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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
On October 9, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its work shepherding a peaceful transition of power. This accolade highlighted Tunisia’s success creating compromise and building coalition, while avoiding much of the violence and authoritarian backsliding of its neighbors. What lessons can be learned from its example, and what challenges still await this fledgling democracy? POMEPS Briefing 27 “Tunisia’s Volatile Transition to Democracy” brings together 20 essential articles published by the Project on Middle East Political Science and the Monkey Cage that illuminate this small but important state’s internal politics and regional impact.

The National Dialogue came at a pivotal moment for the nascent Tunisian democracy. As trust in its first democratically elected government waned, the nation had to navigate the resignation of the Troika government, without following Egypt’s path to anti-Islamist authoritarianism. The parliamentary and presidential elections of 2014 marked a democratic milestone as the centrist Nidaa Tunis took over from Islamist Ennahda, then — to the frustration of some members in both parties — brought it into a coalition government. The contrast between the fate of Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt on one hand and Turkey on the other is marked.

However, despite these notable achievements, the Tunisian democracy has failed to represent a significant portion of the population and overall confidence in the democratic process is slipping. Many of the revolutionaries who initially participated in the uprisings remain disenchanted with their options for representation. Meanwhile, citizens in the interior continue to struggle with staggering levels of unemployment, as elites work the outdated system to their advantage. Though it was the main motivator for the revolution, the economic situation in the country has made little progress. Citizens must also balance their desire for personal freedoms with the need for security, and recent terror attacks have done little to assuage these concerns.

POMEPS Briefing 27 “Tunisia’s Volatile Transition to Democracy” offers important background and analysis by leading scholars on the state’s complex relationship with the democratic process.

Lauren Baker
POMEPS Project Coordinator
November 5, 2015
2014 parliamentary and presidential elections
**Tunisian elections bring hope in uncertain times**

*By Lindsay Benstead, Ellen Lust, Dhafer Malouche and Jakob Wichmann, October 27, 2014*

It’s a new day (again) in Tunisia. On Sunday Tunisians headed to the polls to vote in the second, countrywide elections since former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali left power in 2011.

The first elections were filled with excitement; the world watched intensely, and citizens – many unpracticed but euphoric – waited patiently for hours to cast their ballots. They were the first assembly elections in the Arab world after the popular overthrow of a longstanding dictator – ever. No one was sure who would come out on top (although the moderate Islamist Ennahda party was heavily favored), and it was unclear what the future would hold. But it was a moment to remember.

This year, the enthusiasm from both the international and local communities in the lead-up to elections has waned. The world’s attention now focuses on civil wars in Syria and Libya, the spread of the Islamic State and concerns over insecurity and instability. Inside Tunisia, too, the mood had shifted from optimism to concern. Tunisians have seen their economy worsen, inequalities persist and frustrations mount.

Nevertheless, Sunday’s elections were enormously significant precisely because they were seemingly uneventful. The turnout was unexpectedly high, reaching over 60 percent of registered voters. Voting was peaceful, and as strong turnout figures came in, Tunisians were exuberant. Perhaps most important, the elections saw peaceful turnover of power. Nidaa Tunis, a party that emerged after uprisings against the Ennahda-led government, emerged the winner, and Ennahda conceded defeat. Now, negotiations over the Cabinet will begin, with all the usual haggling. In stark contrast to experiences in Egypt or Libya, Tunisia’s elections are “politics as normal.”

This is not to say that Tunisians are satisfied. A Transitional Governance Project (TGP) poll conducted in June in conjunction with the Center for Maghreb...
Studies (CEMAT), with funding from the United Nations Democracy Fund, found that 48 percent of Tunisians believed that they were worse off than they were before 2011. Moreover, Tunisians are disillusioned with parties, elections and politicians. Again, surveys are telling: 75 percent of respondents did not trust parties, and only 54 percent planned to vote (down from 82 percent in 2012). So too, the percentage of respondents who believed that democracy is the best form of government has decreased – from 78 percent in 2012 to 59 percent. This is not surprising. Many Tunisians viewed the most important characteristic of democracy in economic terms, with 27 percent of respondents in 2014 identifying basic necessities as the most important element of democracy. When economic improvement does not accompany transitions, many lose faith in democracy. The more politically engaged also worry, fearing deadlock, instability and yet another political crisis.

But in the midst of the tension, there is reason for hope. The political playing field has remained fragmented, with 1,327 lists competing, but it is taking shape. Parties are beginning to represent distinct constituencies and interests. For instance, the TGP polls show that Ennahda voters were much more likely to prefer a role of religion in politics than those of Nidaa Tunis. And to a slightly lesser extent, the Ennahda voters felt more strongly that the state should play a role in the economy than the supporters for Nidaa Tunis. Decided Ennahda voters also were less likely to see torture against suspected terrorists as justified; only 45 percent of Ennadha voters saw torture against suspected terrorists or criminals to obtain information as justified, compared to 63 percent of Nidaa voters. On the whole, 52 percent of Tunisians thought that it can be justified.

Finally, the polls found that supporters for Ennahda were more likely to be optimistic about the future (or, perhaps, to view the past more negatively) than those of Nidaa, but were also more likely to see democracy in economic terms. There are also important demographic differences, of course, with Ennahda voters more likely to be male, from lower classes and practicing religion.

This may not seem surprising, as parties often draw from different support bases. But, it is a change. In 2011, supporters of Ennahda spanned a large spectrum of voters. They tended to be religious, but they had very diverse views on the role of religion in the state, and the state in the economy. In 2011, when voters turned out to the polls, they had a vague understanding of the issues at hand. Tunisians across the spectrum looked to Ennahda as the party that “deserved” to have power and could most effectively counter the old regime. These sentiments have disappeared. Indeed, Ennahda has the largest disapproval rating of any party, with the TGP polls finding that 60 percent of respondents had negative attitudes toward the party.

The path ahead is challenging and success by no means assured, but today, it seems that Tunisia is up to the challenge. The past three years witnessed ineffective governments, political assassinations, strikes, demonstrations and finally the expulsion of the Ennahda-led coalition, referred to as the Troika. Yet, it also saw a constitution finalized in January approved by more than 90 percent of the deputies and a technocratic government that maintained popular support as it prepared for elections.

A distinct political scene is emerging in Tunisia. Citizens frustrated with democracy, divided over political parties and engaging in contests over interests are part and parcel of democratic contestation. Far from something to be decried as the end of consensus, or a reason for pessimism, it should be recognized as growing pains for a new democratic policy. In Tunisia, politics is increasingly “politics as usual,” and that’s a good thing. Tunisia’s nascent democratic process stands as a beacon of hope in an uncertain region.

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Details of the public opinion polls and questions referenced here can be found in a longer version posted at the Transitional Governance Project.
Elation beamed from supporters of Tunisia’s secular Nidaa Tunis party just hours after polls closed Oct. 26, marking Tunisia’s second democratic elections after the Arab Spring. Nidaa Tunis is headed by the charismatic Beji Caid Essebsi and is an eclectic conglomerate of cadres from the regime of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, big business, left-wing intellectuals and unionists. The party unseated Ennahda, the moderate Islamist party that swept the 2011 legislative elections. For months, analysts and voters pitted Ennahda against Nidaa Tunis, painting a polarized political field. Religion against secularism appeared to be the name of Tunisia’s electoral game.

Yet the country’s political field is much more diverse than that. With 1,327 candidate lists vying for seats during the three week long campaign, streets were crowded with boisterous rallies and clamorous parades, representing a wide variety of reforms, programs and promises. Preliminary election results reflect Tunisia’s political diversity with a third of voters choosing between extreme leftists, determined capitalists and independents. When glancing beyond the capital of Tunis to the country’s economically challenged interior and south, a simplistic secularist over Islamist victory does injustice to the richness of Tunisia’s shrewd post-revolutionary political evolution.

In Gafsa, the phosphate-rich epicenter of southwest Tunisia, and the neighboring mining town of Redeyef, lofty debates about religion and secularism mean very little to residents. Unemployment in the area soars, and disgruntled residents complain of no improvements since the 2011 toppling of Ben Ali, blaming Ennahda’s governance as much as corrupt interests of the lingering old guard in Tunis. Life in the mining region differs remarkably from that of Tunisia’s capital, but to many residents and local leaders, Gafsa is where the Tunisian Revolution began. In 2008, two years before the Arab Spring, a six-month rebellion by unemployed minors, leftist activists and defected unionists in the mining region was violently crushed by Ben Ali’s security forces. The region was on fire as protesters took to the street every week, fundamentally shaking the regime. Candidates from the region, especially leftists, heavily lambast the post-revolutionary political elite for dismissing the region’s longstanding political tradition. In Redeyef, a town dotted with dilapidated buildings from the French colonial period and flimsy constructions of the 1960s and 1970s, unemployment has reached an estimated high of 40 percent. Most affected are educated youth who desperately seek entry into the phosphate industry. Phosphates extraction, production and trade constitute one third of Tunisia’s economy, yet the industry is heavily controlled by the Tunisian state, which has done little to reinvest in the region.
Though Ennahda swept the elections in the mining region in 2011, the area has always been a bastion for politics concerned with workers’ rights and economic equality. One of the region’s most celebrated local leaders, Adnen Hajii, the so-called Che Guevara of the south, led the 2008 rebellion and has now secured a seat in the 217-member parliament on an independent ticket. He ran alongside the Popular Front coalition, an eclectic mix of 12 parties and civil society organizations, inspired by mid-century intellectual Marxism, Leninism, Arab and Tunisian Nationalism, and European-style social democracy.

Bordered by Algeria to the west and the Sahara desert to the south, Redeyef has historically suffered from underdevelopment and mismanaged economic plans, yet its political vibrancy mirrors none other in Tunisia. Days before the Oct. 26 elections, residents were out in full force, braving the unbearably dry heat to welcome political celebrities. Leftist Hamma Hammami, the Popular Front’s charismatic leader and long-time opponent of Tunisia’s first and second presidents, Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali, visited his loyal followers, many of whom participated in the 2008 rebellion. A recent visit by Slim Riahi, leader of the Free Patriotic Union party, businessman and president of Club African, a popular Tunisian soccer club, captured a surprising amount of support by coming in third, less so for his liberal economic affinities than his soccer profile. Original campaigns by both political factions garnered them well over 10 percent of parliamentary seats, one of the elections’ surprises.

Leftist tendencies in Tunisia have regained much of their former popular appeal following two political assassinations of leftist leaders – Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi in February and July 2013, respectively. The second assassination spiraled Tunisia into a political crisis and inspired a movement, Rahil (Get out), which called for the resignation of the Ennahda-led Troika government. Voters dissatisfied with both Ennahda’s performance and Nidaa Tunis’s program have been drawn to smaller parties, from leftists to those with clear liberal economic agendas. Discussing platforms with groups of leftists in the sparse offices of the Popular Front or Hajii’s party on election day, the mood was clear: Local economic needs trump all other ills.

In regions such as Gafsa, plans for economic equality, redistribution and a heavy regulatory state dominated platforms and public speeches. The Popular Front is first and foremost committed to democracy, principles of social justice and economic equality. But its members cringe when you call them leftists. They have a keen reading of politics: A retired philosophy teacher who taught at a local school in Redeyef clarifies that leftist militancy served a purpose before the Revolution, “it allowed us to unite and fight against Ben Ali and his cronies.” With a smile he says, “Today we have become democrats, we are pragmatic about Tunisia’s future.” The Popular Front, projected to have won 12 seats, wants to ensure a political balance between the leading factions in parliament. “The Popular Front is an example of a party that represents Tunisia’s most pressing needs and one that can function as a legitimate counter-power in parliament by placing a check on both Nidaa Tunis and Ennahda,” says Noaman Ben Ammar, a young, unemployed activist from Gafsa who participated in the 2008 Rebellion and is now a member of the Popular Front. Those who voted for leftists and other smaller parties are thrilled – not only have their economic woes found a voice in the assembly for the first time, but their decision to not vote “strategically” has paid off.

As stories abound about a strong victory of secularism versus Islamism, or the faulty perception that Tunisians are polarized on a religion-secularism dichotomy, those who voted for the smaller parties are content. They understand that in a nascent democracy, a wide variety of platforms with diverse promises are more valuable than a clustering of interests around one or two political factions. “I am a devout Muslim,” says a member of Hajii’s party from Redeyef, “but I will only vote for candidates who represent the real dire needs of my region. For us the only solution is a strong leftist voice in Tunis.” Painting Tunisia as split between religion and secularism cheapens the country’s extraordinary progress toward democratic pluralism.

The parliamentary elections showed that voters’ political
inclinations stretched far beyond the ideological splits of religion versus secularism. Such labels have become fashionable means to make sense of Arab Spring countries, yet they don’t represent Tunisia’s fascinating political, if not democratic reality. For the country’s south, which has been plagued by economic ills since independence, there is hope. “For the first time,” says Ammar, “our needs are represented in the assembly.” The proliferation of political parties and extraordinary strength of civil society defining Tunisian politics following the 2011 Revolution show that Tunisia’s democracy is, indeed, in its making.

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Tunisia’s post-parliamentary election hangover

By Danya Greenfield, November 21, 2014

It has long been a truism of democratic transitions that it is the second election, not the first, that determines whether a new democratic regime has been consolidated. Tunisia’s parliamentary election of Oct. 26 and Sunday’s presidential election, offer just such an event and, even more impressive, the prospect of a peaceful transfer of power through the ballot box. It’s more complicated than that, however, because of unresolved questions about the real nature of Nidaa Tunis and its ability to form a viable government.

The Nidaa Tunis party won a comfortable parliamentary victory in October, taking 85 out of 217 seats, and the governing Ennahda party accepted the results. Nidaa’s presidential candidate, Beji Caid Essebsi, is favored in the Nov. 23 presidential election, although it is not clear whether he will be able to avoid a runoff. Regardless of the outcome of that election, Nidaa has three major challenges to overcome: first, maintaining the cohesion of the party after elections; second, forming a government that answers the demands of its base but does not become paralyzed; and third, moving aggressively to deliver economic and social benefits to an impatient and frustrated Tunisian public. Its ability to respond to these challenges will go a long way toward determining whether the elections lead to genuine democratic consolidation.

Understanding these challenges requires a deeper reading of Nidaa’s electoral gains. Much of the initial reporting cast the election results as a victory of secular democracy over Islamism. With the experience of Egypt and Libya in the background, and general Western discomfort with Islamist parties, this is a tempting and compelling interpretation.

But that would be a gross simplification and a misreading of the political dynamics at play.

Nidaa Tunis is led by Essebsi, an 88 year-old former minister from the era of Habib Bourguiba and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and senior statesman. For some, Essebsi represents the best of Tunisia’s achievements with deep experience in government, charisma, credibility and a non-ideological stance. To others, however, he embodies
a return of the old regime and the ascendency of vested interests seeking to preserve their position, benefits and commercial monopolies. Given that the chants from the uprising that began in 2010 demanded an end to nepotism and corruption as well as the need for equal economic opportunity, some Tunisians are arguing that the Nidaa victory is a reversal of the youth-driven aims of the revolution and a setback for the democratic process.

Nidaa will have the first chance to form a government regardless of the outcome of the presidential vote. It will need to prove that it can respond to the demands of all Tunisians, not just protect the interests of the elite and former ruling party members. There are already questions about Nidaa’s track record related to democratic practices. According to an international expert familiar with these party structures, Nidaa has yet to hold internal party elections, does not have a transparent, decision-making process inside the party, and lacks a coherent, unifying vision. By way of comparison, Ennahda has a far more evolved party structure and internal consultative process, and has now twice demonstrated its willingness to hand over power peacefully. While both parties are still evolving, the anecdotal evidence challenges the notion that secularists will always be better democrats and Islamists are just biding their time to impose an authoritarian model.

Nidaa’s building of its electoral strategy upon capturing the largest number of supporters under its umbrella means it has an enormously unwieldy group of stakeholders that will need to be satisfied. Nidaa galvanized something perhaps more accurately described as an electoral bloc than a coherent party; it includes diverse and somewhat disparate streams across the political spectrum from the far left socialists to the far right nationalists who agreed only on the need to oust Ennahda. This included two of the most powerful special interest groups, the largest labor union that represents public employees (UGTT) and the employers union representing the largest business interests (UTICA), both of which helped lead the successful national dialogue. Without a unifying vision beyond an anti-Ennahda stance, Nidaa could collapse under pressure. This internal division means Nidaa could have a tough challenge in forming a government. It won the most seats but falls far short of a majority and will therefore need to build a coalition or find sufficient parliamentary support to govern. Nidaa has four options, but each has a major downside: 1. Nidaa could join with Ennahda, the second largest bloc in parliament with 69 seats, which would provide a solid mandate in parliament; 2. Nidaa could sideline Ennahda and instead form a weak majority with the other smaller parties; 3. Nidaa could form a national unity government that would include representation from all parties or; 4. Nidaa could embrace the model of “cohabitation,” likely a technocratic government without official party affiliation.

The economic orientation of Nidaa and Ennahda are fairly close, and they would likely agree on key economic reforms that need to be implemented including liberalization of the banking sector, streamlining of business registration, tax reform that would address the informal economy, and revision of labor laws that limit ability of employers to hire and fire. Yet, Nidaa will surely face opposition from two powerful centers: the UGTT, which would likely oppose reform to labor protections, subsidy reform and tax reform; and UTICA, which could be expected to oppose reforms enhancing competitiveness that would erode its market share and profit margin. One member of Nidaa’s economic bureau noted that “Nidaa campaigned and won on its platform; now UGTT will have to get on board with this program,” but confronting the powerful UGTT will not be an easy task. At the same time, other important parties such as the Popular Front (al-Jabha), which won the fourth highest number of seats with 15, would also fight to maintain social protections and subsidies. The constitution also mandates decentralization, which is desperately needed to bring more local decision-making authority to disadvantaged, interior areas of the country. However, this may also be opposed by core constituencies of Nidaa that gain from keeping development and investment dollars concentrated on the coastal areas.

Any accord with Ennahda will likely alienate those for whom antipathy toward the Islamists is the raison d’etre for
Nidaa Tunis. Still, it is clear that many voters supported the party not necessarily as an indictment of Islamist politics, but rather a statement of discontent and frustration with the performance of the previous Ennahda-led government that was unable to deliver what it had promised and carried responsibility for the country’s most acute political crisis. Tunisians are nostalgic for the security and economic stability associated with the pre-2011 period, which enhanced Essebsi’s appeal. Many Tunisians voted for Ennahda in 2011 in part because they wanted to see something new, just as many cast their ballot in 2014 for Nidaa to turn the page on three very troublesome years.

Security and economic progress will be the key priorities for the new parliament and next government. While security threats are unpredictable, it will not be difficult to rally the country around its security institutions and push off needed security sector reform. What cannot be delayed, however, is economic growth and job creation that will only come with structural and fiscal reforms. To achieve this, Nidaa will have to balance many competing interests, even overcoming dissent among its own ranks that have yet to let go of the old model of a centralized state characterized by a narrow elite controlling the flow of information, resources and access.

Survey evidence shows that a plurality of voters who lent their support to Nidaa Tunis expect results. A weak coalition, or a government with strong opposition, will have an enormously difficult time pushing through critical reforms and advancing a clear economic agenda. According to the International Republican Institute’s September poll, 58 percent of respondents described the current economic situation in Tunisia as very bad, and a further 22 percent said somewhat bad. Furthermore, the lethargic pace of economic growth contributed to a 19-point increase (from 48 percent to 67 percent) in the percentage of people who think Tunisia is headed in the wrong direction, as compared with an April poll.

The fear among many Tunisians is that Nidaa Tunis simply won’t be able to form a government that will take bold, ambitious steps toward economic and administrative reform. A Tunisian political analyst noted that “the fear isn’t that Tunisia will fall off the cliff, rather that it will just stagnate.” The politics of satisfying coalition partners could cause complete paralysis and render the government simply incapable of building enough parliamentary support to pass painful, but necessary reforms and administrative restructuring.

Nidaa has a very difficult task ahead walking this tightrope. A presidential victory for Essebsi may give the party more leverage, but it will also make other actors more nervous about a Nidaa-dominated political environment. For now, party representatives have said they are waiting to see the outcome of the presidential election before engaging in the nitty-gritty of government formation, and it may be March or April 2015 before it comes to fruition. In the meantime, Tunisians are impatient for socioeconomic conditions to improve – something that will happen only once the new parliament, government and president assume their positions and provide a sense of stability and forward momentum. The gains from elections are real, but tenuous, and Tunisians will need continued international attention and economic support to capitalize on what they have already achieved.

*Danya Greenfield served as the deputy director of the Atlantic Council’s Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East.*
Three remarks on the Tunisian elections

By Benjamin Preisler, January 5, 2015

Béji Caïd Essebsi’s victory in the first post-revolutionary presidential election in Tunisia has been met with international approval largely because of his “secular” – read: non-Islamist – aura. Especially when compared with the other countries of the Arab Spring, Tunisia should indeed celebrate having held successful parliamentary and presidential elections. Perhaps most importantly, the outcomes were accepted by the losing candidates, a significant step toward the stabilization of democracy in the country.

Yet, for all the political progress that has been made, Tunisia’s economic transition has hardly begun, and political disillusionment of large parts of the population remains a major issue. The victory of Essebsi and his party, Nidaa Tounes, has to be understood in the context of the latter and seems likely to pose a major obstacle to the advancement of the former. Three points are especially worth noting:

1) One of the two factors making possible Nidaa Tounes/Essebsi’s victories was the decrease in the overall number of voters.

For the first free Tunisian elections in 2011 for its Constitutive Assembly 4,308,888 voters turned out. The legislative elections in 2014 had 3,579,256 voters, 729,632 fewer. Note how close in size this figure is to the 554,286 voters the moderate Islamist party Ennahdha lost while – mostly – in government between these two elections. The first and second rounds of the 2014 presidential elections had 3,339,666 and 3,189,672 participants, respectively. Real voter turnout – not the participation rates published by the ISIE and calculated based on the 8,289,924 eligible voter figure from 2011 – went from 51.9 percent in 2011 to 43.2 percent, 40.3 percent, and 38.5 percent, respectively, in 2014.

While Nidaa Tounes presenting a unified front and sapping up the whole spectrum of the anti-Islamist vote was an obvious necessity for their (and Essebsi’s) victory, it would thus not have been sufficient on its own. Without the disillusioned nonvoting of hundreds of thousands of former – especially Ennahdha – voters, Nidaa Tounes would have likely have finished second.

2) Neither Nidaa Tounes nor Essebsi received much of its electoral support from the revolutionaries.

The Tunisian revolution had its origin in the disfavored interior. It was initiated and sustained in the face of a massive security crackdown in late 2010 by the un- or underemployed youths of the region before finding its denouement in the capital in early 2011.

Yet, Nidaa Tounes/Essebsi’s support is especially strong in the richer coastal regions. Both the South and many of the interior regions in the middle of the country had relative majorities for Marzouki or other candidates in the first round of the presidential elections for example. These regions also showed much less support for Nidaa Tounes during the legislative elections. With youth participation in general rather low in all three elections, Nidaa Tounes and its 88-year-old candidate were likely voted into office by a disproportionate number of older people.

In short, the majority that supported Nidaa Tounes/Essebsi in these elections consists disproportionately of the more economically established older people of the coastal regions who had little – if anything – to do with the revolution. Theirs is a nonrevolutionary majority in the sense that many of its supporters clamor for a return to the supposed political and economic stability as well as security of the pre-revolutionary days. Doubts about this new majority’s commitment to the democratic transition process and issues such as transition justice persist (see here, here, or here).
Results for the first round of presidential elections. Essebsi marked in red, Marzouki in light green. (Via Wikipedia)

3) The big question: To what extent will Nidaa Tounes reform the economy against the interest of its own constituency?

The World Bank has published an insightful, self-critical report of the Tunisian economy during the Ben Ali years and ever since. This report underlines the transitional government’s arguably biggest failure, namely that “the economic system that existed under Ben Ali has not been changed significantly.” It is an open question whether this was due to incompetence on the part of Ennahdha and its coalition partners or entrenched opposition in administrative and business circles against these changes.

Either way, it is up to the to-be-established government and the president to undertake these “critical reforms.” The situation of the deprived interior regions as well as of the mass of unemployed young people will not ameliorate if the Tunisian economy is not alleviated of some of its rigidities. Concurrently, the social system needs to be refurbished to move away from mainly subsidizing large swaths of the middle class.

Yet, as tentatively shown above, Nidaa Tounes/Essebsi’s electorate is made up of exactly that urban, coastal middle class, which still benefits from subsidy and regulatory rent system of the Ben Ali era. It is far from certain that Essebsi, an 88-year-old stalwart of post-independence Tunisian politics, and his party will have the – suicidal? – political courage to implement the drastic and sudden reforms the World Bank deems necessary in favor of those Tunisians and regions who did not vote for them. Yet, without those reforms the difficult economic situation of far too many Tunisians will not change, contributing to the populace’s political disillusionment as well as the overall sociopolitically volatile climate.

Benjamin Preisler is a political analyst focusing on Tunisia.
Tunisia opts for an inclusive new government

By Monica Marks, February 3, 2015

Tunisia made positive headlines again on Feb. 2 after its newly appointed prime minister, Habib Essid, announced an inclusive coalition government whose members include representatives of the Islamist Ennahda party.

For many activists inside Nidaa Tunis, a party built on the back of anti-Islamist opposition that won legislative and presidential elections in the fall, the new cabinet came as a shock. On Feb. 2, Taieb Baccouche, secretary general of Nidaa Tunis and minister of foreign affairs in the newly announced cabinet, addressed Nidaa members protesting outside the party’s headquarters in Tunis’s Lac district, reassuring them that he, too, wished Ennahda would have stayed in the opposition. Abdelaziz Kotti, a Nidaa member of parliament, and other prominent party members have spoken out against the decision to involve Ennahda. Likewise Hamma Hammami, head of the leftist Popular Front, which has 15 seats in parliament, also announced his party would oppose the government, largely due to its inclusion of Islamists. The Popular Front, comprised of leftists and trade unionists, staunchly opposes any inclusion of Ennahda, a party it claims is indirectly responsible for the assassinations of two of its members, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, in 2013.

Despite the dissatisfaction of many leftists and secularists who categorically oppose Ennahda’s involvement, Essid’s line-up will likely be accepted on Feb. 4 when it is put before the parliament for approval. Bolstered by the support of four major parties – Afek Tunis (with 8 seats), Ennahda (69 seats), the Free Patriotic Union (referred to by its French acronym, UPL, which has 16 seats), and Nidaa Tunis (86 seats) – the new government enjoys the support of a comfortable enough majority (179 seats in total) to surpass the magic number needed for a confirmation vote (109 out of a 217 member parliament), even if some Nidaa Tunis MPs abstain or vote against it.

If confirmed in parliament, this new government would send reassuring signals that Tunisia is stepping toward pluralism and farther from the politics of exclusion, which is destabilizing so many of its neighbors. However, as with many milestones toward dialogue and democracy in Tunisia over the past four years, the creation of this government wasn’t the inevitable result of some sort of national predisposition toward consensus and compromise. Rather, it came after hard bargaining and represented the reversal of an initial proposed government that was, in fact, startlingly non-inclusive.

Essid proposed the current cabinet, what we might call Essid 2.0, just nine days after initially announcing a cabinet of ministers that involved only two parties – Nidaa Tunis and UPL. Out of the 24 ministerial positions, this first proposed government included 10 posts for members of Nidaa Tunis’s Executive Bureau and three posts for UPL, with the remaining 11 posts distributed among independent “technocrats,” many of whom revolved in Nidaa’s orbit. Distributions among the 15 secretaries of state broke down along similar lines, with a single post given to one additional political party, the National Salvation Front (NSF), which has just one seat in parliament. Other parties quickly denounced the proposed government, with Ennahda, the Popular Front and Afek Tunis labeling it as non-representative and indicating their parliamentary blocs would vote against it.

The lack of political inclusivity manifested in this first government was surprising, and presented strategic impediments to Nidaa Tunis’s leadership in parliament. To attain 109 seats needed for a parliamentary majority, Nidaa – with 86 seats – had to rein together a coalition that involved parties beyond UPL and the NSF. Yet those three parties, with just 106 seats between them, were the only parties represented in the proposed government. Afek Tunis, a secular and economically liberal party that had stayed quite close to Nidaa over the past two years, was widely expected to be a coalition partner to Nidaa.

Indeed, a Nidaa–UPL–Afek coalition would have been
weak, with just 110 seats, 111* if NSF were included. However, such a coalition would have satisfied anti-Islamist hardliners inside Nidaa who staunchly opposed inclusion of Ennahda, thereby possibly delaying what many observers see as an almost inevitable split within Nidaa between anti-Islamist exclusionists (who tend to be leftist in their political background and ideological orientation) and more strategically oriented pragmatists willing to accommodate and even include Ennahda in return for its accepting some share of political risk.

The first proposed government was therefore befuddling to outside analysts trying to ascertain Nidaa Tunis’s strategic motivations. Comprised of mainly Nidaa leaders and affiliated technocrats, the first government involved high ownership and therefore high political risk for Nidaa, a party that – despite handily winning legislative and presidential elections this fall – faces massive economic and security challenges during its coming five years in power. Votes for Nidaa in both elections were additionally divided along stark regional lines, with the interior and south of Tunisia strongly opposing the presidential bid of Nidaa’s founder and former party leader Beji Caid Essesbi and voting instead for his rival, former president Moncef Marzouki. Riots and attacks on police stations followed the elections in some southern cities, largely in protest against Nidaa Tunis, which many Tunisians saw and still see as a soft restoration of the Ben Ali regime – or, as one Tunisian recently put it, “old boukha [the traditional Tunisian homemade liquor] in new bottles.”

Political risk was therefore high for Nidaa Tunis moving into this period of governance, and it would have made strong pragmatic sense to distribute some of that risk among other political parties, as Ennahda had done following its resounding electoral victory in 2011, when it moved to include centrist and secular parties like the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and Ettakatol in its so-called “troika” coalition.

Why, then, did Nidaa Tunis initially propose a non-inclusive government that could not garner enough votes, even, for a parliamentary majority? The answer likely lies in Nidaa Tunis’s internal politics, and in the large number of promises now-President Essebsi made regarding distribution of ministerial posts to party members and supporters. Essebsi formed Nidaa Tunis in summer 2012 largely as a reaction against Ennahda’s 2011 victory. This victory of a party whose members had been almost completely silenced in Tunisia for over 20 years – a combination of ousted dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s repressive policies, which included torture, exile, mass imprisonment and routine harassment of Islamists and, to a lesser extent, secular leftists and human rights activists – flabbergasted many Tunisians, particularly leftists, secularists and coastal political elites, some of whom had worked in the regimes of Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali. In response, large numbers of people opposed to Ennahda’s rise set aside their differences to defeat what many saw as the biggest threat to Tunisian modernity and sometimes their own political goals and class-based interests: Islamism. Nidaa Tunis was, therefore, more of an ad-hoc electoral front than a cohesive political party from the start, and functioned as a broad umbrella encompassing “Destourians” (supporters of Bourguiba’s approach to state prestige and secular modernity), leftists, trade unionists, prominent businesspeople and RCDists (member’s of Ben Ali’s now disbanded political party the Democratic Constitutional Rally).

Other than Anne Wolf’s April 2014 report “Can Secular Parties Lead the New Tunisia?” little sustained, academic research has analyzed the internal organization of Nidaa Tunis. Ascertaining precisely where the party stands on key issues, or if it stands as a party at all, can be difficult given the absence of internal democratic institutions inside Nidaa, such as party congresses or representative leadership organs. The diversity inside Nidaa Tunis – whose opposition to Ennahda has won it support among leaders of both Tunisia’s most prominent trade union, UGTT, and its employers’ union, UTICA – however, has made it difficult for the party to craft clear stances on economic policy and other programmatic issues.

Following Nidaa Tunis’s victory in the October 2014 legislative elections, it became increasingly apparent that fissures were deepening between individuals accepting of a coalition with Ennahda based on economic and pragmatic
political lines, and individuals staunchly opposed to Ennahda largely on ideological grounds. In my recent interviews with Nidaa leaders, some commented that a coalition with Ennahda would almost assuredly split Nidaa, with “Baccouchist” anti-Islamist leftists breaking away from more accommodationist pragmatists to form their own party.

Some harked back to the experience of Ettakatol, the party of former Constituent Assembly Speaker Mustapha Ben Jafaar, which imploded in a variety of directions after he agreed to go into coalition with an Ennahda-led government in 2011. Like Ettakatol, Nidaa Tunis coalesced around the charismatic leadership of one individual, Essebsi, and lacked the internal democratic institutions to enable its members to vote clearly in favor of or against going into coalition with Ennahda. Ministries were double and sometimes triple-promised to individuals in the party, and many people hung close to Essebsi in hopes that they’d be rewarded with a ministry or prominent secretarial post after the elections. The initial formation of Tunisia’s new government, then – Essid 1.0 – was likely an outgrowth of the competitive clientalism inside Nidaa Tunis, and the desire, perhaps, to delay splits within the party. Short-term intra-party dynamics, as opposed to longer-term inter-party gamesmanship and political risk distribution, thus played a large role in the composition of the first proposed government, a government that – based on sheer numbers alone – was quite clearly destined to fail a parliamentary confidence vote.

This second iteration of the government, Essid 2.0, represents a significantly more inclusive attempt at coalition. Though Ennahda’s participation remains the lightning-rod issue for many anti-Islamists inside and outside Nidaa Tunis, Ennahda in fact has been allocated just one out of 24 ministerial seats. Zied Laadhari, a savvy younger-generation pragmatist inside Ennahda, will abandon his position as spokesman of the party to take up the role of minister of employment. Ennahda has also been given three secretary of state posts (out of a total 15), including spots for Najmeddine Hamrouni, a prominent intellectual inside Ennahda who has taken a more behind-the-scenes party role, and Amel Azzouz, a former Constituent Assembly MP who has advocated against environmental degradation in her home governorate of Gabes. Critics of Ennahda’s involvement in government are particularly lambasting Azzouz, whose degree in English language and literature doesn’t begin to qualify her, they argue, for her new post as secretary of state for international cooperation.

With just one ministerial seat and three secretarial posts, Ennahda’s participation will be mainly symbolic. This symbolic inclusivity, however, is highly important to Ennahda’s leadership and base, which have feared a return to the exclusionary crackdown of the Ben Ali years, particularly in light of the regional crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood following Egypt’s July 3, 2013 ouster of former president Mohamed Morsi. Noting that Essebsi refers to that event as Egypt’s “second revolution” rather than a coup, and citing what Ennahda leaders perceive as exclusionary and even eradicationist discourse against Islamists by Nidaa Tunis leaders since 2011, even minimal inclusion comes as a welcome step toward dialogue and pluralism for many in the party.

Ennahda’s base had been highly skeptical of going into coalition with Nidaa Tunis, a party it sees as a front for an old regime comeback. Many wondered why Ennahda should shoulder the blame for another five years of governance, which will almost surely be wracked by many of the same economic and security-related challenges that plagued Ennahda’s former stint in power. However, regional and local-level supporters seem more positive about the prospect of coalition now following the Shura council’s vote against the first iteration of Essid’s government. Prominent appointments in that government, including the Nidaa Tunis member Laarousi Mizouri and Khadija Cherif, former president of a prominent feminist organization, Les Femmes Democrates (ministers of religious affairs and women and families, respectively) were seen by Ennahda’s base as radical left-wing culture warriors whose opposition to wearing of the hijab, in particular, would directly antagonize Islamists and other religiously conservative Tunisians. The fact that last week’s negotiations, however, replaced these figures with less controversial picks and included posts for Ennahda and
Afek Tunis, makes the Essid 2.0 government appear like more of a win to Ennahda’s base, which sees the principled opposition vote of its Shura council as a key reason the government was renegotiated.

The biggest winner of last week’s renegotiations for governmental positions, however, is likely Afek Tunis. A small, well-organized secular party known for supporting foreign direct investment and taking comparatively pragmatic, centrist positions on cultural issues, Afek Tunis was elected to parliament in October with just eight seats. Last week’s negotiations, however, resulted in three ministerial appointments for Afek members – the same number as UPL, which has 16 seats in parliament. Yassine Brahim, a former software engineer and leading figure in Afek Tunis, was appointed as minister of development, investment, and international cooperation – an important post that had been given to UPL’s Vice President Nejib Derouich in Essid’s first proposed government. UPL, led by a prominent soccer club tycoon named Slim Riahi, has been widely rumored to have shopped its parliamentary votes to multiple parties in return for monthly loyalty payments to its MPs. The fact that the ministry of investment, which was a prime location for corruption and bribe-taking under Ben Ali, has been entrusted to Brahim, a politician with a reputation that favors ministerial reform and transparency, is thus reassuring.

Despite forging a wide coalition, this new government – if it passes – will be faced with a host of important challenges regarding state security, economic policy and ministerial reform. Functional cooperation on core issues of economics and security is likely between the parties, but could be stymied by opposition from UGTT. Jebha Chaabia, the party traditionally closest to the powerful trade union, strongly opposes this government based on its inclusion of Ennahda and has demanded that the government freeze price subsidies and undertake a reconsideration of Tunisia’s debt. How the new government balances internationally encouraged liberalizing reforms with the competing demands of UGTT and UTICA will be a key issue to watch. Critics have already accused the first Essid government of being the “most neoliberal in Tunisia’s history.” The second Essid government doesn’t differ much from the first regarding economic policy, so the structure of reforms and popular pushback will likely be a critical question.

The appointment of Najem Gharsalli as minister of interior represents another potential problem. Gharsalli, a former judge under Ben Ali who has been accused of deep corruption by two prominent civil society figures – Kalthoum Kennou of the Association of Judges, and Ahmed Rahmouni of the Tunisian Observatory for Judicial Independence – retained his post as minister of the interior through both governmental negotiations. Ennahda has not seemed to object to his appointment for reasons the party has not yet made clear. If the allegations of Gharsalli’s corruption are true, and if he carries that corruption forward into the Interior Ministry, his presence could seriously thwart much-needed security sector reform.

Overall, however, this coalition represents an important step toward inclusivity and stability at a fragile moment for Tunisia’s transition. It also represents a watershed moment in political learning for Tunisia’s newly elected Nidaa Tunis party, which – unlike Ettakatol and CPR before it – was not socialized into negotiations with Ennahda as part of an oppositional anti-Ben Ali front. Essebsi’s appointment of Lazhar Karoui Chebbi as his official representative in government triggered a backlash among formerly uncritical supporters of Essebsi, some of whom began mocking the 88 year-old president’s age publicly on social media, calling Karoui the “Minister of the Wheelchair” and angrily denouncing Essebsi and Nidaa leaders as “traitors” to their supporters for going into coalition with Ennahda. This de-mytholigization of Essebsi as a charismatic figure could promote healthy, more even-handed criticism of his decisions, and itself represents an important moment in the process of Tunisia’s collective political learning as parties new to government make tough strategic compromises upon ascending to power.

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What happens when Islamists lose an election?

By Rory McCarthy, June 11, 2015

After its defeat in Tunisia’s parliamentary elections last October, the Islamist movement Ennahda has seemed much diminished. It has avoided the political spotlight except to repeat its commitment to the democratic transition and to the new coalition government, in which it holds a small, symbolic role.

The transition from dictatorship to fledgling democracy still looks like a success four years on from the first Arab Spring uprising. Despite real economic and security challenges, Tunisia has so far avoided the violence and repression now so familiar elsewhere in the region. Ennahda has played no small part in that achievement. It governed in coalition with secular parties after winning the 2011 elections and then compromised its Islamizing ambitions to draft a new, widely supported constitution. Early in 2014, it relinquished power to a technocratic government after acknowledging popular frustration over security concerns. Then it accepted defeat in last year’s elections and promised to work with and not against its political rivals. In public, it argues that success lies in consensus and compromise.

However, in private, last year’s election defeat came as a shock among the Ennahda faithful. It triggered a difficult internal debate about the movement’s identity and a reassessment of what it means to be Islamist in light of the new freedoms and challenges of the Arab Spring. How should the movement reconcile its commitment to a civil political program that refrains from proposing sharia law with its historic Islamization project? How can it mitigate the damage of elite-level political concessions on grassroots social activism? The culmination of this debate will be Ennahda’s decision to either continue as a simultaneously political and religious organization or instead divide itself in two for the first time in its history and become a political party and a separate religious social movement.

The defeat should not have been a surprise. Opinion polls, both in the Tunisian media and in private surveys conducted by Ennahda itself, showed that the Islamist movement had lost support since its victory in Tunisia’s first free elections in October 2011. Ennahda members themselves admitted they suffered from their experience in government, when, even though a new constitution was written, not enough was done to solve Tunisia’s pressing socio-economic and security challenges. In Sousse, a historic coastal city where I have spent most of the past 18 months researching Ennahda, voters were critical about the slow pace of economic change and continued high unemployment. A recent nationwide study of exit polling showed that voters wanted to balance civil liberties and security concerns.

Many in Ennahda were frustrated that the movement’s leadership chose not to endorse a candidate in the presidential elections last year against their rival Beji Caid Essebsi, who went on to win. They were disappointed a second time when the leadership accepted a role inside the coalition government led by Essebsi’s Nidaa Tounes party, which had won the parliamentary vote on a strongly anti-Islamist campaign. Ennahda’s most senior advisory body, the Shura Council, was initially reluctant to endorse entry into the coalition and Abdelhamid Jelassi, a senior leader, even briefly stepped down in protest.

Among the movement’s lower ranks there is still much discomfort today. It would have been better, they say, to go into opposition rather than form an alliance with a party like Nidaa Tounes, with its awkward mix of leftist and former regime elements. “We could have been in the opposition and presented a model of a constructive opposition,” said one Ennahda member, who resigned his position as a local bureau leader because he did not agree with the movement’s entry into the coalition. “That would have allowed us to restructure the movement, to rebuild it on a correct basis.”
Ennahda’s leaders wanted to retain a voice in government, but they were also driven by fear. They saw a risk of another campaign against the Islamists similar to former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s repression of Ennahda in the early 1990s or President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi’s recent crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. One member of Ennahda’s Shura Council judged that joining the coalition would prevent an alliance of leftist parties with Nidaa, which he feared would lead only to repression. “Their strategy would be to eradicate Ennahda and to go back to the scenario of the 1990s and 2000s in which Ennahda returns to prison,” he said.

Now the movement is preparing for a congress to discuss whether to remain both political party and religious movement or to divide itself in two, what the movement calls “the ways of managing the project” (subul tasrif al-mashru’) or simply “joining or splitting” (al-wasl aw al-fasl). The decision will be informed first by a major internal evaluation of Ennahda’s actions from the clash with Ben Ali in the late 1980s until the present day. Many in the movement now accept that mistakes were made: they pushed too hard in confronting the Ben Ali regime and failed to secure political allies when they were most needed. Political overreach came at the cost of their Islamization project and ultimately led to the dismantling of the movement for two decades and the imprisonment of tens of thousands of their members.

Those in favor of a split argue that because Ennahda is no longer an underground movement resisting a dictatorship it needs to become a modern, technocratic, conservative political party that offers policies aimed at both Islamist and non-Islamist voters. They contend that the party would still have Islam as a moral guide but, in line with Ennahda’s current position, would not seek to implement sharia as a strict code of law, instead focusing on the broader objectives of the sharia (maqasid al-shari’a) such as freedom, rights, civility and equality. Preaching and social outreach would then be assigned to a separate movement running mosque classes and local charitable associations, in which preachers could distance themselves from the political concessions of party leaders.

However, others in the movement warn that splitting Ennahda would leave a weakened political party that would become isolated from its societal base. “If you separate us from our Islamic roots it’s a risk,” said one local Ennahda leader. “We should specialize in our preferred area of work but under one name. We are both a party and a movement.” Such leaders argue that separation would undermine the comprehensive nature of the Islamist project, which, since the founding of the Islamic Tendency Movement, the forerunner of Ennahda, in 1981, has always sought to unite both the religious and the political. One Ennahda local bureau leader said separation carried negative connotations and would leave individuals unclear about what part of their work was politics and what part was preaching (da’wa). “There are members within Ennahda who can’t understand why we should have this separation of our character and this schizophrenia,” he said.

It is not yet clear which argument will win out. Until recently it seemed that separation was the most likely possibility, but several guest speakers from Tunisia and abroad at recent internal Ennahda discussions have advised the movement against separation. The decision is due at a much-delayed congress later this year, perhaps in October, but may be postponed further if a clear choice does not emerge. Many within Ennahda feel that the debates and discussions have yet to resolve the problem of what precisely it means to be a conservative political party inspired by an Islamic reference in a new democracy. “All these debates haven’t answered the questions inside the movement,” said the Ennahda bureau leader who resigned his post. “They haven’t given the members of the movement a clear vision or project that we can market to society.” Ennahda still needs a major rethinking of its ideology and political vision before it can recover from last year’s electoral defeat.

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Economic, security and political challenges
Tunisia’s golden age of crony capitalism

By Bob Rijkers, Caroline Freund and Antonio Nucifora, March 27, 2014

In the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution in 2011, some 550 properties, 48 boats and yachts, 40 stock portfolios, 367 bank accounts, and approximately 400 enterprises were seized from deposed President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and his clan. The Confiscation Commission in Tunisia estimates that the total value of these assets combined – the total worth of the Ben Ali clan’s belongings – was approximately $13 billion or more than one-quarter of Tunisian GDP in 2010.

While they account for less than 1% of all wage jobs, firms with ownership connection to the Ben Ali family absorb more than 1/5 of net corporate profits in Tunisia (in 2010).

Using new data (available only after the revolution), we confirm what everyone in Tunisia suspected all along – that Ben Ali and his family robbed the country – and document how it happened. The scale of Ben Ali’s capture of the country’s wealth defies previous assumptions: By the end of 2010, some 220 firms owned by Ben Ali and his extended family were taking an astounding 21 percent of all private sector profits in Tunisia.

How did they manage to drive up the profits of their firms to such astronomical levels? They did so by taking advantage of and manipulating Tunisia’s investment laws. Using firm data and merging it with data on regulations on domestic and foreign entry, we are able to demonstrate extensive use of such entry barriers to expand the family coffers.

Ben Ali’s relatives flocked to sectors riddled with regulations; sectors such as telecoms, air and maritime transport, commerce and distribution, banking, real estate, and hotels and restaurants. Entry restrictions to these sectors translated in greater market share, higher prices, and more money for the firms of Ben Ali’s extended family, who had privileged access. At the extreme, the rule in some sectors was Ben Ali or bust. For instance, there was the failed entry of McDonald’s into Tunisia: After awarding the franchise to the “wrong” partner, entry was denied by the government and the franchise pulled its efforts to enter the Tunisian market altogether.

Regulatory restrictions are rife in sectors where Ben Ali firms are present: Approximately 40 percent of Ben Ali firms were in sectors that are subject to authorizations and restrictions to foreign direct investment (FDI). When considering firms not connected to Ben Ali, authorization requirements apply to only 24 percent of all sectors in which Ben Ali firms are not present while FDI restrictions apply to approximately 14% of such sectors.
When existing regulations did not sufficiently shield the family businesses from competition, the president designed and decreed new regulations: Over a 16-year period Ben Ali signed 25 decrees introducing new authorization requirements in 45 different sectors and new restrictions to foreign investment in 28 sectors. Guess who disproportionately gained from these new regulations? Of course, Ben Ali’s family firms.

Many countries effectively use entry restrictions to serve domestic interests, such as protecting consumers from poor quality goods and services or protecting growing domestic firms from unfair foreign competition. However in Tunisia such regulations did precisely the opposite – they served to protect the family’s business interests, at the expense of the Tunisian consumers and firms who had to foot the bill.

Of concern, Tunisians today continue to pay the price for the discriminatory policies instituted by Ben Ali. The Ben Ali clan owned only a fraction of the firms operating in markets protected by barriers to entry, such that other firms operating under these regulations continue to benefit from these privileges. As an example, consumer prices for telecommunications services, a sector that was dominated by the Ben Ali clan, remain dramatically higher than those in neighboring countries. The price of incoming international calls to Tunisia is approximately 20 times the open market price, and outgoing international calls from Tunisia cost more than 10 times the open market price. Such steep prices benefit telecom companies at the expense of Tunisian consumers and firms.

It would be a mistake to assume that cronyism is no longer an issue now that Ben Ali has departed and his assets (including his wife’s shoe collection) are being auctioned off. The system of laws and regulations that allowed the family to capture such a large share of the country’s wealth remains largely in place. Entry authorizations and restrictions to domestic and foreign investors remain the prevalent feature of the investment climate in Tunisia. Today, nearly 60 percent of Tunisia’s economy is in sectors subject to authorizations and barriers to entry for domestic and foreign investors. These regulations continue to enable the capture of the country’s wealth by a few privileged Tunisians at the expense of the majority, hampering investment and the creation of the well-paying jobs that Tunisians deserve.

Meanwhile, new entrepreneurs and unconnected firms struggle to compete, stymied under existing regulation. Perhaps more importantly, polls show that Tunisians see corruption to have increased since the revolution, with the private sector often considered to be the domain of those with connections to power. Legitimate businesses that should be the engines of growth and job creation in Tunisia remain trapped between a mistrustful public and a rigged system.

The risk today is that vested interests will continue to capture the opportunities for rent-seeking, prevent change, and aggravate social exclusion. Removing regulatory barriers that protect the elite few at the expense of the public is critical to accelerate job creation and bring greater prosperity to all Tunisians.

This article is based on the World Bank Working Paper number WPS 6810 “All in the Family: state capture in Tunisia.”

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Scholars of public opinion, including Arab Barometer researchers Amaney Jamal, Michael Robbins and Mark Tessler, offer ample evidence of support for democracy in the Arab world. According to polls from 2006 to 2008, at least 80 percent of residents in Yemen, the Palestinian territories, Algeria and Jordan agreed or strongly agreed that, “Democracy may have its problems, but it is the best form of government.” This figure exceeded 90 percent in Morocco and Lebanon.

Yet, in a recent article published in “Democratization,” I revisited these Arab Barometer data and found that support for democracy is not as widespread as received wisdom suggests. I found that 27 percent of citizens of six countries surveyed by the Arab Barometer believed that democracy is best but unsuitable for their country. The reasons citizens saw democracy as unsuitable stem not from religion or economic modernization – the focus of many studies of Arab public opinion – but from concerns about economic problems and political instability that could accompany free elections.

My research found that 60 percent of citizens strongly support democracy, as indicated by their response to two statements (See Table 3). This group feels that democracy is the best form of government and suitable for the respondents’ own country. Only 7 percent of the region’s citizens reject democracy on both these indicators. Yet, 27 percent regard democracy as the best form of government, but deem it unsuitable at home.

What accounts for these seemingly contradictory views? The answer, it turns out, stems in large part from the respondents’ expectations of what democracy might bring. When citizens worry about economic upheaval, violence or negative cultural ramifications as a result of free elections, they are more likely to reject democracy at home.

Other factors matter, too. Perceptions of poor government performance (including the belief that the government lacks transparency and effectiveness) degrade government legitimacy and lower confidence in democracy’s suitability. Lower levels of economic modernization (such as not following the news or having lower levels of education) matter in Morocco and Lebanon.

While religiosity does not affect attitudes toward democracy, sectarian identity does have an effect. Sect appears to matter in accordance with the consequence-based theory – dependent on the unique political conditions and demographic make-up of each country and its relationship to the consequences of free elections – not cultural determinism. In Lebanon, for example, Shiite Muslims are more likely to see democracy as suitable than are Christians. This may be because Christians, who make up an estimated 41 percent of the population, expect to lose from freer elections, while Shiite Muslims could gain more influence. (Shiite Muslims make up about 27 percent of the population, Sunni Muslims 26 percent. Together, Muslims make up a larger proportion of the country than Christians.)

Why should lagging demand for democracy be a concern? First, scholars have long suggested that public support for democracy is a key driver of democratization. So, it is important for the long-term development of democracy that citizens have confidence in democracy as the best way to achieve a better life. Second, the conditions that appear to threaten public confidence in democracy in the Arab world – instability, violence and upheaval – are an unfortunate byproduct of the transitions taking place in the region. And, this appears to be hampering citizen confidence in democracy.

Recently, the Transitional Governance Project, a survey research and party capacity-building project I am a part of with Ellen Lust, Dhafer Malouche, Gamal Soltan and...
Jakob Wichmann, found declining support for democracy in Libya and Tunisia. In two recent polls conducted in Tunisia, we found that between 2012 and 2014, the proportion of Tunisians agreeing or strongly agreeing that democracy is the best form of government fell from 86 percent to 64 percent.

Interviews I recently conducted in Algeria also suggested declining support for democracy. Citizens expressed concern about instability, which they perceive as growing in Tunisia and Libya. Algerians have experienced their own Black Decade of civil war and incidents of terrorism in recent years, which does little to induce many Algerians to reject their authoritarian regime.

The transitions in the Middle East and North Africa continue, and there are bright spots as Tunisia moves forward in its democratic transition and prepares for parliamentary and presidential elections this fall. But, activists and international actors need to redouble efforts to support the development of fledgling democratic institutions in Tunisia, Libya and elsewhere in order to improve stability and economic opportunities and build confidence that democracy really is best.

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In yet another step in Tunisia’s transition, Tunisians will vote for a new parliament Oct. 26. Polls suggest the economy remains Tunisians’ highest priority. Despite economic turmoil since the 2011 revolution, expectations are high for a quick turnaround once the new government is in place. While this optimism is admirable, economic growth will require a much deeper political resolve than has been apparent.

Recent research published by the World Bank, much of which would have been impossible to conduct prior to 2011, highlights that Tunisia’s economic problems are not the result of the insecurity and lower investor confidence after the revolution. Rather, they are the direct outcome of poorly designed economic policies, which were in place under ousted president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and still remain. The resulting lack of jobs and unequal access to economic opportunity were at the heart of the 2011 revolution. The World Bank report argues that the continuation of the economic status quo poses a threat to Tunisia’s transition.

In March, the World Bank published a study documenting the extent to which Ben Ali’s clan was able to manipulate Tunisia’s investment policies to its own benefit. The analysis found that companies that were confiscated and given to his extended family accounted for just 1 percent of jobs but were able to reap a formidable 21 percent of the country’s private-sector profits.

For more than two decades, Ben Ali was able to preserve this economic system through coercion, repression and patronage. Close connections might be rewarded with a top spot at a state-owned company, a hotel license or access to a lucrative closed sector. Lower-level associates might get access to a government job or face fewer restrictions obtaining land or getting a business license. Loyalty rather than merit was rewarded.

The World Bank’s latest research highlights that, beyond the extractive nature of the former ruling family, Tunisia relies to a large extent on these same restrictions and appears to be trapped in an economic model that was designed in the 1970s. Tunisia’s investment regime, for example, limits potential new investment to less than 50 percent of the Tunisian economy. Whether through public or private monopolies or oligopolies, dozens of sectors are either explicitly or de facto closed to any meaningful competition. The laundry list includes telecoms, road and air transport, tobacco, fisheries, tourism, advertising, health, education, vocational and professional training, real estate, agricultural extension services, retail and distribution and telecommunication services. And the list goes on.

Furthermore, many of these restrictions on competition rely on a complex bureaucracy in which the room for discretion in administering the web of regulations further encourages corruption. The study documents, for example, how the prevalence of corruption “to speed things up” in Tunisia is among the highest in the world. More than a quarter of all firms declared they have to provide an informal payment to accelerate some form of interaction with the administration. The report estimates that close to 13 percent of firm annual sales are spent to deal with these regulations. This, in turn, fosters corruption, costing firms an additional 2 to 5 percent of their revenue every year – revenue that cannot be reinvested into greater productivity or more employment.

This economic environment has had three complementary results. At the firm level, there is very little entry of new businesses and very few businesses grow or even exit the market. So, rather than grow or die, firms simply stagnate. At the aggregate level, the economy has remained stuck in low productivity sectors, and has experienced surprisingly little reallocation of factors of production toward more productive, and remunerative, activities. Thirdly, more than half of Tunisia’s exports consist of low
value added products for France and Italy, which are largely just assembled in Tunisia from imported intermediate components.

The result is that Tunisia is underperforming its competitors in the global economy. The report estimates that this lack of competition costs the country nearly 5 percent of GDP each year – approximately the same amount spent on public investment.

Economists almost euphemistically call these problems structural, but that misses the broader point. The impact is more nefarious than underperformance of the domestic economy. In Tunisia, a patronage-based economy succeeds not only in enriching a privileged few, it entrenches severely exclusionary, non-competitive and distortional elements into the heart of the Tunisian economy.

These issues are not unique to Tunisia, and in some respects are a feature of most dictatorships. But as public opinion polling has confirmed, they are at the heart of why so many citizens across the Arab world have demanded change over the past several years – a change from a system in which whom you know matters more than what you know.

The good news is that Tunisia has many institutional elements that will help any government that takes on these challenges, in particular the country’s much lauded new constitution, which enshrines the critical principles of neutrality and transparency into law. Whether this will be enough to unseat the vested interests that are content with the status quo will be a large determinant of Tunisia’s ongoing transition.

Antonio Nucifora is a lead economist at the World Bank and lead author of “The Unfinished Revolution.” Erik Churchill, a World Bank consultant, was an adviser to the report. Both were based in Tunisia from 2010 to 2014.

Tunisian voters balancing security and freedom

By Chantal Berman, Elizabeth R. Nugent and Radhouane Addala, June 1, 2015

Tunisia remains the Arab Spring’s lone, albeit tentative, success story. In the fall of 2014, the country held parliamentary and presidential elections that were deemed largely free and fair by international and domestic monitors. As a result of electoral returns, Tunisia witnessed a change in government from one led by the Ennahda party, the country’s mainstream Islamist movement, to one led by Nidaa Tounes, a party composed of a number of political actors united in their anti-Islamist stance. Nidaa Tounes party leader Beji Caid Essebsi was later elected president in a two-stage run-off election, replacing interim president and Ennahda-ally Moncef Marzouki.

On Oct. 26, 2014, the day of parliamentary voting, we partnered with enumerators from Tunisian NGO Sawty, Sawt Chabeb Tounes to survey 1,157 Tunisian voters as they exited polls in the governorates of Beja, Gafsa, Sfax, Tataouine and Tunis. We explore the full results of the survey in a recent policy paper published by the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. Responses revealed that the tension between balancing civil liberties and security concerns divides the Tunisian electorate and deeply colors views of its emergent democracy.
Security issues, many of which predate the fall of former President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, have repeatedly threatened to derail the democratic transition. In February and July of 2013, Tunisia witnessed the assassination of two left-wing politicians, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi. Over the past four years, the absence of a strong central state has led to the trans-national flow of weapons, contraband goods and training between armed groups across Tunisia’s porous borders with Algeria and Libya. National security forces have frequently clashed with militants within Tunisia, including major incidents in February 2014 and just days before the October 2014 election.

Tunisia also has the dubious distinction of being the homeland for the largest number of foreign fighters in Syria defending the Islamic State for 2014. The trend of Tunisians leaving their country in search of armed conflict, however, may speak more to the relative paucity of opportunities for organized militancy at home. A notable exception occurred in March 2015, when militants killed 21 foreign tourists and a police officer in an attack on the Bardo Museum, housed directly next to the country’s parliament in Tunis.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that security was an extremely important concern for Tunisian voters in our survey. When asked in an open-ended question about the most important issue facing parties and voters in 2011 and 2014, 12.3 percent of respondents answered “security, violence, and terrorism” for 2011, and this increased to 16.7 percent for 2014. Though mentions of security and violence decreased by less than 2 percentage points between 2011 and 2014, mentions of terrorism quadrupled during the same time period from 1.7 percent in 2011 to 7.5 percent in 2014. Security issues gained equal attention from respondent compared to issues of economic growth and development, and garnered far more concern than “religious issues,” despite the salience and polarizing nature of public debates about the role of Islam in public life under the 2011-2013 Ennahda-led Troika government.

At the same time, however, respondents also mentioned issues related to procedural democracy and the protection of civil liberties at a high rate. This included references to electoral laws and voting irregularities, civic freedoms and rule of law concerns, and institutionalizing a democratic system. These responses constituted 15.3 percent and 12 percent of responses for the more important issue facing the country in 2011 and 2014, respectively.

![Figure 1: The most important issues facing Tunisia in 2011 and 2014](data:image/png;base64,iVBORw0KGgoAAAANSUhEUgAAAFgAAABdCAYAAAAx42MMAAAlwSипqAIAAAAC0lEQVR42mO8S3CAwMBOAFJFQAAAAASUVORK5CYII)

*Figure 1: The most important issues facing Tunisia in 2011 and 2014*

*Data: 2014 original exit poll conducted by the authors; Figure: Chantal Berman and Elizabeth Nugent*

Perhaps more significant, prioritizing security over personal freedoms appears to be an important predictor for how Tunisian voters consider and remember the events of the past four years. We asked respondents whether, given developments since 2011, they considered the revolution to have been a positive or negative event, and allowed them to explain the reasoning behind their answers in a follow-up open-ended question. Our sample of 928 respondents was divided; 35.2 percent answered that the revolution has been a negative thing and 45 percent said it has been a positive thing. These samples cited very different reasons for their answers. Those who consider the revolution a positive development overwhelming cited freedom as the reason. Of those who responded that it was a negative development, 20.6 percent cited issues related to a decline in security and stability, and an increase in terrorism.
Economic, security and political challenges

Our findings illustrate that the Tunisian electorate is concerned both with establishing a secure state and guaranteeing personal freedoms. Until now, these two policies have been mutually exclusive in the region; the particularly strong and muscular coercive apparatuses that guarantee national security and which define Middle East regimes have historically prevented democratization and violated the civic rights of those demanding them. This is nowhere more true than in Tunisia. The country was considered a staunch ally of the George W. Bush administration in the U.S. “War on Terror” and used the broad powers granted to law enforcement under its 2003 terrorism law to not only target growing Salafi-jihadi groups but also to increase repression of freedoms of expression and political opposition – a feat in a country that had already been defined by severe political repression for decades.

Tunisia is currently in the process of drafting new security legislation – a version of a bill was sent to the new parliament for debate and vote in April, though it has yet to be scheduled – and debate among politicians and the public mirrors these dual concerns. On the one hand, instability is a growing concern: Since 2011, militant attacks have killed more than 75 and wounded more than 190 members of Tunisia’s security forces – and obviously must be addressed. At the same time, current legislation contains a number of concerning provisions. In July 2014, Human Rights Watch warned that the draft terrorism law “retains some of the most troubling provisions of the 2003 law” and recently issued a statement that the legislation in its current form “could criminalize the conduct of journalists, whistle blowers, human rights defenders, and others who criticize the police, and would allow security forces to use deadly force when it is not strictly necessary to protect lives.”

Ongoing efforts and debates in Tunisia, including a national transitional justice campaign under the auspices of the Truth and Dignity Commission, demonstrate that not enough time has passed for the country to have fully reformed the hard-handed policing practices of the previous era, justified in the name of national security, and the firmly entrenched institutions that perpetuated these crimes. Though Essebsi certainly intended to signal a strong state-led response to terrorism when he declared, “We are in a war against terrorism,” after the attacks earlier this year, it may also conjure up not-so-distant memories of national leaders abusing terrorism laws to crack down on freedom of expression and political dissent. Tunisia’s citizens have not forgotten previous abuses, and remain wary of a return to a system in which the police were all but synonymous with violations of civil liberties.

Continued instability does not signal that Tunisia’s ongoing experiment with democracy has been derailed, as was suggested in the days after the Bardo attacks, just as a debate about balancing individual liberties and
national security does not signal a lesser commitment to ensuring the country’s safety. These events and our findings demonstrate that Tunisia’s citizens and elected representatives are actively participating in a debate over a fundamental tension inherent in all democracies. Whether knowingly or not, Tunisians collectively risked their lives, their livelihoods and the stability of their country over four years ago to demand a more democratic system. Despite the major challenges and insecurity the country has experienced since 2011, a significant portion of Tunisians still remember the revolution for the positive changes it led to as measured by the democratic rights they gained by mobilizing against the former regime.

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Will Tunisia’s fragile transition survive the Sousse attack?

By Rory McCarthy, June 27, 2015

Tunisia’s government has been quick to announce steps to prevent more terrorist attacks after the tragic shooting in Sousse on Friday, which left at least 39 tourists dead, many of them Britons. But these plans raise serious questions about the future of Tunisia’s once-hopeful democratic transition.

The shooting on the beach at the Imperial Marhaba Hotel in Port El Kantaoui, on the northern end of the Sousse coastline, was the worst terrorist incident Tunisia has faced. In addition to the cost in human lives, the economic impact is likely to be devastating. Coming just three months after 22 tourists were shot dead in the Bardo museum in Tunis, this attack could mean serious, long-term damage to the important tourism industry, which is worth up to 15 percent of Tunisia’s economy. Thousands of tourists have already flown home and more will follow. The tourism sector has one quarter of all of Tunisia’s bad loans, according to the World Bank. That means the impact will be felt across the wider economy, which is already suffering weak growth and persistent unemployment – officially at 15 percent, but unofficially much higher.

Nidaa Tounes, the political party which swept legislative and presidential elections late last year on a promise of security and prosperity, is still struggling to present a coherent strategy of economic reform and renewed investment. In the past, Nidaa, which has links to the political and economic interests of the former regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, was constantly critical of its rival, the Islamist movement Ennahdha, which led a coalition government until early 2014. It accused the Islamists of security lapses, including over the assassination of two prominent politicians in 2013, and for the slow pace of economic recovery. Now Nidaa finds itself facing the same criticism.
Prime Minister Habib Essid, a technocrat appointed to lead the cabinet, has announced a security crackdown, promising to tighten policing at tourist resorts, hotels and archaeological sites. Although there were police and national guard checkpoints on the highways leading into Sousse, and along the main coast road running past the beach hotels, security at the individual hotels was very limited. The gunman in Friday’s attack approached from the sea, and it reportedly took 30 minutes before armed police arrived to stop him. Sousse hotels, a prominent destination for cheap package holidays, have been hit twice before: once in 2013, when a failed suicide bomber blew himself up on the beach, and previously in 1987, during a serious confrontation between the Islamist movement and the regime.

Other security measures will follow as the counter-terrorism narrative returns to dominate as it did under the old Ben Ali regime. Essid said 80 mosques will be closed within days. In the wake of the political vacuum that followed the 2011 uprising, Salafi preachers took control of about 1,000 of Tunisia’s 5,000 mosques. Gradually, the state has regained control over nearly all these mosques but precise figures vary. In March, the religious affairs minister said 187 mosques were beyond state control.

In other cases, there are fears of a return to authoritarian tactics. Essid has signaled that he will try to close down at least one small political party, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Party of Liberation, which has a 30-year history in Tunisia. Although Hizb ut-Tahrir advocates a caliphate under sharia law, in Tunisia it has remained non-violent and was quick to condemn the Sousse shootings. It has not been linked with any of the terror attacks during the past four years. The government will also move against some religious associations and will revise laws on funding for associations. For its part, Ennahdha, although it may privately fear a crackdown, has in public so far sided with the government, calling for a national dialogue on the security crisis and saying that Islam was not to blame. In a speech Saturday, Ennahdha’s leader Rachid Ghannouchi warned against a return to a police state.

New draft laws have also raised concerns, even as the judiciary, security services and much of the deep state remains unreformed since the uprising. One new bill proposes jail terms for any Tunisian found to have “denigrated” police and security services. Another draft law on judicial reform has been found to be unconstitutional for failing to guarantee sufficient independence for judges. The long-awaited counter-terrorism bill, which the government now promises will be completed within a month, has also been criticized by human rights groups as flawed.

Often, politicians, including President Beji Caid Essebsi, the Nidaa founder and a former interior minister in the 1960s, have blamed violent extremism on foreign groups or funding. While the chaotic situation across the border in Libya has allowed Tunisia militants room to train and arm themselves, it is also clear that jihadi violence has been a Tunisian problem for many years, even before 2011. The men responsible for the Sousse shootings and the Bardo attack in March were all young Tunisians. Sousse itself is not just a tourist resort: It too has produced its share of radical extremists who were involved in attacks inside Tunisia and who have traveled abroad to fight in Iraq and Syria with Islamic State. The gunman in Friday’s attack, a 23-year-old student at university in Kairouan, may have been inspired by Islamic State as the group claims, but violent extremism is a Tunisian problem as much as it is a foreign creation.

The security crisis comes on top of significant social and economic unrest. Strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations have intensified in recent months. Work has been halted for several weeks at the main phosphate mines around Gafsa in the south because of disputes over hiring practices, working conditions and pay. The social affairs ministry reported 106 strikes in the first half of the year; the Nidaa-led government has told strikers to get back to work.

Other demonstrations have spread as part of the Where Is the Oil? movement (“Winou el pétrole?”), gathering thousands of protesters to campaign for greater transparency over the nation’s modest petroleum
resources. Protests have often led to violent clashes with the police. Though Essebsi dismissed the movement as “unpatriotic” it shows a growing popular distrust of elite-level politics and worsening frustration at the lack of social and economic reforms.

For many Tunisians, especially in the poor south and interior regions, the original goals of the revolution – work, freedom and national dignity – remain unmet. Some already caution against reading the Tunisian transition as a model story of unqualified success. Although Tunisian political leaders have negotiated their way out of many crises in the past four years, it will be increasingly difficult to keep their democratic transition on track.

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Comparative analysis and regional context
What really made the Arab uprisings contagious?

By Merouan Mekouar, June 13, 2014

After the January 2011 Tunisian revolution, virtually every Arab capital city witnessed popular protest inspired by the Tunisian case. Throughout North Africa and the Middle East, pro-democracy activists coalesced in central city squares and called for political change and economic reform. Yet, despite the presence of similar political and economic grievances, the countries of the region experienced different degrees of revolutionary emulation. While localized acts of protest in Egypt, Libya and Bahrain quickly evolved into regime-shaking demonstrations, other cases of protest in Morocco and Algeria failed to grow into national movements and quickly fizzled within a few months.

In a paper published in the June 2014 issue of the International Studies Review, I argue that for localized acts of protest to take a national dimension, respected political personalities or groups need to be on board during the early acts of protest against the government. In order to make my argument, I use the large theoretical body of informational cascades and focus on four North African countries.

For informational cascade theorists such as Suzanne Lohmann, Timur Kuran, Bueno de Mesquita or Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni, citizens living in authoritarian states face a major informational problem. Because the state controls access to local information and because people are afraid to voice their opinions of the regime, disgruntled citizens are largely cut-off from each other and are unable to evaluate the level of popular dissatisfaction with the authorities. An aggrieved citizen may be aware that close friends and family are unhappy with the regime, for instance, but he or she is unable to assess whether people in other parts of the country are also dissatisfied. Thus, before taking to the streets, disgruntled citizens need to receive a signal that large parts of the population are also unhappy with the regime and willing to mobilize against it. For Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer and Welsh, informational cascades occur when individuals receive new information that helps them update their beliefs and bandwagon around the actions of others.

In the early days of the Arab Spring in North Africa, respected political agents helped trigger informational cascades (and subsequent mass mobilization) by solving the informational challenge citizens faced in some authoritarian countries. In Egypt and Libya, the visible and largely unexpected involvement of groups or personalities traditionally close to the regime (or usually tolerated by it) transformed relatively small, isolated acts of protests into national events and helped signal to the rest of the population the presence of major opportunity for contestation. In contrast, protests led by marginal groups in Morocco and Algeria were unable to convince the rest of the population that there was an opening for demonstration.

Following the Tunisian revolution, mobilization in Egypt in early 2011 was nourished by an unexpected coalition between old and new activists. While a number of groups and personalities had been mobilizing for years against Mubarak's regime, the unexpected involvement of new actors in the early protests alerted the rest of the population to the presence of a truly exceptional opportunity for contestation. In addition to traditionally vocal groups, such as al-Mahalla workers or dissident liberal parties, the protests that followed the Tunisian revolution were characterized by the unexpected involvement of youth, celebrities, or internationally respected figures. Many activists were from well-off families close to the regime, and their involvement brought exceptional visibility to the protests organized by the traditional political activists. The involvement of these new actors created a powerful informational cascade by giving the demonstrations the visibility and the respectability necessary to reach the rest of the population.
A very similar process occurred in neighboring Libya following the February 2011 Benghazi protests. While the city experienced popular protests in 2006 that were swiftly extinguished by the authorities, the 2011 protests were marked by the quick defections of a series of senior government officials and military leaders, some of whom were friends of Moammar Gaddafi. Their actions created a sense of exceptionality and helped the rest of the population realize that Libya was experiencing historic momentum. Within a few days, the defections broke the silence in the country and helped nourish a powerful informational cascade.

In Algeria, in contrast, demonstrations organized by the Coordination Nationale pour le Changement Démocratique (CNCD) in Oran and Algiers were unable to attract more than a few thousand sympathizers. The low turnout of the CNCD demonstrations was particularly puzzling in a country which experiences dozens, if not hundreds, of acts of protests every year. In the Algerian case, virtually all of the country’s political and economic actors firmly stood in defense of the regime. With the exception of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights and a number of small independent unions, all of the country’s major personalities and institutional groups, including respected journalists and popular artists, refused to join the early demonstrations so that the local acts of protest did not gain the visibility necessary to spark an informational cascade.

The situation was similar in Morocco where locally relevant political agents also refused to join the protests organized by the youth of the February 20 movement. While a coalition of youth, human rights activists and Islamists demanded economic and political reform, virtually all of the country’s major personalities and institutional groups, including respected journalists and popular artists, refused to bandwagon on the protests. Not only did these actors refuse to join the demonstrations, they also worked to stop the process of revolutionary diffusion in the country. Religious leaders, former dissidents and respected writers called on their followers to support the monarchy. Even hip-hop artists helped stop popular mobilization. Don Bigg, one of Morocco’s most recognizable singers, dismissed the country’s pro-democracy activists by referring to them as a bunch of “brats” and “Ramadan eaters”.

The comparison of North African countries during the Arab Spring shows that a wide sense of popular disgruntlement with the authorities is not enough to trigger mass social mobilization. Local political agents have the ability to kill or inflate local acts of protests. The calculations made by these agents are critical for the development of informational cascades and it is therefore necessary to study their motivations more in detail.

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**Why is Tunisian democracy succeeding while the Turkish model is failing?**

*By Yüksel Sezgin, November 8, 2014*

In an influential book in 1991, Samuel Huntington established the “two-turnover” test to distinguish between emerging and consolidated democracies. For a democracy to be consolidated, according to the test, free and fair elections must twice have led to the peaceful handover of office between an incumbent and a successful challenger. As Huntington notes, this is a very difficult test. American democracy was not consolidated until Jacksonian Democrats lost the presidency to the Whigs in 1840.

The secularist Nida Tunis’s defeat of the moderate Islamist Ennahda in Tunisia’s elections last week brought the fledgling democracy a big step closer to passing Huntington’s test. The elections also strengthen the embattled forces for democracy throughout the Middle East and Muslim world. Tunisia’s successful democratic experiment despite rising extremism and a weak economy trumps Turkey’s already bogus claim to being the model for democratizing Muslim countries. In reality, Turkey has never been a viable model for Muslim democracy, since it was never a free or liberal democracy in the first place. Except for the short period 1974-1979, Freedom House has consistently classified Turkey as only a “partly free regime.”

While Turkey has descended down this authoritarian spiral over the past two years, Tunisia has achieved the most impressive democratic transformation in the history of the region. Tunisia had its first free elections in October 2011 after the fall of the Ben Ali regime. Ennahda won a plurality of seats (41 percent) and soon reached a power-sharing agreement with two secular parties in the Constituent Assembly. One of the things Tunisians got right was the rejection of presidentialism in favor of parliamentary democracy. Tunisians recognized the dangers of presidentialism in a country with a weak democratic tradition and historic lack of checks and balances. Tunisians also chose proportional representation with a zero-percent national threshold, giving the greatest possible representation to different voices in parliament. Turkey headed in the opposition direction. The AKP government tried unsuccessfully to use its majority to change the country’s parliamentary system into a presidential regime and to switch from the current PR-based electoral system to a “first-past-the-post” majoritarian system, which could give the AKP a supermajority while denying smaller parties’ representation. Turkey has one of the highest and most undemocratic electoral thresholds (10 percent) in the world; but the lack of representativeness of the electoral system has never been a real concern for the AKP elite. Despite earlier promises by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, AKP has never seriously considered lowering the threshold, but rather has exploited current rules to increase its share of seats in the parliament.

The most striking difference between Tunisia and Turkey lies in their approach to constitution-writing, which lawmakers in both countries have undertaken in recent years. Tunisians adopted a new, fairly democratic constitution in January 2014 with the backing of an astounding 94 percent of the national assembly. In Turkey,
by contrast, the parliament failed to reach a consensus to produce the country’s first civilian constitution — a failure mostly due to the ruling AKP’s insistence on establishing a presidential system of government. As a result, the country remains bound by the military-imposed 1982 constitution, which lags in almost every respect behind the Tunisian Constitution of 2014.

Turkish and Tunisian societies are highly polarized along the secular-religious axis. According to the World Values Survey (WVS), 84 percent of Turks and 65 percent of Tunisians describe themselves “religious,” while 14 percent of Turks and 27 percent of Tunisians refer to themselves as “not religious.” Low levels of interpersonal trust also characterize both societies: Only 12 percent of Turks and 16 percent of Tunisians consider others trustworthy (the same measure for Netherlands and the U.S. are 66 percent and 35 percent, respectively). The secular-religious divide has created in both societies an atmosphere of distrust that can inhibit cooperation between parties. This atmosphere has certainly taken its toll in Turkey, where secular and religious politicians refuse to compromise and write a new social contract. Tunisian politicians, on the other hand, seem to have weathered this trust crisis and are now on the road toward consolidated democracy.

Why did the Turks fail and the Tunisians succeed? I think there are two possible explanations: one is based on ideological identification, and the other on leadership styles of Erdogan and Rachid Ghannouchi, the leader of the Tunisian Ennahda movement. First, compared to Tunisians, Turkish people more rigidly identify with a particular ideology and political party. The WVS asked people in both countries to place themselves on an ideological scale of 1 (left) to 10 (right). 18 percent of Turks and 7 percent Tunisians were on left side of the scale, while 35 percent of Turks and 13 percent of Tunisian were close to the right end of continuum. There were more Tunisians in the center than Turks, 39 percent vs. 28 percent. More interestingly, 35 percent of Tunisians answered “I do not know,” compared to only 5 percent of Turks. The greater number of centrists and the lack of ideological rigidity may have encouraged Tunisian politicians to be more flexible and pragmatic, thus enabling compromise between religious and secular groups.

Second, Erdogan’s divisive and increasingly authoritarian style of politics has damaged Turkish constitutionalism.

Tunisia has been a success story largely because of Ghannouchi’s positive role in the constitutional process. Erdogan is neither an intellectual nor a religious leader. It is true that he further liberalized the Turkish political system in 2002-2011, but since then he has turned increasingly authoritarian and corrupt. On the other hand, Ghannouchi is a true intellectual with deep knowledge and understanding of both Western and Islamic philosophy and history. Since the fall of the Ben Ali regime, he has become the voice of moderation and reason in Tunisia. He seems to have better and more sincerely internalized democratic culture and values than Erdogan. While Erdogan interprets his 52 percent majority as the mandate to disregard the will of the other 48 percent, Ghannouchi keeps reminding his fellow citizens that even a 60 percent majority in a divided society where democracy is not yet fully established should not be taken as a mandate to monopolize power.

Yüksel Sezgin is an assistant professor of political science and the director of Middle East Studies Program at Syracuse University.
Arab transitions and the old elite

By Ellis Goldberg, December 9, 2014

“If you want things to stay as they are, they have to change.”

If you want things to stay as they are, they have to change. These are the words challenging an elite faced with ruin which Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa places in the mouth of Prince Tancredi Falconieri in the novel “Il Gattopardi” (The Leopard). Lampedusa’s novel is set in Sicily during the unsettled conditions of the Risorgimento. The problem confronting the old nobility is what to do in the face of the new Italian nationalism and the revolutionary changes to the state and society that the Republican general Giuseppe Garibaldi hoped to impose. To preserve its influence and elite status (that is, to ensure that nothing changes), the family must accept the new forms of governance (that is, accept that everything has changed).

Prince Tancredi’s observation offers a useful framework for understanding the different outcomes of what appear to be similar processes in Tunisia and Egypt. Tunisia has garnered high praise for passing the “Huntington two-turnover” test that every other Arab country has failed: The party that dominated the government immediately after the fall of the authoritarian regime has now peacefully given way to its opposition. Tunisia’s October legislative election therefore marks what political scientists call the consolidation of democracy because it seems that all political actors accept the verdict of the ballot box. This supposed success contrasts vividly with the failure of Egypt’s transition, which ended instead in intense political polarization and a military takeover.

To understand why the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings have had different outcomes, his guidance would be to leave aside the dominant narrative of secularism, Islamism and the political weakness of the youth. Those contentious and seductive issues lead us astray from the more fundamental and essential role of the ruling elite, without whom no country can make the transition from authoritarianism to democracy. We must think of those old elites, even in a revolutionary uprising, as active participants who are neither passive nor innocent.

This has not customarily been the focus of most analysis. Many have blamed Egypt’s revolutionary youth for failing to gain mass support or to build a solid organization either to compete with the Islamists in elections or push the revolution to its conclusion. But revolutionary youth in Tunisia had little more impact on the outcome either way whereas the old elite had a very large impact. Another common explanation has to do with the nature of Islamist forces in the two countries, as a weaker and more savvy Tunisian Ennahda party avoided the mistakes of a powerful but clumsy Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Both arguments miss who these various Islamist and revolutionary forces threatened. Democratization succeeded in Tunisia because the old elite was neither excluded nor subjected to the threat of political or administrative marginalization. The old elite, not revolutionaries or Islamists, proved to be the pivotal actor.

The underlying thread of many analyses since December 2010 has been that democracy can be and perhaps should be the result of a revolutionary rising. But democracy, unlike revolution, is a profoundly conservative as well as inclusive solution to the problems of social change. Democracy’s success more or less guarantees, for a protracted period of time, that there will be few political solutions – whether in terms of moderate public policy or dramatic institutional change – to economic inequality.

An understandable desire by many observers and analysts to conflate a revolutionary uprising with the process of democratic transition has created a narrative that now lacks not only many details but is, in some ways, a significant distortion of the political trajectory of the two countries.

Rather than thinking of revolution vaguely as a rapid...
and complete change, I prefer a definition proposed by German political scientist Otto Kirchheimer. Does the new regime destroy the possibility that the old regime and its members can return to power? We will gain more traction in understanding the events of the last four years if we focus on a different set of admittedly elite institutional actors: members of political parties, government officials and holders of significant economic resources. The crucial question is whether the political conflicts in the wake of a mass uprising and the collapse of a regime provided a plausible existential threat to any particular group. Are all parties, including the ones ousted by the collapse of authoritarianism, able to contest for governance?

In early 2010 there was every reason to think that Egypt was more likely to experience a successful transition to democracy than Tunisia. Egypt had a far more open press environment, more competitive elections, and had experienced more turnover among government ministers. For example, in 2010 the Tunisian prime minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi, was the same one who had been appointed more than 10 years earlier by then-President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Atef Ebeid, who former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak had appointed as prime minister in 1999 (when Ghannouchi assumed his office) to replace Kamal Ganzouri, departed after a five-year term. Ahmad Nazif, Ebeid's successor, had only served seven years when he was replaced on Jan. 30, 2011. Egypt had had three prime ministers in the two decades during which Tunisia had one.

In both Tunisia and Egypt the authoritarian regime centered on a particular figure who had been in power for decades and around whom an increasingly small coterie of family and close associates clustered. By 2010, wide sections of the political elite in each country had been marginalized by a narrow group at the very pinnacle of authority. In each country the regime maintained its grip on power partly through reliance on the police and partly through the manipulation of a single party (the Constitutional Democratic Rally in Tunisia and the National Democratic Party in Egypt). The Tunisian Supreme Court first appeared as an actor in the transition on Jan. 15, 2011 when it declared that Ben Ali was not incapacitated but had quit the presidency. Consequently, Fouad Mebazaa, the speaker of the assembly, was installed as president rather than Ghannouchi, who then remained as prime minister. Mebazaa, a member of the RCD central committee since 1988, served as the president of Tunisia until Dec. 13, 2011 when he was replaced by the human rights activist and Ben Ali opponent, Moncef Marzouki. Had the Egyptian Supreme Constitutional Court made a similar ruling when Mubarak left office, it would have declared that either the speaker of the assembly, Fathi Sorour, or Farouk Sultan, president of the court, was his constitutional successor. Both men were as closely associated with Mubarak as Mebazaa was to Ben Ali.

By Jan. 17, Prime Minister Ghannouchi announced a new cabinet that contained 12 members of the RCD including former Defense Minister Ridha Grira, a graduate of the distinguished French institute for training high-level civil servants, the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (a distinction he shares with Adly Mansour, the president of the Egyptian Supreme Constitutional Court who served as Egyptian president from the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in 2013 until the election of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in 2014).

Ghannouchi's replacement was not an outsider by any stretch of the imagination, but an even more central figure from the old regime. The new prime minister, Beji Caid Essebsi, had served in several key positions under the republic's founder, Habib Bourguiba. Essebsi was defense minister from late 1969 until June 1970 and then served as ambassador to France. In Tunisia, as in other former French colonies, the ambassador to Paris is a position of exceptional importance for economic, political and security issues. Between 1981 and 1986 Essebsi was the country's foreign minister. After Ben Ali ousted Bourguiba, Essebsi moved to the legislature where he was president of the Chamber of Deputies from 1990-91. Essebsi, who would be prime minister in 2011 until he resigned to make way for Ennahda party leader, Hamadi Jabali, on December 24 thus played a key role in determining the nature of the
democratic transition. Before the courts in Tunisia (as in Egypt) dissolved the former ruling party in March, the Interior Ministry had already suspended it from official activity. Essebsi thus presided over the liquidation of the party in which he had spent most of his adult career and from which he would draw many of the leaders for the new party he created for the 2014 legislative elections. Essebsi and his associates were quintessentially what Egyptians derided as “feloul” or the remnants of the old regime.

It is possible that Essebsi only pursued this course under the pressure of demonstrations, but nevertheless it was Essebsi and a number of politicians from the old regime as well as some of their long-standing opponents who bore the responsibility for shaping a democratic outcome in Tunisia. Thus, speaking on Nov. 10, 2011 at the African Media Leaders forum, Essebsi noted that it was his government’s responsibility to ensure that the Tunisian revolution did not devolve into a fratricidal conflict nor deviate from what he called its virtuous path.

Among the consequential choices his government made was the exclusion of members of the RCD from participating in the elections for the constituent assembly. Arguably even more important, however, was the decision to encourage human rights activist Kamel Jendoubi to preside over the commission charged with writing the relevant electoral law and carrying out the election itself, the Independent Higher Authority for the Elections, ISIE. Jendoubi and his fellow commissioners chose to employ a particular version of proportional representation that provided Ennahda with the number of seats that corresponded to its share of the vote but that also privileged smaller parties. Other electoral rules, including other versions of proportional representation, would have translated Ennahda’s 38 percent of the popular vote into a majority of seats rather than the plurality it actually received. Ennahda thus, by design, was unlikely to control the constituent assembly without receiving an overwhelming majority of the popular vote.

Ennahda had the votes in the constituent assembly to impose an electoral law banning members of the old ruling party from engaging in politics. In fact, article 167 was drafted into the organic electoral law by a majority in June 2013. Under the rules of the assembly, however, it was rejected in May 2014 because it failed to gain an absolute majority: 38 of 63 Ennahda delegates present abstained. Such a law would have been an insuperable barrier to the old political elite regaining influence through electoral politics and would have made the creation of Essebsi’s Nidaa Tunis, the largest party after the last elections, impossible. The most widely cited argument for not excluding former members of the RCD was simply that there is, in a democracy, no reason for stripping individuals of their political rights unless they have been convicted of criminal activity. Whether Ennahda representatives were convinced of this argument on its merits or simply took a more hard-nosed view of the likely results of excluding their long-time opponents we do not know, but their decision was consequential.

In Egypt events have worked out quite differently. One obvious and crucial difference was the inability or unwillingness of the Muslim Brotherhood to find a way to compromise with members of the old regime. On the contrary, the Muslim Brotherhood often sought to marginalize and exclude as much of the NDP as possible. These attempts to marginalize and exclude the NDP and its cadre as well as its leadership were highly popular with a significant portion of the Egyptian public. The top NDP leadership included prominent businessmen, religious officials and government officials all of whom were widely derided as corrupt figures of an authoritarian regime.

Days before Mubarak resigned, on Feb. 6, 2011 Vice President Omar Suleiman met with members of the opposition including the Muslim Brotherhood in an attempt to broker an agreement about the future of Egypt. These were the days in which several groups of so-called “wise men,” including some of Egypt’s wealthiest and most important businessmen as well as academic figures and former officials engaged a public dialogue through public statements and occasional interviews. Other opposition leaders including Mohamed ElBaradei opposed the talks, which were unpopular with the demonstrators in Tahrir...
Subsequently there were occasional talks between leaders of the MB and some of their political competitors and more than occasional claims that the MB had worked out a deal with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces but nothing of the kind ever happened. Talks routinely broke down; bargains once made were scuttled; and a heightened sense of distrust permeated relationships between all the dominant actors during the period after Mubarak left office.

Anger and contempt for the political figures of the old regime were common through the first year of the uprising in Egypt and the MB began to present itself as a party dedicated to reforming Egypt by continuing the revolution. Key to this objective was eliminating the feloul. This was surprising to many Egyptians because there was no reason to believe that the MB planned to make significant or rapid changes to the country’s economic or governmental structures which would have been the hallmark of a revolutionary party as widely understood in Western as well as Egyptian academic literature.

The MB’s reaction to the so-called Selmi document of late 2011 shows how different the situation in Egypt was from what occurred in Tunisia. Ali al-Selmi, at the time deputy prime minister, drafted a proposal that had the backing of SCAF and the government, which was then still dominated by liberal elements of the old regime and a handful of its liberal opponents. He offered a set of supra-constitutional principles to guide the work of the still-to-be chosen constituent assembly which had many substantive similarities to earlier such statements issued by the Muslim Brotherhood, his own Wafd party and independent forces in March 2011. It only allowed the civilian government to consider the total budgetary allocation to the armed forces and it gave SCAF the right to prior review of any legislation affecting the army, an unpopular ratification of the military’s hitherto unofficial authority in the new constitution. His proposal also included significant restrictions on how the still to be chosen legislature could choose the constituent assembly. First, Selmi proposed that elected legislators not be allowed to serve as members of the constituent assembly. He also proposed a corporatist plan through which the SCAF would appoint the bulk of the members of the constituent assembly from the existing institutional framework of Egyptian society in which unions, professional associations and other groups would choose their own representatives.

Selmi’s proposal placed mild substantive constraints on what the assembly could write but it egregiously violated one of the few obviously legitimate elements of the transitional process. That an elected legislature would choose the constituent assembly was one of a handful of provisions that had been the object of the March 19 referendum. The MB called for massive demonstrations against the Selmi proposals and hundreds of thousands of people mobilized including sections of the left. Selmi became a lightning rod for protest and mistrust because of his own connections to the old regime. Selmi has a doctorate in economics and had served previously in Mubarak cabinets. He was a prominent member of the Wafd, generally considered a secular pro-business party with a significant Christian base of support. Rejecting the Selmi document placed the MB firmly on the side of electoral legitimacy but it suggested an at best limited tolerance for reaching substantive agreements with the social, political or economic elite of the old regime.

The Muslim Brotherhood initiated demonstrations in Tahrir Square and was able to mobilize significant support against the proposal on Nov. 18, 2011. Police later attacked a sit-in by relatives of the people killed in the initial uprising and protests continued. These included particularly violent confrontations on Muhammad Mahmoud Street, just off Tahrir Square, between the police and youth, many of whom were drawn from the ranks of soccer fans and from poorer neighborhoods, which left 41 people dead and perhaps 1,000 wounded. The Selmi document was another victim and so was the government of Prime Minister Essam Sharaf who resigned on Nov. 21. He was replaced by Kamal Ganzouri, who had served as prime minister under Mubarak from 1996-99.
The left viewed these events as evidence that the Muslim Brotherhood was uninterested in pursuing the revolution to establish a democratic order. Viewed in the framework of Tunisian politics, however, they suggest a different interpretation: The MB refused to reach an agreement with members of the old regime about the new structure of the state. The mobilization of street demonstrations and the willingness to accept the outcome of the violent confrontations that it had neither solicited nor endorsed placed the MB on a distinct path in the months to come. This was the path of electoral politics, themselves a fundamental process for representative democracy. It was also, however, a path in which elections and demonstrations together could be used to marginalize and diminish the role of other institutions of the state as well as the political opponents of the electoral victors.

Sometime before his tragically premature death I had coffee with Samir Soliman, the respected Egyptian political scientist. In the years since it has become common to argue that the failure of the Egyptian revolution and Egyptian democracy can both be attributed to the failure of the secular left to organize sufficient popular support to challenge the Muslim Brotherhood. Seen in this optic, the tragedy of Egypt is the fault of the middle-class intellectuals who played such conspicuous roles in front of the television cameras in the early days of the uprising in 2011. Soliman had a different view of how democracy, if it was to work at all, would work in Egypt. The only party that could conceivably challenge the MB and alternate with it, he argued, was a conservative party. Committed as he was personally to the politics of the left, he did not that day argue that the liberal left would be a likely counterweight to the MB nor did he mention from where such a party would draw its leaders or members.

In Tunisia, just such a conservative-centrist party has emerged in Nidaa Tunis to challenge Ennahda and its roots are heavily in the old regime although it also boasts other supporters. In Egypt for a variety of reasons no alternate center-conservative party was built. That would have necessarily been a party with deep roots in the old NDP, the party many of whose members have re-emerged since the 2013 coup. In the absence of a thorough-going revolutionary exclusion, they would likely have re-emerged anyway. The question is whether they did so through elections or as part of an anti-electoral coalition. Attempting to exclude the economic and political elites of the old regime may have seemed like both revolutionary and democratic good sense to the Muslim Brotherhood and to many Islamists and leftists between 2011 and 2014.

Egyptian revolutionaries (in the conventional left-wing sense) and the leaders of the MB feared the re-emergence of the feloul as a political force. They correctly understood that a powerful conservative party with significant support from Egypt’s business elite was not a friend. Such a political grouping was not inclined to support either the projects of economic and social equality that animated the left or the projects of creating new state institutions that the MB favored. The MB was committed to elections. As the old elite increasingly re-asserted itself the MB responded by attempting to marginalize both their institutional and electoral capacity. In this it echoed the very old concern of revolutionaries in Europe and Latin America that electoral democracy is not necessarily the friend of movements for economic redistribution nor does it necessarily lend itself to the creation of strong protections for the political, civil or social rights of the poor and the weak.

The idea that democracy is the last station on the revolutionary road remains seductive and it informs a certain idealized understanding of U.S. history and the process of democratization. Representative democracy itself, however, is less likely the successful conclusion of revolution and more likely the premature end of its utopian hopes and dreams. Only if nothing changes, can everything change.

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Why Tunisia didn’t follow Egypt’s path

Sharan Grewal, February 4, 2015

The contrast between the Egyptian and Tunisian transitions has been the foundation for a remarkable number of comparative analyses. The yawning divide in the outcomes makes such comparison inevitable: Egypt’s democratic experiment ended in a military takeover and extreme state violence; Tunisia’s produced a consensual constitution and a second peaceful transition of power. Although the consolidation of Tunisia’s democracy is by no means assured, its progress thus far raises the question: Why has Tunisia’s transition to democracy been more successful than Egypt’s?

Many of the most commonly cited explanations are clearly contradicted by available evidence. The usual argument for Tunisia’s exception emphasizes its small and homogenous population and absence of deep ideological divides. But, in fact, ideological polarization was just as severe in Tunisia as in Egypt. Tunisia’s transition, like Egypt’s, suffered from a debilitating Islamist-secularist divide, reflected in two political assassinations and months of political deadlock. Survey data from the Arab Barometer suggest that despite Tunisia’s alleged homogeneity, secularists in Tunisia were as distrustful of their ruling Islamist party as they were in Egypt:

Other analysts highlight socioeconomic differences, arguing that Tunisians are more educated, secular and wealthier than Egyptians, all common correlates of democratic attitudes. But again, the evidence suggests that disillusionment with democracy was just as deep in both countries. Arab Barometer data reveal that by 2013, majorities in both countries no longer thought that democracy was suitable for their country:

Other scholars claim that Tunisia benefited from a roughly equal demographic balance between secularists and Islamists, whereas Islamist candidates in Egypt swept 70 percent of the vote in the first elections. Egypt’s secularists, the argument goes, chose to thwart democracy out of fear that they would never win a future election. However, the Islamist domination of the Egyptian political scene was short-lived: Islamists had lost much of their initial appeal by the 2012 presidential elections, where voting was split 52 to 48 percent for the Islamist and secularist candidates. In the lead-up to the July 2013 coup, Egypt’s Islamist President Mohamed Morsi had only a 32 percent approval rating. His prospects for winning another election appeared dim. Secularists in both countries should
therefore have had sufficient confidence that they could win future elections.

Finally, some contend that Tunisia’s ruling Islamist party, Ennahda, was more moderate than the one in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, Ennahda governed more inclusively toward the secular revolutionaries and the remnants of the former ruling party. However, despite Ennahda’s more moderate behavior, the Tunisian opposition still called for Ennahda’s ouster just as the Egyptian one called for the Brotherhood’s. In both countries, disillusioned revolutionaries joined the supporters of the former regimes in calling on state institutions to undermine the Islamists, whether moderate or not.

What these explanations seem to overlook is that during the summer and fall of 2013, the Tunisian transition was on the verge of following Egypt’s path. Mimicking the June 30 protests in Egypt that led to the July 3 coup, the Tunisian opposition organized massive rallies demanding Ennahda’s ouster and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. The real answer to Egypt and Tunisia’s divergent trajectories may therefore lie in the responses of each country’s state institutions to the calls to thwart the democratic transition. In Egypt, the military and judiciary heeded and even welcomed these calls. The opposition in Egypt was able to appeal to the judiciary to dissolve the democratically elected parliament and to the military to oust the democratically elected president. In Tunisia, by contrast, the judiciary was unable and the military unwilling to perform these functions. Without state institutions to partner with, the Tunisian opposition ultimately had no choice but to come to the negotiating table with Ennahda, facilitating consensus.

Let’s begin with the judiciary. Just five months after Egypt completed its first free and fair elections, Egypt’s judiciary nullified those elections on a technicality, leading to the dissolution of the democratically elected parliament. The Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) had exercised its power to nullify elections twice before (in 1987 and 1990), and appeared eager to perform this function again against the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt’s then-President Hosni Mubarak had successfully packed the judiciary in the 2000s with pro-regime and anti-Islamist judges. Tahani el-Gebali, for instance, vice-president of the SCC, reportedly urged the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to delay the parliamentary elections, fearing they “would bring a majority from the movements of political Islam.” Ahmed al-Zend, head of the Judge’s Association, went further, arguing that with the Brotherhood coming to power, “Egypt is falling. We won’t leave matters for those who can’t manage them, with the excuse that we’re not people of politics. No, we are people of politics.” The Egyptian judiciary was thus both willing and able to side with the anti-Islamist opposition to dissolve the democratically elected parliament.

Why did the Tunisian judiciary not follow suit and fulfill the opposition’s demands to dissolve the constituent assembly? The main reason is that there was no judicial body in Tunisia with the jurisdiction to nullify elections. Tunisia’s Constitutional Council had gained that power in 2002, but having been notoriously weak under the former regime, the Council was dissolved in March 2011. The highest judicial body in Tunisia during the transition was thus the Court of Cassation, which did not have the jurisdiction to rule on the constitutionality of electoral laws. Even if the Tunisian judiciary wanted to undermine Ennahda, it was unable to do so to the same extent as its Egyptian counterpart.

Ultimately, it was the military that delivered the final blow to Egypt’s democratic transition, ousting the democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, on July 3, 2013. Why did the Tunisian military not emulate its Egyptian counterpart and oust the Ennahda-led government? The Tunisian military had a comparable opportunity to intervene: paralyzed political institutions, multiple assassinations and a massive number of people in the streets calling for Ennahda’s ouster. Yet, the Tunisian military had little motivation to oust Ennahda. The military in Tunisia has historically played a much less prominent role in politics than its Egyptian counterpart. Sidelined by former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali since 1991,
the Tunisian military never developed the economic or institutional interests that would drive it into politics. While the Egyptian military could not afford to let the transition get out of hand and thus took an active role in managing it, the Tunisian military had little stake in how the transition unfolded, retreating to the barracks after Ben Ali’s fall. Under Ennahda’s rule, moreover, the military gained in importance and social status, giving it little grievance with Ennahda.

The Egyptian military, on the other hand, had plenty of reason to oust the Muslim Brotherhood. While the Brotherhood respected many of the military’s interests, continuing to defer to the military for key ministerial and governorship appointments and conceding on military trials of civilians, several issues remained. A difference in worldview between the military’s nationalism and the Brotherhood’s perceived pan-Islamism, the devaluing of the military’s economic holdings as a result of Morsi’s mismanagement of the economy, and the personal ambitions of then-Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi all played a role in his decision to intervene.

The Brotherhood’s biggest mistake, however, may have been to encroach on the military’s historic monopoly over national security decisions. The National Defense Council, composed overwhelmingly of military figures under the SCAF, became majority-civilian under Morsi (and tellingly reverted back to majority-military in the 2014 Constitution). In December 2012, the Brotherhood raised more red flags by allegedly backing a Qatari-Palestinian scheme to buy land in the Sinai. The military balked, claiming that “Sinai is a red line” and Sisi took the unprecedented step of issuing a decree (typically the president’s prerogative) limiting the sale of this land. Wael Haddara, an advisor to Morsi, told me about another incident in December 2012 when he and two other Morsi administration officials were sent to Washington to meet with the Department of Defense. Intentionally or not, the Egyptian embassy in D.C. failed to inform the defense attache of their meeting, contributing to fears that Morsi was sideling the military.

The clincher came two weeks before the coup, when Morsi severed ties with the Syrian regime and announced his support for a no-fly zone. At the same time, Brotherhood leaders called on Egyptians to go on jihad in Syria, while a presidential aide insisted they would not be penalized upon their return to Egypt. The specter of experienced jihadists returning to Egypt, as well as the clash with Sisi’s more neutral stance on Syria, may have been the last straw of the military’s toleration of the Brotherhood.

With the military and judiciary willing and able to undermine the Islamists, the opposition in Egypt had little incentive to negotiate with the Brotherhood. There was no reason to compromise with Morsi when the opposition could instead kick him out with the help of state institutions. In Tunisia, by contrast, the opposition realized after months of protest that there would be no judiciary or military to come to its aid. Ultimately, it realized that it had to back down on its demand for the dissolution of the constituent assembly and instead negotiate with Ennahda on the way forward. The Tunisian “success story,” then, is not that all sides wanted democracy, but rather that all sides had no choice but to settle for democracy.

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How Egypt’s coup really affected Tunisia’s Islamists

By Monica Marks, March 16, 2015

Conventional wisdom in academic and policy circles asserts that Tunisia’s Islamist party, Ennahda, compromised only after, and as a direct result of, the July 2013 coup that deposed Egypt’s then-President Mohamed Morsi. The assumption often accompanying that Egypt-centric projection presumes Ennahda would have necessarily adopted a Muslim Brotherhood-style maximalist approach had Islamists won a numerical majority in Tunisia’s 2011 elections. Both propositions dismiss critical specificities of the Tunisian scenario, including Ennahda’s historically long-term logic, the importance of domestic anti-Islamist pressure from leftists, secularists and groups associated with the former regime, and the extent to which Ennahda ceded key compromises well in advance of formally handing power to Mehdi Jomaa’s caretaker government on Jan. 28, 2014. Rather than fundamentally altering Ennahda’s overall strategy, the coup that toppled Morsi and subsequent crackdown on Brotherhood-oriented groups reinforced pre-existing postures of pragmatism and gradualism inside Ennahda that have been crucial to its survival in Tunisian society.

Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, which took a majoritarian approach to power in the wake of Egypt’s revolution, Ennahda adopted a number of farsighted, participation-oriented positions that evinced a much thicker understanding of democratic politics. In early 2011, for example, when Tunisia’s transitional body, known colloquially as the Ben Achour Commission, began debating what type of electoral system Tunisia would have, Ennahda’s leadership contributed to creating the conditions for coalition-building – and their own electoral marginalization – by supporting a proportional representation (PR) over a Westminster-style first past the post (FPTP) system. Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi, who experienced FPTP elections first hand during his 22 years of exile in London, correctly predicted that deploying this system in Tunisia would result in a coalition and democracy-inhibiting landslide victory for Ennahda. Political scientist Alfred Stepan has written as well that a Westminster-style FPTP system would have resulted in Ennahda sweeping approximately 90 percent of seats in the October 2011 elections, instead of the nearly 40 percent plurality it won. Ghannouchi and other Ennahda leaders instead supported a PR system that benefitted smaller parties, reducing Ennahda’s own share of votes in the 2011 election by a staggering 50 percent.

For Ghannouchi and other top leaders in Ennahda, the touchstone moment shaping this minimalist decision was Algeria’s 1990 and 1991 elections, when the Islamic Salvation Front’s (FIS) dominance in municipal and the first round of parliamentary elections spooked the regime, which then canceled elections and initiated a broad crackdown against Islamists. That experience, and the bloody civil war that ensued in Algeria, powerfully impacted Ennahda’s thinking during the 1990s and 2000s. Survival, Ennahda leaders surmised, meant stepping slowly and strategically, careful to reassure vested interests and society at large that it did not intend to wrest control of democratic institutions to impose something resembling an Islamic state. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) failed to internalize the lessons of Algeria. Squeezed by the judiciary and elements of the military that made governance fraught with difficulty, the FJP opted to double down in its attempts to assert authority. As in Algeria, powerful demonstrations of Islamist force fueled opposition rhetoric auguring an Islamist takeover. In Tunisia, however, Ennahda leaders practiced more restraint. Regularly referencing the experience of FIS in Algeria, they remained sensitive to suspicions that Islamists would instrumentalize electoral victory as a means towards illiberal, majoritarian dominance. Ennahda therefore adopted a more minimalist approach and, unlike the Brotherhood, stayed true to its pre-election promises of supporting coalition governments and not running or officially endorsing presidential candidates in 2011 and again in 2014.

Immediately after Tunisia’s 2011 elections, in which Ennahda won an approximately 37 percent plurality,
the party moved to form a coalition government. After reaching out to various secularly-oriented parties, it ultimately partnered with two: Congress for the Republic (CPR), led by long-term human rights activist Moncef Marzouki, and the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties, known in Tunisia as Ettakatol, led by opposition politician Mustapha Ben Jaafar. Though accusations were made that Ennahda marginalized its partners, this three-party “Troika” coalition stayed together from 2011 to 2013. During the Bardo crisis of August 2013, in which protests led by unelected leftist, secular and former regime oriented figures threatened to dissolve Tunisia’s Constituent Assembly, CPR and Ettakatol stood alongside Ennahda to preserve the institution of the Constituent Assembly until constitution writing was complete.

Importantly, Ennahda’s coalition with CPR and Ettakatol didn’t coalesce de novo after the 2011 elections, but rather had roots in a long series of cross-ideological talks between Tunisian opposition actors in the 2000s. These talks involved dozens of independent opposition activists, human rights-defending civil society groups and political actors opposed to the regime of then-President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, including leaders of Ettakatol, CPR and Ennahda. In documents produced in Aix-en-Provence and Rome in 2003 and 2005, parties to the talks signed onto core principles – including commitments to create a democratic political system with popular sovereignty (sayadet al-shaab) as the sole source of legitimacy (kamasdar wahid lil-sulta) and to realize equality between men and women. In 2007 these actors – who in 2005 formed a movement called the October 18 Collective – released a document titled “Declaration on the Rights of Women and Gender Equality” strongly reaffirming support for Tunisia’s 1956 Personal Status Code, which prohibits polygamy and gives women the right to divorce. Ennahda leadership’s willingness to not just talk across the table with secular actors, but codify key commitments with them – such as the primacy of popular sovereignty over sharia, excluding any mention of Islamic law – was therefore expressed formally through a series of negotiations and signed agreements well in advance of both the 2011 elections and Egypt’s 2013 coup.

Ennahda’s stint in power following the 2011 elections tested its leaders’ commitments to pragmatism and gradualism. During decades of oppression and exile, Ghannouchi – who wrote for three decades on the compatibility of democracy and Islamic political thought – along with a handful of other leaders, had elaborated a flexible, ethically based understanding of sharia that prioritized social justice over specific rules (hudud). Soon after the revolution, key figures in Ennahda’s leadership, including Ghannouchi and veteran negotiators of the cross-party 2000s negotiations, stressed that Ennahda would not seek to codify the word sharia. The concept was “shumuli,” or broad enough, to encompass a democratic polity that respected core principles of popular sovereignty, social justice and human dignity. Not all Ennahda members, however, understood or agreed with the views of Ghannouchi, whose writings were banned and largely inaccessible in Tunisia throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Following Tunisia’s revolution, Ennahda therefore began an arduous process of becoming re-acquainted with itself personally, ideologically and organizationally. This process played out very publicly, as a more inflexible, maximalist wing inside Ennahda, led most vocally by former MPs Sadok Chorou and Habib Ellouze, agitated for restrictive interpretations of constitutional language concerning key issues, such as whether or not to tighten wording that would have defined Tunisia as an Islamic state and whether to criminalize blasphemy.

As the drafting process began in early 2012, suspicions that Ennahda secretly harbored fundamentalist, even fascistic aims, ran high amongst leftist and secularly oriented segments of Tunisian society – demographics that are much larger in Tunisia than in Egypt, Algeria and many other Arab countries. Determined and vocal pushback from such citizens, backed by well-networked Tunisian civil society groups, some of whose leaders held similar reservations about Ennahda, put popular pressure on the party to compromise on more permissive formulations of constitutional articles. Such important pushback prompted swift responses from Ennahda leaders, including Ennahda MPs who re-caucused in the Constituent Assembly and even the party’s governing Shura Council itself, whose 150 members sometimes held meetings to discuss and vote on whether and how to reformulate more controversy-creating positions.
Throughout four successive constitutional drafts, Ennahda – affected by popular pressure, debates within the drafting committees and the advice of Tunisian and international experts – softened or walked back its most problematic positions, compromising on a number of important issues long before the Egyptian coup. The language that ultimately made its way into the constitution – the final version of which was ratified by an overwhelming 200 out of 217 total votes on Jan. 26, 2014 – reflected compromises on both political and ideological issues. Ennahda leaders had ceded ground on their core issue of contention: whether Tunisia should have a parliamentary system, as Ennahda wanted, or a presidential system, as opposition parties had sought, ultimately supporting a mixed parliamentary-presidential model in which the president possessed more powers than Ennahda leaders had intended. Compromises on ideology-oriented issues had also been made: The constitution defines Tunisia as a civil rather than an Islamic state and omits proposed language that would have criminalized blasphemy and asserts men and women’s roles “complement one another within the family.” The bulk of these compromises had been worked out in fall 2012 and spring 2013 and were already written into the third draft of the constitution, released in April 2013 – months before the coup.

Egypt’s July 2013 coup did, however, have knock-on effects in Tunisia: It emboldened opposition activists, some of whom formed a copycat Tunisian Tamarod (Rebellion) movement in an effort to force the Troika government to leave power. These activists argued that the Troika had lost all legitimacy and should hand over power to an apolitical, technocratic government immediately. Sensing opportunity, unelected leaders of the main opposition party, Nidaa Tounes, issued calls to dissolve the Constituent Assembly and replace the Troika with a government of technocrats. The Tamarod movement and corresponding calls to dissolve the Assembly, however, remained somewhat marginal until Tunisia experienced its second political assassination: the July 25 murder of Mohamed Brahmi. Brahmi, a low-profile Arab nationalist politician, hailed from the same electoral coalition as Chokri Belaid, a prominent leftist whose assassination just five months earlier, on Feb. 6 2013, shook Tunisian society.

Belaid’s assassination provoked huge demonstrations against political violence and spurred widespread speculation in Tunisia that the Troika government and particularly Ennahda, which Belaid had often criticized, was directly or indirectly responsible.

If the success of Egypt’s Tamarod movement and deep-seated disillusionment with the Troika’s ability to govern provided the fuel, Tunisia’s second political assassination – that of Mohamed Brahmi – lit the fire. Throughout August 2013, tens of thousands of protesters gathered outside the Constituent Assembly in the Bardo district of Tunis to demand dissolution of the Assembly and resignation of the Troika government. Dozens of opposition MPs resigned. This was a time of great test for Ennahda and its coalition partners. On Aug. 6, Mustapha Ben Jafaar, then-President of the Constituent Assembly, made the controversial decision to temporarily suspend the Assembly’s work and began spearheading the Troika’s efforts behind the scenes to find a negotiated path towards compromise. Members of Ennahda and CPR opposed Ben Jaafar’s decision, viewing suspension of the Assembly as a capitulation to street protesters’ anti-democratic demands. Ben Jaafar himself felt differently. In an interview with Stepan and myself on Nov. 4, 2014, Ben Jaafar explained that decision as a strategic step necessary to preserve the institution of the Constituent Assembly against the anti-democratic demands of pro-dissolution protesters. “Putting the Assembly on recess wasn’t giving the pro-dissolution camp legitimacy,” he said. “These people weren’t as democratic as they said. Instead it showed that I’m sticking with rule of law, I’m sticking with this Assembly... I protected the Assembly.”

For Ennahda’s supporters, the Bardo protests represented an attack on the Troika’s electoral legitimacy and an attempt to place power in the hands of unelected technocrats in Nidaa Tounes’s orbit who might then roll back old regime policies. Ennahda’s base tended to oppose their leadership’s decision to negotiate with Nidaa Tounes and other protest supporters, arguing that such negotiations would legitimize the demands of unelected, anti-democratic forces. Against such opposition, however, Ennahda party leaders – with the crucial mediation of Tunisia’s prominent trade union, UGTT, and three
other members of the so-called negotiation “quartet” – worked out a plan to complete the constitution, select an elections board and transfer the reins of government to a technocratic caretaker cabinet. On Jan. 28, 2014, just two days after signing Tunisia’s new constitution into law, Ennahda Prime Minister Ali Laarayedh officially handed over power to technocratic Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa.

Such a technocratic solution to diffusing tensions was itself not without precedent. Cajoled by the heterodox leadership of Ennahda member and then-Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, Ennahda ceded a number of key government ministries to technocrats in March 2013. Opposition to Jebali’s decision was initially widespread in the leadership ranks of Ennahda, with some individuals suspecting him of being pressured by figures close to the old regime. Still, Ennahda’s eventual acceptance of Jebali’s decision, demonstrated by the imposition of a mixed technocratic-political government months before the Morsi coup, represents another piece of evidence that Ennahda’s concessions – both political and ideological – were part of a pragmatic pattern that preceded the Morsi coup.

To be sure, the overthrow of Morsi had a palpable impact on Tunisia, emboldening the Tamarod protests, fueling – though not actually sparking – the eventual fire of the Bardo protests, and reminding Ennahda just how unique and fragile its position as a free, democratically elected Islamist party really was. Ennahda party leaders, who had been critical – even derisory – toward the Muslim Brotherhood from 2011 to 2013, characterized the movement as retrograde, uncooperative and recalcitrant, were deeply moved by the attack on Brotherhood sympathizers in Cairo’s Rabaa Adawiya square. These party leaders began voicing messages of sympathy, saying that no matter their mistakes in power, the Brotherhood did not deserve its undemocratic ouster or the rights-abusing crackdown it received.

The coup may have also softened Ennahda MPs overwhelming support for lustration, which would have excluded persons who held position in Ben Ali’s Constitutional Democratic Rally party (RCD), which had been officially dissolved in March 2011, from running in Tunisia’s 2014 elections. Ghannouchi and other key leaders’ ultimate opposition to lustration legislation was motivated more by long-term commitments to political inclusion and gradualism grounded in the lessons of Algeria and the spectacular failure of Libya’s lustration law than the coup in Egypt. Convincing core segments of Ennahda’s leadership who supported lustration, however, that excluding large swathes of old regime-oriented figures (including the leading candidate for president, Beji Caid Essebsi himself) could create coup-friendly conditions likely became easier after Morsi’s ouster.

Rather than terrifying Ennahda into transforming itself overnight from a maximalist actor into a meek collection of scared and chastened Islamists as is sometimes implied, the coup against Morsi reinforced and offered new justification for Ennahda’s pragmatism, gradualism and support for long-termist compromise – tendencies manifested in Ennahda’s historical negotiations and internal evolution, as well as the key compromises it made after the 2011 elections. It is therefore ahistorical to characterize Ennahda’s compromises, particularly its decision to formally relinquish power in January 2014, as mere byproducts of the “Egypt effect,” or to assume that Ennahda would have necessarily adopted the Brotherhood’s domineering, maximalist approach had Islamists held a higher proportion of seats following the 2011 elections. Ennahda’s logic of long termism and track record of cross-ideological compromise indicate that its leadership’s operative logics have been crucially different than the Brotherhood’s. The vocal pushback from secular civil society organizations, the leftist trade union and unelected old regime-associated actors between 2011 and 2013 likewise indicated that Tunisia’s more anti-Islamist oriented social topography created a very different matrix of opportunity constraints for Ennahda outside the halls of elected office than the Muslim Brotherhood faced in Egypt.

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When it comes to democracy, Egyptians hate the player but Tunisians hate the game

By Michael Robbins, October 16, 2015

Many hoped the protests associated with the Arab uprisings would unleash a democratic wave in the region, sweeping out autocrats who had withheld political voice from generations of Arabs. Yet rather than producing liberalized polities, with the possible exception of Tunisia, the uprisings primarily led to either devastating civil conflict or the resurgence of authoritarian regimes.

How have these events affected how Arab publics think about democracy? Has the nearly universal failure of the uprisings to yield democracy lead citizens to give up on democracy as a system of governance? My forthcoming article in the Journal of Democracy, argues that the uprisings had a surprisingly small effect on attitudes of ordinary citizens toward democracy — likely because the uprisings were not really about democracy in the first place. However, it also finds some notable shifts in public opinion, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia.

With one key exception, the results from nationally representative surveys conducted by the Arab Barometer in nine countries reveal that relatively few people across the region changed their desire for democracy since the Arab uprisings. In 2011, at least three-quarters of citizens in each country said that a democratic system that includes public freedoms, equality of political and civil rights, and accountability of authority is a good or very good political system. In 2013, two years after the uprisings, the results were virtually unchanged: at least 80 percent still held this view.

Not only do most Arab citizens say that democracy is a good system, but the majority also agree that, despite its problems, democracy is in fact the best political system. In both 2011 and 2013, at least two-thirds of respondents in all countries rated democracy as the best system, and only Iraq and Yemen exhibited discernible changes.

Measures of commitment to democracy tell a similar story. At the time of the Arab uprisings, fewer than half of the citizens associated democracy with potential problems such as weak economic performance, instability, indecision and citizens’ unpreparedness. In the years that followed, attitudes changed little in all but one country.

The birthplace of the Arab uprisings — and the place where democratic reforms have been the most substantial — is the exception to this pattern. Two years after the uprisings, Tunisians were twice as likely to say that democracy is bad for the economy compared to 2011 (36 percent vs. 18 percent). Soon after the initial protests, only 17 percent of Tunisians said that democracy led to instability compared with 41 percent in 2013. Tunisians also became two-and-a-half times more likely to say that democracy is indecisive (50 percent vs. 20 percent) and 50 percent more likely to say their fellow countrymen were not prepared for democracy (60 percent versus 40 percent) during this period.

While most Tunisians retained faith in democracy as the best system, they also had growing doubts about it.
In certain respects, Egyptians and Tunisians followed similar paths in the wake of the Arab uprisings: both countries held free and fair elections in which Islamist parties claimed victory and led democratic governments. So why did Egyptians, unlike Tunisians, hold fast to their democratic ideals?

The answer rests in who people blamed for the state of their country after the revolutions. Egyptians held the party in power — the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party — and its ideology accountable for the challenges they endured following the revolution. In June 2011, fewer than half (43 percent) of Egyptians said they trusted the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, just over one-third (36 percent) of Egyptians favored giving religious leaders influence over decisions of government, a question commonly used to measure support for political Islam. These findings suggest that the electoral dominance of the Brotherhood in the post-revolutionary period was not grounded in ideological support but rather in organizational strength and a lack of credible alternatives. Citizens were so unenthusiastic that in the first free and fair elections they had ever experienced, roughly half of the electorate stayed home rather than vote for any of the candidates on the ballot.

The transitional period in Egyptian politics served to further weaken the appeal of the Brotherhood and its ideology. By April 2013, in the last months of Mohamed Morsi’s presidency, support for political Islam had dropped dramatically from 2011 levels; about half as many citizens (19 percent) favored giving religious leaders say over government decisions compared to just two years earlier. Similarly, trust in the Brotherhood fell to 20 percent.

In contrast, views of political Islam and Ennahda, the main Islamist party, remained unchanged in Tunisia. Soon after the Jasmine revolution, just one in five Tunisians favored political Islam, compared with 24 percent in 2013. Over the same period, trust in Ennahda fell only slightly, from 40 percent to 35 percent, a fraction of the 23-point decline in trust for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

So why do Egyptians hate the player but Tunisians hate the game?

Most likely, this difference is due to the nature of the transition in each country. In Tunisia, Ennahda won the largest share of votes of any party but was unable to form a government without the cooperation of two other parties, resulting in a relatively weak governing coalition that was slow to respond to the challenges facing the country. Instead of blaming Ennahda or its political ideology for the failings of the new government, Tunisians blamed the democratic system that produced a weak and largely ineffectual coalition.

Egypt followed a different path. After victory in the parliamentary and presidential elections, the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies sought to consolidate their power and increase the role for religion in the state. After Morsi temporarily declared himself to be above the law in November 2012, Islamist parties passed a new constitution without support from secular or minority interests. During this period of political polarization, Egyptians blamed problems with the transition on the specific government in power instead of on the democratic process that produced it. The result was a steep decline in support for political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood but no change in the desirability of democracy as a system.

Returning to the broader survey results, why did the uprisings have minimal effect on attitudes toward democracy across the region? One reason may be how...
citizens think about the protests. In 2013, respondents were asked to identify the three main causes of the Arab uprisings. In six of the nine countries surveyed, fewer than half name “civil and political freedoms and emancipation from oppression” — elements critical to a democratic governance — as one of the three most important impetuses for the protests. Rather, citizens were far more likely to link the uprisings to state corruption or economic outcomes. By implication, few citizens across the region appear to have directly attributed the changes brought about by the uprisings — whether good or bad — to democracy itself.

Additionally, the lessons following the Arab uprisings did not seem to diffuse widely across borders. Although there is clear evidence that diffusion played a role in the initial spread of the demonstrations in 2011, publics in the region appear to have been less affected by subsequent events in Egypt or Tunisia. Instead, reflecting on the limited reforms that took place in their own countries, relatively few citizens across the region updated their beliefs about democracy.

Although the protests and their aftermath have had profound effects on the regional environment, by and large, Arabs have maintained faith in democracy. For proponents of democracy, this finding offers a glimmer of hope. Although this system of governance is unlikely to take root in the region in the near future, most Arab publics remain supportive of democracy.

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What the Arab protestors really wanted

By Mark R. Beissinger, Amaney Jamal and Kevin Mazur, October 19, 2015

The 2011 popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia that removed long-standing autocrats occurred in rapid succession, with Egyptian demonstrators explicitly drawing inspiration from the example of their Tunisian counterparts. This caused some observers to locate the cause of the uprisings in trends common to both societies and the Arab world more generally, such as the growth of social media or a “youth bulge” in the population. However, the post-revolutionary divergence between Egypt and Tunisia — to say nothing of the violence in places like Libya and Syria — has made implausible the notion that some shared characteristic is driving the countries of the “Arab Spring” along a common, upward trajectory.

The contrast between Egypt and Tunisia today is stark; while the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize last week for shepherding the country towards democracy, the Egyptian government is dominated by the military and its first democratically elected leader sits in jail, awaiting his death sentence.

How, then, are we to understand the divergence between these revolutions, which occurred in the same region, at roughly the same time and made essentially the same demands?

On the one hand, it is impossible to read post-revolutionary outcomes directly from economic or social
circumstances preceding an uprising. Revolutionary processes regularly overwhelm and sideline their progenitors, a fact of which the liberals and leftists initiating the Iranian revolution in the 1970s are sorely aware.

On the other hand, the societal groups participating in a revolution do not emerge out of thin air, but in response to social conditions and political opportunities. Understanding which social groups lead the challenge against a standing government can provide insight into how toppled leaders ruled (or misruled) their populations and help identify the segments of society that leaders of post-revolutionary governments must focus on to address the needs of their citizenry.

In a recently published article, we investigate which segments of society participated in the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions and the conditions impelling their participation. The participants differed in many respects across the two countries and we have developed a historical argument to explain this divergence. The Egyptian uprising was a relatively narrow middle class revolt, whereas the Tunisian uprising constituted a broader cross-class coalition. The ways in which Egyptian and Tunisian leaders managed domestic and international pressures in the 1990s and 2000s created the grievances and opportunities to act on them that fueled both revolts.

Our research suggests that neither the Tunisian nor the Egyptian revolution resulted directly from the flowering of new democratic ideals, as economic issues were more important than political freedoms for participants in both uprisings. Using unique survey data available from the second round of the Arab Barometer study — a set of nationally representative surveys about political life, governance, and political, social, and cultural values administered in 2011 in eleven Arab countries — we show that most Tunisians and Egyptians who participated in the uprisings identified demands for improving the economic situation as the most or second most important reason for the uprisings, with desires for political freedoms coming in a distant second place in both countries (see Table 1).

Despite their similar motivations, the segments of society propelling each revolution differed. A full 55 percent of Egyptian protesters came from middle class occupations, compared to only 30 percent in Tunisia. Workers, students and the unemployed constituted 57 percent of the Tunisian demonstrators but only 19 percent of the Egyptian demonstrators. Moreover, participants in the Tunisian Revolution were considerably younger than the disproportionately middle-aged participants in the Egyptian Revolution, with the youngest age group (18 to 24 years old) overrepresented in the Tunisian uprising relative to their share of the total population, while those nearing middle age (35 to 44 years old) were most overrepresented in Egypt. Finally, civil society association members had

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<td><strong>Egypt</strong></td>
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<td>Demands for improving the economic situation</td>
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<td>Demands for civil and political freedom</td>
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<td>Demands for authority not to be passed down to Gamal Mubarak</td>
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<td>Combating corruption</td>
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<td>38%</td>
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<td>56%</td>
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<td>Replacing the incumbent regime with an Islamic regime</td>
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<td><strong>Tunisia</strong></td>
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*Source: Arab Barometer*
a greater presence in the Egyptian Revolution than the Tunisian Revolution, while Tunisian revolutionaries were significantly more likely to rely on the internet as a coordinating device than Egyptian revolutionaries.

These differences in the social composition of protesters can be explained by the different strategies taken by the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes in the decades preceding the revolutions. Both regimes were forced by fiscal crises to reform their public sectors and by international pressure to take steps towards political liberalization. The ways in which they did so shaped popular grievances and the capacity of citizens to act on them, in turn shaping the different patterns of individual-level participation in the revolutions that eventually broke out in both countries.

In Egypt, the regime dismantled welfare protections for the middle class and co-opted rather than overtly repressed the opposition. This created conditions conducive to an urban revolt by the established middle class, fueled by economic grievances and led by civil society organization.

In Tunisia, by contrast, the regime adopted a more repressive approach to its opposition that, combined with neo-liberal economic policies, undermined civil society organization and activated regional and generational grievances. These techniques created the basis for a cross-class alliance that was spearheaded by the young and began in the provinces, slowly spreading to the capital.

Our analysis may be something of a disappointment for believers in the power of democratic ideals to chart a nation's course. Who participated in the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions was more a function of how state policies impacted different social categories than individuals' ideological orientations or ideals. What's more, participants in the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions were united in identifying economic grievances, rather than demands for more political freedom, as the primary reasons for participation in the uprisings.

However, our conclusions are consistent with most social science findings about the political trajectory of countries that have successfully democratized. Writing almost 50 years ago on the paths taken by Western democracies, political scientist Dankwart Rustow observed that, “Democracy was not the original or primary aim; it was sought as a means to some other end or it came as a fortuitous byproduct of the struggle.” The demands Egyptian and Tunisian demonstrators placed on their governments, and the ways each state responded, were paramount in determining the course of the revolutions. That the Egyptian and Tunisian demonstrators held similar views — while one state has made major steps towards democracy and the other looks as autocratic as ever — underscores the fact that the ideals of the citizenry are not the primary factor impelling or sustaining democratization.

Major trends affecting the entire Arab world, such as the rapid increase in the youth population and the diffusion of social media, have proven no panacea for ridding the region of autocratic rule. Though consistent with most democratization studies, this fact offers little solace to observers of the Egyptian political scene or to the vast majority of Egyptians hoping for a more responsive government. A slightly more optimistic reading of our results suggests that the policies states put in place can prevent societal demands from spilling into open conflict. The government of Tunisia, so far at least, appears to be channeling the struggle of their citizenry in this manner.

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Reflection on the National Dialogue Quartet’s Nobel Prize
Could Tunisia’s National Dialogue model ever be replicated?

By Daniel Brumberg, October 12, 2015

If the story of the Arab political rebellions is one of failed leadership, Tunisia’s story is an epic tale of a political class that forges a remarkable — if still fragile — democratic transition. This victory earned the four leaders of the National Dialogue the Nobel Peace Prize. Cause to celebrate, the prize also offers a timely opportunity to reflect on the wider question of how and why elite bargains or “pact-making” succeed or fail to advance transitions.

Is pact-making a product of local or national conditions — a happy accident of a specific history — or does the success or failure stem from broader or “exogenous” logic that transcends time and place?

In a practical or policy-related sense, what is at stake is whether the Tunisian experience is unique, and unlikely to be repeated or emulated, or whether it offers wider lessons that can be applied to other national dialogues.

I believe that the success of national dialogue in Tunisia is rooted in forces that were deeply embedded in the soil of one country, particularly the absence of a politicized military and the presence of a massive domestic force, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), the leading member of the quartet. The UGTT acted as both a third party arbiter that claimed to exist above the political fray and a key actor implicated in the very conflicts it tried to mediate. This has no parallel in the Middle East, or as far as I know, in any other national context. While Tunisia and its National Dialogue offer an inspiring example for the region, given such unique circumstances, it is unlikely to become a model that can be easily emulated elsewhere.

Before considering the Tunisian case, we need to conceptualize the role of dialogues or “pact-making.” Taking a page out of “The Godfather,” we might say that this dynamic pivots around the transition from autocratic to democratic “protection rackets.” In the former, autocracies protect groups who fear that their political, social or even physical survival might be undermined by a move to free elections and majoritarian rule. In the Middle East, vulnerable minorities — based on economic, religious, sectarian or ideological cleavages — often depended on autocracies to shield them from their real or imagined adversaries. In any genuine democratic transition, the key challenge is for leaders to negotiate rules, procedures and institutions that make it very unlikely that electoral winners will use the ballot to disenfranchise their rivals. By minimizing the fear factor, national dialogues can provide an important mechanism for moving from autocratic to democratic protections.

Scholars who think about national dialogues through a broad analytical lens emphasize a central impediment to pact-making: namely, the tendency of all forces to resist making any concessions because they fear that their rivals will not reciprocate or, if they do signal readiness for a deal, will break it the moment the opportunity presents itself. Given such perceptions, no party is ready to risk their hide for a deal. This classic “collective action” problem is especially hard to overcome when there is a significant disparity of power between the key players. That is why serious pact-making talks usually require some kind of “mutually hurting stalemate” that compels rivals to conclude that they would be better off risking a deal than suffering under the status quo.

This kind of “rationalist” analysis, as it is known among political scientists, is alluring because it does not depend on the peculiarities of culture, religion or ideology. All we need to prove is that the parties have learned from repeated iterations of violent conflict is that they cannot win by fighting and must choose dialogue and compromise. Under these conditions, pact-making springs from a means/end pragmatic calculation — a “second best solution” — rather than any philosophical or normative choice deriving from a particular national historical terrain.
But while this kind of universalist analysis has the advantages of analytical simplicity or parsimony, it suffers from its failure to consider the deeper contextual conditions that might foster stalemate and negotiations in the first place. Indeed, it may be that all the specifics of national context — even slippery variables such as culture, ideology or identity — are crucial. If this is the case, then a purely rationalist analysis shorn from immediate cultural, social or ideological context doesn't get us very far at all.

The advent of Tunisia's successful national dialogue is rooted in structural factors and forces the likes of which have few, if any, parallels in the region. First, it is a relatively small country, with 11 million people in comparison, to say Egypt, with its 90 million. Second, Tunisia has a relatively large and literate middle class based in the coastal/Tunis region, and a strong political elite that is a subset of that class. Third, in the ‘60s, Tunisia’s military was professionalized and depoliticized. Thus, contending elite groups could not go the Egyptian way by looking to the military for a resolution of their conflicts. In Tunisia, rival groups have longed faced a basic choice between talking or fighting.

From this logic emerged an elaborate system of elite conflict management and negotiation that endured from the late ‘60s straight through the era of former President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Take a close look at Tunisia's National Dialogue — as a team of Tunisian scholars did in a recently published book — and you will see that the formal institutions that constituted National Dialogue were one part of a more complex story. Indeed, in the three years following the 2011 Jasmine Revolution, Tunisia’s leaders engaged in series of overlapping formal and informal dialogues pursued in different arenas by elites from rival groups — especially secular and Islamists — most of whom were already familiar with the logic and practice of elite negotiation and conflict management.

This is not to say that the formal National Dialogue was just one of many equal players in a crowded field. Launched in May 2013, the crucial National Dialogue emerged as the most effective arena for elite talks, helping Islamists and secular forces overcome an increasingly violent stalemate. These negotiations came to a head in late summer, when the National Dialogue secured a “Road Map” that allowed Tunisia to exit a deepening crisis in late Summer 2013. Precipitated by the assassination of a leading leftist member of the National Constituent Assembly, the deal set the stage for the resignation of the Islamist-led “Troika” government in September 2013, the ensuing creation of a new caretaker government of “experts” and a calendar for sequencing parliamentary and presidential elections. In addition, the National Dialogue helped a key committee in the Constituent Assembly reach an agreement on a new constitution — a crucial event without which the Road Map itself would never been implemented.

But while helping to mediate these agreements, the National Dialogue leaders were hardly non-partisan actors. On the contrary, the four groups of the “Quartet” were animated by a shared distrust of Islamist forces and thus sought to rebalance the political field in ways that would compel leaders of the Nahda Party to compromise in the face of hard-line resistance in the party’s own ranks. To exercise this influence, UGTT mobilized thousands of its loyal members in the streets — or threatened to do so when the dialogue seemed to reach an impasse — while sustaining its role as the leading arbiter of negotiations. That it could walk this fine and necessarily ambiguous line was a tribute to the political will and skill of many leaders, especially UGTT leader Hocine Abbasi, who leveraged the full weight of the UGTT’s to push all groups to accept the September 2013 Road Map. However, while Islamist and secular groups both made concessions, it was the Nahda Party that swallowed the bitterest pill, namely the dissolving of a coalition government that, after all, had been democratically elected. Nahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi surely knew that unless his party relented, the UGTT might have carried out its threat of a national strike and Tunisia might just have fallen into mounting national conflict and violence.

The Tunisian story also shows the success of the National Dialogue was not preordained. The very forces that
overcame their differences were caught in a whirlwind of improvised escalation that could have ended very badly. The August 2013 specter of a military coup in Egypt helped to focus the attention of all the key players in Tunisia, underscoring the fortuitously positive effects of regional and national events and forces. Tunisia offers a potent and inspiring lesson for the entire region of what can be achieved when leaders compromise. It is a cautionary tale and important example, but given its exceptional origins, even with its well earned Nobel Prize, Tunisia’s National Dialogue cannot easily serve as a model for the region.

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What did Tunisia’s Nobel laureates actually achieve?

By Monica Marks, October 27, 2015

Now that Tunisia’s National Dialogue Quartet has won the Nobel Peace Prize, the political crisis it helped resolve in 2013 has become the focus of newfound scrutiny and fascination. Renewed attention is important, because the history of that high-stakes period remains a rough first draft. Once told in full, this story will offer instructive examples for Tunisia and other countries navigating choppy transitional waters. For now, though, the history of this period remains recent and raw, subject to simplified narratives spun by the Dialogue’s participant protagonists.

So far, Tunisia’s National Dialogue has been heralded as a case of “democracy saved,” with Quartet members described as patriotic civil society organizations that placed collective over parochial interests. These organizations are understood to have thrown Tunisia a life preserver in a crisis moment, saving political actors from themselves. The Quartet has been cast as an example of civil society “outsiders,” in cooperation with allegedly apolitical technocrats, rescuing elected government – both from its purported incompetence and from unelected opponents intent on dismantling democracy. The Quartet members – especially the UGTT, Tunisia’s powerful trade union and the Dialogue’s undisputed standard-bearer – are portrayed as standing midway between Tunisia’s seemingly familiar secular actors and its “devil-we-know” Islamist political elites, yet simultaneously outside politics.

In this script, the heroic Quartet enables Tunisia to peacefully negotiate the Islamists out of power without completely eroding nascent democratic institutions. Tunisia avoids collapsing into chaos or crude coup-making, like Libya or Egypt, and its transition weathers the storm. Told this way, the lessons of Tunisia’s National Dialogue story shine in bold, broad brushstrokes: strong civil society steps in to light the path forward and mediated consensus triumphs over conflict.

However, that’s not quite what happened.

The National Dialogue occupied one pivotal moment in a three-way struggle for power among Tunisia’s secular left, personified by the UGTT, its Islamist center-right, personified by Ennahda, and a range of political figures and economic elites connected to the old regime, personified by elements of Tunisia’s now-ruling party, Nidaa Tunis, and its Employer’s Association (UTICA). This three-way struggle has produced a counterbalancing effect that can
check excesses of power, in which any two can offset gains or threats posed by the third. But it has also produced a pattern of self-interested positioning in which these groups’ political goals have subsumed the pursuit of core revolutionary goals, such as socio-economic dignity, institutional reform and transitional justice.

The Dialogue’s initiator and leader was Tunisia’s general trade union, the UGTT – a group whose secular unionist values represent many Tunisians, especially those on the left. From its founding in 1946, UGTT’s leadership has seen the union as tasked with a special, dual role: defending the rights of workers, but also – and perhaps more importantly – guaranteeing Tunisia stays on a sovereign, “modern” path. The UGTT coordinated resistance against the French during Tunisia’s fight for independence and is imbued with a huge amount of historical and popular legitimacy. Boasting 750,000 members in a population of just under 11 million, it also holds a powerful political bargaining chip: by calling a general strike, UGTT can grind the economy to a standstill.

Despite its legacy and large membership, however, UGTT’s leadership was heavily co-opted under Tunisia’s first two presidents, Habib Bourguiba and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Ben Ali took co-optation to a new level, buying off UGTT’s top brass with free cars, special access to loans and guarantees of legal immunity. The famous Gafsa mining basin protests of 2008 – which anticipated Tunisia’s revolution – began as a protest of local union activists against UGTT’s corrupt national leadership. When revolution struck in December 2010, protests often started from local UGTT branches, but some protesters carried signs indicting union bosses’ corruption.

After Ben Ali’s departure, the UGTT was eager to re-establish its credibility and reassert political influence. At its December 2011 conference, the UGTT ousted its general secretary and other Ben Ali-era leaders. A reenergized union sought to assert itself as an independent force – one that could powerfully oppose, partner with or even supervise the role of government. This new mission created tension between UGTT and the Troika government. The Troika came to power through Tunisia’s first democratic elections in October 2011, and was led by Ennahda, an Islamist party which had been banned for decades. Though it formed a coalition with two smaller, mostly secular parties, Ennahda’s victory stunned many secularists, pro-union leftists, and political and economic elites.

UGTT’s leadership had long viewed Islamists as a broad and blurry group inherently opposed to “modern” values. Ideological hostilities ran deep. Even some UGTT leaders imprisoned and tortured alongside Ennahda members under the regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali tended to label Islamism – rather than old regime authoritarianism – the main threat to unionism. “Bourguiba did what he thought he had to do... he defended republican values,” Mongi Ammami, an adviser to UGTT’s Secretary General who was imprisoned under Bourguiba, told me in 2014. “But Islamists have a totally different project, khilafa [building a caliphate]. It’s a fascist discourse.”

UGTT leaders also saw Ennahda as a political competitor intent on dismantling unionism. In the years following Tunisia’s 2011 revolution, UGTT leaders alleged Ennahda – with the support of purportedly Islamist revolutionary militias, Salafi jihadis and even some members of the Troika coalition party CPR – was attempting to crush the union by infiltrating it from within and attacking it from without. UGTT held large protests against Ennahda in February and December 2012, in response to garbage dumped outside union offices and police firing birdshot on union-backed demonstrators respectively. UGTT’s leaders strongly believed Ennahda was behind these abuses.

For its part, Ennahda claimed the UGTT was intentionally sabotaging Tunisia’s economy to topple the Islamist-led Troika. Ennahda leaders I interviewed throughout 2012 and 2013 described UGTT leaders as ideologically prejudiced against Islamists. Many suggested UGTT’s leaders were intentionally taking a hands-off approach to thousands of wildcat strikes happening throughout the country. Some even claimed UGTT, possibly with
support from the RCD, was stoking these strikes to make governance an especially impossible job. Research has suggested such assertions, like some of UGTT’s claims against Ennahda, are untrue. Yet with the economy in post-revolutionary free fall, and thoroughly inexperienced in the art of governing, Ennahda leaders tended to approach the UGTT with fear and frustration – unsure how to transform what they perceived as obstructionism into constructive collaboration. One crucial mistake Ennahda leaders made was encouraging their supporters to counter-protest at UGTT demonstrations during 2012. Instead of cooperating to solve Tunisia’s socio-economic challenges, UGTT and Ennahda spent much of 2012 locked in a destructive cycle of competing street protests that directly contributed to Tunisia’s 2013 political crisis.

Ennahda placed itself in further opposition to the union by awarding public administration jobs to its own supporters. Ennahda leaders denied wrongdoing, claiming that winning parties in established democracies often exercise their prerogative to make political appointments. Yet such actions brought Ennahda into heightened conflict with the UGTT, which condemned it for threatening the public administration’s neutrality. Some prominent members of UGTT, along with anti-Islamist parties like Nidaa Tunis and the Popular Front, went further, claiming Ennahda was covertly seeking to Islamicize the Tunisian state.

Escalating tensions between Ennahda and the UGTT played a central role in precipitating the National Dialogue, a project that began a full year earlier than most observers realize. UGTT began the first National Dialogue in June 2012 in an attempt to apply pressure to Ennahda, which its leaders perceived as jeopardizing both the union’s strength and the “civic” (i.e. secular) character of the state.

In the months prior, Ennahda – freshly installed in the Constituent Assembly – had engaged in protracted, painstaking debates over whether or not the word “sharia” should appear in Tunisia’s new constitution. These conversations generated identity-based controversy and engendered fears among secular and leftist Tunisians that Ennahda would railroad their views, imposing a majoritarian conservatism on the country. UGTT’s intervention therefore found strong support among well-established secular civil society organizations that shared its suspicions regarding Ennahda. Two of these, the League of Human Rights and the Bar Association, helped UGTT convene the 2012 Dialogue, forming the base of what later became the Nobel-winning Quartet.

But the 2012 National Dialogue initiative faced strong pushback from Ennadha and its coalition partner, Congress for the Republic (CPR), a stubbornly revolutionary human rights-oriented party. Ennadha and CPR believed the Dialogue was an attempt by unelected actors to dictate the democratic political process. They were especially disturbed by the Dialogue’s inclusion of Nidaa Tunis, an unelected party heavily represented by former members of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party of Ben Ali. Ennahda and CPR viewed the 2012 Dialogue not as a neutral, civil society process but as a vehicle for the old regime to influence Tunisia’s freshly elected government and legislature.

However, their position grew less tenable after a series of destabilizing events, including the September 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis and two high-profile political assassinations in 2013. The first assassination, on Feb. 6, targeted leftist politician Chokri Belaid, a vocal critic of Ennahda and long-time defender of trade unionists. Though Islamic State militants later claimed responsibility, many secular and leftist Tunisians believed Belaid’s assassination proved what they had always suspected: Ennahda’s supposedly “moderate” Islamism was just a cover for an Islamo-fascist takeover. Thousands massed to accompany Belaid’s coffin to the Djellaz Cemetery in Tunis, and UGTT declared a general strike. The second assassination, on July 25, targeted lesser known Arab nationalist MP Mohamed Brahmi.

Brahmi’s assassination ground Tunisia’s transition to a standstill. It also set the stage for a dramatic three-way power struggle, pitting Nidaa Tunis, sometimes in criticism of but often in agreement with UGTT, against Ennahda.
The political crisis of summer 2013 was inflamed and exploited by political elites, including UGTT. Nidaa Tunis was especially well poised to exploit political tensions that, though brewing during 2012, boiled over following the two assassinations. While Tunisia’s two best-organized political forces, UGTT and Ennahda, contributed to the development of these tensions, Nidaa Tunis – a charismatically led party with strong ties to the former regimes – capitalized on them the most.

Though Nidaa Tunis enjoyed the support of many Tunisian secularists, leftists and trade unionists, its political machine was fueled by ex-RCD money and manpower. Members of the Employer’s Association, which joined the UGTT-led Quartet in August 2013, represented Tunisia’s traditional economic elite, and many had a heavily vested interest in maintaining the status quo ante. Together, these groups represented large segments of Tunisia’s old political and economic elite – an elite that felt cheated by the victory of three largely non-establishment parties in 2011.

For months prior to Brahmi’s assassination, Nidaa’s leadership had been calling for not just the resignation of the government but also the dissolution of Tunisia’s core transitional body: the elected National Constituent Assembly. Beji Caid Essebsi, Nidaa’s founder and president, appeared on Tunisian television February 7, 2013 – one day after Belaid’s assassination – to demand the Assembly’s resignation. Essebsi and other opponents of Ennahda claimed that replacing the elected Assembly with an unelected group of supposedly apolitical “technocrats” was necessary because the Assembly had overstayed its mandate and was therefore illegitimate. Incidentally, the Assembly’s one-year mandate, which international experts labeled unrealistically short, was created by Tunisia’s 2011 transitional government, which Essebsi headed.

Against these demands, the UGTT cast itself as a neutral mediator determined to negotiate a peaceful solution to the standoff. In August 2013, UGTT made the surprising decision to invite the Employer’s Association, a group with which it had traditionally been at loggerheads, to form a 3+1 mediation Quartet leading the Dialogue. In September 2013, this Quartet presented Ennahda and Nidaa Tunis with a roadmap to resolve their differences through a two-way compromise. Ennahda and its Troika partners would leave government completely within the space of just three weeks, while the Assembly would stay on to complete the constitution and pave the way for Tunisia’s 2014 elections.

UGTT and the Employer’s Union, the Quartet’s other heavyweight, were not neutral actors. Both overlapped politically and ideologically with Nidaa Tunis, and both shared Nidaa’s goal of booting Ennahda from power. Yet under the UGTT’s leadership, the Quartet opposed Nidaa’s demand of dissolving the Constituent Assembly. Had it decided otherwise, Tunisia’s transition would likely be in tatters.

The 2013 political crisis presented the UGTT with an important opportunity to regain “national savior” status, recouping lost credibility after decades of regime persecution and manipulation. UGTT burnished its reputation both locally and internationally through its successful mediation efforts. This so-called Bardo Crisis also presented UGTT with a platform on which to display its political and ideological weight. Indeed, though Ennahda ultimately succeeded in negotiating the terms of its exit, the UGTT’s chief negotiator Houcine Abbasi did not shy from using union power to cajole desired concessions.

Ultimately, the National Dialogue managed to quell the highly politicized three-way struggle that produced Tunisia’s 2013 political standoff. The Quartet resolved this impasse without dissolving the Constituent Assembly – a crucial decision that helped keep Tunisia’s transition afloat. The National Dialogue also forged a fragile consensus among Tunisia’s major power players: the UGTT, Ennahda and Tunisia’s traditional political and economic elites, represented jointly by Nidaa Tunis and the Employer’s Union. Throughout the 2013 Dialogue and the crisis that catalyzed it, each of these groups asserted themselves as powerful forces on Tunisia’s post-revolutionary stage, demanding to be integrated – or, in the case of the old elites, re-integrated – in Tunisian politics.
Despite overcoming a major political hurdle, the National Dialogue did little to concretely advance Tunisia’s pursuit of revolutionary goals, including socio-economic dignity, institutional reform, and transitional justice. Rather than collaborating to address these critical issues, the Dialogue’s protagonists spent much of 2012 and 2013 aggravating, exploiting, and eventually resolving a diversionary political crisis. That crisis sapped political and civil society leaders’ energies at a critical transitional moment during which far-reaching changes may have been possible.

With the Nobel Peace Prize, Tunisia’s National Dialogue Quartet has been rightly applauded for helping Tunisia overcome a major political crisis. History should learn from their efforts. But history should also remember that the Dialogue’s principal protagonists resolved a conflict that, to varying degrees, each one helped create, and that political power players were the primary winners in this saga. For average citizens to taste the fruits of Tunisia’s revolution, their leaders must transcend opportunistic infighting that characterized 2012 and 2013 to enact far-reaching economic and institutional reforms. Long after global applause for the Quartet has faded, Tunisians will keep asking what, if any, dividends their revolution has delivered.

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