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The Jasmine Revolution: Causes in Synthesis

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The Jasmine Revolution:

Causes in Synthesis

by

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The Jasmine Revolution:
Causes in Synthesis

by

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The Tunisian Revolution sparked a major wave of unrest culminating in the broader Arab Spring. This study attempts to identify primary causes of the Tunisian Revolution and situate it in broader discourse on revolutionary theory through a synthesis of the currently existing literature on the Tunisian uprisings, and to propose a new concept to view the revolution through: emulsifying internationalization. Emulsifying internationalization describes the aspects of globalization under capitalism which facilitate cross-regional and cross-class sympathies to emerge, reducing barriers to revolutionary identification. The study recompiles an account of the Tunisian Revolution and discusses policy implications for the region and the United States.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation sparked a wave of revolution and unrest that would spread from the Governor's Office of Sidi Bouzid all the way to Yemen and Bahrain. The mass protests that characterized the Arab Spring recast the long quiescent countries of the Middle East and North Africa as drivers of global change and crisis; they refocused academic and journalistic debates about the emerging power of social media and civil society organizations. The Tunisian Revolution still carries an impact entirely out of proportion to the tiny North African republic's demographic and economic clout.

But the appearance of revolution in Tunisia in the first place seemed highly doubtful at its onset. The Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index for 2010 ranked Tunisia as the second most stable country in Africa, trailing only Ghana. Widespread and sustained protest in the Gafsa mining region in 2008 had been violently suppressed. European companies had been planning a massive solar energy project, Desertec, in Tunisia and surrounding countries, which was finally scrapped in 2013 for various reasons including concerns for a deteriorating security situation. Revolutions almost by definition catch observers off guard, but the Tunisian case begs the question: what makes the causes and processes which contributed to the initial success of the Tunisian Revolution special? What features does it share with previous revolutions, and what do the differences tell us about where global trends in security and revolutionary change are headed?

Attempting to relate the Tunisian Revolution causally to any other specific revolution –

let alone situating it in a typology of revolution – has its critics. We run the risk of "isolat[ing]

each specific revolutionary experience from its own specific past," as Mehdi Mabrouk puts it.[1]

There is an obvious danger in over-attributing as complex and socially-bound an event as

revolution in any single cause, and yet a strictly mechanistic retelling of the chronology and

moving parts which constitute the material process of revolution leaves us without any insight

into the deeper forces which drive them.

Many of these deeper forces are so common as to define the phenomena through their

universality: where has there been a revolution without some combination of economic privation

and political oppression? Causal and comparative study is useful for its power at identifying

factors common to regional and global political contexts, not for predicting near replicas of

particular cases in the future. By attempting to weigh causal forces and contributing factors in the

Tunisian case and comparing these elements with the broader academic understanding of

revolution, we may be able to learn something about widely-shared and emerging social

problems which drive unrest.

This paper begins with a broad treatment of the literature of revolution from political

science and historical perspectives, both important contributions to our understanding of the

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[1] Mabrouk, Mehdi. (2011). "A revolution for dignity and freedom: preliminary
observations on the social and cultural background to the Tunisian revolution." *The Journal of North African
Studies*, 16:4, 626.

common phenomenon of revolution and more recent scholarship addressing the Tunisian case. Theoretical underpinnings for explaining the revolution based on the available literature are then discussed, leading to the composite concept of "emulsifying internationalization." This is followed by a detailed account of the events of the Tunisian revolution and the pre-revolutionary period, recompiled through a synthesis of the literature.

I then present an argument for aspects of the Tunisian Revolution which contributed to emulsifying internationalization. These include a dual process of coastalization and internationalization alongside the technocratic diminution of the ideological underpinnings of the state accompanied by the gradual withering of its core constituencies. The populist roots of Tunisia's revolution are examined in detail, as well as the role of social media in amplifying cross-regional revolutionary identification. A brief section on implications for United States policy follows.

Finally, I relate the Tunisian case to some preliminary suggestions for the larger study of revolution and provide a summation of the broader study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A tremendous amount of scholarly work in political science has been devoted to the subject of revolution, from early analyses of the "great revolutions" of history to the contemporary explosion in scholarship focusing on newer topics like the mechanics of revolutionary mobilization and microanalysis of revolutionary leadership. For the purposes of this study a selection of major works on revolution are addressed, followed by case-specific literature on the Tunisian revolution.

Revolutionary Theory

Skocpol: Class-based revolution and structural analysis

Theda Skocpol's "States and Social Revolution" is a classic structural analysis of great revolutions from a Marxist perspective. Skocpol differentiates between political and social revolutions, ascribing to the "great revolutions" of history the status of social revolutions, which she defines as: "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures… …accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below."[2] Skocpol makes the crucial insight that the state is a site of contestation between social forces which itself is somewhat autonomous of social forces, even those considered to be dominant. Revolutionary pressure builds from the rising power of classes hitherto not served by the state.

Using Skocpol's definition, Tunisia seems to have entered a political revolution without a true social revolution. It is hard not to see parallels between the group dynamics she details in the Russian Revolution, which did produce social revolution, and those of Tunisia. In Russia, the traditionally dominant class of nobles had seen their economic and social position deteriorated

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[2] Skocpol, Theda. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1979). 4.

by industrial reforms aimed at modernizing the Russian economy, weakening the ability of the state to muster decisive defense for the old order.[3] As other authors will discuss, the neoliberal reforms carried out by the Ben Ali regime created a similarly widespread loss of economic and social security for Tunisia's middle classes, with a key structural difference that most of Tunisia was well into the process of industrialization. In broad comparison, Tunisia's pre-revolutionary situation comports with Skocpol's depiction of an old regime in crisis coupled with popular unrest in the lower classes.

Keddie: Populist revolution

The Iranian Revolution has claimed a contested status with other "great revolutions" chiefly for its apparent cultural linkage: the aims of the revolutionary movement led by Ayatollah Khomeini were religious in addition to ever-salient economic concerns. The success of the Islamic Republic against the Shah inspired widespread speculation that a broader turn to Islamist revolution might be in the offing, though this has failed to materialize. Many have studied the Iranian case for this seeming anomaly, including Nikki Keddie, whose work has been tremendously influential to understanding Islamism in Iran and further abroad.

Keddie has argued that the deep association of the Shah with Western and particularly American influence and cultural values opened up space for the use of culturally-driven ideology to mobilize a revolutionary coalition across classes.[4] The narrative of "Westoxification" which Khomeini drove resonated deeply with the sense of disempowerment and alienation felt by large sectors of Iranian society under the Shah's extraordinarily paternalistic and personalistic rule. That much of the leadership came from Iran's Shi'i clergy, which had a long history of

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[3] Ibid., p. 93.

[4] Keddie, Nikki R. "Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective." *The American Historical Review* 88, no. 3 (1983): 597.

involvement in Iranian politics and could boast of deep cultural legitimacy, served to put an Islamist skin on a revolution which at its core could be described as "populist."[5]

While Tunisia's revolution lacked early revolutionary leadership from the religious establishment or Islamists, Ben Ali's regime was deeply associated with international capitalism, and indeed liberal reforms to the economy which opened it up to further international penetration were Ben Ali's chief raison d'etre for claiming power in the first place. Keddie's argument for populist revolution may have some applicability in the Tunisian case, even if the Tunisian revolution did not immediately appear to be rooted in traditionalism.

Keddie herself has argued that there is a secondary common cause between the Arab Spring and the Iranian Revolution of opposition to foreign policies deferential to the United States.[6] Tunisia's economic exposure to the international community as a driver for populist impulses in its revolution will be discussed in the case-specific literature.

Goldstone: Fourth Generation Revolutionary Theory

Jack Goldstone offers a competing vision of revolution which synthesizes previous analyses based on structural weakness in regimes with more contemporary criticism of the assumptions and applicability of the previously dominant structural analyses, which Goldstone terms "third generation" revolutionary theory. Goldstone's review of the field doesn't point to a particular comprehensive theory, but it changes the framing of revolution from one of constant underlying revolutionary pressure to an emergent process produced by two related but distinct processes: regime weakness and revolutionary identification.[7] Crucial to both is a perception

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[5] Ibid., p. 591.

[6] Keddie, N. R. "Arab and Iranian Revolts 1979-2011: Influences or Similar Causes?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies, 44*(1), 2012: 152.

[7] Goldstone, Jack A. "Toward a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory." *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2001): 173-174.

among participating elites and popular groups that the actor they are supporting supplies both "effectiveness and justice."[8]

Goldstone's identification of emerging processes of revolution leaves space for the absence of revolution in states which have nonetheless experienced periods of acute economic and organizational crisis. It also allows for a more comprehensive treatment of cultural and multi-class causes of revolution than classical Marxist explanations. Elsewhere in his "Rethinking Revolutions: Integrating Origins, Processes and Outcomes," he lays out a 12-step modular process of revolution, the variation of which he argues determines the outlines of particular revolutions as "color" revolutions producing weak liberal states or "radicalizing" revolutions producing authoritarian regimes.[9]

Case Specific Literature

Urban-Rural Divide

Claire Clancy-Smith: "Coastalization"

Claire Clancy-Smith provides a long-term historical view of the causes of the Jasmine Revolution in her essay "Tunisian Revolutions: Reflections on Seas, Coasts and Interiors."[10] Clancy-Smith describes intersecting causal roots in the urban-rural divide exacerbated by the colonial and postcolonial periods. Clancy-Smith points towards the gradual "coastalization" of the Tunisian economy and society.

"Coastalization" refers to the hyper-concentration of resources along major waterways. In the Tunisian case, it emphasizes cultural, ecological and economic aspects of the rising

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[8] Ibid., p. 148-149, 154.

[9] Goldstone, Jack A. "Rethinking Revolutions: Integrating Origins, Processes and Outcomes." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 48, No. 1 (2009): 20-31.

[10] Clancy-Smith, Julia. *Tunisian Revolutions : Reflections on Seas, Coasts, and Interiors*. (Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2014): 6.

internationalization of the Tunisian elite since the mid-1800s. Clancy-Smith traces neglect of interior populations back to the boom in agricultural exports to Europe during the Napoleonic Wars,[11] leading to an orientation towards and eventual capture by international markets. The introduction of European models of extractive taxation and the eventual cooptation of the Husaynid monarchy into French colonialism following the 1881 Treaty of Bardo are also highlighted as contributing to the gradual delegitimization of the coastal elite.

Cultural drift accompanies economic exploitation in Clancy-Smith's account of Tunisia's transformations, with the colonial period producing new modern identities distinct from the European colonizers and traditional modes of life in the Muslim Maghreb, particularly as regarded the role of women. A new "Mediterranean Universalism" cleft the emerging Tunisian urban middle and upper classes with their more secular and gender-equal orientation from more conservative society in the interior.[12] Independence only reinforced this group's power over society, and the increasing reliance on tourism as a core economic activity for Tunisia sustained its fundamentally international orientation. Other authors have noted the deep economic and cultural polarization between cosmopolitan northern and coastal Tunisia and the more traditional interior.[13]

Clancy-Smith thus portrays the Jasmine Revolution as the continuation of a centuries-long process of separation between the coasts and interiors of Tunisia for which the proximate causes of rampant corruption by the Ben Ali regime and acute economic stress in the country's interior were simply heightened expressions of pre-existing tendencies. Her argument centers on

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[11] Ibid, p. 6.
[12] Ibid, p. 23
[13] Alexander, Christopher. *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb.* 2nd edition. (New York, Routledge, 2016). 71, 77.

well-established Marxian analyses of class conflict but modulates that class conflict through geographical and cultural concerns.

Alia Gana similarly identifies a process of gradual transfer of public resources towards coastal industry and tourism from the 1980s onwards.[14] Gana also identifies increasing pressure on Tunisia's domestic farming sector, with an original postcolonial agricultural import substitution scheme giving way to the gradual liberalization and consolidation of Tunisia's commercial farming enterprises. The increasing reliance of the Tunisian farming sector on international sources for inputs – and the increasing substitution of domestic food products for international imports – has contributed to a high average percentage of household budgets spent on food security.[15] In the meantime, agriculture in Tunisia's interior has become a stopgap employment measure for family members unemployed in the formal economy. The author concludes that total internationalization of the food system in Tunisia was a major driver of the unrest that lead to the Tunisian revolution.

Ayeb Habib also identifies deep marginalization of the central, southern and western regions of the country rooted in a disparity in access to land and water resources as a central cause of the uprisings culminating in the Jasmine Revolution, which he dubs the "Alfa Grass Revolution" after the hardy and high-yielding pasture grass found more frequently in the vicinity of Sidi Bouzid.[16] He notes the halving of utilization rates for traditional oasis-based small shareholder farming since the 1990s, during which large elite-owned farms irrigated by well water have more than doubled in hectare coverage.[17] Habib divides support for the revolution

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[14] Gana, Alia. "The Rural and Agricultural Roots of the Tunisian Revolution: When Food Security Matters." *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture & Food* (2012): 204.
[15] Ibid., p. 206.
[16] Habib Ayeb. "Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution." *Review of African Political Economy*, 38:129 (2011): 470.
[17] Ibid., p. 472.

into marginalized and middle classes, stressing the different demands and different chronology of adoption of the two groups. While the lower classes were more interested in employment and food security issues, the middle classes fought for the right to assembly and freedom of speech. Dignity became the bridging value between these disparate interests as a cross-class coalition formed after initial protests.

Hania: Precursors of the modern urban – rural divide

Abdelhamid Hania charts the development of midwestern Tunisian tribal society from the independent Tunisian Hafsid dynasty through Ottoman and later French occupation. Hania identifies the essential nature of interior society as collectivist and martial by dint of the harsh environmental conditions and the cooperation necessary for intermittent agriculture in Tunisia's drylands.[18] Hania describes the intermediation of the tribal Sheikh responsible for collecting taxes and maintaining security as a limiting factor on the influence of the central state in Tunisia's interior. Hania identifies a crucial period of change in urban-tribal relations in the early 17th century with the Muradid Beys of the Ottoman Empire, who began a project to curb tribal influence.[19]

Ottoman / Muradid attempts to curb tribal influence were far more successful in the north of the country than in the central and southern regions, where resistance persisted into and well beyond the period of French occupation starting in 1881, which disrupted Ottoman attempts to bring tribal power to heel. Hania ends with the observation that as Midwest Tunisia emerged into the 20th century it had developed a centuries-long relationship of resistance to central authority.[20]

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[18] (Translated) Hania, Abdelhamid. "Midwest Tunisia Amid Changes Resulting from the Events of the 18th and 19th Centuries." from Al-Ahmar, al-Mawlidi. *The Tunisian Revolution: Examining the Triggers through the Prism of the Humanities.* (Doha, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2014): 47-50.
[19] Ibid, p. 56.
[20] Ibid., p. 83.

Beissinger, Jamal, Mazur: Cross-class Coalitions and Regional Disparity

Beissinger et al. contrast survey information from the nearly contemporaneous Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions to characterize the protest movements in both countries. The findings for Tunisia emphasize a broad cross-class coalition chiefly characterized by regional disparities, with revolution beginning in the interior and neglected coastal cities like Sfax, where neoliberal adjustments and reductions in welfare and social investment were felt more acutely than in the capital and favored regions.[21] This tends to support the argument for "coastalization" advanced by Clancy-Smith, with a broad cross-section of Tunisian society playing a role in a revolution chiefly characterized by massive participation in the regime's hinterland and a slow advance to the capital.

The 2011 Arab Barometer survey used as the chief methodological tool reported a much higher participation rate among Tunisians (16%) in the revolution than has been found in Egypt and in other countries using different methods,[22] and show broad buy-in from lower, middle class, unemployed, and student Tunisians. The findings cut directly against arguments that civil society groups catalyzed revolution in Tunisia, showing that only 6% of the Tunisian population belonged to such groups at the time of revolution, and a comparatively small proportion (18.8%) of civil society members participated in revolutionary activities in comparison to the Egyptian case (42.9%).[23] While labor unions and other civil society groups like the General Union of Tunisian Workers have had a large role in the direction of the revolution since its inception, these findings cast doubt on the argument that revolution was spearheaded among civil society

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[21] Beissinger, Mark R., Amaney A. Jamal, and Kevin Mazur. "Explaining Divergent Revolutionary Coalitions: Regime Strategies and the Structuring of Participation in the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions." *Comparative Politics* 48, no. 1 (2015): 14.

[22] Ibid, p. 17.

[23] Ibid, p. 6.

groups. The findings also generally support the importance of youth unemployment in Tunisia's revolutionary foment.

Zemni: Urban Contention

Sami Zemni addresses the spread of protest to the favored urban centers in Tunisia despite the revolution's rural roots. Zemni frames increasing openness to revolutionary grievance in urban Tunisia changes produced by neoliberal reforms to the economy. Zemni argues that the practical political effect of these reforms was to create a shared sense of solidarity between urban Tunisia and the deprived interior due to economic migration to the cities and increasingly visible inequality in urban settings.[24]

Zemni recounts how a retreat from state services, loss of jobs in the Gafsa mining region, and a restructuring of agrarian land ownership favoring large holders drove a wave of migration to Tunisian cities, where general stagnation in jobs imperiled the meritocratic promise of higher-skill jobs previously enjoyed the Tunisian middle class. With corruption increasingly visible and the cross-regional sympathies of newer city-dwellers creating solidarity with the interior, urban and middle-class alliances with the rural and poor became increasingly possible.

Youth Bulge and Unemployment

Campante and Chor: Education / Employment Imbalance

Campante and Chor begin with the widely-supported observation that educated citizens tend to participate in political activities more often than the uneducated.[25] The authors contend that the combination of widespread unemployment and much improved levels of education in the Middle East were crucial to the widespread unrest seizing the region starting in 2011. The data

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[24] Zemni, Sami. "The Tunisian Revolution: Neoliberalism, urban contentious politics and the right to the city." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41 (1), (2017): 78.

[25] Campante, Filipe R., and Davin Chor. "Why was the arab world poised for revolution? schooling, economic opportunities, and the arab spring." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 26 (2), (2012): 168.

they provide for Tunisia show Tunisia's added educational value in years of schooling (within the top 20 in the world for the time evaluated) as well as general unemployment far greater than the average.[26] Their data also suggests a propensity of high-education, high-unemployment populations towards political demonstrations. Mabrouk's study also highlights the increasing problem of well-educated but jobless youth, showing the declining ability for graduates to obtain jobs in most fields.[27]

Campante and Chor also demonstrate that the demographic typically thought of when considering "youth bulge" arguments – late teens and early twenties – is actually on the decline in Tunisia, whereas slightly older Tunisians (25-39) are at an all-time high coinciding with peak working years.[28] They ran regression analysis looking at changes in executive leadership for a cohort of countries taking into account unemployment, education, and the (15-24) and (25-39) age demographics, and found a statistically significant correlation between unemployment, high education and executive change that was complimented by high proportions of citizens aged 25-39 but not as much by those aged 18-24. In other words, their sample supported an education-employment gap argument over a youth bulge argument.[29]

Murphy: The IMF, Unemployment and Poverty

Emma Murphy makes the argument that international financial institutions persistently ignored signs of structural weakness and corruption in the Tunisian economy and enabled predatory economic practices by the elite via their loan and privatization schemes. Despite very real economic and social progress since the "doctor's coup" of 1987, Tunisia's official rate of

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[26] Ibid, p. 171.

[27] Mabrouk, Mehdi. (2011). A revolution for dignity and freedom: preliminary observations on the social and cultural background to the Tunisian revolution, The Journal of North African Studies, 16:4, p. 628.

[28] Campante, Filipe R., and Davin Chor. "Why was the arab world poised for revolution? schooling, economic opportunities, and the arab spring." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 26 (2), (2012): 170.

[29] Ibid, p. 182.

3.8% poverty was substantially undercounted, with other methodologies counting as high as 11.5%. Meanwhile, before the revolution 45.6% of Tunisians were considered "floating middle class," at risk of falling into poverty in the event of shocks to food prices like those experienced in the 2000s.[30]

With so many living in economic precarity despite strong macroeconomic factors, the IFIs nonetheless called for the reduction and targeting of limited fuel and food subsidies which many Tunisians relied on to prevent themselves from falling into poverty. Meanwhile, Tunisia's rate of growth was not enough to ensure jobs for new market entrants. With unemployment around 15% and reaching nearly 40% in the southwest of the country, Tunisia was unable to create opportunities for its well-educated youth population.[31]

Murphy's study reveals a staggering lack of awareness on the part of IFIs when it comes to government corruption. Through the late 1990s up until the eve of the revolution, the economic interests of tenderpreneurs linked directly to the extended Ben Ali-Trebelsi family rose to encompass fully a third of the Tunisian economy.[32] The World Bank and IMF failed to register the extent of the corruption because they relied on the Tunisian government's own data, which reflected the seizure of state assets by family members as part of an overall positive indicator of the privatization of state assets.

Social Media

The increasing penetration of online social media and its capacity for rapidly disseminating peer-to-peer news and messaging has been pointed to as contributing to the

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[30] Murphy, Emma C., "Under The Emperor's Neoliberal Clothes! Why the International Financial Institutions Got It Wrong in Tunisia." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 41, 42.

[31] Ibid., pp. 43, 44.

[32] Ibid., pp. 46-49.

possibility of Tunisia's 2011 revolution. Popular western news outlets pointed to the Tunisian

blogosphere and Facebook participation as the most externally visible particularities of the

broader Arab Spring, often limiting their popular coverage of the revolts to these technological

means of protest.[33]

Howard and Hussain: Digital Media and Organization

Howard and Hussain lay out a case for new media making spontaneous organization and

dissemination of dissident media possible in the incredibly censured traditional media market of

the modern Middle East. The Tunisian government had interfered in internet access before,

sporadically blocking popular sites like Facebook, Daily Motion and YouTube in the 2000s.[34]

The nature of digital communication made it much harder for the Tunisian government to

respond to acute crisis in 2011, however.

The authors point to the rapid adoption of mobile phones in Tunisia, the prevalence of

dissident blogs and the tendency of online Twitter and blog conversations to precede material

action against the regime as evidence that digital media pushed social revolution.[35] Bloggers

provided thought leadership inside the country and hacktivists disrupted the regime's attempts to

clamp down on online control, even materially damaging the regime by downing the Tunisian

stock exchange.[36]

Kahlaoui: Digital Activism in the Ben Ali Era

Tarek Kahlaoui, himself a political blogger and activist under the Ben Ali regime,

cautions against the overestimation of social media's influence on the Tunisian Revolution,

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[33] Kahlaoui, Tarek, "The Powers of Social Media." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 147.

[34] Howard, Philip N. and Hussain, Muzammil M. *Democracy's Fourth Wave? : Media and the Arab Spring* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2013): 38.

[35] Ibid. p. 48, 51.

[36] Ibid. p. 30.

noting the larger cross-class coalition that carried the revolution to culmination through new and traditional means of communication. He traces the internet activism which helped disseminate the news of the revolution and regime abuses to an anti-censorship movement responsible for the "Leave Saleh Alone" and "Bad Day for Ammar" campaigns (Ammar being the Tunisian nickname for the internet error message "404 error page not found").[37]

Kahlaoui argues that digital activism through social media created an effective challenge to the state's propaganda efforts, thus blunting the ability of the regime to maintain its media's credibility as unrest mounted. He highlights in particular the dissemination of Wikileaks cables in the weeks prior to Bouazizi's self-immolation which revealed the massive extent of the Ben Ali-Trabelsi family's corruption and the spontaneous creation of semi-official news outlets to reveal regime abuses as protests met stiff police resistance.[38] Ultimately, Kahlaoui fights against the over-simplification of the revolution to a "Twitter Revolution" but makes a strong case for social media's convening and sustaining power in a revolutionary movement that remained leaderless until very late in the crisis.

Lowrance and Social Media Participation

Shelly Lowrance corroborates the high rate of Internet penetration in Tunisia but cautions that more traditional means of communication have frequently driven revolution and that subversive means of using the internet are only about as common as active methods of control pursued by governments in telecommunications.[39] Lowrence highlights the active filtering and censorship of ATI, Tunisia's internet agency, as well as the frequent harassment and arrest of

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[37] Kahlaoui, Tarek, "The Powers of Social Media." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 150, 151.
[38] Ibid., pp. 153-155.
[39] Lowrance, S. "Was the Revolution Tweeted? Social Media and the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia." *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 25 (2016): 155–176.

independent journalists and bloggers. She shows that the role digital media played had distinct phases in application, and highlights "bridging activities" that helped transform online activism into material action.

Lowrance's interviews reveal a pattern of increasing intensification of digital organizing and broadcasting effort, initially focused on getting information out of Sidi Bouzid to the international media, then breaking an internal government blockade on news about the unrest, and finally serving a convening function for mass protests. The author also notes the importance of previous internet freedom campaigns like the "White Shirt" protests, building an experienced network and popular familiarity with online coordination. These creative forms of protest echo Mabrouk's insight about Tunisian youth involvement in social media, chiefly that the irreverence of conversation possible on social networks serves to "demystify" authority.[40] They fit into a larger discourse on the capacity of social media to highlight corruption and generate disaffection, corroborated by other authors.[41]

Classical Marxism and The Labor Union

Achcar: Class Struggle

Gilbert Achcar lays out a Marxist explanation for the Arab Uprisings in his book "The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising." Achcar argues that the Arab Uprisings are a product of expanding productive capacity coming into conflict with existing relations of production, and that the decade of labor struggles preceding 2011 as well as the cross-regional eruption of unrest indicate that revolution was "overdetermined" by acute

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[40] Mabrouk, Mehdi. "A revolution for dignity and freedom: preliminary observations on the social and cultural background to the Tunisian revolution." *The Journal of North African Studies*, 16:4 (2011): 633.

[41] Bishara, Azmi. "Revolutions, Reforms and Democratic Transition in the Arab Homeland from the Perspective of the Tunisian Revolution." *Palestine - Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture; East Jerusalem* Vol. 18, Iss. 1, (2012): 22-25.

economic privation. Achcar points to the Gafsa mining struggles of 2008 and wide-spread protests in Skhira in 2010 as an indication of the mounting pressure on Tunisia's corporatist system preceding the general uprisings.[42]

Achcar portrays the UGTT, Tunisia's centrally-sanctioned labor union, as internally divided over the revolution. The lower rank-and-file participated widely in the preceding labor struggles that made mass mobilization possible, while core leadership remained close to the Ben Ali regime until it became clear that the revolution would be successful. Interviews conducted by Shelly Lowrence corroborate this, showing the initial Sidi Bouzid protests frequently organizing at the local UGTT chapterhouse.[43] Mabrouk also highlights the roots of the UGTT's historically contentious relationship with the government in the Black Thursday repression of 1978 through the Gafsa crisis,[44] and Christopher Alexander has also noted the ambivalent and increasingly contentious relationship of the UGTT with the government.[45]

The UGTT's initial participation and then abandonment of the Tunisian transitional government, which Achcar characterizes as a conservative coup d'état preserving the basic system of "politically determined capitalism" in place under Ben Ali, marks the re-emergence of a class conscious political movement in Tunisia which Achcar places at the core of Tunisian

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[42] Achcar, Gilbert. *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013). 118, 124.

[43] Lowrance, S. "Was the Revolution Tweeted? Social Media and the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia." *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 25 (2016): 155–176.

[44] Mabrouk, Mehdi. "A revolution for dignity and freedom: preliminary observations on the social and cultural background to the Tunisian revolution." *The Journal of North African Studies*, 16:4 (2011): 626-627.

[45] Alexander, Christopher. *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb.* 2nd edition. (New York, Routledge, 2016): 75-76.

revolutionary causation. Indeed, Achcar makes the claim that if the UGTT had run for office in Tunisia's post-revolution elections, it would have defeated Ennahda.[46]

While it is certainly likely that the UGTT would indeed play a major political role if it chose to do so given its influence and popularity in post-Ben Ali Tunisia, the revolution quickly achieved broad cross-class buy-in and only a relatively small proportion of Tunisians are involved in labor unions. Achcar presents a compelling case for the primarily economic roots of Tunisian grievance which led to revolution but de-emphasizes other causes. He has expressed doubts that Tunisia has indeed experienced a revolutionary transition, given that the moderate coalition currently in place in Tunisia isn't based in a worker's movement.[47]

Netterstrøm: A Closer Look at the UGTT

Kasper Ly Netterstrøm demonstrates the complexities that allowed the UGTT to participate in (and at the lower levels even catalyze) the Tunisian Revolution despite its long-standing co-optation by the Ben Ali regime. Through interviews with UGTT members at different ranks of the organization, Netterstrøm assembles a history of the UGTT's often-complicit, occasionally defiant history with the Tunisian state.

The author's assembled accounts depict a filtration of complicity and resistance from the general secretary on down through the regional branches to the rank and file, with each lower level of the union reinforcing the economic and social position of the workers it represented through careful doublespeak and insubordination.[48] Even though corruption heavily penetrated the middle and upper levels of the UGTT, this filtered resistance permitted the lower levels of

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[46] Achcar, Gilbert. *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013). 237-238.

[47] Achcar, Gilbert, and Nada Matta. "Gilbert Achcar on the Arab Upheaval—Facts and Fiction." *Journal Of Balkan & Near Eastern Studies* 18, no. 1, 2016: 7.

[48] Netterstrøm, K. L. "The tunisian general labor union and the advent of democracy." *The Middle East Journal, 70*(3), (2016): 395.

the union and the regional branches controlled by Leftists to give refuge to protestors and help organize actions. This filtration of resistance is noted as well in interviews with core UGTT leadership held by the American AFL-CIO.[49]

Netterstrøm's account also shows a common element with the case of the Tunisian Army's response in the sense that an attempt by Ben Ali to prevent the formation of powerful rival factions within his government ended up critically weakening the regime. Whereas Ben Ali's disregard of the Army led them to refuse to show preference in favor of the regime once violent protests had begun, Ben Ali's attempt to sabotage the regime's increasingly powerful union fixer General Secretary Ismail Sahbani led to the election of a new general secretary more actively sympathetic to the independence of lower-ranked union cadres who did not use his power to preclude union involvement in protest.[50]

Hartshorn: Corporatist Collapse

Ian Hartshorn of the University of Pennsylvania corroborates the sustained inability of the Ben Ali regime to control rank and file UGTT members[51] and introduces a novel concept in "corporatist collapse" as a means of evaluating the fall of Egypt and Tunisia's governments. Hartshorn defines this as the simultaneous inability of corporatist state structures to maintain quiescence from the top-down and advocate for the interests of workers and citizens from the bottom-up. In the Tunisian case, the UGTT came to represent a smaller share of the population as unemployment soared, and the rank and file of the union were no longer as quiescent as they were under Sahbani.[52] Whereas their Egyptian counterparts had been entirely undermined by the

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[49] Hamrouni, Abdellatif et al. "Tunisian Labor Leaders Reflect Upon Revolt." *Middle East Report No. 258* (Spring 2011): 30-32.

[50] Ibid, p. 389.

[51] Hartshorn, Ian M. "Corporatism, labor mobilization, and the seeds of revolution in Egypt and Tunisia." (Dissertation) *Proquest Dissertations Publishing,* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 2015): 146-148.

[52] Ibid, pp. 167-16

regime, the Tunisian UGTT was therefore able to make the transition fairly easily from

corporatist apparatus to revolutionary mover once the higher leadership had become convinced

of the safety of noncompliance.

Zemni: Labor Origins

Sami Zemni posits that the labor struggles of the Gafsa Mining Crisis of 2008 were the

start of the broader unrest which would culminate in the ouster of Ben Ali.[53] Local cells of the

labor movement participated in protracted and violent strikes against the central government

after the state-led mining corporation announced that it would give new jobs to Tunisians from

the coastal regions instead of local labor. Though ultimately unsuccessful, the Gafsa crisis served

as a dry-run of sorts for the grass roots labor organizing that would occur during the 2011

Revolution.

Zemni also shows the longevity of the UGTT's ambivalent and often oppositional

relationship with the Neo-Doustor / RCD dictatorship, harkening back to the deteriorating

economic situation of the early 1980s precipitating a general strike under the leadership of Habib

Achour.[54] After open conflict with the government led to a state crackdown, the UGTT adopted a

pro-regime stance which gradually gave way to central leadership's accommodation of the

regime but permissiveness towards the militancy of local chapters of the union. Zemni places the

roots of the Tunisian revolution within worker's struggles as opposed to "the simple dichotomy

of the "the people versus the dictator.""[55]

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[53] Zemni, Sami. "From Socio-Economic Protest to National Revolt: The Labor Origins of the Tunisian Revolution." in
The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK,
Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 129.
[54] Ibid., pp. 136-137.UG
[55] Ibid., p. 142.

Rikke Hostrup Haugbølle joins the chorus of criticism for popular media and scholarship's reduction of the Tunisian Revolution to a "Twitter Revolution." She criticizes the lack of methodological follow through applied to this particular proposed causal mechanism and attempts to chart a history of Tunisia's media reforms and draw a comparative case between the Gafsa Crisis of 2008 and the revolution as it relates to media and connectivity. Haugbølle shows media reforms easing the tight restrictions on public journalism Tunisia shared in common with many other Arab nations in the 1990s as Ben Ali was looking for easy ways to burnish his image as a liberal reformer. [56] In a move surprising no one familiar with the Ben Ali regime, news media privatization in the 2000s permitted family and allies of the dictator to own news companies and no one else, but the author points out that the privatized news media eliminated a language barrier for less educated Tunisians by broadcasting widely in the Tunisian dialect as opposed to the high register of Arabic, FusHa.

Haugbølle demonstrates that a major telecommunications expansion hit Tunisia between the Gafsa unrest and the beginnings of the Tunisian Revolution, with access to cellphones and wireless networks through 3G growing to over half the population.[57] Whereas the Gafsa unrest went almost totally unreported in Tunisia while it was unfolding, protestors in Sidi Bouzid were capable of broadcasting demonstrations and violence by the police in real time. The state-aligned elements of what the author refers to as the Tunisian "media ensemble" only served to reinforce the validity of the protest narrative by their unbelievable silence on the issue.

Regime Response

Dalacoura: Strength of State Response and Regime Cohesion

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[56] Haugbølle, Rikke Hostrup. "Rethinking the Role of the Media in the Tunisian Uprising." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 167, 168.
[57] Ibid., pp. 170-173.

Katarina Dalacoura makes the argument that two primary factors dictated whether regimes were successful in heading off the unrest that struck most of the Middle East during the Middle East: the strength of the state's response and the extent to which the regime and the state had become synonymous with one another.[58] As Dalacoura demonstrates in brief, the Tunisian regime was particularly ripe for overthrow according to these two parameters.

While strong responses to the uprisings tended to mixed results, Ben Ali's relative inaction in the face of spreading protest (crackdown and media blackout, but without a particularly violent repressive effort) did little to deter increasing participation in the revolt, according to Dalacoura's logic. At the same time, the Tunisian state bureaucracy and its core military component, the army, maintained separation from the Ben Ali regime, with the army categorically refusing to put down protests against Ben Ali and his tight (and largely family-related) coterie of businessmen.

Research by Zoltan Barany is helpful in explaining this emphatic non-reaction and abandonment of the regime by the Tunisian military. Hedging against military coups that have long been prevalent in Tunisia's neighborhood and following Borguiba's lead, Ben Ali kept the military relatively small and strictly politically detached, which achieved the objective of preventing coup but left the military with little to lose and no particular political affinity for the regime once popular revolt broke out.[59] Barany also notes the long-established training relationship of the Tunisian military with its American counterparts as a mode of transference for valuing democratic principles and a strict separation from internal political affairs.

Islamism

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[58] Dalacoura, Katarina. "The 2011 Uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political Change and Implications," *International Affairs*, 88 (January 2012): 69-70.
[59] Barany, Zoltan. "The Role of the Military." *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 4 (2011): 27.

There would not appear to be much evidence that Tunisia's revolution was driven by an Islamist revolutionary ideology. Popular informed opinion at the onset of the Arab Spring was that the demonstrations had caught most of the major Islamist political parties off guard, and in Tunisia it was not initially obvious that revolutionary trend had much input from Islamists. The En-Nahda Movement, the country's biggest Islamist force, had been efficiently repressed since its surprising electoral strength in the early 1990s, and its core leadership including Rached Ghannouchi only returned from exile and began politically organizing following the ouster of Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. The influence of Islamist political thinking, however, may have still been influential absent revolutionary leadership from Islamists.

Fadel: Modern Islamic Political Thought

Mohammed Fadel argues that the influence of modern Islamist political thought helped shape the demand for popularly legitimate government which undergirded revolutionary action, reinforcing demands for democratic legitimacy which enabled a broad coalition to take part in revolution.

Fadel introduces and summarizes the key political tenants of three major Islamic modernist thinkers (Tahtawi, al-Tunisi, and Rida) to show that democratic governance and a post-enlightenment appreciation for rationally derived laws outside of religious matters are compatible with the contemporary forms of Islamism in Egypt and Tunisia.[60] While Fadel does much to show a route to compromise between democratic secularism and the modernist strand of Islamist politics, he does not establish modern Islamism as empirically tied to the Tunisian revolutionary moment.

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[60] Fadel, Mohamed. "Modernist Islamic Political Thought and the Egyptian and Tunisian Revolutions of 2011," *Middle East Law and Governance* 3 (2011): 101-104.

Kenneth Perkins sees some influence for Islamists in the creation of a pre-revolutionary moment in the disaffection for the Ben Ali regime created by the violent crackdown on the core membership of Tunisia's popular Islamist movement MTI (now *en-Nahda*). Though initially eager to demonstrate rapprochement with Islam, the surprising strength of MTI candidates in the 1989 elections combined with Algeria's descent into civil war with Islamists in the 1990s led Ben Ali to crack down viciously on a movement which by that point had become quite popular among a large segment of the Tunisian population.[61] Though supporters did not organize the initial events that spurred the revolution, they participated as individuals and later as a movement.

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[61] Perkins, Kenneth. "Playing the Islamic Card: The Use and Abuse of Religion in Tunisian Politics." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 70, 71.

Chapter 3: Theory

What is a useful theoretical model for the Tunisian Revolution? Such a concept should both connect the causal factors and events of the revolution itself and amplify their explanatory power in a way which affords robustness without being so all-encompassing as to cease to be of use in comparative analysis. It should also be well grounded in broader revolutionary theory and interact meaningfully with them.

Skocpol provides some crucial insights for the origin of political revolution in Tunisia. Her theory of state autonomy is crucial to understand the eventual breakdown of state order under Ben Ali. She posits that the state itself has interests and organizational modalities which set it apart from the dominant classes which typically support and benefit from it, and that sometimes the state's activities can directly cut against the interests of its core supporters; the state is a site of contestation between social classes which itself contests for power.[62] The actual extent of this autonomy varies by polity and particular historical context; in the Tunisian case, this autonomy became increasingly circumscribed, and eventually replaced nearly entirely with the narrow interests of an incredibly small circle of businessmen centered in the leader's immediate family.

Skocpol does not place much importance on the state's perceived legitimacy so long as the means of coercion afforded to the state's repressive organs remain coherent and intact.[63] However, in the Tunisian case the state's repressive capacity fit these criteria but did not intervene to preserve itself. This is somewhat puzzling. The answer may lie in the progressive

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[62] Skocpol, Theda. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1979). 29-32.
[63] Skocpol, Theda. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1979). 31.

weakening of regular state interests relative to the Ben Ali state-within-a-state; when the broader population shifted decisively towards supporting revolution, there was nothing identifying the armed functions of Tunisia's regular forces with this privileged faction. The Tunisia's armed forces had never fought any major actions and remained a tightly-organized if small and depoliticized force at the outbreak of the revolution; unlike in Egypt and Iran, the armed forces did not accrue significant economic interests which would bind their interests with that of the "mafia state" Ben Ali's state-within-a-state had become.

Another facet of the revolution points to the need to expand our theoretical analysis beyond Skocpol's focus on the means of coercion, which is the relative absence of violence from the revolution in general. In Skocpol's model, revolutionaries should possess considerable means of force; in the course of the Tunisian Revolution, the revolutionaries didn't have any coercive means whatsoever even well after the immediate target of the revolution, Ben Ali, had fled to Saudi Arabia. Only after the dissolution of his successor government did figures clearly aligned with the revolutionary moment gain civilian control over the Armed Forces.

All of this points to the importance of revolutionary identification and revolutionary ideology in explaining the Tunisian case. Skocpol's work doesn't delve particularly deep into the role of revolutionary ideology nor does it afford ideology predictive power in the course of revolution, though she does attest to its power for organizing and permitting revolutionary action.[64] For that, it may be more useful to turn to Jack Goldstone's observation that revolution is an emergent phenomenon centered on a dual process of regime weakening and revolutionary mobilization. The Tunisian state had experienced acute economic and systemic crisis in the early

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[64] Skocpol, Theda. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1979). 169-171.

'80s with the struggles between Bourguiba and Achour, during the Bourguiba-Ben Ali transitional period, and again during the Gafsa Mining Crisis of 2008; why didn't revolution emerge at these particular moments?

Tunisia's revolutionary coalition consisted chiefly of the rural and recent migrant-poor and the Tunisian middle classes, and of Tunisia's secular left and broadly right of center Islamists. The interests of these diverse factions, for historical-ideological reasons, appeared relatively immiscible. Ben Ali's regime had pursued a careful policy of manipulating the antagonism between Tunisia's secularists and Islamists to prevent the emergence of a broadly based anti-regime coalition, and co-opted labor interests through a corporatist model of bargaining and political control.

Broadly speaking, the Tunisian case falls within Jack Goldstone's typology of a color revolution: a largely peaceful revolution carried out by a broad cross-class coalition without counterrevolution or outside intervention producing a weak, liberal government.[65] The Tunisian government lost confidence gradually and refused to use decisive force to quash large demonstrations based primarily on grievances rooted in declining economic opportunity and a massive distributional problem, but a cross-class coalition developed around the common ideological concept of "dignity," which for workers was economic and for the middle classes meant the protection of civil rights and a clamp-down on corruption.[66]

These diverse demands and class interests required bridging values and phenomena to coalesce into a unified movement. The three most salient features of the Tunisian revolution –

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[65] Goldstone, Jack A. "Rethinking Revolutions: Integrating Origins, Processes and Outcomes." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 48, No. 1 (2009): 21-23.
[66] Habib Ayeb. "Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution." *Review of African Political Economy*, 38:129 (2011): 476.

Tunisia's increasing coastalization, the ideological collapse of Ben Ali's technocratic regime, and the emerging convening power of social media – all had "emulsifying" effects for the emerging multi-class coalition. These features all also relate closely to globalization and the internationalization of the Tunisian economy, without centrally identifying an "international other" to serve as a motivating antagonist in the myth-making of the revolution as in Keddie's Iran. Taken together, these factors point to an "emulsifying internationalization" of Tunisia's economic and social tensions which permitted cross-regional and cross-class sympathies to build even as it contributed to Tunisia's increasingly exacerbated income inequality.

Emulsifying internationalization points to the ways in which the increasingly international orientation of Tunisia's society and political legitimacy opened it up to revolution by a coalition of allies unlikely to form under regular conditions. It helps explain the success of the 2010 revolution even in the absence of clear revolutionary leadership which was arguably nascent in the crises of the early '80s, early '90s and 2008. It combines both short and very long-term processes which led to collapse of a popular perception of the state's legitimacy and a gradual reduction of the fear of cross-class and cross-ideological collaboration on the part of the regime's opponents. Through a reconstituted history of the processes which led to the Tunisian revolution, it is possible to evaluate the power of this set of related phenomena.

It also points to the eventual dissolution of the revolutionary legitimacy conferred on Tunisia's newly minted democratic institutions, unless policies are implemented to address the underlying economic grievances of Tunisia's interior regions which served as the structural impetus for the country's unrest and eventual revolution. If the Tunisian economy continues to stagnate and resource distribution remains tilted in favor of the coastal cities, Tunisia's revolutionary coalition is likely to separate back into its antagonistic component parts. The

Tunisian middle classes may settle for the greater institutional accountability and rights protection afforded by polyarchic democracy. The poor and the residents of the marginalized interior are much less likely to do so. A later section on the policy implications of the causes of the Tunisian Revolution aims to provide some suggestions for U.S. and international policy to tackle this inherent problem.

Chapter 4: The Tunisian Revolution: Roots in Synthesis

Since the twilight of the Bourguiba era, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali walked a tightrope between secular and Islamist opposition groups, much like other Arab dictators in the late 20th century. He pressed for a "National Pact" which professed a commitment to human rights and democracy while recognizing some aspects of Tunisia's Islamic heritage and secured the signatures of sixteen other parties to legitimize it. Touted as a liberal reformer bringing "Zinestroika" to Tunisia after increasingly erratic authoritarianism under Bourguiba, Ben Ali's initial bid for reform turned out to be cosmetic. Despite heavy interference in the 1989 elections, Islamist candidates secured 14% of the official vote and reached as much as a third in some urban centers.[67] Alarmed by the newly minted status of Tunisia's Islamists as the second power above the regime's usual leftist opposition, the state refused to recognize the *Mouvement de la Tendence Islamique's* political wing *en-Nahda* (The Renaissance), as a legal political party.

Amid escalating regional tensions as neighboring Algeria descended into full civil war with its Islamist opposition, the Ben Ali regime rounded up and jailed those core party leaders and activists not outside the country already in 1992.With a stroke, the rapprochement Ben Ali had presented with some aspects of public Islamism through the "National Pact" was over.[68] The regime had found a bogeyman convenient to both the fears of its opposition-inclined liberal and leftist citizens who prized Tunisia's hard-won secularism and to the rising security concerns of

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[67] Alexander, Christopher. *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb.* 2nd edition. Routledge, 2016. Pp. 50-55.

[68] Perkins, Kenneth. "Playing the Islamic Card: The Use and Abuse of Religion in Tunisian Politics." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 71-73.

the West in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and the Algerian Civil War.[69] Especially as Tunisia benefitted from a revived and steadily growing economy, the regime was able to manufacture quiescence.

Ben Ali also benefited from a circumscribed labor movement, and successfully used the threat of Islamist takeover to coopt it. Tunisia's oldest and most prominent labor union, the UGTT, was instrumental in securing the country's independence from the French Mandate and managed to retain significant power as Habib Bourguiba shifted towards an increasingly authoritarian government. By the late '70s opposition to Bourguiba's market reforms and a failing economy had crystallized under the leadership of the fractious and politically powerful UGTT Secretary-General Habib Achour, under who the UGTT called a 1978 general strike. The strike was met with violent repression and torture, and ultimately proved disastrous for the UGTT's political fortunes. Though Achour was called back till 1985 to head the UGTT during the general chaos that erupted in the last years of Bourguiba's rule,[70] the open election in 1989 was manipulated by Ben Ali to install his chosen candidate, loyalist Ismail Sahbani. Ben Ali used fears of an Islamist takeover of the union to persuade the left wing (which he had effectively suppressed as Minister of the Interior and in the security establishment) to provide decisive support for Sahbani.[71]

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[69] Ben Rejab, Lotfi. "United States Policy towards Tunisia: What New Engagement after an Expendable "Friendship"?" in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 86-87.

[70] Zemni, Sami. "From Socio-Economic Protest to National Revolt: The Labor Origins of the Tunisian Revolution." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 135-138.

[71] Netterstrøm, K. L. "The tunisian general labor union and the advent of democracy." *The Middle East Journal, 70*(3), (2016): 386-388.

The secularist opposition parties were similarly coopted as Ben Ali's regime consolidated, accepting a gradually increasing proportion of designated seats in Tunisia's parliament during the 1990s that never exceeded 20 percent and pitted the opposition against itself.[72] Tunisia's opposition thus gained a secure platform and a space from which to press bounded dissent under Ben Ali's co-opting model of dictatorship. The structure of its major labor union was preserved although leadership had been turned to support the regime. Though heavily persecuted, Islamism saw slight normalization on the margins with the National Pact and with the legalization of the call to prayer in 1988[73] and much later with the establishment of Tunisia's first legal Islamic radio station, Radio Zaitouna.[74] That it was owned by Ben Ali's son-in-law Sakhr el-Meteri only serves to highlight the late Ben Ali regime's increasing personalism and corruption. Emerging into the '90s with their political capital spent and blood shed, opposition groups had no choice but to accept the limited space allotted for them. As UGTT veteran Kheireddine Bouslah said of this time: "In a country so lacking in political pluralism, there was no choice but to adopt a two-pronged approach."[75]

Having effectively crushed or coopted domestic opposition, Ben Ali moved forward with serious structural changes to the Tunisian economy which brought it in closer contact and in some ways under the influence of France, the EU and the international financial institutions of the World Bank and the IMF. Emerging debt-ridden and economically dysfunctional from the

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[72] Alexander, Christopher. *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb.* 2nd edition. (New York, Routledge, 2016: 58-60.

[73] Perkins, Kenneth. "Playing the Islamic Card: The Use and Abuse of Religion in Tunisian Politics." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 69.

[74] Haugbølle, Rikke Hostrup. "Rethinking the Role of the Media in the Tunisian Uprising." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 167, 166.

[75] Hamrouni, Abdellatif et al. "Tunisian Labor Leaders Reflect Upon Revolt." *Middle East Report No. 258* (Spring 2011): 31.

economic and political crises of the 1980s, Tunisia was forced to seek IMF and World Bank support in 1987. The prolonged period of privatization, business-friendly reform and foreign investment attraction Ben Ali set out to achieve over the next two decades was tailor-made to build trust with and ensure the continued support of the IFIs. It also proved a remarkable success at first, with a huge segment of the Tunisian population joining the middle class, stable and regionally high growth hovering around 5 percent annually, and a greatly improved credit situation.[76] Ben Ali made sure to secure a close personal relationships with France's Jacques Chirac and Nicholas Sarkozy,[77] and convinced France and the EU to relocate many light manufacturing operations to Tunisia and invest in its tourism industry, providing increased economic opportunity for the coastal regions.[78] Large scale protests and unrest generally disappeared during this period as criticism of the regime was limited to the anemic officially recognized liberal opposition, individual journalists and academics, and members of the Tunisian Human Rights League.[79]

As the economy improved and international money continued to flow into the country, Ben Ali's family and a close coterie of businessmen began to rely less and less on formal state institutions and to exploit their dominance of the state to divert resources for their own personal consumption and investment. The President and his wife, Laila Ben-Trebelsi, manipulated the privatization mandated by Tunisia's Structural Adjustment Plan to create a new class of

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[76]Murphy, Emma C., "Under The Emperor's Neoliberal Clothes! Why the International Financial Institutions Got It Wrong in Tunisia." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 36-39.

[77] Kallander, Amy Aisen. ""Friends of Tunisia": French Economic and Diplomatic Support of Tunisian Authoritarianism." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 112-115.

[78] Clancy-Smith, Julia. *Tunisian Revolutions : Reflections on Seas, Coasts, and Interiors*. (Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2014): 1-2.

[79] Alexander, Christopher. *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb.* 2nd edition. (New York, Routledge, 2016): 60, 61.

tenderpreneurs who began to take over massive portions of the Tunisian economy, aided by preferential access to international funding and a manipulation of Tunisia's privatization schemes.[80] To the outside world, the extent of this massive corruption was obscured by rosy appraisals of the country's macroeconomic situation and a reliance on the government's own data in international assessments, but Tunisian corruption was still well known in Europe to those doing business with the Tunisian regime.[81] The World Bank consistently placed Tunisia ahead of its neighbors in tackling corruption and posting major gains on its *Ease of Doing Business Index.*[82]

Even Transparency International, one of the world's premier anti-corruption organizations, was hoodwinked by the Ben Ali regime's complex facilitation of its own corruption. A World Economic Forum Survey that was included in TI's Corruption Perception Index data for Tunisia relied on survey data from primarily large Tunisian firms, and may have been affected by the self-censoring of Tunisia's business class, which like other sectors of Tunisian society was constantly surveilled by the regime.[83] Tunisia's CPI rating dropped precipitously following the revolution, as evidence of the Ben Ali-Trabelsi "Mafia State" emerged into clear view.

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[80] Murphy, Emma C., "Under The Emperor's Neoliberal Clothes! Why the International Financial Institutions Got It Wrong in Tunisia." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 45-49.

[81] Baumann, Hannes. "A failure of governmentality: why Transparency International underestimated corruption in Ben Ali's Tunisia," *Third World Quarterly*, 38:2 (2017): 472

[82] Murphy, Emma C., "Under The Emperor's Neoliberal Clothes! Why the International Financial Institutions Got It Wrong in Tunisia." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 45.

[83] Baumann, Hannes. "A failure of governmentality: why Transparency International underestimated corruption in Ben Ali's Tunisia," *Third World Quarterly*, 38:2 (2017): 472-474.

For regular Tunisians, especially those Tunisians not well-connected with the regime who ran small businesses, this corruption was increasingly obvious and odious. The spark of the 2008 Gafsa Mining Crisis, later heralded as a pre-cursor to the revolution of 2010-2011, was the popular perception that the government was awarding precious mining jobs on the basis not of a meritocratic competition but in exchange for bribes and as favors to the well-connected.[84] Adding to this increasingly insufferable condition, Tunisia's economy ceased generating growth at a pace which could accommodate new highly-educated job seekers to the economy, let alone cut into the country's persistently high unemployment rate. The 2000s presented Tunisia with a paradox of its own success at providing access to higher education: though it ranked in the top 20 countries in the world for average increases in school years per citizen, it had saturated its high-skilled job market and was no longer capable of ensuring stable jobs for its young graduates.[85]

The intentional hyper-concentration of development had already created a persistent shortage of employment in the interior, driving internal migration to the suburbs of the major coastal cities, where light manufacturing linked with Europe's supply chain was largely based.[86] A decline in the smallholder agricultural sector in favor of big export-oriented farms funded by the capital of Tunisia's tenderpreneurs placed increasing pressure on the economy of the interior. The center of the country became increasingly economically unsustainable, with many unemployed members of families depending on subsistence farming[87] just as large numbers of

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[84] Zemni, Sami. "From Socio-Economic Protest to National Revolt: The Labor Origins of the Tunisian Revolution." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 129.

[85] Campante, Filipe R., and Davin Chor. "Why was the arab world poised for revolution? schooling, economic opportunities, and the arab spring." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 26 (2), (2012): 172-174.

[86] Zemni, Sami. "The Tunisian Revolution: Neoliberalism, urban contentious politics and the right to the city." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41 (1), (2017): 76.

[87] Gana, Alia. "The Rural and Agricultural Roots of the Tunisian Revolution: When Food Security Matters." *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture & Food* (2012): 204-206.

young graduates from the interior were returning to their home towns, often jobless or seeking

work in the mining sector.[88] As the state became more extractive, more visibly corrupt, and less

capable of exchanging job opportunities for the quiescence of the Tunisian people, youths and

those employed in failing sectors in these fragile interior regions began to resort to political

protest.

The promise of employment and the steady growth of the Tunisian economy during the

1990s and early 2000s created rising expectations among Tunisians, who were increasingly

frustrated as greater portions of Tunisia's growth were siphoned to a narrow elite with privileged

international business links. Even so, most of Tunisia's traditional sources of opposition were too

weak and fractured to supply consistent pressure for revolution or reform. The Gafsa Mining

Crisis started when the UGTT's regional boss 'Amara 'Abassi manipulated the hiring process to

give jobs to the well-connected. Though local members of the UGTT participated in the violent

strikes starting in Redayef and finding support in chapters in Kairouan and Ben 'Arous. The

national leadership hesitated to support the strikers and eventually gave them legal and medical

aid, but no larger strike was called.[89]

The absence of decentralized media made it relatively easy for authorities to manage the

timely flow of information out of the southern towns serving as strongholds for the strikers. State

and elite-owned media did not report the Gafsa Mining Crisis, and the authorities blocked roads

to the affected towns. It was incredibly difficult for most Tunisians to access information about

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[88] Haugbølle, Rikke Hostrup. "Rethinking the Role of the Media in the Tunisian Uprising." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 168.

[89] Netterstrøm, K. L. "The tunisian general labor union and the advent of democracy." *The Middle East Journal, 70*(3), (2016): 392.

the ongoing conflict, which was soon put down.[90] Local union chapters provided key leadership during the initial protests in 2010, but it was only once major demonstrations had begun across Tunisia that the UGTT's core leadership, the secular opposition, and *en-Nahda* joined with the demonstrators in demanding Ben Ali's ouster.

Mohammad Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010 touched off protests in Sidi Bouzid which then spread to Meknassy and Sfax. News of his self-immolation and the circumstances which surrounded it spread quickly throughout the country. Initial police repression caused hundreds of deaths, but as the protests grew beyond the countries poorest regions and neighborhoods and as activists and leadership of opposition parties joined in, a broad cross-class coalition spread major protest to every major Tunisian city. The army finally decisively refused to engage protestors in defense of the Ben Ali regime, which after 23 years in power, fled the country for Saudi Arabia, leaving remnants of the withered RCD party to hold the government for another month under Prime Minister Mohammad Ghannouci until finally the government agreed to hold elections and accepted the Prime Minister's resignation in February of 2011.

In just months, Tunisians had overcome deep internal stratification and division on the basis of region, class and religiosity to accomplish the ouster of one of the Middle East and North Africa's longest-enduring dictatorships. Largely leaderless, the movement managed to speak with one voice, channeling both economic grievances and human rights concerns through the mediating value of dignity. With its core ideological justifications withered away by a technocratic and international orientation, the state opened itself up to opposition coalitions

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[90] Haugbølle, Rikke Hostrup. "Rethinking the Role of the Media in the Tunisian Uprising." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri(Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 168, 169.

motivated by a wide range of normally irreconcilable ideologies. Through its coastalizing

economic reforms, Tunisia had driven a long process of internal migration leading to increased

cross-regional sympathies. The final emulsifying agent in this process was the utilization of

global social media; as the police moved to violently repress the initial protests, the regime lost

narrative control over the situation and ultimately lost its rule.

Chapter 5: Coastalization, Ideological Collapse and Accelerated Identification

The most remarkable feature of the Tunisian Revolution was its seeming lack of initial leadership. There was no vanguard party, as in the great revolutions of Russia or China; no decisive meeting of the estates. The Tunisian Revolution shares this feature in common with some but not all of the "color revolutions;" while East Germany's "Peaceful Revolution" featured spontaneous demonstration and hastily organized small opposition groups directing protest activity independently, many featured strong revolutionary leadership from without the system (Poland's Lech Walesa comes to mind) or from reformers within (Hungary's Imre Pozsgay).

The seeming spontaneity and rapid completion of the process of revolutionary identification in the absence of strong leadership generating revolutionary demands and a common ideological framework is explainable by emulsifying internationalization, which consists chiefly of three factors that continue to recur in examination of the causes of the Tunisian Revolution. The internationalization of the coastal elite combined with the marginalization of the interior and widespread internal migration of workers from the interior to the coasts plays a major contributing factor. So too does the regime's collapse of ideological coherence and a relatively permissive social atmosphere which allowed disparate opposition frameworks to coexist and build amity. Finally, social media and new information technologies disrupted the regime's monopoly on news, enabled the rapid mobilization of revolutionary protesters with relatively loose organization, and promoted national and kinship-based sympathies for the cause of the protesters, as well as opening the regime up to acute international pressure.

Coastalization

The urban-rural divide grew drastically while the ruling elite became increasingly narrow and internationalized. At the same time the long-term marginalization of the interior brought to the major coastal cities a new pool of internal migrants who had roots in the interior and were more receptive to the problems of the interior. Tribal associations which have been obscured by modernity and the state's "Tunisian Family" policy of homogenization have proven a relevant factor for the country's central and southern regions, strengthened this effect. This resulted in increased unrest in the center of the country, but also made it easier for the unrest to spread quickly the country's major cities.

Tunisia has been a trading country deeply linked to the international economy since its time as a Phoenician colony, but since the early modern period especially its elites have generally become more dependent on foreign patronage. Ottoman conquest in the 1500s brought a Turkish ruling class; the 1800s brought French colonial rule. The nationalist and later socialist government of Habib Bourguiba stands in stark contrast with its policies of import substitution and its promotion of domestic agriculture, but the government of Ben Ali was heavily dependent on international credit and the European Union's manufacturing supply chain and its tourist pool, and in later years was using international finance to siphon the Ben Ali-Trabelsi family's corrupt earnings out of the country.

As the coterie of tenderpreneurs surrounding Ben Ali enriched themselves through dominating the banking sector and manipulating privatization programs, they also physically dominated the coastal cities' best real estate, building massive villas by seizing farm plots or selling themselves state land.[91] General welfare programs gave way to specific patronage geared

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[91] Clancy-Smith, Julia. *Tunisian Revolutions : Reflections on Seas, Coasts, and Interiors.* (Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2014): 28, 29.

towards regional pacification based on membership in the RCD.[92] Ben Ali's Tunisia managed to construct an increasingly predatory neo-patrimonial system even as his predecessor Habib Bourguiba had managed to stamp out the influence of Tunisia's traditional practitioners of patrimonial politics: the tribes.

Tribal politics were the norm outside of the coastal cities during the early modern period, and their effective management was key to the Hafsid dynasty's enduring success. After Ottoman Conquest, the Muradid Beys undertook successive campaigns to reign in the power of the tribes starting around 1630. They met with tremendous success in the north of the country but were unable to eliminate tribal power in the Midwest of the country, and their detribalization process was brought to a halt with the advent of European power over Tunisia.[93]

In postcolonial Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba contended with tribal politics in a very real way in his early power struggle with a faction of the Destourists led by Salah Ben Youssef. Ben Youssef had strong tribal linkages in the south of the country and envisioned a far more traditional and Islamic state than Bourguiba and other nationalists did.[94] Bourguiba adopted the patrimonial title of *Zaiim*, which connotes a patriarchal authority in exchange for protection and was a traditional title of tribal sheikhs. He used the imagery of family to craft a national identity which placed him in the role of national father. It was only in 1956 that Tunisia adopted its Code of Personal Status instituting modern family relationships and undercutting the tribal patriarchs,

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[92] Zemni, Sami. "The Tunisian Revolution: Neoliberalism, urban contentious politics and the right to the city." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41 (1), (2017): 75, 76.

[93] (Translated) Hania, Abdelhamid. "Midwest Tunisia Amid Changes Resulting from the Events of the 18th and 19th Centuries." from Al-Ahmar, al-Mawlidi. *The Tunisian Revolution: Examining the Triggers through the Prism of the Humanities.* (Doha, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2014): 56-57.

[94] Haugbølle, Rikke Hostrup. ""Together for Tunisia": Tribal Structures and Social and Political Mobilization," *The Middle East Institute* (2016). http://www.mei.edu/content/map/together-tunisia-tribal-structures-and-social-and-political-mobilization

and only in 1958 that collective tribal ownership of property was formally abolished.[95] With

these moves the effective political power of Tunisian tribes was extinguished.

This didn't extinguish the social importance of kin groupings, however, among which

tribe was still prominent in the country's Midwest. This social linkage became nascent political

power in the early days of the revolution, as families and tribes mobilized themselves by sharing

mutual stories of oppression at the hands of the regime.[96] The legitimacy of the *Zaiim* Habib

Bourguiba rested on his claim that the state protected the Tunisian family from harm; after years

of blatant corruption and the massive Wikileaks scandal which leaked a paper trail of the

regime's nepotism only weeks before the start of protests, Ben Ali's regime increasingly was

perceived to be stealing the country's patrimony.

Ideological Collapse

The process of revolutionary identification was accelerated by the regime's retreat from

ideological coherence and its tacit normalization of both liberal politics and to some extent

Islamism. The original nationalist and socialist ideological underpinnings of the ruling party

were largely cast aside in favor of a technocratic argument appealing to people's greed – Ben Ali

abandoned the leftist policies of Bourguiba and the mandate of state-led development for a

program of privatization based on the demands of international finance, which was tenable for

citizens so long as the economy kept improving. When the pace of growth could no longer

guarantee Tunisian graduates secure employment in the formal economy, and when the regime

began exercising its power to predate on the marginalized (both in interior provinces like Sidi

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[95] Charrad, Mounira M. "Central and Local Patrimonialism: State-Building in Kin-Based Societies." In *Patrimonial Power in the Modern World,* edited by Julia Adams. (The American Academy of Political and Social Science, July 2011): 55-57.

[96] Mabrouk, Mehdi. "A revolution for dignity and freedom: preliminary observations on the social and cultural background to the Tunisian revolution." *The Journal of North African Studies*, 16:4 (2011): 631.

Bouzid and by appropriating the land of the urban poor) there ceased to be a coherent national value framework which could justify the government's actions aside from the RCD's status as the guardians of secularism.

But Tunisia's Islamists, already moderate by any standard, had changed in detention and exile. Though Rachid Ghannouchi started taking a more hardline stance following his immediate departure from the country which called for the veiling of women and a reduction in tourism,[97] the leader and his party continued to moderate and mend fences during their absence from the Tunisian political scene. Though the secular opposition parties initially welcomed the violent repression of *en-Nahda*, the Tunisian League of Human Rights and associated lawyers did not, continuing to publish criticism of the regime's detention and abuse of Islamists during the late '80s and '90s, building amity between these elements of the broader opposition.[98]

By the mid-2000s, broad elements of the Tunisian opposition were ready to cross the essential secularist-Islamist divide and cooperate with one another. In 2005 the October 18 coalition, so named because of a hunger strike against the regime started by activists, united *en-Nahda* with *et-Takatol* the Progressive Democrat Party and others to demand the government guarantee freedom of the press and the right to political pluralism for all parties. In the immediate build-up to the revolution, the remaining distrust between Islamists and secularists may have spurred revolutionary organization on even faster; the secular parties had been hearing rumors that *en-Nahda* was in talks with the government to provide support in exchange for

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[97] Alexander, Christopher. *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb.* 2nd edition. (New York, Routledge, 2016): 56.

[98] Perkins, Kenneth. "Playing the Islamic Card: The Use and Abuse of Religion in Tunisian Politics." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 72, 73.

legalization, and wanted to get out ahead of any such possibility.[99] The regime's soft

normalization of aspects of performative Islam in Radio Zaitouna and the legalization of the call

to prayer may have contributed to this reduction in tensions between Tunisia's two main political

opposition camps, alongside more salient efforts by Islamist activists and leaders to make

political Islam less threatening for Tunisia.

Especially as the Ben Ali-Trabelsi family and their singular dedication to self-enrichment

became visibly separated from the state, an authoritarian regime which had long ago abandoned

the trappings of the ideology undergirding the state at independence in favor of the raw

economic appeal of technocratic development appeared unattractive to normal Tunisians.

Meanwhile, the regime's cooptation of its opposition, secularist, Islamist and labor, had

normalized these strands of politics enough that Tunisians viewed them as viable alternatives and

their proponents could successfully work together. The state remained tacitly legitimate on the

international level, but the broken promise of technocratic development left it severely lacking in

domestic legitimacy.

Social Media

Finally, it must be said that while (mostly media) narratives assigning social media a

central role in the making of the revolution have little to offer by themselves, social media

appears to have played a key role in the revolutionary identification and mobilization processes.

As Tunisians adopted social media, it gave normal citizens the capacity to bypass state media

and generate their own content. The spectacle of Mohammad Bouazizi's self-immolation and the

immediate identification many Tunisian's felt with this young man's despair spread digitally in a

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[99] Alexander, Christopher. *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb.* 2nd edition. (New York, Routledge, 2016): 75, 78.

country newly equipped with 3G mobile networks capable of uploading and viewing social media content free of direct central control, if not surveillance.[100]

This news was spreading on the heels of a concerted effort by cyber-activists on Facebook to spread the Wikileaks revelations about the ruling family's massive corruption which had already set the country on edge. As the protests progressed into a genuine national movement, groups of online activists took it upon themselves to intensify their news dissemination efforts, with Tarek Kahlaoui and others even creating a semi-official news agency based on Facebook to vet and disseminate the news of recent protests and government responses.[101] Even some of the unfounded rumors in circulation appear to have helped: an incorrect story that Bouazizi was an unemployed college graduate resonated deeply with many young Tunisians.[102]

Digital, user-controlled media allowed the Tunisian Revolution to bypass the complication of its early lack of revolutionary leadership by decentralizing decision-making and facilitating the spontaneous generation of a commonly-held revolutionary ideology. As evidence of the regime's corruption and the regime's human rights abuse continued to accumulate online, the Tunisian people's initial particularistic and class-based grievances were transmuted into the least common denominator held by nearly all Tunisians not immediately benefitting from "The Family's" largesse: the central demand of human dignity. Though governments will undoubtedly try to disrupt this capacity of citizens in the future, where it is possible for communities to

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[100] Haugbølle, Rikke Hostrup. "Rethinking the Role of the Media in the Tunisian Uprising." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri(Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 169, 170.
[101] Kahlaoui, Tarek, "The Powers of Social Media." in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, edited by Gana Nouri, (Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 153, 154.
[102] Campante, Filipe R., and Davin Chor. "Why was the arab world poised for revolution? schooling, economic opportunities, and the arab spring." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 26 (2), (2012): 174.

communicate in such a manner, social media remains a potent force for the acceleration of

protest movements.

Chapter 6: Policy Implications

The emulsifying processes that fostered Tunisia's rapid revolutionary crisis brought an end to a dictatorship which had become a predatory block on the efficiency of Tunisia's economy and the aspirations of Tunisian citizens. But to borrow Skocpol's typology, the revolution was ultimately political, not social. If Tunisia's underlying economic disparities are left unaddressed, fresh unrest could paralyze the progress of Tunisian society and endanger regional security. The causes of the Tunisian Revolution suggest policy implications for the United States which might be generalized to other middle income, highly interconnected states.

Increase monitoring and assistance efforts in peripheral regions in developing countries

USAID's *Tunisia Country Development Cooperation Strategy* (CDCS) of 2016 addresses Tunisia's structural problems in a studied and thorough way, highlighting persisting issues of corruption, geographic disparity and lack of opportunity for skilled workers. The U.S.'s development programming is already attempting to tackle issues of chronic lack of access to materials and opportunity for the country's interior in a systematic way.

However, taking a deeper look at the development agency's work so far in Tunisia reveals that actual projects have so far failed to reach the interior regions as persistently as intended. USAID has assisted the United Nations Industrial Organization in providing significant assistance in the interior governorates of Kef, Kairouan, Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid, but assistance channeled through the Business Reform and Competitiveness Project (BCRP) and the Center for Entrepreneurship and Executive Development (CEED) have remained tightly clustered around Tunisia's already relatively prosperous first and second cities, Tunis and

Sfax.[103] USAID should increase efforts to source deserving businesses and entrepreneurs in the country's interior regions to increase cross-regional wealth and participation in the formal economy.

In addition to providing money and expertise for strengthening systems of local government mandated by Tunisia's constitutional commitment to decentralization, development assistance should also expand direct work with the local governments of the interior to source business opportunities for local firms. By expanding local partnerships through government channels, the United States can ensure that it is helping to both ameliorate the disparity of outcomes between Tunisia's regions and to increase the Tunisian's public confidence in the efficacy of local democratic government.

Devise and encourage better measures of corruption

Though the now infamous Tunisia Wikileaks cables from the U.S. Embassy warned of (and may have contributed to) an impending public crisis over the massive corruption of the Ben Ali-Trabelsi clan, international observers have persistently underestimated the levels of corruption experienced under the Ben Ali regime. While the U.S. is funding several anti-corruption efforts in Tunisia, it needs to make certain that good diagnostic tools are being used to evaluate the impact of corruption in the post-revolutionary economy, or else risk a repeat of the massive loss of public wealth experienced under the old regime facilitated directly by the failure of international measures of corruption.

The 2016 CDCS uses the UN's Doing Business Index to assess the Tunisian business climate, which deserves re-evaluation considering recent revelations that the Doing Business

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[103] "Tunisia Country Development Cooperation Strategy." *USAID* (September 2016): 18.

Index may have manipulated indicators for expressly political purposes in the case of Chile's Bachelet government. Future efforts to encourage private sector reform in Tunisia should rely less on international rankings and benchmarks for corruption, which is a complex phenomenon difficult to capture with any one variable. Corruption takes on many forms, and in the Tunisian case it was facilitated directly by the Ben Ali government's attempts to conceal self-enrichment through privatization schemes originally intended to improve Tunisia's business competitiveness.

Accordingly, the United States and other international donors should fund country-specific studies of corruption which take a more investigative approach and rely less on government-verified metrics to achieve their results. Foreign development and privatization of public industries are frequent sites of corruption, and the international community must take care to ensure that development aid is not being siphoned off in ways that directly harm the intended recipients.

Strictly avoid incentivizing limitations on acceptable ideological frameworks

Ben Ali's regime bolstered its domestic and especially international legitimacy for decades by burnishing its image as a bulwark against political Islam in North Africa, and Western countries were happy to provide ample security assistance as a result. The broader Arab Spring phenomenon has shown both the prevailing power and ultimate limitations of Islamist politics in the public sphere, with Tunisia's *en-Nahda* participating successfully in both government and opposition roles in the post-revolutionary phase. While the United States should continue targeted assistance to build increased resilience against violent extremist recruitment efforts, the U.S. must make sure moving forward that its efforts to combat and discredit the

violent fringes of Islamism do not lead it to incentivize monopolistic behavior on the part of Tunisia's secularist parties.

The United States should therefore make it clear that its continued financial support for institution building in Tunisia is dependent on the free participation of all nonviolent political parties. Evidence from Islamist participation in democratic politics in the Tunisian context already suggests that participation has a moderating impact. In 2016 the *en-Nahda* movement forswore Islamism in favor of the term Muslim Democrats, and their period in government suggests that the party is sufficiently committed to pluralism and open transition of political power.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The causes and processes of the Tunisian Revolution highlight important policy problems for the present and point to new avenues of worthwhile research. The urban-rural divide is a common problem of contemporary society in most developing and all developed countries which retain significant regionally marginalized populations. Behind it lies a distributional issue yet to be adequately addressed by policy and, just as importantly, by the ideologies which uphold the international state system. The lesson of the Tunisian Revolution also points to the need for a greater understanding of the way that social media is utilized in the developing world and particularly in societies with expanded notions of kinship beyond the Western-typical nuclear family.

As the globe continues to become both more connected in its media and economy and also (for the present moment) largely more populist in the attitudes of the societies which inhabit it, the urban-rural divide may continue to be a major driver of unrest, especially in countries where core economic activity is centered around international trade. The Tunisian Revolution indicates that the issues of marginalized regions can quickly destabilize the country if there is broad cross-regional sympathy or a high rate of internal migration from peripheral regions to core cities. More needs to be done to address increasing issues associated with the urbanization that industrial and postindustrial society brings with it.

Persistently high unemployment and a lack of opportunity for rural citizens in particular are seeming features of the current international economy which require both physical and ideological solutions. The Tunisian Revolution mobilized a huge cross-section of Tunisian society through its appeal to the malleable value of dignity, but the liberal democratic state which now governs the country hasn't come up with adequate policies to support the interior or an

adequate ideology to either justify state transfers to marginalized regions or build up their resilience to the frustrated expectation of material gain. If this situation persists, the underlying class-based demands of the interior and urban poor may re-emerge as new drivers of more persistent unrest.

Finally, this study points to the need to better understand the impact of social media in the developing world. A number of researchers have pointed to the importance of tribal and regional associations in the spread of the Tunisian revolution. Political science research would benefit from more robust efforts to model the possible effects of tribal kinship and its associated digital linkages on the spread of unrest across regions. A study conducted with similar methods and sampling to the Tunisia Labor Market Panel Survey of 2014 would help unravel the actual links between kinship groups, online communication and participation in the protests that led to the ouster of Ben Ali. The TLMPS asked responders about internal migration within the country; an expanded survey geared towards examining the spread of revolutionary activity could ask respondents how they had first heard of protest activity, whether they participated in any protest related activity and whether they had and tribal or regional affiliations which compelled them to participate.

The deeper one looks at the history of revolution, the more difficult it is to assign a precise chronological start and end to the phenomenon. The American Revolution began in 1765; its origins could be traced to the French & Indian War or earlier. The fighting stopped in 1783; the various states didn't ratify the amendments which would bring the disparate states under the aegis of the federal government until 1791. The Tunisian Revolution is, depending on your standard, just more than seven years old at this point, and there are some, Gilbert Achcar among them, who would say it hasn't yet begun. This work aims to contextualize and relate the diverse

efforts which have been undertaken so far in what is still very much an emerging literature on Tunisia and its revolution, which are themselves emerging phenomena. It makes no attempt to provide a final account of the Revolution, but if I have achieved my goal, it will point future researchers in the direction of better questions about the Tunisian case and its relation to the broader phenomenon of revolution.

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