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Transgressive protest after a democratic transition: The Kamour Campaign in Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

A democratic transition is likely to bring significant changes to the character of contentious politics. Scholars argue protest is likely to become normalized and more frequent because of new opportunities, but less radical because it is channelled by political actors into a more responsive political system. However, less attention has been paid to explaining those protest episodes, which remain transgressive. This article uses an original event catalogue and informant interviews to examine the microlevel interactions within one such episode, the Kamour protest in Tunisia in 2017, in which hundreds of young unemployed protesters staged a four-month long sit-in and shut off an oil pipeline to demand jobs and increased state spending in their region. Findings show that in conditions of low political trust, protesters relied on three mechanisms: they escalated but self-limited their actions; organized autonomously but used fraternization to seek the protection of the military; and resisted institutionalization as a political party even as they transformed their claims to appeal to the 'absent state' to demand deeper democratic reforms. Evidence from Tunisia contributes to explaining how political mistrust shapes transgressive protests after a democratic transition.

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A democratic transition is likely to bring significant changes to the character of contentious politics. Protest frequency is expected to increase as repression declines (della Porta, 2016; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015), but the quality of protest is likely to become less destructive, with the threat of action playing a more central role than direct action itself (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 269). The outcome after the transition appears to be a 'normalization' of protest, which becomes 'less radical, more focused, and less visible' (della Porta, 2016, p. 38). Yet, there are good reasons to ask if such normalization always applies. If the achievement of social rights lags behind political freedoms; then, redistributive protests may present a significant challenge to the new democracy (Silva & Rossi, 2018). If activists are disaffected with formal political institutions, their claim-making may take on autonomous forms (Flesher Fominaya, 2015).

In this article, I respond to Tilly's call to address microlevel dynamics within contentious episodes (Tilly, 2008) by examining how activists negotiate protest in a democratizing system and how interactions shape their strategic choices. Della Porta proposes that

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here

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'eventful' democratization, in which protest brings down an authoritarian regime, can create exceptions to protest normalization when citizens develop activist skills, when some activists are co-opted into institutional politics encouraging others to radicalize, or when hopes for a better life are frustrated (della Porta, 2016, p. 40). This article informs these exceptions by identifying the mechanisms involved when protest retains a transgressive quality as marginalized groups mobilize for inclusion in a new social contract, effectively demanding deeper democratic reforms. By transgressive I mean episodic collective action involving newly self-identified political actors often using innovative techniques, in contrast to institutional claims made by established political actors using established means (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 7). I demonstrate this dynamic through a microlevel analysis of a major episode of protest in Tunisia, in the years after the start of a democratic transition in 2011. This research adds to recent work on late Third Wave democratization which highlights transgressive contentious politics in transitions away from authoritarian rule (Grimm & Harders, 2018; Ketchley, 2017; LeBas, 2011).

I use an original event catalogue supplemented with qualitative fieldwork to reconstruct the fine-grained interactions within the Kamour campaign in 2017 in the southern governorate of Tataouine, 500 km south of Tunis. Over four months from February 2017, hundreds of unemployed protesters staged a sit-in and then shut down an oil pipeline to demand thousands of new jobs and increased state spending in their region. Kamour protesters refused co-optation by political parties and trade unions and escalated their actions while directly negotiating with government ministers, but they stopped short of challenging the legitimacy of the new state. Microlevel attention to a single episode like this contributes to an explanation of how protest quality is affected by democratization in conditions of low political trust. The article proceeds in three parts. First, I consider why protest may not always normalize after a democratic transition, and I outline the context of protest in the Tunisian case. Second, I present the methods employed in constructing the event catalogue. Third, I analyze the Kamour campaign by highlighting three salient mechanisms: protesters escalated their actions to impose their claims, but set limits to their radicalization; they organized autonomously but used fraternization to seek the protection of the military as an ally; and, though they rejected institutionalization as a political party, they transformed their claims from an initial demand for local jobs to a critique of the 'absent' state. What began as a protest of the unemployed quickly developed into a long-running claim for deeper democratic reform.

Protest normalization and democratization

Although social movements were once seen as rivals to institutionalized politics (Gamson, 1990; Jenkins & Klandermans, 1995), scholars now see a much closer relationship between the two. Protest, at least in its non-violent forms in Western democracies, has become normalized, meaning it is perpetual rather than sporadic, frequent and broad in its claims, institutionalized, and widely perceived as legitimate (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). Some scholars proposed a substitution theory, in which individuals in post-industrial democracies disengaged from conventional politics and turned to elite-challenging protest as an alternative avenue of activism (Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002; Norris, 2002). Others argue that in democracies in the West and elsewhere, movements are not just an alternative avenue of expression but are interdependent with political

parties (Goldstone, 2003). Given the growing legitimacy of protest, demonstrators are often also committed to institutionalized politics, as found in surveys of protest participants in Belgium (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001) and across Europe (Giugni & Grasso, 2019).

In democratizing contexts, a similar pattern of normalization seems to apply. Tilly's concept of the 'parliamentarization' of protest showed that claim-making in early 19th century Britain shifted from the parochial and particular to become 'cosmopolitan, modular, and autonomous', using transferable routines of action and targeting parliament, but using less direct action (Tilly, 1995, p. 46). Social movements and political parties emerged simultaneously as the growing centrality of parliament required groups to undertake cumulative, coordinated, entrepreneurial action (Tilly, 1997). Likewise, research on post-Communist states found protest was usually organised by established groups including unions and parties, which pressed for reform but did not challenge the regime's legitimacy (Ekiert & Kubik, 1998). In Central Eastern Europe, protests after an 'eventful' democratic transition became less political and tended to be local and fragmented (della Porta, 2016, p. 60). Dissatisfaction kept mobilization going as repression declined, and though protest became normalized it was less powerful.

Theories of normalization rely on protesters perceiving parties as potential allies; however, there are plausible reasons why they may resist the 'parliamentarization' of protest. Low trust in parliament need not imply low trust in political parties. Yet, some protesters are mistrustful of parties, which they see as hierarchical and remote, and they may lack an 'identity coherence' with a suitable party (Piccio, 2016). Movements may self-identify in opposition to established parties and political systems to avoid co-optation (Flesher Fominaya, 2015). Democratization activists may find themselves marginalized and disempowered by partisan electoral politics (della Porta, 2016, p. 228). Among the urban poor in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), scholars identified extensive political activity occurring outside parties, through informal networks (Singerman, 1995) and 'social non-movements', the shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people which produce social change even without ideology, leadership, and organizations (Bayat, 2013, p. 15). We can expect protest organizers will consider options beyond a turn to institutionalized politics, including reinvigorated mobilization (Kriesi et al., 1995).

Protest goals during democratization are likely to shift from challenging the regime's legitimacy towards making new claims, especially when gains in political and civil rights are not matched by a similar expansion of social rights. Research on Latin America identified a struggle for 'incorporation', meaning the recognition of popular sector claims, the right to political participation, and the right to influence public policy, all challenging the exclusionary consequences of neoliberalism after a wave of democratization (Silva & Rossi, 2018). Work on the Argentinian *piquetero* movement highlighted 'bridging with the state', or collective action in order to gain access to rights and benefits, a struggle for state presence to reach beyond mere repression (Rossi, 2017). Similarly, in the MENA region, cycles of socioeconomic protest after the 2011 uprisings have been interpreted as a struggle for popular sector incorporation from those who have little access to the political arena (Weipert-Fenner & Wolff, 2020). Collective action in the MENA often makes claims which reach beyond narrow political rights to make

a 'demand of state' (Zemni, 2015, p. 85) in a new inclusive social contract, in the form of state intervention, the creation of new jobs, or resource reallocation. This is protest that challenges not the authoritarian state, but the absent state.

Demands on the state are likely from marginalized groups, but they may have fewer resources for mobilizing. Research suggests these resource-poor groups participate less in protest because they lack networks and mobilizing organizations (Ekiert & Kubik, 1998; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001). However, work has shown that mobilization of the unemployed in particular need not depend on the resources of political mediators. Mobilization can develop during sharply increased unemployment and when networks organize through an 'anchorage to the local' (Chabanet & Faniel, 2012, pp. 13–14), or when unionization is in decline (Baglioni et al., 2008). Protests of the unemployed in Europe benefit from changing constituencies, as unemployment and precarity increase (Lahusen, 2013). In the MENA, in resource-poor refugee communities, strong, informal leadership networks can facilitate high levels of mobilization (Clarke, 2018). The implications of these findings are that resource-poor groups mobilize more than expected, but often at the less-visible local level. A focus on microlevel dynamics is likely to show that these groups make choices shaped by their interactions with others and take advantage of whatever local resources and opportunities are available.

Protest after the Tunisian transition

Although a consolidated democracy emerged in Tunisia in the years after 2011, with multiparty elections, a new constitution, and a semi-presidential system of government, political elites avoided deep socio-economic reform and pursued political compromise, which was widely perceived as merely redistributing power among themselves (Marzouki, 2015). Public trust in political institutions remained weak, with widespread perceptions of administrative corruption, and falling confidence in government, courts, parliament, and political parties. In the Arab Barometer Wave IV survey, shortly before the Kamour protests, 80.1% of The Tunisian respondents had not very much or no trust in political parties and 71.8% had not very much or no trust in parliament (Arab Barometer, 2016). In Tunisia, and other countries in the region, survey respondents indicated they could not fully exercise their civil and political rights, even if they were guaranteed by law, and tended to prioritize socio-economic rights over civil-political rights in defining democracy (Teti et al., 2019). In Tunisia, low political trust was likely connected to poor economic indicators, and a perception that socio-economic reform lagged behind political change. Official unemployment remained around 15%, with youth unemployment as high as 36% (World Bank, 2017).

Tunisia witnessed a return to protest after 2011 as an alternative avenue of claim-making against an unresponsive elite politics of consensus (McCarthy, 2019). Monthly protest reports compiled by the *Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux* (Forum Tunisien, n.d.), chart an increase in protest, which began after legislative and presidential elections in October–November 2014 (Figure 1). Protest frequency continued to rise after the 2014 elections and came in waves, often peaking around the January anniversary of the uprising and with a sustained peak during the 2017 Kamour protests. Although industrial action was often organized by unions, notably the influential Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), much of the protest was characterized by

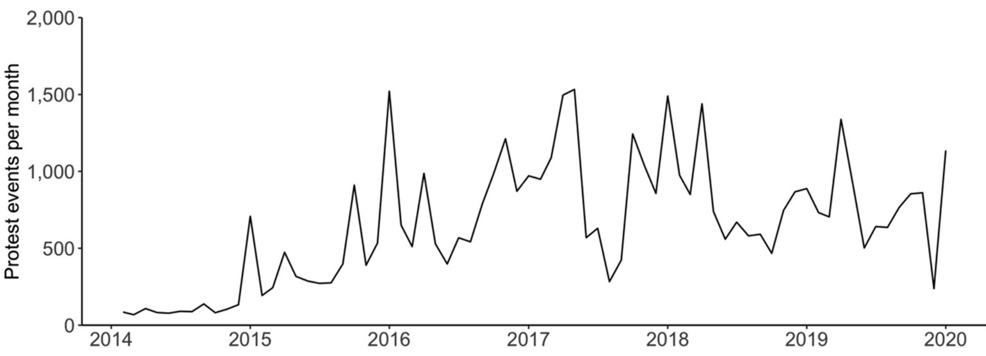

Figure 1. Protest frequency in Tunisia 2014–20. Source: *Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux.*

autonomous organizational forms, driven by demands for employment (Jöst, 2020; Weipert-Fenner, 2020), new environmental networks (Loschi, 2019), or anti-corruption campaigns (Chomiak & Salman, 2016). While in the authoritarian past public dissent was harshly repressed, now the government has set up work programmes, or '*chantiers*', to buy social calm (Meddeb, 2017). After major protests in Kasserine in January 2016, the government created 6,400 jobs under one work programme (Gobe, 2017). Similarly, after the Kamour protest thousands were due to be hired to work in a new state environmental company. But, with the government under pressure from international lenders to reduce the public sector payrolls, these job creation projects were often temporary.

In the south of Tunisia, a region rich in natural resources but historically marginalized (Ayeb, 2011), the recent wave of contention began with the Gafsa protests of 2008, when workers, the unemployed, and students demonstrated for 6 months over hiring practices at the town's large phosphate mines. Protesters held sit-ins and blocked trucks and trains transporting phosphate out of the region (Allal, 2010; Gobe, 2010), providing a repertoire of claims and actions which diffused into the later Kamour protests. After 2011, protests in the Tataouine governorate have been sporadic, driven by anger at unemployment, poor quality public services, and restrictions on trade across the Libyan border. Several factors had worsened conditions, including the decline of the border economy with Libya, an increasing military presence restricting smuggling routes, and investment restrictions blamed on tribal land tenure systems (Meddeb, 2021). A smaller number of protests were political, including clashes at a party office in October 2012 which left one political activist dead, and occasional attacks on police stations. Across the south of Tunisia, protests emerged over natural resources. In May 2015, phosphate production in Gafsa was again halted during weeks of sit-ins on railway lines, roads, and at the entrances to quarries and processing plants (Byrne, 2015). From 2016, there were several short union-led strikes over working conditions in desert oil facilities across the Tataouine governorate, while in the neighbouring governorate of Douz protesters shut a gas pipeline in April 2017 (Après Tataouine, des habitants de Douz réclament leur part des recettes pétrolières, 2017). By the time of the Kamour protests in 2017, the socio-economic crisis in Tataouine was acute, with unemployment at 32.4%, rising to 45.9% for graduates (Gouvernorat de Tataouine en chiffres 2018).

Over the four months from February 2017, hundreds of young, unemployed, mostly male protesters staged a sit-in, first in Tataouine and then at the Kamour road junction near desert oil installations, to demand thousands of new jobs and millions of dollars in state investment. In April, government ministers, including eventually the prime minister, travelled to Tataouine to negotiate directly with the protesters. When talks failed, the government deployed the army to defend the oil installations, the first use of the military against domestic unrest since the democratic transition began in 2011. Yet protesters forced their way into the military zone and shut down the primary north-south oil export pipeline. In response, the government sent in National Guard units, but pulled them back after one protester was killed. Eventually, late at night on 15 June the government conceded to the protesters' demands, promising 4,500 new jobs and 80 m dinars ($32 m) in annual development spending, according to the two-page signed agreement (Maḥḍar Ittifāq [Minutes of the Agreement], 2017), and the pipeline reopened. In Tunisia, the campaign was seen as a 'turning point' with its autonomous mode of organizing (Cherif, 2017), and offered an alternative economic model in which commodity surpluses might fund local social development (Ajl, 2019). Tataouine became a site of recurring contention over the next 3 years, culminating in another significant protest episode in July–November 2020, when protesters, frustrated at the lack of promised jobs, again shut down the pipeline for several weeks, at a reported cost to the state of $350 m (Tunisia Reaches a Deal with Oil Field Protesters, Production to Restart, 2020).

Methods

This article draws on an original catalogue of protest events in Tataouine between July 2016 and July 2017, to include the months before the unemployment protests and the first Kamour episode, which ran from February to June 2017. The event catalogue reconstructs the actions and interactions taking place among the political actors involved (Hutter, 2014), with detailed information on 346 protest events, which range from industrial strikes, to roadblocks, sit-ins, demonstrations, marches, hunger strikes, and the forced closure of infrastructure. Data was collected from the Arabic-language web-sites of two radio stations: *Radio Tataouine*, a state-run local radio station covering the governorate of Tataouine, and *Mosaique FM*, a privately owned national radio station based in Tunis. To cross-reference and supplement these sources, I draw on national and international media reports, social media posts by protesters and trade unions on Facebook pages, press releases from oil companies, and photographs and video clips uploaded to YouTube, which illustrate protests in the governorate.

Compiling event catalogues involves a number of challenges, not least the problem that media reports of protests are likely to suffer from both selection and description bias (Earl et al., 2004; Ortiz et al., 2005). A particular difficulty in compiling this catalogue was that protests in the southern governorate of Tataouine, 500 km from Tunis, were covered only sporadically by national media. Standard media sources used in compiling event data for cross-national comparison, for example, the ACLED data set (Raleigh et al., 2010), did not provide sufficient coverage to enable a microlevel investigation. The *Radio Tataouine* website offered a rich resource of local reporting, with text, audio files, images, and sometimes video. In the absence of a local newspaper, this station was the sole source of local news and offered more detailed and frequent accounts than national media

coverage. Triangulation with multiple sources, including national newspapers and a radio station based in Tunis, which might be less sympathetic to the local challenges facing Tataouine, addressed problems of selection bias through what Beissinger calls a 'blanketing strategy' (Beissinger, 2002, p. 476).

In compiling the data, I code for protest events not claims, and I introduce each event lasting more than 24 hours as a new event each day. I do not specify a minimum number of participants in each event, in line with the conventions of the European Protest and Coercion Data (EPCD) project (Francisco, n.d.). I record the number of participants, given that this determines how disruptive a protest will be and is therefore more significant than reporting protest frequency alone (Biggs, 2018, p. 353). However, participation numbers are often missing in reports or only alluded to in broad terms. In these cases, I use a conservative estimated figure based on photographic or video evidence, or through inference from the text, again in line with the EPCD dataset. I discuss the sources, their limitations, and the coding process in more detail in the appendix.

In addition, I conducted open-ended interviews with 26 informants from Tataouine, including protesters, civil society organizers, and union activists, during two fieldwork trips to the city in August 2017 and April 2018.[1] Interviews were conducted in Arabic and recorded when interviewees agreed. I protect the anonymity of my interviewees, not least because several are still subject to investigation by police. In identifying informants, I followed a snowball, or chain referral, sampling strategy at first, because of the value of personal referrals when researching sensitive topics and hard-to-reach groups (Cammett, 2006). As a second step, I sought out a wide range of Kamour protest organizers, who provided accounts of key moments of decision-making, which I triangulated with the event catalogue. These qualitative interviews provide evidence to explain how protesters gave meaning to their actions and how they made strategic choices as they saw the possibility of protest opening up.

Escalation and fragmentation

On 15 February 2017, half a dozen young men pitched a tent outside the governorate headquarters in Tataouine, with a national flag and a cardboard sign reading: 'We demand work in the oil companies.' A month later, on 22 March, several dozen men in Ksar Ouled Debbab, a village 10 km southwest of Tataouine, set up roadblocks with burning tyres to stop trucks heading south into the oil fields in protest at unemployment. Within days roadblocks spread to surrounding villages and into Tataouine city, accompanied by signs reading: 'Oil is a collective right', 'Youth employment is our right', and the slogan taken up by the protesters as their own, 'No Giving Up!' ('*Errakh la!*'). Compared to the previous months of activism in Tataouine, the protests marked a scale shift (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 331), with an increase in the number and scale of coordinated protest events, which encompassed new actors, the unemployed youth, articulating a broader set of claims. The event catalogue shows a sharp increase in the frequency of protests and in the numbers participating (Figure 2). In the months before the first unemployment sit-in began, protests in the governorate had been dominated by the UGTT, with short strikes by workers at desert oil facilities lasting only a few days and involving no more than two dozen participants at each site. However, the unemployment protests from

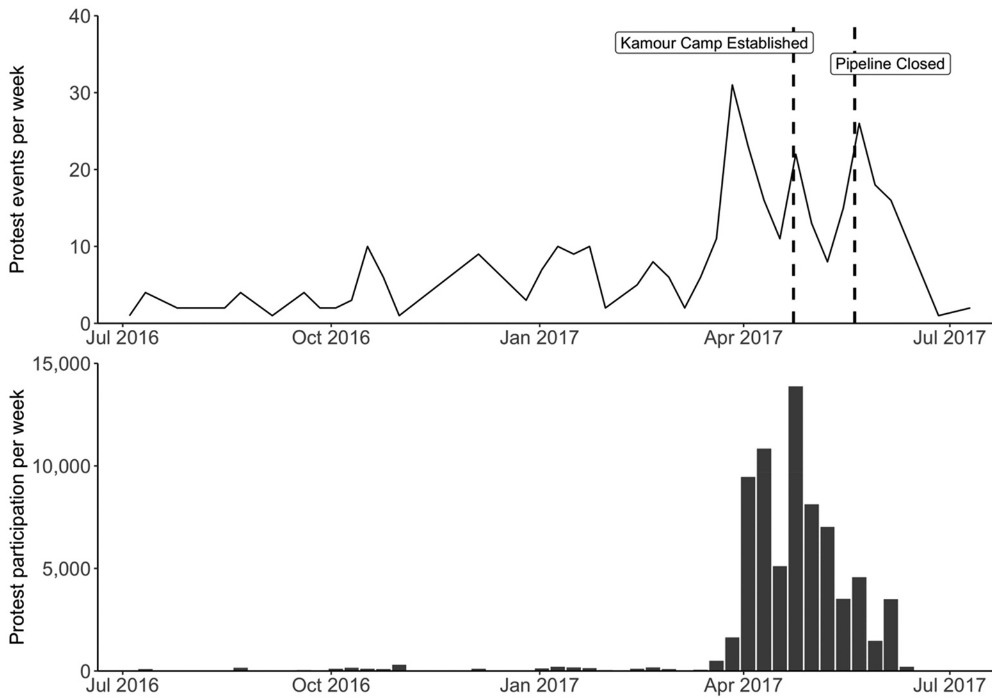

Figure 2. Protest frequency and participation in Tataouine, July 2016-July 2017. Source: Author Event Catalogue.

February 2017 onwards were much more frequent, and mobilized several thousand young unemployed people every week, bridging a range of claims. As the protest developed, the focal point shifted away from the city to target oil transport routes in the desert. As Figure 2 shows, peaks in frequency and participation align with the spread of roadblocks in March, the establishment of the Kamour protest camp in April, and the closure of the pipeline in May. Protest participation started to decline once the Kamour camp had been established; it was difficult to sustain high participation in the challenging conditions of the desert.

The unemployment protests marked a significant shift in the repertoire of protest tactics (Figure 3). Union protests were dominated by strikes and industrial sit-ins, but the unemployment protests brought diverse, disruptive tactics. The protest repertoire shifted to public sit-ins, road blocks, and, at the height of the escalation, the month-long closure of the oil pipeline, alongside general strikes, demonstrations, hunger strikes, and marches. Spatially, the protests moved from an initial stage in the villages and the city of Tataouine, out to the Kamour road junction, 90 km south of the city, in order to obstruct oil company vehicles and eventually to shut down the pipeline itself. The Kamour camp began a new contest over the unpopulated territory of the oil fields, where protesters could use oil infrastructure to exert leverage in their negotiations.

This turns into a more robust protest repertoire intensified through a form of 'improvisational' performance (Tilly, 2008, p. 14), which one protester called 'degrees of escalation' (Interviewee #6, Tataouine, 11 April 2018). Early in the protests, when roads across Tataouine city were blocked, the government twice made offers to resolve

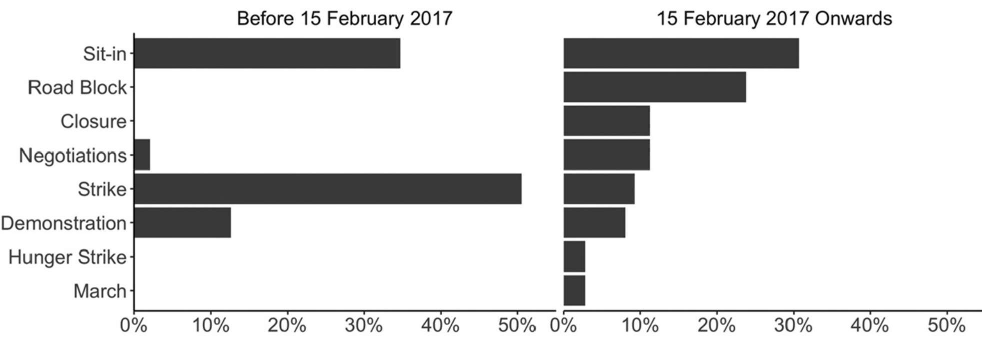

Figure 3. Protest repertoire before unemployment protests began in February 2017, and after. Source: Author Event Catalogue.

the dispute, promising to hire 500 people from a state environmental company and to require oil firms to hire most of their staff locally. In turn, the protesters organized a general strike and demanded 4,000 new jobs, including the recruitment of one member of each family, and the allocation of 20% of oil revenues into a regional development fund. Prime Minister Yousef Chahed sought to delegitimize the protests as criminal, warning in a televised interview: 'Opposing the state crosses a red line' (Hiwar maʿ al-sayyid raʾis al-hukuma Yousef Chahed [Interview with Prime Minister Yousef Chahed], 2017). But on 23 April, shortly before Chahed was due to lead negotiations in Tataouine himself, several thousand protesters drove in convoys out of the city to establish a camp in the desert at Kamour. 'We said: "Let's go to Kamour and within three or 4 days the state will be afraid. Let's put pressure on them and get real promises from them,"' said one protester (Interviewee #2, Tataouine, 12 August 2017). The escalation was also an attempt to earn recognition for their claims. 'At the beginning they laughed at us and didn't believe us. The struggle started there,' said one organizer (Interviewee #25, Tataouine, 18 April 2018).

While the first escalation was well-supported within the protest movement, the second escalation fragmented the group. The prime minister met protesters in Tataouine on 27 April to resolve the crisis with a 64-point promise of reform, but the encounter became a critical juncture. Political parties and the UGTT, which had initially sympathized with the campaign, now endorsed the prime minister's modest offer and called for an end to the roadblocks. But hundreds of young people gathered outside the meeting, climbing walls and angrily chanting the slogans of the 2011 uprisings, 'Work! Freedom! National dignity!' and '*Dégage!*'. Protest organizers increased their demand to 4,500 new jobs. In response, President Beji Caid Essebsi took the unusual step of deploying the military to guard oil infrastructure (Khiṭāb ra'is al-jumhuriyya ila al-shaʿb al-Tūnisi [Speech of the President of the Republic to the Tunisian People], 2017). However, under pressure from continued disruption, the government also made an improved offer of 3,500 jobs, of which 1,500 would now be in the oil sector. Here the Kamour protesters faced a dilemma: whether to risk a costly confrontation with the military in the desert or to accept a significant offer, though one which still fell short of their demands. During a long meeting at the protest camp on 16 May, the consensus broke down. A radical flank, who were a minority in the meeting according to some

informants, insisted escalation would force greater concessions. At least 200 protesters then crossed into a military zone 10 km from Kamour to reach the pipeline. 'We had only one last solution which was closing the tap. It was the limit of protesting', said one (Interviewee #6, Tataouine, 11 April 2018). The rest, who wanted to accept the government offer, returned to Tataouine and began a sit-in outside the governorate building. On 20 May, the protesters forced their way into the military zone and shut down the pipeline at the SP4 valve station, halting the flow of oil. It remained closed for most of the next 28 days.

However, the escalation was not unlimited. Both the moderate and the radical flanks tried to set bounds to their transgressive actions. Those opposed to shutting the pipeline argued that escalation would bring repression and would damage the oil firms that protesters hoped would hire them. One protester said: 'We were afraid that closing the tap would bring down the government. We escalated but negotiations were always open. If the government fell, then there'd be a curfew and we'd lose everything' (Interviewee #6, Tataouine, 11 April 2018). Some in this group later attempted to institutionalize the protest movement as a political party. But even those who led the escalation also protested with discipline. The pipeline was shut down in an orderly way, without causing significant infrastructure damage. After the pipeline was closed, organizers called on protesters not to use violence, nor to confront security forces or burn government buildings. After one protester was killed in Kamour on 22 May, the protest coordination announced: 'Some want to use Tataouine as a scapegoat to bring down the government. We say if we had gone out to bring down the government, we would have done it . . . We went out to demand our right in our homeland' (Coordination of the Kamour Sit-in, 2017e). Organizers warned violence was a 'trap' that would justify a yet more securitized response to their demands (Coordination of the Kamour Sit-in, 2017d). The protests involved an escalation mechanism, but this was constrained by both fragmentation and self-limiting behaviour. The escalation was intended to raise pressure without tipping into the anti-systemic protests of 2011. Organizers stopped short of challenging the legitimacy of the state.

Autonomous mobilization

The Kamour protest was organized autonomously, explicitly refusing cooptation by political parties and trade unions. Protesters self-organized through a participatory model, describing themselves not as a movement but a 'sit-in' (*iʿtiṣām*). Eighty representatives from neighbourhoods in Tataouine and nearby villages were chosen to agree on strategy, and a dozen of them formed a leadership group, the 'Coordination of the Kamour Sit-in' (*tansiqiyyat iʿtiṣām al-Kamour*). In organizational form, this was deliberative decision-making built on a shared identity of exclusion. One protester said: 'It's as if we were one mind thinking the same way' (Interviewee #4, Tataouine, 13 August 2017). The protesters explicitly rejected any alliance with political parties, which they saw as self-interested actors trying to dilute their demands, and with the UGTT, which they perceived as prioritizing negotiation over escalation. In October 2016, civil society groups in Tataouine had held a demonstration against the union's ineffective 'unilateralism' (Waqfa iḥtijājiyya li-ʿadad min mumaththili al-jamʿiyyat [Protest stoppage by a number

of association representatives], 2016). UGTT leaders, who criticised the Kamour protests as economically disruptive, took part in the negotiations in June 2017 but only as guarantor of the agreement.

Rather than working with parties and unions, protesters instead sought the protection of the military as a neutral actor. In authoritarian contexts, fraternization with security forces may emerge during uprisings against incumbent regimes, when protesters generate solidarity with regime supporters (Ketchley, 2014; Kurzman, 2004, p. 115). Democratization, however, presents an open 'unstructured opportunity', in which political alignments shift, many potential allies are available, and the regime is more cautious about repression (Ekiert & Kubik, 1998). Previous authoritarian regimes in Tunisia had deployed the military for repression during crises, notably the 1978 general strike, the 1984 bread uprising, and the 2010–11 uprising. Deploying the military again in 2017 pointed to the persistence of authoritarian security techniques in the democratic era. However, in Kamour, the military was no longer perceived purely as an instrument of the regime, but as a potential ally that shared some identity characteristics with protesters. The military's heavy recruitment from marginalized regions of the country, exemplified by a large barracks in central Tataouine itself, may in part explain why it acquiesced in the shutting of the pipeline at Kamour (Grewal, 2019).

The event catalogue and informant interviews show that Kamour protesters explicitly courted the military. During the initial phase of roadblocks, protesters blocked police and National Guard vehicles and oil company trucks, but allowed army vehicles, civil protection forces, and ambulances to pass. Though informants spoke disparagingly of the police and National Guard, they described the military as neutral and patriotic. Said one: 'The army is protecting the country. They do not interfere' (Interviewee #6, Tataouine, 11 April 2018). On 17 May, when the radical flank of protesters moved from the Kamour crossroads to the SP4 pumping station, they entered the zone controlled by the military. Army officers initially refused to let them in, ordering those with vehicles to drive back to Tataouine, as some did. On 20 May, hundreds of protesters gathered at the wire fence around the pumping station, standing face to face with a few dozen soldiers, chanting their slogan '*Tataouine errakh la!*', and sometimes posing for photographs with and embracing soldiers, according to video recorded at the scene (Radio Tataouine, 2017). A colonel-major addressed the crowd through a loudspeaker and soldiers fired shots into the air as protesters approached. But eventually the protesters breached the wire fence and, after discussions with a senior officer, a protester together with an oil engineer, walked into the building and closed the pipeline tap. Outside, the crowd sang the national anthem and waved the Tunisian flag.

On 21 May, National Guard units surrounded the pumping station and reopened the pipeline. That evening, protest organizers issued statements on their Facebook page stressing the legitimacy of their sit-in. 'Our protests are peaceful … We will not be dragged into violence because we are the ones protecting the homeland. The security forces and the army are the sons of the people … We demand the implementation of the constitution.' (Coordination of the Kamour Sit-in, 2017b). When protesters returned to the station the following morning, they were confronted by National Guard forces who fired tear gas and drove their vehicles at the crowd, until one protester was hit by a car and killed. When protests broke out hours later in Tataouine in response, Kamour organizers aligned themselves with the military: 'Urgent request from the youth of

Tataouine: support the army to secure the city ... We have confidence in the army' (Coordination of the Kamour Sit-in, 2017c). The government withdrew the National Guard forces, and on 23 May, with the military still deployed at the pumping station, protesters again entered the building and shut down the tap. The military remained on site but acquiesced; the pipeline was not reopened until an agreement was signed with the government a month later. Having started their campaign with autonomous mobilization and the explicit refusal of cooptation, protesters then used the mechanism of fraternization to court the military as an ally. Protester fraternization with the military enabled the most disruptive repertoire of action at Kamour.

Challenging the absent state

Initial claims for employment in the oil industry were scaled up during the Kamour protests into a broader demand for inclusion in the new democratic system. However, though these rhetorical claims succeeded in mobilizing large numbers of protesters, they were not easily channelled into institutionalized politics. Social movements may try to amplify their claims by working with or creating their own political parties, especially if they seek to win access and influence policy in a process of 'incorporation' (Silva & Rossi, 2018). Mistrust of political parties constrains this process in the Middle East, although the *Beirut Madinaty* movement in Lebanon stands out for its ability to connect street mobilization with formal political participation (Geha, 2019). In Kamour, a small group of political entrepreneurs tried a similar strategy by presenting an electoral list for the May 2018 municipal elections. The list, 'The Independent Youth in Tataouine', was set up by the group that had refused to join the protest escalation which shut down the pipeline, suggesting the tactical split marked a deeper strategic disagreement. They adopted the '*Errakh la*' slogan and prioritized similar claims, addressing unemployment and the need to link Tataouine to national rail and road infrastructure (The Independent Youth in Tataouine, 2018). However, the list won less than 5% of the votes and only one seat on the 30-seat municipal council. During the electoral campaign, several protest organizers declined to join the list, and organizers admitted they were struggling to convince their fellow protesters to vote (Interviewee #11, Tataouine, 13 April 2018). The Islamist movement Ennahda, a party in the ruling coalition government which had criticized the Kamour protests, dominated municipal elections across the socially conservative governorate.

Claim-making at Kamour relied on a territorially framed grievance, a critique of the extraction of natural resources from the marginalized periphery to enrich Tunisia's more prosperous northeast. This extractive process belonged to a global pattern of resource exploitation, which has a particular resonance in North Africa (Hamouchene, 2019), and especially in Tunisia, with its history of oil, phosphate, and mineral extraction (Ayeb, 2011). In Kamour, this grievance frame shaped not just protesters' claims, but also their repertoire of action. Claims grew from jobs in the oil industry, to demands for a share of oil revenues and for publication of hydrocarbon contracts. Informants described the sovereignty of the state in the south as 'incomplete' because natural resource profits were not reinvested in the region (Interviewee #15, Tataouine, 15 April 2018). On the day they shut the pipeline, organizers said: 'We did not stop production [of oil]. We want to stop the looting of the profits of production' (Coordination of the Kamour Sit-in, 2017a). The

effect on repertoire was to give the protests a 'territorialized logic' in a battle for the control of space (Rossi, 2017, p. 13). Rather than occupying urban public space, a strategy of the 2011 uprisings, the Kamour protesters instead set up their protest camp at a desert road junction. The disincentives were evident: it was hard to supply with food and water, there were no local residents to mobilize, and the camp was hardly visible to the citizenry. But they exploited the most useful local resource, the pipeline infrastructure. The government response demonstrated the political salience of this territory: as well as deploying security forces, the government also asserted control over the desert through new emergency powers. From July 2017, 'sensitive and essential' installations became closed military zones (Décret Présidentiel no. 2017,).

The Kamour protest was not a revolutionary claim to topple the state, but a critique of an incomplete process of democratization, targeting what one informant called the 'absent state' (Interviewee #15, Tataouine, 15 April 2018). Although della Porta found that protest was likely to become less political after a democratic transition (della Porta, 2016, p. 60), in this case what began as a local claim for jobs soon developed into a political demand for inclusion. In Tunisia, the expansion of social rights lagged well behind civil and political reforms, especially in under-resourced regions like Tataouine. The Kamour protesters refused to adopt the mechanism of institutionalization by forming a political party to press their claims, but they transformed their claims from merely a demand for more jobs to a moral claim for a more equitable distributive system. Informants ascribed moral legitimacy to their actions by repeated appeals to the new 2014 constitution, with its reference to public ownership of natural resources and to the state's commitment to strive for balanced development across all regions. The Kamour sit-in exposed the failure to address youth unemployment or to incorporate marginalized regions in a new social contract, and the government's continued reliance on repression to counter dissent. Although the government framed the Kamour protests as a threat to democracy, the protesters themselves imposed demands for deeper, more inclusive democratization.

Conclusion

The Kamour campaign, though significant and prolonged, was only one episode of protest among many in Tunisia during the period of democratization after 2011. Not all protests adopted the same organizational forms or mobilizational techniques, and generalizing from this case is difficult. However, analyzing the microlevel interactions within a single case provides the opportunity to identify how protest quality changes during democratization in conditions of low political trust. In line with the broader literature, this study finds that the protest frequency increased during and after the transition. However, it demonstrates that protest does not always normalize or become less radical, less visible, or less political. This article highlights the mechanisms involved when protest retains a transgressive quality, rather than normalizing through 'parliamentarization' as often expected. First, protesters escalated their actions in stages, responding to negotiations with the government and encounters with security forces. However, this escalation mechanism was not unlimited but was bound by internal splits and by self-limiting curbs imposed by protest organizers themselves, who stopped short of challenging the legitimacy of the democratic state. Second, though the protest was organized autonomously, organizers used the fraternization

mechanism to seek the protection of the military as a neutral actor at a moment of fluid political alignments. It was only with the acquiescence of the military that the group achieved its most transgressive act, the extended closure of the pipeline. Third, protesters resisted institutionalization as a political party. Yet their claims were not confined to local economic demands, but instead they transformed into a critique of the absent state and a demand for deeper democratic reform, which would incorporate marginalized regions into the national economy through a more equitable share of natural resources and a more just distributive system.

These findings contribute to explaining how disaffection with formal political institutions manifests itself after a democratic transition. Once political and civil rights are consolidated, with successive elections and constitutional guarantees of individual liberties, there is likely to remain a contest over the expansion of social rights, often presented as a struggle for popular sector inclusion or as the expansion of citizenship rights. Although this inclusion may target access to formal political institutions and policymaking, it is also likely to involve actors who are marginalized and resource-poor and who are unwilling or unable to channel their claims through formal institutions because of low political trust. Even when political opportunities open up transgressive protest is still possible because of the way protesters' actions, identities, and ideas are shaped by interactions with other actors. Given that low political trust is a feature across the MENA region, this points to the potential for future research on the correspondence and connections between the cycles of protests that have returned in recent years and the extent to which grievances, mechanisms, and visions of change might be shared across borders.

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