The Making of a Revolution in Tunisia

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Abstract
In their search for explanations for the so-called Tunisian paradox under Ben Ali—a country with comparatively high levels of socio-economic development, yet plagued by the absence of a civil society that could push for political liberalization—analysts primarily investigated the gradual co-optation of political institutions and actors. As research and analytical agendas were consumed by the robustness of Ben Ali’s authoritarian state, little attention was paid to the development of informal and extra-institutional political activities that existed even under deepening political repression. In hindsight, many of these informal activities clearly contributed to the December 2010-January 2011 nation-wide campaign, which eventually led to the Arab World’s first bottom-up revolution ousting an unpopular and illegitimate ruler. This article will engage two stories about the Tunisian Revolution that later inspired protests and contentious activities across the Middle East and North Africa. First, it will tell a back-story of contentious activities preceding the January 2011 events that surprised observers, scholars and analysts—even those familiar with the Tunisian case. Second, this article will discuss some of most pressing political dynamics that have emerged in the post-revolutionary (and pre-October 2011 election) environment. The concluding section will subsequently identify avenues for short and long-term research on the subject of contestation, resistance, and the construction of a new political order.

Keywords
Tunisia; civil society; contestation; informal dissent

I. Introduction
A striking characteristic of Tunisia’s political landscape before the January 14, 2011 revolution that forced ex-President Zine Abedine Ben Ali from power was the ostensive obliteration of any oppositional or alternative political space. Consequently, observers of the small North African state, especially political scientists, had directed their attention to analyzing the robustness and sustainability of Tunisia’s authoritarianism under the leadership of Ben Ali and
the now obsolete Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD political party).¹ In their search for explanations for the so-called Tunisian paradox—a country with comparatively high levels of socio-economic development, yet plagued by the absence of a civil society that could push for political liberalization—analysts primarily investigated the gradual co-optation of political institutions and actors. Some favourite topics included the phoney electoral process under Ben Ali’s rule, the extent of the police state, illicit economic practices on part of the regime and a small clan of privileged families loyal to Ben Ali and his in-laws, and the on-going harassment of oppositional actors, whether political figures, journalists, bloggers or rights activists. The focus of scholarly research thus mirrored the regional nickname attributed to Tunisia under Ben Ali: Pinochet on the Mediterranean. As political scientists and policy experts consumed their research and analytical agendas with the robustness of Ben Ali’s authoritarian state, little attention was paid to the development of informal and extra-institutional political activities that existed even under deepening political repression. In hindsight, many of these informal activities clearly contributed to the December 2010-January 2011 nation-wide campaign, which eventually led to the Arab World’s first bottom-up revolution ousting an unpopular and illegitimate ruler.

This article will engage two stories about the Tunisian Revolution that later inspired protests and contentious activities across the Middle East and North Africa. First, it will tell a back-story of contentious activities preceding the January 2011 events that surprised observers, scholars and analysts—even those familiar with the Tunisian case. Second, this article will discuss some of most pressing political dynamics that have emerged in the post-revolutionary (and pre-October 2011 election) environment. The concluding section will

subsequently identify avenues for short and long-term research on the subject of contestation, resistance, and the construction of a new political order.

II. A Back-Story of Contention

In the days and weeks immediately following the Tunisian Revolution, journalists quickly latched on to a simplistic recounting of the events that inspired the nation-wide protests between December 2010 and January 2011. A young produce vendor by the name of Mohamed Bouazizi from the South-Central town of Sidi Bouzid (one of the poorest areas of Tunisia that has been suffering from high unemployment for years), set himself on fire after a local police officer confiscated his license to sell from a street cart. Bouazizi tried to complain to the local municipality but to no avail, as the agent slapped or spit in his face (depending on the source), causing Bouazizi to set himself on fire. The dramatic and public suicidal act represented both Bouazizi’s personal frustration as well as a protest of Tunisia’s corrupt procedures and lack of avenues for socio-economic advancement. Mohamed Bouazizi, who became the face of the revolution, thus symbolized the plight of millions of Tunisians, especially the unemployed yet educated youth, who were excluded from economic advancement and denied political expression by the repressive and corrupt policies of Ben Ali and his small clan of powerful families. Within hours, Bouazizi’s self-immolation unleashed waves of protest, first in Sidi Bouzid and then across Tunisia’s South, before culminating into a nation-wide campaign.

Contrary to this commonly known journalistic account, a much deeper history of political resistance had existed in Ben Ali’s Tunisia. Similar to other moments of popular mobilization that marked radical changes to political orders—whether the rise of Solidarnosc in Poland, or the Orange Revolution in post-Soviet Ukraine—Tunisia’s most recent experience is rooted in previous moments of political contention. For instance, in James C. Scott’s recounting of the incident at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, which gave rise to Solidarnosc in August of 1980, he notes that “[b]ehind 1980 lay a long prehistory, one comprising songs, popular poetry, street wisdom, political satire, not to mention a popular memory of the heroes, martyrs, and villains of earlier popular protest.” The rise of Solidarity in Poland has traditionally been introduced

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through the lens of Anna Walentynowicz’s dismissal; yet, the sudden solidarity and rapid formation of a nationwide labour movement headed by Lech Walesa was actually rooted in shared feelings of oppression, subjugation, and humiliation that formed and strengthened over time. As in Tunisia, Ukraine, Egypt, and many other cases that experienced moments of heightened political contention leading to the ousting of incumbent leaders, these solidarities were not formed through formal political institutions or channels, but rather in daily conversations at home, in beer canteens (or coffee houses in the case of Tunis) and restaurants, and articulated in the form of jokes and satires.

In Tunisia, spaces of political contention and resistance have existed all along, even under the increasingly authoritarian political conditions of Ben Ali’s rule. Yet such spaces and practices were largely ignored because of their unseen location outside the official realm of politics, which included a controlled civil society and the co-opted electoral system with a few legal political parties that were allowed to compete in one of the region’s most un-competitive systems. In addition to his illiberal political practices, Ben Ali also expanded an omnipresent political narrative, one that was manifested in a visual cult of political personality as well as political programs exclusively intended to fashion regime-obedient citizens. The visual political cult cluttering public space throughout the country consisted primarily of large posters depicting the ex-president and sculptures of the number 7, which marked the day he ascended to power on November 7, 1987. Political programs accompanying the visual cult, such as the 2008 Youth Pact (Pact Jeunesse), actively sought to inculcate Tunisia’s youth with the phoney messages of democracy, plurality, and liberty produced by the former ruling RCD political party.

As the various manifestations of Ben Ali’s political cult in both practice and public representation overshadowed alternative and oppositional politics, Tunisians nonetheless contested Ben Ali’s omnipresent political system through various channels. Widespread practices, such as dodging mandatory elections, secretly mocking the president and his notoriously corrupt family, cultivating alternative political identities in soccer stadiums, and subversively critiquing the regime in semi-independent and oppositional print publications, signalled the existence of a political culture of dissent, rather than obedience and quiescence. Many of these forms of contestation did not overtly challenge the

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state, but rather implicitly punctured the pervasive narrative of Ben Ali’s regime. At moments, however, political activists and even soccer fans did challenge the state, either by chanting in large numbers during soccer games against the police—which was synonymous with the Ben Ali state—or by explicitly holding the state accountable for repression in street and internet-based protests. In recounting a back-story to Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution, I will only discuss explicit attempts to engage and challenge the state since 2008 in order to exemplify the interconnectedness of contestation over time and across the country.

Under Ben Ali, explicit forms of contestation challenging or even engaging the state in Tunisia were severely limited because of state repression. Intensifying repression on the part of the Tunisian state—from arbitrary economic barriers to jailing, disappearances and torture—alienated Tunisian citizens from participation in formal politics. Nonetheless, frustrated yet courageous Tunisians engaged in pockets of episodic contention, most notably in the South-Western phosphate mining town of Gafsa and the surrounding area nearby the Algerian border, just south of Sidi Bouzid, where the most recent wave of protests broke out following Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation. In January and February of 2008, street-based protests broke out in Gafsa and the nearby town of Redeyef, against unfair hiring and labour conditions exercised by the state-run Compagnie Phosphate de Gafsa (Gafsa Phosphate Company or CPG). In an area where unemployment has lingered around 40 percent, residents searching for work believed that the CPG had struck an unfair agreement with the local branch of the General Tunisian Worker’s Union (UGTT), which involved hiring based on nepotism and not merit. Beginning as anti-CPG demonstrations, these street-based protests attracted unforeseen levels of support, and swiftly culminated in a loosely organized social movement across the Gafsa region, rebelling against unemployment, social injustice, repression and neglect on part of the Ben Ali regime.

The reoccurring weekly protests in Redeyef were never covered in Tunisia’s state-controlled press, though the oppositional papers Al-Maukif, Al-Mouatin and Al-Tariq Al-Jedid reported on them regularly. On university campuses across the country, student activists quickly caught onto the protests as did Tunisian diaspora communities in France and Canada. Some of the activists were supporters of the illegal PCOT—the Tunisian Worker’s Communist Party

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(Parti communiste des ouvriers tunisiens)–and its student wing, which had supported the struggle of Tunisian workers in the country’s poor South. Within days of the first protests, local schoolteachers, wives of miners, neglected youth, and even local union branches joined the expanding movements. The snowball effect that transformed a targeted protest against unfair hiring practices on the part of a local phosphate monopoly into a broad movement quickly culminated in a political movement with set goals. Protesters took to the streets every week to explicitly engage in a dialogue with the Ben Ali government, seeking to negotiate more jobs and improved social welfare and justice.

Similar to his response to the December 2010 uprisings, Ben Ali ordered security forces to violently stifle the protests–arresting hundreds of protesters and torturing jailed participants. As Tunisians across the nation became aware of snippets of contentious encounters in the country’s South, the government quickly labelled the non-violent and peaceful wave of protests as an organized coup attempt, justifying its increased repression. By April 2008, activists coordinated a day of solidarity with the Redeyef/Gafsa protests on April 4th as wives of imprisoned workers along with union members and widows of deceased mining workers protested in Redeyef. With sporadic clashes continuing throughout the spring, the military eventually moved into Gafsa and Redeyef and fatally shot two protesters in June 2008. As the Tunisian press remained silent on the increasingly violent events in the country’s South and international news sites covering the events were blocked, Internet savvy activists in major cities began circulating the Redeyef/Gafsa story via emails and Facebook. Just a few months later, on August 18, 2008, Ben Ali ordered for Facebook to be shut down, citing national security violations by terrorists, only to unblock it by September 3, 2008, following an international pressure campaign on Facebook. Despite the quashed Redeyef/Gafsa campaign, Tunisian activists continued to push against the state in subsequent attempts at oppositional mobilization.

Via Facebook and Twitter, six young activists loosely arranged one of the last organized oppositional events preceding the Jasmine Revolution, called Tunisie en Blanc (Tunisia in White; in Arabic: nhar ala a’mar or Day against Aamar), on May 22, 2010. The widely advertised event on Facebook was entitled, Ce Samedi, je m’habille en blanc et je vais prendre un café sur l’Avenue (“This Saturday, I will dress in white and have a coffee on the avenue”), and was described as a peaceful demonstration against Internet censorship in Tunisia. The plan for the demonstration consisted of two events: (1) a protest by the Ministry of Technology in Tunis; and (2) a widespread citizen engagement calling for supporters to dress in white and have a coffee in one of the
many cafés on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the main boulevard in downtown Tunis connecting the Medina to the French colonial city.

Compared to Tunisia today where protests have become a regular mode of political expression, laws and bureaucratic procedures governing protests and demonstrations under Ben Ali were quite stringent, and did not allow for any sort of organized activity criticizing the government. Even when organizers applied for protest or demonstration permits where the intent was not to explicitly criticize the regime, but rather express grievance for, say, working conditions in clothing factories or call centres among female employees, the authorities routinely denied permission to assemble in public. The few demonstrations that did exist in Ben Ali’s Tunisia were usually government-sponsored marches in support of the Palestinian cause, or against Israeli and U.S. policies towards Gaza. In short, besides a number of ongoing worker’s strikes and protests in the Southern cities of Gafsa and Gabès, organized and authorized protest against the government—especially in the capital city of Tunis—was severely limited prior to January 2011. Moreover, by 2010, authorities were already aware of the snowball effect any large-scale public gathering or protest could cause, as the 2008 Gafsa/Redeyef incident exemplified.

*Tunisie en Blanc* was therefore a bold attempt by a number of young activists to trigger public support against internet censorship, which affected hundreds of thousands of Tunisians: not having access to popular websites such as youtube.com and dailymotion.com, accessing critical articles about the Tunisian regime published abroad, among many others. The particularly striking fact in this case, however, was the way in which young activists were able to mobilize thousands of Tunisians within Tunisia as well as in France, Canada, the U.S., and Ghana. Relying primarily on Facebook—a site that was shut down for a few months in 2008 only to be opened amidst an international Internet-pressure campaign to lift the blockage—the “Tunisia in White” activists used a medium and space that was shielded from the government’s unilateral oversight and control. Additionally, to further ensure the dissemination of the “Tunisia in White” campaign, the activists launched the event just days before the planned activities on May 22, 2010. On May 17, 2010, the Facebook group “*Nhar Ala Aamar*” (“Day against Aamar”) appeared, and approximately 5,000 Tunisian supporters “liked” the group. The group, which was dedicated

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to the event, described the movement as a peaceful and citizen-oriented community organization for a free Internet in Tunisia.

During the six days that the Facebook group existed, a critical debate ensued on the wall of the site. With the number of supporters for the *Tunisie en Blanc* event mushrooming on a daily basis across Tunisia and abroad, supporters and interested parties had located a space to debate the meaning of political participation, freedom of expression, freedom to protest non-violently, and questioning government censorship of the Internet and other political spheres. A vibrant political debate ensued among supporters, which was moderated by the event organizers, who stressed the right to non-violent citizen mobilization and encouraged supporters and others interested individuals to discuss topics that have previously been taboo in public. Yet by May 22, 2010, the Tunisian authorities detained some of the organizers and disbursed groups of individuals dressed in white seated within cafés on Avenue Bourguiba—later the site of the Jasmine Revolution. Even though *Tunisie en Blanc* did not fully materialize, its online success indicated that a crucial political debate had been started outside the private homes of Tunisian families. Only seven months later, *Tunisie en Blanc* activists were able to help propel the Jasmine Revolution by encouraging similar debates on the thousands of Facebook pages of Tunisians involved in the January 2011 protests. Like in May 2010, organizers stressed the non-violent dimension of protest while pacifying fears of participating in street-based demonstrations.

The extra-institutional and informal continuation of oppositional politics under Ben Ali’s reign paints a deeper history of contention than that portrayed by journalistic accounts of one individual sparking a revolution. Even prior to Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation, a frustrated individual had set himself on fire without provoking a nation-wide protest campaign. In pushing scholarly analysis to consider informal politics, especially under repressive political conditions, a window opens to the alternative political spaces and practices that help us understand those political moments that take us by surprise.

III. The Study of Political Voids for the Long-Term

This article commenced with the assumption that the obliteration of a pluralistic political space defining Tunisian politics under Ben Ali contributed to a scholarly proclivity towards the authoritarian state, rather than the few (albeit charged) spaces where meaningful political contestation existed. The official narrative of the Ben Ali regime was saturated with phoney messages of
democracy, pluralism, liberty and freedom, produced solely to placate an international audience while suppressing opportunities for domestic dissent. The few contentious spaces that did exist—from intentionally avoiding politics all together to explicitly challenging the state at particularly opportune moments—grew as a result of the oppressive apparatus that sought to suppress them. Lisa Wedeen has written of the authoritarian politics in Syria that saturated public space with phoney political messages only to “invite transgression”. In other words, an unintended consequence of regime strategies to obliterate oppositional political spaces is that such strategies indeed produce the various forms of opposition and resistance that they attempt to silence. Thus, the gap between official narrative and political reality becomes an important indication for where and how political resistance occurs.

Rarely, however, is scholarly attention directed towards the space between official authoritarian narrative and the opposition and resistance that it breeds. Studies instead assume that authoritarian states succeed in obliterating oppositional politics. Indeed, assuming the full control of the authoritarian state over all segments of political life, political scientists have been reluctant to study oppositional politics, precisely because of the premise that weak bottom-up politics cannot affect the fierce state. Yet once we recognize that repression invites dissent, which in turn produces more repression, causing more dissent, and so on, we likewise realize that a political dynamism exists even under the most robust authoritarian conditions, which should not be overlooked, but instead examined in great detail. As oppositional and alternative politics are gradually pushed outside of the official political realm, we should not assume that oppositional politics under authoritarian rule have become obsolete. Rather, we should continue to locate the spaces where meaningful contestation might exist. Through this lens, an alternative and more dynamic political reality unfolds, such as the one chronicled above—one that allows us to examine how ubiquitous authoritarian politics are punctured by moments of political contention.

The above-mentioned moments of contention—from loose street-based protests in a mining area, to nation-wide solidarity groups created by activists and supported by social networking sites, to new online mobilization initiatives such as Tunisie en Blanc, to the post-Sidi Bouzid protests in December of 2010, and more waves of mobilization via online social networking sites—are

testimony to the more complex relationship between repression and dissent. Although the regime of Ben Ali attempted to obliterate oppositional voices, its oppressive strategies increasingly fuelled dissent, eventually resulting in the region’s first nation-wide protest movement that ousted an authoritarian leader. Moreover, similar to the case of Solidarity in Poland discussed previously and the successful rise of popular oppositional movements elsewhere, these contentious moments in Tunisia were rooted in widespread and longstanding feelings of oppression, mostly socio-economic but also political and symbolic (for instance the initial outrage after the release of TunisLeaks), which were experienced and navigated by Tunisians on a daily basis for over two decades.

The long-term implications of the Tunisian Revolution for the study of resistance and contestation under authoritarian rule are thus two-fold. First, politics should not be located solely within formal political institutions, especially in authoritarian systems. Though this analytical angle has been apparent in recent months, it was largely overlooked for decades. Analysts should not assume that extra-institutional politics (i.e., the voices and concerns of Tunisia in White or Jasmine Revolution activists) are immediately absorbed into new pluralistic political systems. Instead, a new political void might emerge as Tunisian citizens begin navigating a political order flooded by copious new political voices and institutions. This also means that non-elite political actors need to be taken seriously.

Second, and probably most importantly, those interested in the study of resistance need to adopt a broader conceptualization of resistance and what constitutes political space. Rather than dismissing episodes of contentious politics, such as the Redeyef/Gafsa protests in 2008 and Tunisie en Blanc, as sporadic moments that cannot affect the fierce state, the interconnectedness and overlap of such movements need to be carefully analyzed.

IV. Elements of a Stable Anarchy: Tunisia’s Immediate Political Concerns

At the six-month anniversary of Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution, the political landscape has already changed radically (despite growing disenchantment with the fulfilment of revolutionary goals). I have written elsewhere that revolutions should be approached as heightened moments of political contention rather than a large-scale systemic overhaul,9 and I likewise contend that public

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9) Chomiak, Contesting Authoritarianism.
disenchantment and frustration with a new and fragile political environment should be analyzed carefully. At the very least, it is simply unjust to equate a precarious transitional phase and an unforeseen political future with the complete failure of a revolution.10 Even in the eyes of widespread discontent, a refreshingly open, free, and contentious public debate stimulated by hundreds of new political voices, the proliferation of nearly 100 political parties, and 20,000 civil society organizations, has come to characterize the political context in Tunisia.

Accounts of public disgruntlement among Tunisians, especially in the country’s poorer South, have to be attributed to some of the same conditions that motivated ordinary citizens to take to the streets in the first place: economic crisis; unemployment; and lack of economic opportunity. Widespread disgruntlement fuelled by economic predicament is not dissimilar from the sentiments expressed so vividly and publicly following Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation. For future research, especially in the short-term, it is imperative that analysts remain sensitive to the new political space that is unfolding among grievances that have been carried over from the Ben Ali era and the rapid flood of new political elites, institutions, and voices.

Despite the radical change in public political discourse and the plethora of new parties and associations, Tunisia approximates a stable anarchy at best. The interim government headed by President Fouad Mebazaa and Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi is weak, as are its institutions. The public and two of the leading political parties, An-Nahda and the Democratic Progressive Party (PDP), have heavily criticized The Higher Political Reform Committee, chaired by Yadh Ben Achour (usually referred to as the Ben Achour Committee), for its inability to achieve consensus, its internal disagreements, the postponement of elections, and legislative deadlocks.

The postponement of Constituent Assembly elections from July 2011 to October 2011, coupled with internal infighting and lack of consensus, have stirred a growing public debate about the purpose and possible dissolution of the reform committee.

A more worrisome element of the stable anarchic system, however, is the uncertainty of whether the police and security services are indeed under the government’s control. In ordinary and mundane discourse, the near absence of traffic police and chaos on roads and highways has provoked sarcastic remarks

about the revolution causing more barriers to completing simple tasks (such as driving to work) than improving the living conditions of Tunisian citizens. Even though the ex-ruling RCD party has been disbanded, and party elites have been forced to depart from official posts, uncertainty about networks of allegiance, continued connections to the Ben Ali family, and the re-entry of former RCD elites into politics through the guise of independents or new and small political parties is causing suspicion and fear among a restive citizenry. In the next section I will turn to two contentious debates that have been steering Tunisian political discourse: (1) the an-Nahda and anti-Nahda schism; and (2) the questions of reconciliation and consensus. Besides the desperate

La Presse De Tunisie, Sunday, July 3, 2011, p.5. Translation: Man: “In the context of achieving the objectives of the revolution, you are required to carry me” Donkey: “But not to support you.” The cartoonist is strategically using the French porter (to carry) and supporter (to support).
need to pull Tunisia out of its current economic crisis and swiftly lower unemployment (official figures estimate 11.5 percent unemployment, with almost 4 percent living in extreme poverty; however, the real figures are estimated to be significantly higher), these two political debates will be most telling of Tunisia’s political future, both in the transitional short-term and consolidated long-term.

Party Polarization and Prospects for Reconciliation

With approximately 95 approved political parties at the time of writing, Tunisia’s party politics have transformed from virtually non-existent to alarmingly over-representational for the country’s small population of only 10 million. The spectrum of ideologies includes centrist, leftist (socialist, democratic-socialist, communist, Marxist and green), right-wing (nationalist, republican or Bourguibist), multiple Islamist movements, as well as some 10 pan-Arabist parties. Although some parties have worked to form coalitions—for instance the well-organized *Pôle Démocratique et Moderniste*, which includes the third strongest centre-leftist party *Ettajdid* (which first grew out of a communist movement, but has since abandoned communism in 1993), a centrist-right alliance *Alliance républicaine* (AR), and is currently negotiating the participation with a group of leftist parties—a dangerous schism has developed between the Islamist *an-Nahda* and the large bloc of parties opposing aspects of *an-Nahda’s* political program, including the second most popular PDP led by Nejib Chebbi. *An-Nahda* was first called the Islamic Tendency Movement (*Al-Ittija Al-Islami*), when its current leader, Rachid Ghannouchi—who has and continues to stress non-violence, social justice, a pluralist political space and a form of Islamism rooted in Tunisia’s culture of modernity—founded it in 1981. Ghannouchi was previously imprisoned under both the leadership of Tunisia’s first president, Habib Bourguiba, and later under Ben Ali in 1987. Both leaders were wary of Islamist victories following the widespread popular support for the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Over the last three decades, *an-Nahda* followers have been harassed, imprisoned, and tortured, as have followers and youth members of the Communist PCOT. When Ghannouchi was released from prison in 1988, he moved to London as a political exile and returned to Tunisia for the first time on January 30, 2011. By March of 2011, *an-Nahda* was legalized as a political party, and currently holds an estimated support base of more than 20 percent of the electorate.
The schism that has developed between *an-Nahda* and those opposing elements of the *an-Nahda* political platform (which has not yet been officially released) is framed as a dichotomy between Islamism and modernism. *An-Nahda* has been accused of veiling its Salafist tendencies, and collaborating with *Hizb Al-Tahrir* and Salafist movements, while hiding its real political intentions, which allegedly include establishing an Islamic Republic in Tunisia, outlawing alcohol, excluding women from public life, and shutting down the country’s brothels. The “modernist attack” on *an-Nahda* has intensified quite rapidly since the party was legalized only four months ago. What is particularly peculiar about the growing rift between the popular and well-organized *an-Nahda* and parties like the second most popular PDP, headed by Nejib Chebbi, is that the latter initially called for the inclusion of moderate political Islam in both the interim as well as post-transitional government. In fact, a number of leftist oppositional parties supported *an-Nahda* in the late 1980s when the movement was suffering from heavy government repression.

At a June 2011 conference organized by the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy in Tunis, the fissure between *an-Nahda* and all other political parties became vividly clear. PDP and a number of other left-leaning parties heavily criticized *an-Nahda*, now calling for the removal of Islam from the core of public life and politics. In particular, Nejib Chebbi accused *an-Nahda* of using mosques to spread their political message, abandoning any political program in favour of purely religious discourse, and lacking any tolerant political elements (instead seeking to instil fear among Tunisians). Chebbi, who initially called for the inclusion of Islamist voices following the January 14 Revolution, now publicly states his anxiety about *an-Nahda* in particular, and the inclusion of religion in the political process more broadly. *An-Nahda* leaders (Rachid Ghannouchi and Hamadi Jebali), along with Adelfattah Mourou, who is currently referred to as an independent but rumours peg him as *an-Nahda’s* top candidate, continuously stress their civil-political commitment while representing a religious reality on the ground, and reject the binary category of Islam versus democracy. While anti-*Nahda* voices among political elites are working hard to push for a recognizable division between Islam and modernity, *an-Nahda* leaders are defending their vision of modernity (separate from French and Western modernity)—one which aligns with Tunisian history and has room for religion in public and political life.

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11) Critics worry that *an-Nahda* is strategically employing ambiguous language about modernity within the Tunisian context to leave room for the establishment of an Islamic republic should the party rise to power.
This polemical discourse has most certainly dominated political debate among Tunisia’s public, much of which has teetered between fabricated assaults and vulgar accusations. So far, the effect has been an increasing mistrust in old political parties as well as the many new actors that have entered Tunisia’s political landscape. *An-Nahda* is commonly equated with Salafism, as neither Ghannouchi nor Jebali are actively taking anti-Salafist positions. Additionally, some of the most popular organized protests in the capital of Tunis are anti-*Nahda* events (a popular slogan has been “I love Islam, I hate *An-Nahda*”), while *an-Nahda* continues on its well-organized nation-wide mobilization campaign.\(^{12}\) However, the current inter-party debate in Tunisia is not only entrenching widespread mistrust in political parties, but also alienating Tunisian citizens yet again from politics.

Political elites have consequently introduced a nebulous political discourse on reconciliation and consensus. In the few months before the October 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, the debate on reconciliation and consensus might take centre stage if party leaders begin to clarify, introduce, and discuss their visions for a new Tunisian political order in a meaningful way. First, the boorish attacks by political elites and strong party adherents need to stop in order for parties to develop sound political programs that resonate with Tunisia’s most dire needs, including economic development and integration (both politically and economically) with the country’s South. Second, reconciliation should be discussed in public, whether at party congresses or in town hall meetings, and include an open and dynamic debate of what exactly is being reconciled. Is it the relationship between public political life and Islam? Is it the development of a national pact or a form of national unity, including commitments to Bourguiba-style modernism and moderate, non-violent Tunisian Islam? Do consensus and reconciliation require a debate about the inclusion of former RCD-members and Ben Ali loyalists in Tunisia’s new political order? The first and foremost frustrating public debate on these issues is the preoccupation with reproducing a schism between Islam and modernity, which in turn has hindered the articulation of sound political platforms while silencing smaller political parties who fear becoming ensnared in either side of the debate.

The debates on Islam and modernity, as well as national reconciliation have overshadowed other post-revolutionary concerns, such as who controls the

\(^{12}\) To date, *an-Nahda* has held 30 political rallies across the country, many of which have attracted crowds in the thousands. Besides Chebbi’s PDP, which has held some nation-wide rallies, no other political party has embarked on a campaign of comparable scale.
means of security within Tunisia. Yet, as analysts of democratic transitions know all too well, the period before the first electoral cycle should resemble a messy and contentious political space. Although Tunisia still needs to install a legitimate system of control over its internal security apparatus and police, we need to remember that the current state of contention and messy politics, which has never existed in Tunisia’s modern history, marks a solid departure from decades of orderly authoritarian rule.