<sup>41</sup> Particularly the young generation that was politicised in the run up to and during the protests started to use the new possibilities to get involved in the political transition. At times their engagement started with the wish to do something rather than concrete ideas. "When we began, we just had the idea to establish a CSO to engage the youth in this process" said a co-founder of transparency and anti-corruption watchdog 'I-Watch'.<sup>42</sup> Other CSOs, such as Al Bawsala, were created by young Tunisians living abroad who chose to return. Their engagement was motivated by the hope to have the chance to contribute to shaping post-Ben Ali Tunisia and facilitated by new freedoms including a less restrictive association law.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the development of Tunisian civil society was influenced by a substantial increase in foreign funding.

This sudden increase in civil society engagement and the different backgrounds and approaches to activism of those involved led to a range of divisions within post-2011 Tunisian secular civil society. The remainder of this article will map these divisions, examine their origins and explore how they relate to the role that different parts of civil society had played before and during the uprisings against Ben Ali. A first division relates to the origin of civil society organisations. While the number of Tunisian CSOs has increased, so has the engagement of foreign and international NGOs

in Tunisia. Formally there is no difference between local and foreign CSOs as they all have to adhere to the country's association law. Furthermore, foreign and international CSOs often employ Tunisians and local organisations sometimes have foreign staff. Nonetheless, there are tensions between organisations that are of Tunisian origin and those which are not. Some Tunisian civil society activists question international organisations' motives and see them as foreign agents with hidden agendas. Others recognize these organisations' past and present engagement, but feel that Tunisia's transition should primarily be driven by Tunisian actors. Moreover, there are conflicts due to the fact that there is competition between them and that national organisations perceive this competition as unfair.<sup>44</sup>

This is particularly evident when it comes to foreign financial assistance. Most major donors prefer to award rather large amounts of project funding to keep their overhead costs low. An example is the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which is the European Union's (EU) main funding programme aimed at strengthening civil society in third states. Most of its grants range from several tens to hundreds of thousands of euros and require CSOs to complete an extensive and highly technical application process.<sup>45</sup> Hence, they are geared towards professionalised NGOs whose staff work full-time rather than on a voluntary basis and who have substantial grant-writing and project management skills. However, many local Tunisian civil society organisations are more reliant on volunteers, do not have the capabilities to master the application procedures and lack the organizational capacity and experience to manage large budgets.<sup>46</sup> As a result, there is a perception within Tunisian civil society that funding from the EU and other donors is too often awarded to organisations with non-Tunisian origins. This irritates Tunisian activists, particularly as they often feel that foreign organisations implementing projects in Tunisia spend too much on organizing

conferences and conducting studies rather than doing work on the ground.<sup>47</sup> As one civil society activist put it:

You have all these conferences in expensive hotels and all these panels with always the same people. And they sit there and talk, and they agree on everything, and they congratulate each other how right they are. (...) If you are hungry, you can just go to the Africa Hotel in Avenue Bourguiba, there is always a conference, you always get something to eat. (...) It's a waste of time to talk to people you agree with, we need to talk to the people we don't agree with.<sup>48</sup>

Some activists question the use and impact of specific large foreign-funded projects as well as the competence of some of the organisations implementing them. An example regularly mentioned in this context is the Programme d'Appui à la Société Civile (PASC), an EU-funded project with a budget of seven million euros<sup>49</sup> that has faced a range of problems relating to both its design and its execution. In the view of various local activists, these problems were at least partly caused by the fact that an integral part of the project was set up by the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), a Brussels-based NGO that neither had an office in Tunisia nor major on-the-ground experience.

To increase their chances to obtain large grants, local associations may team up with foreign ones. For example, the EU encourages applications of consortiums of a foreign lead applicant and a Tunisian co-applicant. If the application is successful, the EU mainly deals with the lead applicant who in turn redistributes funding to the co-applicant. However, this constellation provides for further potential for conflict, for example due to the de-facto hierarchy it creates as well as the often quite different wage levels between Tunisian and non-Tunisian civil society organizations.<sup>50</sup>

Tensions also arise around the question which CSOs take the lead on important policy issues. Some activists disapprove of external actors taking the first step and then

asking them to participate as they feel that it should be Tunisians who come up with initiatives. While external actors acknowledge this, they complain about what they see as a lack of proactiveness and initiative within Tunisian civil society. As a non-Tunisian employee of an international NGO put it: “We always have that debate. But then make an offer, propose something. I started to think about something because there is a need, and if you are not going to do it, I will do it.”<sup>51</sup> A further challenge is that although many local organisations are highly effective when it comes to short-term mobilisation, they tend to struggle with long-term planning.<sup>52</sup> As the same NGO worker put it:

They are so good when it comes to reacting, you know, at one precise time, on one precise issue. They can mobilise, get people on the streets, for example about the complementarity in the constitution [a draft of the Tunisian constitution had stated that men and women should “complement each other within the household”, the formulation was changed to emphasize gender equality after major protests]. But when you cooperate on a long-term project as we did, after four months I called them, I emailed them, I sometimes felt maybe I am harassing them, and at the end some were just like, yeah, we do need someone to call us. But this is exhausting.<sup>53</sup>

The challenges of obtaining and managing large grants and of taking the lead on important societal and political questions have led to two interlinked debates within local Tunisian civil society. First, there are different views on whether and to what extent engagement should continue to be primarily based on volunteerism. Second, there are differences on whether and to what extent civil society should accept foreign funding. Advocates of the professionalization of civil society and the acceptance of foreign funding argue that the ideal of volunteerism comes at the cost of quality and impact. As Amira Yahyaoui, the founder and former director of Al Bawsala argued:

You cannot say I advocate for women's rights on Saturday and Sunday, but during the week I work. If you want to get Tunisian NGOs at the same level of international NGOs, you need to have people working full-time for you. So you

have to pay them. I think that to build a country you can have support from outside, but you can't build it from the outside. We need Tunisian NGOs as professional as international NGOs. I wanted to get Tunisians, and I wanted to get good Tunisians. (..) And if you want them not to join international organizations instead, then you have to pay them well.<sup>54</sup>

Critics of professionalization and foreign financial assistance point to what they see as undesirable side-effects that endanger the basic principles of civil society.

Professional NGOs receiving foreign funding can offer much better-paid jobs than the Tunisian public or private sector. Critics argue that these NGOs create a culture of careerism where activists are motivated by above-average wages and other perks, rather than being primarily driven by the causes they engage for. Several activists discarded members of this group as “five-star activists”.<sup>55</sup> “The influx of funding has corrupted civil society. Activists got used to luxury, to hotels and travels”<sup>56</sup>, one of them said.

Moreover, critics argue that the dependence on foreign funding is bound to directly or indirectly influence CSO's work and leaves them vulnerable to donors' changing funding priorities. They are particularly sceptical towards the major role of the EU in financing Tunisian civil society, arguing that it induces beneficiaries to become less critical towards controversial EU projects such as the planned Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Tunisia or its policies on migration. They also point to the fact that some organisations have started to execute strongly pre-defined projects, effectively reducing civil society to a service provider implementing the donors' agenda. Finally, with funding priorities changing from year to year, they criticise organisations that are becoming experts or pretending to become experts on whatever international donors decide to fund next. For example, civil society organisations specialised in election-observation that had received major funding in 2014 due to the parliamentary and presidential elections went on to venture out to apply



for funding in other fields. “The order is often not that there are ideas that need money. There is money, and therefore one needs ideas”<sup>57</sup> an employee of one of these NGOs said.

While there is a certain polarisation between proponents and opponents of professionalization and foreign funding, a third faction within civil society is seeking the middle ground. They welcome foreign financial assistance as long as it doesn't come with too many conditions attached. While they are open towards professionalization, they feel that associations need full-time employees assisting and complementing volunteers rather than replacing them. As a former president of the LTDH put it:

Professionalisation is good, but the role of the volunteers needs to be safeguarded. They have to come up with a strategy and make the decisions, but it has to be implemented by someone else. They have their own jobs, so they need staff who are educated who put the strategy into action under the supervision of the elected volunteers. I am not for associations that only consist of professionals. But the actual work has to be done by professionals.<sup>58</sup>

A further debate within Tunisian civil society echoes the previously mentioned division in the LTDH during the 1990s. The question is whether and to what extent priorities should be guided by ideals or pragmatic concerns. Some activists feel that the focus should be on demanding and promoting a perfect implementation of what they see as universal human rights. Others, while largely agreeing in principle, point at two practical problems. First, there are societal constraints as a substantial part of the Tunisian population sees universal human rights as a rather Western concept that should not necessarily be adapted. Calling for too progressive reforms too soon could therefore provoke a backlash as it might go beyond what the more conservative parts of society are willing to accept. Second, focussing mainly on human rights might come at the cost

of focussing on those social and economic issues that are far more pressing for large parts of the Tunisian population.<sup>59</sup> The co-founder of a prominent CSO explained that:

Many civil society organisations neglect social and economic rights. I mean, the basis of the revolution is the call of Tunisians for more social and economic rights, access to jobs, access to health infrastructure, access to social security services, having a contract when they are working since 20 years, you know, this kind of thing. And the focus for the past three years has been on civil and political rights. Which are as important as social and economic rights, but there are lots of areas that are neglected. And this is a big mistake because we are not solving the deeper problems of the society.<sup>60</sup>

A widely shared fear is that not tackling the major socio-economic challenges that Tunisia is facing might discredit the democratic transition. As Sana Ben Achour, a long-time civil society activist who is now running a charity dedicated to Tunisian women put it:

The revolution in 2011 was progressive, it was about freedom and human rights. But if we continue like this, if we do not manage to fight poverty, if things are not getting better soon, then there might be another revolution. And this revolution is going to be regressive.<sup>61</sup>

### **The generational gap in Tunisian civil society**

The final faultline lies between the generation that started to engage in the years before as well as during and after the uprising against Ben Ali, and the generation that had already been active before. Following their self-description, the old generation will also be referred to as the ‘Historiques’, which translates as ‘the historic ones’. To begin with, tensions can be partly explained by the fact that representatives of both generations tend to feel entitled to lead post 2011-Tunisian civil society. The old generation’s claim to leadership is based on the fact that they have resisted the dictatorial regimes of Ben Ali and Bourguiba and that they have championed human rights and democracy at a time in

which activism entailed major risks to personnel security and well-being. Meanwhile, many within the new generation feel that they are the natural leaders as their generation made the transition possible. They feel that what they see as their revolution is hijacked by both individuals from politics and civil society who, in their view, contributed little to nothing to the ouster of the Ben Ali regime.

Such notions go hand in hand with a lack of respect for each other's past and present achievements. Various younger activists expressed the notion that "there was no civil society before 2011".<sup>62</sup> The old generation is then either completely ignored or conflated with the government-aligned NGOs that the Ben Ali regime had produced. This is partly based on the fact that the Historiques tried to balance the thin red line between advocating for human rights and avoiding being imprisoned and outlawed. Hence, they compromised in ways that delegitimised them in the eyes of some activists from the new generation. Following this line of thinking, it was the post-2011 generation that created civil society in the first place, adding to their own sense of entitlement. Others acknowledge the role played by the Historiques prior to 2011 but are tired of being constantly reminded of it.<sup>63</sup> "I don't care about the past"<sup>64</sup> or "We are tired of hearing all that. You did it, it's ok. Now shut your mouth"<sup>65</sup> were notions expressed by individual young civil society activists in response to corresponding questions. Among those who acknowledge the old generation's commitment, the costs it entailed and the achievements it yielded, some tend to belittle the contribution this generation is making in post-2011 Tunisia. "The Historiques did a good job before, but now they are largely useless"<sup>66</sup> a representative of the new generation quipped.

At the same time, there is a certain arrogance and paternalism among the old generation towards the young one. Asked why the new generation was not sufficiently included into the National Dialogue process, representatives of the old generation said

that there was no time as the country was on the brink. “Yes, of course the youth is important” a senior member of the LTDH stated. “But you have to understand, it was a very serious situation. We had to act fast.”<sup>67</sup> The notion various representatives of the old generation conveyed during the interviews was that while the youth should be included in principle, the ‘grown-ups’ have to take matters in their hands when things get serious.<sup>68</sup>

In cases of cooperation between both generations, tensions arise around rather banal issues such as the speaking order during conferences or whose name or logo comes first in publications. This relates to a second cause of division. To begin with, problems emerge for purely generational reasons. Independent of the setting in which it occurs, cooperation between people in their 20s and people in their 60s and 70s might be expected to be prone to difficulties. The sometimes perceived, sometimes actual lack of respect for the respective other side does not help. However, the problems go deeper. Notably, both generations tend to use rather different means of communication. The new generation works with facebook and emails. Some activists of the old generation prefer to communicate by telephone, written correspondence and personal meetings. When new CSOs organise events, they send out invitations by email. However, activists of the old generation do not necessarily have email-addresses and if they do, they might not check and respond to their emails regularly. At the same time, they get the impression that they are intentionally excluded if they are not notified of events and activities. Meanwhile the new generation is often unwilling to make the extra effort that is necessary to include them. As one representative of the new generations put it:

It is so difficult to contact them. You always need to call, they don't reply to emails. They say they will come but then they are not. Come on, we have lots of new organizations, I am sick of running after them.<sup>69</sup>

One example were the Jamaity awards, an annual gala where civil society engagement is awarded with prizes in different categories. In its first edition, the young crew organising the event forgot some of the key actors of the old generation, which caused tensions in the aftermath.<sup>70</sup> A second problem relates to different styles of communication. Within the older generation, one sometimes hears complaints about the deterioration of the Tunisian education system under Ben Ali and how it “has ruined an entire generation”.<sup>71</sup> Many of the Historiques studied in France during the 1960s. They tend to use an abstract and at times rather pompous language that is seen as elitist and pretentious by the new generation. As one activist explained:

They [the old generation] were in France in May 1968 [during the Paris student uprisings], they have seen movies like ‘Z’<sup>72</sup> by Costa Gavras. When I ask the young ones, why don't you join the Femmes Democratres [ATFD], they complain that their discourses are langue de bois [a term that literally means ‘wooden language’ but is better translated as ‘waffling’].<sup>73</sup>

A third cause of tension is based on the rather different ideas of what civil society engagement should look like. Under the Ben Ali regime, organisations understood their role as opposition to the regime. With Ben Ali gone and an actual political opposition in place, this role has been taken over by others. The old civil society organisations now have the opportunity and are expected to make constructive propositions rather than just opposing things. However, some of them struggle to adapt to this new context.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, many post-2011 organisations started with the ambition to use the new freedom to implement quite specific ideas and projects. For example, rather than merely advocating for more public integrity and accountability from the government, Al Bawsala enforces it by monitoring the activities of the Tunisian parliament and informing the public about what is discussed in its committees.

Moreover, both generations use different tools for their work. The post-2011 generation are digital natives who make extensive use of social media and other means of modern online communication. The day before former prime minister Mehdi Jomaa took office, the Tunisian anti-corruption watchdog I-Watch set up a 'Jomaa Meter' – a website listing his promises and tracking whether he delivered on them. In contrast, parts of the old generation have a rather limited understanding and make only limited use of modern technology. For example, until fairly recently the LTDH did not even have an electronic list of its members. As one representative of the new generation quipped:

The old generation has a 'communiqué de presse' approach. When you ask them what they have done in the past year, they proudly tell you that they issued 30 statements and organised 15 press conferences.<sup>75</sup>

The final cause of tension between the two generations is their lack of trust towards each other. The Historiques consist of a small circle of a few hundred activists that are of advanced age and largely know each other personally. They are organised in a handful of organisations whose memberships overlap, with the LTDH serving as an umbrella organization that includes almost everyone. For the new generation, it is difficult to get access to this circle. At the same time, the old generation is rather hesitant to open itself. One activist explained that:

It is not because they were worried that these people would take their place but because they didn't know them and what their agenda is. They were there for 30 years or more, they were all friends, 400 activists, they all knew each other.<sup>76</sup>

This lack of trust towards newcomers stems from the Ben Ali period. A former president of the LTDH explained that:

In the past ten years, we could not open the LTDH to new members. Each time we did that, the party in power would try to infiltrate us. They even created a law that forced us to take everyone who wanted to join. We refused that.<sup>77</sup>

The fear of being infiltrated by forces close to the former regime persists. Moreover, there are new worries about Islamists joining. And in light of the above-mentioned divisions, they are also partly unwilling and partly unable to include and work with the new generation. In turn, the new generation's exclusion contributes to existing scepticism and mistrust among them towards the old generation. This is further enhanced by what they see as the old generation's privileges. Due to their pre-2011 engagement and their role in the National Dialogue, the representatives of the old generation tend to have a better network within Tunisian politics. For example, the Tunisian minister in charge of civil society from 2015 to 2016, Kamel Jendoubi, was a president of the Committee for the respect of freedoms and human rights (Comité pour le Respect des Libertés et des Droits de l'Homme en Tunisie, CRLDHT) and honorary president of the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (previously EMHRN, now Euromed Rights) whose Tunisian members include the CRLDHT but also, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux, FTDES) as well as the LTDH and the ATFD. Hence various representatives of these organisations had personal ties to him that the younger generation lacked.

## **Conclusions**

Post-2011 development of civil society has been shaped by the new opportunities of post-Ben Ali-Tunisia. These include not only a less restrictive political environment but also the increased availability of foreign funding and the growing engagement of international NGOs. However, the new opportunities and the emergence of a new generation of activists have also contributed to tensions across civil society. The

increased freedom encourages some activists to pursue idealistically motivated maximalist goals that more pragmatic activists fear could undermine the transition. Increased involvement of non-Tunisian actors entails tensions on the question of how 'Tunisian' Tunisian civil society should be. Increased foreign funding leads to tensions around the question of how independent associations should be. Both the availability of funding and the increased role of young people whose professional opportunities are limited lead to divisions on whether civil society should be professionalised or primarily be driven by volunteers.

The existing literature has identified similar tensions elsewhere in the Arab world and beyond. Notably, an emerging body of research examines the 'NGOization' of civil society, particularly in transitioning countries that receive financial assistance from Western governments and institutions. However, little research has been conducted on generational differences that occur as a result of the dynamics of transition processes. Such differences constitute the overarching faultline within Tunisian civil society, which has seen the emergence of a divide between the generation of activists that was already active under the authoritarian Ben Ali regime and a new generation that emerged in the run-up to and after its ouster. Tensions between these two generations are based on the fact that both feel entitled to claim the leadership of post 2011-Tunisian civil society and on the lack of mutual respect for and trust in each other. This is complemented by their rather different ideas about how to do things. In fact, the generational divide also transcends some of the other divisions. For example, the old generation has traditionally been based on volunteerism and it is very sympathetic to the concept. However, as established, often upper middle-class academics and lawyers, it is easier for them to insist on such ideals than for the socio-economically marginalised younger generation. For similar reasons, the younger



generation also tends to be more flexible with regards to the extent to which funded projects might be pre-defined by donors.

This generational divide is both a risk and a lost opportunity. Large parts of the Historiques are at an advanced age. Unless they manage to include younger activists, they risk not having anyone to take over key organisations like the LTDH. Moreover, both generations might potentially complement each other not only in terms of capability and clout, but also with regards to whom their activities address. While the older generation is able to connect with the governing elites, the younger one might connect with the disenfranchised youth. Hence, the generational divisions endanger the survival of some of the most important Tunisian associations and reduce the potential impact that civil society could have.

## Notes

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1. Deane, *Transforming Tunisia*; and Kéfi, *Civil Society*.
  2. Walton et al., *Challenges to INGO Legitimacy*.
  3. Dupuy et al., *Ethiopia's regulatory crackdown*; and Walton et al., *Challenges to INGO Legitimacy*.
  4. Härdig, *Beyond the Arab revolts*, 1136.
  5. Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*.
  6. Banks et al., *NGOs, states, and donors revisited*, 708.
  7. Mercer, *Critical review of the literature*, 10.
  8. Alvarez, *Advocating feminism*; Hammami, *The Professionalisation of Politics*; and Jad, *NGO-isation*.
  9. Roy, *Indian Women's Movement*.
  10. Chahim and Prakash, *NGOization*.
  11. Roy, *Public Power*; Willner-Reid, *Aid marketplace*.
  12. Banks et al., *NGOs, states, and donors revisited*.
  13. Jacobsson and Saxonberg, *Beyond NGO-ization*.

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14. Howell and Pearce, *Civil Society and Development*, 121.
  15. Cullen, Platform of European Social NGOs.
  16. CIA, *The World Factbook*.
  17. Yerkes, *Revolutionaries*.
  18. Honwana, *Youth and Revolution*.
  19. Interviews with senior members of Al Bawsala and LTDH, Tunis, September 2015.
  20. Bellin, *Civil Society in Tunisia*, 126.
  21. Perkins, *History of Modern Tunisia*, 142.
  22. Perkins, *History of Modern Tunisia*, 150.
  23. Yousfi, *Une Passion Tunisienne*, 34f.
  24. Vandewalle, *Second State*.
  25. Martin, *Democratic Learning*, 803.
  26. Interviews with civil society activists, Tunis, July and August 2015.
  27. Interview with a senior member of the LTDH, Tunis, August 2015.
  28. Interview with an activist, Tunis, September 2015.
  29. Interview with an activist, Tunis, August 2015.
  30. Human Rights Watch, *Lawsuit*.
  31. Interview with an activist, Tunis, August 2015.
  32. Interview with a senior member of AFTURD, Tunis, August 2015.
  33. Interview with an activist, Tunis, September 2015.
  34. Yousfi, *Une Passion Tunisienne*, 70.
  35. Alianak, *The Arab Spring Realised*, 37.
  36. Interviews with activists from both organisations, Tunis, July to September 2015.
  37. Cavatorta, *Awakening*, 76f.
  38. Breuer et al., *Social media and protest mobilization*.
  39. Chomiak and Entelis, *Making of North Africa's Intifadas*, 15.
  40. 'Rais Lebled' translates as 'head of state'.
  41. Martin, *Democratic Learning*, 803.
  42. Interview with a co-founder of I-Watch, Tunis, June 2015.
  43. République Tunisienne, Décret-loi no 2011-88.
  44. Various interviews with Tunisian activists, Tunis, April to September 2015.
  45. European Commission, *Financial Transparency System*; and European Commission, *How to apply for a grant*.
  46. Interview with a member of staff of Mourakiboun, Tunis, May 2015.
  47. Various interviews with Tunisian activists, Tunis, April to September 2015.

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48. Interview with Tunisian activist, Tunis, September 2015.
  49. Union Européene Delegation en Tunisie, Synopsis PASC Tunisie.
  50. Interview with a staff member of a Tunisian NGO, Tunis, May 2015.
  51. Interview with a staff member of an international NGO, Tunis, July 2015.
  52. Interview with a staff member of an international NGO, Tunis, August 2015.
  53. Interview with a staff member of an international NGO, Tunis, July 2015.
  54. Interview with Amira Yahyaoui, co-founder of Al Bawsala, Tunis, September 2015.
  55. Interviews with Tunisian activists, Tunis, June to September 2015.
  56. Interview with Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, president of Doustourna, Tunis, June 2015.
  57. Interview with a staff member of a Tunisian NGO, Tunis, May 2015.
  58. Interview with a former president of the LTDH, Tunis, September 2015.
  59. Weilandt, Socio-economic challenges.
  60. Interview with a co-founder of a Tunisian NGO, Tunis, May 2015.
  61. Interview with the director of Beity, Sana Ben Achour, Tunis, July 2015.
  62. Interview with a Tunisian staff member of an international NGO, Tunis, May 2015.
  63. Interview with a Tunisian staff member of an international NGO, Tunis, May 2015.
  64. Interview with a Tunisian activist, Tunis, August 2015.
  65. Interview with a Tunisian staff member of an international NGO, Tunis, May 2015.
  66. Interview with a senior staff member of a Tunisian NGO, Tunis, September 2015.
  67. Interview with a senior member of the LTDH, Tunis, August 2015.
  68. Interviews with Tunisian activists, Tunis, June to September 2015.
  69. Interview with a member of staff of a Tunisian NGO, Tunis, August 2015.
  70. Interview with a member of staff of a Tunisian NGO, Tunis, August 2015.
  71. Interviews with civil society activists, Tunis, April to August 2015.
  72. 1969 Algerian film about the Greek military junta.
  73. Interview with a Tunisian activist, Tunis, August 2015.
  74. Interview with the co-founder of a Tunisian NGO, Tunis, May 2015.
  75. Interview with Amira Yahyaoui, co-founder of Al Bawsala, Tunis, September 2015.
  76. Interview with a staff member of a Tunisian NGO, Tunis, May 2015.
  77. Interview with a former president of the LTDH, Tunis, September 2015.

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