WHEN AUTHORITARIANISM FAILED IN TUNISIA: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE BEN ALI REGIME AND THE FACTORS THAT LED TO ITS DOWNFALL

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By

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Finally, the research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to the people of Tunisia, and to those who oppose tyranny for the sake of freedom.

May your courage prevail,
TYLER PENTLAND LOGAN
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INTRODUCTION

It would be an unfortunate understatement to discount the impact of the events that transformed the political landscape of Tunisia in the lead up to January 14, 2011. Not only did these events instigate dramatic shifts to national parameters of Tunisia’s social, economic and political constructs, but they ushered in a (delayed “third” wave\(^1\)) of political reforms that led to the downfall of entrenched authoritarian regimes across North Africa and pioneered a new political identity for the Arab World, defined by the efforts of ordinary citizens who challenged and ended prolonged periods of dictatorship. Beyond the circumstantial evidence that underscores Tunisia as the unique impetus in which the Arab World’s regional anomaly of authoritarianism was finally challenged, the Tunisian case is relatively sterile and continues to leave onlookers puzzled in explaining the preconditions that eventually marked it as the first example of a successful popular revolt against a tyrannous regime that represented one of the most notorious of the region’s durable authoritarian examples.

Students of international relations of the Arab World have grown familiar with regional themes that have long dominated the scholarship, like the absence of democracy, resilience of durable authoritarianism, underdeveloped civil society and the broad pervasiveness through which these characteristics are shared by countries in a single unique region – ultimately preempting the following question – one yielding a political paradox that remained unsolved for decades: why did the wave of democracy fail to

break on the shores of not a single country in the Arab World? The commendable attempts to answer this question over decades demarked with signposts, vantage points, and paradigms that have guided the trajectory of the scholarship spurred a myriad of credible, yet unsatisfactory studies to decipher this regional quagmire. Ironically, despite this unwavering devotion embodied by years of scholarly contributions, political scientists failed to predict the dramatic events that unmistakably underscored a monumental blip on the region’s historic timeline, manifested in rumblings of revolution.

That unmistakable “blip” – Tunis, Tunisia on January 14, 2011 brought an end to an unwavering trend following the forced departure of Tunisia’s former president, Zine El Abedine Ben Ali and ending a 23-year dictatorship. After a month of incremental demonstrations, Ben Ali and his family were deposed from Tunisia’s government in a coordinated popular revolution linked to grievances reflecting universal discontent over the country’s economic stagnation, unemployment, poverty, lack of political freedom, and consistent disregard for fundamental human rights. In the subsequent weeks, we witnessed the deconstruction of the former regime, as Tunisia’s interim governments laid the groundwork for an entirely new, inclusive system that strives to be absent of former regime leadership or bare any resemblance to it. We have yet to witness the consequences of this dramatic restructuring of Tunisia’s entrenched authoritarian government until a new constitution is indoctrinated and national elections are held. To be certain, Tunisia turned the Arab World’s “authoritarian anomaly” on its head.

Attributed with one of the leading works on the subject of “dense” authoritarian durability, Posusney and Angrist highlighted that although “democratic stirrings” had

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2 The extent to which one can argue that a democratic wave has in fact engulfed the region remains up for debate, and is contingent on the outcome of Tunisia’s political experiment, further complicating the Middle East’s political debacle.
begun to be seen in very specific examples across the Middle East, it was “too soon to herald the dawn of a Middle Eastern ‘democratic spring,’” since the region was “home to the world’s most tenacious authoritarian rulers, whose very longevity [called] into question the potential for rapid transformation.” ³ The prerequisites that are laid out in explicit detail throughout their work reflect on the region’s regressive tendencies toward democratization – attributed to, among other things, weak institutions, security apparatuses, cultural and economic influences, and calculated political reform – an analysis supported by Sadiki to explain Ben Ali’s political “reform” strategies. He argues that “Ben Ali’s reforms [represented] yet another phase in the reproduction of a hegemonic political practice” based on control, not democratic power sharing.⁴ Previously, these factors drove regional scholars to conclude that there was “little cause for optimism that authoritarian countries in the Middle East [would] undergo transitions to democracy in the near future.” Angrist again in 2007 independently verified that Ben Ali’s assumption and consolidation of power “[looked] viable for the foreseeable future.”⁵ The events that unfolded in Tunisia challenged the views of the field’s leading experts and proved to the world that enduring authoritarianism had in fact, failed in a region that seemed immune to political liberalization.⁶

The traditional means through which Arab rulers were capable of subverting these “stirrings” (for an additional five years in Tunisia) were grounded in fundamental

⁶ Posusney, pp. 1-2; 16.
practices that sustained regimes for decades. As Schlumberger explains, the source of authoritarianism stems from its “working mechanisms and inner logic,” and did not necessarily require analysis that seeks to understand why democratic transitions had failed to occur. Still, Schlumberger and his contributing authors were on to something in their collective work published in early 2007, noting immediately in the introduction that consensus had been met by the field’s scholars that the new millennium had brought about significant political developments across the region, and that “the winds of change” were beginning to blow; however, disagreement remained over whether this political reform would resemble democratization.\(^7\)

Alexander described Ben Ali’s Tunisia as a “deeply authoritarian place” that was dominated by a president who faced no serious institutional constraints and who directed a ruling party that was essentially indistinguishable from the organs of the state. The “rules of the political game” as he adds made it impossible for opposition parties, alone or in coalition, to replace it. Maintaining consistency with his colleagues, Alexander describes how the government regularly violated “a broad range of individual and collective rights,” and believed (incredibly as recently as 2010), that since Tunisians had never changed a president or ruling party by ballot box or by violence, that “they [were] not likely to do so anytime soon.”\(^8\) A leading expert on Tunisian politics, Alexander’s inability to foresee Ben Ali’s removal from power is not only indicative of the opinions surrounding Tunisia’s perceived stymied politics, but the Arab World’s entrenched propensity to robust authoritarianism. Hibou notes that the Ben Ali regime exercised an

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“undeniable repression” that fused mechanisms of oppression and domination to furbish a quintessential authoritarian system, or dictatorship. Hibou’s impressive study of Tunisia’s “political-economy of repression” reinforces Eva Bellin’s research from the early 1990s on Tunisia’s “stalled democracy” and the Ben Ali regime’s normalization of authoritarian legitimacy via “economic mechanisms and techniques” that allowed people to live “normal lives” while assuring allegiance to Ben Ali through “concrete” measures of force that authorized “control, economic security, surveillance, and wealth creation” – balancing the country’s championed “economic miracle” and “repression.” When considering the latter, coupled with the regime’s reliance on its omnipresent “coercive apparatus” to compel enduring acquiescence, this work intends to demonstrate that it was these very factors that prolonged the life of the regime, that ironically, contributed to Ben Ali’s ultimate demise.

With regard to the president himself, Hibou and Hulsey highlight that there has been a tendency in the scholarship to personalize power and emphasize Ben Ali’s responsibility for state repression, looking specifically at, “the breadth of arbitrary decisions that perturb administrative functions; the existence of a system of loyalty founded on fear of, and gratification by, the chief; and the lack of a social basis for political power associated with the perceived apathy and passivity of the given society.”

Similarly, expanded analysis noted by the authors focuses on the “importance of the

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police and institutional repression, as well as the absence of freedoms of expression.”
fixated on the policies that were disseminated directly by the president himself.\textsuperscript{13} This
thesis supports this assessment and will attempt to sustain the argument that Ben Ali’s
indispensable role as “chief” of the Tunisian state should not be underappreciated, and
that his removal from power explains the subsequent collapse of the authoritarian system
that coddled him.\textsuperscript{14} In his 2007 work “Tunisia’s ‘Sweet Little Regime,’” Clement Henry
did not consider Hibou and Hulsey’s mechanisms of oppression as necessary quantifiers
to further the argument that Ben Ali led a “rogue” or even “repressive” state, instead it
was the extent to which “the political leadership (…) [deviated] from applicable social
norms” exposing the vulnerability to combinations of internal and international pressures
for change. Henry predicted that the regime’s “irrational nature of repression” eventually
would delegitimize Ben Ali’s authority to rule – even for those closest to him, but as this
thesis argues, repression represents only one of several factors that can be highlighted to
explain the regime’s downfall.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Methodology:}

The rapid evolution of contemporary events presumes that the temporal linear
predisposition of this particular case study offers few opportunities to conduct a research
project, even with the advantage of hindsight, and would result in an extreme limitation
to extrapolating ample data and citing steady trends needed to adequately support a
theory. Thus, more appropriate questions stem from the pre-revolutionary period and

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Henry, Clement, “Tunisia's Sweet Little Regime,” in Robert Rotberg, ed., \textit{Worst of the Worst: Dealing
find their origins further back in Tunisian history, specifically at the onset of Ben Ali’s ascension to the presidency. After 23 years in office, what spawned this unprecedented wave of revolutionary demonstrations? By conducting a comprehensive research project around the political, social, and economic conditions of Ben Ali’s Tunisia, one is able to identify the critical trends that inspired a popular political transformation of this caliber. Many of these critical trends are likely to be uncovered in a more relevant context given contemporary knowledge of the ultimate political outcomes that are now within our scope and can be more accurately narrated chronologically, perhaps generating a framework for regional political economy studies or a new paradigm for the democratization literature in the future. By linking the eventual downfall of the former regime (initiating a downgrade of authoritarianism to at least some degree) with the identifiable causes that we now know were catalysts to the regime’s downfall, a platform for analysis is introduced where pertinent literature and the lived experiences of local research subjects represent adequate contributions to the study of authoritarianism and Tunisia’s political experience.

It will not be argued here that the Tunisian revolution is an example where democracy is considered a force that ultimately chipped away at the authoritarian behemoth; rather, this study will approach the exodus of Ben Ali from a more cynical angle – where the causes of regime collapse in Tunisia were propagated by the inept, self-deprecating, and corrosive features produced by the regime itself, where the “failure” of a conventional, yet highly sophisticated authoritarian model offered the latitude for political contestation. Had the regime maintained focus on preserving its sophisticated apparatus, it is unlikely that “Arab Awakening” or Arab uprisings would have found their
origins in an impoverished Tunisian town with the desperate action of a penniless fruit vendor.\textsuperscript{16}

The aspirations of this assessment are to convince the reader that by identifying critical features of the Ben Ali regime and its observable transformations over 23 years, I will support the conclusion that the system that Ben Ali created was ultimately destined to fail. I hope to prove that the collapse of the Ben Ali regime transpired from its authoritarian backsliding. By combining the relevant scholarship and the primary research content offered by my interview subjects, I will support a tight argument that should convince the reader that the events that transpired on January 14, 2011 were actually not that surprising.

The foundations for the research comprising this investigation rest on a series of primary interviews,\textsuperscript{17} arranged and managed by the author, and contextualized by a comprehensive literature review of secondary sources covering a survey of topics including: authoritarianism, history, social science, and political economy. The dramatic transition that transpired in Tunisian politics warrants an analysis that centers on the perceptions and opinions of local Tunisian citizens who for the first time were able to discuss in detail the intricacies of a regime that instinctively suppressed dissent and revoked individual freedoms. As a result, holding in-country interviews became an ideal method of data collection given the unprecedented access I had to information that in many cases, had been forbidden from disclosure in public are now being revealed for the first time. These interviews represented the predominant vessel of data collection and

\textsuperscript{16} Appendix C-1.
\textsuperscript{17} Note on Coding: Throughout the text, interviews are footnoted and identified by a series of three numbers separated by periods. The first number denotes the interview consecutive placement in the research study, the second number represents the linear corresponding month the interview was conducted, and the third represents the day it was conducted. The identities of the interviewees are not disclosed.
were based on pre-drafted questions in English, unless French or Arabic translation was required.

A total of twenty in-country interviews were conducted, across a sprawling sample of research subjects with varying backgrounds, including: students, professors, human rights activists, political party representatives, cyber activists, economists, businessmen, civil society leaders, international governance consultants, and media specialists. Research subjects ranged in age from approximately nineteen years old, to approximately 60 years old and represented a near equal gender ratio. All interviews were conducted in the capital and covered a socio-economic sample between middle class and upper-middle class individuals. Approximately five of these research subjects were made available through the author’s personal and professional contacts; a base that was subsequently expanded via snowball sampling and in some cases, the use of cold calls after arriving in-country. Of the twenty interviews conducted, only fourteen have been formally cited in this assessment given the propensity for information to be repeated by research subjects or to avoid redundancy with material from the scholarship.

In order to maintain the discretion of a participant’s identity, names will never be referenced throughout this analysis. Given the sensitivity of the information that was discussed and the author’s priority in protecting the welfare of all research participants, it was imperative that discretionary measures were taken to ensure the privacy and protection of information obtained throughout the research period. Since the interviews that were conducted for this assessment took place only five months after the revolution, perceived threats to an individual’s personal security were palpable and continue to linger even to the date of this piece’s publication, reflective largely of the difficulties that any

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18 Appendix A, Formal Interview Questions for All Research Subjects.
new government will face when attempting to fully dismantle the entrenched, omnipresent security apparatus that remained in the former regime’s wake. Interviewees had low confidence that the removal of the regime’s leadership would suddenly leave them immune to the former security state and its lingering elements and the threats they posed to personal safety. Although these concerns were highlighted by most participants during the interview, they did not appear to restrict their commentary or affect their willingness to participate after being assured that their contributions would remain anonymous. Stipulations outlined in Georgetown University’s IRB research protocol\textsuperscript{19} were upheld to the highest standards and ensured protection for all participants in this project.

This paper surveys the methods and strategies pursued by Tunisia’s fallen authoritarian regime. The questions that are inspired by this particular case study yield elaborate and perhaps, incomplete answers given the historic significance of Ben Ali’s eventual departure from power, derived not only from his personal abdication under popular pressure, but the subsequent fallout of political activism that has followed. The sluggish political evolution that stalled the development and growth of democracy in the Middle East underscores the significance of any meaningful political transition, and compels the subsequent challenge against Middle Eastern authoritarianism. Rather than adhering to traditional discourse founded in the anomaly of democratic immunity and the elements that contributed to authoritarian durability across the region, the Tunisian revolution provides a new vantage point for analysis, one that this thesis has adopted.

\textsuperscript{19} Appendix B, Georgetown University IRB# 2011-227.
It should be noted that the content on which this analysis will focus directly reflects and is shaped around the primary fieldwork data. I have not attempted to include or exclude scholastic prose for any particular reason but pursued this particular approach to amplify and contextualize the untapped contributions and experiences of the interviewees. The author does not suggest a preferential consideration to the following topics and recognizes that inspiration for additional research can stem from this particular thesis.

**Organization of the Thesis:**

Chapter 1 will focus on the final years of Tunisia’s first president, Habib Bourguiba, and Ben Ali’s acquisition of power in what has been described as the “Transition Period.” Subsequently, Chapter 2 will discuss the consolidation of Ben Ali’s political authority, touching on a variety of topics including, political opposition, civil society, elites, and approved modes of political expression. Chapter 3, appropriately titled the “Rashwa” (Bribe) State, will describe the economy, regionalization, corruption, oppressive economic mechanisms and means of social control, unemployment, and the education system. Chapter 4 will cover elements pertaining to the country’s complex security state, human rights issues, media and propaganda, oppositional activism, and clandestine communication. Chapter 5 will provide an assessment of the regime’s downfall, highlighting the causal factors that led to the December 2010 uprisings and Ben Ali’s eventual departure. A conclusion explaining the regime’s legacy and longevity will be offered in Chapter 6.
“People welcomed the coming of Ben Ali with a lot of hope because they were thirsty for change. No one thought about the kind of person Ben Ali was, they focused more on the prospect of something new, and the impact a change would have on their lives, which had become difficult and dull…politically, socially, economically – Ben Ali was viewed as a savior.”  

23 years ago when Zine el Abedine Ben Ali ascended to the presidency and seized power from his predecessor and Tunisia’s first post-independent dictator, Habib Bourguiba, onlookers watched with great anticipation as the young and apparently more liberal ruler embarked on a massive campaign of political, economic and social reforms to rebuild fragile domestic institutions and restore confidence in the Tunisian presidency. Unfortunately, the stark contrasts between Ben Ali and Habib Bourguiba were temporary, and soon were recognized as categorical steps oriented towards a clear reversion to the country’s notorious status quo, fostering an even greater diversion from hollow promises of democracy and political liberalization. The “transition period” as it was appropriately coined, reconfigured 20th century Tunisian politics. This chapter will investigate the primary conditions that prompted Ben Ali’s pseudo-liberalization strategy at the onset of his rise to the presidency.

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20 Interview (17.6.2).
The transitional period (lasting roughly between 1987 and 1992) is a critical period in Tunisian history that falsely represented what many believed embodied a necessary era of political and social reforms that strayed away from the country’s history of authoritarianism under the Bourguiba presidency. Amid promises to carry out an array of reforms following his ascension to office, Ben Ali vowed to usher the country into a new age of democratic and social development unlike his predecessor, prompting many to support the coup that secured his position in Tunisia’s highest office. The scholarship and personal testimonies confirm that he was welcomed by the masses and that his administration represented the prospect for much needed change.

In what is described as a period of “Espoir et désespoir” (hope and desperation), the undignified forfeiture of the Tunisian presidency by the country’s first dictator offered what many believed would be the pivotal moment that Tunisians had been waiting for; the chance to undergo a political shift towards democracy under their new president, who outwardly appeared to want the same thing. Unfortunately, it only took a couple of years to realize that these anticipated reforms never materialized, and ironically, conditions grew comparatively worse under the country’s new leadership. This chapter will provide a brief overview of Bourguiba’s legacy, the conditions under which the political transition occurred, and the initial years of Ben Ali’s rule. The despair that marred the unrestrained expectations of a fresh start to the country’s political history cannot be understated, and reveals an almost poetic misfortune for the people of Tunisia who prepared for the arrival of a long-delayed democratic transition but were forced instead to endure another 23 years of dictatorship.

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21 Interview (3.5.24).
Espoir – Mission of Modernity:

The legacy of Tunisia’s first president, Habib Bourguiba engenders an uncomfortable juxtaposition between the fond and almost reverent admiration that most Tunisians espouse for their first leader and the realities of his incremental construction of a dictatorship, which tended to outweigh his achievements and credibility in the years that led to the coup that removed him from power. The contradictions that this confusion generates were well documented in response to the leading questions posed to participants in this research project. The demise of Bourguiba was recalled by all interviewees, and the content that reflected their memories on the country’s only transition of power prior to the events of 2011 were remarkably vivid and established a valuable backdrop to the emotions, uncertainties, prospects and disappointments that emanated from this remarkable period in Tunisian history; history has been kind to Bourguiba 23 years after the fact. In order to fully understand the impact that Bourguiba impressed on the contemporary Tunisian state, questions were framed around the legacies of both presidents and were specifically designed to conceptualize the state’s formal historic narrative. The personal anecdotes and contributions from interviewees corroborated much of the material that reflected Bourguiba’s legacy, although there was much to say about the corrosive impact his dictatorship had on the country in the late 1980s.

For most interviewees, Habib Bourguiba carries memories of a “great liberator,” a hero who helped usher the country out of its colonial past into a long-anticipated political emancipation. His reputation as one of the Arab World’s first leaders to stand up to a
colonial power and facilitator of a relatively peaceful transition of power from – in Tunisia’s case – the French system of direct rule to the Tunisian people, is also viewed as the impetus for several other liberation movements that spread across the Arab world. Bourguiba’s charisma and heroic persona underscore his image as a “great savior,” and people genuinely believed that he was the primary figure responsible for building the modern state of Tunisia. Concurrently however, Bourguiba’s effective campaign to hyperbolize his personal contribution to the creation of an independent state awarded him a broad mandate to exercise authority, and as much as he perpetuated a national discourse focused on unity and universal freedom, he also ensured that the system he created would make the state and its citizens highly dependent on him. His historic role can be isolated to a handful of initiatives that were periodically cited in this study:

- **Modernity:** Bourguiba is viewed as the father of modernization in Tunisia. He created a system that he envisioned would exploit the advancements that colonization had introduced, like governance, education, language and secularism. However, he also attempted to marginally disassociate Tunisia from its colonial past by minimizing the impact of more positive influences that France had on the modern Tunisian identity. Bourguiba intended to remain independent of the Pan Arabism movement that swept across the region in the 1960s with the intention of adhering to more Western values and traditions, encouraging Tunisians to extol their newfound national independence and freedoms, despite the Arab World’s

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22 Interview (3.5.24).
23 Interview (14.6.1); Interview (5.5.25).
24 Interview (17.6.2).
simultaneous calls for unity. Overall, Bourguiba’s emphasis on modernity can be divided into three distinct trends: the personalistic narrative as a beloved patriot, which bolstered his legitimacy; the architect of state-welfare socialism, under which essential services like education, healthcare, women’s rights, and family planning were free; and the economic and social liberator for, privatizing industry, abolishing polygamy, and adhering to the French education system – changes that made him “dear to the hearts” of Tunisians and perpetuated his heroic identity.

- **Image of anti-Colonialism:** In order to rally support in favor of projects intended to underscore a clear and independent Tunisian identity, much of Bourguiba’s rhetoric veered away from French culture and its prolonged influence over Tunisia’s contemporary history. However, this subtle attempt to remove Tunisia from French influence was an ineffective strategy under the state’s modernization renaissance, which as previously highlighted, incorporated several critical elements from the French colonial period – predominantly structural elements that buttressed the state, government, institutions, constitutional emulations, education, language, social norms and the role of religion.

- **Modernity Trumps Political Islam:** Bourguiba perceived an inherent incompatibility between Islam and the construction of his version of the modern state. Participants noted that Bourguiba made it impossible for people to favor 

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25 Interview (5.5.25).
26 Ibid.
both Islam and the state’s vision, because they contradicted one-another. Most Tunisians believed that this philosophy offered an acceptable compromise, especially during the latter years of Bourguiba’s presidency when the country’s primary Islamist group, the Mouvement pour la Tendance Islamique (MTI), began adopting more radical oppositional tactics, proving that Islamists were hostile liabilities to his political agenda. Bourguiba’s abusive propaganda against Islamists ostracized, and made them feared in Tunisian society, “making many unaware of what they were capable of,” according to one interviewee.27

Although Bourguiba’s somewhat controversial legacy is viewed favorably by participants, it is certainly worth considering that the unrestrained fond reflection for Bourguiba that was pervasively evident in each interview may have been especially poignant given the temporal conditions of this research project – where a lesser of two evils logic supported the interviewees’ broad favorability towards their first dictator is a plausible explanation to his positive legacy when compared with Ben Ali.

Désespoir – Dissatisfaction Outweighs Achievement:

Despite the previous attributes that invoked more positive images of Bourguiba, his infallible façade was chipped away in the latter years of his presidency and led to a remarkable shift in popular favorability toward the regime’s numerous shortcomings and eventually, repressive attributes that seemed to tarnish the leader’s early achievements. Although Bourguiba’s government was not democratic, it was the failures of his “non-

27 Interview (16.6.1).
democratic choices” and the resulting consequences for Tunisians that made people change their views. Most cited are: the failure of the socialist experiment based on centralized planning and the collectivization of agriculture and retail trade (1961-1969); the trust he placed in his inner circle; the corruption of the elites indentured to the state party; and his self-proclamation as lifelong president in 1975.

The propaganda machine that had so affectively marginalized Tunisia’s Islamists and garnered support for Bourguiba’s modernization programs, had simultaneously been perpetuating a positive image masking serious economic and social ailments that eventually grew to levels beyond the government’s ability to hide them and invoked the repressive image of Bourguiba’s politics. The positive portrayals of Tunisia’s liberation period and the valiant role that Bourguiba played did not match the historic realities that were revealed to those who studied the period outside of the state’s education system. One interviewee highlighted that there were other “good people” beside Bourguiba who did things for Tunisia, but Bourguiba intended to portray himself as a gilded and indispensable element of the state, and he prevented any consideration for alternative, collective contribution of the people. Only a few isolated personalities other than Bourguiba were credited for the state’s achievements, when it was in fact, a national effort that all Tunisians felt they were a part of. These championed personalities included Bourguiba himself, most of the country’s elites, as well as the country’s incumbent president Ben Ali. All of them came from the country’s coastal Sahel region and represented a very distorted demographic absent of representation from the highly

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28 Interview (11.5.30).
29 Ibid.
30 Interview (3.5.24).
31 Will be used throughout the thesis to describe the central part of Tunisia’s eastern coastline from the south of Hammamet town to the city of Mehdia, and the city of Sousse.
impoverished areas in the south or the Interior\textsuperscript{32}. Bourguiba routinely focused his attention and subsequently made decisions that favored the Sahel in order to sustain support among those who had the means to depose him. This regional imbalance in development between the Sahel and the Interior continued well beyond Bourguiba’s presidency and is a significant data point to flag when attempting to understand the eventual demise of Ben Ali decades later. Persistent marginalization of the Interior under Bourguiba initiated a policy focused on coddling the country’s small but powerful elite population by focusing development projects and state-led investment discriminately in the Sahel region, while simultaneously asphyxiating the Interior of critical resources and opportunities\textsuperscript{33}.

Remembered for his famous mantra, in which his personalized view of power was emphasized, “\textit{L’Etat, c’est moi}\textsuperscript{34} (I am the State) he invoked an image of a “\textit{combatant suprême}” (supreme fighter) in the liberation movement, generating a perception that the Tunisian people, or as one participant recalled, the “\textit{poussière}\textsuperscript{35}” (dust) of the nation owed their freedoms to him and exploited his ego to derive legitimacy and his enduring longevity as president. After decades, this demoralizing and paternalistic relationship began to make people feel like nothing; like they had no self-worth, collective identity, or that they really contributed to the creation of the state that had begun to control them. These perceptions were reified even further by the state’s socialist policies, which

\textsuperscript{32} Will be used throughout the thesis to describe the Tunisian countryside in the interior and south.
\textsuperscript{33} Interview (3.5.24).
\textsuperscript{34} An homage to Louis XIV’s famous mantra.
\textsuperscript{35} Quoting Habib Bourguiba, “D’une poussière d’individus, d’un magma de tribus, de sous-tribus, tous courbé sous le joug de la résignation et du fatalisme, j’ai fait un peuple de citoyens.” (“Tunisians were nothing but a dust of individuals… out of which I created a nation.”)
cemented a relationship between those who were dependent on the state – “like a father who reared his needy children.”

From the onset of his presidency, Bourguiba relied entirely on a state-led socialist system that initially instilled great support from the Tunisian people. However, Bourguiba’s policies vested in self-sufficiency were only capable of salvaging economic growth for about two decades before Tunisia, like the majority of its regional counterparts, was forced to integrate reformist policies amid domestic economic crisis. By the end of the 1970s, the impressive record of economic growth and early optimism of the state’s ability to manage economic development had dissipated, and was replaced instead by realizations that a number of structural flaws marked the economy. This political malaise had a profound impact on the government’s uncontested political authority, causing oppositional groups to form official parties and spurred new independence for trade unions. The prosperous system of socialism became reinterpreted as a bitter memory of abuse and fraud, underlying a clear rupture in the social contract that defined the relationship between the state and civil society.

Following pressures from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reconfigure his vision of modernization and state-led development, Bourguiba reluctantly lifted subsidies on bread and other dietary staples, causing prices to double within a week. The effects were profound, generating riots across the country and forced police into the streets to quell the dissent, resulting in the deaths of 150 Tunisians. Remembered as the January 1984 Bread Revolt, these protests foreshadowed the eventual fate of the

36 Interview (3.5.24).
country’s authoritarian system, as they were spontaneous, mostly driven by students and unemployed youth, and originated in the disenfranchised south and southwest parts of the country. The violence spread within two weeks to the rest of the country and integrated professional unions and politicized groups, expanding the platform from economic grievances to issues like corruption, nepotism, authoritarian politics and regime incompetence.\textsuperscript{39} The crackdown continued for weeks until President Bourguiba reintroduced the subsidies and announced an expansion of the social welfare net in response to the on-going demonstrations.\textsuperscript{40}

The state’s tight control and centralization of the economy, coupled with strong state-business relations enabled it to weather the adjustments of the 1980s. In particular, new policies centered on restructuring and readjusting private sector relationships represented a shift where the Tunisian government chose to respond to unavoidable exigencies following what Hermassi cites as a reconceptualization of the role of the state stemming from a new global logic that narrowed the scope of economic intervention by local governments during this time period.\textsuperscript{41}

Pratt notes that a period of inevitable liberalization within the economy followed this uncomfortable period of economic austerity. Specifically in Tunisia, reactionary reforms to damper the country’s economic crisis consisted of reductions in government spending, increased interest rates and a devaluation of the Tunisian Dinar, as recommended by the IMF and World Bank.\textsuperscript{42} However, the IMF adjustments that


\textsuperscript{40} Posusney, Marsha Pripstein and Angrist, Michele Penner. \textit{Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance}. Lynne Reinner Publishers, Inc.: Boulder, 2005, p. 51.

\textsuperscript{41} Hermassi, pp. 230-231.

\textsuperscript{42} Pratt, p. 92.
literally changed the banking system overnight into one that responded to, rather than dominated market forces by allocating credit, was still highly regulated by the Tunisian Central Bank. This type of oversight was possible even in times of economic hardship because of Bourguiba’s personality cult that perpetuated an image of the central state as a “monument without cracks” that could continue to handle the burden of economic stabilization from the top-down, similar to the successful socialist policies enacted under his initial years in the presidency. Furthermore, the severity of the crisis made state officials reluctant to relent control over pivotal components of the economic structure, which in the long-run proved beneficial to the regime, as it was able to retain a substantial degree of certainty when predicting economic outcomes.

By the mid 1980s, the government had reconfigured its authoritarian structure to a coalition of state officials, top security officials, military officers and private-property owners, marking an “official” diversion from the socialist economic model by ushering in major economic reforms shortly before Bourguiba’s oust from power. Local businessmen responded favorably to the regime’s new economic path, which provided them more leverage than they had ever seen since independence, and inspired “greater confidence” in the government to promote an economic environment more suitable to the interests of the private sector. The first enterprises to be privatized were hotels and commercial establishments, followed by larger industrial and transportation companies.

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44 Ibid.
46 Ibid., p. 124.
47 Pratt, p. 97.
Bourguiba’s socialism experiment failed to endure beyond the early 1980s and led to higher rates of poverty and higher living costs. The aforementioned “social contract” that had been implemented years earlier could no longer be sustained at the behest of the government, even though it continued to practice exclusionary politics. The elites that surrounded the regime however grew richer during this time, having reaped the benefits of an economy that had been forced to privatize following the government’s retraction from private industry. This economic imbalance, contingent mainly on one’s association to the government, angered the population and increased frustrations over the status quo.48

In 1987, Bourguiba issued an unsettling decree (probably under diminished capacity) ensuring that he would remain “President for Life,” officially shattering the hopes for democratization, but unofficially contingent on his ability to sustain his deteriorating socialist contract balancing state welfare and services with society’s disengagement from politics. The series of economic crises that swept the greater Arab World in the 1980s had a devastating effect in Tunisia and hampered the government’s ability to maintain its end of the bargain, prompting occasional demonstrations against flawed economic policies, citing government incompetence and demands for greater political liberalization. However, despite new fiscal restrictions, Bourguiba’s government remained resilient largely by maintaining subsidies on essential staples and continuing to endorse critical social services.49 Furthermore, the emergence of any viable opposition to Bourguiba was unlikely, given the personality cult that he had developed

48 Interview (5.5.25).
over his decades at the apex of a Tunisian political system that had been designed to depend on him. Change appeared inevitable, it was just unclear what that change would be or when it would occur. “People really understood the sense that something was going to happen because the economy was down, people were reluctant to invest, there was an internal struggle in the palace between the president and influential political actors, and opposition groups – the MTI in particular – were becoming more active and intensifying their demands for political reform.”

**Sliding Into Dictatorship:**

Looking to Bourguiba’s political legacy, tarnished by what occurred in the last two years of his presidency, it was easy to forget the good things that he had done. He was considered a dictator who did not allow any opposition to his authority and pursued a Draconian style of leadership, where anyone who spoke out against him would be put in jail. Sizable portions of the population had grown dissatisfied with his unwavering, extreme policies toward religion and discredited his initial promises to nurture democracy and encourage participatory politics. One participant recalled that discontent over Bourguiba’s dramatic crackdown on political freedom had become so widespread in Tunisian society that people were looking forward to the “big party” that the country would throw after Bourguiba died, which appeared to be the only way that a political transition would ever.

**An Enemy in Islamists:**

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50 Interview (17.6.2).
51 Interview (17.6.2); Interview (7.5.27).
52 Interview (11.5.30).
For the country’s leading Islamist party the MTI, failures of Bourguiba’s modernization project further supported its efforts to demand reform to what it considered an unsustainable and deteriorating political system. Following various demonstrations and riots organized by the MTI in the mid-1980s, the group became the epicenter of dissent, which led the regime to arrest and suppress the group by force. However, Bourguiba’s response only empowered the MTI, and amplified its stature to “the best organized and most politically influential” opposition group in Tunisian politics.53 And despite the crackdown, the MTI maintained a dominant presence in the Tunisian political arena.

Participants confirmed Bourguiba’s partially irrational fears over the Islamist threat, noting that “Bourguiba wanted to kill Islamists” at the end of his reign.54 Members of the contemporary Ennahda party (formerly MTI) highlighted the group’s sad history under Bourguiba’s presidency, explaining how the MTI’s first petition to get a license to operate legally in 1981 as a political party had been ignored by the government, and that most of the group’s leadership had been forced into corrupt state trials that resulted in harsh judicial decisions.55 In 1987, the MTI had a second major confrontation with Bourguiba following the group’s more radical approach to contest the government’s oppression, by demonstrating in the streets and taking part in what Ennahda leadership described as “objectionable activity,” such as the use of violence.56 The interesting observation to highlight about the MTI is that its members, like many oppositional groups that operated under Bourguiba and eventually Ben Ali, were cognizant of the consequences their actions would carry. Even though they frequently intended to accept

53 Brownlee, p. 52.
54 Interview (16.6.1).
55 Interview (13.5.31).
56 Ibid.
the regime and operate under a corrupted ruled of law that privileged the president, they were persistently rebuffed for obscure, malicious purposes.

Failing Health:

Bourguiba’s presidential decree that ensured he would remain president until his death severely impacted his popularity and legitimacy among most Tunisians, who knew his health had been deteriorating. Many questioned whether he was actually becoming senile and whether he was still the actual decision-maker in the Palais in Carthage. His age, indications that he was being irrationally stimulated by various tendencies (Islamists, elites, the IFI’s), and the fact that he had even entertained the idea of being president for life confirmed to the country that he had become senile. One interviewee shared a story about a personal interaction he had with Bourguiba during the former president’s final years in office. Just months before the political transition occurred, he met Bourguiba and recalled that he was very ill. He said that Bourguiba had absolutely no idea what was happening around him. The participant noted that he had to undergo an extensive briefing on how to interact with Bourguiba prior to meeting him that covered things like how to shake his hand (which at that time required that the guest lift Bourguiba’s hand off the table and place it down again) and what to do if he wanted to kiss you. The whole experience produced something of a sad irony when considering the nature of such a powerful regime, and the dying old man that controlled it.

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57 Interview (5.5.25).
58 Interview (11.5.30).
The Tunisian people did not dislike Bourguiba despite all of the negatives that can be attributed to his presidency, but that they had grown bored\textsuperscript{59} and were just “fed up” with him. “People wanted him to just give up and gracefully relinquish power.”\textsuperscript{60} Given the widespread agreement that the interviewees shared with this particular source’s view, it is not surprising that the change they had all been anxiously awaiting did eventually occur; it would be the circumstances under which the transition of power from Habib Bourguiba to his successor transpired that would be the most intriguing.

\textit{“Tagheer al Mubarak” (The Blessed Change):}

The downfall of Habib Bourguiba came to be described as a bloodless “constitutional health coup;” the resulting \textit{“tagheer al mubarak,”}\textsuperscript{61} or “blessed change,” as it was referred by the Ben Ali regime, confirmed Ben Ali’s rise to the political apex in November 1987\textsuperscript{62} and tempted prospects for a new chapter in Tunisia’s political history, which until that time, had been dominated by the former president and closed to any opposition. The ascension of then prime minister, Ben Ali occurred swiftly through a “legitimate” coup based on a forced, unanimous endorsement by a board of seven physicians that concluded Habib Bourguiba’s mental health had deteriorated below the capacity to hold office – a loophole stipulated in the Tunisian constitution through which Ben Ali found support for his posturing. Political scientists further attribute the smooth transition from Bourguiba’s entrenched dictatorship to much welcomed “new blood” that could improve the country’s poor social and economic conditions.

\textsuperscript{59} Interview (7.5.27).
\textsuperscript{60} Interview (17.6.2).
\textsuperscript{61} Rather than the term \textit{inqilaab} or “coup” in Arabic
\textsuperscript{62} Interview (6.5.26).
In 1987, Ben Ali assumed the duties of the chief executive of the republic. This power transition marked an abrupt end to the long and arduous tenure of Bourguiba’s presidency, and brought to the fore a series of crucial issues to the nation, including: “demographic changes, unemployment, unequal distribution of resources, economic stagnation, ossified political structures, Islamic agitation, and promised but persistently postponed pluralism.”\(^6^3\) The agitation and institutional restrictions likened to Bourguibism were corrosive influences to the glorified legacy the president had embodied in his latter years. National dissatisfaction over failing economic policies and withheld individual freedoms were exacerbated by Bourguiba’s evident physical and mental deterioration, thus mounting the national support necessary for Ben Ali to assume the presidency. By no means do onlookers label Ben Ali’s action a “coup de force.” He remained within his legal mandate as Prime Minister to intervene on Bourguiba’s behalf as stipulated in the Tunisian constitution, which gave him legitimacy to rule. In his first presidential speech to the nation on November 7, he discussed themes of unity, continuity and change that depended heavily on revisions to the constitution and vested commitments to political pluralism, and reforms to the press and electoral laws. In hindsight, the most shocking point from his speech highlighted a commitment to combat corruption, uphold legal procedure and dismiss the lifetime presidency\(^6^4\) – three charges that would later be brought against him by the nation that supported his political ascension.

C’est Qui Ben Ali?:

\(^6^4\) Ware, p. 592.
At its onset, the impacts of the political transition were relatively uncertain for most people, not only for the fact that it had occurred so dramatically and without any official explanation, but also because Ben Ali was a relatively unknown figure who had kept a very low profile under the Bourguiba presidency. One source confirmed this assessment by explaining that when Ben Ali assumed power, it was not necessarily a period of political transition, but rather a medical coup d’état or “changement de palais” (internal transition via “Palace Revolt”). Since he had been prime minister and part of the former regime, people presumed that there would not be any dramatic changes to the country’s politics.65 Another participant jokingly remarked that Ben Ali’s reflection in Tunisian history as the leader of the “changement” really did not mean anything; for her, it was as though he had swung in like “Spider-Man” to take over the country.66 Clearly, questions lingered over who Ben Ali actually was and whether his “interim” as president would facilitate an anticipated transition to democracy.

Others who were more familiar with Ben Ali from his roles as prime minister, and chief of national security later questioned his qualifications. Some charged that he lacked the legitimacy to hold office without national elections and were unsure whether he even held the credentials to inherit the country’s most powerful office, especially under such nebulous circumstances. One interviewee recalled her personal shock when it was revealed that he had never graduated from high school or obtained a legitimate degree. For years she asked herself, “how could an uncertified man become president of a country that emphasizes education?”67 She highlighted that even though Bourguiba was

65 Interview (14.6.1).
66 Interview (6.5.26).
67 Ibid.
a dictator, he was qualified for the position because he was at least a lawyer.⁶⁸ Some of the rhetoric on Ben Ali’s credibility was less skeptical but downright critical; as one source candidly remarked, there was a big difference between an “educated and cultured tyrant” (enlightened despot) like Bourguiba and what Ben Ali was – an “ignorant and illiterate.”⁶⁹ Others questioned his morality after discovering that he had divorced his first wife to marry his mistress, Leila Trabelsi.⁷⁰

**A New Savior?:**

In Ben Ali’s first speech after assuming office, initial recommendations for political reform were announced, most importantly, revisions to the constitution to subvert articles that called for a life presidency and the automatic succession of the prime minister to the presidential post. He also addressed lingering concerns over the prospects for enhanced political pluralism in the context of amended electoral and press laws. He amnestied thousands of political prisoners – including Islamists, changed the death sentences of several opposition figures to life in prison and invited political exiles to return to Tunisia.⁷¹ Hopes that change was inevitable were incrementally reaffirmed during an unprecedented period of political contestation that boosted the confidence of senior MTI leadership and encouraged their participation in elections assured to be absent of coercion and intimidation.

As his political personality began to evolve, Ben Ali sought to show his opponents that the secular Tunisian state was not hostile to Islamists and that

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⁶⁸ Ibid.
⁶⁹ Interview (13.5.31).
⁷⁰ Interview (6.5.26).
reconciliation with them was possible. As a result, he welcomed an array of civic concessions that were initially perceived to have underscored confidence in his government, support for his presidency, and challenged external criticisms claiming legitimacy was only possible through traditional mechanisms of authoritarianism. These concessions included credible amendments to the penal code, laws pertaining to habeas corpus, detention and revisions to the State Security Courts. Ben Ali even began to revitalize previously banned religious institutions and university centers of theology that had been destroyed by his predecessor. It is apparent now that these “concessions” were deceptive measures implemented to actually increase the state’s control and supervision over threatening institutions by incorporating them into “the system” that was designed to oppress them.

Ben Ali’s initial years in power hosted a relative continuation of the Bourguiba “one man/one party system” except Ben Ali demonstrated a relinquishing role from the dictatorship that Bourguiba led by the time he was deposed. 72 People welcomed Ben Ali with a lot of hope because they were thirsty for change. But no one thought about the kind of person Ben Ali was because they were preoccupied by the prospect of something new and the impact a change would have on their “increasingly difficult and dull lives.” Ben Ali embodied the image of a “new savior” to remedy the country’s dilapidated political, economic and social forums. “Most intellectuals believed he would bring about good changes, especially since he had promised so many things that had never actually been available to the people before, like multipartyism, democracy and freedom of expression.” 73 In the first two years, there were remarkable improvements to the

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72 Interview (2.5.23).
73 Interview (17.6.2).
economy and a more inclusive political scene, which indicated Ben Ali may have been honest. He welcomed the country’s democratic transition and gave more freedoms to civil society, media and political parties and promised to organize the country’s first democratic elections.74 People were happy to see that Ben Ali maintained focus on the positive achievements of Bourguiba’s presidency, by maintaining a certain openness towards the West, enforcing security, allowing for a more open economy, encouraging the growth of the private sector, supporting the code of personal status and continuing to empower women; “all of that was fine,” according to one interviewee.75 Lack of a dramatic disruption and in fact, enhancement of Bourguiba’s more favorable policies probably enabled Ben Ali to inherit the presidency without major social backlash because he was doing things that people actually wanted, so there was no reason to prematurely contest his authority until the national elections took place.

Unlike Bourguiba, Ben Ali was a pseudo political elite, which allowed him to garner support from the “club” of politicians under Bourguiba’s state party for not only the continuation of Bourguiba’s national policies, but also a continuation of his practice for political favoritism. As long as there was no disruption to the system of benefits or political leverage that elites depended on, they were inclined to support Ben Ali and very likely were responsible for constructing and disseminating Ben Ali’s various policies of political and civil reform at the time, especially because he appeared to not be the most intelligent. But he held the seat of power, so “the machine had to work to support him.” As one participant noted, just like in every Arab country, in Tunisia there was a power behind Ben Ali’s power (i.e. “shadow government”) that made sure that he stayed there.

74 Interview (7.5.27).
75 Interview (8.5.27).
Beyond the support of the former state party’s political cronies, traditional elites, and even former opposition groups like the MTI\textsuperscript{76}, some participants asserted that the United States and other external actors played a big role during the political transition because they supported Ben Ali’s calls for reform.\textsuperscript{77}

**Rewriting History to Earn Legitimacy:**

Ben Ali relied on other strategies to derive the legitimacy that he initially lacked as president by revising the country’s education system to perpetuate a new written history that reflected favorably on his personal achievements and contributions to the country. Unfortunately for Ben Ali, this also meant that Bourguiba’s unmatched legacy would have to be officially altered to make Ben Ali appear equally, if not more popular than his predecessor. “Like all dictators, Ben Ali essentially erased the immediate past that he did not like,” as one interviewee noted.\textsuperscript{78} It was apparent that Ben Ali did not have the charismatic legitimacy of Bourguiba and prompted him to orchestrate a paradigm shift from Bourguiba’s discourse on history, anti-colonialism, and national liberation, to reflect new achievements that could be attributed to Ben Ali, like development, economic growth and political reform.\textsuperscript{79}

Additionally, Ben Ali recognized that Bourguiba’s legacy loomed over his presidency as a constant rubric to which all of his policies were compared, prompting him to take extra steps immediately after assuming the presidency to minimize the significance of Bourguiba’s legacy. Ben Ali’s paranoia from constantly being compared

\textsuperscript{76} Interview (3.5.24).
\textsuperscript{77} Interview (6.5.26).
\textsuperscript{78} Interview (8.5.27).
\textsuperscript{79} Interview (14.6.1).
to the former president escalated to the point where people claimed that they were not even allowed to say “Bourguiba,” whether in official state media, or even when referring to landmarks. For example, the major thoroughfare in downtown Tunis, “Avenue Habib Bourguiba” was normally referred to as “La Rue Principale” (the main road) during Ben Ali’s presidency. One source noted that in 2000, when Bourguiba eventually died, state owned media was not permitted to broadcast the funeral and people were displeased for being unable to openly commemorate the life of their first president as a moment in their national history. Tunisians, particularly from older generations, viewed Bourguiba positively and felt deprived, as though their father had been stolen from them because of Ben Ali’s concerns over Bourguiba’s popularity; Bourguiba was the only rivaling heroic figure that could compete with Ben Ali’s authority, even after Bourguiba died. Ben Ali enforced a national admiration for a new generation of heroes who brought change in 1987 and saved the country from Bourguiba’s dictatorship, according to some interviewees. Ben Ali’s attempts to erase the history of Bourguiba represented a clear attempt at reconfiguring the personality cult that Bourguiba had constructed as a means of ensuring his own longevity and unconditional support.

Tunisia’s “Renaissance:”

As time progressed, the parameters of Tunisian history were dramatically altered to indiscriminately erase everything that occurred prior to 1987. Interviewees explained that a “rebirth” of history followed Ben Ali’s coup, and that 1987 represented a distinct

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80 Interview (16.6.1).
81 Ibid.
82 Interview (17.6.2)
83 Interview (8.5.27).
84 Interview (6.5.26).
shift in history that was used as a redline for comparison of historic data and statistics. Ben Ali’s government was systematically juxtaposed to the government of Bourguiba, generating a “before and after” indicator that always favored what happened after Ben Ali assumed the presidency. Interviewees noted that there is no way to tell whether this information was accurate, or if it had simply been fabricated to support Ben Ali’s claims to his legitimacy.⁸⁵ One source noted that through conversations with her family, she eventually recognized that everything she had been taught in school about Ben Ali had been a form of propaganda.⁸⁶

**Conclusion:**

Many viewed Ben Ali’s “constitutional coup” as a sham, orchestrated by an opportunist intent on inheriting the Bourguiba dictatorship, not transforming it. Ben Ali was simply performing for an eager audience, but probably knew that his legitimacy would always be questioned and forced him to sustain his progressive and authoritative image at whatever costs.⁸⁷ After a couple of years, it became obvious that the system was becoming more repressive than it had been under Bourguiba and that many of the individual freedoms that had been promised were not only being unfulfilled but were actually being limited further than they had been in the past.⁸⁸ People quickly realized that the cult of personality had returned when Ben Ali took over; one participant noted that he was happy to see that the towering images of Bourguiba had been taken down to close that chapter on Tunisia’s period of dictatorship, but no sooner were they replaced with those of Ben

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⁸⁵ Interview (16.6.1).
⁸⁶ Interview (6.5.26).
⁸⁷ Interview (14.6.1); Interview (10.5.30).
⁸⁸ Interview (3.5.24).
Ali. Ben Ali’s regime was showing signs that his presidency would also be extensive, and even more corrupt than Bourguiba’s had ever been.\footnote{Interview (5.5.25).} It is clear now that the regime’s longevity and the consecration of a rigid authoritarian apparatus represented the ultimate end goals for Ben Ali and discredits the perceived contrast to Bourguiba, given the extensive period of dictatorship and repression that ensued within just years after his coup. Brownlee’s short but valuable assessment of Ben Ali’s constitutional coup rationalizes the continuation of an authoritarianism that simply passed from “one personalistic leader to another.”\footnote{Brownlee, p. 50.} There is a clear disassociation with the significance attributed to the regime’s change in leadership at the most fundamental levels, since the regime’s survival and re-stabilization required only a minimal change within the regime’s elite (prime minister to president). This “shallow” transition as he describes, highlighted potentially threatening consequences for a regime ill-prepared for domestic opposition. Brownlee asserts that the penetration of civil and security soft-liners was directly responsible for the removal of Bourguiba; however, their inability to work together failed to turn power over to the regime’s opposition. Rather, it was reshuffled from within, and worked to the opportunistic advantages of Ben Ali.\footnote{Ibid.}
“Outwardly, Tunisians had a country that had all the ingredients necessary to produce a democracy. They had all of the institutions that were necessary and had reinforced those institutions, plus we had a strong economy and a beautiful education system…democracy should have been an easy next step.”

Scholars would agree that the Tunisian case had long been a surprising example of stalled democracy, challenging hopeful prospects that it had great potential for democratization as early as the 1960s, given the country’s openness, orientation to progressive social policies, and educated Western-elite. These features normally bode well for a democratic trajectory, and in the democratization literature, Tunisia possesses textbook characteristics conducive to political pluralism and competitive elections. However, Habib Bourguiba’s reliance on socialist economics and overbearing interventionism by the public sector coupled with gradual strides toward privatization were considerable hindering mechanisms to cultivating inclusive politics. In times of political and economic hardship, Tunisians had been conditioned to rely on government intervention to restore order and prosperity. However, when Tunisia’s “bulky” civil society became too powerful, the state maintained an arsenal of countervailing measures to revive its dominant authority. In contrast to the entrenched authoritarian practices of his predecessor, Ben Ali entered the Tunisian presidency with a reform agenda, specifically

\[92\] Interview (17.6.2).
to establish the “rule of law, to respect human rights, and to implement the kind of
democratic political reforms that Habib Bourguiba had steadfastly refused,”\(^93\) compelling
many to question the subsequent political devolution that ensued as the regime matured.

Ultimately, Ben Ali’s initial promises were suspicious and caused many to view
prospects for political reform with skepticism. Scholars have examined the country’s
constitutional transition by looking at the nature of the regime rather than the leader, and
note that it became very clear that the entrenched authoritarian regime constructed by
Habib Bourguiba had actually remained; it was just inherited by a new personalistic
leader. Ben Ali’s gradual internal restructuring of the Bourguiba regime was the ultimate
consequence of this misstep, which systematically accounted for previous vulnerabilities
and ultimately prevented room for opposition, at least for a while. Clearly, the regime
never lacked a deficit in the political oppression needed to prolong its authority in the
Tunisian political system, prompting many to question the events of December 2010, and
the subsequent downfall of what had been considered one of the most robust authoritarian
regimes in contemporary history.

The “National Pact:”

Political opposition and the international community quickly championed Ben Ali’s calls
for multipartyism at the behest of a formal “National Pact” for political pluralism and
liberalization that ultimately graduated into nothing more than illusory posturing, where
fundamental continuities were simply being masked by surface modifications to authentic

\(^93\) Alexander, Christopher. “Authoritarianism and Civil Society in Tunisia.” Middle East Research and
However, at the time of its unveiling, the National Pact was a groundbreaking development in the Tunisian political system. Specifically, it laid out broad principles to attract as many constituencies as possible to a new “presidential majority” but also institutionalized substantive economic and politic bargains. It incorporated language that strongly emphasized “traditions of loyal competition” and encouraged differing opinions that signified neither sedition nor division. Alexander describes the importance of this conscious focus on the language that dominated Ben Ali’s first year as president, with its emphasis on values and broader principles of democracy and national unity. It was clear that the interests of the collective took precedence over any individual reflecting a far more liberal democratic discourse in favor of multiple parties, competitive elections, gender equality, and freedoms of expression and the rule of law. However, he also notes that the new Tunisian government had taken the “wind out of the sails” of the Tunisian people by translating messages of unity and historically fragmented leadership into submission, leaving them to applaud rather than challenge the regime. Nevertheless, the National Pact was signed by 16 political parties and organizations and encouraged democratic participation, while also reaffirming the government’s support for the Code of Personal Status, respect for human rights, and freedoms of expression and association. Ben Ali’s initial years in power added further momentum to the positive trajectory toward liberalization. As outlined in the previous chapter, the new leader saw himself as the “dedicated reformer” by embarking on an aggressive campaign to restructure the Tunisian government and support initial promises to augment individual liberties.

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95 Ibid, p 54.
96 Ibid, p 53.
This “National Pact” (*mithaq*) extended by invitation from the president to oppositional forces initially represented a starting point for discussions reflecting many of the lingering shortcomings from the Bourguiba era and covering broader topics like, “national identity, the political system, economic development, and foreign policy. Although the Islamists (initially represented under the MTI) were invited to participate, they were not one of the six signatory parties to the final product, which ultimately aimed to prepare for “a more elaborate corporatist formula with a growing pluralist potential.”  

Allani notes that despite the Islamists’ support for his new regime, Ben Ali approached the idea of movement legalization warily. The MTI therefore underwent a gradual integration into the new political arena while undertaking several provisions, which included amongst others, acceptance of the “*Choura*” (consultation) of the modern political regime, and a marginal shift in their religious platform. The movement was renamed “*Ennahda*” or “Renaissance” party to remove a religious pretext from its name at the insistence of the regime. However, despite Ennahda’s willingness to accept the terms for competitive democracy laid out by the regime, Ben Ali never legalized the party.

Thus, even though the National Pact appeared to respond to the oppositions’ calls for multiparty politics under Ben Ali’s presidency, it became apparent that it functioned primarily as an illusory structural change, part of an eclectic selection of surface modifications that masked a devious agenda. As Lisa Anderson clarified in her second attempt to explain it, “virtually all the signatories of the pact represented dependencies of

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99 Alexander, *Middle East Research and Information Project*.  

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the perennial ruling party, far from a compromise or bargain among equals, the pact was an effort to create the appearance of political pluralism in the absence of political actors with autonomous social and economic power.”\(^\text{100}\) Ben Ali’s attempt to temporarily appease the disgruntled MTI and its supporters is now viewed as the primary motivation for introducing the National Pact through what has been described as a “strategic ploy” constructed to buy enough time for him to stabilize his own position of authority.\(^\text{101}\) As described by a member of Ennahda, after being imprisoned by Bourguiba in 1984 the Islamists supported Ben Ali’s rise to power, and in 1988 applauded his call to give every ideology – even the Islamists – the right to form a party.\(^\text{102}\)

In his first speech to the nation, Ben Ali reinforced his reformist image by including a Qu’ranic verse demonstrating solidarity with Tunisia’s Muslim population and potentially, an extended hand of acceptance to the participation of political Islamists who had long been considered enemies of the state.\(^\text{103}\) This gesture was particularly positive for the MTI, which had consistently advocated nonviolent political reform and highlighted the failures of Bourguiba’s insufficient economic reforms and inability to meet the peoples’ needs. And although Ben Ali also targeted Islamists during his tenure in the Bourguiba administration, working to quell the MTI opposition in response to anti-government riots and university rallies organized by the party, it became clear that Bourguiba’s concerns over the fate of the “best organized and politically influential”


\(^{102}\) Interview (10.5.30).

opposition leaders outweighed the economic strife at the source of discontent prompting Ben Ali to rethink Bourguiba’s ineffective strategy. The unrelenting encouragement for further demonstrations by the MTI was likely a primary motivation for the constitutional coup. Promises for reform indicated that a rapprochement of sorts was possible in Ben Ali’s new pluralistic Tunisia and garnered widespread support from across the country for what appeared to be legitimate calls for change.\textsuperscript{104} Ben Ali was also cognoscente of the potential domestic and international ramifications that could arise in the wake of a deliberate assault against the MTI, given their popular support across Tunisia and the overwhelming backlash that could destabilize his new and fragile government. As Christopher Alexander points out, even if these predicable domestic tensions did not emerge through the outward suppression of MTI opposition, the prolonged domestic rumblings would certainly have frightened potential international investors in the Tunisian economy and would diminish the government’s ability to negotiate favorable loans and risked meddling by neighboring rabble-rousers in the region, thus solidifying Ben Ali’s priorities to reach out to secular opposition and secure his popular support at least temporarily.\textsuperscript{105}

What many perceived was a genuine effort by Ben Ali to respond favorably to popular demands for pluralism, eroded to a malicious sham, foreshadowing the ever-present deception and dishonesty that would plague the Tunisian political system over the next twenty years. Interviewees acknowledged that after about two years, the country slid into dictatorship, evidenced first by Ben Ali’s persecution of the Islamists. Subsequently the regime selected and targeted other groups, including political opposition sympathetic

\textsuperscript{104} Brownlee, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{105} Alexander, \textit{Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghrib}, p. 53.
to Islamists, then journalists, “then eventually everyone became terrorized by the regime.”

Lawson notes that despite perceived strides towards liberalization in its early years, “the forces that made up Tunisia’s dominant coalition remained oriented towards maximizing certainty with regard to outcomes.” He cites the “package of reforms” that were introduced at the start of Ben Ali’s presidency, and the state’s revamped Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD) party as a dominant force in the country’s 1989 elections (discussed below) as examples that reflected not only the intentions of the president himself as many observers claim, but the force of intraregime interaction. Thus, policies favorable to the regime were a direct result of state officials’ disinterest in foreseeing an alternative outcome in support of any opposition. This apprehensiveness to change was even shared by the newly formed political parties, which “remained uncertain about the limits to political freedom under the new regime, leading them to exercise considerable self-restraint.”

The National Pact and the country’s first elections (which would subsequently be followed by elections of similar farce) cemented an inherent truth about the country’s political environment that lasted throughout its duration, in which every part of the system that Ben Ali built ended up being fake, almost as though the government were content with perpetuating the image that its tourist brochures generated. The regime successfully skirted the country’s rapid transformation from dictatorship, to what many

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106 Interview (2.5.23).
describe as a totalitarian state – reliant on propaganda to highlight its apparent modernity, its apparent democratic principles, and its apparent rule of law.\textsuperscript{108}

**Authoritarian Elections:**

Elections offered some solace to the failures of the National Pact and were viewed as a critical mechanism to following through with initial commitments to democracy. Excitement within the population to participate in meaningful elections demonstrated a major step forward in Tunisia’s history; however, revelations that yet another authoritarian dictator had occupied the presidency were confirmed by the inconceivable results, which revealed that the state’s RCD party had captured all of the seats in Parliament. Besides coercively manipulating the ballot box and preventing transparent vote monitoring, scholars attribute this implausible outcome to a specific form of electoral rigging. Posusney explains the Tunisian elections as a “plurality-based, multimember system” known as the “party-block vote,” where citizens cast votes for a single party; the highest number of votes received by a party wins all of the seats in the district under this system. The regime was capable of manipulating the outcomes of elections with relative ease when considering the winner-take-all characteristic of the voting system, which discounted the possibility that any opposition would obtain seats in Parliament if the regime claimed majorities throughout the country.\textsuperscript{109} Despite opposition pressures for revisions in favor of proportional legislative elections, the elections that eventually took place in 1989 maintained the former majority list system in

\textsuperscript{108} Interview (16.6.1).

favor of the RCD. Failure to reach significant gains on the political front compounded by reemerging media restrictions disadvantaged the RCD’s fledging opposition led to the RCD’s sweep of every seat in the National Assembly.\textsuperscript{110} One interviewee highlighted that it had been very clear to the Tunisian people that the results of the first elections were changed, “maybe because they were not acceptable to Ben Ali, which perhaps explains why he changed his politics to become a dictator.”\textsuperscript{111} Another participant agreed that the results had been changed. Beyond the obvious absurdity that Ben Ali had won 99.9\% of the vote, the interviewee said the regime had voted on her behalf because she received a registration voting card in the mail that she had never asked for, which in her words, “revealed the results of the elections before they had even occurred.” Under Ben Ali’s regime, even people who had died voted.\textsuperscript{112}

The benefit of hindsight indicates now that Ben Ali was in fact not building a truly competitive democracy, but laying the foundations for a pseudo democratic system that came to be defined as “consensual democracy,” or “a political order that allowed a bit more freedom to express opinions and to organize within boundaries drawn and defined by the state.”\textsuperscript{113} Ben Ali described this new type of democracy just three years after his ascension to power, noting clearly how the state was responsible for outlining the foundations and limiting the parameters around which competition and dialogue could occur within the state-supported RCD party. This variation of liberalization did ease tensions and allowed for freer expression of opinion, but also facilitated access to the RCD to gather information, enacted a system of favoritism, enabled the swift

\textsuperscript{110} Alexander, \textit{Middle East Research and Information Project}.
\textsuperscript{111} Interview (16.6.1).
\textsuperscript{112} Interview (5.5.25).
\textsuperscript{113} Alexander, \textit{Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghrib}, p. 54.
cooptation of regime supporters, and targeted dissidents. Ultimately this structure aimed to help Ben Ali and the RCD rule more effectively and never sought to provide a framework for democratic elections that would one day remove them from power. And it was not long before these deceptive motives of the regime were revealed.

Over the next 20 years, the Ben Ali regime did not demonstrate any genuine commitment to fully opening the system to contestation in any of the subsequent elections it held, thus prompting onlookers to question the motivations behind them. Rigging elections represents one of several strategies pursued by authoritarian regimes to consolidate and impose their legitimacy. In this particular case study, Ben Ali recognized his fragile hold on power prior to introducing a roadmap for elections and considered their utility as an integral means of support for his leadership, which remained somewhat controversial considering his non-traditional rise to power. Similarly, his authority had yet to be publicly legitimized in front of the international community and specifically, Tunisia’s democratic allies. However, as demonstrated by this example, the holding of elections under authoritarian regimes functions solely to reinforce the regime’s durability and penetration of the state. The results are irrelevant, often yielding exceptionally high numbers in favor of the regime’s party to demonstrate fabricated, unrelenting support for the status quo and a disinterest in visible opposition.

However, even Ben Ali’s regime could not perpetually claim sweeping victories in every election without risking a backlash of public criticism. Thus, the regime reconfigured its strategy by agreeing to concessions with pre-approved political parties sanctioned in the National Pact, to proportionally allocate opposition seats in the 1994 elections. Although this compromise represents some flexibility on the part of the regime
and a willingness to entertain the idea of liberalization, this strategy was simply cosmetic in nature, intent on perpetuating a new image of political inclusiveness and cooperation. Although the opposition may have marginally benefited from this deal (legally assured to procure twelve percent of the seats in parliament) the regime became more durable and less legitimate by simply choosing to oppose “something.” Furthermore, the deal posed no threats to the regime’s durability, since the remaining seats were contested under the same system for elections held in 1989. Again, the multi-party block system favored the RCD, which won all of the contestable seats.\footnote{Posusney, p. 102.} This proportional percentage was expanded to 20 percent following accusations of fraud and vote coercion in 1999 for the very same reasons the rules of the game were altered in 1994. Michele Penner notes that in addition to offering an aura of legitimacy to the RCD’s power, “the entry of self-admittedly weak opposition into the parliament served Ben Ali’s purpose by fostering tighter discipline among the RCD delegates,”\footnote{Ibid.} and provokes important insight to the effects that elections have on the internal dynamics of authoritarian regimes.

In the 1999 parliamentary elections, which also coincided with a contested presidential race, the regime responded dramatically to opposition demands for “representation at the ballot counting and an independent, national group of election supervisors.” Additionally, Posusney notes that some press restrictions were lifted, and pro-government rallies outside of polling stations, normally used to pressure voters, were prohibited.\footnote{Ibid, pp. 102-103.} In the country’s 2004 elections, oppositional participation was still tolerated under the same guidelines designed by the RCD, which reproduced the expected domination of the RCD in parliament.

\footnotetext[114]{Posusney, p. 102.}
\footnotetext[115]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[116]{Ibid, pp. 102-103.}
Sadiki uses the results of parliamentary and presidential elections under the regime as evidence that “highlights Ben Ali’s predilection for omnipresence and singularity in playing the role of Tunisia’s new national mentor.”\textsuperscript{117} Angrist notes that in 1999, the president ran “opposed” by two handpicked candidates for the first time to claim his third and theoretically last term in office. The two men who were “selected” by the regime were not considered presidential, and neither had volunteered their candidacy. More reasonable oppositional candidates who had previously demonstrated an interest in challenging Ben Ali were prevented from running. The landslide victories in favor of Ben Ali and his RCD party clearly show that the motivations for holding elections were less driven by a new precedent of the regime’s tolerance for contestation, but rather, for making a very public show of Ben Ali’s political predominance.\textsuperscript{118} Thus, when considering the preceding data, discussing the possibility for viable contestation in Tunisia’s organized elections is not serious.\textsuperscript{119} Angrist echoes this point: “the ruling party’s preponderant political position and electoral rules confer advantage on large parties” and enabled the RCD to monopolize the legislature,\textsuperscript{120} regardless of the regime’s inclination to allow oppositional participation. Furthermore, over-analyzing the significance of the parliament as a vessel for substantive political change is a misstep to begin with.

Angrist highlights that the presence of oppositional candidates in the country’s parliament was insignificant, given the body’s systemic subordination as a political


\textsuperscript{119} Sadiki, p. 123.

\textsuperscript{120} Angrist, p. 176.
institutions. Parliament lacked the authority to initiate legislation and could not check the authority of the executive branch, which embodied the real seat of political power. The nature of the “approved” opposition parties further downgraded the political mobility of the institution. These parties were often very small, under-funded, and had no real resonance across Tunisian society. Therefore, the fabricated political forum that was “the parliament” and the elections that determined how the RCD’s distribution would shift within the ninetieth percentile, underscored an unfortunate reality: “weak opposition parties holding a small minority of seats in a weak legislative institution…do not add up to serious advances in political pluralism.”\textsuperscript{121}

The lessons learned from this cursory overview of Ben Ali’s Tunisia’s history of elections yields a disturbing realization to the prescribed gestures of political transition that had been so fundamental to Ben Ali’s early platform. As Sadiki underscores to the contrary, “the only transition [was] from single-party rule to ruling-party hegemony,” a frightening by product of an elaborately designed system of elections fixed to predetermined outcomes in favor of the state.\textsuperscript{122} Thus, electoral politics in the Tunisian example have been about “returning the incumbents to a monopoly of political power” through a course of action by which the regime continued to “possess the democratic process [by] employing bureaucratic-corporatist strategies.”\textsuperscript{123} This assessment contributes to previous discussions pertinent to strategies of democratization that enhance regime legitimacy. According to Sadiki, the regime more or less “appropriated and employed all state resources to reproduce itself without much serious competition.” He adds that the potential for democracy was remiss under the leadership of a president who

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} Sadiki, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., pp. 121-122.
alone had been deciding “the pace, scope and spheres of reform” to the political system.\textsuperscript{124}

**Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD):**

What quickly evolved into the life-force and epicenter of Ben Ali’s dictatorship was the revamped state-led RCD party, representing a clear parallel with Bourguiba’s emphasis on state-party politics (led previously by the Neo Destour Party). Ben Ali ascended to the presidency with an interest in changing the status quo, by anchoring the “monolithic machinery” of the RCD as an entrenched institution of the state, just shrouded by a “jibbah\textsuperscript{125}” of democracy. It is argued that the RCD had been constructed as a *ruling party*, and never intended to be a competitor among equals in the opposition. In other words, Ben Ali had never intended to separate the party from the state; rather, it had been consecrated as a means to fulfill two functions: to “serve as a unifying force and a vehicle of stability,” signaling both a top-down approach to democratization and echoing Bourguiba’s self-indulgent approach to unifying, stabilizing and edifying the masses at the expense of viable political forces and identities.\textsuperscript{126}

The RCD’s penetration and impressive swallowing of Tunisian society marked it as a force to be reckoned with for competitors who participated in major political occasions. The party, “significantly boasted almost a quarter of the country’s university lecturers. The number of students who declared official membership rose from just a few hundred in 1987, to 8,000 in 1995.”\textsuperscript{127} The RCD boasted that two million members were

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{124} Ibid., p. 122.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Traditional Tunisian garment.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Sadiki, p. 122.
\item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
officially registered in the party in January 2011, equating to one fifth of the total population of Tunisia. Many charge that this number is excessively inflated and speaks to the malignant characteristics of the nation’s political system, where citizens were often coerced into joining the party ranks by harassment and direct threats. The RCD ruled Tunisia by dominating the political, social and economic lives of Tunisians for decades, a sentiment shared by interviewees who acknowledged that “few people were involved with political life, and for those who were, it was by joining the RCD.” The party thrived by advertising “cheap propaganda” that highlighted its apparent overwhelming support within the country (traced from largely deceptive sources) and by deriving legitimacy for its historic legacy as a liberating force under French colonial rule.

Essentially, the idea of the modern “state” as a political entity had been replaced by a full-fledged authoritarian state, which functioned under the framework of an RCD party that compelled popular allegiance.

Politicians – “A Necessary Evil:”

The blame that is attributed directly to the president’s policies reflects the elites and party members that supported his authority. Lack of freedom of expression and political victimization had come from the hands of the country’s own government officials in government. A non-transparent “shadow government” of politicians operating out of the palace in Carthage had surrounded Ben Ali but never questioned the politics of the

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128 Interview (6.5.26).
130 Interview (2.5.23): Interview (11.5.30).
131 Interview (20.6.3).
regime, and instead, worked to “feed the beast” and sustain the regime at the expense of the nation, according to one source. It became apparent that, even to the small group of decision-makers who were close to him, that only Ben Ali could have “the good ideas” and the “puppet ministers” around him never challenged the president’s policies.\(^\text{132}\) It was the handful of these elite “yes-men,” Ben Ali’s inner circle, whose wealth and livelihoods depended on the regime’s survival.\(^\text{133}\) Participants noted that the elites betrayed the Tunisian people, by approving laws and protocol across every industry that served to advantage the ruling family and its supporters, essentially focusing their energy on devising strategies to funnel the country’s wealth into the hands of the regime through a sophisticated network of patronage and corruption that will be discussed further in Chapter 3.\(^\text{134}\)

**The Political “Opposition:”**

Ben Ali’s legacy of change failed to endure beyond the limits of a pervasive and delicately crafted apparatus of authoritarian rule that simply relied on unfulfilled promises for change and institution-building. Many were skeptical over how the leader’s security background would be appropriate to reversing a highly personalized, deinstitutionalized and privatized Bourguiba state. As Sadiki indicates, regardless of the democratic “stirrings” intrinsic to Ben Ali’s rule, the manufacturing of political community and ethno nationalism in Tunisia eventually returned to historic policies of exclusivity and singularity and contradict the very democratic tendencies to which Ben

\(^\text{132}\) Interview (17.6.2).
\(^\text{133}\) Interview (2.5.23).
\(^\text{134}\) Interview (6.5.26).
Ali alluded during his maiden speech in 1987. Sadiki reaffirms many claims mentioned in this assessment that make it abundantly clear that Ben Ali has consistently been deciding “the pace, scope, and spheres of reform” since his inception. By the latter half of the transition period, Tunisia was considered akin to “un commissariat,” a police-state driven by exaggerated fears and paranoia at the hands of a complex mukhabarat intelligence network constantly at odds against an alleged “fundamentalist threat” posed by the country’s cohesive Islamist opposition. One explanation for Ben Ali’s ultimate “authoritarian bent” laid in the regime’s deep fear over a regional Islamist threat, sharpened by the turbulent domestic stirrings faced by its western neighbor, leaving many to consider motivation for regime behavior to have been exogenously driven.

The ultimate indicator that proved to most onlookers that prospects for change were farfetched transpired in Ben Ali’s inaction towards demands by domestic opposition to move forward the date for legislative elections and reform the electoral laws; it would have been inconsistent with the regime’s liberal rhetoric to maintain a single-party elected legislature for the slated first four years of Ben Ali’s term under policies of democratization. The electoral law itself required reform to offer opposition parties a legitimate chance to gain representation in the National Assembly by winning seats, rather than the institutionalized “winner-take-all” laws that favored the state’s ruling party for decades. Ben Ali faced an arduous task of maintaining a “professed commitment to democratic reform” while also subverting to conservative elements within the RCD and avoiding a substantial loss of its representation in the National Assembly. A series of tactful decision-making established the safeguards needed to appease both

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135 Sadiki, p. 121.
136 Ibid., p. 123.
sides that placated opposition demands, ensured a façade of democratic pursuits and demonstrated support for the RCD’s hardliners who demanded a healthy majority. The latter of these arrangements enabled the ruling party to implement a predetermined formula for calculating oppositional representation in the National Assembly at the behest of Ben Ali, thereby allowing a guaranteed, but insignificant presence to face an unbreakable RCD majority.\footnote{Alexander, \textit{Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghrib}, pp. 56-57.} In order to project an image centered on pluralism, democracy and individual expression, the regime tolerated a constructed, décor opposition, and although Ben Ali was very bothered by the presence of opposition parties, he reconciled the benefits of at least a semblance of multipartyism in Tunisia.\footnote{Interview (17.6.2).} He probably saw pluralist democracy as a way to enhance his legitimacy, proving to the world that democracy existed and that he was chosen by his people\footnote{Interview (20.6.3).} – and that opposition groups had some degree of control over his otherwise unrestrained authority. Domestically, it had been established that he had the ability to quash any threat the opposition might pose through alternative security or legal mechanisms that made sure opponents remained confined to limited roles.\footnote{Ibid.}

\textbf{The Cartoon Opposition:}\footnote{Interview (6.5.26).}

To address the regime’s need to project an image of diversity and multipartyism certain opposition parties were permitted to “play the oppositional role” and constructed as part of a more broad façade portraying a system of political representation.\footnote{Interview (11.5.30).} Everyone
acknowledged that the opposition parties that were involved in elections were created by the regime, because even the opposition candidates themselves who participated in presidential elections would say that they supported Ben Ali. One source provided an excellent assessment of these legal opposition parties, noting that even though they were definitely puppets, some actually did not even know that they were puppets and believed that the success of their parties was based on the fact that they were not the RCD. But they did not understand that their activities were completely controlled and had been kept within bounds laid out by the regime. One interviewee expanded on this assessment and explained that the regime’s fake opposition parties were ironically more threatening than the RCD, because their sole function was to perpetuate the legitimacy of the Ben Ali regime by making it appear pluralistic and democratic regardless of its platform, and they were rewarded for that support. The RCD was at least honest about its operations.

Consequences of Being Part of the “Real” Opposition:

“He instilled great fear by using illegal and immoral methods to threaten those who challenged his authority by sabotaging peoples’ characters, destroying their homes (and families), their cars, etc, which prevented people from speaking out, or at the very least, made them think twice about publishing or speaking out against the regime.”

Apart from the décor opposition was a more distinct and viable category of political activists that did challenge the regime, and often suffered severe consequences as a result.

143 Interview (13.5.31).
144 Ibid.
145 Interview (20.6.3).
146 Interview (17.6.2).
147 Interview (10.5.30).
Anyone who said what they really thought about the old regime would be oppressed and threatened. Leaders of official, but illegal political parties were generally not arrested but would be put under surveillance so the regime could monitor their movements, control their internet access, ban them from traveling, and inhibit their professional mobility.\textsuperscript{148}

The regime used various tactics to prevent parties from organizing any meetings outside of their party headquarters (which were typically bugged), and even then, some people would not be permitted to enter the building.\textsuperscript{149} There were always obstacles as one interviewee from the political opposition explained. She would rent a conference room for a party meeting in a hotel for example, and the regime would cancel the reservation at the last minute, finding any way to constantly disrupt her party’s activities. With another example she explained how police would detain party leaders or speakers at party events for hours to prevent them from attending.\textsuperscript{150} “Real” opposition parties also suffered from lack of means or financial support either from within the country or through external actors because it was “not allowed.” The regime ensured that opposition parties were perpetually disadvantaged by vandalizing their members’ homes, destroying their cars, and burning down their offices, among other things.\textsuperscript{151}

Beyond targeting party leadership directly, the regime cut off its resources at their source by harassing those who supported them. In order to deter potential members from joining the regime arrested them, contacted their families, and “tried to push them far from the party.” To the dismay of opposition leaders, the regime very often succeeded.\textsuperscript{152}

If one person joined the opposition, then everyone they would be associated with would

\textsuperscript{148} Interview (17.6.2).
\textsuperscript{149} Interview (10.5.30).
\textsuperscript{150} Interview (17.6.2).
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} Interview (10.5.30).
be vulnerable to punishment by the regime, which made many reluctant to speak out for fear that their families or friends would be targeted. The regime was known to accuse aspiring members of bogus charges just for showing an interest in working with an opposition party. The source recalled an example where two people were imprisoned following fake trials that had found them guilty of engaging in terrorist activity.

Parties were eventually prohibited not only on ideological grounds, (i.e. parties that contradicted the regime’s interests) but also if party leadership did not demonstrate the adequate level of “courtesy” to the regime. Typically the regime would be more prone to leave opposition figures alone if they did not publicly slander the Tunisian government at home or abroad, essentially imposing a distorted lese-majesty that criminalized anything that could be perceived as criticism of Ben Ali, his wife, or her family. In the latter years, the regime grew more paranoid of the potential threats that the political opposition posed to its authority. Opposition figures were persecuted directly in the media and were accused of serious crimes like treason or spying as a way to discredit their messages and reduce their popular support. Under a similar tactic designed to “destroy your enemy from within,” the regime would infiltrate opposition parties with clandestine elements loyal to the regime. Informants would request to join the party and play a supportive role in promoting the party’s message for a while, before eventually revealing information that would be detrimental to the party, perhaps by publishing information that would give the regime justification to crackdown on the

153 Interview (17.6.2), Interview (20.6.3).
154 Interview (10.5.30).
155 Interview (17.6.2).
156 Ibid.
157 Interview (7.5.27).
party’s activities, or by enticing more loyal and indispensable party members to walk out.\footnote{158}{Interview (17.6.2).}

Despite their sustained efforts to remain operational, no party (décor or fake) was able to get their party message across to supporters under the regime because the regime had enacted measures to prevent access to it. Since the regime had full control over news vendors throughout the country, rarely could anyone find the oppositional newspapers that parties published. In order to maintain the image that oppositional parties were being included in the country’s domestic political forum, the RCD normally would purchase the bulk of their newspapers to prevent regular citizens from reading them, and in effect, deliberately sponsored the activities of the opposition to ensure that it survived. Of course, as one interviewee added, the RCD would not purchase every newspaper to make it look less obvious that they had complete control over political life. If anyone chose to purchase the newspapers that remained, she indicated that without a doubt they were being watched by someone nearby or in many cases, reported to the RCD by the vendor himself.\footnote{159}{Ibid.} Interviewees indicated that the regime never did any of these things openly because it did not like to be seen by foreign governments and human rights activists as an oppressive dictatorship and tried to covertly conduct its campaign against the opposition.\footnote{160}{Interview (10.5.30).}

When asked how her party remained motivated to continue to function under this type of oppression one source who had worked in the “real” political opposition stated that those who chose to challenge the government believed that they had a “duty to inform and guide the country toward the right path, away from the entrenched behavioral...
For her, and many of her counterparts, it seemed unrealistic to assume that their efforts would lead to the removal of Ben Ali directly. Rather, the motivation they had to stay involved in this perceived unfulfilling and unrelenting David verses Goliath political game was fed by hopes that the president would eventually die “because in the Arab world, as she noted, it is God who usually determines when a leader’s reign comes to an end,” and that the foreseeable political transition could possibly be influenced by their enduring activism.

**Ben Ali’s “Blank Check:”**

Ben Ali’s role in persecuting the Islamists during Bourguiba’s presidency, particularly during the last few years, was a fact that had been well-known to the Tunisian people when he took power in 1987. Many acknowledged how his bloodless and non-violent political transition starkly contrasted with his recent past in support of Bourguiba’s tyrannical and despotic assault on the increasingly influential Islamists. One source admitted that people understood that Ben Ali had attempted to diminish his involvement in Bourguiba’s anti-Islamist campaign, especially as Ben Ali began embarking on his own repressive crackdown just two years after the coup. He had revealed his true paranoia over the “Islamist threat” that he had actually exploited as a member of Bourguiba’s regime and intended to finish the job once he was in charge.

Initially, the whole political spectrum agreed with Ben Ali because he promised democracy and “everything you could imagine,” despite his role as “the technician of repression” during the last five years of Bourguiba’s presidency. Ben Ali was a major

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161 Interview (17.6.2).
162 Ibid.
163 Interview (5.5.25); Interview (13.5.31).
contributor to the persecution of political opposition groups under Bourguiba and very likely climbed the ranks in government by participating in Bourguiba’s witch-hunt.\textsuperscript{164} The Tunisian people themselves had unknowingly given Ben Ali a “blank check” for what would eventually become a broad and unforgiving campaign waged initially against Islamists and leftists that incrementally expanded to include anyone who challenged the regime’s authority or legitimacy.\textsuperscript{165} After his ascension to power it looked like he was just enhancing the security of the country by “dealing with the Islamists or something” and explains why he received such little social retraction against his persecution of them. But by the late 1990s and early 2000s, the whole political scene became a “joke.”\textsuperscript{166}

**Sacrificing Contestation for Security:**

The exclusion of the Islamists from the National Pact was a clear indication that the alleged liberal machine that encouraged pluralism had quickly stopped working well, not only for discouraging an inclusive political forum, but for taking deliberate steps to wipe-out the outspoken opposition by whatever means necessary. Although the legacy of Islamist suppression remained static between the latter year’s of the Bourguiba presidency throughout the political transition, and into Ben Ali’s early years, a clear increase can be identified in the early 1990s, prompting observers to conclude that it was at this time that the “real” political coup that defined Ben Ali’s ultimate agenda occurred, once his grip on power had been adequately secured. The trouble began, as Henry notes, in 1991 when the newly liberated Islamist opposition was unable to gain government

\textsuperscript{164} Interview (13.5.31).
\textsuperscript{165} Interview (11.5.30).
\textsuperscript{166} Interview (17.6.2).
recognition of its Ennahda Party, which was labeled as a malicious state opponent.\textsuperscript{167} Thousands of Islamists, members of the Ennahda Party, and any of its supporters were exiled, jailed, torturd and in some cases, suffered “social deaths” through the loss of friends, family and employment opportunities.\textsuperscript{168} The height of oppositional repression against the Islamists occurred following the country’s legislative elections in 1989, a forum through which Ben Ali was able to identify and subsequently eliminate members of the regime’s greatest opposition force. If one were to measure repression by political prisoners, qualitative or quantitative indices of torture, deaths in jail, and individual suffering, then the latter years of the transition period should be considered the most repressive of the Ben Ali regime, and a dramatic retrogression from its initial promises.\textsuperscript{169} In response to growing dissatisfaction and anger over the 1989 election results, members of the Ennahda Party intensified protests at local universities and in working class neighborhoods, resulting in an increase in repressive tactics by the government. It is estimated that some 8,000 Islamists were arrested between 1990 and 1992.\textsuperscript{170} Late night raids and house-to-house searches of certain neighborhoods were commonplace and allegations of torture and interrogations of citizens in military courts multiplied. Observers claim that the justification and popular consent for its crackdown was easily obtained under a successful public relations campaign focused on enhancing Tunisia’s domestic and international security concerns, which correlated directly to dangerous and contentious influences from the increasing “threats” posed by Islamists, operating both within Tunisia and abroad.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., p. 306.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} Alexander, \textit{Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghrib}, p. 60.
Hibou and Hulsey note that the “basic machinery of [Tunisia’s] repressive system can be found in the mechanisms modified by the regime, by international donors and commentators, which all served to extol both Tunisian society’s capacity for adaptation and reform as well as the social and economic aptitude of the regime.” 171 The aftermath of the 1989 elections marks the end of Ben Ali’s tolerant “honeymoon” period, ushering in an era of oppression and political marginalization that proved that the “machine had stopped working well.” 172 Ennahda’s exclusion from national elections prompted the group to openly exert pressure on the regime to follow through with its original commitments to liberalization, forcing the government to “step-up” its repression through late-night raids and house-to-house searches to capture Islamist activists, as well as supporters of Leftist group’s like the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and the Tunisian Communist Worker’s Party. 173 Things deteriorated very quickly by the 1990s when “many people started disappearing.” A university professor who participated in this study remembered that her university had been closed for three months during the Islamist “round-ups” and that state media would constantly show images of militant Islamists, claiming that they were operating in Tunisia. Some of her students were expelled from the university and imprisoned for terrorism without trials. “Many people started disappearing very quickly.” 174

According to Henry, at this time the Ben Ali regime was as repressive as any other, “if repression is to be measured by the number of political prisoners per capita,

172 Interview (10.5.30).
173 Interview (7.5.27).
174 Interview (16.6.1).
quantitative or qualitative indices of torture, deaths in jail, or other measures of individual suffering.”\textsuperscript{175} Susan Waltz reports that the government’s extensive dragnet hauled in more than 8,000 individuals between 1990 and 1992.\textsuperscript{176} The average Tunisia turned a blind eye to Ben Ali’s overt oppression of the Islamists’ activities, political or otherwise, to prevent the disastrous political side effects of Islamist intervention in politics occurring beyond their western border in Algeria from happening in Tunisia,\textsuperscript{177} where aggressive Islamic activism was seen as directly responsible for that country’s economic hardship, demonstrating an overall “willingness to tolerate a strong state that claimed to act on behalf of the national well-being.”\textsuperscript{178} The benefits of a prosperous domestic economy outweighed the national distaste for the regime’s human rights record.

For the Tunisian people, security was very important, and probably is the factor that explains why they may have not cared that the politics were not “too democratic” in the beginning, but as one interviewee claimed, this should have been an indicator that the regime was actually moving away from democracy and was not just a reaction to the president’s concerns over Islamist influences. Furthermore, interviewees agreed that the majority of Tunisians frankly were not on the Islamist’s side, and that they had betrayed the Islamists by keeping their eyes shut to Ben Ali’s assault against them at the time, but “as long as it was against the Islamists and for security nobody reacted,” except for a very active fringe of the population – mainly human rights activists, who denounced these inhuman treatments against the them. This passive condoning of political oppression allowed for it to spread, and eventually eliminated anyone who spoke out against the

\textsuperscript{175} Henry, p. 301.  
\textsuperscript{176} Alexander, \textit{Middle East Research and Information Project}.  
\textsuperscript{177} Interview (16.6.1).  
\textsuperscript{178} Alexander. \textit{Middle East Research and Information Project}.  

63
regime, like oppositionists, advocates of democracy, and fundamentally, anyone who disagreed – rationalized as essential for security.\textsuperscript{179}

The harsh treatment of the Islamists in Ben Ali’s early years introduced an important axiom to Tunisian politics that would continue to guide the regime’s violent reaction to religious ideology, and particularly political Islam, both to limit the role of powerful and allegedly violent political parties like Ennahda, and to ensure that Tunisian society remained secular to preserve a modern image. One participant noted that religion was like “Dracula” when Ben Ali was president.\textsuperscript{180} Liberal parties who never directly challenged the regime but did not accept the targeting of the Islamists were also punished. These parties were strangled by lack of resources and publication rights and essentially “were not allowed to be a normal party for not going against the Islamists.”\textsuperscript{181} From Ben Ali’s perspective, Islam, modernity and democracy were not compatible. Subsequently, leftists and even human rights organizations were eventually targeted for denouncing the regime’s treatment of the Islamists. Eventually the “tyranny affected everyone,” as the regime devised more innovative ways to quell dissent.\textsuperscript{182} In Ben Ali’s world, if you were neutral, you lacked patriotism, and if you were critical towards the harsh treatment reserved for the Islamists and other human rights activists, you were a traitor to the state-party (“nation”).\textsuperscript{183}

According to a representative from Ennahda, the party is not revengeful of the Tunisian people for abandoning the Islamists throughout Ben Ali’s presidency; however, he noted the shame that the group felt for the Muslim world, and particularly, countries in

\textsuperscript{179} Interview (8.5.27).
\textsuperscript{180} Interview (6.5.26).
\textsuperscript{181} Interview (10.5.30); Interview (13.5.31).
\textsuperscript{182} Interview (13.5.31).
\textsuperscript{183} Jebnoun, Nourredine. Contributing comment. 4.11.12.
the Middle East that knew the regime had been deliberately targeting Islamists but did nothing to help them. He remarked that Arab and Western governments had been just as complicit in the persecution of Islamists because they endorsed Ben Ali’s “reign of terror,” even when they really knew the truth. He noted that Ennahda had benefited from having its leadership imprisoned because it strengthened the resilience of the party. Its members always had been able to continue their work despite having to confront tough resistance from the regime. “They never knew if they could return and knew that they could be arrested at any time or imprisoned for a number of years,” yet the group was able to slowly persevere.

The Role of the Syndicate:

The Tunisian Syndicate known informally as the UGTT had always played a big role in Tunisian politics. According to one interviewee, “when ‘Zine’ came into power, “he bought the syndicate, like he bought everything else” by alienating and intimidating its members and monitoring their activities and their movements.” He domesticated and emasculated them through money, intimidation, infiltration, cooptation, and a divide and rule strategy. The syndicate helped in the construction of the state under Bourguiba. Once an powerful opposition actor in the Tunisian political system, the management of the syndicate had also been coopted by Ben Ali after being forced to give in to the regime’s harassment and was no longer able to sustain an oppositional posture.

184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.
186 Interview (17.6.2).
187 Ibid.
The Civil Society Mafia:

Civil society groups demonstrate two trends in the Ben Ali world: the very few that operated independently from the regime, and the fake organizations that functioned to support a placebo activism. Like the country’s political parties, there were real civil society actors who genuinely stood up against the regime, its oppression, and the country’s lack of individual freedoms. More often than not, these were the people who ended up either having to leave the country or were harassed, beaten or tortured. Onlookers note that there were “no humanly acceptable conditions under which they could function during Ben Ali’s presidency,” and their decision to convey advocacy amid inescapable consequences made them very brave but assured that their organizations would remain under-developed. In fact, the poignancy of independent advocacy groups was so limited that in general, the perception is that there was no civil society operating outside of the regime, especially when considering the threats that the regime posed to their survival.

Conversely, there was an abundance of “fake” civil society groups that was described as the “civil society mafia,” and identified the group of organizations that were allowed to receive grants from abroad or that were in some kind of coordination or agreement with the government. No civil society association could receive grants under the regime without its approval, to the degree that someone in the government would pick up the phone and discourage the head of the organization from taking the money by threatening to make his life a “living hell.” Therefore, any sanctioned organizations had to be working with the government, not alongside it. Any group that earned the

188 Interview (20.6.3).
189 Interview (2.5.23).
credentials or received training or resources from the regime meant that it was part of the civil society façade. Like the political opposition, Ben Ali wanted some diluted version of civil society to exist that created an image that he was a benevolent leader with an overwhelming level of social support.  

Under Ben Ali’s presidency there were about 9000 NGO’s, “but maybe ten were actually independent; most of these NGO’s were actually created by the regime itself to show the world that it was democratic.”

Some just called them “GONGO’s,” or “Government-Organized Non-Government Organizations” because getting permission from the government to establish an organization was seen as a privilege, not a right.

When asked whether or not civil society organizations operated under the regime, one interviewee immediately said “no,” and asked me if I was “crazy.” She elaborated by saying that all organizations that existed had to support Ben Ali, and that ultimately his government did not care about social issues that were important to the people. Whether or not the statistics indicate that there were a marginal number of organizations that had actually been truly independent of the government’s control, the point is clearly irrelevant, since even the independent organizations were incapable of actually accomplishing anything. The same participant shared her perceived point of view of the government’s policy towards civil society: “to hell with the environment, to hell with Tunisia, all that matters is the well-being of the Ben Ali family.”

Conclusion:

190 Interview (20.6.3).
191 Interview (7.5.27).
192 Interview (14.6.1).
193 Interview (6.5.26).
194 Ibid.
“Domestic politics were such a failure.”\textsuperscript{195}

Although an interest in pluralizing the Tunisian political system was initially articulated, the regime was able to stave off legitimate challenges to its authority by liberating only specific “pockets” of society that worked to distract, preoccupy, and to some extent, appease the urge to express its frustrations and pluralistic tendencies. The regime’s infiltration and control over fundamental outlets of the public sphere like freedoms of expression, media, political activism, and even education were critical to ensuring that the regime remained durable.\textsuperscript{196} And although politics was prohibited, the regime knew that it had to construct alternative aesthetic realities\textsuperscript{197} for the people to be rewarded for their acquiescence and to draw attention away from their unfortunate realities. These “doses of morphine,” as one interviewee described were manifested in things like football, music, art, entertainment, or big festivals. Overall the same interviewee said that they were all “stupid” things that she likened to a mother giving her baby chocolate as a temporary fix to make it stop crying, but “chocolate” was not life.\textsuperscript{198}

Although the older people had grown accustomed to this dynamic, the young people were born into it and were distraught by their social oppression. They were not allowed to organize together or to be members of opposition parties. Interviewees noted that the only place where the youth could come together was the football stadium, so it became a place for jobless people to express their anger against the government’s authority. The regime could not react too violently though, because it was better for the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{195} Interview (5.5.25). \\
\textsuperscript{196} Interview (14.6.1). \\
\textsuperscript{197} Interview (16.6.1). \\
\textsuperscript{198} Interview (6.5.26). 
\end{flushleft}
youth to act out in a stadium than it was to act out in politics, maintaining a delicate balance between oppression and freedom. Growing frustration and resentment of hundreds of thousands of unemployed youth without futures juxtaposed alongside handfuls of the privileged few driving Mercedes and Hummers was palpable and progressively worsened in the last ten years of Ben Ali’s presidency.  

This new generation was not willing to settle for the lives that previous generations had settled for, and arguably benefited from for the most part. As one source highlighted, although it is certain that a substantial percentage of Tunisia’s population had suffered from abject poverty under the Ben Ali regime, Tunisia was a country where people made a “relatively decent living, that hosted a pronounced middle class, good education, freedom to travel, and the ability to live relatively decent lives as long as they did not speak about politics, challenge or question the government.” This may explain why it took a new generation of youth to recognize that “they were being cheated.” Ben Ali did not do what he promised for the youth and by December 2010, they had reached their limit.

A concise review of Tunisia’s political, economic and social conditions functioning under Ben Ali’s tenure at the political apex now reflects the regime’s morbid trajectory. Bellin considers Tunisia a primary case study to understanding the relationship between democratization and labor, maintaining that Tunisia fell into the categorization of a “stalled democracy,” where the possibilities for political liberalization were indeed there, yet hinged on “important changes to state-society relations and the gradual pluralization of power. It could be satisfactory to chock up the regime’s collapse

199 Interview (10.5.30).
200 Interview (20.6.3).
201 Interview (14.6.1).
to an unwavering gap between what she cites as “attenuated authoritarianism and full-fledged democracy,” compounded by the regime’s sheer disinterest in reconfiguring social forces and gradually distributing power.\textsuperscript{202} With the benefit of hindsight, as well as the unprecedented candor that the Tunisian population now has when speaking about the former dictator’s rule, the scholarship is offered new, and pertinent insight to the preconceived perceptions of his regime’s durability to shed new light on the great Tunisian paradox – the violent removal of an unwavering and robust dictatorship.

CHAPTER 3
THE “RASHWA” (BRIBE) STATE

Tunisia has long been viewed as a major success story in the Arab World for its unique economic performance, vested in steady GDP growth and per capita income levels that rise high above those in its neighboring countries. It has been repeatedly heralded by the world’s international financial institutions (IFI’s) boasting successful indicators behind its atypical economic trajectory, despite an entrenched authoritarian backdrop. However, the realities of Tunisia’s political-economy were dramatically clarified amidst national demonstrations that emerged in late 2010, calling for substantive improvements to the country’s fledging economy, a more balanced distribution of state wealth, services and development initiatives, and most shocking, unprecedented universal demands for civil and political liberties. The results of these courageous challenges to Ben Ali’s brutal authoritarian regime resulted in the removal of his symbolic crown and the end to the rule of what many believed would be an enduring dynasty. After only 28 days of organized protests that eventually amassed the population of Tunis along Habib Bourguiba Avenue, the symbolic artery in the center of the country’s capital city, Ben Ali and his family fled the country and relinquished the power that he had strategically amassed during his years in office. The ensuing “Jasmine Revolution” has had profound impacts on the historic evolution of the Tunisian political experience that had been indiscriminately revoked under both Ben Ali and his predecessor Habib Bourguiba. The exciting prospects for democratization and the relief to an economic system that had been choked by the greed
and malignant habits of the regime and its supporters are at the forefront of a carefully
guided experiment that the Tunisian people have begun.

A critical component to explaining sustained political authority restricted to the
hands of just two men in half a century is the nourishment of a viable and productive
economy, largely responsible for yielding the services and welfare expected by the
population in exchange for its political apathy. The correlations that can be cited
between economic crises faced by the country and insurgence of oppositional rumblings
reinforce the important role of the economy. Devoting a portion of this assessment to
Tunisia’s political-economy is essential to elaborate further on the emergence of the
monumental grievances that ultimately fueled the momentum of mass protests against the
regime, and eventually led to Ben Ali’s downfall. Tunisia’s political development
worked in tandem with economic development through a system of “dirigisme,” or
central management of economic affairs through corporatism. Rather than promoting
economic growth, this system encouraged political stability and kept the regime secure so
long as patronage continued to keep the political elite loyal.203 Sadiki notes three distinct
features of the Ben Ali economy: unity, centralized authority and incremental reform, of
which “unity” can be highlighted as its biggest success story.204

Sources recognized that Ben Ali’s dependence on economic policies tied to IFI
tutelage had been consistent during the transition from Bourguiba, and that the economic
policies that would define the Ben Ali regime had been declared a year prior to the coup

203 Henry, Clement M., “Political Economies of the Maghreb,” in David S. Sorenson, ed., Interpreting the
Zoubir and Haizam Amirah-Fernandez, eds., North Africa: Politics, Region, and the Limits of
under agreements with the World Bank and the IMF specifically.\textsuperscript{205} The political stability of a post-Bourguiba regime was heavily vested in the health and development of Tunisia’s deteriorating economy. And at the onset of his administration, Ben Ali directed much needed attention to improving Tunisia’s economy by remedying relationships with trade unions and public organizations. Primary concerns rested in re-identifying economic incentives, concessions and guarantees to ease the flow of resources between the private and public sectors, to promote competition, and to safeguard the rights of the working class. This also reflected a trendy shift in foreign policy that swept across the Arab world in the late 1980s and early 1990s as regimes chose to adapt slightly to economic adjustment programs sponsored by the world’s IFI’s, which often stressed political readjustment caveats and subsequent loosening of political repression like expanded pluralism, and as in the Tunisian example, national elections.\textsuperscript{206} In fact, Tunisia is considered the impetus for many of these unprecedented waves of political and economic reform. All of these relatively superficial changes did little to destabilize the government’s central role in the economy and deviated from initial promises of self-sustainability, since the Tunisian economy was largely reliant on the support of a Western financial support system. Ben Ali’s greatest accomplishments stem from his ability to balance a fragile financial system contingent upon foreign aid and stimulus programs, and distributing wealth across competitive coopted factions of his government.

Across the Middle East, cooptation and corporatism became temporary, yet effective strategies to building domestic alliances and maintaining power, ultimately defining a political structure that was built on corporate arrangements and various

\textsuperscript{205} Interview (11.5.30).
organizational “modalities,” rather than systems based on traditional democratic values. Furthermore, this new era of state corporatism functioned as a model of subordination over mass organizations while simultaneously securing greater organization over a selective group of corporatists whose activities were bound by laws and defined by state-led national development objectives, thereby distracting newly enfranchised factions of the population from deteriorating political mobility and regime accountability. As a result, tangible endeavors to raise national productivity and combat social deficiencies like illiteracy were achieved through a discourse of national unity, as emphasized by Ben Ali in his initial years in office that was reinforced by regime elites and facilitated by an inclusive rhetoric.\textsuperscript{207} This structure was further supported by a simultaneous exclusion of the old political oligarchy, which was replaced with a new coalition of supporters mobilized through corporatist organizations and a structured system of subordination where competition was eliminated and power revolved around the executive. The resulting resources that accumulated in the hands of the executive enabled regime permeability throughout the state by way of institution-building supported by an overwhelming bureaucracy, which reified the regime’s authority and robustness.\textsuperscript{208} Authoritarianism became normalized amid calls for national unity and nationalization projects, like social programs and development initiatives in which civil society actors may have rejected the political system that subdued them but continued for the most part, to remain committed to the project, making them part of the obstacle to democratization.\textsuperscript{209} And eventually, new concerns developed across the population that shifted from economic sustainability and domestic strife to the use of Tunisia’s

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid., pp. 7-8.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid., p. 13.
international aid and reversion to traditional practices of corruption among the nation’s elite.\textsuperscript{210}

The economic success that once supported Ben Ali’s legitimacy to the presidency gradually evolved into a more sinister vessel of authority, where political expression was sacrificial for economic viability across the population. Sadiki recognizes how the construction of the regime’s political identity fell in tandem with its economic development policies, vested in corporatism and “dirigisme.” State control of the economy became a tool for entrenching political quietism, where marginalized segments of the population were forced to pay political deference to Ben Ali’s rule and forfeit individual rights for food. Essentially, goods were awarded for political acquiescence under the nation’s new model of “economic reformism put to the service of political particularism.” Tunisians recognized this “deal,” where politics were left to the president, and in exchange he let them eat. This philosophy has acquired the term “khubzism” and warrants that “you eat and you keep quiet,” marking “an unmistakable trajectory” towards a strong state at the expense of society.\textsuperscript{211} This economic reality was a fundamental pillar of the regime and ensured prolonged stability insofar as it was capable of continuing to supply food to the population and maintain its end of the bargain.

The “constitutional coup” occurred during a period of economic losses and consistent bankruptcies. The façade of economic infallibility that had been maintained by Tunisia’s personalistic leader, infamous for directly noting that he alone embodied the state, had been cracked wide-open amid the ascension of a new president intent on


\textsuperscript{211} Sadiki, pp. 126-127.
responding to national calls for democracy, liberalization and improvements to the economy. The government responded to the latter by offering more low-interest long-term loans to export-driven enterprises; however, the state’s unrelenting grip on the financial sector may have made investors weary and preestablished private business owners aloof to policies of economic reform.\textsuperscript{212} It is likely that any liberalization policies endorsed by the regime were strategies of resistance to its demise by restructuring itself through constant negotiations between the “public” and “private” realms, consciously exerting its authority through delegation and control. Some scholars note that the privatization of the state does not necessarily mean the loss of its capacities of control or cannibalization by private interests, but rather a response induced by national and international transformation.\textsuperscript{213} Nevertheless, highlighting the modus operandi of structural adaptation cowers to the unprecedented economic liberalization that occurred through the development of a substantial private capitalist sector in Ben Ali’s early years, and what many believed was the “space for the development of autonomous sources of economic power that might imaginably countervail the state one day.”\textsuperscript{214}

Ben Ali inherited the Bourguiba system, brokering the same social contract as Bourguiba. However, as described in Chapter 1, economic downturn and forced implementation of financial reforms during Bourguiba’s later years constrained the government’s ability to provide the social services that it vowed to distribute in exchange for political acquiescence. This social contract policy that carried over from Bourguiba


\textsuperscript{214} Angrist, p. 178.
was unsustainable and as one source noted, allowed the elites operating in an empowered and reinforced class system to dictate the country’s economic trajectory\textsuperscript{215}, which ultimately yielded a higher degree of capitalism, privatization and state retraction from the economy. Interviewees noted that the subsequent liberalization of the Bourguiba economy spurred the development of a competitive middle class and a more privileged society that had become accustomed to private sector growth, which it continued to demand after Ben Ali’s coup primarily because the middle class could afford private services that the state had relinquished for economic austerity. However, “if you were poor, you were forced to rely on the state,” which meant that your access to the welfare that had initially been promised was limited once Ben Ali arrived.\textsuperscript{216}

Additionally, by its very nature however, the liberalization of the private sector was painstakingly gradual and never functioned with candid independence from government control – prompting many to underscore the extreme ambiguity of the “public,” and “private,” and consequently the process of privatization in general making Tunisia a country strongly “marked by interventionism.”\textsuperscript{217} The state’s role in the economy focused largely on intervening to establish tariffs and other mechanisms to impose restrictions on imports, distribute subsidized credit and readjust the exchange rate to invoke critical advantage to specific domestic manufacturers often beholden to the state. Since a substantial portion of economic actors were reliant on the ruling party and the state for their livelihoods, both capitalists and workers were reluctant to speak out against the unevenly professed rules of the political game for fear that the retribution

\textsuperscript{215} Interview (3.5.24).
\textsuperscript{216} Interview (2.5.23).
\textsuperscript{217} Hibou and Hulsey, p. 197.
from political authorities would result in material disaster.\textsuperscript{218} Lawson expands on this particular issue by noting that only lukewarm political allegiance was professed among members of the private sector in their expressions of support for the regime’s RCD party in Ben Ali’s early years.\textsuperscript{219}

**Economic Regionalization:**

The majority of the indicators that yield Tunisia’s impressive economic growth are pulled from the mid-1990s after the economic downturn inherited by Ben Ali in his rise to the presidency had passed. Prior to the onset of the Arab Spring in December 2010, Tunisian politics were fairly stable, partly from its successful and vigorous attempts to root out viable opposition (discussed in the previous chapter), but also for its liberal economic policies that sought to reduce budget deficits, cut inflation and open the economy to foreign trade. A relatively high living standard stemming from an economy non-reliant on oil and gas resources made the country an emulative economic model for other Arab states\textsuperscript{220}; however, contemporary history has unveiled the problematic features of the economy that shattered previous conceptions of its successful development. Noting now that the predominant factors that led to the country’s political uprisings in 2010 reflected dire economic realities faced by marginalized populations astray from the capital and its surrounding neighborhoods, we recognize the importance of reviewing these features through a more thorough lens to understand how the regime was forcibly removed.

\textsuperscript{218} Angrist, p. 199.
Interviewees echoed Ben Ali’s paramount focus on broadcasting an image of positive economic growth and development, both to the more privileged sectors of Tunisian society and to the world to reinforce his legitimacy. The regime “spent a lot of money” to generate and improve its image, as one participant noted, particularly in foreign media. Ben Ali intended to juxtapose the more “rough” oppressive elements of his regime to the benevolence that he derived from nurturing a successful economy, constantly championing Tunisia as an emulative pupil of the IFI’s for example.

For one interviewee domestic politics factors were “quite simple;” the regime obeyed the World Bank and the IMF by implementing their adjustment programs to protect the economy “but it was a fake obedience.” The regime showed the world that it was complying with the recommendations laid out by the IFI’s, but in reality, it had been producing false figures to deceive onlookers of the economy’s real failures, which also fooled the Tunisian people by perpetuating a lie that the country was “not very poor.” The welfare programs that actually existed for example were geared towards supporting the wealthy class, while the majority of programs aimed at tackling poverty and focusing on development were simply jargon.

In their telling study on the country’s economy under the Ben Ali regime, Hibou, Meddeb, and Hamzi claim that the IFI’s were responsible for helping to “spread the image of an ‘economic miracle’ performed by the Tunisian government.” By deconstructing the country’s allegedly stable and prosperous economy, the authors identify “key [processes] in developing the fiction of the Ben Ali regime as a ‘model student’” by drawing comparisons that were temporally and geographically incoherent; modifying the construction of indicators; systematically

221 Interview (14.6.1).
222 Interview (11.5.30).
223 Interview (10.5.30).
forgetting past performances; appropriating social phenomena; selecting information to conceal any which did not send the ‘right’ message; presenting “figures that were either shown or hidden, depending on their relevance to official discourse;” and finally, shifting the meaning of words.\textsuperscript{224}

When reviewing the numbers in absolute terms, the positive perceptions that onlookers developed with regard to overall economic performance are not surprising. Rivlin cites several examples of the successful trends in the economy between 1995 and 2003 (apart from the aims of an identified modernizing, manufacturing sector which remained relatively stagnant) through exceptional growth in the mechanical engineering and electronics sectors. Similar growth in leading export sectors, specifically textiles, clothing and leather increased by 134 percent between 1990 and 2003. Still, four primary concerns hindered the potential of Tunisia’s economy under Ben Ali, even during a period of successful growth: agriculture, a weak private sector, an unfavorable international environment, and unemployment.\textsuperscript{225}

**Positive Economic Growth – Statistics Supercede Sociology:**

The manipulation of the country’s economic data was the way the regime was able to generate false perceptions to its more bleak economic realities. Tunisia was considered modern and hosted economic success\textsuperscript{226}, but as one interviewee highlighted, “all of Tunisia cannot be lumped together.” The government only chose to develop the Sahel coastline and not the Interior. As a result, indicators show that the economy was


\textsuperscript{225} Rivlin, p. 206.

\textsuperscript{226} Interview (16.6.1).
witnessing positive growth, but only a fraction of the population actually benefited from this growth making it a statistical fact but not a sociological one. Positive figures highlighting 5% annual growth did not come close to having a holistic influence on the country, and as the source elaborated, “manipulation of the statistics and expertise was a strategy to validate the image of the Tunisian model.” One interviewee claimed that the state budget was officially zero when considering the huge income disparity between the Sahel and the Interior. Furthermore, nobody knew accurate details about unemployment until after the revolution – the regime claimed 14% but it was probably double that. One interviewee believed that Ben Ali created “two Tunisias:” one that was like Europe and another that was like Bangladesh; where shocking details of people eating food from the garbage without healthcare or basic services were revealed. Political programs purposely ignored the Interior and left many without even the most basic services like running water or electricity, dilapidated infrastructure and unclean drinking water. Meanwhile Ben Ali gave the impression that the lower class could be helped and that he was a “good father” for alleviating their grievances.

Specifically, this observation reflects that regionalization had become a habitual, and entrenched policy that Ben Ali had inherited from Bourguiba, but it was one that he chose to accentuate. Participants all agreed that Bourguiba and his Neo Destour Party only focused on developing the Sahel region and more specifically, targeted neighborhoods in certain cities that reflected the personal ties regime elites and influential

227 Interview (14.6.1).
228 Interview (7.5.27).
229 Interview (16.6.1).
230 Interview (6.5.26).
231 Interview (3.5.24).
232 Interview (3.5.24); Interview (6.5.26).
personalities had to those areas.\textsuperscript{233} Although the Interior saw limited development around village centers, government programs never expanded far beyond these areas.\textsuperscript{234} Beyond choosing to privilege their hometowns and the people who supported their rise to prominence, it is relatively unclear as to why the Interior was strategically neglected by the Tunisian government, both under the periphery of Bourguiba and Ben Ali.\textsuperscript{235} Perhaps these growing regional disparities can be explained by an overrepresentation of people from the Sahel within the Tunisian administration, and the Interior’s allegiance to Salah Ben Yusuf (a Pan Arab nationalist), responsible for a schism in Habib Bourguiba’s Neo-Destour party, which negatively impacted the relationship between the government and the countryside. Sources agreed that the western part of the country had been “forgotten, ignored, untouched by development, and stricken by poverty.” Unemployment rates in these areas easily reached 50\% from lack of opportunity lower education levels.\textsuperscript{236} The fact that the revolution originated in the Interior was not surprising when considering the figures, and as one interviewee noted, would make any ruler’s demise inevitable in a country that had become so divided.\textsuperscript{237}

\textbf{Caisse 26/26 and the Image of Development:}

Specifically, when considering the poverty-alleviating policies geared towards maintaining solidarity across the country, the establishment of the “Caisse 26-26 National Solidarity Fund (NSF), which claimed to allocate large sums of money to the needy and contributed to infrastructure projects in the country’s poorest neighborhoods,
the incentives do not appear to be entirely economically-driven. Scholars now recognize that targeting development projects in particularly vulnerable “incubators” for Islam became a selective feature of the country’s political-economy scheme, where development was seen as a secular force to limit the radicalization and politicization of Islam. However, regardless of the strategy’s hidden agenda, it would be unfair to neglect the obvious benefits the NSF offered. Since the program’s inception in 1992 (presumably orchestrated to damper outcries over the Islamist crackdown) supposedly 2 million Tunisians had directly benefited from its services through the construction of schools, modern housing, roads, water and electricity. Still, these services are conceived more as political payoffs in a “deal” brokered between the regime and its supporters, whereby state services were offered in exchange for sustained political quietism.\(^{238}\) Sadiki underscores that this arrangement was essentially a quasi-tactic contract (marginally modified from the social contract under Bourguiba) between the state and society that represented a “quintessential example of economic reformism put to the service of political particularism.”\(^{239}\)

For interviewees, the purpose of the Caisse 26/26 was irrelevant because it represented another hollow gesture in the state’s economic propaganda. One source noted that the stark imbalance between the country’s urban, and remote poor areas was proof that the fund was a sham, while the regime continued to disseminate propaganda under the Caisse 26/26 guise to show that it was developing the impoverished Interior.\(^{240}\) In her personal experience, one interviewee explained that she had been routinely denied permission to conduct charity work because the regime was concerned that the realities of

\(^{238}\) Sadiki, pp. 126-127.
\(^{239}\) Ibid.
\(^{240}\) Interview (17.6.2).
pervasive poverty outside of the Sahel would be revealed and potentially broadcasted to a wider audience. To appease frustrations over these types of restrictions, the regime established its own charitable programs and encouraged the population to donate money to various “Caisses” (funds) that routinely represented a “brilliant idea” supposedly linked directly to the president himself, and reflected development or social initiatives focusing on poverty, infrastructure, and programs targeting the Interior. These funds generally received warm public endorsement (private companies would be exonerated from paying taxes for donating) and in his early years, polished Ben Ali’s positive and “fatherly” image anchored in his perceived interest in helping the country and nurturing Tunisia’s modernity. However, the sad reality is that these funds were rarely spent under the pretenses for which they had been collected, and were simply rerouted to the President’s personal coffers. Not only did the regime want to prevent the realities of the country’s stark poverty and its failures from being revealed, it also intended to keep its acquisition of public charity secret, probably to ensure that future Caisses continued to solicit public endorsement, and more specifically, received adequate funding.\textsuperscript{241} The Caisses represented just a marginal insight into the regime’s propensity to corruption, which eventually evolved into an indispensable feature of the economy.

**Understanding the Economy – “Liberal with a Savage Dimension:”**\textsuperscript{242}

“No government is founded exclusively on tactics of repression and violence, even when ascribing the classification of a “police” state to the Tunisian case. Repressive regimes are heavily reliant on alternative mechanisms that extend beyond the police apparatus,

\textsuperscript{241} Interview (5.5.25).
\textsuperscript{242} Interview (3.5.24).
often working through economic, political and social mechanisms to impose tactical authoritarian systems.\textsuperscript{243}

The economics of political oppression played a fundamental role in consolidating the state’s control over mechanisms and procedures that influenced the domestic business climate; and so we stray slightly from the political discourse that besets repression as the optimal tool for political subjugation. When asked to describe the economy under Ben Ali’s presidency, arguably the most troubling byproduct of the regime’s brutality, participants shared very vivid and disturbing accounts and universally acknowledged its inward orientation toward the ruling family. By the early 1990s, a strange and inhospitable business environment emerged, in which Ben Ali’s family appeared to adopt a competitive posture against the national economy, coopting industry after industry and solicited bribe after bribe.\textsuperscript{244} The economy was based on an unequal network of connections and relationships that compartmented a privileged faction of society and prevented everyone else from prospering, eventually yielding a huge social disparity between a handful of billionaires from Ben Ali’s clan, and everyone else.

The constraints placed on domestic businessmen and entrepreneurs is a formidable example that explains the state’s meddling in affairs of the so-called “private” sector and the “price that must be paid” for those who sought certain advantages by cooperating with the state. The structure that often weighs on the liberal mobility of private sector entrepreneurs is what protects them and provides benefits including: social peace, geopolitical stability, market protectionism, fiscal exoneration, and administrative

\textsuperscript{243} Hibou and Hulsey, p. 187.
\textsuperscript{244} Interview (3.5.24).
exemptions. The protection offered by the state is thus considered adequate compensation for a political system conducive to unrelenting obtrusiveness and control, where the demands of the regime were translated to “more or less obligatory gifts” to its RCD party, police associations and directly to Ben Ali’s clan. This relationship specifically reduces the idea of “politics” of coercion by the regime to an “exchange commodity.” This system was cyclical, where the state inevitably recruited and encouraged the subjugation of its victims to the political system’s disciplinary power, through their participation in the very system that fueled a logic of negotiation and settlement. Thus, the private economy perpetuated profound mechanisms of “resistance” that simultaneously functioned as practices of accommodation, agreements and negotiations.245

In general, as one source noted, Ben Ali’s political economy policy was “wrong” because “it did not allow Tunisian people to do anything in their own country.” It was almost impossible to start an economic project or to build a business. If you did and it was successful, the Trabelsi family would come to you and demand 50% of the company. Whether or not you agreed, they would eventually just take everything from you and say “bye bye.”246 Another interviewee shared the same view, explaining that the family of the president, and especially the family of his wife were extortionists: when someone wanted to invest money in a business, the ruling family would require “X%” of the benefits even if they had not even invested anything themselves. Anytime there was a flourishing business its owner would be subject to bogus taxes, forced to sell, or obliged to take the ruling family as a partner. A progress report issued by the World Bank in

245 Hibou and Hulsey, pp. 189-190.
246 Interview (6.5.26).
2007 highlighted this discriminatory intervention by the government: “Although Tunisia ranks well on a number of competitiveness and business climate indicators, special treatment of well-connected individuals is a growing concern of the Tunisian business community and may partially explain the low level of domestic private investment. Beyond its effect on investment, weak public sector accountability, and the resulting limited involvement of beneficiaries with public service providers, is likely to reduce the effectiveness of public service provision.”\(^\text{247}\) If people refused, the ruling family would force them out of the deal and threaten their livelihood, some even being forced into exile.\(^\text{248}\)

Rare are the ones who succeeded without the regime’s complicity.\(^\text{249}\) Most succeeded only by surrendering and becoming a member of the Ben Ali “gang.”\(^\text{250}\) By choosing to cooperate with the ruling family, many people accepted certain sacrifices for guaranteed assurances that their businesses and interests would be protected for their willingness to bargain with the state, at least in the beginning.\(^\text{251}\) By the early 1990s, several members of the ruling family had monopolized the country’s economy, and literally liquidated their coopted businesses to avoid paying taxes to the state. Ultimately, people stopped investing in the economy because of the ruling family’s corruption and unchallenged authority. Lack of transparency or visibility in the economy meant that the ruling family could simply seize your assets without justification, which was a risk that private sector investors eventually chose to avoid altogether.\(^\text{252}\)

\(^{248}\) Interview (10.5.30).
\(^{249}\) Interview (5.5.25).
\(^{250}\) Ibid.
\(^{251}\) Interview (10.5.30).
\(^{252}\) Interview (2.5.23).
A primary example of this mode of power relations is revealed in the Tunisian tax system administered under the Ben Ali regime. An undisclosed tax system offered the regime high degrees of latitude in pursuing illicit negotiations with Tunisian businessmen in its early years. However, aforementioned free trade agreements signed between the government and the EU, as well as decreased income from oil, had dramatic impacts on government revenue and forced the intensification of tax controls to meet the surplus. The latter years of Ben Ali’s presidency witnessed overt dissatisfaction amongst key private sector businessmen over the arbitrary nature of tax controls and the weight of back payments. Tax evasion was an integral feature of the Tunisian economy for decades, and was leveraged by both Bourguiba and Ben Ali as a tool for legitimacy but was defended publicly as a claim to encourage the “development of a national bourgeoisie.” While the extent to which policies of tax evasion were abandoned by the regime in times of economic hardship, it still relied on tax collection as a source of negotiation to retain support of prominent corporate clients who supported the status quo. This system also presented significant benefits to the client. Hibou and Hulsey note that engaging in tax evasion assumes several guises: first, when businessmen do it “unintentionally as an unexpected result of an imperfect command of rules and regulations;” second, to alleviate financial cost of an enterprise; and finally, as a direct manifestation of a power struggle with fiscal authorities. They conclude that the latter motivation outweighs the others in the Tunisian case, since the fiscal arm is often used for repression by the state, and is considered a “site of struggle, power relations, compromises, and the exercise of power more generally.” They highlight further that “fiscal practices are never simply a game of negotiations and settlements;” they are too

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Hibou and Hulsey, pp. 189-190.
often inaccurately understood as substitutes for political representation or signs of “resistance” by civil society. Ben Ali understood the political leverage that was embodied in the imposition of tax laws and translated fiscal policies to instruments of punishment during periods of heightened political opposition, where tax, and social security collection were more diligently monitored as the first mode of regime resistance to domestic political rumblings. When this strategy failed, the regime became more reliant on its omnipresent security apparatus, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Some interviewees noted that the standard of living was more or less ok, but it as a cosmetic situation because the regime never engaged in long term planning, so as it matured, people’s lives worsened because life became more expensive, and salaries and opportunities remained stagnant. Youth participants bluntly stated that there were simply no jobs. Tendencies toward privatization and entrepreneurship were quickly reversed, and private businesses were not encouraged to develop as independent and free enterprises because the government could not steal from them or control them. Even the black market had been eliminated because the regime could not make money off of it. By 2009, the economic and social conditions were not good, and according to one interviewee, there were many indicators that showed that the country was approaching the “end of something,” people did not know “what that end was, but it was something.”

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254 Ibid., pp. 190-191.
255 Interview (8.5.27).
256 Interview (5.5.25).
257 Interview (6.5.26).
258 Interview (20.6.3).
259 Interview (6.5.26).
260 Interview (11.5.30).
Ben Ali’s Mafia – The Key to His Undoing:

This “end” would be determined by the ruling family’s uninhibited spending habits and rapacious self-indulgence in the public sector. The regime utilized its political mobility and coercive tactics to realize economic opportunities through patronage and control. Privatization encouraged the development of corruption and the monopolization of wealth by “clans” close to Ben Ali. Since, the private sector still remained highly dependent on the state for public intervention, private intermediaries were forced to recognize their powers in relation to their proximity to the highest function, which was public (i.e. the state). As a result, state run enterprises commanded no accountability to those operating along the blurred line between the public and private, and enabled unregulated flows of assets accrued to the “state” to freely travel from the Tunisian Central Bank to the personal accounts of the ruling family and its supporters.

This mode of transfer became a cornerstone to the despicable obsession of the Ben Ali regime to garner national assets, and explains how successful economic trends akin to Tunisia’s contemporary development failed to produce the egalitarian distribution of resources needed to subdue the political grievances of impoverished populations living in the Interior. Systemic penetration by the regime into a fundamentally haphazard private sector, coupled with a highly regulated public sector void of transparency, contributed to the formation of a textbook Kleptocracy regime consisting of two families (the Ben Alis and the Trabelsis) who controlled all of the country’s top economy, tried to

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261 Rivlin, p. 209.
262 Hibou and Hulsey, p. 197.
take part of everyone’s business in the country\textsuperscript{263}, and spared no industry from its greed and thievery. The deliberate policies of self-indulgence that became fundamental to the regime’s identity justify its affinity to stability as the primary feature of the economy. Kleptocracies are largely characterized as a structured form of political and government corruption where the government exists to augment the personal wealth and power of regime elites at the expense of a wider population, often without the pretense of state services. Considering the time it took to consolidate authority and neglect its role as a provider of public services, it would be unfair to categorize the Ben Ali presidency in its entirety as a kleptocracy, but it certainly qualifies in its latter years, where state funds were directly embezzled to the personal accounts of members of the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families. Due to a lack of adequate oversight by outside parties, and intimate knowledge of state assets and their dispersal across the national budget, Ben Ali amassed a fortune by stealing directly from his people. Still, political elites in professed Kleptocracies need stability to ensure the “conversion of their transient political influence into economic goods and services” that will be kept within the hands of the ruling family.\textsuperscript{264} This philosophy defines the behavior of the Ben Alis and the Trabelsis when considering the prioritization of resource allocation to the security apparatus and the regime’s high-level of permeability within the domestic economy. The associated effects identified in the scholarship of this form of autocratic rule largely identify with the Tunisian case and provide the most jarring explanations for the regime’s ultimate removal from power.

Kleptocrats perpetuate an institutionalized parasitic degradation of the economy, political affairs and civil rights, discouraging prospects for foreign investment and

\textsuperscript{263} Interview (20.6.3).
\textsuperscript{264} Henry, p. 205.
weakening the overall domestic market. Since kleptocrats are notorious for laundering funds that are typically accrued from tax collection or in Tunisia’s case, tariffs and private sector profiteering policies, the system has a dire impact on the livelihoods of nearly everyone living in the country. The embezzling of funds often earmarked for public amenities, welfare programs, and infrastructure further degrades the universal quality of life and squanders the resources needed to sustain and develop critical social services. The gradual deterioration of expected government services, like proper roads, strong education systems, adequate hospitals and affordable commodities represented tangible sub causes of the regime’s very public thievery, and caused many to refer to the ruling elites as a local Mafia that relied on coercion and intimidation as strategies to compel the flow of assets – even at the lowest levels of society – to the regime’s coffers.

Rampant corruption, traditional nepotism, and clan-type bourgeois kleptocracy were intrinsically linked to Ben Ali’s regime, as its cancerous tentacles gradually penetrated all sectors of the economy over a 23-year life-span. Particularly malignant, were Ben Ali’s parasitic in-laws and the country’s First Lady, “la Régente de Carthage,” Leila Trabelsi, who were linked to numerous corruption scandals for stealing state and private assets, including: “illegal appropriation of prime real estate, and acquisition of formally state-owned companies at substantially depreciated prices.” Tunisian citizens began to view the entrenched, systemic practice of the [royal] family’s greed and self-indulging behavior with disgust abreast poor economic performance and a severe reduction in the quality of state services. The regime’s inappropriate spending habits and displacement from the reality of the economic hardships that its citizens faced

266 Sadiki, pp. 128-129.
began to slowly produce a buffer of illegitimacy that separated the state from society and ultimately depoliticized the relationship.

By 1990, corruption had become palpable across the country. The behavior of the president and his wife branded them as “thieves” and “criminals” because in addition to whatever they simply took from the state, they managed an economy that had been designed to steal from the people. Following Ben Ali’s departure in 2011, it was revealed that the ruling family had embezzled 1/3 of the county’s state budget to their personal bank accounts; funds that could have been used to develop or invest in the country, but instead as one interviewee noted, the “bandit bought buildings and condominiums.” Meanwhile, his family started to run the country like a Mafia, supposedly engaging in illicit activities like dealing drugs, extorting bribes, and compelling business partnerships under threats of violence or financial ruin.

Most interviewees trace Ben Ali’s affinity for corruption to his merger with his wife’s family, claiming that prior to the couple’s marriage, Ben Ali was probably “cleaner.” Participants also noted that Ben Ali’s daughters from his first marriage never adopted the audacious spending habits of their in-laws. Ben Ali’s in-laws allegedly exacerbated the levels of uninhibited spending to an extent that the president began losing control over them, and as one source added, “maybe he also lost control after he started to enjoy the lifestyle as well.” By empowering his in-laws and putting them in positions of high political authority, they accumulated vast wealth and became financial behemoths that rapidly dominating and drained the country’s economy.

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267 Interview (7.5.27).
268 Interview (3.5.24).
269 Ibid.
270 Interview (5.5.25).
271 Interview (8.5.27).
Meanwhile, the periodic IFI reports failed to recognize these emerging, corrosive features, largely given the fact that the indicators used to monitor the economy – and consequently provided the foundations for Tunisia’s positive classification – did not account for this immaterial economy that had largely been hijacked by the state’s network of elites and the ruling family. The recent economic history of Tunisia is one of an increasing deficient growth model to which few paid attention and largely explains the important socioeconomic dimension of the 2010 uprisings. Complete silence was kept on this phenomenon in the media as well as the academic research or the technical reports of the IFI’s, or the EU. In contrast, Western attention has been exclusively focused on macro-economic balances and liberalization drive along neo-liberal ideology.\textsuperscript{272} Even independent observers that were persistently critical of the Ben Ali regime continually championed and perpetuated the idea of the “Tunisian exception,” where successful economic performance downplayed the “police machinery” that ran the country. Shortly before the realities of economic disparity were brought to the forefront of the world’s media stage in 2010, scholars certainly recognized that cracks were beginning to form in the façade of the “economic miracle” that had made Tunisia noteworthy within the region. Sadiki notes that the use of the economy as a tool to “tighten regime control over people’s lives and political choice” became obvious, where economic opportunity became linked to political loyalty to the regime. Simple administrative procedures represented a forum of political choice that forcibly reified regime support akin to an individual’s personal needs – whether a person wanted to procure a loan from the bank or

\textsuperscript{272} Jebnoun, Nourredine, Contributing comment. 4.11.12.
enter a particular university, it became common practice to present a voting card with the application.\textsuperscript{273}

The Tunisian government system, reliant largely upon allegiances, networks and clients was characterized by the increasing involvement of individuals and groups in a system of relations that “kept a hold” on society, and prevented individuals from speaking out, criticizing or opposing – guided largely by a pervasive system of corruption that gradually spiraled out of control and enveloped everyone.\textsuperscript{274} Scholars note that it became impossible to stop the “chain of reciprocity and dependency” and thus, increasingly difficult to avoid intensifying the use of “exchange, financial exploitation, and clientelism.” Hibou notes that this “consolidation simultaneously produces fault lines” and opened up gaps for denunciation and criticism, and thus kept people silent while feeling disapproval. Dissatisfaction for these mechanisms of governance does not translate to opposition, but rather, “silence and cover-ups are the expression of an increasing sense of unease and a gradual delegitimization of the main techniques of government.”\textsuperscript{275} This assessment largely provides a rational explanation to prolonged governance by the repressive regime and those living under the myth of economic miracle, where malignant features of the system slowly erode the legitimacy of the regime and feelings of universal dissatisfaction fester to the point of retaliation.

By 2009, Ben Ali was considered nothing more than a thief, rather than a leader. He and his family were running a quintessential Mafia state that fostered pervasive discontent across every economic class in the country. The ruling family had repeatedly

\textsuperscript{273} Sadiki, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{275} Ibid., pp. 278-279.
been raping the country over two decades and broadly marginalized its support base, leaving only oppressive tools like force and fear as mechanisms to retain its authority and derive legitimacy.276

**The Rashwa State:**

In line with traditional features of the kleptocratic state, it had become apparent that the country’s system of corruption had implemented a national dependence on the ruling family, evidenced by an intrinsic “rashwa” (bribe) driving an illusory “state” that functioned unofficially to garner resources through menial and constant daily exchanges bound by explicit legal parameters drawn by the official state. As one participant explained, this traditional rashwa – without which nothing and no one could operate277 – touched and controlled everyone and penetrated every part of society. Corruption functioned within the law and was like a web that touched the whole society, implicating everyone at a certain level.278 Interviewees indicated that corruption was in all domains; the president’s family was always involved, whether it was in the smallest exchanges or the largest projects – “cars, banks, telecommunications…everything.”279 It was a phenomenon that grew exponentially and impacted every aspect of life, including sports, education, finance, culture…everything. As a result, society grew poorer, to an extent that even the people in the middle class could not live easily because they could not afford to pay for daily needs.280 The rashwa system was ever-present across the country

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276 Interview (3.5.24).
278 Interview (16.6.1).
279 Interview (7.5.27).
280 Ibid.
and reminded people that they could not do anything without the approval of the ruling family, and for many, represents the principle factor that pushed people to finally speak out against the government. One interviewee noted that you could not receive loans from banks, fulfill federal certifications, obtain approval for official paperwork, receive educational scholarships, or take jobs in the civil service unless you paid the family’s rashwa and that of their proxies.  

Muhammad Bouazizi’s case reflects the national frustrations that had gradually developed over habitual extortion and its inextricable role in the state’s operational strategy. As a street vendor, the law dictated that he needed to obtain a license to operate a permanent stall but his application went unanswered. Representatives of the state – the police in this case – operating on behalf of the Ministry of Interior confiscated his scales – unofficial state – and would only return them to him if he paid the rashwa, demonstrating the inherent relationship between private extortion and the state’s legal framework. As a result, people considered everything that occurred in Tunisia as illegal, and led participants to assess that the collapse of the regime was vested in the contradiction between a state that enforced laws that forced bribes out of people to support the ruling family. Bouazizi, like too many other forgotten familles de miettes (crumb-fed families) restricted to perpetual poverty, was not immune to this system of rashwa extortion, where even those who had nothing but crumbs to eat, were expected to provide a share to the government in order to survive. One interviewee commented that she had no idea how the country sustained itself or how the economy did not collapse.

281 Interview (10.5.30).
282 Interview (16.6.1).
283 Ibid.
under the weight of such high levels of corruption, once the true figures had been revealed.\textsuperscript{284}

**Managing Unemployment:**

The country’s inhospitable job market was also marred by the regime’s familiar detriments, like extortion, bribery and exploited loyalty to the elites running a police state. Curbing chronic unemployment in an environment non-conducive to independent private enterprise presented a dichotomy destined to usher in dramatic repercussions, both to the potential for economic growth in the country, as well as the political legitimacy of its presidential monarch. Economic analysts have labeled Tunisia’s unemployment debacle as the greatest problem the country faces even amid positive indicators marking its impressive demographic trends by the IFI’s. In recent years, the rate of workers entering the labor market has been increasing, and yields a need for the creation of approximately 110,000 jobs per year to cope with the trend.\textsuperscript{285} The economy failed to grow fast enough or in the right way to accommodate official figures yielding 14-15 percent unemployment rates in the first decade of the new millennium. Under the Ben Ali regime, rampant unemployment was certainly acknowledged as a pivotal grievance to the authoritarian bargain that existed between the government and its people. Yet, the means through which the regime sought to address the problem were intrinsically short-term solutions that failed to pioneer necessary reforms to the economic quagmire—most notably, a lack of job creation or opportunities for work.

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\textsuperscript{284} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{285} Rivlin, p. 198.
Instead, surging unemployment of mostly educated youth was a burden to be bared by the national education system, which had at one time yielded the highest performance in the Arab World. Overall, the labor force had become more educated and the number of women entering the workforce increased following the successful implementation of program’s to expand and improve women’s education. Thus a phenomenon emerged in which a labor-market non-conducive to skilled labor led to underemployment of educated youth – a worrisome trend for proponents of education as a tool for economic development. Furthermore, like many of its Arab counterparts, Tunisia’s emerging graduates lacked the diversification in professional specializations needed to pioneer higher economic returns in local sectors\textsuperscript{286}, which ultimately reflects negatively on the national education system and the degrees that the regime supported. Tunisians looked to other Islamic and Arab cultures like Indonesia, Turkey, and Morocco; all of which appeared to have higher economic growth than Tunisia, which was very odd according to the students who participated in this study, because their country supposedly had great universities, which meant something was “wrong.”\textsuperscript{287} The source added that the youth grew very depressed because of the dire unemployment situation, which forced people to move abroad because there were no opportunities in Tunisia. By the late 1990s, over half a million people were unemployed, job creation was decreasing and 60,000 graduates were entering the job market annually.\textsuperscript{288} For those who could not find jobs, Ben Ali “created a private sector” as an alternative to the high unemployment since, as one college graduate noted, the majority of private sector jobs were reserved for members of the RCD. She indicated that former students had to take tests to demonstrate

\textsuperscript{287} Interview (6.5.26).
\textsuperscript{288} Interview (10.5.30).
employment eligibility after graduating from degree programs, and that membership in the RCD was a powerful prerequisite to gaining employment.\textsuperscript{289}

\textbf{The Educational Agenda – Quantity Over Quality:}

Cognizant of the threats posed by swarms of unemployed youth exiting the education system with few career prospects, the regime sought to buy time by postponing the inevitable influx of university graduates into the labor force by embracing a policy of “over-education,” where opportunities to remain in the national education system were offered in lieu of a job search. Consequently, the regime invested funds for more universities, graduate level institutions, tuition scholarships and salaries for often mediocre professors to house a dissatisfied population of youth that expected jobs. The majority of the country’s youth population had never known another leader or political system than the one they were living under, and naturally began to question the savage restrictions on individual freedoms and liberties they endured in expectation of profitable livelihoods and welfare support from the state. The caliber of the national education system began to rapidly decline, given the surplus of students, lowering standards from lack of competition in specialized programs, inadequate funding from the government, and an overall disillusionment among students and professional faculty over the regime’s depoliticization of the education sector.

One interviewee noted that the decline in educational value was inevitable because the country had undergone a baby boom and that the regime had failed to consider more long term planning to address emerging problems. She noted that in order to respond to the increasing flow of degree-holding graduates into the professional

\textsuperscript{289} Interview (6.5.26).
market, the government opened more and more universities to stave off its responsibility for job creation. Post graduate education facilities flourished simply to get unemployed youth off the streets and to keep them occupied. The regime opened universities on “every street corner” and forced existing programs to raise admissions caps, in some cases increasing masters program quotas from 20 students to 60. Another interviewee noted that ministers would always disguise the country’s regressive indicators from Ben Ali, particularly those dealing with Tunisia’s renowned educational legacy, choosing instead to provide a “quick-fix” to the problem. This particular source, a university professor, explained how she had been directly told by the dean in 2008 that her university needed to add four or five masters programs to keep the youth in schools so that the government could release lower unemployment figures.

As a result, the value of degrees rapidly decreased because education became a quantitative prerogative; preparing for the country’s youth surge was something that could have been anticipated and planned for 10 or 15 years prior, and led to the country’s vast unemployment, but the regime had no interest in addressing the needs of the country until they posed a direct threat to its authority. In addition to the ever-worsening quality of education, participants indicated that the programs that were being created by the government did not “lead students in the right direction;” by preparing them to start businesses with entrepreneurial programs for example. Instead, the programs that

290 Interview (8.5.27).
291 Interview (17.6.2).
292 Interview (7.5.27).
293 Interview (8.5.27).
294 Interview (6.5.26).
were made available to the youth were preparing them for already-inflated industries, like white collar jobs, teachers and civil servants.\textsuperscript{295}

The Trabelsi family’s entrepreneurial endeavors eventually penetrated the education industry as well and led to their personal investments in private education. As a result, the Ministry of Education was discouraged from maintaining its high standards and once emulative education system to limit competition against the Trabelsi family and to ensure profit for their investments.\textsuperscript{296} Additionally, the ruling family’s personal investments in private schools led to the illicit distribution of state-led funding to those particular institutions, rather than to the new public institutions in which the state had invested. One participant noted that the Ministry of Education gave state offered “loans” to build and support the private universities that were established by the Trabelsi family. These state funds – extracted directly from the Tunisian people – were desperately needed by public universities that lacked essential resources and suffered from government neglect.\textsuperscript{297}

The value of degrees lost considerable integrity in the latter years of Ben Ali’s presidency partially as a result of an overt favoritism towards students and faculty that were loyal to the RCD party. A frequent trend in the university system and commonplace across all industries in the country was the blatant practice of political nepotism, where skilled professionals were eventually replaced with people loyal to the regime despite their qualifications, credentials or behavior.\textsuperscript{298} Many of the deans, directors, and

\textsuperscript{295} Interview (8.5.27).
\textsuperscript{296} Interview (17.6.2).
\textsuperscript{297} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{298} Interview (16.6.1).
presidents of the universities were nominated by the palace for reasons that were not always based on competence or efficacy, according to several sources.\textsuperscript{299}

Finally, education suffered under the regime’s oppressive and unrelenting restrictions over material that could be discussed in the classroom. Universities were a major source of political paranoia for the regime, because they housed a high number of disenfranchised youth who were more prone to challenge the regime’s authority. As a result, the university had become a depoliticizing instrument that regurgitated a pre-approved curriculum managed by the regime and imposed certain restrictions on students in order to prepare them for the passive lives they were expected to live after graduating. One interviewee elaborated saying that no one could wear \textit{hijaabs}\textsuperscript{300}, students could not organize unions, students who were not affiliated with the RCD were not allowed to win student elections or receive scholarships. Both student and faculty skills, “accomplishments, achievements and publications were not important, what mattered was the kind of service you could provide to the regime – and that meant being a member of the RCD or writing articles that championed the regime, which would get you whatever you wanted in that case.” Professors lacked all motivation in this environment because they could not even tell the students what they really thought. It was as though they were playing a role to earn a salary. Every program was channeled and had to be validated by the Ministry of Education, essentially muzzling the professors in order to maintain a “consistent harmonization” that prevented any room for independence or means to prepare students for employment and active life.\textsuperscript{301} One of the professors who

\textsuperscript{299} Interview (17.6.2).
\textsuperscript{300} Muslim headscarf worn by women.
\textsuperscript{301} Interview (8.5.27).
participated in this research study noted that she would not have been able to be interviewed if we were in Ben Ali’s Tunisia.  

**Tunisian Political-Economy:**

To many, the Tunisian economy represented one of few triumphs of the Ben Ali reform process, and it continues to gain recognition as one of the most prosperous examples of economic growth in the Middle East. Alexander notes that “most Tunisians tolerated the government’s repression” if it meant lower unemployment and attracted foreign investment. However, the consolidation of wealth across a select group of elites began to shift public opinion and left many both financially disenfranchised and without political participation. Essentially, the “deal” had been broken. Government officials retained a substantially higher degree of control and discretion over the private sector, relying heavily on arbitrating powers to regulate the government-private sector relationship. Although the government is believed to have recognized its limitations as both entrepreneur and financier, it was unwilling to share power with the private sector, utilizing deceptive measures like limiting transparency or clarity with regard to government sponsored contracts, and continuing to act arbitrarily and unpredictably. The country’s large public sector increased opportunities for government-sponsored patronage and control. The Ben Ali regime relied on cooptation and patronage to appease the potential opposition forces close to the epicenter of government power, often paying them off for their loyalty at the expense of a free-market economy encouraging of

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302 Interview (16.6.1).
304 Rivlin, p. 209.
competition and eliminating corruption. Sadiki ascribes Ayubi’s “overstated state” example to this case where the strengths of opposition forces shifted from the economic sector and began to find support in social movements that, as previously mentioned, failed to be fully institutionalized during Ben Ali’s early years in office.

As a result, civil society became a platform for unity and collaboration, yet civil society actors too fell victim to renewed political oppression that implicated civil liberties across society.\textsuperscript{305} We recognize now that the causal relationship between economics and politics envelops a new cultural fold and that authoritarianism cannot be reduced simply to economic and institutional dimensions. As Pratt notes, there is no mutually exclusive relationship between socioeconomic viability and demands for political and civil freedoms. Rather, we understand authoritarian hegemony exerted by a regime to lack a zero-sum credential since the extent to which a dominant group can exert its power reflects the extent to which the dominated group chooses to participate in the system and their belief in the validity of the system. Therefore, a highly functional apparatus in which civil society is constructed at the hands of the state leads onlookers to equate civil society with regime longevity rather than a vessel for democracy and liberalization.\textsuperscript{306} State pioneered civil society ultimately traces resources and power back to the regime, therefore, actions of ordinary people who continue to participate “in the system” that oppresses them fortifies a rigid regime infrastructure that leaves it immune to popular and united contestation.

Through this explanation, and as demonstrated in the Tunisian example, civil society actually abandons a more traditionalist, liberal role as presented by de

\textsuperscript{305} Pratt, p. 4. 
\textsuperscript{306} Ibid., p. 10.
Tocqueville where it functions as a buffer whose institutions exist beyond the state and act to counterbalance state power and prevent despotic rule. Tunisians have relied on a unique system of “self-regulation” during periods of economic or social crisis, where the country has accepted the intervention of a strong state to restore order and prosperity. However, inviting the state into the depths of private enterprise and civil society has enabled unrestricted direct access and greater state control through countervailing measures.\textsuperscript{307} The autonomy with which civil society organizations and NGO’s could function is debatable. Tunisia had thousands of NGO’s at the height of the regime’s most repressive age, but only about a dozen or so were considered truly independent from the government – and not used as a counterweight to oppositional actors in civil society.\textsuperscript{308} Still, it is argued that the domination of civil society under authoritarianism does not destroy it; civil society continues to exist but does not behave or resemble civil society in liberal democratic systems. It has consistently played a role in Middle Eastern case studies of the time period, cited as a catalyst for state building and avenue for citizens to become part of the state.\textsuperscript{309}

Political scientists have adequately highlighted the power of civil society and its influence in exclusionary authoritarian systems. When we delve deeper into the Tunisian case, it is abundantly clear that the role of civil society should not be underestimated, and that in fact, its functionality and evolution throughout the rule of Ben Ali provided a realm of support and expression for Tunisians despite the consistent and unrelenting inhibitions exerted by the regime. Nonetheless, the regional aphorism endures. As Pratt

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\textsuperscript{307} Alexander, Christopher. \textit{Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb}. Routledge: New York, 2010, p. 34. \\
\textsuperscript{309} Pratt, pp. 11-12. 
\end{flushright}
notes in the introduction to her extensive analysis covering the functionality of civil society across the Arab World, the arrival of the “third wave” of democratization (ref. Huntington) compounded by pressures from economic sponsored reform organizations like the IMF or the World Bank that should force traditional authoritarian regimes to open up to more progressive civil society institutions is remiss. Although elements of traditional civil society embodied in NGO’s, women’s groups and human rights organizations have evolved organically under the repressive authoritarian apparatuses characteristic of the region, expected political openings have not emerged in a sustainable way.\textsuperscript{310} Pratt classifies the Tunisian case as a single party example notorious for coopting functionally differentiated organizations, like trade unions, peasant organizations, and professional associations under the regime’s umbrella, thus leaving little room for political or civil society activity independent of the regime and concentrating the possible power and opportunities of these sectors within its hands.\textsuperscript{311} And yet, with all of these slight reforms to Tunisia’s economic, social and political sectors, it too falls into the pervasive discourse over the democratization aphorism, where pivotal structural elements that have come to define the region’s states now serve as clear impediments to democracy and liberalization, despite the fact that in many examples like Tunisia, these elements do exist and have even been reformed as outlined in this analysis. This leaves many to seek explanations from the literature that reflect the nature of Middle Eastern authoritarianism and its relationship to liberalization strategies as a means for prolonging regime strength. Within Posusney and Angrist’s collection of texts on the subject, one author in particular, Eva Bellin addresses this very

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{310} Ibid., p. 1.
\textsuperscript{311} Ibid., p. 3.
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issue and supports a powerful explanation to the Tunisian transitional period, where calls for reform radiated cosmetic notions of political liberalization and prospects for change, while actually discreetly erected a state apparatus that engulfed major factions of society and molded them in a way that suited the strategies of the regime, rather than encouraging the latitude necessary to establish institutions that function beyond the control of the state.

By acknowledging a litany of axioms regarding fledging civil societies incapable of further democracy (sometimes described as empty shells), state-ownership of principle economic stimuli despite evolving structural adjustments, low literacy and education rates, and the region’s overall isolation from democratic “epicenters,” it is clear that the prerequisites needed for democratic growth are absent and explain the failure to catch the third wave. However, beyond these prerequisites, it can be argued further that they are still inadequate to explaining the region’s sustained affinity to authoritarianism, especially since the democratic impulse has manifested itself previously in several ways. Civil society, although often perceived as hollow and ineffective, is active and present, and economies in the region have (often forcibly) liberalized through the encouragement of international financial organizations. Tunisia vividly represents this historic path of development, while also retaining one of the critical characteristics that is used to respond to the authoritarian argument – state capacity and the ability to sustain a monopoly over coercion through an effective and coherent “coercive apparatus.” It is this distinction

Bellin argued, that separates successful cases of revolution from cases of “revolutionary failure or nonoccurrence.”  

**Conclusion:**

The surprising scholarly interpretations and associated testimonies offered throughout this analysis prompt many to question why the Tunisian people allowed unrelenting political oppression to continue to endure amid a stagnant, fledging economy and deteriorating public services. The social contract that assured society’s political obedience in exchange for services and high standards of living evaporated long before Muhammad Bouazizi’s act of self-immolation and a subsequent national uprising against the regime. Both Bellin and Hibou attempt to explain this anomaly through in-depth investigations that reflect upon the relationship between mechanisms for policing and oppression, and the economic miracle by echoing scholars like Michel Foucault for his contributions on socio-economic bases to the exercise of power and the process of knowledge that constituted Ben Ali’s political power, looking specifically to “rationalities of the mechanisms of subjection, submission and consent” Subsequent to the preceding analysis on Ben Ali’s presidency and the functionality of the economy and its accessory to the authoritarian model, dissatisfaction still remains as scholars continue to grapple with the prolonged durability of a closed political system while emphasizing in particular, the temporal variable and its relationship to a relatively prosperous economy. Hibou identifies a polarization in the scholarship and how critics categorize the Ben Ali regime given the conditions in place. The first group attributes an unconditional support

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313 Ibid., p. 25.
314 Hibou, p. 9.
to the “economic miracle” concocted from a mixture of clear economic success, the development of social programs and the march towards democracy, where support from the masses was founded in the “construction of the myth of the economic miracle,” both by external observers and within a narrative perpetuated exclusively by Tunisian officials.\textsuperscript{315} The other group highlights a “contradiction between economic success and ferocious political repression,” yielding the propensity for oscillation between these two extreme positions. As a result, scholars were inconclusive in their recommendations for Ben Ali’s Tunisia; debating over whether to target support for economic programs and ignore the political situation or praise an economic success story that was simply “spoiled” by an increase in political restrictions.\textsuperscript{316}

Meanwhile, this same logic provides an interesting justification for the domestic debates that were occurring amongst ordinary Tunisians who toyed with this paradox. Bellin notes that both private sector capital and organized labor were surprisingly ambivalent toward the “general project of democratization,” when compared to their enthusiasm for state responsiveness on particular policy issues in periods of economic liberalization. Both parties remained with the regime despite a barrage of false promises for democratic reform, leaving Tunisia “stalled between democracy and authoritarianism” and the state “neither fully accountable to society nor fully autonomous.” The best explanation offered for this ambivalence to political reform is vested in the origins and growth of private capital and labor, attributed largely to state sponsorship and the state’s central role in maintaining discretionary and ambiguous support for the private sector; the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\footnotesize\textsuperscript{315} Ibid.
\footnotesize\textsuperscript{316} Hibou and Hulsey, p. 187.
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incomplete autonomy between the private sector and the state “spelled diffidence about the democratic project.”\textsuperscript{317}

As previously referenced, Angrist discusses the potential for democratization given the liberalizing trends seen in Tunisia’s economic history. The country, up until December 2010 was a relatively prosperous nation, boasting a high GDP, large middle class, and high education and literacy rates for the developing world. Regardless of these positive indicators that would normally bode well for the establishment of political pluralism, the “prospect seemed out of reach at [that] juncture.”\textsuperscript{318} At the time of that piece’s publication, the ability to predict the revolutionary events that would take place a mere two years later seem to contradict any previous assessments that considered political change as even a remote possibility in a country like Tunisia. However, to the credit of Angrist and the overwhelming number of scholars who shared her views, change did not happen gradually, nor by result of systemic evolution. The dramatic disruption to the status quo warrants a new context for discussion pertinent to Tunisia’s political-economic relationship, and the effects that one has had on the other, rather than attempting to integrate preexisting hypotheses to explain the contemporary realities that have now emerged. The archaic rhetoric centered on the possibility of state-led democratization is a phenomenon that is contradicted by the Tunisian case, which drastically undercuts the viability of arguments acknowledging the role of the economy as a barometer to political freedoms, given the Ben Ali regime’s steady resilience to reform despite notable economic achievement.

\textsuperscript{318} Angrist, 198.
Furthermore, it is readily apparent from the previous analysis that questions concerning the integrity of the reports released by the IFI’s that constantly championed Tunisia’s economic performance should be raised. The parameters on which these reports are based are clearly problematic, and warrant new consideration beyond the scope of analysis that relies on economic indicators as the sole sources for analysis. We understand now that the Tunisia boasted reputable scores to its demographic and principle economic indicators, yet the extent to which the regime had penetrated local industry and monopolized private enterprise misled analysts to conclude that the country’s trajectory was positive and advantageous to political and social development throughout the country – predictions that strayed far from reality. Rampant corruption among members of the Mafia monarch’s Kleptocracy, chronic unemployment and vast income disparity between the country’s interior and coastal region’s define the country’s economic profile during Ben Ali’s presidency and are the direct causes for the dramatic political events that emerged in 2010.
CHAPTER 4
THE SECURITY STATE

When I first asked someone to explain how he would describe the Ben Ali regime, his immediate response was, “Have you read 1984? Do you remember the image of a giant poster looking down at you?”

Overshadowing the bustling Habib Bourguiba Avenue in downtown Tunis is the behemoth Ministry of Interior (MOI), a term in itself that instilled disturbing sentiments of fear, terror and even reverence for most Tunisians. An extension of the omnipresent state RCD party, the MOI represented the epicenter of the Ben Ali regime’s authority and its principle mechanism of oppression. Operating under a guise of security against allegedly persistent threats posed by Islamists and political oppositionists, the MOI operated under unchecked authority to quell resistance and compel political acquiescence from society, sparing no measure of compassion or humanity to sustain the status quo. Understating the authority of the MOI would be a severe miscalculation, given Ben Ali’s affinity to the use of security to support his legitimacy to rule the country. The universal recognition of the MOI’s symbolic power was affirmed by the masses that accumulated in front of its headquarters building in the capital during the country’s political uprisings in 2011, which to most outsiders would be a non-traditional gathering point for protesters calling for the downfall of a country’s government and is certainly indicative of where the regime’s true authority lied. The dismantling of Ben

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319 Interview (2.5.23).
320 Appendix C-2.
Ali’s regime voiced under a universal slogan that originated in Tunisia and resonated across the Arab World – “As-shaab yooreed isQaat an-nithaam” (the people want to topple the regime) – espoused the inextricable linkage between Tunisia’s runaway president and the “regime” (an-nithaam) he maintained to ensure his political longevity.

The initial years of Ben Ali’s presidency saw a dramatic shift in resources to accommodate and buttress paramilitary and police units that came to define the security-centric nature of the state – an evolving feature of the regime. Henry notes that Tunisia suffered from idiosyncratic rule after Ben Ali’s coup in 1987, given the new leader’s unfamiliarity with an institutionalized network that been inextricably reflective of Bourguiba and his philosophy, and compounded by his lack of comparable historic legitimacy. Funds that had been traditionally allocated to the regular armed forces were diverted to prevent the military from amassing too much power during the highly precarious anti-Islamist campaigns that followed Ben Ali’s attempts at political reconciliation and democratization, as outlined in the 1988 National Pact. This disingenuous gesture inadvertently forced the Islamists out of the political arena and created a precedent for their prolonged persecution throughout the regime’s tenure. Further reforms stripped the military of the potentially disruptive, largely youth-based conscripted soldiers who presented risks to political stability, further deconstructing the integrity of the army and left it highly under-funded and resentful. Simultaneously, these

321 “Nithaam” carries several translations in Arabic, including: system, regime, institution. For the purpose of this investigation the most logical translation would be “regime” or “apparatus,” since the demonstrations carried out by the Tunisian people called for more than the removal of the president from power, but the pervasive security apparatus that operated on his behalf.
322 Interview (16.6.1).
reforms empowered the senior-military officials since the army had been relatively corporatized through inadvertent specialization and new autonomy that was given to commanders and the armed forces. This fundamental polarization entrenched a hazardous dynamic to the unchallenged political authority garnered by Ben Ali and his supporters atop the political apex. The disenfranchised and abandoned army slowly made it just another institution subordinate to the regime after being deliberately excluded in the president’s early years, which clearly explains its relatively swift defection amid mass political demonstrations that forced the regime from power two decades later.

Sadiki notes that “the rise of alternative identities, [whether] spatial or political, in the community manufactured by the regime is not only imaginable, but also carries risk.”

The most jarring feature of the regime was the imposition of its inflated internal security apparatus. By the 1990s Tunisia represented a “police state,” following “big and visible increases in the police force,” producing numbers that ranged between 80,000 and 150,000; almost four times the force from the mid-1980s. – a “vast” police force that “dwarfed” in absolute numbers, those in Morocco and Algeria, for a population that was one-third the size of the others. According to Henry, it is impossible to estimate the real costs of Tunisia’s infrastructure as a police state, or the extent to which the funds required to realize this miscalculated vision could have been otherwise invested in more

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productive expenditures. The quintessential “mukhabarat state” amplified the Islamist threat to condone its excessive policing, and contributed to the regime’s deep fear of a region-wide Islamist threat, underscored by the violent bloodbath in Algeria that occurred during Ben Ali’s first decade in office.

Hibou notes that we have “seen repressive techniques, in their extreme and visible forms, touch only a very restricted number of people, on the other hand, daily life in Tunisia was characterized by the conjunction of an apparent normality and a constant and intrusive police presence,” and although no government is able to survive based exclusively on the means of violence without some alternative to power and legitimacy, in the totalitarian Tunisian case, the basis of power and a network of secret police and informants were not mutually exclusive. The Ben Ali regime relied essentially on a dehumanized form of repression, where police were replaced with placebo robot soldiers, where conceivably, one man could push a button and destroy whomever he pleased, thus meshing the relationship between power and violence into a single entity and blurring the distinction between the “softer” forms of police control, surveillance and censorship by the services of order, and the single RCD party.

The security apparatus was responsible for uninhibited violations of civil liberties, given its propensity to surveillance, phone tapping, direct threats, passport confiscations, beatings, and assassinations. The targets for these methods of oppression were indiscriminately selected, ranging from rank and file workers, to university professors,

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327 Henry, Interpreting the Middle East: Essential Themes, p. 198.
328 Sadiki, p. 123.
human rights activists, and political opposition figures.\textsuperscript{330} Scholars have long reviewed Ben Ali’s motivations for constructing an overbearing police state, following notable attempts to expand on civil liberties and construct a new forum for political contestation during his first years in office. When considering the historic context of his own role in Bourguiba’s removal from power, it is argued that Ben Ali recognized that simple cooptation of critical elites was inadequate to preserve regime durability. Ben Ali’s own rise justified his paranoia over loosening the reins of power.\textsuperscript{331} Instead, outright repression became an integral feature of the state’s operational strategy during the regime’s early years.\textsuperscript{332} It is certain that the police played an undeniable role in Tunisian political life through its obvious techniques of oppression, where the importance of violence, fear and a general ambiance of mistrust cannot be underestimated by regional scholars. However, as Hibou notes, mechanisms for domination and control over the Tunisian population were anchored in the most everyday relations of power. Her contributions to the psychological ramifications of the coercive police state outline methods of dominance over all aspects of the lives of ordinary citizens, which characterized the core nature of the regime. Specifically, when considering the obvious influences that ever-present policing has on a person’s frame of mind, control takes place above all, “through constant coercive practices involving economic and social activities.”\textsuperscript{333}

\textsuperscript{331} Sadiki, p.123.
\textsuperscript{332} Alexander, Middle East Research and Information Project.
MOI or RCD?:

As the regime matured and consolidated its authority, it became clear that there had been a serious shift in power from the RCD – which to many appeared to have lost all semblance of a political party and retained few functional characteristics beyond superficial support for the regime and a political status quo – to a more abrasive tool of the government in coordinated measure with the MOI to compel allegiance through terror and to quash dissent. People began to see that there were no more politics in the party, just emotionless, immoral and “low” individuals whose only credential for their position of power had been the support that bolstered their mobility from corrupt practices and a reliance on the police. Anger against the ruling Ben Ali and Trabelsi families, against the party, and against the regime (the police especially) festered across Tunisian society, especially in the regime’s latter years.334

For the most part, Ben Ali had followed through with his promises to bolster the country’s security but many questioned what they had given up in return, especially after it had become clear that his solution to enhancing the country’s security was to impose a police state that the MOI regulated.335 Towards the end of Ben Ali’s tenure, it was apparent that the true seat of authority had transferred from the executive and judicial branches to the MOI, whose employees forcibly extracted legitimacy from the Tunisian people without impunity by fear, torture, unlawful arrest, imprisonment without charge. Tunisians acknowledged the police’s unconstrained authority, evidenced by creative street terminology – Tunisians specifically referred to the police as “al Haakim336,” –

334 Interview (10.5.30).
335 Interview (6.5.26).
336 Roughly translated from Arabic, the term means “one who judges,” as in the justice system, indicating that police authority was perceived to supercede that of the state’s justice system.
which denotes a fusion between the ideas of justice and crime, over which the police had paramount, uncontestable authority.\textsuperscript{337} For some, a bloated security force and shifting jurisdiction from the RCD to the MOI had made Ben Ali irrelevant because the system of control and coercion that supported his political longevity was secure.\textsuperscript{338}

Every interviewee noted that it was routine for neighbors, students, colleagues and family members to randomly disappear for no apparent reason, where rarely any justification for the actions of the police would be required or expected under the regime’s conception of swift justice.\textsuperscript{339} Tunisia became a country where fear dominated society – embodied in a trend of authoritative abuse of power and oppression against dissent, or perceived lack of allegiance to the regime; often the latter could be justified by corrupt and despicable abuses of power – where citizens could be targeted for less innocuous crimes like open defiance against the regime to the more ambiguous, like being beaten to death after being accused of being a Salafi, when the victim did not even know what a Salafi was.\textsuperscript{340} Random persecution for no particular reason was common, and failing to stay within often unclear bounds of the “law,” either by attending a business meeting, reading the wrong book, choosing to grow facial hair, or raising the price of bread in your coffee shop as one source highlighted, could make you disappear.\textsuperscript{341} The regime was not only content to run these more ambiguous campaigns to eliminate members of society it deemed necessary but targeted efforts to “simply destroy them,” either by threatening their families, vandalizing their property, preventing academics and opposition figures from publishing or holding meetings, firing them from

\textsuperscript{337} Interview (6.5.26).
\textsuperscript{338} Interview (2.5.23).
\textsuperscript{339} Interview (10.5.30).
\textsuperscript{340} Jebnoun, Nourredine, Contributing comment. 4.11.12.
\textsuperscript{341} Interview (2.5.23).
their jobs, and manipulating the tax system to impose such heavy fines that they would be forced into bankruptcy.\textsuperscript{342} Many have labeled Ben Ali’s Tunisia as a casebook example of the totalitarian state, where a pervasive reign of terror perpetuated by the regime indiscriminately shadowed the country, successfully removing society’s more contentious actors, but also imposing a broad understanding that everyone was constantly being watched and that all individual freedoms that, throughout Tunisia’s prolonged history of dictatorship, had been put “off-limits” were gradually revoked to the point where self-scrutiny dominated daily life and trust was outweighed by fear for one’s personal safety.\textsuperscript{343}

The impressive percentage derived from the police/citizen ratio, no matter who supplies the actual estimates fell between 1/67 and 1/112 for a population of 10 million.\textsuperscript{344} Police omnipresence was the most visible form of repression, and indisputably the most denounced by international human rights organizations, comprising a complex network of policing that radiated far above and beyond those who held the official title of police officer. Policing, surveillance, monitoring and clandestine reporting encompasses a much larger following, including certain soldiers on police duty, different categories of “informers,”\textsuperscript{345} and also members of the state party. To some degree, “everywhere in the country, throughout all regions, in administrative offices, public companies, big private enterprises, on the roads and on public transportation, at place of work and in bars and places of relaxation and entertainment, all of these agents kept people under surveillance and carried out continuous checks on citizens, travelers,

\textsuperscript{342} Interview (5.5.25).
\textsuperscript{343} Interview (2.5.23).
\textsuperscript{344} Hibou, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{345} Ibid.
employees, school pupils, students, believers, car drivers, readers, parents, consumers, passers-by, lovers and tax payers” to assure monitor and document any suspicions, inklings or even accusations of dissent. The regime even embedded informants in its embassies around the globe to report on citizens abroad.

The Use of RCD Informants:

The arbitrary division between the MOI and RCD ensured a pervasive state presence across the country that tapped into every industry, political forum, and neighborhood, facilitated by a system of informants that covertly worked on behalf of the regime to report dissent. Nearly every participant made reference to the RCD’s intricate network of spies that would operate within society as the regime’s embedded eyes and ears, to wipe-out public dissent or uncover potential plots against the government. In every city, neighborhood and university, there were a determined number of people that were specifically implanted by the RCD to spy on people. Interviewees said that Tunisia became a country where everyone remained silent almost about everything, because even though it was understood that there were certain topics that could never be discussed openly, the ambiguity made most people feel vulnerable because there would almost always be someone around who was spying for the regime.

RCD informants were either employed by the MOI, or would be paid indirectly for their services. They were highly localized, as it was more beneficial to the MOI to have the highest level of reliable information about individuals that were being reported on, including their names, where they lived, worked, or went to school. The informants

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346 Hibou, pp. 81-82.
347 Jebnoun, Nouredine, Contributing comment. 4.11.12.
348 Interview (5.5.25).
would monitor an individual's activities and their behavior, documenting things like drug use, whether they went to a mosque, whether women wore hijaabs, and what clubs or organizations they joined. One interviewee noted that whenever more sensitive topics were brought up by an individual, talking directly about Ben Ali for example, everyone who was within ear shot would be scared that he or she was a spy and that they could be implicated in discussions of dissent just by association.\textsuperscript{349} The list of names produced by the informants would be provided to the local police, who would then respond as necessary.

Interest in operating on behalf of the RCD for most was ultimately based on a universal understanding that people were incapable of living better lives without the regime’s blessing. RCD members were showed opaque favoritism and given preferential treatment in critical circumstances across daily life, which represented a powerful incentive for a population lacking adequate opportunities and facing economic hardships to sacrifice moral integrity for sheer survival. In addition to receiving initial consideration for the limited number of jobs that were even available in the country, a portion of the RCD’s informants, members and affiliates supported the state’s party for the wide spectrum of guarantees they would receive. Spies were not paid directly but got a number of benefits, like the freedom to travel abroad, administrative facilitation for any applications or processing (visas, job applications, university scholarships), guaranteed placement in highly contested university slots, higher grades, better salaries, promotions, land leases, lower taxes, bank loans with lower interest rates, and business permits among other things.\textsuperscript{350} One interviewee offered two personal examples to explain how

\textsuperscript{349} Interview (6.5.26).
\textsuperscript{350} Ibid.
membership in the RCD was crucial to self-advancement. She had a friend – an aspiring playwright – who submitted a script that allegedly made symbolic reference to the state that was interpreted as critical, which forced him out of the competition and preventing him from publishing in the future. She had also been a casualty of non-affiliation with the state party, unable to get a job because she could not produce an RCD membership card or provide a reference to a familiar RCD contact working in the law firm where she had applied, confirming that the rashwa system of bribery and corruption was permeable across society, and traced directly to the RCD.351

Whether members of the RCD demonstrated genuine allegiance to the regime was probably inconsequential. The Tunisian government had successfully amassed a semblance of support in nearly two million members of the state party, which underscored a powerful corollary to the regime’s overall resonance and likeability, even though the motivations for membership were undeniably misleading, at least for a substantial percentage of the RCD’s members. It is important to underscore that the RCD’s appeal did not translate to an acceptance of the status quo, but often represented a symbolic gesture of political allegiance to Ben Ali and his clan, which reflected the self-interests of the individual and demanded the regime’s reciprocation to that allegiance by a continuing provision of goods, services and security.

RCD affiliation underscored the regime’s permeability and quintessential functional necessity for the average Tunisian, and underscored a certain relationship of compulsion between society and the state that made it impossible for citizens to survive outside of the constructed system in which they lived and operated. Every aspect of life

351 Ibid.
was tied to Ben Ali and a regime that relied on compulsion for national acquiescence\textsuperscript{352}, punishing anything outside of support for the regime, and subservience to the RCD, which outside of the MOI, resembled a satellite epicenter of the state’s authority. Interviewees expanded on this judgment, noting specifically that membership in the RCD was not a voluntary choice, but was “necessary to survive.”\textsuperscript{353} The RCD’s monopoly over every aspect of public, and arguably private life tied every Tunisian to a compulsive, stagnant and entrenched regime, whose oppressive exoskeleton appeared uncontestable.\textsuperscript{354}

In what Hibou describes as the “snares of mediation,” the bodies of the state party, whose network of informants represented only a minute network of surveillance across the country, was “indisputably the most significant and most systematic means of surveillance,” illustrated by a physical omnipresence of the party by way of thousands of cells spread across the country (7,500 local cells and 2,200 professional cells). Hibou further notes that these cells, situated in residential and business districts fulfilled the function of “alarm bells” should the “norms not be respected.” Over the parties two million official members (1 out of every 2 working citizens), the certainty with which one can fully understand the depth and breadth of the state party’s penetration of society remains a question, and furthermore, what the official figures really meant. There were many supporters of the RCD that were not willing members, while some were affiliated with the party without even knowing it. As previously argued, elaborate explanations to the RCD’s structure is more or less irrelevant because its “figures were mere conventions,

\textsuperscript{352} Interview (13.5.31).
\textsuperscript{353} Interview (6.5.26).
\textsuperscript{354} Interview (13.5.31).
where the systemic quantification of the party is part and parcel of the discursive staging which tried to conceal the absence of any public debate.”

If a state of tension or crisis emerged, RCD informant’s would report the situation, and would also be held responsible for it, which might explain the extreme vigilance and maximum degree of control the state party exerted over all aspects of daily life. With unrelenting pressure, the RCD cells infiltrated the “life of the district or village, public places (cafes, bars and cyber cafés), economic and social situations (access to jobs reception of social programs, activities of associations), and sensitive factions of the population (young people, the unemployed, former Islamist voters, believers, day laborers, and of course, illicit street vendors),” coding the entire functional setting of the Tunisian space by these cells. The locations of these cells were selected not only for the necessity of keeping them under surveillance but for the necessity of creating a useful space for the deployment of relations of power.

The Placebo Effect:

Although Ben Ali eased restrictions on national media in the early years of his presidency by permitting more newspaper and magazine publications as well as more liberal guidelines for writers and editors, it was not long before promises to ease freedoms of speech were reneged. In 1988 the RCD seized copies of a local opposition newspaper for publishing articles on multiparty politics and judicial law. These two examples ushered in a period of mass hypocrisy in which the government would maintain a firm commitment to enhancing freedom of the press by legalizing new newspaper and

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355 Hibou, p. 86.
356 Hibou, pp. 86-87.
magazine publications, while simultaneously arresting journalists and confiscating material that was considered outside the bounds of legal censorship. A lack of clear taboo subjects made it impossible to gauge the government’s sensitivities and ultimately inspired a culture of self-censorship alongside outward policies of media reform.\(^{357}\)

Henry describes the state of Tunisia’s public media prior to the revolution as “deplorable” where journalists functioned as participants to a slow death of the profession. Outlets of local media like newspapers and magazines were considered indicators of the regime’s repressiveness in how people were free “not to buy” them for their sheer lack of real content.\(^{358}\)

The progressive limitations on freedom of the press and Internet usage represented a sad story, where the profession was slowly put to death by “asphyxiation” throughout the tenure of Ben Ali’s presidency, amid gradual bans on press circulation and state dominance over media outlets.\(^{359}\) Angrist notes that even though prior to its downfall the regime had recently made some efforts to improve its political image by marginally loosening restrictions on the press code, methods of significant constraint continued to be operative, largely as a result of the industry’s dependence on advertising revenues from businesses and institutions that could be pressured by the regime if media outlets fell out of favor.\(^{360}\) The preceding evidence culminates to a clear diagnosis of the Ben Ali regime’s superficial attempts at masking a repressive status quo where


\(^{358}\) Henry, “Tunisia’s Sweet Little Regime,” pp. 305-306.

\(^{359}\) Ibid., p. 305.

expression of political dissent was not tolerated. Those who chose to defy the regime’s “normalized” version of society risked violations to their civil liberties and livelihood.\textsuperscript{361} For journalists, researchers, writers and professors who studied media and journalism, the regime provided them with two choices: either to become a member of the RCD’s administrative hierarchy; or work elusively on research and other projects that the regime prohibited, facing explicit inaccessibility to information, and forcing them to devise creative strategies to bypass the state’s infamous 404 Error message indicating that the website they were visiting had been blocked\textsuperscript{362}. Even though professional journalists were not indiscriminately targeted for their profession, research that contradicted the regime’s official lines, or depicted an alternative image than what the “state-owned media” (rather than “national media”)\textsuperscript{363} broadcasted was risky, as one participant explained. He admitted that he was regularly monitored – and not discreetly – by the regime if he received emails from external media outlets or from people that the regime had been keeping tabs on. Anyone who was involved in media or journalism suffered a lot for the sake of their profession, reconciling half a century of editorial lines drawn by the state and bound by parameters established “from above,” which perpetuated several propaganda campaigns intended to glorify the regime and accentuate Ben Ali’s “positive personality.”\textsuperscript{364}

It should be noted that even four months after the fall of the regime, requests to participate in this research project were denied by prominent media outlets, very likely as

\textsuperscript{361} Ibid., p.178.
\textsuperscript{362} Appendix C-3.
\textsuperscript{363} Interview (11.5.30).
\textsuperscript{364} Ibid.
a result of habitual self-censorship and an unwavering reluctance to report candidly on subjects that had been prohibited for decades.

The Use of Propaganda:

“It was like we were living in a perfect world, where Ben Ali and his family were Godly, and everything that was on the radio, on television or in the newspaper was produced to support this image, and no one could say that it was wrong.”

A propaganda machine was constantly churning out media that amplified the regime’s alleged achievements and masked the truth, which interviewees all agreed was never found in the media. As one source noted, everyone knew they were living in a political masquerade or a “big joke” that no one would dare admit, and for the most part this was probably true even for the more educated factions of society; given how convinced some of the more educated participants admitted they had been by the regime’s daily propaganda, they were certain that Tunisia’s under-privileged and less educated populations had to believe the positive images that were being broadcasted, since they were less likely to have access to independent news.

One interviewee, a well traveled, affluent and intellectual politician embarrassingly admitted that she had to pinch herself sometimes to remember not to believe the news she read about the regime, which was tempting simply because the propaganda was constant and ever-present. Everything that the country broadcasted, including its contentious statistics pertaining to economic

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366 Interview (13.5.31).
367 Interview (17.6.2).
performance had all been tampered with, and that the only way to obtain accurate and reliable information about the regime was by traveling abroad.\textsuperscript{368} The state’s powerful subjugation of independent media and strong propaganda campaign made bypassing the figurative firewall to questionable information difficult; however, alternative messages to the status quo were available through informal markets that were not under the control of the state (although it tried to coopt them) and by way of informative foreign outlets that offered more realistic news about the country.\textsuperscript{369}

**Clandestine Communication:**

Given the oppressive picture that was painted by interviewees, I was compelled to further investigate the means through which society was able to communicate the frustrations and the dissenting opinions that were clearly present under Ben Ali’s presidency. The sub currents of communication that flowed below the regime’s networks of informants and official whistleblowers were critical to amassing the support that was necessary to unify the country’s uprisings in 2010 and caught my personal interest, since many of the conversations I had with participants about clandestine communication had very likely never openly been shared with outsiders until my arrival in-country.

One source immediately responded to this question with a broad statement depicting a clear moratorium on communication, noting that in Tunisia, you could not criticize anything that related to the government, because Ben Ali was supposed to have made all of the decisions and he was responsible for all of the bright ideas for projects and policies around the country, so criticizing anything would be viewed as a direct

\textsuperscript{368} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{369} Interview (11.5.30).
criticism of him. There was such a high level of fear even among the elites and more prominent figures in the government that if suggestions were made to improve the country without the blessing of Ben Ali, they too were susceptible to punishment; therefore, it was common for all ideas pertaining to national policy, development, the economy and society to emanate from the president himself, forging a clear link between Ben Ali and everything that occurred under his watch. The source noted that Tunisia was worse than China and Syria because you could at least criticize the government in those countries, just not their leaders.\textsuperscript{370} This explains Tunisia’s “subtle oppression, through a kind of soft and vicious approach” that had been considered more effective than the harder forms or repression that are usually seen in China and Syria. Steven Heydemann reinforced this assessment in a publication on authoritarianism in the Arab World, when he included an excerpt from a personal interview that he conducted with a Syrian political analysts, who stated “Tunisia is our model. Just look at them! They are much more repressive than we are, yet the West loves them. We need to figure out how they do it.”\textsuperscript{371} Although one source may have naively pointed out that you could get away with saying “some things” as long as they were not critical and did not violate the law, it is evident that there were very few things that fell outside of these bounds.

Social Communication:

Communication under the regime was difficult, and most participants acknowledged that although challenging the regime was a very serious practice, there were some brave Tunisians who chose to do it regardless of the consequences they would face, thus

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{370} Interview (17.6.2).
  \item \textsuperscript{371} Heydemann, Steven, “Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World,” \textit{The Brookings Institution}, Analysis Paper Number 13, October 2007, p. 1.
\end{itemize}
yielding an important rationale: the level of dissent would directly correlate to the benefits society would gain from hearing the truth.\footnote{372 Interview (3.5.24).}

The most cited examples of communication under the regime fell into a clandestine category, where everything had to be said very discreetly, very privately, and with a high level of consideration for who you were speaking with and who could hear you.\footnote{373 Interview (6.5.26).} Most people discussed the regime with their immediate families or close friends that had a “certain rank of maturity;” the people they knew and could trust, often at home or “between the walls” as several interviewees noted. Younger interviewees acknowledged that their families were often the only true sources for learning about the regime and recounted the shocks they would sometimes have after learning things from their families that drastically contrasted with what they heard in school or the media.\footnote{374 Ibid.} One woman noted that she would always be certain that her cell phone was off and not anywhere in range of her voice, since it was probably tapped.\footnote{375 Interview (8.5.27).} In its most cursory description, communication during the Ben Ali presidency was not easy, and presented serious consequences to those who were caught. Participants acknowledged that you had to trust those you interacted with whom you interacted with your life because the offers awarded to those who reported dissenters to the regime were enticing. Open criticism was almost non-existent, except for those who knew and embraced the consequences that challenging the regime entailed.

Consequently, society was essentially stripped of the substantive or significant discussions that had once filled the air around the Avenue Habib Bourguiba’s outdoor
cafés. One source thought that the limits on communication in the more urban areas were likely much higher than in the Interior because populations were further away from the RCD’s epicenter, which lessened its direct control and gave locals more latitude to broadcast their grievances. Outlets of covert communication did exist but were susceptible to monitoring and heavy scrutiny. They included things like oppositional media publications, web radio, community televisions, chat television programs, and external news outlets like al Jazeera and the plethora of resources available in the virtual public sphere – all accessible via proxy.

There were informal, less obvious channels of communication that did exist that were less easy to control, like word-of-mouth communication within selective networks, gossip, rumors, satire, or jokes. As people grew more familiar with the regime’s levels of tolerance, they began to devise new strategies that were affective at voicing dissent without actually saying anything. But even these unofficial means, as one woman in this study highlighted, were eventually suppressed: “people used to whisper in the beginning, but people were even scared to whisper.” In the beginning of Ben Ali’s presidency, people would tell jokes to vent their frustrations about the regime, but towards the end, jokes seemed to disappear from society, “if you were not part of the RCD you could not do anything, not even smile.” Beyond telling jokes and indulging in idle gossip, Tunisians were permitted to vent their frustrations through sports, and in particular, acting out in sports stadiums (as previously noted in Chapter 1), locations that

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376 Interview (20.6.3).
377 Ibid.
378 Interview (14.6.1); Interview (11.5.30).
379 Interview (11.5.30).
380 Interview (17.6.2).
381 Interview (6.5.26).
the regime had deliberately set aside as venues where exerting the same degree of control had been less stringent. Sports allowed people to shout, decompress, release their frustrations, use derogatory language, gather en masse and to relish in a generally positive energy, things that were essentially banned in normal life. Participants also noted that more subtle behaviors, like donning a hijaab, growing a short beard, or frequently traveling outside of the country were other things that people did to express their discontent.\textsuperscript{382} In fact, many people traveled outside of Tunisia as a sign of contestation against the deplorable situation at home. Freedom abroad gave certain people the courage to express their frustration through media-based or academic avenues.\textsuperscript{383} One woman revealed that even when she traveled abroad, she could not escape the fear that the regime generated. She would be reluctant to read any human rights publications, or to attend a conference that discussed Tunisia for fear that someone around her would report her activities – maybe not directly implicating her for such “treason,” but the threat to her family, friends or colleagues were another matter.\textsuperscript{384}

The universities, although highly regulated and under constant surveillance by the RCD and the police, were also epicenters for social movements that allowed people to communicate dissent, albeit in clever ways. Sources allege that there was a small youth student movement in Tunisia that operated clandestinely outside of the regime’s knowledge. Members of these movements would discuss things like politics and governance, often holding informal meetings to question the legitimacy of the regime and condemn highly sensitive subjects, like dictatorship and corruption.\textsuperscript{385} One interviewee

\textsuperscript{382} Interview (16.6.1); Interview (7.5.27).
\textsuperscript{383} Interview (14.6.1).
\textsuperscript{384} Interview (16.6.1).
\textsuperscript{385} Interview (3.5.24).
noted that certain universities invited these types of conversations if they reflected the material that was being taught. Her experience in law school for example, revealed that professors encouraged open discussions about democracy and the government in Tunisia. In her common law classes students were allowed to talk about Tunisia in a comparative context that gave students the freedom to draw differences between constitutions and forms of government around the world. She confirmed that it was only at the higher levels of university education where these types of discussions could ever take place openly.\footnote{386}

Activism Abroad:

A marginal minority did choose to fight and understood their fate; the regime imprisoned, exiled or killed the political activists.\footnote{387} The most reliable had to leave the country and only succeeded in disseminating truthful information about the regime if they were given an audience abroad. Elaborated further in Chapter 1, some activists stayed in Tunisia and tried to work within the margins as legal opposition parties. Facing no alternatives, the decision to function as a controlled political voice was a courageous choice that some actors made because they still suffered for it, even though they were acting within the bounds of the law. Legal opposition members were still persecuted, harassed, bankrupted, imprisoned, and put under constant threat.\footnote{388}

Disregard for Human Rights:

\footnote{386} Interview (6.5.26).\footnote{387} Interview (2.5.23).\footnote{388} Interview (8.5.27).
At the onset of the presidential transition, Ben Ali eased restrictions on the formation of associations and political organizations. A de facto moratorium was imposed on the death penalty and several reforms were implemented governing preventative detention, as well as the use of torture with the ratification of the United Nations Torture Convention.\(^{389}\) However, despite praises from the international community over Ben Ali’s apparent revolutionary improvements, reality did not represent a major stride from the Bourguiba era. For example, prisoners could still be held by the government for up to 18 months, and faced an increasing incidence of the use of torture while in custody. By 2005, the State Department’s annual report on Human Rights Practices stated that Tunisia’s human rights record remained poor and that it continued to commit serious abuses, “including torture, abuse of prisoners and detainees, arbitrary arrests and detention, police impunity, lengthy pretrial and incommunicado detention, infringement of citizens’ privacy rights, restrictions of freedom of speech and press, and restrictions on freedom of assembly and association.”\(^{390}\) Many of these citable allegations trace their sources to the initial targeted campaigns against the regime’s domestic opposition in the early 1990’s. Henry notes that political prisoners were often singled out for particularly harsh treatment and that some members of the country’s Islamist party have been jailed since 1991, many in solitary confinement for protracted periods.\(^{391}\)

As previously highlighted in Chapter 1, the regime’s early campaign to quiet the opposition had been relatively successful, diminishing any legitimate threats to its political authority. Yet, even during a time of robust political acquiescence, the regime continued to implement measures to retract individual freedoms that represented a


\(^{390}\) Henry, “Tunisia’s Sweet Little Regime,” p. 302.

\(^{391}\) Ibid., p. 303.
potential springboard for dissent. Alexander notes that some of the methods used to co-opt and manipulate press, unions, and other organizations harkened back to the Bourguiba days. Yet, these very public restrictions cowered to the content of extensive reports on Tunisia’s deplorable human rights record that reflect some of the more oppressive and coercive tactics that were used by the regime to quash dissent. In a 2005 report on human rights practices released by the U.S. Department of State, specific violations reflecting the regime’s predisposition to the use of torture by the police force were documented, noting an array of techniques brought to the attention of government officials and human rights watchdogs. Persistent persecution of political opposition figures and their families was a common trait of the regime’s practice of intimidation. Although prison conditions improved over the years, the barometer was inherently low, upgrading them from “spartan” to “poor” and far below international standards. Prisoners were not guaranteed the same treatment while in detention, especially given their political affiliations.

392 Alexander, *Middle East Research and Information Project.*
393 Henry, “Tunisia’s Sweet Little” Regime,” p. 302.
394 Ibid., p. 303.
“The Ben Ali regime was like a rotting fruit that was in its last moments before falling from the tree.”  

A progressive deterioration of political, economic and social conditions had festered and became palpable by 2010, spreading far beyond the regionalization barriers that had once kept them contained to Tunisia’s forgotten people in the Interior. This transformation was clarified through several citable indicators that have been attributed to the regime’s downward trajectory and eventual demise when surveying the latter years of Ben Ali’s presidency. These particular data points are frequently highlighted, and contribute to a culmination of factors that explain the dramatic uprisings in December 2010. A timeline of relevant occurrences will be introduced that roughly covers a selection of indicators over a “decade of demise” that aims to organize and explain a sequential and exponential build-up of tensions that eventually reached levels of unsustainable proportion.

According to Henry, it is not the level of repression per se that has led onlookers to define the government under Ben Ali as a rogue regime, or even a “highly repressive one,” but instead the regime is criticized by the “extent at which it deviated from the expectations of the local and international communities,” which left it highly vulnerable to internal and international pressures for change. Although the regime had successfully erected an overbearing bureaucratic and security structure that penetrated all sectors of

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395 Interview (3.5.24).
Tunisian society is argued to have been the greatest source of illegitimacy to the regime, as it remained unable to modify and control the power of public opinion. This assessment certainly attracts credibility when considering the ultimate fate of Ben Ali amid mass demonstrations calling for the regime’s downfall. An atmosphere of oppression was incapable of counteracting widespread public discontent and dissatisfaction over the government’s subversive policies, perpetual self-indulgence and apathy to the harsh realities that plagued Tunisian society.

With the benefit of hindsight, we now are able to pinpoint some significant incidents that occurred well before 2010 that may contribute to a more solid justification to understanding how and why the political uprisings transpired. Furthermore, there are several key correlating ingredients that can be cited to explain why the events that unfolded in Sidi Bouzid attracted the national momentum necessary to introduce such a dramatic challenge to the political status quo. Although we may find it more convenient, or perhaps, sufficient to cite sequential data points that cover an approximate two month period prior to January 14, 2011, interviewees acknowledged several other causes that explain the Interior’s uprisings, and more importantly, why these uprisings were different from those that preceded them.

**Longevity by Constitutional Reform:**

The regime’s crackdown on political freedoms, as noted in previous chapters, is characterized through a calculated and deliberate crackdown on opposition, situated in a short-sighted strategy to extract politics from society and reserve it for a privileged few.

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Beyond the regime’s more discreet and clandestine operations that subjugated dissent and established a never-ending series of political hurdles along a 23-year track, the regime appears to have lost faith even in its own abilities in the latter years. More skilled dictators across the region would have likely discouraged Ben Ali’s rigid objection to political liberalization, which has been a proven and credible strategy to enhance the longevity of authoritarian regimes with insignificant contraction to regime authority.\footnote{Brownlee, Jason. \textit{Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization}. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2007, p. 6; Heydemann, Steven. “Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East,” in Oliver Schlumberger, ed., \textit{Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes}. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2010, pp. 22-23; Ottaway, Marina. “Evaluation Middle East Reform: Significant or Cosmetic.” in Marina Ottaway and Julia Choucair-Vizoso, eds., \textit{Beyond the Façade: Political Reform in the Arab World}. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington DC, 2009, pp. 6-9.}

Political reform offers the semblance of enhanced freedoms, instills new confidence among persistently marginalized opposition actors, and rejuvenates faith that the regime may be displaying signs of progress in times of entrenched dissatisfaction across society. However, the Tunisian case introduces a startling contradiction to more rational approaches offered in the authoritarian handbook, where the regime’s perceived weaknesses were actually amplified through a handful of very public, legal maneuvers that underscored Ben Ali’s intentions to remain in power, essentially reaffirming the fears of a population whose frustrations had been mounting.

In 2009, Ben Ali participated in what many perceived would be his last presidential elections. Given his age and the assurance that he would retain the office for at least another five years as stipulated under the constitution, questions began to flourish across Tunisian society over the future of Tunisian politics and what the next political transition would look like. People reflected on the future of the presidency and who would follow in his footsteps (it would surely have been someone from his family), or
whether more amendments would be made to the constitution to accommodate the president’s choice to stay.\textsuperscript{398} He had already introduced groundbreaking amendments to the constitution years earlier, which set an unsettling example for how the law could be manipulated to sustain the regime. Reforms made to the constitution under article 39 gradually removed presidential term limits, presenting a legal mechanism and had allowed Ben Ali to remain in office indefinitely.\textsuperscript{399} Although there was still a restriction on the age of the president (capped at 75 years), it was expected that further reforms would be made to extend the age to Ben Ali’s preference. Furthermore, amendments to the constitution had been made that prevented the president from being implicated in charges brought against him following his tenure in office.

\textbf{2008 Uprisings:}

2008 saw an unprecedented expression of defiance against the regime in a series of mass demonstrations that erupted in the Interior. Echoing the discourse of most Tunisians – and quoting one in particular – “all of the ingredients that led to the downfall of the regime were present in the Interior...even back in 2008.”\textsuperscript{400} That year, several “intifadas” (uprisings) occurred which did not predict the events of 2010, but certainly indicated that the regime was beginning to face serious challenges to its authority, and that populations living outside of the country’s more privileged areas were no longer afraid to speak out against the unjust regional neglect that had incrementally forced people into abject poverty. Interviewees readily acknowledged that the uprisings that

\textsuperscript{398} Interview (8.5.27).
\textsuperscript{399} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{400} Interview (11.5.30).
occurred in 2008 were a direct result of the government’s policy to deliberately marginalize areas outside of the Sahel coastal region. Historically, the Gafsa Basin and Kasserine manifest important symbolic and nationalist heritage for their leading role in Tunisia’s liberation movement from colonial rule; these areas are renowned for suffering heavy losses to successfully purge the French from the country, reflecting a disturbing irony where those who had spilled their blood to help liberate the country from colonial rule, were the same people that had been systematically deprived from economic development, employment opportunities, or government investment.

In his extensive analysis of the Gafsa Basin’s social movement, Eric Gobe highlights that it represented the “most important protest movement seen in Tunisia since the Bread Revolt of January 1984,” and noting within Tunisia’s authoritarian context that these uprisings showed that “significant segments of the Tunisian population were able to voice their protest; at the same time, however, the protest movement, due to the limited support it enjoyed within Tunisian society, was unable to grow, nor was it able to withstand the coercive policy of Ben Ali’s regime.” Interviewees shared this assessment and believed that these uprisings were actually the impetus for the revolution that would eventually depose the president, but at that time, they failed to spark the same reaction or resonate to the degree witnessed in 2010, in their view because the social media tools that facilitated communication across the country had not yet been integrated across society. Because people did not have Facebook yet, the 2008 Interior uprisings remained relatively isolated and easily contained by the regime. Furthermore, the regime

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401 Interview (10.5.30).
403 Interview (7.5.27).
had successfully managed the crackdown by manipulating local clan and tribal rivalries to prevent the uprisings from spreading with the support of its RCD cells. These events were significant because they represented an unrelenting and unified front against the regime that tested its ability to restore order. Although many people died over the eight-month period, the regime prevented the uprisings from reaching levels beyond its control.\footnote{404} Regardless, the fact that these uprisings were able to last for eight months probably revealed that the regime was weakening and affirmed suspicions that its robust façade – a well-constructed “paper tiger”\footnote{405} – was enabling its longevity.

**Madame la Présidente:**

A particularly malignant and repeatedly cited influence that was responsible for the regime’s demise was the President’s wife Leila Trabelsi – unofficially commanding the title Madame la Présidente and officially considered the most loathed person in Tunisia, described by one source, as a “filthy, greedy whore.” Now a social pariah, “the politically ambitious first lady was easily the most detested figure in the government; a monstrous symbol of nepotism and state embezzlement” and the spark of injustice that ignited the revolution. Her mafia-style control over the country’s economy, controlling everything from car dealerships to supermarket chains, siphoning off their profits to support the family’s reprehensible spending habits. She has been accused of forcing people from their homes to claim their land, decorating her palace rooms with the

\footnote{404}{Interview (16.6.1).}  
\footnote{405}{Interview (5.5.25).}
country’s priceless artifacts, and encouraging her children to fly ice cream in from St. Tropez to serve at their dinner parties.\footnote{406}

Described as, “the woman responsible for the Arab Spring,” the bête-noir “inspired dread in the public imagination,”\footnote{407} a sentiment that festered when it became clear that she was grooming her husband to take over the presidency either after his death or foreseeable abdication.\footnote{408} Her visibility in the media, documenting her participation in conferences promoting women’s rights infuriated a country that simply saw the regime spending “tons of money” to fund her forced and growing presence in the public eye. People saw that she was discreetly hijacking the role of the president, but just over “daily affairs at the time.”\footnote{409} Appalled by the appearance of her posters hanging from buildings next to Ben Ali, some even showing placards with “\textit{ar-Ra’eesa}” (President) below her face subtly indicated that she would eventually take control over the country’s politics and to the country’s detriment, continue the Ben Ali dynasty. One interviewee involved in opposition politics pointed out that Leila had a whole group of people working with her to take over the presidency and that it was obvious among ordinary people that she wanted the position, even though she never explicitly said it. Beyond her audacious spending habits, arrogant reputation, and illusory political ambitions, her association to Ben Ali and his passive tolerance for her rapacious habits ultimately contributed to his downfall. One source highlighted that people were never really sure if Ben Ali even knew about the Trabelsi family’s corruption, but towards the end, it became evident that Ben Ali had not only been aware but was involved as well, which damaged his credibility.

\footnote{407} Ibid.
\footnote{408} Interview (7.5.27); Interview (6.5.26).
\footnote{409} Interview (17.6.2).
even more. Ben Ali Ben had been spared criticism for years over the behavior of his wife, until she gave birth to a son in 2005 – a clear heir to the Palace throne and irrefutable proof that Leila Trabelsi would soon become the de facto ruler of Tunisia.\textsuperscript{410}

**Waning Support Among Key International Actors:**

Interviewees from this study and onlookers alike recognize the influence that international actors had over ensuring the longevity and stability of the regime, either by way of positive endorsements from the IFI's, or through opportunistic alliances offered under the guises of stability and security. The uprisings in 2010 indicate that this support was vested in sheer convenience for Tunisia’s primary alliances – particularly France and the United States – and sustained through Ben Ali’s claims that there were no viable alternatives, specifically when considering his partnership on the “Global War on Terror.” However, we now know that both France and the United States were growing more and more aware that the regime was unsustainable, evidenced predominantly in their inconsistent foreign policy messages during the 2010 uprisings.

In a tell-all novel from France’s former Ambassador to Tunis (2002-2005), Ambassador Yves Aubin de La Messuzière describes Paris’ foreign policy towards Tunisia and the complacency that his government showed toward the regime’s oppressive realities. He reveals that the critical injustices addressed to diplomats in political and media circles could not have foreseen the ultimate upheaval of Ben Ali’s regime. Regardless, France had long-held a warm bilateral relationship with Tunisia and that although the regime’s “weaknesses” with regard to human rights and public liberties were

\textsuperscript{410} Interview (7.5.27).
well-known, Ben Ali’s “fight” against Islamists in a post-September 11 world protected him, regardless of his “style of government.”

Although it took a popular uprising of unprecedented proportion to convince the French government that the “certain truths” that were relayed by their Ambassador were reliable, one can wager that the confusing messages and seemingly erratic behavior that France displayed in the first two weeks of Tunisia’s unrest demonstrates that it was beginning to recognize that Ben Ali was not an indispensable component in Tunisian politics. Sarkozy’s shifting views throughout the uprisings were powerful indicators that Ben Ali’s foreign support was waning and probably infused greater momentum to and greater confidence for protesters who saw that the regime was not being unconditionally buttressed by external powers.

However, even just days before Ben Ali’s departure, the French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie extolled France’s ties with the Ben Ali regime when addressing the French National Assembly, claiming that “France [was] ready to provide Tunisia with France’s security expertise;” on January 15, 2011, one day after Ben Ali fled, 15,000 teargas canisters were shipped from France to Tunisia. France’s posture probably influenced the United States as well, which was rumored to have assisted in Ben Ali’s departure, supposedly after the US Ambassador realized that there was no way that the regime could survive and that the longer Ben Ali stayed, the greater the risk was to Tunisia’s domestic instability, as one interviewee noted. US opinion of the regime was already concerning and suspicions over its sustainability were mounting. Profound evidence highlighting the United States’ concerns over the regime’s propensity to

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412 Interview (20.6.3); Interview (3.5.24).
413 Jebnoun, Nourredine, Contributing comment. 4.12.12.
414 Interview (8.5.27).
corruption and relentless security practices had been revealed just months earlier in the illicit publication of classified US State Department cables by WikiLeaks, documenting in explicit detail the arrogance with which the Trabelsis and Ben Alis ruled Tunisia. These cables indicated that the United States was apparently becoming indifferent of supporting a ruling family and their entourage whose “quasi-mafia” and corrupt behavior were viewed akin to Saddam Hussein’s relatives.

**WikiLeaks Confirms Corruption:**

The uprisings that started generated a reactionary momentum across the country partially because of the convenient release of the classified cables that revealed telling insight into the country’s ruling family, including the government’s “bad” politics, such as its expenses, and even the salary of the president, according to one participant. Although government corruption was common knowledge in the Tunisian population, specific figures and quantitative measures that “humanized” it were not. WikiLeaks confirmed the intricate details and made them accessible to everyone. As one participant explained, “the country began to boil because it was clear that the government was getting everything, and the people were getting shit.”

WikiLeaks exposed “a growing ruling family and its alliances who were unwilling to stop their desire to take everything in the regime’s final years;” a system of uninhibited thievery and corruption that ultimately traced directly to the ruling family. Through underground business dealings, a sophisticated system of patronage and patrimonialism, influential families and political hardliners were able to be “paid-off” for their support and lack of financial transparency

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415 Interview (6.5.26).
416 Interview (16.6.1).
through monitoring institutions allowed regime leadership to amass enormous sums of wealth owed to Tunisian taxpayers and earmarked for investment in development projects.

One source believed that this corruption was the only element that could inspire such a desperate response by the population, explaining that “the downfall of the regime was based on Ben Ali’s economic corruption, not on more social issues like freedom of speech.”\(^\text{417}\) Another informant initially alleged that WikiLeaks proved that Ben Ali had been running a “rogue state” but then changed her mind immediately to a mafia state, explaining that leaders of a rogue state at least have morality and try to advance the state. In Tunisia’s mafia state, Ben Ali did not care about developing the country; he was only concerned about developing his family.\(^\text{418}\)

By 2010, the corruption that had systematically been forcing marginalized populations into poverty revealed that the regime had reaped tens of billions of dollars. What became even clearer was that there was not one family in Tunisia that was not affected by these practices at a certain time. Most chose to passively reconcile their misfortune, while others abandoned their homeland in search of better lives outside of Tunisia. The regime stole from you regardless of your class, wealth, prestige, politics, education, or religion. For one man in particular, the exploitation had reached a level that became so unbearable, the only way he could escape the humiliation, hopelessness and despair; the pitiful remnants left by a regime that literally sucked the life out of the country and its people, was to take his own life in a tragic display of self-martyrdom. Muhammad Bouazizi’s last words explain his decision; after dousing himself with

\(^\text{417}\) Interview (11.5.30).
\(^\text{418}\) Interview (16.6.1).
benzene after attempting to recover the scales he needed to sell fruit, he shouted “how do you expect me to make a living?” before setting himself alight, reflecting a paradox that was well understood across the country.419

Muhammad Bouazizi: “His Case was Our Case”:420

Although it has been argued that there were many factors that culminated in the Tunisian revolution, Muhammad Bouazizi’s “political suicide” was certainly a catalyst that resonated as a broader sign of contestation against, among other things, Tunisia’s dire unemployment situation, which directly stemmed from the country’s political corruption. Bouazizi’s demonstration underscored an inextricable linkage between unemployment and politics that revealed an unmistakable attribution that issues like unemployment, limited opportunities and poverty could be traced back to the failed economic policies of Ben Ali’s government.421 His action “flipped a switch” that set anticipated events in motion that had been stymied for decades.422 Most interviewees remarked that the tragic act of self-immolation was not something new, and that in fact it had happened just a month earlier but failed to inspire the same response across the country. Bouazizi’s example was “relatable” because he attempted to work within the arbitrary bounds of the state that overshadowed society, but he was rebuffed and directly challenged by a female police officer – a de facto extension of the RCD’s oppression. Regardless of the exact circumstances behind the dispute over his license to operate a fruit and vegetable cart, people understood his frustrations in trying to live in a country where non-affiliation to

419 Interview (16.6.1).
420 Interview (6.5.26).
421 Interview (14.6.1).
422 Interview (3.5.24).
the state party meant an unrelenting struggle to survive, even if you followed the rules.\textsuperscript{423} Bouazizi’s spontaneous reaction to his subordinate reality reflected deeper and repressed conceptions of state oppression that were suddenly unleashed across the country in reaction to his desperate action, which has made it the event that has been attributed to the beginning of the subsequent revolution.\textsuperscript{424}

**Bi Kuli Hazim – Unrest Returns to the Interior:**

Tunisia’s regional imbalance of development also explains this dramatic response to Bouazizi’s self-immolation in the Interior that suffered from uneven development and government investment.\textsuperscript{425} The people in the “forgotten” Interior were much poorer and deprived from government attention compared to the Sahel coastal regions, and the perception that many had was that the country’s “general division” readily meant that people in the Interior had fewer jobs, and limited opportunities. Thus, it was no surprise that Bouazizi’s action resonated across Tunisia’s more disadvantaged population.\textsuperscript{426}

After just 10 days, the riots spread from Sidi Bouzid – the hometown of Bouazizi – to the country’s powder keg in the Interior.\textsuperscript{427} For one interviewee, it became clear that once the uprisings had spread from Sidi Bouzid, it was certain that the regime would eventually collapse; he thought Ben Ali had six months.\textsuperscript{428} What had once been handfuls of people that resorted to more primitive methods of retaliating against government

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{423} Interview (6.5.26).
\item \textsuperscript{424} Interview (20.6.3).
\item \textsuperscript{425} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{426} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{427} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{428} Interview (11.5.30).
\item Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
forces by throwing rocks at police – which led them to be shot\textsuperscript{429} had evolved into organized, sizable masses of protesters that appeared un-phased by the regime’s brutal retaliation.

As it had traditionally done in the past, the regime bombarded growing crowds by using live fire and riot control police to physically break up the demonstrations\textsuperscript{430}, which led to the deaths of 20 men, women and children from Kasserine – intended as a lesson in terror on the part of the regime, but one that ultimately failed to deter demonstrators. Previously, smaller protests in the Interior were easy to crush, but as one woman indicated, Bouazizi’s act meant that the “message was out,” and the regime’s violent reaction only inspired more crowds to go out into the streets.\textsuperscript{431} The protests continued and began to spread from Kasserine to other key locations and stretched the regime’s personnel and resources to an unprecedented extent. One participant noted that even though there were many people who supported Ben Ali, the Tunisian people began to see the idea of a “hero” in everyone that stood up against him and explains how the momentum was sustained and continued to grow.\textsuperscript{432} During the initial days of the uprisings, the regime responded with a very “hard” discourse through state-owned television, indicating that those responsible for instigating these uprisings would be severely punished. However, the regime’s blatant recognition of the uprisings and its willingness to broadcast images of events in the Interior was a response that had never been witnessed before and indicated that the regime knew it was in trouble.\textsuperscript{433}

\textsuperscript{429} Interview (2.5.23).
\textsuperscript{430} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{431} Interview (20.6.3).
\textsuperscript{432} Interview (3.5.24).
\textsuperscript{433} Interview (11.5.30).
Even the regime’s leadership recognized that the size and character of the
demonstrations had grown beyond historic thresholds, and that the uprisings were
escalating beyond what onlookers could describe as the regime’s comfort-zone (reaching
a “culminant point” to reference Clausewitz) – the point at which the ability to quell
dissent through standard mechanisms of repression had been reached. The dissatisfaction
over shared grievances across the country’s interior had reached a monumental and
unprecedented resonance and warranted a more personalistic contribution from the
president himself. Ben Ali’s visit to the hospital to show his support for Bouazizi’s
situation (although he had probably already died by this point) highlighted the impact of
self-immolation and the profound power that wielded as a form of protest. Yet, Ben Ali’s
foolish photo opportunity backfired because he was seen as disingenuous in his sympathy
for the tragic death of one of his subjects. If anything, it proved that the unrest had
captured the attention of the regime and that it needed to respond to dissent in more
innovative ways than the use of force.434

**New Communication Reveals Shared Grievances:**

“People don’t stand up to tyranny unless there is a universal grievance”435

Beyond the notions that political freedom and unemployment were the more poignant
grievances that most Tunisians shared and should be considered explanations to how the
revolution spread across the country, interviewees offered additional input on how to

434 Interview (20.6.3).
435 Interview (13.5.31).
conceptualize the “collective grievances,” Tunisians shared when living under Ben Ali and further describe how the ideas of revolution spread so dramatically.

For most, the deplorable economic situation defined their lives. One source claimed that everyone in the country was suffering from the poor standard of living, stating that “when you are poor, you can’t do anything. You can’t live your life, get married, go out with your friends, nothing.” Even those who had jobs or who had been fortunate enough to live in the more privileged areas of the country claimed that salaries and the standard of living were not equal. Products were extremely expensive and highly inflated compared to just average salaries, which made it impossible to save money.

The limits that were imposed on society under a mechanism of economic constraint did not match expectations, which for many were formulated by what they saw around them. Tunisians, for the most part, were highly educated and had knowledge of the outside world. The political sacrifices that the population had made to sustain a more agreeable social contract in support of welfare and an enhanced quality of life had been for nothing, and it became clear that they were no longer willing to tolerate the lives that they had settled for. As participants explained, it became a question over how long were they going to continue to remain silent. The uprisings became “a call of heart, wisdom, and brain;” after so many years of saying yes to Bourguiba and Ben Ali, people felt humiliated and knew it was time to speak out.

After two days, the events that occurred in Sidi Bouzid were being discussed in Tunis, where one source noted how a group of colleagues were so surprised by the

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436 Interview (6.5.26).
437 Ibid.
438 Interview (3.5.24).
439 Interview (8.5.27).
440 Interview (5.5.25).
courage displayed by the protesters and how they were not afraid to confront the police.\textsuperscript{441} The regime’s capacity of repression should not be underestimated, and one source noted in those very early days that he was certain that the protests would be brought to the same violent end as they had in the Gafsa Basin in 2008.\textsuperscript{442} However, the popular grievances of those living in the Interior – corruption, lack of opportunity, lack of freedom – had finally translated to the Sahel. The courage that emanated from the Interior gave people across the country the confidence they needed to examine their own misfortunes, and to question whether or not the sacrifices they had made for the “regionalized advantages” they had accepted were actually worth Ben Ali’s support. A lot of people joined the movement including lawyers, teachers, professors and unions, which helped it spread from the Interior to the Sahel, and demands quickly shifted from concerns over dignity and work, to Ben Ali’s departure from politics.\textsuperscript{443} Broad recognition that expectations were not met proved that Ben Ali’s injustice had spread across all politics and all industries, prompting everyone to go into the streets during the revolution;\textsuperscript{444} this included the capital Tunis, where hundreds of thousands of people moved en masse to Habib Bourguiba Avenue, a display that had never happened before.\textsuperscript{445} Sources note that the regime could not respond to such a vast number of people congregating at once in different parts of the country, possible only by the “speed of communication and its popular capitalization.” The revolution would never have

\textsuperscript{441} Interview (11.5.30).
\textsuperscript{442} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{443} Interview (8.5.27).
\textsuperscript{444} Interview (3.5.24).
\textsuperscript{445} Interview (2.5.23).
occurred without the use of new modes of critical communication to spread the message and universalize the movement.\footnote{Interview (8.5.27).}

\textbf{“Merci Facebook:” The Role of Social Media:\footnote{Appendix C-4.}}

The Internet was crucial and enabled an unprecedented level of communication and access to information through websites like: Anonymous, WikiLeaks, Facebook, and You Tube.\footnote{Interview (6.5.26).} Broadcasting pictures and videos of Bouazizi’s self-immolation vividly depicted the reality of his desperation and facilitated and overpowered a severed physical linkage between the Sahel and the Interior that the regime had tried to sustain. Depictions of the regime’s failed development and investment programs in the Interior that had long been based on rumors were clarified by online activists who continued to post information that espoused the regime’s failures and defended those who suffered because of them. Traditional strategies to physically contain the Interior were no longer affective, since the rest of the country could now see what was actually happening – a critical transition that the government had never planned to control.

Prior to the onset of the uprisings, communication that occurred on very public and widespread forums like Facebook or You Tube did not appear as threatening to the regime because these particular forums were not politically oriented. The communication had been occurring between “normal” people, not political activists; therefore, the regime could not allege that they were political dissenters and ironically, anyone who chose to make negative comments against the regime did not feel under threat because they were

\footnote{Interview (8.5.27).}
not affiliated with the regime’s prescribed “opposition.” This communication slowly began to “destabilize and shake” the foundations of the regime. Technology and information diluted the regime and prevented it from “keeping secrets” and provided the valuable evidence that a lot of people needed to prove that Ben Ali had failed.

Although self-immolation and other desperate suicidal acts had happened before, limited penetration of social media across the population prevented people from knowing about it. By 2010, Bouazizi’s self-immolation sparked a flurry of online activism, manifested in the “Facebook post,” video clips, and the use of a “Like” link to facilitate information sharing and national exposure to content that outpaced, overrode, and challenged the government’s propaganda narrative. Social media and improved telecommunications became political for the first time and allowed people to get honest information quickly. One woman reflected on her own experience as a cyber activist during the revolution, claiming that she did not sleep for two months and that more privileged participants in the revolution adopted the role of communication facilitators. The bravery and sacrifices that “their brothers and sisters” were showing from their participation in the uprisings compelled the cyber activists to share their struggle and to make sure that they did not “miss the opportunity to bring about this positive change” in Tunisia. The sense of national unity was underscored by the use of social media, and how everyone adopted a specific role in support of the movement. This was particularly true for Tunisia’s youth population. When before it appeared that the young people were not politicized or interested in anything now seems to be untrue because the revolution

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449 Interview (14.6.1).
450 Interview (3.5.24).
451 Interview (10.5.30).
452 Interview (5.5.25).
showed that they were actually more aware. And for the first time as one source noted, social media rejuvenated the youth generation that had suffered the most from the regime’s neglect – “rendering them jobless, disempowered, incapable of marrying, and unable to afford even the most mediocre lives” – proving to the country that their suffering, which had been misdiagnosed as political apathy was actually incorrect.453

The important role that social networking tools played in facilitating rapid communication across the country cannot be overstated, and probably represents one of the indisputable distinguishing factors that isolates these particular uprisings from those that had occurred previously; however, the role of social media is a “big subject,” and as highlighted by one interviewee, it is certain that social media “cannot invent the real world.” Social media has to be grounded in something real, and consequently did not play a unilateral role in Tunisian politics, it provided logistical support.454 We cannot forget or discount the role of people when discussing Tunisia’s political transformation.

La’a Khowfa B’ada al-Youm:455

Identifying the impetus for revolution and the point at which a population is willing to die rather than continue to live under oppression is a quagmire that this investigation does not attempt to unravel; however, there is no question that a popular “breaking point” had been reached in December 2010. As one participant noted, the uprisings were like a “wave that crashed on the shores of the country,” and although “no one knew how it got there, they controlled, oriented and used it.” A culmination of information made

453 Interview (16.6.1).
454 Interview (11.5.30).
455 Appendix C-5.
available by international press and WikiLeaks helped and made people aware of the regime’s vast corruption. Simultaneously, social media tools spread images that showed how the very poor were suffering. Things happening in the Interior for the first time reflected conditions everywhere and “represented the drop of water that made the glass overflow.” The hungry people in forgotten areas in the Interior had been telling the truth for years and were finally being heard and did not care how far their voices carried, how loud they were, or whether the regime heard them anymore. Sources stated that the situation had become so disgusting that people no longer felt fear and were ready for anything, whether gunshots or death. “After thousands overcame their fear, revolution was inevitable” because too many people had nothing to lose anymore. When facing unemployment, despondence, and humiliation, what is the value in life? The “wall of fear” that confined public interest had been torn down by the population. Death was no longer a deterrent to dissent.

Ben Ali’s “Spanish Castle:”

Although we can clearly identify the factors that led the population to challenge the regime’s credibility and openly oppose its rule, it is equally critical to devote space to understanding the regime’s behavior in an attempt to explain its inadequate response to popular opposition, by answering lingering questions over how a seemingly indestructible regime could collapse in just 28 days. Popular uprisings of such an

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456 Interview (5.5.25).
457 Ibid.
459 Interview (8.5.27).
460 Interview (13.5.31).
461 Interview (10.5.30).
unprecedented caliber seriously tested the durability of a regime that had long advertised a powerful exoskeleton of oppression. However, to underscore the unconcealed shock described in first-hand accounts, the regime appears to have been unable to manage the influences that were threatening its own internal durability.

## The Personalities:

Conflicting internal dynamics at the political apex had deteriorated to levels that were unsustainable, specifically when considering the competing personalities of the ruling families and their conceited posturing to attain and exert political influence. The family members that had traditionally been content with reaping the financial benefits of being close to the regime were gradually vying for political positions, including the president’s brother-in-law and son-in-law. Competition within the family led to an unhealthy polarization of political authority that reverberated across the government and ultimately fragmented a once, consolidated group of elites.\(^{462}\)

## The Speeches: Ben Ali’s Personal Touch

The regime’s reaction to the increasing level of dissent in 2010 was badly orchestrated and made it appear as though no one in the government really even knew what was happening, exacerbated further by Ben Ali’s famous trilogy of speeches that only alienated him further from an irreconcilable population. After visiting Bouazizi in the hospital, Ben Ali gave his first speech in which he threatened to quell dissent violently because it would not be tolerated and was against the law. Although participants admitted that people were nervous over the extent to which the regime would carry out its

\(^{462}\) Interview (7.5.27).
threats, his reference to an arbitrary rule of law undermined his legitimacy and reaffirmed his sheer ineptitude to the source of the country’s uprisings, inspiring people to return to the streets the next day.\textsuperscript{463} People charged that his speech had insulted them and undermined their demands. For the Tunisian people it was only about his removal – a non-negotiable term that they were prepared to die for. His pleas to the country in his second and third speeches promising that he would not run for another presidential term, that he understood the demands of his jobless and needy citizens, and that he felt betrayed by the people he had dedicated his life to serve, but they meant nothing to a country that had “heard it all before.”\textsuperscript{464} The political uprisings that were sweeping the country had evolved to represent more than the overthrow of the president, but the dismantling and reconstruction of the entire system that had failed them.

**The Structure:**

Structurally, it had been revealed with the dramatic demise of the regime that domestic policy had always had fragile and weak foundations. Had the people known what else was going other than domestic policy the revolution would have happened earlier, but could have been more violent, since the visible deterioration of the regime’s authority had been apparent in its latter years.\textsuperscript{465} One informant noted that the whole regime was “make-believe,” like a Spanish castle\textsuperscript{466}, outwardly stable, sturdy and prolific, but when you remove one card the precarious and fragile structure completely collapses. This particular “card” happened to be Ben Ali, whose own design of rule that ensured he

\begin{footnotes}
\item[463] Interview (10.5.30).
\item[464] Ibid.
\item[465] Interview (8.5.27).
\item[466] Interview (17.6.2).
\end{footnotes}
would sustain an indispensable presence at the regime’s core, guaranteed its downfall when he was forced from power. Furthermore, his supremacy at the summit of the regime’s political pyramid left it haphazardly vulnerable to the decision-making of one individual in times of crisis, and in this crisis, Ben Ali’s assessment of the uprisings had been misguided. Un-preparedness and miscalculation define the four weeks as the regime struggled to respond to the forces that were weakening it, and led observers to highlight the severe lack of coordination and inability to respond affectively to those forces can be attributed ironically to Ben Ali’s preferred “one-man” system of rule.\textsuperscript{467} The standard protocol of employing the use of force against dissent was also challenged internally, which surprised the president and left him scrambling to establish constituencies.\textsuperscript{468}

\textbf{RCD OUT:}\textsuperscript{469}

There were also clear indications that the president’s loyalty had been waning, evidenced by his approach to leadership organization and his propensity to sacrifice loyalty to alleviate his personal paranoia. The president was very good at creating tension between elites in the government because he never trusted anyone, often compelling him to put ranking officials against each other and shuffling them throughout his cabinet to prevent anyone from establishing a loyal power base. Recognizing the need to remain close to the president to avoid alienation, government elites would constantly be competing for his favor or trying to maneuver to advance their own political mobility, which ultimately detracted from the regime’s robustness and fostered a clear lack of cohesion even at the

\textsuperscript{467} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{468} Interview (20.6.3).  
\textsuperscript{469} Appendix C-6.
highest levels of leadership.\textsuperscript{470} This dynamic appeared to reflect the RCD’s confidence in the president’s ability to sustain power, and as we now know, their overall allegiance to him as the uprisings outpaced the regime’s efforts to suppress them. Not only were internal politics in the regime introducing new questions over Ben Ali’s ultimate role in the regime’s future, but the layer of support around the regime was thinning\textsuperscript{471} because people in the regime were also no longer willing to support it\textsuperscript{472}. For example, his own party did not react to the uprisings by organizing counter protests in favor of the regime or initiating campaigns to endorse a new political solution. The RCD’s inaction proved that the ruling family’s most critical allies had abandoned its politics and kleptocratic habits.\textsuperscript{473} One participant believed that the RCD gave up on him because its allegiance to Ben Ali had really never been about personal loyalty, but as previously noted, was about greed, self-interest and corruption.\textsuperscript{474} Recent revelations of the former Presidential Security Chief confirm this point. He pointed out that Ben Ali had never trusted anyone, especially the RCD machine. To ease his paranoia and ensure control Ben Ali infiltrated the RCD through the Presidential Guard (PG), which became responsible for drafting reports on the RCD leadership and membership, as well as the top bureaucrats within the administration.

Every family in the country had been victimized by the ruling family’s rampant corruption which explains how even members of the RCD just grew disgusted by the status quo, especially since their compliance in sustaining the regime no longer awarded them the benefits that had seduced them in the past. For the upper echelons of

\textsuperscript{470} Interview (17.6.2).
\textsuperscript{471} Interview (2.5.23).
\textsuperscript{472} Interview (5.5.25).
\textsuperscript{473} Interview (10.5.30).
\textsuperscript{474} Interview (3.5.24).
government, corruption had spread from the economy into a discomforting level in the political system as well, especially after 2009 as one source noted.\textsuperscript{475} A combination of fear and paranoia no longer made even the most powerful politicians in the country immune to Ben Ali’s coercive authority. One interviewee said that Ben Ali’s ministers could not disagree or \textit{even} resign from office because they were afraid that it would be viewed as a sign of contestation to the president’s legitimacy and the consequences to them or their families could be serious. This system led even the most disenchanted Tunisians to recognize that the government’s honest people had been forced to support him or to simply leave the country.\textsuperscript{476} Reflecting the higher levels of the party’s constituency, the RCD’s spy networks began weakening when it became clear that the attractive benefits that had once been a fundamental basis for the regime’s recruitment strategy were diminishing. The margins of greed and self-indulgence had reached such high levels that even the regime’s fragile support system embodied in the RCD had been robbed of the goodies that had assured their allegiance. Sources explained that people in the ruling party recognized that the information they shared about opponents of the regime only contributed to supporting the single family that they had begun to despise.\textsuperscript{477}

\textbf{Economic Syndicates – Political Affairs no Longer a Priority:}\textsuperscript{478}

Despite being heavily embedded in the regime, the economic syndicates that had initially refused to participate in the uprising eventually demonstrated their support by passively disseminating guidance that encouraging local branches to make their own decisions in

\textsuperscript{475} Interview (7.5.27).
\textsuperscript{476} Interview (5.5.25).
\textsuperscript{477} Interview (10.5.30).
\textsuperscript{478} Interview (3.5.24).
late December 2010. Lack of clear authority gave most of these local branches (headed by RCD loyalists) a degree of freedom that they had never exercised and participated in the uprisings by announcing strikes, disrupting the economy, and fueling the masses in the streets. The UGTT amplified the momentum of the protests especially under the advisement of coordinated branches in the interior municipalities, like Le Kef, Gafsa and Kasserine. One participant noted that the participation of the syndicate was particularly damaging to the regime because the government did not have enough resources to suppress the widespread dissent it was encouraging, as though the UGTT had set multiple fires that were burning around the country at the same time, making it much more difficult to send security forces to arrest the leaders responsible for the uprisings or those participating in them.

Attempted Coup?:

Further indications that the regime was facing serious struggles from within reflects the overwhelming perception among participants that Ben Ali did not flee the country on his own terms, but that the collapse of his regime ultimately stemmed from “internal ambiguities” and likely, a coup de palais that occurred alongside the revolution in the streets. The circumstances of January 14, 2011 to this day remain unclear and as one source claimed, made everyone in the government very “dizzy.” The most compelling evidence that a coup probably took place is seen in the arrest of the director of the

479 Interview (10.5.30).
480 Interview (20.6.3).
481 Interview (17.6.2).
482 Interview (16.6.1).
president’s personal security guard, Seriati for his alleged involvement (rumored with the Trabelsi family) to carry out a coup against Ben Ali.  

Army Rejects Order to Fire on Protesters:

The fact that the army did not follow the regime was another critical factor. According to one woman, if the army had supported Ben Ali then the revolution would have never happened. One interviewee noted that Ben Ali did not privilege the army during his regime, that the army suffered a lot during his presidency, and that it maintained a strong grudge against him. The army was not as well trained or well equipped as those in other Arab countries. In total, the army contained only about 36,000 people and had been responsible predominantly for civil activities since independence. Ben Ali played a pivotal role in keeping the army weak so that it never had the option to influence politics. For example, one interviewee alleges that he was so paranoid that the army would turn against him that he dispatched the PG to spy on the Army as well, but it seems that reports written on the armed forces were ineffective due to the inability of the PG to infiltrate the chain of command and to understand the modus operandi of the Army’s leadership. One interviewee believed that Ben Ali had been responsible for shooting down a helicopter filled with several high officials from the army in 2002 even though we now know that it was a mechanical accident. For security, Ben Ali preferred to rely on his PG that amounted to several thousand (which nobody knew about) and his

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483 Interview (10.5.30); Interview (16.6.1).
484 Interview (16.6.1).
485 Interview (14.6.1).
486 Jebnoun, Contributing comment. 4.12.12.
omnipresent police “dogs” who did shoot at the protesters.\textsuperscript{487} Since the army had been conscripted from the people – many in fact from the more impoverished and neglected areas of the country that were leading the uprisings – it maintained its loyalty to the people and refused to shoot.\textsuperscript{488}

**Expecting the Unexpected:**

Although the factors that led to the downfall of the Ben Ali regime are relatively identifiable, a more challenging question that this investigation hopes to answer is a temporal one: why now? Some participants did not fully equate their personal response to the self-immolation of Bouazizi, or even view him as the real catalyst for Ben Ali’s ultimate demise; rather, Bouazizi’s particular case – one that embodies the regime’s exploitation of dignity, humility and self-worth – was just one of many factors that inspired a national resonance that eventually amplified beyond the imagination or conception of even the Tunisian people themselves.

As events unfolded, people were not shocked that another round of uprisings had emerged in the Interior, but there was a feeling that things were different this time. There were new doubts over the future of the regime and indications that it was near the end; no one knew when it would collapse, or ultimately how, but people never thought that it would only end as a result of a popular reaction or struggle; people did not think seriously that a popular uprising would be the reason. It had long been assumed that the regime

\textsuperscript{487} Interview (8.5.27).
\textsuperscript{488} Interview (10.5.30).
would last until Ben Ali died, because he was sick. And if he did die, no one really knew
who would succeed him.\footnote{489}

Although there is no clear answer to why the revolution took place when it did,
interviewees recognized that these uprisings were different because they were leaderless,
unified, spontaneous and the product of broad converging forces. For most, what
happened in January 2011 was completely surprising and had the regime been aware of
its ultimate fate, the uprisings would have been crushed because that is what the regime
normally did.\footnote{490} One woman believed that Ben Ali was such a coward for leaving after
just one month.\footnote{491} Nearly all participants highlighted the significance that a coordinated
process that had no real direction occurred this time that has not occurred before, which
was largely guided by information spread through mass media like, Al Jazeera, satellites,
phones, social networking sites and other new modes of communication.\footnote{492} Access to
information and the power of universal self interest converged at a unique and fantastical
point on the historic timeline and enabled the revolution to advance successfully. Finally,
informants note that the pace of the expansion of unrest was perfectly gradual, which
deceived the government and prevented it from reacting too violently or fast enough to
quash dissent.\footnote{493}

\footnote{489} Interview (7.5.27).
\footnote{490} Interview (2.5.23).
\footnote{491} Interview (5.5.25).
\footnote{492} Interview (3.5.24).
\footnote{493} Interview (10.5.30).
“The Ben Ali regime was like an infection. Once you treat it, you have to wait for it to heal.”

The previous assessment proves that there is not one single factor that can be isolated to explain the downfall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, but rather, that a multitude of converging catalysts led to what the scholarship would assert was the ultimate removal of an authoritarian dictator in a country that was least likely to spawn a revolution. The Ben Ali regime was marred by flaws: clear fissures in the political structure; the despicable behavior of an increasingly complacent ruling family; pervasive corruption; nepotism; and brutal suppression of individual freedoms. Although these particular indicators can be identified with the benefit of hindsight, the factors that we now know contributed to Ben Ali’s ultimate demise remain insufficient to explain the regime’s endurance, specifically questioning how the fallen president’s departure from power did not transpire decades earlier amid such widespread dissatisfaction. Thus, we are compelled to question why and how did a regime that had ultimately withered away by the nature of its own corrosive elements endure and affectively radiate the image of resilient durability for 23 years? Several answers were proposed by participants in this research study, which leaves the reader to believe that the regime’s longevity stemmed from a combination of the following factors.

494 Interview (5.5.25).
• **Ben Ali’s Party Politics:** Some have argued that simply because Ben Ali was an alternative to an increasingly unpopular Bourguiba, people were willing to give him a chance to follow through with the initial promises that he made immediately following his rise to the presidency. The transition period marked a hopeful alternative to the latter years of Bourguiba’s presidency, which had largely been tainted by a more consolidated variant of authoritarian rule and a crackdown on personal freedoms and civil liberties. Ironically, it would be the apparent pluralism in the National Pact signed by a wide spectrum of the political opposition groups that would ultimately determine their exclusion from politics; they were given no guarantees that the ensuing political system would welcome their inclusion, or that declarative opposition to the regime had “outed” them as dissenters, inhibiting their ability to openly challenge the regime leaving them susceptible to harassment. Ben Ali had successfully isolated the more prominent political actors that had emerged under and silenced them under false pretenses, severely diminished the threats that political actors could pose to his authority.\(^{495}\)

Furthermore, one observer noted that the Tunisian people had failed to see the “pre-screened film” that began its production during Bourguiba’s presidency, when Ben Ali’s true sentiments towards the Islamists were revealed by his participation in their persecution as the Interior Minister. The president’s inconsistent policy towards Ennahda throughout the National Pact negotiations, followed by his initial campaign to target Islamists were policies that were essentially neglected by the population and failed to encourage regime

\(^{495}\) Interview (11.5.30).
accountability. As a result, we now know that uninhibited Islamist repression was actually an impetus for a more habitual practice adopted by the regime against all opposition groups or contestation that followed.\footnote{496 Interview (11.5.30).} It is uncertain whether Islamists should be considered Ben Ali’s “trial variable” in a greater experiment against the opposition, but his initial efforts to dismantle their networks and limit their influence were successful, and probably contributed to his decision to pursue other targets.

- **International Security Concerns Trump Despotic Rule:** It is important to devote some attention to the role of external actors to explain the durability of Arab authoritarian regimes in general, a policy to which Tunisia was certainly not excluded. Both the United States and France are accused of turning a blind diplomatic eye to the intensification of authoritarianism under Ben Ali in order to pursue their own national interests, often to a significant detriment to the Tunisian people. Specifically, these countries shied away from policies that condemned some of the more unsavory characteristics of the regime, including its, reliance on the security apparatus, affinity to secret police surveillance, deplorable human rights record, use of torture and coercion, corrupt justice system, economic favoritism, and absence of rule of law. For the United States, the regime’s firm stance against Islamists, marked by their forced exclusion from the political system and the regime’s secularization policies, underscored Tunisia as a valuable regional security partner. Ben Ali’s cooperation on larger foreign policy priorities of the United States, including mitigating the Arab-Israeli peace process and
endorsing measures suitable to economic growth by the IFI’s further contributed to the regime’s external support. For the French, concerns revolved around Tunisia’s local economic opportunities and their activism on illegal immigration to the Northern Mediterranean. The unrelenting international support for authoritarian regimes in the Arab World and their unrestrained use of coercion at the hands of an obtrusive security apparatus is offered as a “crucial explanation for their competitive longevity in global terms.” But after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, indications that the regime’s endurance may have been waning were shattered amid new pledges of financial, political, and military support in favor of entrenching a convenient and cooperative government that would tote the West’s anti-Islamist line. Ben Ali’s regime grew stronger because of this external support, raising its fledging life expectancy and diminishing any potential for accountability for its habitual oppression. As one international observer noted, peace and stability should not be overlooked when thinking about Ben Ali’s presidency (regardless of the means by which these were achieved) just for the fact that they actually existed, which is not a very common occurrence in the region. Ben Ali justified his Draconian style of governance to the international community as a necessary measure to prevent Tunisia from plummeting into instability. This relationship founded on national security interests rather than a respect for human rights or democracy promotion was “shameful, and disgraceful” according to one interviewee, who noted that it is unfortunate how the West failed to intervene over the moral standards that they

497 Angrist, p. 187.
498 Interview (11.5.30).
499 Interview (20.6.3).
normally champion but instead funneled hundreds of millions of dollars to the bank accounts of despotic leaders, rather than their subjects.\textsuperscript{500} Observers noted that for 23 years, there was no serious alternative that could challenge Ben Ali internally, largely because the international community supported the apparatus that prevented opposition from affectively operating. Trade, security, and defending an image that Tunisia challenged regional deficits in economic development, education and social welfare, were all benefits that the Tunisia international allies favored at the expense of the Tunisian people.\textsuperscript{501} In the last ten years, the regime began to weaken from a failing economic model, growing political resentment, and insufficient social services.\textsuperscript{502}

- **Democracy After Stability:** Following Bourguiba’s presidency, which in its latter years, had failed to avoid a regional economic downturn, the priorities of most Tunisians had been readjusted to reflect more personal concerns, like resolving “debts and personal struggles” rather than politics, which had never been a major concern for most people since their needs were met under Bourguiba’s social contract, according to one source.\textsuperscript{503} Interests lied in restoring a favorable economy and reintroducing national stability, instead of pressuring the new president to follow-through with his initial tendencies toward democracy. People recognized that democracy could not occur without stability, and it appeared that Tunisians were willing to wait for democracy until the economy

\textsuperscript{500} Interview (13.5.31).
\textsuperscript{501} Interview (11.5.30).
\textsuperscript{502} Interview (14.6.1); Interview (16.6.1).
\textsuperscript{503} Interview (7.5.27).
improved and the aftermath of the political transformation stabilized before the country’s political future was discussed. Proving that the economy would reach an acceptable level of “success” is difficult to assess objectively. Whether economic liberalization is a sine qua non to democracy is contested in the literature but at least provides an explanation in this particular case for a certain exclusionary political latitude offered to the regime. It is evident now that the failure to hold Ben Ali accountable to his initial promises for pluralism provided him the time needed to execute a well-constructed plan to secure his hold on power, while simultaneously neglecting attention to policies intended to develop and improve the economy. Although security is often cited as a positive initiative during Ben Ali’s presidency (not surprising under a police state), by the early 2000s, the regime’s credibility was further questioned following a terrorist attack in the eastern island of Jerba, which proved that the only real achievement the regime could highlight was no longer relevant.  

- **Development without Democracy:** The social and political costs were very high under a national policy that intended to centralize development to a key group of decisions-makers who were responsible for carrying out plans to develop the country’s infrastructure and social services. Ben Ali exploited national concerns over Bourguiba’s failed economy and emphasized underdevelopment in critical industries and services across Tunisia to garner broad support for the country’s retraction from politics in exchange for the regime’s focus on development –

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504 Interview (14.6.1).
essentially redrawing the social contract that Bourguiba had sustained for the first two decades of his presidency. It became apparent after Ben Ali abolished the National Pact and reformed the constitution to increase term limits on the presidency that he had no genuine interest in restoring popular participation in politics, leaving the economy as his sole priority. However, underdevelopment stemming from targeted regional favoritism severely undermined initiatives that painted a successful picture vis-à-vis the Tunisian economy. Although the deplorable marginalization of populations living outside the country’s Sahel region is now known, the regime was content with hiding its development failures to the country’s elites and middle class. Not only had the truth been concealed from the Tunisian people but national assessments produced by the government for consumption by international actors like the IMF and World Bank are now known to have been completely fabricated to assuage skepticism that Tunisia’s economy was fledging and to ensure continued favorability and financial assistance from aforementioned international donors.

- **Terror:** Of course, it would be impossible to justify authoritarian durability without dedicating space to the power of coercion, the institutionalization of fear, and the use of terror as means through which the Ben Ali regime maintained political acquiescence. These particular strategies were ever-present in Tunisia, and terror was directly linked to the regime’s survival according to most interviewees. For one interviewee, her immediate response was simply “terror,”

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505 Interview (14.6.1).
506 Interview (11.5.30).
507 Ref. Chapter 4.
which she later elaborated on by noting that terror was the only way the regime was able to last. People had been so terrorized that only irreconcilable frustration and hunger could trump the people’s level of fear because the “regime was so oppressive.” 508 Others explained that people wanted Ben Ali to leave power, but “they had their limits and were not willing to sacrifice themselves at that time.”

One source noted that the events that occurred in 2010 are difficult to explain when one considers the impact of collective sacrifice, which represents a psychological breaking-point that must be reached in order for revolutions to occur. 509 This assessment has tried to justify that it was inevitable that Tunisians would eventually go out into the streets and demand change, given the extensive analysis that has been presented explaining what led them to do so, but it does not attempt to understand how a popular decision to die for the sake of freedom was reached either in this case or when assessing other examples from the Arab Spring. People saw that the events of 2010 had become a collective and unceasing effort, which according to some, made them believe that they too should be willing to sacrifice themselves at that time. 510

- **Apprehensive Activism:** One interviewee highlighted the nature of the Tunisian mindset (stemming from the “Arab mind” 511) as a plausible explanation for the regime’s propensity to endure. He observed that Tunisians have had been pacifist to injustice and that a popular resistance to speaking-out against wrongdoing was

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508 Interview (2.5.23).
509 Interview (16.6.1).
510 Ibid.
embedded across [a beach] society; this point was clearly reiterated in previous chapters, particularly when considering Ben Ali’s treatment of Islamists. People were “not in a hurry” to push Ben Ali from power, because “he did not oppress everyone, just pockets here and there that chose to challenge the government.” Still, the regime’s brutality cannot be underappreciated, but until the last decade of his reign, “most people had a decent living and just lacked individual freedoms that were not that important for most people.”

512 This passivity translated to the political spectrum, and reveals that there was no “political armada of elites” that wielded the power, the courage, or the incentive to speak out against the unfavorable practices of their leader. One’s personal strife and willingness to challenge Ben Ali determined an unsettling fate, since individuals could be more easily targeted and silenced. Furthermore, individual action against the government behemoth was ultimately unsuccessful, and required the coalition of support that emerged in December 2010 to challenge the status quo. Tunisians, as he continued, are prone to covet a “wait mentality,” that was particularly valuable in this case, since the time they chose to react was particularly opportune and appropriate.

513 Another interviewee furthered this sentiment by stating that people just kept making themselves believe that things were fine, but in reality holistic restrictions grew “tighter and tighter” until they finally reached a breaking point.

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512 Interview (20.6.3).
513 Interview (3.5.24).
514 Interview (8.5.27).
• **Hiding Regional Disparities:** Economic conditions and social movements were the main reason the regime collapsed, according to some interviewees.\(^{515}\) Specifically, the regime’s political and developmental regionalization can be directly attributed to the source and trajectory of the uprisings in their early stages, originating in the country’s forgotten interior regions. It was the people from these same regions that were more apt to speak out against the regime, both as a result of its diminished presence outside of metropolitan areas (i.e. RCD informants, police municipalities) and because regions in the Interior did not have adequate representation or power in the capital – no one to speak up for them or defend their grievances.\(^{516}\) Keeping the Interior isolated and underrepresented allowed the regime to focus its resources and attention on a privileged fraction of the population, who for the most part lived decent lives until the regime’s latter years. Rather than trying to improve the lives of those living in the Interior, the regime chose to ignore its population and hide their sad realities from those who might demand reform.

• **Corruption Gradually Dilutes Legitimacy:** Although the effects of corruption do not require an expanded explanation beyond what has been outlined in this thesis, the extent to which corruption disconnected the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families from their people is a citable justification for the regime’s longevity. It was not the existence of corruption per se that pushed his subjects to their breaking-point but rather, its incremental increase over time that allowed him to

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\(^{515}\) Interview (11.5.30).

\(^{516}\) Interview (3.5.24).
“lose touch” beyond the point of “politeness or manners” as one interviewee stated. A system of corruption based on alliances and spies that implicated everyone, and consequently diminished criticism of the regime’s spending habits, ensured the regime’s survival because many benefited from it, at least in the beginning.\textsuperscript{517} However, “the dictatorship started to last too long,” as did its thievery. Eventually, the ruling family was in charge of its own self-destruction because it did not provide any economic or political reforms yet continued to steal the state’s assets. Acceptance in the absence of freedom began to overpower society’s passive negligence to Ben Ali’s legitimacy.\textsuperscript{518} This was especially poignant for those who served in the government, “who probably just had enough with the Trabelsis and Ben Ali.” As one interviewee noted, “they were not stupid; they knew what was going on but were probably not brave enough to say anything. They knew that the behavior of the families was wrong.”\textsuperscript{519}

**Digesting Revolution – Popular Revolt or Coup?:**

One of the most meaningful observations that can be identified through this research project is the enthusiasm extolled by the interviewees over prospects, and in some accounts, hope that democracy and personal freedoms will be introduced to the country for the first time in its modern history. As one interviewee noted, for her entire life, she had grown depressed over the fact that she would likely live and die without ever knowing elections or democracy in her own country. For Tunisians who were educated, who had opportunities to travel and were given access to information beyond the control

\textsuperscript{517} Interview (20.6.3); Interview (5.5.25).
\textsuperscript{518} Interview (10.5.30).
\textsuperscript{519} Interview (20.6.3).
of the regime, these enticing freedoms were synonymous to a symbolic “forbidden fruit” that had been within reach over the course of the country’s post-independence history, but never attainable.\textsuperscript{520} For many, this realization has provided enough motivation to ensure that Tunisia’s march toward liberalization is not derailed. However, it is clear that the road ahead will be long, complicated, and likely disappointing at some junctures. After only four months since the revolution took place, worrisome developments were readily recognizable by interviewees, who made it clear that more arduous tasks were ahead, and that the removal of the regime’s senior leadership was simply one of many reforms that would still need to be carried out.

Although the transition on January 14, 2011 has been ascribed a “revolution” many questions are unanswered over the circumstances under which the former president left the country and leave many to believe that the popular deposal of the government that we perceive from the Tunisian case may actually be absent, when considering some of the opinions of interviewees. Nearly every interviewee challenged the assertion that Ben Ali willingly left the country and consciously resigned from the presidency. One source noted that “he had not intended to leave for good and that the departure was probably prepared by his staff,” perhaps to save his life. The fact that he left a lot of things (unspecified) that many presumed he would take with him if he knew he would not be returning, particularly items of value in the Palace at Carthage, supports their views\textsuperscript{521} Furthermore, Article 56 of the Constitution was used to justify Ben Ali’s departure, which stipulates a temporary leave of the president, but it had been repealed the next day, providing further evidence that something had happened during the 40-hour period.

\textsuperscript{520} Interview (5.5.25).
\textsuperscript{521} Interview (8.5.27).
between his departure and the prime minister’s interim occupation of the presidency. Ben Ali was aware that his “tools of oppression,” like the police and his personal guard were strong enough to suppress the uprisings and it was uncharacteristic of him to have given up so easily.\footnote{522 Interview (7.5.27).} It was presumed that he would return to Tunisia and indiscriminately bombard Kasserine – an uncontestable catalyst of dissent – with force to stop the protests.\footnote{523 Interview (17.6.2).} Allegedly, he had given the same order just five days prior to his departure, but it had been ignored by the Army. When Ben Ali decided to leave on January 14\textsuperscript{th}, it was thought that he would return “after one or two weeks maybe.”

Not only was the president’s imminent departure a surprising revelation, but the immediacy with which he chose to leave the country raises even more questions. How could one of the most notorious authoritarian rulers have fallen from power in just 28 days? Interviewees were hard-pressed to answer this question and were ultimately upset with themselves for not forcing him from power earlier, given how weak he proved to be. For example, one interviewee stated bluntly that “no one ever imagined that Ben Ali could ever be forced from the country” and she could not believe that the Tunisian people had not realized that his regime was so “fake…such a paper tiger.”\footnote{524 Interview (6.5.26).} It was clear that in December the movement was growing, but when it was announced that he had left the country it shocked people because it happened so fast, especially since at the time as one interviewee recalled, the “threat was not that great.”\footnote{525 Interview (17.6.2); Interview (14.6.1).} The question remains whether this was just an uprising or a revolution. One interviewee was certain that the president would not have left so quickly unless “the change had first come from within the
Certainly, “something happened in the palace, but nobody knows exactly what.” In an interesting parallel, Ben Ali’s mysterious overthrow resembles his own power-grab from Bourguiba and the nebulous details that surrounded his own constitutional coup. Nobody knows how he left the presidency.

**Ben Ali’s Legacies:**

As Tunisia buoys in the wake of the regime’s demise, nearly a year after Ben Ali’s departure, we assess the legacies that it has left behind. Some ramifications of not only Ben Ali’s tenure as president, but also Bourguiba’s reign culminated a 53 year period of dictatorship, rendering to no fault of their own, few Tunisians with the means to conceptualize a culture of democracy, beyond the institutional definition that the term embodies. An unfortunate heritage of half a century of nepotism has left the Tunisians “disadvantaged in democracy.” Some have argued that Tunisians should not even be attempting to question the idea of democracy and whether they are capable of becoming democratic, but whether they understand what the ideas of liberty and freedom really mean. Currently, “Tunisians view freedom as something closer to anarchy.” The stark transition that has occurred and the current freedoms that post-revolutionary Tunisia now offers to people are the same freedoms that were previously hijacked under the former regime. With regard to political, social and economic conditions, the collapse of authoritarianism presents a number of challenges as remnants of the former regime are carefully dismantled.

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526 Interview (14.6.1).
527 At the time of publication
528 Interview (14.6.1).
529 Interview (20.6.3).
Politics:

With regard to politics, there appeared to be a cautious optimism among those who participated in this research project toward the prospect for pluralism in the county. There is new excitement over the formation of political parties and organizations that are now able to broadcast their platforms across a wide spectrum of ideologies and interests, and although their views are extremely diverse, corroboration and consensus prevail on fundamental necessities to guide the country into the future, like “maintaining focus on re-writing the constitution and devising strategies to build upon the country’s current accomplishments.”

Although no one can be convinced even now that a dramatic democratic shift will, or even can occur after only several months since the country’s political structure was “revolutionized,” people are confident that the country will never become what it had been before. The fear that had once quelled the masses and inhibited their desire to challenge the status quo has been erased and replaced with long-withheld freedoms and civil liberties. Yet, many are convinced that political obstacles will long overshadow the new political buds that the Arab Spring has yielded.

One interviewee who was involved in reconceptualizing the country’s political legislation noted that introducing a new political system in Tunisia would be “un bras de fer,” or exceptionally difficult despite her optimism that Tunisia is receptive to democracy. The explosion of political parties and associations is a positive and normal reaction in new democracies, but there are fears that these parties are more interested in infighting or working to mutually disadvantage one-another, rather than encouraging the

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530 Interview (5.5.25).
531 Interview (7.5.27).
adequate development of more inexperienced politicians or activists. Parties are prone to remain immature and inexperienced under this inhibiting competitive behavior, both limiting the number of credible political participants, as well as, unevenly empowering more organized political groups that operated under the regime, and in particular as one source highlighted, Ennahda.\footnote{Ibid.} It is preferred that political Darwinism will be the catalyst for determining whether political parties will survive, not the malicious and deliberate actions of political contenders at this early stage of development.

**Conceptualizing Politics:**

There is no model for democracy in Tunisia that exists; it needs to be learned and refined. Many have highlighted the risks that democracy presents for such an inexperienced population, where suddenly everyone is now able to participate in politics and express opinions openly, “no matter what they are and regardless of how they contribute to the debate.” Democracy, as much as it is viewed as the “Holy Grail” to post-authoritarian societies, the power of democracy can pose an imminent threat when it is not understood properly or if taken for granted. “A substantial portion of the population lacks the maturity to understand the current stakes; they do not understand politics, political parties, and politicians have failed to find better ways to communicate with them.” One interviewee said that it appeared as though politicians were speaking tongues to less educated fragments of society, and that the Islamists were likely to succeed because Islam is the only discourse that is not foreign to the masses.\footnote{Interview (8.5.27).} It is reasonable to assume that what people are not able to understand will make them uncomfortable, and until
politicians are able to better articulate their platforms they will lose support. Elections present the same problem, since the average person’s ability to tell the difference between discourse and manipulation in political platforms is essential to avoiding coerced support, especially among the less educated, and more vulnerable populations\textsuperscript{534} – which in Tunisia are the same people that inspired the revolution to begin with.

However, the sense of optimism and the energy surrounding the anticipated “next step” in Tunisia’s political history is palpable. One interviewee assured me that “Tunisia has been ready for democracy since independence,” and accurately pointed out that there is no “precondition for democracy,” so Tunisians will adopt a system that works for them. She noted that the problem now is not envisioning or even constructing a system that facilitates the political transition, but lies with the country’s political actors. Questions loom over the influence of political actors who were involved with the former regime, knowing what their true motives are, and how they may impact the political transition. Furthermore, there are meta actors that need to be considered, such as the security apparatus, certain political parties, and the supporters of the former regime that have the potential to sabotage the revolution\textsuperscript{535}.

Similarly, it was widely recognized that the institutional aspects of a highly sophisticated authoritarian regime represent yet another obstacle to fully revamping the country’s political system. One interviewee recognized that even though the head of the regime had been removed, the regime itself was still present and very powerful\textsuperscript{536} The regime was a “system that worked for 55 years,” and “it’s not easy to stop the machine.” The enthusiasm that overshadowed Ben Ali’s departure had ended by May 2011 when

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\textsuperscript{534} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{535} Interview (14.6.1).
\textsuperscript{536} Interview (11.5.30).
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this research was conducted, and activists and political parties were beginning to realize that removing the head of the system did not dismantle it or consider the people that were still around “who benefited from it.”

The Economy:
The Tunisian economy was destroyed by the ruling family’s system of corruption which as one interviewee noted, had reached “astronomical proportions.” The ruling family hemorrhaged money from the state’s Central Bank and left the country bankrupt and did great harm to social and welfare programs, liked education, healthcare, and development projects; as a result of the former regime, the quality of the country’s education system has dramatically decreased, and the healthcare system appears to be “beyond repair,” according to one interviewee. There is hope that with Ben Ali’s departure corruption will be reduced and condemned under an independent judicial system, hopefully encouraging entrepreneurship and private business once again. One interviewee noted that there was a revived confidence among the country’s economic leaders and that they are now willing to invest without concerns that they will be approached by the government and “stolen from” anymore. In a more disturbing trend, businessmen associated with Ben Ali are returning to Tunisia after having financed the electoral campaign of Ennahda, which in return has given them a kind of immunity from prosecution by the new government.

Society:

537 Interview (11.5.30); Interview (16.6.1).
538 Interview (16.6.1).
539 Interview (2.5.23); Interview (5.5.25); Interview (10.5.30); Interview (14.6.1); Interview (3.5.24).
In the aftermath, the regime’s downfall was a “good thing” for civil society, which has flourished in its wake. Civil society has become active, “like a baby learning how to walk.” People now recognize the importance of associations and organized politics, according to one interviewee, and people are being attracted to the idea of “association.” Tunisians are recognizing that they can be empowered by a well-structured civil society, which the interviewee said is the “energy and vitamins of society.”

In just four months, there were a large number of truly independent NGO’s that were allowing the Tunisian people to develop a sense of civic culture across a sprawling array of fields, including science, the environment, and humanitarianism.

Interviewees described a new, emerging culture that is gradually being integrated into society. Families are able to have more discussions, new family dynamics are emerging, and active discussions about governance, participating in elections, and what kind of new government should replace the old system are occurring. Civil society is eager to inform, and raise consciousness for important issues during the country’s political transition, hoping to contribute necessary education to society about democracy and civil liberties.

“Before, people felt less than the West, but now they are energized, serious about the transition, and believe that they can now be considered equal to the Europeans.” Now Tunisians are breathing a new air and can “fly like birds.” However, participants recognize that in contrast to the aforementioned benefits, a burgeoning, inflated civil society does have its detriments. “Too many people are trying to express their interest and authority in the political sphere, so now there is a risk of

540 Interview (3.5.24).
541 Interview (7.5.27).
542 Interview (6.5.26).
543 Interview (3.5.24); Interview (5.5.25).
“civil society desertification,” according to one interviewee. This new civil society should be “taking baby steps to learn the issues and develop the habits to organize and be effective in what it is doing.”

Society in general has been scarred by the Ben Ali presidency. Interviewees noted that he had a negative impact on society and led it to become more “conservative” because of all of the regime’s failures. For one woman, the hatred for Ben Ali was so fierce that her judgments on his presidency’s contributions to society were unavoidably clouded. She could not identify any positives because of how much people suffered under Ben Ali and believed that his authority tainted everything. “He acted like a great savior to the people but failed them. He did not simply corrupt a handful of people in Tunisia, he corrupted the values of society,” which will make it very difficult to repair.

With regard to changes in the media, the assessment was bleak. One interviewee responded in French that “tout a changé, rien a changé” (Everything has changed, nothing has changed).” He continued that the way of reporting has not changed. Credible journalists are expected to convey more than one side of a story, but unfortunately in the traditional Tunisian media, “we are still waiting for professionalism, ethics, pluralism and so on.” He believed that “the way of working has not changed, and the people who are leading the media have not changed,” which further indicates that considerable progress still needs to be made, even though Ben Ali is gone.

Without question, thoughts about Ben Ali’s Tunisia before 2011 yield a legacy marred by very specific characteristics. A despotic, corrupt, kleptocratic and mafia

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544 Interview (14.6.1).
545 Interview (2.5.23).
546 Ibid.
547 Interview (16.6.1).
548 Interview (11.5.30).
regime that maliciously exploited the Tunisian people reflects the frequency and intensity of feedback from participants in this study as they responded earnestly to a question that for the first time in their lives, they could answer freely: How would you describe the Ben Ali regime? Such a simple question – one that perhaps instilled great fear for most Tunisians, now embodies one of the more liberating side-effects of the Tunisian revolution, and undeniably reconfigures a shocking reality for the Tunisian people, who can now leave that life of fear and repression behind. Consensus in the answers across the diverse sample of interviewees I included in this study was remarkable. Terms like, “dictatorship,” “powerful mafia regime,” and “fake” predominated in their responses. Interviewees highlighted the regime’s lack of transparency, corruption, and complete disregard for individual freedoms.\footnote{Interview (17.6.2); Interview (5.5.25); Interview (3.5.24).} One interviewee said that “Ben Ali did not just steal money, he stole the soul of the nation.”\footnote{Interview (16.6.1).}

**Deconstructing Ben Ali’s “Political Schizophrenia:”**

In a final assessment of Ben Ali’s presidency, we must juxtapose the positives with the negatives because they are directly correlated in a de facto zero-sum equation that is prone to leave onlookers relatively indifferent in their opinions of his impact on Tunisia. As one participant noted, “all dictators like to monopolize power and need to drive legitimacy directly without representative institutions.” In Ben Ali’s example, the situation was murky, because he chocked up his achievements under a “quantitative, not qualitative measure.” “He built tons of universities, but the quality of education was downgraded because there was no academic freedom or effective structures. He may

\footnote{Interview (17.6.2); Interview (5.5.25); Interview (3.5.24).}
have given more freedoms to women but *no one* enjoyed independence or political participation. Behind every accomplishment, there was corruption that transferred billions to the ruling family’s foreign accounts. He enhanced security and fought terrorism, by constructing a police state that justified oppression and imprisonment to ensure stability.” To be certain, he added, “nothing is perfect.” What Ben Ali said “was always very interesting and democratic, but the actions to match those statements were never credible and represented a type of political schizophrenia.”

**Conclusion:**

The most important lesson that we learn from Tunisia’s dramatic political transition is that revolutions are unpredictable and perplexing. Although we can isolate several factors that can justify them after they have occurred, it can be difficult to deconstruct them. Still, explaining the Tunisian revolution should not be a sole priority as the country continues to carry out its political experiment. Rather, preparing the country’s progression into the next phase of its history should be our primary concern. Embodied in one of the famous mantras that emerged during the uprisings in December 2010, “*Khubz wa ma wa Ben Ali la’a*” (Bread and water, no Ben Ali) denotes the sacrifices that Tunisians recognized they were making to realize their own political future – by deposing their dictator. “Being rich or poor is no longer what matters.” Serious drawbacks expected in any revolution, like debt, contentious politics, and diminished security are considered the “prices that must be paid” with the assurance that no “matter how things

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551 Interview (5.5.25).
552 Interview (14.6.1).
553 Ibid.
554 Interview (5.5.25).
may be, they will never be worse than they had been before.”  Instead, the Tunisian people are experiencing freedoms that had been unimaginable just one year ago. Although the course of this freedom has introduced new hazards, challenging hurdles, and periodic setbacks, the people are finally able to “fly” uninhibited. In a curious metaphor articulated by a young Tunisian woman of the generation that is accredited with fueling the revolution: “We (the Tunisian people) are like birds whose wings were clipped by Ben Ali, forcing us to stay on the ground. Free Tunisians are now flying; birds can die, birds can get shot with a sniper, but at least we are flying as we never could before.”

555 Ibid.
556 Interview (6.5.26).
APPENDICES:

A. Formal Interview Questions for all Research Subjects:

Intro:
What role did domestic politics play in the Jasmine Revolution in your opinion? Economics? Society?

Education:
What were your experiences like as a student in the Tunisian education system? What years were you in high school? Did you graduate? What years were you in college/university? What did you study? What were you taught about your national history? How were you prepared to enter the workforce?

Politics:
How would you describe the political scene at the onset of Ben Ali’s rise to the Presidency? (Elections, opposition parties, Islamists). How did domestic/internal politics change over the years and what effects did these changes have on your life (the lives of your friends and family)?

How would you describe the Ben Ali Regime? What were its greatest flaws? (Human rights issues, media, freedom of speech, religious reforms, economic freedom, role of women, security forces). What were its greatest accomplishments?

Did people discuss or communicate any frustrations? How? (Through which means?)

Economics:
What jobs have you worked in since you finished school? What was it like to work in (selected industry) during Ben Ali’s presidency? Do you notice any major changes in the workplace following Ben Ali’s departure? If so, what are they and why? If not, why do you think no changes have occurred?

How would you describe the country’s economic climate throughout Ben Ali’s presidency? Job opportunities? Standard of living? Did your opinion of the regime’s policies on these subjects change over the years?

What were your initial feelings at the onset of the economic uprisings in December? Did you believe these uprisings would bring about change?

Services:
What government services/welfare were/was available under Ben Ali? What did you think of these services?

Revolution:
How would you explain the uprisings in December 2010?
How had the Tunisian government reacted to dissent during previous demonstrations? What was different this time?

Why do you think the government collapsed so quickly?

Do you believe the transition has begun to meet the challenges presented by Ben Ali’s regime?

Which areas still need improvement?
B. IRB Certification

Georgetown University Institutional Review Board

Date: June 20, 2011

To: Tyler Pentland Logan, Graduate Student
CCAS

From: David Blakes<br>
Institutional Review Board

Title: When Authoritarianism Failed: An Investigation into the Political, Social and Economic Factors that Led to the Downfall of the Ben Ali Regime in Tunisia

IRB#: 2011-227

Annual Approval Date: May 13, 2011
Expiration Date: May 12, 2012

Action: Approved as submitted
Expedited Initial Review
Category 7b
C-3 signed 05 Apr 11
C-1 signed 07 Apr 11
Oral consent form for Anonymous interviews
Formal Interview Questions for all Research Subjects
Focus Group Questions with University Student Subjects
CV: Logan
SSDF: Logan
GT1 training: Logan

Your above-referenced protocol and consent form were approved through expedited review by Dr. Heidi Li Feldman, the IRB Chair or a designee, on May 27, 2011.

This is to inform you that you may commence your project. Approval for this study is through May 12, 2012.

The IRB has waived the requirement for the investigator to get signed informed consent forms for all of the subjects in the above study, per the regulations at 45CFR46.117(c), because the IRB has found that:

1. The only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harms resulting from a breach of confidentiality.
   Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern.

2. The research presents no more than minimal risk to subjects and involves no procedures which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.

Medical-Dental Building, SW 104, 3906 Reservoir Road NW, Washington DC 20057
(202) 687-5515 telephone (202) 687-4847 facsimile
C-1: Graffiti in Tunis: “Glory to the Heroic Martyr Muhammad Bouazizi”

C-2: The Ministry of Interior, Habib Bourguiba Avenue, Tunis
Impossible de trouver la page

Il est possible que la page recherchée ait été supprimée, que son nom ait changé ou qu'elle ne soit pas disponible pour le moment.

Essayez de la manière suivante :

- Si vous avez entré l'adresse de cette page dans la barre d'adresses, vérifiez qu'elle est correcte,
- Ouvrez la page de démarrage et recherchez des liens vers les informations voulu
- Cliquez sur le bouton Précédente pour essayer un autre lien.
- Cliquez sur Rechercher pour trouver des informations sur Internet.

HTTP 404 - Fichier non trouvé

C-3: Error 404 message indicated a government-blocked website
C-4: Graffiti in Tunis: “Thank you Facebook”

C-5: Poster in Tunis advertising the screening of a documentary on the Tunisian uprisings entitled “No Fear After Today”
C-6: Graffiti in Tunis: “Long Live Liberty” and “RCD OUT”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


