

## THE MAKING OF THE TUNISIAN REVOLUTION

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The rapid fall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia on January 14, 2011 has not only sparked a wave of uprisings across the Arab region, but has also raised many questions about the roles of socio-economic inequality, youth unemployment, corruption, and government oppression in the making of the Tunisian uprisings. This paper argues that what seemed to be an island of stability in the region was in fact a ticking time bomb that was set off by Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010. It further argues that the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime could not have taken place had it not been a leaderless revolt. As a result, the paper provides a critical analysis of the making of the Tunisian revolution by investigating the key factors that maintained stability, and the mechanisms that set the stage for the uprisings. In doing so, the analysis reveals the radical social transformation that took place since the early 1990s leading to the breakdown of the social contract, and the gradual drift of the middle class away from its implicit support of the Ben Ali regime. The new political landscape opens up a real opportunity for democratic transformation, vibrant civic engagement, and sustainable economic revival. Therefore, our analysis would be incomplete without a careful look at the new dynamic between the forces of political Islam, secularism, and the middle class. Finally, the paper closes with a summary and some concluding remarks.

*Keywords:* Tunisia; revolution; social contract; neoliberalism; political Islam; inequality; unemployment; corruption.

### 1. Introduction

The 2010–2011 Tunisian uprisings that took Ben Ali, his feared security apparatus, and his Western Allies by surprise shook the world and presented many mainstream analysts and commentators with a dizzying paradox (Hibou 2011). How did this politically stable, westernized, highly educated, tolerant, and relatively prosperous society erupt into popular protests that toppled one of the strongest police states in the Arab world, and plunge the entire region into a wave of popular revolts? Only a few weeks before the uprisings began in Tunisia, the World Bank issued its 2010 Country Brief on Tunisia stating: “Tunisia has made remarkable progress on equitable growth, fighting poverty and achieving good social indicators.” The report went on to argue that “Tunisia has consistently scored above its income category in the Middle East and North Africa average on most dimensions of comparative governance ranking and development indexes.” Finally, it concluded with an almost

congratulatory statement claiming that “Tunisia is far ahead in terms of government effectiveness, rule of law, control of corruption and regulatory quality” (World Bank 2010). All of these statements were subsequently removed from the World Bank website in the days after Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia.

The illusion of stability, economic prosperity, and growing liberal democracy was created by an elaborate set of smoke screens, propaganda PR messages, data manipulations, and vicious clamp downs on dissenting opinions. However, for the average Tunisian, especially those living in the non-coastal cities and towns, the harsh socio-economic reality was as clear and palpable as could be (Bedoui and Gouia 1995). The middle class socio-economic status was sliding steadily, while the Trabelsi-Ben Ali business empire was devouring the traditional business class, alienating investors, and harassing entrepreneurs and small business owners. In 2002, *Reporters Without Borders* ranked Tunisia 128th in its Press Freedom Index, and by 2010, the country’s ranking dropped to 164 (out of 178), narrowly outranking the likes of North Korea, Cuba, Syria, and Turkmenistan.

This paper argues that what seemed to be an island of stability in the Middle East was in fact a ticking time bomb that was set off by Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010. It further argues that the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime could not have taken place had it not been a leaderless revolt. As a result, the paper provides a critical analysis of the making of the Tunisian revolution by investigating the key factors that maintained stability, and the mechanisms that set the stage for the uprisings. In doing so, the analysis reveals the radical social transformation that took place since the early 1990s leading to the breakdown of the social contract, and the gradual drift of the middle class away from its implicit support of the Ben Ali regime. The new political landscape opens up a real opportunity for democratic transformation, vibrant civic engagement, and sustainable economic revival. Therefore, our analysis would be incomplete without a careful look at the new dynamic between the forces of political Islam, secularism, and the middle class. Finally, the paper closes with a summary and some concluding remarks.

## 2. The Inevitable Leaderless Revolt

Before January 14, 2011, many political analysts believed that dictatorships could only be brought down either by a military coup, an external intervention, or an internal challenge by a well-established political opposition with strong leadership. In other words, democratic change in the Arab world was believed to only happen in a top-down fashion because the region’s culture was “not ready for democracy” (Huntington 1984, Lewis 1993, Diamond 2010). What the Tunisian revolution has demonstrated, however, is that a non-violent grassroots popular uprising can overthrow a 23-year-old dictatorship in 23 days without any support from abroad, without any connection to radical Islamic groups, and most importantly without any centralized leadership. The leaderless revolution model struck a nerve in the heart of all the dictatorship regimes in the Arab region. The main argument that we want to

establish here is that the police-state nature of most of these regimes was well prepared to deal with organized opposition of all kinds (e.g., secular, religious, leftist, underground, violent, peaceful, externally-sponsored, etc.), but they were never prepared to deal with a leaderless decentralized revolt (Lynch 2012). In order to fully comprehend the birth of this phenomenon, one has to critically assess the institutional setting of the Tunisian socio-economic and political landscape that made a leaderless revolution not only possible, but also simply inevitable.

A leaderless revolt does not automatically imply lack of organization (formal or informal), but it also does not imply that it was only possible via social media and communication networks. A leaderless movement is a last resort strategy for the politically oppressed peoples of all socio-economic, religious, cultural, and political orientations. As Trotsky explained, revolution is “the forcible entry of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny” (Trotsky 1932, p. 17). What brings the masses together in a leaderless movement is not class-based or faith-based solidarity but rather *political* solidarity. Socio-economic discontent is important in creating a fertile ground for uprisings, but it is ultimately *political exclusion* that drives the revolution (Goodwin 2001).

Rather than reviewing the breadth of the literature on revolutions and social movements, this article looks at the Tunisian uprisings through the analytical lens of George Lawson’s theory of ‘negotiated revolutions’ (Lawson 2005). Negotiated revolutions seek to join the international system of liberal democracies; they use non-violent means to challenge the state, they are based on the idea of liberation rather than utopia, and they aim to rectify injustices through restorative rather than punitive or retributive justice. Lawson argues that the concept of classical revolution has lost currency after the fall of the Soviet Union. Post-1989 revolutions were mainly concerned with embracing the Western free market economic model rather than overthrowing the international system and achieving a utopian social order. Therefore, post-Cold War revolutions are domestic revolts aimed at creating a liberal democracy in order to join the international system rather than fighting it. According to Lawson (2011), revolution trajectories take shape with a particular social order and are determined by three factors: state effectiveness, coercive apparatus, and the formation of a close-knit identity with the revolutionary movement (Lawson 2011, pp. 1078–1081). The following analysis will establish the transformation of the Tunisian socio-economic political landscape from one marked by a stable social contract model in the post-independence period to one marked by a corrupt and repressive plutocratic state that was disembedded from its people, and a society that, despite its socio-economic and cultural diversity, found itself increasingly united under the revolutionary ‘shared identity’ of the oppressed.

Like many former colonies, Tunisia’s postcolonial governance inherited a top-down political system under the leadership of a charismatic independence hero. Habib Bourguiba, who declared himself “President for Life” in 1975, was once asked about Tunisia’s political system, he replied, “The system? What system? I am the system.” Soon after independence in 1956, Bourguiba established a political system

that allowed him and his *Neo-Destour* party to monopolize power and push through his modernist social and economic reforms without any meaningful political opposition. A lawyer by training, Bourguiba was a masterful negotiator and political player. He established a presidential political system in which the national assembly rubberstamped presidential decisions and provided the illusion of government accountability (Perkins 2004). A non-competitive electoral system was established to simply gauge the popularity of government policies, rather than challenge its leadership. By the early 1980s, Bourguiba was old, ill, and no longer fully in charge. Driven by paranoia, he kept shuffling and replacing his ministers fearing that some of them might get too ambitious, dare to challenge his leadership, and overthrow him. Zine El-Abedine Ben Ali was the unlikely candidate that Bourguiba picked specifically because he was the least politically savvy and least charismatic member of his government. Ben Ali was the head of Army Intelligence (1964–1974), head of National Security (1977–1980), Ambassador to Poland (1980–1984), Interior Minister (1986–1987) and simultaneously Prime Minister for six months before overthrowing Bourguiba on November 7, 1987. Ben Ali was the exception in Bourguiba’s administration; he was the only professional military person in Bourguiba’s elite civilian administration of university graduates and technocrats.

Tunisia was going through a major economic crisis during Bourguiba’s last years in office. The political vacuum pushed the country to the verge of collapse as the Islamists political ambitions and rising popularity become more evident. Ben Ali ushered in the World Bank sponsored structural adjustment program, and promised to establish a pluralistic liberal democracy by abolishing life time presidency, and setting a term limit of three 5-year consecutive presidential terms. In reality, however, Ben Ali was just buying time in order strengthen his grip on the political landscape and preserve the same presidential powers granted under Bourguiba’s system. He freed political prisoners and invited 16 political organizations and parties, including the banned Islamists, to join him in signing a “National Pact” to promote national interest, stability, and democratic reforms. Ben Ali used pro-democracy and pro-human rights language to court as much support from his potential opponents as possible. He even flirted with the Islamists during his first three years in office by promising to legalize their party. This allowed him to gauge their popularity and identify their network and their supporters before launching a massive clamp down on the entire group (Erdle 2010).

The *Neo-Destour* party was renamed *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique* (RCD) and continued to dominate the political landscape until it was finally dismantled in the aftermath of the revolution in 2011. Ben Ali’s political rhetoric encompassed and overshadowed all the progressive political messages of the opposition (i.e., human rights, freedom, democracy, gender equality, environmental sustainability, social justice, solidarity, etc.). Whatever the opposition wanted to advocate, Ben Ali was already saying and doing; or at least pretending to do. Therefore, there was no need to have an opposition. Those who understood what Ben Ali and the RCD were doing and voiced their objections were simply banned,

prosecuted, or exiled. For instance, *Tunisie Verte* (Tunisian Green Party) was never allowed to legally operate in Tunisia (although its application was never formally rejected); instead, Ben Ali's regime approved the application of the "Green Party for Progress" which was simply the creation of the Interior Ministry. *Tunisie Verte* continued to struggle for legal status and to fight for ecological sustainability while being constantly harassed by the regime (Zitouni 2011). Ben Ali also portrayed himself as a patron of the Islamic faith in Tunisia by building a glorious mosque in Carthage and attending all major religious ceremonies. In addition, his son-in-law, Mohamed Sakhr El Matri, started a private Islamic radio station (Zitouna FM) and an Islamic Bank (Zitouna Bank). This was all done to counter any political challenges from Islamist opposition groups. In short, Ben Ali and the RCD made it impossible for real opposition to emerge or to exercise any meaningful influence in the political sphere. Over the years, Ben Ali continued to promote the illusion of political pluralism by increasing the number of seats reserved for the opposition parties in the national assembly, but the "majority lists" election rules were constantly tweaked to marginalize influence of the opposition while always giving them hope for the possibility of gaining more seats in the future. Even a split within the RCD party was virtually inconceivable. Anyone suspected of having the potential to build political capital that could challenge the President was immediately moved to a less prominent position. Overall, Tunisians became cynical about the possibility of political change from within the existing electoral system, so nobody was surprised to see Ben Ali's bids for re-election winning 90–99% of the votes.

Were other non-political forces such as the national associations or the military capable of bringing about political change in Tunisia? The national associations (*association nationales*) are the corporatist organizations that represent the third most important pillar of the Bourguibist and Ben Ali forms of government (complementing the elite state bureaucracy and the ruling party). Their role is to financially co-opt the population and provide support for government policies. The most important national associations are the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), the Tunisian Union of Industrialists, Merchants, and Artisans (UTICA), the Tunisian Union of Farmers and Fisherman (UTAP), the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT), and the General Union of Tunisian Students (UGET). All of these associations were led by supporters of the ruling party, which often put them at odds with lower ranking members of their associations<sup>a</sup> (Erdle 2010, Alexander 2010a, 2010b). For instance, Abdessalam Jrad Abbassi was the Secretary General of UGTT during the 2008 Gafsa mineral field workers movement and his family also owned a subcontracting mining company that favored wage cuts and layoffs of the Gafsa miners. As a result, over the years, Tunisians grew even more cynical about the possibility of political change coming from a coalition between the national associations and the broader labor movement or civil society.

<sup>a</sup>One noticeable exception, however, is UGTT, which often opposed the regime's harsh stance against workers, especially in the late 1970s. During the 2011 uprisings, it became evident to the UGTT leadership that the regime would become a dangerous liability in the face of popular protests.

As for the military, both Bourguiba and Ben Ali always marginalized it in terms of financial resources and favored the state security forces instead (police, national guard, secret police, and presidential guard). Fearing a military coup, Bourguiba gave a room in the presidential palace of Carthage (right next to his office) to the Swiss embassy, so he could use it as a diplomatic refuge in case of emergency. Ben Ali not only continued in Bourguiba's tradition, but also strengthened the secrete service and presidential security apparatus, which employed 55,000 people. Other estimates suggest that the number was between 150,000 and 200,000 people and supported nearly 10% of the population (Erdle 2004: 214). May 2002 proved to be a turning point in how Tunisians felt about the possibility of change coming from the military. That was the time when Ben Ali's third consecutive term in office was due to expire, and he had to call for a referendum to amend the constitution in a way that would effectively ensure his presidency for life. On May 1, 2002, a military helicopter crash killed the Army Chief of Staff, five colonels, four majors, two lieutenants, and one warrant officer first class. Virtually the entire top echelon of the military was wiped out in this mysterious "accident".<sup>b</sup> The news of the helicopter crash obliterated the last hope of the military intervening to stop Ben Ali from restoring presidency for life. On May 26, 2002, the constitutional referendum was passed with 99.5% approval, thus giving Ben Ali the green light to rule the country until 2014. Ben Ali never suspected that Rachid Ammar, the army chief of staff, a military man with no political ambitions, would refuse orders from Ben Ali's Interior Minister (Ali Seriati) to fire on protesters, and side with the protesters in January 2011.

Therefore, the Tunisian revolution had to come from a non-traditional decentralized leaderless movement. A "leaderless" movement occurs when the population at large has literally come to a strong consensus that does not need to be broadcasted via megaphones by a set of heroic and charismatic leaders standing on stage. The message is known to, and shared by the people. Social uprisings are marked by "the formation of multi-class coalitions in which diverse strands of protest are linked through decisive leadership, common ideological frameworks and shared narratives, often inspired by stories of national awakening" (Lawson 2011, p. 1080). The collective experience of the Tunisian population with the oppression and corruption of the Ben Ali regime, and the complete sense of humiliation that Tunisians were subjected to, made it unbearable for the middle class, which saw its socio-economic status and interests gradually become more aligned with that of the poor rather than the regime and its elite class supporters. This formed a large multi-class coalition against the Ben Ali regime and his security forces. Needless to say, this leaderless movement did not emerge overnight and it did rely on a large number of fearless citizen activists who played the role of catalysts in the lead up to the 2011 uprising. The Ben Ali regime was always able to handle a few activists and opposition leaders at a time. Opposition leaders can be jailed, tortured, exiled, or even killed, but a

<sup>b</sup>A government investigation declared the event an unfortunate accident. Even a post-revolution military investigation has found no evidence of any wrongdoing. The accident, however, remains suspicious.

leaderless mass movement was simply undefeatable (Schraeder 2012). It was a broad-based social movement with a “shared narrative” of being the victims of oppression, corruption, abuse, censorship, and injustice. This “shared narrative” that sparked the uprising encompassed a number of grievances and was heard loud and clear in the popular chants of the protesters.

In addition to the palpable socio-economic daily struggles that Tunisians grew accustomed to, the WikiLeaks U.S. diplomatic cables confirmed what many people in Tunisia had known for a number of years. The detailed description of the lavish lifestyle of the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families angered the population and increased its frustration with the increasingly oppressive, corrupt, and arrogant government. The WikiLeaks cables convinced the middle class residents of the coastal cities that they are in the same boat as the disenfranchised residents of the interior cities and towns of the country. So, when Bouazizi set himself afire in Sidi Bouzid, it was a symbolic culmination of a nation-wide rage against the regime. In fact, this leaderless revolt stood firmly on top of a series of smaller revolts that the Ben Ali regime managed to crush. In addition to the struggles of human rights, pro-democracy, and Islamic political activists, we should mention three significant pre-Bouazizi regional revolts that demonstrate the sense of collective struggle that Tunisians felt under Ben Ali.

First, the “October 18 Movement for Rights and Freedoms” which formed in 2005 as a broad coalition between liberals, leftists, and Islamists to protest the so-called “Anti-Terrorism Law” enacted in 2003. The law was written in a way that made it easy for the regime to prosecute dissenting views. Second, the so-called “Hunger Intifada” began on January 5, 2008 in the town of Redayef (southwest of Tunisia) and spread throughout the Governorate of Gafsa. The Gafsa mineral field is the fifth largest in the world with an annual production of 8 million tons of calcium phosphate, but suffers from severely high levels of unemployment, poverty, and environmental degradation. The main employer in Gafsa is CPG, a state-owned company that has drastically reduced its work force in the last 10 years from 15,000 to only 5,000 workers. The movement began with the group of unemployed graduates (*Uniondes diplômés chômeurs*) staging a sit-in in front of the UGTT office to protest the CPG’s latest corrupt hiring practices, and to demand jobs and a commitment to regional economic development. They were soon joined by their families, the poor, women widowed by mining-accidents, and the exploited working class who set up tents in the area for the next six months. The movement was met by the iron fist of the regime, which led to the killing of two young protesters by the security forces, and the arrest of more than 200 peaceful demonstrators. Substantiated reports of torture and abuse fuelled the protesters determination. In what Amnesty International described as an unfair trial, 50 trade unionists were handed up to 8-year prison terms, and their protesting mothers, sisters, and wives were harassed, arrested, ill-treated, and imprisoned for up to one year. That is how the leaderless movement was born in Gafsa. Finally, the third pre-Bouazizi regional revolt took place in Ben Guerdane on August 9, 2010 when angry protesters clashed with the police to protest a new tax of 150 dinars on cars crossing the border with Libya. The

vast majority of the Ben Guerdane population makes a living through cross-border trading with Libya. The protests spread to neighboring regions of Skhira and Feriana, and like the Gafsa 2008 events, the people of Ben Guerdane suffered ruthless treatment, arrests and abuse by the police. The unrest was so severe that Tunisia had to close the border for several days. After mediation efforts led by UGTT, the arrested protesters were released without charge, the border was reopened, but the tax levy remained in effect (Khosrokhavar 2012).

It is the culmination of all these events that initially created a sense of hopelessness in the face of injustice and abuse by the regime, then turned into a collective sense of unity in suffering, that turned into a general sentiment of fearlessness. By the end of August 2010, the leaderless revolt calling for jobs, freedom, and dignity was ripe and ready for the Bouazizi sacrifice to light the mighty spark of the Arab uprisings. Although the middle class did not take part of the initial moments of the uprisings, lawyers played a significant role in giving the Sidi Bouzid protesters legitimacy and calling on other professionals and members of the middle class to stand up against injustice. The lawyers were also able to articulate the “shared narrative” and “shared identity” of the multi-class diverse anti-regime social movement. Lawyers, however, were not the leaders of the movement, they were facilitators working in the same capacity as other professionals, labour activists, bloggers, human rights advocates, etc. Similarly, social media and mobile telecommunication technology facilitated the spread of information and communication within the broad-based social movement. As a result, the Tunisian uprisings do not resemble the pre-1989 revolutions of the poor and working class as theorized by Moore (1978) and Skocpol (1979). The Tunisian revolt does, however, confirm Lawson’s theory of “negotiated revolutions” which are driven by the nonviolent masses and in which “the control of fervor and the dignity of protest rise above the social context defined by the old regime” (Lawson 2005, p. 490).

However, deep inside the inner circle of the Ben Ali regime, there was a radical structural transformation that took place over a 20-year period that has played a significant role in the fall of Ben Ali and the creation of a new alliance between Islamists and secular groups within Tunisia’s middle class. This transformation was crucial in the formation of a socially diverse multi-class anti-regime coalition with a shared narrative and a shared identity.

### **3. The Transformation of Elite Power Structure**

The power structure of the Ben Ali regime was initially very similar to the one set up by Bourguiba after independence; but by the early 2000s, the old Bourguibist system gave way to a mafia-like power structure centered on Ben Ali’s entourage. During the Bourguiba and early Ben Ali days, however, the elite power structure was characterized by what Volker Perthes (2004) and Steffen Erdle (2004) described as three concentric circles that highlight the different degrees of influence within the Politically Relevant Elite (PRE). The inner circle comprises the core elite group that

makes decisions on strategic issues. The second circle is the intermediate elite group which exerts considerable influence on issues of lesser political importance, but have little influence on strategic issues unless they are invited to contribute or are delegated some decision making powers on an occasional basis. The intermediate elite group includes the upper ranks of state bureaucracy, ruling party executives, and leading figures in the national associations. The third circle is what [Perthes \(2004\)](#) refers to as the “subelite” who are only capable of indirectly influencing strategic decisions, setting the national agenda, or contributing to the national discourse. This circle includes the midlevel of the above-mentioned groups, in addition to contesting elites such as independent NGOs and opposition parties. The boundaries between these three circles are permeable in a way that allows for occasional penetration of some members of the subelite into the intermediate elite, and occasionally even into the inner circle.

The regime’s inner circle was composed of three distinct groups: the palace, the lieutenants, and the entourage. The palace is the President’s team of political advisors, close friends, and family members. The lieutenants are Ben Ali’s most important executive team, which includes the most powerful ministers (interior (security apparatus), foreign affairs, international cooperation, social affairs, and economic affairs) and the Politburo of the RCD. The entourage consisted of Ben Ali’s family, his second wife’s family (the Trabelsis), and the families married to Ben Ali’s daughters (Chiboub, the Mabrouk, Zarrouk, and El Matri). The entourage quickly expanded to include the in-laws of the in-laws, all of whom became presidential relatives through marriage, and therefore had privileged access into the inner circle. The inner circle political elites who also preside over the RCD party structure reinforced their political capital via marital and business affiliations within the Trabelsi-Ben Ali clan ([Beau and Graciet 2009](#)).

Ben Ali’s early days in power followed in Bourguiba’s footsteps by playing a game of “musical chairs” that reshuffles elites to strengthen the core and minimize discontent ([Owen 2012](#)). Bourguiba, however, relied on the post-independence educated elites from the Tunis and Sahel bourgeoisie, whereas Ben Ali carefully selected apolitical technocrats who were highly qualified to execute his policy directives, but lacked social and political capital to be his political rivals. Overtime, the entourage began to dominate and overpower the lieutenants, and use the executive power of the palace to increase their economic power. The former elites became more isolated and alienated after the rise of the Trabelsi-Ben Ali clan, which had amassed a tremendous amount of wealth in a very short period and acquired a vast business empire in banking, insurance, communications, real estate, construction, transportation, retail, tourism, manufacturing, and mining. The economic power of the Trabelsi-Ben Ali clan was built under crony capitalism, which was set in motion soon after Ben Ali tightened his grip over the political landscape in 1992, and neutralized all political opposition.

In 1992, Ben Ali issued a presidential executive order mandating that all major government contract bids must go through the President’s office. In the past,

however, a committee of technical experts from various ministries formed a selection committee within the auspices of the Prime Minister's office, and selected the winning bids for all major government project bids. The 1992 decision set in motion a long wave of corruption and kickbacks emanating from the President's personal office. This period also coincided with Tunisia's endorsement of the World Bank-sponsored *Mise à Niveau* policies (structural adjustment program), which mandated the privatization of several state-owned enterprises, all of which also benefitted the Ben Ali plutocracy.

The traditional business owners and entrepreneurs who lacked the proper network connections to the Trabelsi-ben Ali clan suffered severely from the new regime structure. Short of marrying into the President's family, they were often faced with three choices: sell their businesses to the clan; agree to "partner" with them (you do the work, and they collect most of the profits), or face constant harassment by the government (tax audits, inspections, etc.) and unfair competition until being driven out of business. None of these choices were pleasant. It created a division within the Tunisian capitalist class, and further concentrated economic power with the President's entourage. The economic impact of this elite power reconfiguration was devastating because many of the former business elites who refused to join the clan (e.g., Batam, Kallel, etc.) shifted their investment in the Tunisian economy into real estate (which fuelled speculation) or moved abroad. The lack of private sector investment was fuelled by the fact that the Trabelsi business empire was there to serve the lavish life-style of the clan rather than reinvest in the companies they owned. And to top it all off, the government was reducing its investment share in GDP, which made Tunisia's job creation hopes ever more dependent on foreign direct investment (FDI), tourism, and workers remittances. Eva Bellin (2002) demonstrates how the so-called reforms of the Ben Ali era have crippled both labor and capital, which have been the social actors of democratic change in so many countries after 1989. Between 1987 and 2000, Ben Ali was able to keep the Bourguiba-style cozy relationship between his regime and the labor movement via modest concessions, as well as the traditional business elite class, which benefited from government contracts and export subsidies. However, the emergence of Ben Ali's extended family as a corrupt business empire has changed this dynamic and open the door for both labor and capital to align their interest with a diverse multi-class anti-regime social movement.

#### 4. The Breakdown of the Social Contract

One of the most important points to understand about the making of the Tunisian revolution is the transformation of the middle class during the Ben Ali era. The rapid improvement in the Tunisian standard of living and quality of life that took place in the 1970s was suddenly brought to a halt during the 1980s economic crisis, and by the time Ben Ali took over as President in 1987, the neoliberal economic reforms were already set in motion through a series of IMF stand-by credit agreements and World

Bank loans granted in 1986–1987. Both institutions credited Tunisia’s leadership for its commitment to economic reforms and its “pre-emptive SAP”, which began in the 1970s *Infatih* (opening) policies (Murphy 1999, White 2001). The long-standing social contract between the government and its people became the main obstacle standing in the way of Tunisia’s economic prosperity. The traditional way of viewing the state as the main agent of economic development through its protection and support of a large middle class<sup>c</sup> began to gradually fade away during the crisis in the 1980s. The gradual nature of this change is what kept the middle class from revolting at first, but when the economic concessions became unbearable and the heavy-handed political oppression became increasingly intolerant of economic grievances, people became increasingly cynical of government reforms, and grew fearless of its repression.

While on life-support under IMF and World Bank assistance in the 1980s, the Tunisian government had to pledge its long-term commitment to SAP and economic liberalization by making a concerted effort to privatize State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), reduce budget deficits, tighten monetary policy, increase labor market flexibility, eliminate price controls, liberalize trade and finance, introduce currency convertibility, focus on export-led growth, and stabilize external debt. The World Bank put a lot of pressure on the Tunisian government to amend or abolish the *Code de Travail* (Tunisia’s labor legislation<sup>d</sup>) and to replace it with a business-friendly legislation giving employers the freedom to hire and fire without restriction in order to stimulate private investment and foreign direct investment (FDI). Incidentally, much of the labor market “flexibility” resulted in the creation of a group of sub-contracting companies (mostly owned by the Trabelsi-Ben Ali clan) operating on the margins of the Tunisian labor laws and relying exclusively on “contractual” workers (*les contractuels*). Tunisia used a gradualist approach to reduce employers’ social security contributions, and crafted amendments to clarify conditions and compensations for labor dismissal (Murphy 1999, p. 154). Over a 20-year period, however, those small steps amounted to significant declines in the real purchasing power and the relative bargaining position of the working class, and what used to be small acceptable sacrifices during the 1980s crisis became blatant abuse and injustice in the era of the Trabelsi-Ben Ali plutocracy.

The government was convinced that SAP would heal its ailing economy and prop the country to the level of developed nations by the turn of the century. From his first days in office, Ben Ali pushed ahead with a series of legislation to put SAP in motion. The tax system was revised and harmonized to give Value Added Tax (VAT) a more prominent role in public finance; a tax-evasion amnesty was initiated; a consolidation of tax brackets (at lower maximum rates) was introduced, soon

<sup>c</sup>Tunisia invested heavily in health and education in its post-independence period because Bourguiba firmly believed that a country without any significant natural resources can only advance via its human capital. Therefore, the middle class grew during that period and became the main beneficiary of the social contract.

<sup>d</sup>See Elsafi (2006) for a detailed overview of labor law in Tunisia.

followed by a more aggressive tax collection effort targeted to high-income earners, rental income, and business profits. New government committees were set up to study SOEs and make recommendations for privatizations, and new legislation was passed in 1989 to provide a legal framework for privatization. The government decided to keep control over strategic industries and gradually privatize SOEs that have a non-administrative character.<sup>e</sup> In an effort to convince the international financial institutions (IFIs) of the positive progress in the privatization drive, the government decided to begin by privatizing the most profitable (sellable) SOEs such as textile companies, hotels, and small banking subsidiaries. Other SOEs in mining, construction materials, and transportation were given Performance Contracts to improve efficiency and profitability.<sup>f</sup> Monopolies such as transportation were partially opened to competition. By the time the Eighth Development Plan (1992–96) came into effect, Tunisia launched its more aggressive privatization effort under financial incentives from the World Bank,<sup>g</sup> the European Union (EU), and USAID.<sup>h</sup> While this period did not witness any complete privatizations of strategic SOEs, the government consistently sold shares of SOEs through stock market floatation to induce further management transparency and scrutiny for companies such as *Tunis Air*, *Compagnie Tunisienne de Navigation* (CTN), and *Société Nationale de Distribution des Pétroles* (SNDP). In 1996, the *Société Tunisienne d'Électricité et du Gaz* (STEG) lost its monopoly over production of electricity and was required to buy from independent suppliers, but it still remained the monopoly provider of electricity to final consumers. *Tunisie Telecom*, the state monopoly telecom company, remained under state control and received a massive high-tech upgrade in infrastructure throughout the 1990s. In 2004, the government decided to sell a 35% stake of *Tunisie Telecom*, the most profitable SOE, which saw its profits hit a record high of \$823 million in 2005, up 23% from 2004. The bidding euphoria began immediately with some of the top telecom companies in the world competing to win the deal. In the end, it was the UAE's Telecom-DIG that snatched the deal in March 2006 with a spectacular US \$2.24 billion bid (TND 3.05 billion). Starting in the mid-1990s, privatization deals and government sub-contracting became increasingly lucrative for Ben Ali's inner circle, the in-laws, and close business partners. The age of large-scale corruption emanating from the Palace of Carthage had begun.

The government efforts to boost its austerity program, reduce food subsidies, and cut the food import bill in the second part of the 1980s were upset by severe droughts and locust plagues that devastated agricultural output. This led Prime Minister Hedi Baccouche to think that perhaps Tunisia should scale back its SAP and focus on fighting unemployment and reducing external debt. He faced stiff opposition from Ismail Khelil (Governor of the Central Bank) and Mohammad Ghannouchi

<sup>e</sup>See Belev (2000) for a comparative analysis of privatization policies in Tunisia and Egypt.

<sup>f</sup>SOEs were sold to firms from countries that were “friendly” to the regime (Qatar, Egypt, UAE, Turkey, Morocco, Libya), with direct kickbacks disbursed to Ben Ali and his cronies.

<sup>g</sup>Disbursement of loans became conditional upon acceleration of the privatization effort.

<sup>h</sup>USAID provided a \$10 million grant to support further privatizations.

(Planning and Finance Minister), which ultimately led to his dismissal in September 1988, and his replacement by Hamed Karoui (former Minister of Justice) who pushed ahead with SAP despite the devastation of unprecedented floods in January 1989. Things got worse economically with the Gulf War in 1990–91. By the end of 1990, Tunisia had lost more than \$700 million from Kuwaiti (and Kuwaiti-dominated) investment funds, U.S. financial aid, and tourism revenues. More than 200 Tunisian firms doing business with Iraq and Kuwait also faced serious setbacks during the Gulf War and its aftermath. But despite all these complications, the government was determined to continue its economic liberalization at all costs. IFIs continued their financial support through the early 1990s, austerity brought government deficits under control, which made Tunisia more attractive to international creditors and ushered in a series of syndicated loans and a greater appetite for borrowing, which doubled the country's external debt once every decade, reaching \$9 billion in 1996, and \$20 billion by 2007, with a debt service ratio exceeding 15%.

On the trade liberalization front (*Infitah* policy aside), Tunisia's free trade journey began in 1990 when the country officially joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) through which Tunisia agreed to eliminate trade barriers such as tariffs and import licenses. And in 1995, Tunisia became the first Mediterranean non-member country to sign an Association Agreement with the EU that established a schedule for gradual tariff reductions spanning from 1996–2008. In 2008, Tunisia entered the complete trade liberalization phase with the EU,<sup>1</sup> which represented a double challenge for the Tunisian government; on the one hand it significantly reduced tax revenues, and on the other hand put more pressure on the unemployment front due to fierce competition from the EU. This was the last nail for the coffin of Tunisia's old social contract. The gradual transformation of Tunisian government policy from a producer-state to a regulator-state (privatization of SOEs and greater private sector role in investment) has left its mark on the socio-economic fabric, thus affecting the institutional structure at the economic, social as well as political level (Ben Salah 1977). The economic liberalization brought about economic dislocation and social exclusion, which was initially absorbed by the large middle class, which saw its status slowly move closer to that of the poor while the size of the socio-economically vulnerable population steadily increased, especially in the interior of the country (Brisson and Krontiris 2012).

In Tunisian society, middle class status has been acquired primarily through education and access to government jobs. While the government continued to support education throughout the economic liberalization period, it significantly cut back on hiring. For example, some of the most representative professionals in the Tunisian middle class are schoolteachers. Primary school teachers, for instance, used to be hired at the tune of 1,000–2,000 new teachers per year in the 1960s all the way until 1990, but then began experiencing severe cutbacks with an average annual decline of 398 teachers per year between 2000 and 2005; and an average annual

<sup>1</sup>See also Nablî *et al.* (2002) for an assessment of Tunisia's competitiveness in the global economy.

increase of only 45 new teachers between 2005 and 2010 (Al-Dimassi 2012, p. 146). This trend was also noticeable in a wide variety of administrative hiring practices within government ministries. The decline of the middle class status became more visible as the educated youth faced the terrible reality of unemployment after college. In 1994, the unemployment rate among college graduates was only 3.8%, and began to nearly double every five years, reaching 8.7% in 1999, then 14% in 2005, and 22.9% in 2010. The most recent statistic released in 2011 is a devastating 29.2%.

The increased burden on the middle class also came in the form of higher home mortgage rates, which are controlled by the government. Those rates went from a low 3% in the 1970s to nearly 7% in 2009. Household debt grew rapidly in the last two decades to substitute for wage stagnation and compensate for the higher cost of living and reduced opportunities for government employment opportunities. The most noticeable household debt growth period occurred between 1997 and 2003. In 1997, the household debt to income ratio stood at 28.9% and rapidly increased to 43.1% in 2003. Two-thirds of the incurred debt was devoted to home mortgages, while the rest went to automobiles and other consumer household items (Al-Dimassi 2012). As a result of this household debt increase, Tunisian families grew more dependent on worker remittances from abroad, which used to finance less than 7% of household expenditures in the early 1980s, but now pay for nearly 10% of their expenditures. Therefore, the economic status of the middle class became more financially unstable at the same time that society was opening up to a hyper-consumerist western culture, which fuelled conspicuous consumption and the desire to emulate the super-rich Tunisian elite. This social transformation led to a further disenfranchisement of the poor class because it did not have access to loans from financial institutions, while the middle class was able to borrow, spend, accumulate debt, live beyond its means, and slowly slide down the financial stability scale.

It is important to point out that as the government embraced the free market policies to replace the developmental state of the 1960s, the gradual withdrawal of government expenditures has left a significant gap that was supposed to be filled by private investment. The latter, however, was driven by the excessive borrowing of the Trabelsi-Ben Ali clan, and was mostly speculative in nature and mostly directed to imports of cheap consumer goods, so it was not capable of absorbing the unemployed. In addition, the government focused on promoting self-employment and entrepreneurship through microfinancing schemes sponsored by the National Solidarity Bank, most of which contributed to the rise in indebtedness, defaults, and corruption (Hibou 2011). As a result, the government broke its economic support ties to the middle class, which grew increasingly dissatisfied with its material status but had no political recourse to express its grievances; instead the Ben Ali regime increased its oppression, and the middle class began to see its interests drift away from that of the elite, and align more with the poor, the disenfranchised, the oppressed, and the underground opposition.

As the social contract was being eroded by free market policies, the Ben Ali regime became gradually incapable of supporting the middle class, which grew increasingly

dissatisfied with the rising cost of living, rising corruption, and lack of opportunities for upward mobility. Instead of compensating the middle class for the deterioration of their economic status either by increasing subsidies or increasing political concessions on freedom of speech and democratization the Ben Ali regime increased repression despite its constant rhetoric about freedom and democracy. Ben Ali could no longer claim that political repression was necessary to protect the secular middle class from the Islamists. The reaction of the Tunisian population was cynicism towards an increasingly hypocritical and repressive regime. Simultaneously, the Islamist message about social and economic justice, which used to resonate with the poor, became more relevant for the secular middle class. Therefore, in order to understand the new alliance between the Islamists and the secular/liberal middle class in Tunisia, one has to delineate the specific historical origins and evolution of political Islam in post-independence Tunisia.

## **5. Towards a New Liberal-Political Islam Coalition**

Bourguiba's ascension to power in 1956 affirmed the dominance of the secular independence leaders over the more conservative and religious followers of his political rival Salah Ben Youssef. Bourguiba put in place one of the most progressive personal status laws (Personal Status Code) in the Arab and Islamic world, isolated religious institutions such as the Zitouna mosque from the education system, eliminated the Islamic land tenure (*hbous*) system, and banned religious courts. However, the Arab defeat in the 1967 war brought some doubt about the legitimacy of secular nationalism; and as Bourguiba shifted his economic policy toward free markets in 1970 after the socialist experiment of the 1960s, he drew increasing criticism and opposition from the secular left, which included socialists and communists who were driven by a regional current of Arab nationalism. So, in order to protect his regime in the early 1970s, Bourguiba supported a group of Islamic studies students and professors to create an organization called the Association for the Safeguard of the Quran (ASQ), which attempted to counter the rising influence of the leftist/Marxist dominated groups, especially UGTT and UGET.

ASQ was initially a non-political group of intellectuals who focused on questions of religion and culture in Tunisian society. They were educated people who grew up in religious and conservative middle class families, and felt overwhelmed by the dominance of the secular French culture that grew stronger amongst the Tunisian secular elite after independence. Some of the ASQ members had been in Syria and Egypt where they came in contact with members of the Muslim Brotherhood. A philosophy teacher by the name of Rachid Al-Ghannouchi<sup>j</sup> emerged as the group's leader and argued that the threat to Tunisia's Islamic and Arab heritage and cultural identity can only be stopped through political means. The ASQ focus quickly shifted

<sup>j</sup>Al-Ghannouchi was originally inspired by Arab nationalism, which Bourguiba vehemently rejected. Arab nationalism was an anti-colonial movement and many nationalists turned to Islamism as a form of "authentic" anti-colonial struggle.

away from religion and culture towards questions of economic discontent and political activism (Alexander 2012).

Several factors contributed to the rapid growth of the ASQ in the 1970s. First, several members of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt traveled to Tunisia after their release from jail, and many of their ideas gained currency amongst ASQ members. Second, a violent crackdown on labour activists in 1978 created a political vacuum in the opposition that the Islamists were quickly able to fill. And third, the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran brought excitement, hope, and bigger political aspiration for Islamists across the Middle East. By the end of 1979, Bourguiba's government began to crackdown on the Islamists and accused them of planning an Iranian-style violent theocracy. This was Bourguiba's way to rally support from the secular middle class against the Islamists. ASQ was quick to respond by denouncing violence and Iranian-style theocracy, and established a new organization called the Islamic Group, which was the prelude to the establishment of a political party called the *Mouvement de Tendence Islamique* (MTI) or the Islamic Tendency Movement in 1980. The MTI was banned and its members were arrested, prosecuted, tortured, and exiled. The violent crackdown by the government led to a few violent revenge attacks by some members of the MTI. However, all violence was vehemently denounced by the MTI, which gave it greater credibility among Tunisian society and differentiated it from other Islamists groups in the region. The MTI changed its name to *Ennahdha* (renaissance) during the early days of the Ben Ali regime. Ben Ali initially flirted with the Islamists giving them hope for official recognition of their party. He needed to buy time and identify their members and supporters before launching his major crackdown.

The threat of a solid Islamist political opposition was very clear for Ben Ali. In the midst of the 1980s economic crisis, Ennahdha had a non-violent democratic agenda that is based on Islamic values and is consistent with the middle class hopes for economic and social justice. In 1988, the Islamists won 85% of the vote in the student's elections, and in 1989, the Islamist ran as independents, and had a clear victory (estimated at 30–60% of the votes) over the secular opposition parties, but results were falsified in favor of Ben Ali's party. For Ben Ali the honeymoon with the Islamists was over. Ennahdha was banned for good, but its underground network of supporters and especially its fundraising for the families of jailed or unemployed members, and the widows and orphans of the party, remained a strong base for their connection to the poor, and to the secular middle class. Unlike their counterparts in Egypt, the Islamists in Tunisia were unable to form charitable organizations and clinics, but they remained active socially without getting involved in politics. However, its exiled members continued to voice their critique of the Ben Ali regime and expose its human rights violations, lack of political freedom, undemocratic practices, corruption, and poor record on economic and social justice. Ben Ali's attack on the Islamist movement meant that anyone suspected of being a member, supporter, or sympathizer would be subject to constant police harassment and would face serious economic hardship due to lack of employment opportunities. This is way

the middle class often appeared to be overly secular by fear of association with the Islamist, but over the course of Ben Ali's presidency, there was a slow convergence of interests that eventually brought a larger segment of the middle class closer to the Islamist camp.

In a way, Ennahdha's political work to connect with the middle class during the 1990s and the 2000s was not any different than its message of the 1970s and 1980s. Ennahdha did not move its political and social agenda to meet the middle class position; instead it was the increasingly disenfranchised middle class (especially in the interior of the country) that gradually moved closer to the Islamist position. In addition, the advent of satellite news networks, especially Al Jazeera, played a major role in revealing the people's discontent with the Ben Ali regime and the realization that the Islamist boogeyman was in fact an illusion created by the autocratic regimes to scare the secular middle class into supporting the political status quo when in reality their best interest was more aligned with the political message of the Islamists (Ramadan 2011). The aggressive news coverage of the 2003 Iraq invasion, the second Intifada (2000–2005), the 2006 Israeli attack on Lebanon, the 2009 attack on Gaza, and the 2010 Gaza Flotilla massacre have increased the collective sense of hopelessness about the prospects of democratic change through external international pressure. As a result of all these external and internal events, it became inevitable that the Tunisian secular middle class would be in the same boat as all the other economically vulnerable and politically excluded members of society.

Though not a driving force during the December 2010 uprising, Ennahdha quickly put its political forces on the ground to take advantage of the newly opened political space and was able to make use of its fundraising capabilities and its vast network of supporters to gain sufficient clout during the 2011 elections (Bradley 2012). It is currently sharing power with a secular coalition. Today, Ennahdha enjoys a solid popular support base of 30% of the population. While sharing power with two secular political parties, Ennahdha has so far honored their commitment to human rights, freedom of speech, and other democratic values, despite some outstanding grievances related to the spinners' dossier, corruption, and security. On the economic front, however, Ennahdha suffers from a lack of imagination. Its economic plan is no different than Ben Ali's failed market-based policies, which relied almost exclusively on exports, tourism, and FDI. Both Ennahdha in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have openly endorsed free market policies partly because they do not want to be associated with the Iranian-style socialist experience.

Ennahdha is not the only Islamist political party in Tunisia. After the fall of the Ben Ali regime, a new radical wing known as Salafists has emerged. Although very small in numbers (around 5,000 people at most), the Salafists are very active, confrontational, and on several occasions violent (Pargeter 2012). They have a Taliban-type interpretation of Islam and governance. In an odd way, the Salafists are strengthening the coalition between Ennahdha and the secular parties, because Ennahdha must constantly denounce the political views of the Salafists and restate the party's commitment to democracy, women's rights, and human rights, while at

the same time protect the Salafists' freedom of speech and right to engage in non-violent protests. This fragile coalition can only be stable under the following conditions. First, the Salafists must be allowed to exercise their freedom of expression in a non-violent manner, which will keep Ennahdha a relatively moderate partner for the secular political parties. Second, the youth unemployment crisis must be quickly alleviated in order to ease the burden on the middle class and relieve some of the economic inequality and social exclusion, especially in the interior of the country. Third, long overdue labor demands must be reconciled under Ennahdha's neoliberal economic model. Fourth, the current government must maneuver foreign affairs to balance domestic concerns with international pressures and commitments especially with neighboring countries (Libya and Algeria), as well as major EU partners (France, Germany, and Italy), the United States, and the new regional foreign policy superpower, Qatar (Hroub 2012). Fifth, the new constitution that is being drafted by the newly elected constitutional assembly must meet the highest standards of constitutional law and democratic principles, while satisfying the expectations of the Tunisian public at large. Democracy cannot flourish without some minimal level of social and economic justice, the eradication of pervasive corruption, increased transparency in the government's economic transactions, of and the institutionalization of a respected legal framework (Khosrokhavar 2012, p. 82). Failure to face these challenges may lead to a severe social and political instability, further youth uprisings, labor revolts, or even a reversal towards an autocratic system dominated by theocratic rules.

## **6. Concluding Remarks**

The Tunisian uprising that ousted the Ben Ali regime only lasted 23 days, however, its root causes go back several decades and are deeply entrenched into the historical evolution of Tunisia's economic, social, cultural, religious, and political fabric. The successful uprising that took place on January 14, 2011 sparked mass protests across the Middle East, but has not led to any major success stories yet. Egypt continues to struggle with post-Mubarak political and economic instability. Libya suffered through a devastating civil war and is still struggling to control armed militias despite having elected a new government. Yemen still operates under the same political structure, and is facing severe internal divisions that may push the country into another civil war. Bahrain's royal family is still in power despite massive protests bringing nearly a third of its citizens into the street to face violent crackdown by security forces. And Syria is in an all out civil war with a staggering death toll of several thousand people. So, by comparison, the Tunisian case is a best-case scenario. However, there are many challenges that face Tunisia today and that require a careful diagnoses and thoughtful interventions.

This paper traced the root causes of the transformations that marked the economic, social, and political events leading up to the 2011 uprisings, with a particular emphasis on the role of the 1980s economic crisis and the role of neoliberal reforms in

ending the social contract and moving the secular middle class closer to the Islamist movement in Tunisia. Any new administration that aims at addressing Tunisia's pressing challenges must, therefore, avoid cosmetic changes and political rhetoric if it is serious about addressing youth unemployment, economic inequality, labor disputes, widespread corruption, social exclusion, judicial reform, religious freedom, freedom of speech, and civil rights. It is inevitable that many of the demands of Tunisian civil society cannot be achieved without an economic plan that is capable of producing large numbers of good paying jobs for the unemployed youth. However, given the fragile political and security environment in the region as well as the dire economic circumstances of Tunisia's major trading partners (such as the on-going fiscal crisis in the Eurozone) and the global economic slowdown, it is very hard to imagine any significant improvements in export revenues, tourism, workers remittances, or FDI flows. In addition, it is unreasonable to expect domestic business investment to drive job creation in the absence of a predictable business and political environment. Therefore, the urgency of direct job creation is undeniable (Karray 2011). Tunisia must vehemently reject neoliberalism and turn toward an employment-led growth model rather than export-led and debt-driven growth models (Kaboub 2007, 2012). Direct job creation programs are not silver bullet solutions to Tunisia's economic problems, therefore they must be accompanied by a wide range of political, judicial, educational, environmental, agricultural, industrial, and trade reforms that are tailor-made to take advantage of Tunisia's existing resources and the skills of its unemployed population (Pickard and Schweitzer 2012). However, rhetorical hopes for better economic and political outcomes are dangerously misleading if one does not focus on well-targeted active labor market policies.

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