2011

Tunisian Push for Democracy: Successes, Failures, and Lessons

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Introduction

This paper is based upon original research conducted over a summer in Tunisia. As such there are some differences that might separate the style and structure of this paper from other academic papers. First is that my goals going into this project were broad. I did not have a specific research hypotheses that I could test, but rather a range of factors that I could observe and assign importance to. The country was, and is, still changing rapidly, and therefore I felt that my research should exhibit the same flexibility. Second is that (at least in the paper) the use of firsthand, informal sources far outweighs that of academic sources. This is due both to the value of the interviews and conversations that I had with top level party members and political scientists, as well as the fact that no literature on the current situation in Tunisia exists, and therefore I have to rely on the extrapolation of theoretical logic to the Tunisian case, which is not always useful. Those two disclaimers then being added, I can then move on to the purpose of the introduction, which is to provide some background and key events regarding the Tunisian transition and my experience of that process, as well as a small summary of the findings and theories that I gained from that experience.

On Jan 14th, after a month of sustained, mass protest, Zinedine El Abidine Ben Ali was forced out of office after 23 years in the presidency. Protests were both ideological and economic in nature, and an interim government then came to power charged with overseeing the economic and political reform of Tunisia until a constituent assembly could be elected on July 24th (now postponed to October 23rd). However, the first interim government, led by the new president Faoud Mebazaa and prime minister Mohammad Ghannouchi, experienced severe political problems in regards to the hostile opposition forces, leading to the resignation of Ghannouchi in late February.

The new (and current) interim government is led by prime minister Beji El Caid El Sebsi, and is staffed mainly with officials that were involved in politics during the old regime, including members of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and the Democratic Front for Labour and Liberties. Other

important actors include Ennahda, a moderate Islamist political party that has been forcefully banned from politics for over thirty years, and the January 14th Front, a coalition of leftist and secular parties that have emerged from the transition process.

Upon my arrival then, in Tunisia, I sought to investigate all aspects of society that had in the past been considered important aspects of democratic transitions (civil society, elite and party politics, economic activity, etc.). I was optimistic about the transition process coming in, especially considering the high levels of education and wealth attained by Tunisian society, as well as the absence of military intervention in the government that derailed Egypt's democratic transition. I thought, as did many, that Tunisia stood the greatest chance of any Arab country of having a successful transition. However, I encountered a Tunisia that was struggling mightily with the transition process. This was due to a number of political factors that will be discussed later in the paper, and it opened my eyes to the difficulty of democratic transitions and their inherent pitfalls, especially regarding the Arab/Islamic region.

This paper then is a documentation of two months of observations on the political and societal transition in Tunisia. It begins with an identification of the major problems that I observed to be hindering the transition process, and then attempts to orient these issues within the broader framework of democratic transitions. It then seeks to address changes (mainly positive) that have occurred in the transition process since I left the country, and attempting to draw out causal factors and suggest topics for further research. A general summary of my findings: While Tunisia experienced a host of initial political problems relating to the structure of politics and society during the Ben Ali era, recently there have been signs that suggest they are making significant progress in handling those issues and creating a democratic political culture in the lead up to the October 23rd elections. The speed at which the Tunisians were able to begin learning democratic politics has been surprising, and stands to add elements to the research on democratic transitions.

Observed Political Problems

This section is intended to address the details of political factors in Tunisia that I observed were hindering the progress of democratic reform over the summer. The transition that began in December involved a popular opposition that challenged the government through strength in numbers, organizational unity (if not ideological), and an uncompromising attitude. Even after Ben Ali's removal from power, the opposition continued their protest, forcing the resignation of the new prime minister of the interim government. The strength and size of the "democracy" movement in Tunisia was certainly promising at that point, but a number of Tunisians argue that even then the opposition was showing signs of fracturing. When I arrived three months later I was confronted with the results of those nascent cleavages, with political and economic problems developing at a much higher rate. In this section I discuss these problems, which I have identified as four broad crises: Elite polarization, popular mistrust/disillusionment, lack of legitimacy, and economic instability. These crises, to an extent, cause and are caused by each other, but here I want to present the details of each specifically, and after we can move on to talk about some of the underlying factors that contribute to these political symptoms.

Elite Polarization: Islamists vs. Secularists

Prior to the removal of Ben Ali, the Islamic question had been forcefully answered by decades of stringent secularism. Beginning with Borguiba in the 1950s, the Tunisian regime has violently insured that the political sphere remain free of any Islamist voice. This secularization affected the social sector as well, creating an interesting blend between Islamic and European influences. As explained to me by one 21 year old Tunisian woman: "We have our own personal of Islam. We smoke,we drink, we have

sex, but for us this is not against religion."[1]   However, regardless of this seemingly laissez-faire

religious attitude, a significant number of political Islamists (both fundamentalists and moderate), have

survived in Tunisia in order to maintain and undercurrent of opposition. Now that the political barriers

have been lifted, Islamist parties have joined the political fray, and the question over the place of

religion in politics has become a central debate, often stalling or obscuring other important issue points.

Ennahda, a previously banned Islamic movement, remains the figurehead for the Islamist

platform in Tunisia. Their leaders are famed throughout the country as some of the most stringent

opposition activists under the Ben Ali regime, as well as weighty participants in the January revolution.

At least that is what supporters of the party will claim, while other more secular minded Tunisians tend

to ignore their previous opposition role under Ben Ali and downplay their part in the January revolution.

Ennahda claims to represent the popular will, arguing that they are the only party who understands the

suffering of the common people. They even emphasized to me that their goals are not political, but are

instead "human" goals aimed at satisfying the needs of Tunisian citizens, whereas other parties (leftist

and secularists) are currently pursuing illegitimate political power.[2] On the contrary, one secularist

describes them as, "power-hungry radicals that get too much money from Saudi Arabia. They want to

change the face of Tunisia."[3] These are quotes taken from high-profile actors, capable of influencing

politics at a national level, and they don't show any signs of the consensus or compromise necessary for

a functioning, inclusive political process.   Both sides seem to be focused upon gaining as much

relative political power as possible in this transition, at the expense of meaningful political dialogue

and constructive solutions to Tunisia's mounting problems.

Perhaps the most public example of the effects of this elite polarization is the failure of the

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[1]Taken from an interview with Phedra Bezzarga, a 20 year old civil society activist working with the organization SAWTY
     in Tunis
[2]Taken from an interview with Samir Dilou, Ennahda's representative to the National Committee for the Protection of the
     Revolution
[3]Taken from an interview with a member of the Progressive Democratic Party who asked not to be named

consensual political body known as the National Committee for the Protection of the Revolution. The

first of its kind to emerge from the revolution, the National Committee was originally a government

sponsored reform commission made up of 18 lawyers and political scientists charged with forming an

independent election committee and writing laws regarding the elections and the impending constituent

assembly. However, after facing protests about the commission's revolutionary integrity, the interim

government allowed the addition of near to 150 new members from numerous revolutionary groups

such as Ennahda, the January 14th movement, Tunisian General Labour Union, etc. The commission

then evolved into a watchdog committee that was to formulate, approve, or annul laws regarding the

transitional government, the elections, and the constituent assembly. Although these new additions

were not received well by officials in the interim government,[4] the members of the committee had a

large amount of popular legitimacy at the time, and it was an opportunity for the opposition to engage

in consensual, inclusive political action.

Unfortunately, divisions among the opposition were almost immediately obvious. In a

conversation with Dr. Asma Nouira, a political scientist and university professor that was a member of

the original 18 member commission, she described the addition of revolutionary actors as disruptive to

the original goals of the committee, because each party approached the committee with its own power

interests in mind, rather than the collective interests of the wider Tunisian community. She also

claimed that despite their revolutionary rhetoric, their attitude was undemocratic: "They are acting like

dictators, not democrats."[5] Another prominent Tunisian political scientist later ratified this view,

arguing that neither party (Ennahda, secularists, leftists) were willing to accept any binding agreements

that limited their actions to the exclusion of their adversaries[6]. Each detail, small or large, was fought

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[4]Iheb Ettounsi. "Revolution protection council stirs debate in Tunisia." *Magharebia,* 02/22/11.
   http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/22/feature-03
[5]Interview taken from Asma Nouira, a political scientist involved in the National Committee for the Protection of the
   Revolution and professor at University of Jendouba
[6]Taken from an interview with Hamadi Redissi, a professor of public law and political science at University of Tunis

over and either discarded or pushed through without any sort of consensual agreement. The adversarial

nature of the committee significantly slowed the legislation process, and led to the postponement of

elections, originally scheduled for July 24th, to October 23rd. The committee was described as an "utter

failure" while the election change was given the title of "catastrophe."7

Following the election changes, questions about the legitimacy and efficacy of the committee

filtered down to Tunisian citizens and civil society activists across the country. The feedback that I

received from that point on was almost exclusively negative, considered just another example of

Tunisian elites struggling for power. More importantly, the elites themselves began to lose faith in the

political process, as numerous political scientists, lawyers, and parties left the commission in protest,

culminating in the withdrawal of Ennahda itself. In a conversation with Ennahda's former

representative to the National Committee, he explained his party's departure as a protest against what

he deemed were illegitimate actions by the left and secularists aimed at excluding Ennahda from the

constituent assembly. The final straw was a law that was formulated by the left, intended to limit

funding from foreign sources, which represents the bulk of Ennahda's budget and funds its numerous

social programs. The left claimed that it prevented Ennahda's unfair social advantage gained from rich

Islamic groups throughout the Middle East, which they claimed was the source of Ennahda's

overwhelming support among lower classes. Ennahda saw it differently of course, and proceeded to

withdraw from the commission, leaving in its wake a paralyzed, illegitimate reform committee.

In the end, the result of this elite polarization has been the freezing of the political reform

process in Tunisia at a time when it is needed most, contributing to and compounding some of the other

political problems on our list. By the time I left, elites had still failed to find a method or forum to

promote meaningful political dialogue, and high level politics had devolved into political name-calling

and media smashing, rupturing ties among the population as well. As we move on to the next item in

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[7]Ibid.

the list, we shall see how this elite divide has not only created divides among the population, but has also alienated a significant portion of Tunisians (revolutionary and not) from politics at the

center.

Popular Mistrust/Disillusionment

Coming off the revolution, there were a significant amount of young, revolutionary actors that were invited to participate in the political process. These actors were new to the political process, and still wary of government intentions, so those that did accept government offers to participate were quickly criticized and isolated from the revolutionary cohort.[8] Certainly there were reasons for caution among the youth and revolutionary ranks, but this initial rejection of the political process began a trend of mistrust toward the new interim government. This created what is described as a vicious cycle, wherein popular distrust of new governments affect or hinder its ability enact reform, which further reinforces a populations distrust and disillusionment.[9] I once again turned to Dr. Nouira to corroborate this analysis for me, as more than once she lamented how the "poor government" was unable to enact reform in the face of a hostile population. She argued that initial mistrust of the government was at first justified, due to the connection that many officials had with the Ben Ali regime, but even then the population was unaware of the true political problems at the time. It was economic problems, political and economic rules, and a fractured opposition movement that threatened the health of Tunisian democracy. The population lost sight of those goals in the face of their initial distrust regarding the interim government, and it was through that distrust that the National Committee for the Protection of the Revolution evolved into its government watchdog status. The interim government suffered from a

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[8]Sara Sorcher. "Arab youth still want change, but won't be politicians." *National Journal,* 08/04/11.
   http://www.nationaljournal.com/nationalsecurity/arab-youth-still-want-change-but-won-t-be-politicians-20110804
[9]William Mishler and Richard Rose. "Trust, Distrust and Skepticism: Popular Evaluations of Civil and Political Institutions in Post-Communist Societies." *Journal of :Politics.* 59.2 (1997) pg 420

crisis of legitimacy, and the National Committee was supposed to be the population's representative in the realm of central politics, which Dr. Nouira felt resulted in a breakdown of the political process.10

Of course, it is difficult to present strong reasons for a population to trust a government or political system that has always been an oppressive, deceitful presence in their lives (the problems with this will be discussed later in the paper); however, from an objective standpoint it seems as if Dr. Nouira has a point, especially given my experience of with Tunisian citizens after the National Committee began to break down. One civil society activist described the National Committee as the population's one true investment in the political process: "We could never trust the government, but the (National Committee) was supposed to represent us, and they failed."11 Multiple times, when asked about politics in Tunisia, citizens would point to the National Committee and say that the power grabbing was just another example of the attitude of politicians in the country. One date farmer in Tozeur, an desert oasis in the interior, went as far to say that democracy is impossible in Tunisia, and the rest of the Arab world, because all they (elites) want is power12.

As far as ordinary Tunisians are concerned, at this point there were few foreseeable avenues into the central political scene. They either had to align their interests with one of the major parties, which further enforce the cleavages at the elite level, or they could align with some smaller, more moderate parties that place more emphasis on collective action and process then specific interests. Some turned to civil society, but they too are just learning how to be independent, and from my numerous interviews with members and leaders of civil society organizations, progress is frustrating and slow. Moreover, most of these small parties and civil society organizations have little say in the operations of the central political arena, which continues to hold a general monopoly over power. As a result, statistics show that many of the population have simply opted out of the political process

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[10]Taken from a separate interview with Asma Nouira
[11]Taken from an interview with Mehdi Himoudi, a civil society activist with the organization Hippocampe – art et citoyenneté
[12]Taken from a conversation with a farmer in Tozeur (translated from Arabic/French)

altogether, with nearly half of the eligible voters unregistered for Tunisia's first election13.

One more important effect is that the failure to incorporate and act upon the collective interests of the population (economic improvement, anti-corruption, human rights guarantees) has reinforced the traditional conception of the political system in the minds of many Tunisians, and reignited the government/populace dichotomy wherein the political process is solely the realm of the elite, rather than a forum that is capable of representing the interests of the average Tunisian. Tunisians continue to take to the streets demanding faster political reform, rather than expressing their attitudes in an institutional framework. To be sure, faith in the political process is still much higher than the time of Ben Ali, but the further that Tunisia digresses from faith and support of the political elite and process, the easier it is to regress into the vicious cycle of mistrust and low performance described above. There is certainly an incentive to maximize the opportunity for success for Tunisia's democratic experiment, and widespread disillusionment among the population is a poor way to start.

Absence of Legitimacy

When I use the term "absence of legitimacy," I refer to a state in which there exists no single actor or collective body of actors that are seen as legitimate (either by law or by popular support) by a majority of the population. As a result, any action that takes place in the political or economic arena is subject to review and challenge by hundreds, if not thousands of different observers, with no universal scale to measure or judge by. Because there are no real laws designating legitimacy at the center, any group of actors can claim that actions of the government are illegitimate, and if they have enough popular support, the government has little choice but to secede some decision-making powers to these new actors. However, even within this new group of "legitimate" actors, there still do not exist any binding

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[13] "Ce n'est pas un séisme, mais une crise de croissance dans le cadre de choix stratégiques du parti" *Le Temps,* Tunis 08/28/11

laws that govern their actions. At any point, one facet of that group may claim that it is not subject to a majority rule, without the fear of binding legal action being taken against it. In other words, there is no consistent monopoly on methods of rule enforcement among elites (violence included), and therefore

the force of any decision-making power rests on popular sentiment (strength in numbers). If the population then refuses to back a specific actor or group of actors with a significant amount of numbers, than any action within the political sphere becomes increasingly more difficult or impossible, as it is indefensible from a legitimacy standpoint.

It is easy to see how the Tunisian transition has created this crisis of legitimacy, especially given the problems of elite polarization and popular disillusionment discussed in the previous sections. The original interim government was formed by a constitutional decree left over from the Ben Ali era, which did not hold weight with the population for obvious reasons. The population had already shown that it was capable of ousting an interim government (Ghannouchi's), and therefore officials were essentially forced to secede some power to the National Committee for the Protection of the Revolution, a political body that had popular support; However, due to a polarization of interests and a lack of binding legal agreements governing the National Committee, parties such as Ennahda (to use only one example) were able to take issue with any and all policies that they considered against their interests, regardless of the will of the majority. When they withdrew from the National Committee, leaders of Ennahda argued that the committee was illegitimate, because they were not elected and they did not operate under democratic laws14. Both of these are appeals refer to the legal legitimacy gained from elections and operating laws, and although it ran the risk of alienating itself from the political process, Ennahda leaders believed that it had the support of a significant portion of the population, which is all that was necessary to guarantee their place at the table in the October elections.

To be fair, the National Committee has certainly sought to uphold certain legal agreements, like

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[14]Taken from my interview with Samir Dilou and Ennahda following a press conference of similar wording

majority voting, and without Ennahda it has done fairly well. It has passed a resolution banning

foreign funding for parties15 (the law which originally precipitated Ennahda's removal), and has

drafted

and ratified a document outlining the path of Tunisia's transition, including the cessation of the

National Committee altogether16. However, the fact remains that Ennahda has been excluded from

this entire process, and that polls consistently rank them as one of the most most popular parties in the

country17. It's unclear whether the government and the National Committee will have enough legal

legitimacy to force Ennahda to cooperate with the laws that it has written regarding the elections.

Based on personal analysis, the erosion of general confidence in the National Committee and the

government would support the theory that it does not have the legitimacy to force Ennahda's

cooperation with out seriously rupturing the transition process and precipitating a large amount of

violence from Ennahda's constituency. Ennahda aside, independent opinion polls over the summer

have shown that as much as 40 percent of the Tunisians support Islam in politics.18 The legitimacy

regarding the political process is simply unclear, and therefore the rules of the political game are

threatened by any side that feels as if it has been cheated in this transition process. These political

problems are serious when considering the fragility of Tunisia's new democracy, but they are even

further compounded by our last problem area, which is Tunisia's struggling economy.

Economic Woes

Despite widespread protests regarding political reform, human rights, and other non-material issues of

the revolution, polls have shown that, behind security, economic well-being has been the highest

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[15]Kaouther Larbi. "Tunisia moves to ban foreign party funding." *Associated Foreign Press,* 07/20/11
    http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gi7eiARGRWB0ZQmkpj2MP-
    4pjhuA?docId=CNG.8c842cce49ab707aca10cae6608b94ca.371
[16]Houda Trabelsi. "Tunisian parties sign transition road map." *Magharebia,* 09/20/11
    http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/09/20/feature-01
[17] Larbi (2011)
[18]Survey of Tunisian Public Opinion conducted by the International Republican Institute, May 2011.
    http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/flip_docs/Tunisia%202011/HTML/index.html

concern for Tunisians, as well as the issue that the government has performed the most poorly on[19] (security is not being addressed at this point, because from what I could tell security issues in Tunisia stem directly from political turmoil and lack of resources, which can therefore be fixed by fixing the issues above). This attitude is not surprising, considering that the spark of the revolution came from an

unemployed street vendor's self-immolation, and the areas of the most consistent, violent protest has come from the poorer cities of the interior. In an economic sense, the Tunisian revolution has been a truly paradoxical event, because the instability stemming from economic complaints has driven tourism away from the country, which is Tunisia's second largest employer behind agriculture.

From personal travel experience, I was oftentimes the only foreigner in regions of the interior that relied on tourism for a higher standard of living, and more than once I was forced to negotiate deals with locals for accommodation, as the three or four hotels in a given area would be closed. Everywhere I went, I was asked, "where are the tourists?" The collapse of tourism has caused significant job losses, as well as social disquiet. Regardless of the actual material effects related to the absence of tourists (which are significant) Tunisians seemed to use tourism as a barometer of normality in the country. Complaints regarding tourism were often followed by the disclaimer that once the tourists were back, the situation in Tunisia would be much better. In recent months, tourism has picked up, and was beginning to see French and Italian citizens on the streets of Tunis, but hotels and resorts are still operating way below their seasonal averages. More important, however, than the instability surrounding this one aspect of the economy, are the problems regarding sustainable economic development and restructuring of the Tunisian economy.

Despite having to deal with the negative impacts on the economy created by revolution, we have to keep in mind that one premise of the revolution is that the Tunisian government needs to improve the economic situation in relation to pre-revolution levels. Not only does it have to make up

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[19]Ibid.

the ground they have lost during months of instability, but it has to exceed the previous status-quo. As a start, international organizations such as the G8 and UN have pledged recovery funds to the Tunisian government, and on Sept. 20th, the Tunisian Finance Minister Jalloul Ayed revealed the "Jasmine Economic and Social Plan" a five-year plan focused on creating jobs in the short term and shifting the economic structure of Tunisia toward higher technologies in the long term, an effort to absorb higher

amounts of college graduates.[20] This is a promising start, especially considering that a large portion of this budget will be paid from the Tunisian government savings in an effort to avoid foreign debt. However, distribution issues may be a problem due to the only partially functioning political apparatus, and slow reform regarding anti-corruption laws.

The section above has served to highlight problem areas that threaten the health and stability of Tunisia's transition process. They cast a gloomy picture to be sure, but democratic transitions have never been easy affairs. The point of my focus on these problems was to bring them into the foreground as issues that need to be solved, rather than as insurmountable obstacles barring the path to Tunisian democracy. As we transition, then, to talk about some of the theoretical and systemic underpinnings that give rise to a number of these problems, we can begin to develop a better understanding of how to solve them, and how Tunisia may be dealing with them. Luckily, the scholarship on democratic transitions is well-developed, and combining that scholarship with my observations in Tunisia should give us a better look at the future prospects for Tunisia.

Theoretical Explanations and Implications

As I sought to orient my original research and experience in Tunisia within the framework of the democratic transition literature, I encountered two main bodies of scholarship that is well-developed

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[20]"Tunisia unveils new economic, social plan." *Bernama,* Malaysia 09/20/11
http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v5/newsworld.php?id=614593

and still in use today: the literature regarding democratic transition from authoritarian/military regimes in Latin America and Southern Europe, and that involving transitions from communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Both are considered part of the third wave of democratization as defined by Samuel Huntington[21], but they have significant theoretical differences that affect the way scholars view

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democratic transitions on the whole.

The essential differences between the two regions stem from the method of transition, in the key political actors as well as the dynamic of power across society. The southern Europe and Latin American transitions were characterized by negotiated pacts between elites and representatives of a demobilized democratic opposition, whereas the transitions in communist Eastern Europe involved and relied heavily upon mass mobilization and the complete removal of previous elites[22]. The severe differences between these two movements upset the previous notion that there were a series of tools or steps that were beneficial to all transitions[23], and comparative scholars that began to compare the two focused more of their analysis on the different types regimes prior to democratization, and the way the political, economic and social structure and lasting causal effects on the nature and success of democratic transition.

An example of this shift in thought is a highly popular book by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan[24], in which they spend the first few sections explaining a more structural view of democratic transitions, where the nature and health of new governments was directly derived from its nondemocratic predecessor. For example, an authoritarian government (as defined by Linz and Stepan) was much more likely to have a successful transition through a series of negotiated pacts between the regime and

[21]Samuel Huntington. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century.* Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press. 1991

[22]Valerie Bunce. "Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Post-Communist Experience." *World Politics.* 55.2 (2003) 167-92

[23]Valerie Bunce. "What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years." *Annual Review of Political Science.* 2.1 (1999) 115-44

[24]Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan. *Problems o f Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South American, Post-Communist Europe.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press (1996).

a more independent civil society or opposition movement. On the other hand a post-totalitarian

government is more likely to transition successfully through mass uprising an quick electoral defeats of

previous regime officials25. This new focus provided a theoretical unification between Latin America

and Eastern Europe and created a new framework for analyzing different democratic experiences in a

comparative manner.

This focus on regime types logically expanded to focus on societal factors as well, especially

immediately before and after transitions. Even if post-totalitarian regimes are toppled by mass

mobilization, there are nuanced factors within opposition forces and society in general that further

determine the health of a new regime, such as ethnic makeup,26 ideological unity27, and preconceived

perceptions of governments in general28. A good example of this analytical subtlety is a work by

Michael McFaul, wherein he separates the Eastern European transitions into three categories based on

the distribution of power within society, even though all of the transitions were precipitated by mass

mobilization against the communist regime. Some involved an overwhelming, unified majority of the

population, with well-supported leaders, that rose up and was able to impose democracy on the political

structure, while others featured a less significant portion of the population, without powerful leaders,

that new, nondemocratic figures manipulated in order to elevate their political status in a new, but no

less authoritarian government29. It is this level of nuance that has given the transition research much

more explanatory power regarding the initial transition and more predictive power regarding future

political health.

Within this body of research then, we can begin to understand the current political situation in

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25Ibid 57-59

26Bo Rothstein. "Creating Political Legitimacy: Electoral Democracy Versus Quality of Government." *American Behavioral Scientist.* 53 (2009) 311-30

27Bunce (2003) pg 22

28Anja Neundorf. "Democracy in Transition: A Micro perspective on System Change in Post-Socialist Societies." *Journal of Politics.* 72.4 (2010) 1096-1108

29Michael McFaul. "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World." *World Politics.* 54.2 (2002) 212-224.

Tunisia, as well as highlight some key differences. Firstly, according to accepted definitions, Tunisia

under Ben Ali can be defined as a sultanist/personalist regime, which is characterized

by a monopolization of power in a single ruler, which subjects politics, society, and the economy to the

whims of the leader[30]. The political power of the RCD, Ben Ali's ruling power, gives the political

arena

some aspects of single-party rule, but the true political and economic power was centralized in the

hands of Ben Ali and his wife Leila.[31] Parliament was a closed affair, civil society was subject to the

will of the government, and it never developed any sort of political nature, and while there was a

measure of economic pluralism and privatization, at any point business were subject to control and

extortion by Ben Ali, his wife, or his cronies.[32] Certainly, Tunisians enjoyed a certain measure of

social freedom and economic well-being created by his secular, liberal policies, but scholars maintain

that they traded this "good life" for guarantees of political and economic rights[33]. Essentially, Ben Ali

ran the country according to his arbitrary rules, and if you played by them, then you received some

benefits, but it did not allow for alternate views nor any sort of independent organization that could

foster political challenge.

The prospects for success in transitions from a sultanist regime type are typically gloomy in the

literature, arguing that the best option (realistically only option) is the route that Tunisia took, a popular

uprising that brings to power an interim government that is supposed to set elections; however,

problems with this path include staffing the interim government with former regime officials,

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[30]Definition taken from Linz and Stepan (1996), but Tunisia specifically discussed as a personalist regime, or having those characteristics in Dafna Hochman. "Divergent Democratization: The Paths of Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritania." *Middle East Policy Council.* (2007) Journal Compilation . Also in Jason Brownlee. "Portents of Pluralism: How Hybrid Regimes Affect Democratic Transitions." *American Journal of Political Science.* 53.3 (2009) 515-33

[31]Hochman (2007)

[32]I listened to number of personal stories from small business owners in Tunisia who described this the economic process. For parliamentary information see Hochman (2007), and for civil society see Hamdy Abdel Rahman Hassan. "The State and civil society in Africa: A North African perspective." *American Journal of Political Science and International Relations.* 3.2 (2009) 66-76

[33]Hochman (2007) pg 73

postponement of elections for the good of the people, and certain parties (also filled with previous regime members) gaining nondemocratic power through an absence of legitimate alternatives.33 To an extent, all of these factors are present in post-revolution Tunisia: most of the interim government officials have ties to the previous regime or to the equally oppressive Bourguiba regime prior to Ben Ali, elections have already been postponed because reforms were still needed to ensure their fairness, and the interim government, in a legal sense, is checked only by the National Committee. There is an

adversarial nature to that relationship , but absent Ennahda, the National Committee is aligned much closer in an ideological sense.

The logic of these regime structure arguments is fairly airtight, and can be used to explain many of the problems that I identified during my experience in Tunisia. In an absence of independent political organizations or elite, the interim government was initially staffed with officials that were connected to the Ben Ali regime. The population had only experienced corruption and oppression in regards to these old elites, and therefore entirely new political actors were entrusted with some decision-making powers. However, these new faces lacked experience; they had never before needed to answer hard questions (such as the role of Islam in politics) in an institutionalized setting, which in turn created a polarization that stalled the political process. With the perceived failure of politics at the center, many members now had nowhere else to turn, as independent civil society was still a nascent sector. They then had the choice to either radicalize politically or remove themselves in disappointment, resulting in a crisis of legitimacy, as a democratic rule of law was scrapped in favor of a radical, warlike political arena. Essentially, the Tunisian population was completely unfamiliar with democracy, and had to learn it on the fly, which was always going to be difficult.

In the initial phases of Tunisia's transition process, the regime structure logic was difficult to argue with, especially during my experience there, where I saw evidence all around me. However,

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33Linz and Stepan (1996) pg 58

given a series of recent developments, Tunisian politics seem to have recovered nicely. I have tried to keep in contact with academics and politicians in Tunisia for updates on the transition process (as news is exceedingly difficult to find outside the country), and since the beginning of September things have turned rather positive. My most recent email reads, "111 parties are competing and officially all political publicity has ceased as of 11 September... Ennahda is still the single largest political party, but will have to make alliance with other Arab nationalist and Islamist parties . All in all: democratic transition is going fine and if the election results are not significantly challenged on 23 Oct. it will turn

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out to be the first successful democratic revolution of the Arab spring."34 This is certainly from a very optimistic Tunisian, but I received another email from a member of Ennahda saying that, "It was the National Committee that we rejected, but we have negotiated a new assembly that is fairer and we are given a better share. We look forward to good representation in the elections."35 It seems as if, from a polarized, broken political structure, Tunisia has been able to pull together a relatively cooperative and fair transition process, certainly not the results that I expected upon my departure.

How then, can we account for this change? What is it about Tunisian politics and society that seem to defy the predictions of democratic transition literature? Certainly, Tunisia is not in the clear, and it is not as if they have suddenly created this functional democratic government, but they certainly seem to have taken significant steps in ameliorating the political problems listed above. Elites are learning how to cooperate despite differences, security issues are being resolved, and popular support for the political process is coming around. It seems Tunisians are learning democracy faster than anyone expected, especially given the absence of any unifying ideology or leader. Tunisia went from a transition that was being compared to struggling Central Asian countries,36 to a process that is

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[34]Taken from email correspondence with Mounir Khelifa, director of SIT study abroad in Tunisia
[35]Taken from email correspondence with Oualid Ayadi, assistant to Samir Dilou of the Ennahda party
[36]Ian Bremmer. "Is the Arab Spring losing its spring." *Al Jazeera* 04/11/11
   http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/04/2011479616652196.html

described as "going fine." Explanations for this change can certainly be made by looking at the

modernization aspects of Tunisian society, such as high levels of education and relative wealth, and

those are definitely valid and worth discussing. However, there are other aspects regarding the

diffusion of information throughout the transition process that have garnered attention, and are worth

mentioning here.

Development vs. Diffusion: An Interactive Process

A large sector of transition studies focuses on endogenous factors within countries that promote

democratization. For example, economic development leads to higher education levels, increased

media technology, as well as a desire for control in an individual's economic and political life.

Naturally this leads to the development of independent economic and societal associations that promote

the development of democracy.37 However, it has been mentioned before that in countries like Tunisia

(Islamic countries especially), populations have often traded political and economic independence for a

strong state that provides security and economic welfare. Economic development it Tunisia, instead of

weakening the state, entrenched the state and instilled a sort of complacency among the Tunisian

population. It required the rise of a new, dissatisfied class of young Tunisians to overcome that

complacency and produce change. Certainly, their high education level, combined with the failure of

the government to meet rising expectations contributed to the protest movement, but this new

generation couched their movement in completely different terms, not just demanding better economic

governance, but a fundamental change in the political and economic structure. There were factors

beyond the structural make-up of Tunisian political society that inspired these changes, which may

explain why the new successes in the Tunisian transition have defied predictions.

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[37] Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations.* Newbury
Park, CA: Sage (1989). Also see Seymour Lipset. "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and
Political Legitimacy." *American Political Science Review.* 54.1 (1960) 69-105.

Apart from internal development arguments, scholars have also given credence to the idea that external factors, such as the diffusion regional and international trends, norms, and ideas. The argument is that many societies do not progress toward democracy due to internal innovation, but rather to external pressures and incentives, especially in a regional context.38 In fact, some have argued that these external factors are better predictors of trends toward democratization than internal factors

are.39 This is certainly consistent with the observed trend of regional democratization, where entire regions go through transitions in a relatively short period of time, even those that would not be considered internally ready (Central Asia, Southeast Asia, etc.). It is also consistent with Francis Fukuyama's idea of the "end of history," where certain international factors (communication, cooperation, economic development) have made the spread of liberal, democratic ideology inevitable and unstoppable40.

Tunisia certainly had aspects of this diffusion in its transition. The huge number of Tunisians living abroad in France, Italy, and other European countries created a free flow of ideas that have affected the political attitudes of young Tunisians, not to mention the increased efforts of Arab news agencies to expose government corruption and promote "real" news.41 However, for a number of reasons, I would question the theory that it is this exposure to new democratic ideology that created this transition in Tunisia, and more importantly that it gave them the tools to handle transitional challenges and quickly learn to practice democratic politics.

38Richard Gunther and Anthony Mughan. *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (2000). Also see John O'Loughlin et. al. "The Diffusion of Democracy: 1946-1994." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers.* 88 (1998) 545-74
39Barbara Wejnert. "Diffusion, Development and Democracy." *American Sociological Review.* 70.1 (2005) 53-81
40Francis Fukuyama. "The End of History?" in *Conflict After the Cold War,* ed Richard K Betts. New York: Pearson Education Inc. (2008)
41Louay Bahry. "The New Arab Media Phenomenon: Qatar's Al-Jazeera." *Middle East Policy.* 8.2 (2001) 88-99

First is that these European ideas about political structure have been around for a number of years. Numerous generations of Tunisians have lived through secularization policies designed to bring Tunisia culturally closer to Europe and farther from Islamic culture. There have always been large numbers of Tunisians living abroad, and citizens have been aware of the alternative political systems that exist just across the Mediterranean. It took a new cohort of jobless young Tunisians, whose educated expectations exceeding economic realities. It was the economic factors that pushed them to try out new ideological paths, rather than the strength of the ideology itself, which indicates to me that the spread of norms and ideas should not be considered a key causal factor in this transition.

Second is that the political ideas espoused by opposition forces are in no way coherent. Key

words such as democracy and freedom are thrown in the face of the regime, but the significant polarization of opposition forces in Tunisia clearly demonstrates that these words can carry different meanings depending on who is using them. It is not the same as in successful Eastern European transitions, where an ideologically unified opposition force, usually embodied in a charismatic leader, was able to articulate a clear, detailed democratic and economic plan that an overwhelming majority could agree on. This simply did not happen in Tunisia, and as we have seen, this initially caused many problems.

It can even be argued that in Tunisia different people joined the revolution for a different reason (ideological, economic, power, etc.), and that they were all unified by their hatred for the regime. This would certainly explain the quick break up of opposition forces after Ben Ali was removed and a number of key officials were expelled from politics, and I believe the argument carries weight. However, this still does not explain how quickly Tunisian society was able to resolve issues that only a few months ago had the potential to destabilize the political process completely. From my experience in Tunisia, I would have argued that groups often failed to identify their personal reason for joining the revolution with the higher collective goal of establishing a functional democracy. As Dr. Nouira

pointed out, the different parties were acting selfishly rather than collectively, which was destabilizing the political process. Why then, has collective action experienced this revival in Tunisia? The argument that I would put forth to explain this change is not based on internal modernization factors nor external ideological factors, because these have remained constant throughout the transition process. I would argue that, for the first time in history, international connections and internal media technologies have allowed for the diffusion of something far more useful than ideology: experience.

To be specific, when I use the term experience, I am referring to situations where individuals or groups are able to engage in meaningful independent discussion about differences in ideas, or when actors who have had political experience in a democratic setting are able to penetrate transitional

societies and influence those around them. For example, social media sites, one of the most talked about aspects of the Tunisian transition, have provided online forums where thousands of people are able to engage in horizontal discussion amongst each other, as well vertical discussion between the population and elite groups. Also, numerous Tunisians living in the United States and France have returned to found civil society organizations and political parties, some of which have been the most successful of their kind during the transition process. My argument here is that this diffusion of experience has contributed enormously to the ability of Tunisians to develop a political culture at eye-popping speed.

Beginning with social media technology, my experiences in Tunisia only confirmed what much of the media circles have been saying about their effect during the revolution, that they were independent, transparent spaces for political organization where anti-regime support could be mobilized. No one that I spoke to in Tunisia questioned this pivotal role that sites like Facebook played in increasing the efficacy of social mobilization during the protest days (although some assigned it more importance than others). To be honest, however, this was not a question that I was initially interested in, as I saw it as a temporary phenomenon capable of creating mass mobilization. At most I

believed that it would continue to provide a convenient source for organization both for protest movements and political parties, but not serve an important role in the transition process.

It was immediately clear, however, that this was not the case. What I found in Tunisia was a well-developed blogosphere that brought together proponents of different ideologies and from different backgrounds. Most of the young Tunisians that I met and befriended were part of themed, online forums that they regularly contributed to, and in my discussions with them I found that their political ideas developed very quickly, bringing new arguments to the table each week. Essentially, these social media sites were operating as massive online coffee shops, where people could discuss opposing ideas in a structured manner. Of course these sites faced problems of unnecessary polarization and

adversarial discussions (just as the political system did) but there were a significant number of contributors who were committed to meaningful discussions, and it provided a practice forum for developing political culture, which citizens could then carry on into everyday life.

However, during my time there I continued to downplay the importance of social media sites, believing that it was not a tool used by a majority of the population, and that it had not translated into the greater political scene. Parties were using social media sites to create forums and open lines of communication with their constituents, but these seemed like incoherent jumbles of ideas that were not necessarily useful. Essentially, I believed without the structure created by politics proper, social media sites did not have the ability to transfer into real process. I still believe this to an extent, but from the feedback that I have gotten recently from bloggers and party members that I remain in contact, it seems that these online forums have become more organized and useful, especially in fostering connections between parties and their constituencies. Their effect on the political learning process during transition remains ambiguous, but given the speed at which Tunisia has developed at least a measure of political culture, it is likely that they have played a significant role in creating and diffusing experience, and should be examined in that light.

The other aspect of experiential diffusion mentioned is much more concrete in its effects. On numerous occasions I encountered parties or civil society organizations that were founded and operated by Tunisians who had been involved in the political process in France, Italy, United States, etc. I worked closely with two of these organizations during my time in Tunisia, both founded by Tunisian-Americans committed to the democratic cause. SAWTY, a civil society organization run by two Tunisian-American college students, is currently one of the most active and successful of its kind in the country. Where many civil society organizations flared out in the early days of the revolution, SAWTY has succeeded in organizing tour buses dedicated to spreading messages of citizenship, organized a nationally televised debate where numerous parties presented their platforms to Tunisian citizens, and

organized a Tunisian/French civil society forum aimed at fostering tighter connections between the well-developed French civil society sector and the nascent Tunisian sector. Throughout this process the two founders have been committed to running a democratically organized association, and in my numerous conversations with other civil society groups SAWTY as been described as an outstanding example for other organizations to emulate.

Afek Tounes, a political party, is the other organization that I was able to work closely with. The party was founded as a partnership between an influential Tunisian lawyer and a few Tunisian-American businessmen. The interviews and conversations that I had with Afek Tounes members stood out because of their moderate, mature attitude toward the political sector. Essentially, they underlined three or four common goals of the new government, such as economic development and anti-corruption laws, that they believed all parties could commit to. Beyond that, they stressed a moderated approach to the political arena, where fair process was the key to balancing the numerous interests of different parties and groups. It was an attitude that I had not heard of up to that point in all my interviews with Tunisian political parties. Even American political parties do not express the commitment to the collective balance of interests that Afek Tounes does. Furthermore, Afek Tounes is a popular party in

Tunisian. Its moderate policies, far from uninspiring, as attracted a large youth wing and it is currently

the largest post-revolution party in Tunisia, ranking 7 out of 111 currently registered for the October

23rd vote.42

The success and popularity of both of the organizations mentioned above are examples of the

diffusion of experience across different sectors of Tunisian societies. They may not be as widespread

as social media sites, but they certainly have a concrete effect on their sector, and with time, could

prove to be important actors in a young Tunisian democracy. Combined with the ability of social

media sites to help quickly develop a political culture in a transition environment such as Tunisia, the

argument for the diffusion of experience is strong, and deserves to be examined in the coming months.

The theory and argument laid out above certainly has holes, but I believe that my research has provided

a good base for further investigation into the role of these different aspects in hastening the transition

process and contributing to its success.

Concluding Remarks

Tunisia is still in a state of change, so extrapolating trends and determining causal factors at this point

are exceedingly difficult. However, the research done here serves a two-fold purpose. One, to provide

detailed documentation of the transition process for future study. Two, to orient further research and

investigation, so that important, puzzling, and unique aspects of the transition can be given appropriate

focus in the coming months. It is possible that in the next few years, scholars will look back at the

development of social media sites in Tunisia and conclude that they were not an important factor, but at

the very least it can then be eliminated from an expanding list of causal factors. If one thing is certain,

it is that the Tunisian transition has thus far followed the trend of political studies as a whole, wherein

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[42]The specific policy points regarding Afek Tounes, as well as the statistics regarding its rank among political parties, were
taken from interviews and emails with Lofti Saibi, one of the Tunisian-American founders

new actors and issues have been incorporated in order to provide a more complete picture of the political realities that have developed in an increasingly diverse and complex world.

Also, I understand that this research is limited in scope, not only within the sphere of the Tunisian transition, but in regards to the region as a whole. Personally, I hope to continue developing this research in Tunisia in the future, when I would have a better sense of what it is that I should be investigating and how to go about investigating it. I would also like to expand it to include comparative issues within the region that deserve study, such as the merits of the current Moroccan political opening versus Tunisia's transition path. Regardless, this research has been a first step in cracking the shell of the Tunisian transition, highlighting and discussing key factors that would be

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difficult to identify without on the ground research. If the idea of the diffusion of experience can be developed within the region and added to transition literature then this research will have been a great success, notwithstanding its scope and academic rigor. The region is in flux, and will be for some time to come, and the more original research that comes out of this period of change, the better for the region and the development of common knowledge regarding democratic transitions.