

**POPULAR PROTEST IN NORTH AFRICA  
AND THE MIDDLE EAST (IV): TUNISIA'S WAY**

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## **POPULAR PROTESTS IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (IV): TUNISIA'S WAY**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Tunisia is where it all began. It is also the country where the democratic transition arguably has the greatest chance of success. There are many reasons for this, but the most significant lies in the country's history of political activism and social mobilisation, which decades of regime repression never fully stifled. This politically activist tradition served the nation well during the uprising, as workers, the unemployed, lawyers and members of the middle class coalesced into a broad movement. It will have to serve the nation well today as it confronts major challenges – namely, balancing the desire for radical political change against the imperative of stability; finding a way to integrate Islamism into the new political landscape; and tackling immense socio-economic problems that are at the origin of the political revolution but which the political revolution on its own is incapable of addressing.

In hindsight, Tunisia possessed all of the required ingredients for an uprising. Notwithstanding the so-called economic miracle, vast expanses of the country had been systematically neglected by the regime. The unemployment rate was climbing, especially among the young and university-educated. The distress triggered by these socio-economic, generational and geographic disparities was epitomised by the self-immolation, on 17 December 2010, of a young, unemployed, vegetable seller, from a small town, who was supporting his sister's university studies. His suicide quickly came to embody far wider grievances; notably, it was widely reported and believed by most demonstrators that Bouazizi was a university graduate. In the wake of his death, young demonstrators took to the streets in the south and centre of the country, demanding jobs, economic opportunities and better educational and health services.

The uprising spread both geographically and politically. Trade unions played a crucial role. Initially hesitant, the principal trade union, the Union générale des travailleurs tunisiens (UGTT), soon after assumed the leadership role. Pressed by its more militant local branches and fearful of losing the support of its base, the UGTT mobilised ever greater numbers of activists in a growing number of cities, including Tunis. Satellite television channels and social

networking sites – from Facebook to Twitter – helped spread the movement to young members of the middle class and elite. At the same time, violence perpetrated against protesters helped forge a link between socio-economic and political demands. The image that the regime projected of itself was of an indiscriminate police repression, so it was only logical that the demonstrators perceived it that way. Nothing did more to turn the population in favour of the uprising than the way Ben Ali chose to deal with it.

As for the regime, its bases of support shrivelled in dramatic fashion. In his hour of greatest need, President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali found himself basically alone without support. Over time, what had been a one-party state had become the private preserve of the president and the first family. Economic resources that had been previously shared among the elite were increasingly monopolised by Ben Ali and his wife, Leila Trabelsi, and the private sector paid a hefty price. The ruling party, the Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique (RCD), no longer served as a source of patronage; it was unable to organise a single pro-regime demonstration despite repeated calls by the president's entourage. Likewise, the army suffered under Ben Ali, who did not trust it in the least; in the end, the military was loyal to the state, not the regime. Even the security services were distrusted by Ben Ali, with the exception of the presidential guard, whose privileged treatment only fostered greater resentment.

The uprising was fuelled by these contrasting dynamics, which stimulated increased support for the revolution amid increased defections from the regime. All in all, the country experienced mounting popular resentment, the mobilisation of young citizens using social networking sites, growing involvement of political parties and trade unions, and a weakened power structure, which had alienated its traditional sources of support. At every stage, the authorities' response – from the use of lethal violence to Ben Ali's delayed and disconnected reactions – helped transform a largely spontaneous and localised popular movement into a determined national revolution.

When Ben Ali hastily fled on 14 January, the game was far from over. The country faced three fundamental challenges; of these, it has made headway in managing one, taken initial steps to tackle the other and has yet to address the third.

The first task was to devise transitional institutions that could address competing concerns: fear of a return to the past versus fear of a plunge into chaos. There were many hurdles to overcome. The post-Ben Ali government's first incarnation seemed to many to be a carbon copy of the old, with remnants of the RCD including holdovers from the last cabinet. The opposition responded by establishing a council claiming to embody genuine revolutionary legitimacy. After a period of institutional tug-of-war and several false starts, however, an acceptable institutional balance appears to have been found. Controversial ministers left the government and the council overseeing the transition was expanded to include a representative mix of political forces and civil society. Elections for a constituent assembly – a key demand of the protesters – have been scheduled for 23 October 2011.

Tunisia's experience carries important lessons. Ben Ali's successors did themselves substantial harm by failing to consult broadly or communicate clearly. By displaying flexibility and a willingness to shift course in response to public demands, they subsequently were able to avoid a major political crisis.

A second imperative is to integrate Islamists into the reconstructed political system. Tunisia starts with a not inconsiderable advantage. An-Nahda – the country's principal Islamist movement – stands out among its Arab counterparts by virtue of its pragmatism, efforts to reach out to other political forces, and sophisticated intellectual outlook. Some secular parties too have sought, over the years, to build bridges with the movement. An-Nahda took a back seat during the uprising and, since the revolution, has been at pains to reassure. But mutual mistrust persists. Women's groups in particular doubt the movement's sincerity and fear an erosion of their rights. In turn, the Islamists still recall the brutal 1990s when the organisation was systematically crushed by the Ben Ali regime.

The third challenge is also the most pressing – attending to deep-seated socio-economic grievances. For the many ordinary citizens who took to the streets, material despair was a decisive motivating factor. They did want freedom and a voice in politics, of course, and have every reason to rejoice at democratic progress. But the political victory they achieved has done little to change the conditions that triggered their revolt in the first place. To the contrary: the revolution inevitably – if unfortunately – devastated tourism; regional instability pushed oil prices upwards; uncertainty harmed foreign investment; and the conflict in Libya provoked a refugee crisis that hit Tunisia hard.

A difficult economic situation was made worse. In the absence of strong domestic steps and generous international assistance, there is every reason to expect renewed social unrest coupled with an acute sense of regional imbalance, and a sense of political disconnect between the north and southern and central regions of the country.

Such concerns notwithstanding, Tunisia remains for now cause for celebration rather than alarm. The transition is not being led by a strong army any more than it is by a handful of politicians. Rather, a heterogeneous blend of institutions, political forces, trade unions and associations is finding its way through trial and error, negotiations and compromise. For the region and the rest of the world, that should provide ample reason to pay attention and to help Tunisians on their way.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **To the Tunisian Government, the Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution and Various Transitional Government-appointed Councils and Commissions:**

1. Publicly and regularly present the work of the government, the Higher Authority, and all other councils.
2. Work with all socio-economic partners on the issue of employment, protection for the most disadvantaged, and the reintegration of unemployed university graduates.
3. Strengthen the Ministry of Regional Development's mandate, in particular by establishing an emergency plan for underprivileged regions.
4. Focus on the social reintegration of former political prisoners, notably by providing assistance in finding jobs, technical training and family compensation.
5. Continue to reform the security services, in particular by:
  - a) Establishing a broad commission – including representatives from civil society, human rights organisations and the ministries of the interior and justice – responsible for reforming and centralising these services;
  - b) Making public the security forces' and police's organisational structures on the basis of information collected by the interior ministry and human rights organisations; and
  - c) Establishing a program to train security forces with the help of international partners.

**To the Tunisian Government, the Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Parties, Trade Unions and Associations:**

6. Organise a national conference on women's rights, bringing together the full range of political and civil society movements, including Islamists, with the aim of drafting a national plan to promote women's integration and defend their rights in the labour market and in terms of political representation.

**To Tunisia's Political Parties:**

7. With an eye to forthcoming constituent assembly elections, ensure proper inclusion on electoral lists of the young, women, regional representatives and members of civil society and human rights organisations.

**To the International Community:**

8. Reschedule Tunisia's external debt and conduct an audit in coordination with the government and its socio-economic partners in order to distinguish genuine debt from illicit transactions tied to the former president and his family which broke the laws of both debtor and creditor nations.
9. Help the government deal with people crossing into Tunisia from Libya by granting them immediate humanitarian assistance, enabling non-Tunisians and non-Libyans to return to their original countries, facilitating the temporary integration of Libyan refugees in Tunisia and providing logistical border-control assistance to the Tunisian army.
10. Work with the Tunisian government to ensure the continued freeze of Ben Ali's and his family's assets and to facilitate their recovery by the government within a reasonable timeframe and consistent with relevant national laws.
11. Organise an economic support conference for Tunisia in partnership with the Tunisian government and representatives of civil society, including associations and trade unions, to coordinate international economic assistance.

**Tunis/Brussels, 28 April 2011**

## POPULAR PROTESTS IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (IV): TUNISIA'S WAY

### I. INTRODUCTION

The Tunisian Revolution, which led to the downfall of the regime of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, suddenly brought together, and in a complex way, several dynamics of Tunisian society and politics. The first was the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of two families, that of the president and that of his wife Leila Trabelsi, to the detriment of society and much of the regime.

Having come to power in November 1987 in a “palace coup” that removed the former president Habib Bourguiba from power, Ben Ali initially based his authority on a hegemonic ruling party – the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD),<sup>1</sup> a powerful Ministry of Communications in charge of muzzling the media, and security services that controlled the opposition and eclipsed the army. But this vast apparatus gradually eroded from within, as the ruling families developed their monopolistic methods, depriving the RCD of its political prerogatives and accumulating huge personal fortunes by plunder and extortion. Relying on an authoritarian system that no longer made any pretence of political participation or economic redistribution to contain rising social unrest, Ben Ali and his wife turned the seat of their authority, the Carthage Palace, into an isolated fortress.

The core legal opposition parties – the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP),<sup>2</sup> the Tajdid Movement,<sup>3</sup> and the De-

mocratic Front for Labour and Freedom (FDTL)<sup>4</sup> – were able to make their voices heard, despite the regular banning of their newspapers, the arrests of their activists and systematic electoral fraud. Their participation in legislative and presidential elections, whenever their candidacies were not invalidated, could serve as nothing but symbolic candidacies. Only the Tajdid Movement enjoyed parliamentary representation, having won two seats in the October 2009 legislative elections. Other opposition figures from clandestine political formations, including militants of the radical left and of the Islamist movement An-Nahda,<sup>5</sup> blended into the few non-partisan spaces for political expression, namely volunteer and human rights organisations,

<sup>3</sup> The Tajdid (Renewal) Movement was founded in 1993 and, like the PDP, was part of the so-called legal opposition under Ben Ali. It was the heir to the former Tunisian Communist Party, banned in 1962. It participated for the first time in elections in 1994 – elections for parliament – and held seats in the Tunisian Parliament. Its current secretary general, Ahmed Ibrahim, participated after the Jasmine Revolution in the first transitional government of Mohammed Ghannouchi. The Tajdid Movement has a political weekly, *Al-Tariq al-Jadid* (The New Way). Its website is <http://ettajdid.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> The Democratic Front for Labour and Freedom (FDTL) was founded in April 1994 but not legalised until 2002. Social democratic in its politics and member of the Socialist International, the FDTL is chaired by Mustapha Ben Jaafar, a doctor and native of Tunis, former deputy secretary general of the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH) in the late 1980s. The candidacy of Jaafar for the October 2009 presidential elections was rejected by the Constitutional Council. The FDTL has a political weekly, *Al-Mouatinoun*. Its website is [www.fdtl.org/](http://www.fdtl.org/).

<sup>5</sup> The main Tunisian Islamist group, the An-Nahda movement is heir to the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), which was founded in 1981 by Rashid Ghannouchi and Abdelfatah Mourouh. Ideologically, it is inspired by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, but at the beginning it also drew inspiration from the Iranian revolution. In the April 1989 legislative elections, the movement won 13 per cent of the vote, a figure contested by the party, claiming massive electoral fraud. From the early 1990s, the movement was subjected to an intense repression, and most of its political leadership went into exile in France and Great Britain. It was legalised in March 2011 following the overthrow of Ben Ali. Since early April, it has been publishing a political weekly titled *Al-Fajr*. Its website, where all of its founding documents and platforms since 1981 can be found, is [www.nahdha.info/arabe/home.html](http://www.nahdha.info/arabe/home.html).

<sup>1</sup> Created in 1988 to succeed the Destourian Socialist Party founded by Bourguiba.

<sup>2</sup> The Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), founded in 2001, was the heir of the Progressive Socialist Rally, founded in 1983. It was part of the legal opposition under Ben Ali. It was headed by Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, a former Baathist, who converted to Marxism in the 1970's. The PDP is now a centre-left party, having opened its ranks to various liberal figures and “the independent left and progressive Islamist movement”. See *Parti démocratique progressiste, Documents fondateurs, Sixième conférence, 22-23-24 décembre 2006*, Tunis, a publication of *al-Maouqif*, in Arabic. It is the only Tunisian political party whose secretary general, Maya Jribi, is a woman; she has held this position since December 2006. Its website is <http://pdpinfo.org/>.

lawyers and judge associations, or local leadership within the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT).<sup>6</sup>

In France, Tunisian immigrant networks also provided political refuge.<sup>7</sup> The Islamist movement An-Nahda, meanwhile, saw much of its leadership exiled to London and Paris. Despite ideological, statutory, and geographical divisions, the opposition developed a unified platform in October 2005, bringing together the legal and illegal left-wing, liberal, and Islamist political tendencies. They agreed on a transitional democratic program and demanded legalisation of political parties, the release of prisoners of opinion, and media openness.<sup>8</sup>

Tangible signs of a contestation of power began to emerge on the ground in 2000. That year, the hunger strike of writer and journalist Taoufik Ben Brick, covered and publicised primarily in the European media, had shined a spotlight on the question of political freedom. In 2003, the arrests of internet users by the authorities announced the arrival of new political and generational phenomena.

As for the lawyers and judges, they denounced a justice system that functioned at the beck and call of the regime. Engaged in the defence of prisoners of conscience, the National Bar Association became a pole of contestation. The April 2005 conviction of lawyer Mohammed Abbu

for two and a half years for publicly expressing his political views led to a lengthy mobilisation of virtually all of the members of the Tunisian Bar.

In addition to human rights, it was above all socio-economic demands that challenged the notion of an economic "Tunisian miracle" and began to shake the regime. Southern and central Tunisia suffered from severe underdevelopment, resulting in high unemployment, poor working conditions and poor infrastructure. In early 2008, publicised by immigrant associations in France, a revolt in the Gafsa mining region and the southern city of Redayef underscored the gravity of the situation. In the summer of 2010, young protesters clashed with police in southeastern Tunisia in the Ben Guerdane riots. In both cases, just two years apart, locals took to the streets to make socio-economic demands in demonstrations that were crushed by riot police.

Through this period, the UGTT began to experience its first internal fracturing. Some national unions – those of teachers and health and postal workers – and some local and regional union affiliates further on the left of the political spectrum were tempted to join the protests, whereas the leadership of the union, close to the regime, envisaged for themselves at most a mediating role.

The revolutionary process initiated 17 December 2010, following the self-immolation of a young vegetable seller (widely believed to be an unemployed university graduate) in the town of Sidi Bouzid, pushed together these otherwise somewhat distinct dynamics: internal weakening of the regime, alienation of elites, growing popular unrest, remobilisation of youth around modern means of communication, and the survival of traditional socio-economic structures, which could serve to reinforce these dynamics. Paradoxically, the regime's actions and reactions at each stage in the evolution of "spontaneous" explosions of local popular discontent into what became a decisive national-level contestation for power helped catalyse an explosive combination that had already existed, but that the regime had previously been able to compartmentalise and contain.

This fourth report from International Crisis Group concerning the wave of uprisings that shook the Arab world<sup>9</sup> takes on a special meaning. Tunisians were indeed the first to stage a popular revolt in this protest wave. The roots of the Tunisian revolution have many points of convergence with the rest of the Arab world now plagued by

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<sup>6</sup> Founded in 1946 by Farhat Hached, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) has long been the leading trade union in Tunisia. Having participated in the 1956 Constituent Assembly, the UGTT has always been split between a contestatory orientation challenging the regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali and a strategic decision to support and work cooperatively with the state institutions. In 1978 and 1984, the trade union led efforts to oppose liberal reforms and privatisation. It was not until 1989 that the UGTT navigated much closer to positions in support of the Ben Ali regime. However, some trade union sectors, such as those of educational, postal, and health workers, as well as some regional branches, remained loci of protest against the regime. This division between the leadership of the trade union and the politics of some of its local and regional branches – which became strongholds of leftist and Arab nationalist political action banned from all other venues for political expression – has led analysts to speak of "two UGTTs". See Larbi Chouikha and Vincent Geisser, "Retour sur la révolte du bassin minier. Les cinq leçons politiques d'un conflit social inédit", in *L'année du Maghreb*, VI, 2010, online at <http://anneemaghreb.revues.org/923>.

<sup>7</sup> One of the main Tunisian associations in France, the FTCT (Tunisian Federation for Citizenship on Both Shores), was a major supporter of the Gafsa mining area protests, organising rallies and demonstrations in France during that period. It would later be a pillar of "collective support to the struggles of the people of Sidi Bouzid", which was launched in France after 18 December 2010 and includes about a hundred French and Tunisian trade unions and political associations.

<sup>8</sup> See Lotfi Hajji, "The 18 October coalition for Rights and Freedom in Tunisia", *Arab Reform Initiative*, 7 February 2007, [www.arab-reform.net/spip.php?article440&lang=en](http://www.arab-reform.net/spip.php?article440&lang=en).

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<sup>9</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa reports, N°101, *Popular Protest in North Africa and Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?*, 24 February 2011; N°102, *Popular Protest in North Africa and Middle East (II): Yemen between Reform and Revolution*, 10 March 2011; N°105, *Popular Protests in North Africa and Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt*, 6 April 2011.

internal dissent over nepotism, authoritarian rule, corruption, and glaring social inequalities. Despite all of the obstacles still at work, the real progress of the democratic transition in Tunisia, the debates about a constituent assembly, and the open dialogue with the Islamists, are all positive signs of a hopeful transition.

## II. BETWEEN POPULAR UPRISING AND REGIME COLLAPSE

### A. THE UPRISING'S TRAINING EFFECTS

#### 1. The provincial revolt: From the socio-economic to the political

Economically marginalised and affected by high unemployment and lack of appropriate infrastructure, the central and southern areas stood in contrast to the coastal areas, which benefited from much higher investment.<sup>10</sup> Another distinction – this one generational – meant that Tunisian youth were unemployed at a rate three times the national average – which was officially estimated in 2008 to be at 14 per cent.<sup>11</sup> What could have remained an isolated local news report, the tragic suicide of a young, vegetable seller from the small provincial town of Sidi Bouzid came to represent the widespread malaise of Tunisian youth.

On 17 December 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi decided to end his life by self-immolating in front of the Sidi Bouzid police headquarters, after having been publicly humiliated by police confiscation of his wares.<sup>12</sup> Teachers of the National Secondary School Teachers Union (SNES) led him to the hospital where he later died of his burns. The same day, the family of the victim, accompanied by trade unionists, marched to the police headquarters to express their anger.<sup>13</sup> Riots broke out, pitting local residents against the police and lasting for several nights, and including relatives, neighbours, and youth who identified with his plight. According to one witness, “Mostly adolescent youths provoked the police, stoning a school where the police had positioned their reinforcements. The youths forced the police to come out into the night and trapped them by luring them into poor neighbourhoods, where they had strung cables across the streets to trip them up”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Des tunisiens dans la rue contre le chômage”, *Le Figaro*, 28 December 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Marion Sollety, “Le chômage des jeunes, moteur de la révolution tunisienne”, *Le Monde*, 7 January 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interviews, inhabitants of Sidi Bouzid, January 2011. Some local people explained Bouazizi's suicide as a reaction to the humiliation inflicted on him by a police woman who allegedly hit him during questioning, a story that triggers a feeling of outrage in a society still to some degree structured by traditional tribal norms: “To be slapped by a woman, in the middle of the street, it can burn you up inside. With us, the Hamama [tribe], that is intolerable”. Interview with a member of the family of Mohammed Bouazizi, quoted in *Liberation*, 5 February 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group interviews, trade unionists from Sidi Bouzid, January 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interviews, inhabitants of Sidi Bouzid, January 2011.



After a week, the building protests extended to neighbouring cities. This was the second phase of the uprising. Menzel Bouzaiane, al-Maknasi, and al-Mazuna, then Argab, Bin Aoun, Jilma, Souq al-Jadid, Bi'r al-Hafi, and finally, Saba-bala are all localities in a region dominated by the Hamama tribe. In Sidi Bouzid, protests grew further following a second suicide, that of Houcine Nejji, an unemployed young man who jumped from the top of an electric pole on 22 December. The young demonstrators' demands reflected anger and a feeling of socio-economic frustration; the young protesters were denouncing many things all at once, including the lack of university and medical facilities, the massive youth unemployment – and not only of university graduates – and the overall lack of socio-economic opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

The regime's response tracked in parallel with the gradual rise in strength and politicisation of a movement that at its origin had been based on socio-economic demands. On the one hand, police repression took an increasingly violent turn with the application of deadly force; it was in Menzel Bouzaiane, just 60km from Sidi Bouzid, that on 24 December two people died from gunshots during a demonstration.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the mediatic presidential reaction appeared delayed and disconnected; it was not until 28 December that Ben Ali, in his first televised speech following the protests, promised to respond to the protesters' demands. He even visited Muhammad Bouazizi at his bedside.<sup>17</sup>

The union leadership of the protest, both in Sidi Bouzid and in the environs, proved decisive. UGTT locals gave the movement both structure and sustainability. The Secondary School Teachers Union, dominated by far left and Arab nationalist trends, gradually adopted a strategy of political confrontation with the regime that went beyond the socio-economic; "We immediately called on the people not to consider this act a suicide, but rather to consider it a political assassination. Bouazizi should be seen as a victim of the regime".<sup>18</sup> The Secondary School Teachers Union leaders were not the only ones in the UGTT that sought to politicise and support the movement: local affiliates of regional sections of the union and locals of the primary teachers union, the health workers union, and the postal workers union, traditional bastions of the "trade

union left",<sup>19</sup> immediately aligned themselves with the protest movement.

During the week following the death of Mohammed Bouazizi on 4 January 2011, union networks gave further shape to the movement. In Sidi Bouzid, union teachers organised the protests via a "Committee of the Marginalized" created for this purpose.<sup>20</sup> The trade union dynamic born in Sidi Bouzid extended logically to a regional level and quickly affected the entire central region of Tunisia. Trade unionists explained that they had activated their networks at the regional level as a whole, including Regueb, Menzel Bouzaiane and as far as Sfax and Bizerte, "to relieve pressure. When we saw that the crackdown was focused on Sidi Bouzid and that many of the security forces were coming from Tunis to reinforce them, we decided to diversify locations and organise protests in other regions".<sup>21</sup> For Sami al-Tahiri, leader of the Secondary School Teachers Union, a succession of self-immolations followed by the first gunshot victims:

It made us understand that Tunisia was boiling over, that all of the marginalised areas were waiting for a spark. This intifada had no principal leader, but everywhere there were local leaders, who were often trade unionists. Sometimes we organised our own events, and sometimes we would just join existing protests and politicise them, providing slogans that posed questions about the regime and not just about socio-economic issues.<sup>22</sup>

In these matters, however, the position of the UGTT was not uniform. A session of the Executive Board on December 18, 2010 decided to send a delegation to Sidi Bouzid to meet the governor and help collect and communicate the grievances of the local population. In this way, the union leadership initially sought the role of mediator,<sup>23</sup> whereas most of the rank and file were already lining up on the side of the rioters and protesters.

Nonetheless, the geographical spread of the movement brought in other actors. In Kasserine, it was the lawyers who responded in solidarity with the Sidi Bouzid demon-

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interview, young unemployed university graduates in Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine and Tala, March 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Isabelle Mandraud, "En Tunisie, des manifestations dégénèrent en affrontements avec la police", *Le Monde*, 28 December 2010.

<sup>17</sup> "Discours du Président Ben Ali à propos des événements de Sidi Bouzid", Maghrebinfo, 29 December 2010, <http://maghrebinfo.actuamonde.com/archives/article10410.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sami al-Tahiri, Secretary General of the National Secondary School Teacher's Union of the UGTT, Tunis, 28 January 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, postal worker labour activist, Tunis, 18 February 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent trade unionist, Sidi Bouzid, 25 January 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sami al-Tahiri, Secretary General of the National Secondary School Teacher's Union of the UGTT, Tunis, 28 January 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interview, Aly Ramadhan, Deputy Secretary General of the UGTT, Tunis, 4 February 2011. Also see, "Les dossiers chauds de l'UGTT", *Réalités* (weekly), numéro 1310, interview conducted by Zyed Krichen with Abdesslem Jrad, Secretary General of the UGTT, 3 February 2011.

strators. Initially, they ran into difficulties mobilising people. On 24 December, a small group of lawyers, between twenty and 50 depending on the source,<sup>24</sup> turned out in the streets to put pressure on the UGTT and push the union to join them in a show of support for the Sidi Bouzid demonstrators. The lawyers protested for almost five days, but failed to rally the masses. So on 28 or 29 December, they decided to march in the district of Al-Zuhur – a neglected, poor suburban neighbourhood<sup>25</sup> – and from there they marched back to the city centre boosted numerically by the support of young people from poor neighbourhoods.

The local UGTT branch dithered, again seeking the role of mediator. In early January, union leaders met with the governor of Kasserine and with Mondher al-Znaïdi, the minister of health and Kasserine native.<sup>26</sup> On 3 January, the first day of school following winter break, middle and high school students came in as reinforcements to the protests. As for the national leadership of the movement, activist lawyers played an increasing important role, especially given the skills they derive from their “politicised profession”.<sup>27</sup> In this way, the National Council of the Bar Association played a leading role in the expansion and popularisation of the insurrection on a national scale. On 31 December, members of the bar organised protests in Tunis, Sousse, Monastir and Jendouba in the north and Gafsa in the south. On 6 January, the lawyers went on strike.<sup>28</sup>

In early January, the insurrection continued to spread, reaching the cities of Tala and Feriana, two cities in the centre-west governorate of Kasserine. The institutions of the state began to be targeted: police stations and local offices of the ruling RCD party in Kasserine were attacked and set on fire.<sup>29</sup> Between 8 and 10 January, police repression increased in Kasserine and Tala in particular, killing roughly 21 people according to the authorities, and closer to 50 according to trade unionist and hospital sources.<sup>30</sup> Witnesses reported snipers firing on the crowds.<sup>31</sup> On 10 January, the police suddenly disappeared from Kasserine

and the army took over, welcomed as liberators by the population.<sup>32</sup>

The geographic expansion of the insurrection combined in this way with a political extension of the protests, as frustrations and socio-economic demands rapidly morphed into challenges to the regime and its symbols. As power was primarily exercised by the regime in the form of police violence, there is no doubt that it played a determinative role in this shift. The image of the state was thus reduced to its simplest repressive function. Amnesty International pointed out that the police:

Displayed a blatant disregard for human life ... and did not seek to minimise injuries. Many demonstrators were killed with one bullet in the head or chest, which suggests that these shots were fired by trained professionals with the intent to kill.<sup>33</sup>

State power was also characterised by the notable absences of the president and, more generally, by a breakdown in public communication. It was not until 10 January that Ben Ali made his second televised intervention. In that speech, he promised to create 300,000 jobs over two years, but at the same time condemned “terrorist acts” remotely controlled from abroad.<sup>34</sup> Offering no credible alternatives, the regime helped push the protesters into total confrontation with the state.

## 2. The UGTT's call for insurrection

The UGTT's call for insurrection turned out to be, in retrospect, a turning point in the uprising. It was a shift of position that had been long delayed. The first press releases of the UGTT Executive Office had attempted to situate the UGTT in the role of mediator, urging the state to “release those who were arrested” and to “take urgent measures to implement the decisions concerning the employment of young people”.<sup>35</sup> The Deputy Secretary General of the UGTT explained the tipping point in the decision-making process:

In the early days we were there to listen to the protesters and demand their release. But after the crackdown in Kasserine, we broke with the strategy of economic

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<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interview, inhabitants of Kasserine, January 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, Shihab al-Saadawi, lawyer, Kasserine, 27 January 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> The Bar Association had indeed proved itself, since the early 2000s, a bastion of protest against Ben Ali. See Eric Gobe and Michaël Bechir Ayari, “Les avocats dans la Tunisie de Ben Ali: une profession politisée?”, in *Année du Maghreb*, III, 2007, online at <http://anneemaghreb.revues.org/359>.

<sup>28</sup> “Tunisie: les avocats en grève pour dénoncer la répression”, Agence France-Presse, 6 January 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interview, inhabitants of Kasserine, January 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *Libération*, 5 February 2011.

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<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interview, inhabitants of Kasserine, January 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Amnesty International, “La Tunisie en révolte: les violences de l'état pendant les manifestations anti-gouvernementales”, February 2011.

<sup>34</sup> “Ben Ali s'adressera aux tounisiens ce soir”, Agence France Presse, 13 January 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Statement by the Executive Office of the UGTT, Tunis, 28 December 2010.

partnership [with the regime] to change to a clear policy, calling for the transfer of power.<sup>36</sup>

The UGTT's national leadership also had to take into account the commitment of regional and local branches to the movement and was at risk of being marginalised by its own base. Indeed, it was in these sections that the movements of the left and extreme left were embedded, with trade unionists from the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (PCOT), the Democratic Patriots (Watad),<sup>37</sup> or Nasserist or Baathist tendencies. According to a national leader of the trade union, these local leaders were "more aware and more political. Even though they had a minority viewpoint, they had always wanted to use the union as a political platform".<sup>38</sup>

Over time, the UGTT leaders' "wait and see" approach became untenable. The UGTT's Sfax Regional Executive Office member Mohamed Abbas explains: "We did not want to repeat the mistake of Gafsa", when the union leadership took six months to comment on the workers' uprising in the mining town, procrastination that earned the UGTT much criticism from the rank and file and regional branches of the union.<sup>39</sup>

This protest movement gave us an opportunity to disassociate ourselves from repression and the corruption. Trade unionism suffered profoundly under Ben Ali. Trade union action was hampered by the regime, in particular through the privatisation programs [of the Ben Ali regime]. The strengthening of the private sector meant the weakening of the unions.<sup>40</sup>

The decision by the UGTT to engage in the movement would not be dependent on the existing regional or local processes of decision-making, but by a deliberate decision from the very top. On 5 January, the National Secondary School Teachers Union called for a work stoppage

of twenty minutes in the schools to "support the protests in different areas".<sup>41</sup> For Sami al-Tahiri, "this shift facilitated the involvement of much wider swaths of the population in the protest movement".<sup>42</sup> The turning point came on 11 January. A communiqué of the National Administrative Council of the UGTT recognised "the right of regional trade union structures to observe the protests" and the "right of citizens of other regions and professional sectors to express their active solidarity through peaceful protests, and in coordination with the National Executive Office".<sup>43</sup>

The strategy of the trade union left seemed to pay off: it was now the national leadership that had to align with the regional and local, rather than the reverse. In Sfax, the unions declared a 12 January strike. There, they could count on the support of local businessmen fed up with the economic marginalisation of the city in comparison with Sousse and Monastir, where the ruling families were well established. With about 30,000 people in the streets according to union sources,<sup>44</sup> Sfax witnessed the largest demonstration in Tunisia before the fall of Ben Ali. After Sfax, protest slogans became revolutionary, calling no longer just for the president's departure, but for the fall of the regime.<sup>45</sup>

The nationwide mobilisation of the UGTT played a role in the geographical extension of the protest movement and the increasing focus of contestation on Tunis. Ben Ali's departure day for Saudi Arabia, "14 January, was the day of the general strike launched by the UGTT. From that point forward, it was no longer just Sidi Bouzid, or just Kasserine, but all of Tunisia, including the capital. The general strike meant that the Carthage [Palace] was surrounded".<sup>46</sup>

### 3. The virtual erupts into the real

If the reasons for Ben Ali's fall are clearly not limited to the "Facebook effect", and if this is not a "twitter revolution", it is necessary to understand the importance of social networks in shaping the movement. With nearly two

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, Aly Ramadhan, Deputy Secretary General of the UGTT, Tunis, 5 February 2011.

<sup>37</sup> The Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (PCOT) is a left wing political formation that had been banned under Ben Ali. The Democratic Patriots (Watad) were also banned and made up another of the numerous political formations of the radical Tunisian left. Both have their roots in the radical left of the late 1960s, the movement represented by GEAST (the Socialist Study and Action Group) and the journal *Perspective (Al-Afaq)*, and later in Al-Aml at-Tunusi's group (The Tunisian Worker), from whose ranks also comes the leader of the PDP, Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, who was a minister in the first transitional governments of Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abdeljalil Badawi, member of the Executive of the UGTT, Tunis, 25 January 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohammed Abbas, UGTT member, Sfax, 29 January 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abdeljalil Badawi, member of the UGTT leadership, Tunis, 25 January 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Statement of the National Union of Secondary School Teachers, dated 25 January 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sami al-Tahiri, Secretary General of the National Union of Secondary School Teachers, Tunis, 28 January 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Statement of the UGTT National Administrative Commission, 11 January 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohamed Abbas, UGTT member, Sfax, 29 January 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, political and union activists, Sfax, February 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, UGTT member postal worker, Tunis, 18 February 2011.

million Facebook users in Tunisia,<sup>47</sup> and a core group of about 2,000 active bloggers,<sup>48</sup> the internet has played a key role by giving the movement a way to achieve visibility that traditional media could not provide, by radicalising the population by posting images of the crackdown, by helping coordinate the insurrection, and, finally, by facilitating the emergence of new social actors bringing with them their own political culture.

This internet phenomenon, while both generational and a harbinger of new repertoires of action, was nevertheless not born with the Sidi Bouzid revolt. In February 2003, nine youths web-surfing in southern Tunisia were arrested by the authorities and accused of terrorism. According to their lawyers, their only crime was to have visited banned websites. The case of the “Zarzis Internauts” culminated in October 2005 with an international solidarity campaign mounted primarily in France, just one month before Tunis was to host the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).<sup>49</sup> Facing a media landscape characterised by heavy censorship throughout the decade of the 2000s Tunisians developed political and informational websites in the form of individual or collective blogs, such as Nawaat, Tunezine, or Réveil tunisien.<sup>50</sup> Tunisian cyberspace politicised gradually, under the double threat of online censorship and arrests of internet activists:

All sites, whether for cooking, sports, fashion or online dating, began to carry messages that conveyed political content. At first, we were divided between ideological tendencies, but very soon censorship brought us together rather than polarising us. Facebook became a place to criticise dictatorship, corruption, and censorship – in short a place to challenge the regime.<sup>51</sup>

From this accumulation of experience, a minimalist vision emerged, preferring over any specific Islamist or left-wing political agenda “a generalised democratic orientation” that aspired to “carve out a minimal space of political freedom as much online as offline”.<sup>52</sup>

Tunisia's online activists admit that internet-based networks did not immediately contribute to the dynamics of the Tunisian uprising. However, it was Facebook that enabled a political connection between labour activists of central Tunisia and middle class youth across the nation and facilitated organisation of the protests in Tunis just prior to the fall of Ben Ali.<sup>53</sup> Twitter, a site that allows the communication of telegraphic information instantaneously over a wide network of internet users, began to play a “significant [role] only ten days after the first events in Sidi Bouzid, with the emergence of hashtag #Sidibouzid”.<sup>54</sup>

Facebook combined with YouTube, a video-uploading and sharing website, facilitated the diffusion of images of the insurrection. Some Tunis-based bloggers travelled to provincial towns to collect images of the protests, often using mobile phones, and sent them to international television stations, particularly France24 and Al-Jazeera.<sup>55</sup> Al-Jazeera thus acted as a feedback mechanism for YouTube and Facebook. The television station had only one correspondent based in country and had always been denied permission to open an office in Tunis. However, Al-Jazeera could draw on a vast reservoir of images circulating on the web and broadcast them into Tunisian households (especially including the many which were not equipped with internet but which had a satellite dish) and to pan-Arab and international audiences. The Al-Jazeera correspondent Mohammed Krichen said:

It was as if instead of having zero cameramen, we suddenly had a hundred. The technical quality was poor. It was difficult to check everything out. But in the end, we preferred to take the risk of disseminating these videos rather than be absent at a time like this.<sup>56</sup>

In retrospect, one of the primary roles of Facebook and other social networks was to facilitate the politicisation of part of the young urban middle class. Traditional political actors seemed to recognise this. According to a member of the Islamist movement An-Nahda, “The internet caused the failure, to all of our surprise, of the regime's project

<sup>47</sup> Official statistics give Facebook 2,201,780 users in Tunisia, with 42 per cent of users aged 18-24. See [www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/tunisia](http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/tunisia) for the month of February 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, cyberactivist, Tunis, 2 February 2011.

<sup>49</sup> See Hélène Bailly, “Le drame des internautes de Zarzis en Tunisie”, *Afrik.com*, 9 March 2005, [www.afrik.com/article8187.html](http://www.afrik.com/article8187.html). The WSIS was the largest UN summit in history and was focused on Internet freedom.

<sup>50</sup> Réveil tunisien is at [www.reveiltunisien.org/](http://www.reveiltunisien.org/). Nawaat is at <http://nawaat.org/portail/>. The Tunezine site ([www.tunezine.com/](http://www.tunezine.com/)) has not been updated since February 2006. The archives are still available.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tunisian cyberactivists, Tunis, 28 January 2011.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sami al-Tahiri, Secretary General of the National Union of Secondary School Teachers, Tunis, 28 January 2011.

<sup>54</sup> “Quelle Twitter révolution en Tunisie?”, *Nawaat.org*, 19 January 2011, <http://nawaat.org/portail/2011/01/19/quelle-twitter-revolution-en-tunisie/>. A “hashtag” is a message prefix, a word or phrase following the “#” symbol, which refers to the theme and connects the message to the intended audience.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tunisian cyberactivists, Tunis, 28 January 2011.

<sup>56</sup> “Al-Jazeera à la pointe de la révolution tunisienne”, *Le Monde*, 19 January 2011. Mohammed Krichen is an Al-Jazeera journalist based in Qatar.

of creating a consumerist and apolitical middle class".<sup>57</sup> Facebook seems to have laid a foundation in the virtual world, creating a sense of solidarity of activism that could later express itself more easily in the real world. "Facebook allowed us to overcome our fear of the regime. With Facebook, I knew before going to a protest that I would not be alone. We felt like we belonged to a group which, even though it was virtual, would protect us".<sup>58</sup>

#### 4. The limited role of political parties

The traditional parties did play a part in the insurgency, but their role was limited. The Tunisian movement was neither apolitical nor partisan. It was deeply politicised, but did not have political leadership. Political parties participated at first indirectly, rallying their grassroots activists to support the movement. These political organisations supported the movement, but their support was not very steadfast and had limited effect. For the most part, they issued press releases and calls for action, primarily on the internet.

The arrest and imprisonment of political activists were therefore late in the game, and the repression of protests in central Tunisian cities preceded their entry by several days. To be sure, certain illegal parties, like the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party and various democratic Patriot and Arab nationalist movements, immediately supported the revolt starting with Sidi Bouzid. But they had no choice but to support professional or associative labour activism, particularly through the Tunisian Human Rights League or the UGTT.<sup>59</sup> They did not suffer any less from the wrath of the police. On 29 December, the spokesman of the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party Ammar Amroussia was arrested in Gafsa, and on 12 January, the historic leader of the party, Hama Hammami was arrested at his home following a statement issued two days earlier by his organisation calling for the end of the regime of Ben Ali.<sup>60</sup>

Activists of Tajdid and of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), two legal opposition groups, participated in protests, while their publications, *Al-Tariq al-Jadid* and *Al-Maouqif*, were banned. The spokesman of the Committee of Support for Sidi Bouzid and member of the PDP, Attia Athmouni, was arrested by the police 29 Decem-

ber.<sup>61</sup> The same day, the PDP called for the resignation of the communication and interior ministers.<sup>62</sup> Just hours before the fall of President Ben Ali, several activists and members of the PDP leadership were also incarcerated.<sup>63</sup>

The Islamist movement, meanwhile, seemed partially absent from the protest movement. An-Nahda (Renaissance), the main Islamist opposition to the regime, is in fact a group whose organisational capacity was stripped to nearly nothing by years of repression. According to a former political prisoner in contact with An-Nahda, "When we were talking with them in prison, one of their managers told me one day in confidence that what was left of their organisation was 50 people under constant surveillance and unable to meet".<sup>64</sup> Like the illegal left-wing parties, the Islamist movement could not act without operating within other professional or labour organisations or associations. A leader of the movement said that Islamist professionals were for example well established members of the National Bar Association, "particularly in the region of Tunis".<sup>65</sup> One indicator among others of the absence of Islamists was the lack of Islamists killed during the uprising. According to one Islamist organiser, his movement did not count but "one or two martyrs during the confrontations".<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, the visibility of the Islamist movement is still very low, and deliberately so. No Islamist slogan appeared during the protests. According to an An-Nahda organiser:

It was a deliberate decision on our part. Our slogans were slogans of consensus. We called for a fight for freedom, against oppression, for social justice, and against corruption. We did not want to divide the street with slogans of our own.<sup>67</sup>

Throughout the uprising, An-Nahda did not issue its own statements. Only the Houria wa-Insaf (Liberty and Fairness) organisation, which is close to An-Nahda, took a position right from the beginning of the uprising. Its first

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interview, Nourredine al-Beheiri, An-Nahda organiser, Tunis, 24 January 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interview, cyberactivists, Tunis, 28 January 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hama Hammami, Leader of the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party, Tunis, 6 February 2011.

<sup>60</sup> "Appel du Parti communiste des ouvriers de Tunisie à l'attention du peuple tunisien et de ses forces démocratiques", 10 January 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Statement of the Sidi Bouzid Solidarity Collective (France), "Halte à la répression", 29 December 2010.

<sup>62</sup> "Tunisie: remaniement ministériel après les troubles de Sidi Bouzid", 29 December 2010, <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/actualite/opinion/20101229.OBS5431/tunisie-remaniement-ministeriel-apres-les-troubles-de-sidi-bouzid.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interview, member of the Progressive Democratic Party leadership, Tunis, 7 February 2011.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, former political prisoner in contact with An-Nahda, Tunis, February 2011.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interview, An-Nahda leader, Tunis, 4 February 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, An-Nahda organiser, Tunis, 18 February 2011.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, Aly Laraidh, An-Nahda organiser, Tunis, 12 February 2011.

statement denouncing police repression and calling for economic opportunities for young unemployed university graduates was dated 19 December 2010, only two days after the death of Mohammed Bouazizi.<sup>68</sup>

Samir Dilou, a member of An-Nahda and president of the International Association to Support Political Prisoners (AISPP), commented, "We do not want the medal of the revolution. We were there like so many others. But we were not looking for visibility, protests with Islamist slogans. We did not want to give Ben Ali any gifts!"<sup>69</sup> For another organiser, Ziad Dulatli, this low profile was in response to the Ben Ali strategy designed to "divide the political forces between progressive forces and reactionary forces".<sup>70</sup>

## **B. A REGIME WITH CLAY FEET**

### **1. The RCD resignation**

The Tunisian state relied on a huge repressive apparatus. The Ben Ali regime nonetheless maintained appearances by retaining a discourse that the president still wanted to believe lent legitimacy to the regime. This discourse maintained that he was the legitimate heir of Habib Bourguiba, the first president of independent Tunisia and leader of the nationalist Destour and Neo-Destour<sup>71</sup> movements, which themselves represented the defence of the state and of Tunisian independence. Nevertheless, this discourse had not been working for a long time and had been discredited from within. The sudden fall of the Ben Ali regime cannot be understood without reference to its inherent weaknesses. The regime depended on interlocking structure of repression that included the state apparatus, a compliant media, a hegemonic party, and a plethora of security forces, but as its power grew, its base of support shrunk.

It is an important fact that despite its one million declared members, the RCD was unable to organise a single loyalist counter-protest, even though orders to this effect were given by the palace. For Mohammed Gheriani, former secretary general of the RCD and former governor of Sidi

Bouزيد, "Members of the RCD were among the protesters, even though Sidi Bouزيد was an RCD stronghold. If the regime fell quickly, it was because the RCD let it happen. No one wanted to defend the president any longer".<sup>72</sup> Another RCD leader said that:

When orders were given to mid-level party officials to mobilise their men, their situation was difficult because much of their rank and file were sympathising with the demands of the protesters. Many members of the RCD were opposed to power that was based on the party but was wielded by two families and the clans that hovered around them.<sup>73</sup>

Former adviser to Ben Ali, Salem Mekki points out that Sidi Bouزيد was one of the cities showing the highest rate of RCD membership, "nearly 20 per cent". The high percentage makes sense; party membership in poorly developed areas could be explained by the hope for some material benefit. The gradual waning of RCD membership under Ben Ali seems not only to have affected some of the senior leadership, dispossessed of their political power, but also, and above all, many of the mid-level officials.

Going from bad to worse as a vehicle for political mobilisation, the party was able to provide few material advantages to its members. For example, the leader of a local branch of the RCD was unable to find employment opportunities for all three of her university-educated daughters.<sup>74</sup> The passivity of the RCD during the protests was therefore not surprising. Mid-level officials were torn between their political leadership calling for the organisation of counter-protests and rank and file hostile to the regime. The palace was exasperated when some officials were summoned by the secretary general to be called to account, and no sanctions were handed down.<sup>75</sup> In the end, orders were watered down and did not translate into action.

The climax of this charade of loyalty was 14 January. Just hours before the departure of Ben Ali, the RCD Secretary General Mohammed Gheriani decided to organise a demonstration in support of the president in Tunis after the afternoon prayer downtown at the main November 7 Square.<sup>76</sup> The UGTT organised an identical rally on the

<sup>68</sup> Houria wa-Insaf (Liberty and Fairness) Association Statement, 19 December 2010, [www.nahdha.info/arabe/News-file-article-sid-4276.html](http://www.nahdha.info/arabe/News-file-article-sid-4276.html).

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interview, Samir Dilou, An-Nahda organiser, Tunis, 6 February 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ziad Dulatli, An-Nahda organiser, Tunis, 3 February 2011.

<sup>71</sup> The Neo-Destour founded by Habib Bourguiba was the heir of the Destour (Constitution) Party founded in 1934. The Neo-Destour was a pillar of the Bourguiba regime, notably because of its participation in the National Constituent Assembly of 1956 alongside the UGTT and UTICA (the employers association). The Constitutional Democratic Rally, or RCD, is its heir.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohammed Gheriani, former RCD Secretary General, Tunis, 11 February 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interview, Salem Mekki, former Ben Ali adviser and member of the RCD Central Committee, Tunis, 3 February 2011.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, RCD senior leader, Tunis, 2 February 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interview, Salem Mekki, former Ben Ali adviser and member of the RCD Central Committee, Tunis, 3 February 2011.

<sup>76</sup> The former Place d'Afrique, re-baptised November 7 Square after the Ben Ali coup in 1987, it is located in downtown Tunis

same square calling for the president's departure. Having received orders not to intervene, the police let through the UGTT-organised demonstrators, who filled the square. The two crowds mixed and the pro-Ben Ali demonstrators began changing sides until the entire crowd was supporting the end of the regime.<sup>77</sup>

## 2. From a one-party state to a predatory regime

The mid-level officials of the RCD were not the only ones to abandon the regime in its final hours. Some senior officials followed the same path. Their argument essentially the same as that of the mid-level officials; there was no remaining reason to defend the regime. Former defence minister and Tunisian ambassador to Rome until 2005, removed from the RCD politburo in 2001, Mohammed Jegham focused his attacks on the president's wife, Leila Trabelsi, and the Trabelsi family:

RCD officials no longer existed. We were treated at best like pawns and at worst like we had the plague. In 2005, still ambassador in Rome, the palace wanted me ... in China. I said no and was returned to a position as an ordinary party activist.<sup>78</sup>

Kamal Morjane, former number three at the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), appointed by President Ben Ali to be minister of defence in August 2005<sup>79</sup> and later foreign minister, seemed to draw the same conclusion:

It was not only the Tunisian political space that had been clamped down on all of these years, it was the RCD, and the apparatus of the state. Leila Trabelsi controlled everything, the media publicising his foreign and interior policy positions, everything. The ministers were completely stripped of their powers. Even access to the president was totally controlled.<sup>80</sup>

In short, the party apparatus itself had been taken prisoner, stripped of political power in favour of "the two families",<sup>81</sup> the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families, and a security

apparatus that even the political system apparently could not keep in check.

A growing share of the business community as well gradually bore the brunt of the rise of the two families buzzing about the palace. Their tactics included marriages of convenience with the leading business families, use of threats by the security services, and extortion of varying degrees of legality.<sup>82</sup> According to the director of a polling organisation, former president of the ATUGE (the Association of Graduates of French Engineering Schools):

In the early 1990s, Ben Ali wanted Tunisia to make money. But his wife encouraged him to monopolise the business sector. Wealth was concentrated increasingly in their hands, and their methods left a lot of people broke. The leading business families were not protected. Ben Ali and his wife did not understand the effects of their greed.<sup>83</sup>

According to Beatrice Hiboux:

During the privatisation program, they (the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families) purchased companies at a nominal price and then sold them to industrialists and businessmen [at a substantial markup]. If a company was profitable, they took a cut of the profits. On foreign investments, they took commissions or a cut of the profits. They also served as intermediaries for the award of public contracts. The Trabelsi network controlled customs and smuggling operations.<sup>84</sup>

In addition, the takeover of large parts of the economy was part of a regional strategy. Coastal cities like Sousse, Ben Ali's birthplace, and Monastir were at a strong advantage, marginalising the industrial heart of the country.<sup>85</sup> For Hassan Zargouni, businessman and CEO of Sigma Conseil, the January 14 revolution can be read on many levels:

This was not a revolution caused by poverty. It was a revolution caused by acute gaps in wealth. However, among these gaps in wealth was the growing gap between the business class, dispossessed and the ruling class.<sup>86</sup>

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and marks the beginning of the main artery of the capital. After the fall of Ben Ali, it was renamed January 14 Square.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, Salem Mekki, Tunis, 3 February 2011.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohammed Jegham, RCD member and former Minister under Ben Ali, Tunis, 6 February 2011.

<sup>79</sup> From 14-27 January, Kamal Morjane stayed on as foreign minister in the first government of Mohammed Ghannouchi and was considered by some as a viable presidential candidate.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, Kamal Morjane, former RCD member and Minister under Ben Ali, Tunis, 6 February 2011.

<sup>81</sup> The Ben Ali and Trabelsi presidential families indeed held a virtual financial monopoly on Tunisia, ranging from banking to airports and from hotels to transportation. See the graphic illustrations in "Le clan Ben Ali: une mafia à la tête de l'état", *Le Monde*, 19 January 2011.

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<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group interviews, business community, Tunis, 7 February 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hassen Zargouni, CEO of Sigma Conseil, Tunis, 5 February 2011.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Beatrice Hiboux in *La Dépêche*, 16 January 2011. Beatrice Hiboux is a researcher at the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and author of *La force de l'obéissance. Economie de la répression en Tunisie* (Paris, 2006).

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hassan Zargouni, CEO of Sigma Conseil, a polling organisation, Tunis, 5 February 2011.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.



### 3. The fragmentation of the security apparatus

14 January was the day of the fall of Carthage, where the Presidential Palace is located. Combined with the general strike called by the UGTT and the protests that rocked the centre of Tunis which had begun in the early morning, the role of the civilian-led professional army would be decisive. Starting in the late morning, it placed its tanks in strategic locations in the capital and round the presidential palace.<sup>87</sup> Estimated at only 35,800 men,<sup>88</sup> the army had never played a political role in Tunisia and had been carefully kept out of power. Its size paled in comparison to other elements of the security apparatus mobilised by the Ministry of Interior – the National Guard and National Security Police. On 7 November 1987, it had had little or no involvement in the coup that deposed President Bourguiba. Ben Ali was already relying on the security services, who would see their numbers quadruple over the years and who were estimated at 150,000 men.<sup>89</sup>

According to a former adviser to the first government of Interim Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi, who took office after Ben Ali's fall:

Of the 35,000 men in the army, if we remove the administrative staff, there are actually only between 15,000 and 18,000 soldiers. The army had half as much equipment as the other security services. For example, they had 4 of the 12 helicopters in Tunis.<sup>90</sup>

The Tunisian military was marginalised, not benefiting from any special compensation or significant material advantages for their service to the state, and absent from the power struggles, so they had no interests related to the preservation of the regime. During the first protests in Tunis, some soldiers interposed themselves between the police and the demonstrators.<sup>91</sup> According to one former Ben Ali adviser, the army broke away from supporting the regime around 10 January. Ali Seriati, head of the Presidential Guard, had summoned army officials, police, and various security services to coordinate the crackdown. It

was then that the generals refused to follow suit, and began officially to separate themselves from the efforts to repress the demonstrations. The military did not support Ali Seriati, one of the president's closest advisers, "He acted as if he was the generals' general, which the army did not accept".<sup>92</sup>

The Presidential Guard was indeed the only elite group in the security forces that the president trusted. The guard was limited to 5,000 competitively selected individuals, who enjoyed excellent benefits vis-à-vis other security services, especially in terms of salaries. Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, a leader of the Tajdid movement (and a former legal opposition party) and member of PM Mohammed Ghannouchi's transitional government, said, "that even the police and security services were poorly paid in the Tunisia of Ben Ali. We discovered this when we saw the first police demonstrations for higher wages in Tunis this fall".<sup>93</sup>

Above all, the confidence that the president placed in the Presidential Guard at the palace was a source of humiliation for the other security services. These services were in effect banned from deployment in the neighbourhoods of the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families (Carthage, La Marsa, La Goulette, and in the vicinity of the airport.) Similarly, when protecting the president and his family in provincial areas, other security services would be searched by the Presidential Guard. According to a former Ben Ali adviser, "The other security services hated the Presidential Guard, which was always considered superior to them". Throughout the crackdown, the Presidential Guard operated in the provinces and in Tunis, despite its smaller numbers, which, according to a former member of the RDC politburo, "was taken very badly by the local police commanders".<sup>94</sup>

The 14 January revolution draws its meaning from this combination of discontent and defection. The disintegration of the system and ineffectual leadership at the top were confronted by a popular movement that, if it had remained confined to poor and marginalised areas of central Tunisia, could still have been contained. The politicisation of the movement happened quickly, under the combined pressure of a state apparatus essentially seen as repressive, and facing a president, whose speeches were disconnected from reality and insufficient – only three televised speeches in the space of a month. The speeches, if they gradually recognised the varying social and socioeconomic demands of the youth, suffered all the same from systematic delays in fully addressing the demands of the growing

<sup>87</sup> *Jeune Afrique* offers a description of the events of the last hours of the Ben Ali regime. See Abdelaziz Barhoui, "Tunisie: les derniers jours d'un régime à l'agonie", 31 January 2011, [www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/ARTJAJA2611p029-032-bis.xml0/libye-meurtre-opposition-presidenttunisie-les-derniers-jours-d-un-regime-a-l-agonie.html](http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/ARTJAJA2611p029-032-bis.xml0/libye-meurtre-opposition-presidenttunisie-les-derniers-jours-d-un-regime-a-l-agonie.html).

<sup>88</sup> Hanène Zbiss, "La Grande muette sort de l'ombre", *Réalités*, Number 1315, 10 March 2011.

<sup>89</sup> See Abdelaziz Barhoui, "Ben Ali et l'armée tunisienne", *Jeune Afrique*, 11 February 2011, [www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAJA2612p044-049.xml2/](http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAJA2612p044-049.xml2/).

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interview, government adviser, Tunis, 1 February 2011.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, protesters, Bourguiba Avenue, 1 January 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group interview, former political adviser to Ben Ali, Tunis, 3 February 2011.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, a leader of the Tajdid movement, Tunis, 17 February 2011.

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Ben Ali political adviser, Tunis, 3 February 2011.



protest crowds. On 13 January in his last speech, the president promised to leave his post in 2014, a concession that now seems sorely lacking by a president facing a movement calling for his immediate resignation.<sup>95</sup>

The process of politicisation leading to the uprising in Tunis can be explained by an interconnected sequence of events: early actions by local UGTT labour activists, the tilting of the labour leadership toward supporting the movement as it progressed, an all-out mediatization of events – both on television and online, and the extension of political contestation to the young middle class as well as elites. In this sense, 14 January bore evidence of national consensus. But this national convergence of interests had limitations, which would come to light early in the democratic transition and that would lead to two visions and two different conceptions of the post-14 January period.

### III. INSTITUTIONAL CONTINUITY OR REVOLUTIONARY RUPTURE

#### A. WHAT INSTITUTIONAL POWER AND WHAT COUNTERVAILING FORCES?

With Ben Ali's departure, the situation became paradoxical. The dictator had fallen, but the institutions were still functioning. On 15 January, the Constitutional Council applied Article 57 of the constitution to appoint the president of the National Assembly, Fouad Mebazza, president of the Republic for an interim period of two months. On 17 January, a government of national unity was established under the leadership of Mohamed Ghannouchi, the former prime minister under Ben Ali. The debates of this first transitional period running from mid-January to late February 2011 shed light on the positions of the political and social actors today. The core question was whether to continue the revolution based on concerns about the past and spectres of the regime, or to stop the revolution based on fear of an institutional vacuum.

Tensions between those who embodied the new institutional powers and those who prided themselves on revolutionary legitimacy focused on two issues: the composition of the government and the composition of the first commissions created to steer the transition to democracy. In both cases, in the context of shifting power relations, it was the protesters who, without achieving all of their goals, were able eventually to force those in charge to adjust. There are important lessons to ponder as the region as a whole faces the challenges of transition: if the lack of communication and consultation initially marred the credibility of the new leaders, their relative flexibility and ability to adapt to the demands of political actors and to public opinion allowed the transitional process to move forward without any major crisis.

The different successive Ghannouchi governments indeed tried to balance between constitutional continuity and revolutionary rupture. They gradually moved towards a team of technocrats and to the older part of the legal opposition – the Progressive Democratic Party and Tajdid – and tried at first to juggle between preparing for presidential and legislative elections within six months, stabilising the security situation, responding to socio-economic demands, and addressing the urgent need for reform. The aim of the first governments was to move gradually away from the logic of revolutionary rupture and to move peacefully towards a democratic order, building on what was left of existing institutions to avoid a political and security vacuum, while opening doors to civil society to serve as a potential counterweight.

This approach partially failed. For a large part of the opposition that had not participated in the transitional govern-

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<sup>95</sup> "Tunisie: Ben Ali s'engage à partir en 2014, appelle à la fin des tirs", Agence France Presse, 14 January 2011.

ment, they did not fear an institutional vacuum as much as they feared a return to the past. This opposition began to organise against the Ghannouchi government. The January 14 Front, formed on 20 January, deliberately situated itself to the left. Mainly led by the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party and the Movement of Democratic Patriots, and including several left-wing and Arab nationalist organisations,<sup>96</sup> and building on a strong base of UGTT union activists, it positioned itself in total opposition to the constitutional framework. It called for the dissolution of institutions inherited from the old regime, such as the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Supreme Council of Magistracy, as well as the election of a constituent assembly within a maximum of one year.<sup>97</sup>

This opposition, which included the January 14 Front, but was larger, better organised, and probably less maximalist than the January 14 Front, organised the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution. The Council would nonetheless polarise the political debate and exacerbate tensions between the government and the non-governmental opposition. On 11 February, 28 organisations met at the headquarters of the National Council of Lawyers in Tunis and signed a joint statement establishing the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution and asked that it be recognised by decree by the president of the Republic. They demanded decision-making authority and not just a consultative status.<sup>98</sup>

In addition to the January 14 Front, the Council for the Protection of the Revolution was supported by powerful forces. The UGTT and the Bar Association were probably the two backbones. Mustapha Ben Jafaar's Democratic Front for Labour and Freedom (FDTL) participated. An-Nahda's signature weighed heavily, even though this group tried to keep a certain neutrality vis-à-vis the other political protagonists.

The creation of the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution should not create the false impression that all opposition groups support it. The Council, even if it is very inclusive, is still contested by many associations and human rights groups, some of which were present at its creation. This is the case for the Tunisian National Freedom Council (CNLT),<sup>99</sup> the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD),<sup>100</sup> the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT)<sup>101</sup> and the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH),<sup>102</sup> who withdrew from the project at its inception. It is not about how representative the Council is. Rather it is the logic of anti-government lobbying or of a "shadow government"<sup>103</sup> of questionable legitimacy. The UGTT and a part of the radical left can thus use the Council as an instrument for gaining political power, and not for simply going along with a democratic transition.<sup>104</sup> For Omar Mestiri, founding member of the Tunisian National Freedom Council:

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<sup>99</sup> Founded in 1999, the Tunisian National Freedom Council (CNLT) is one of the main human rights organisations in the country, alongside the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), founded in the late 1970s. If the LTDH welcomed throughout the 1980s a number of activists from the left and far left, many internal disagreements emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s around the defence of Islamist prisoners. The CNLT, which derived in part from the LTDH, represented at the time one of the currents more in favour of an open and inclusive policy towards Islamist groups, especially An-Nahda.

<sup>100</sup> The Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) is the result of the mobilisation of some Tunisian women activists in the mid-1980s against political Islam. The ATFD through the 1990s also became a movement opposed to the regime of Ben Ali, while working to defend women's rights as social rights. Throughout the 1990s, the ATFD would also become a movement opposed to the Ben Ali regime, while working to defend women's social and economic rights, and now its main aim is the secularisation of Tunisian institutions.

<sup>101</sup> Founded in 2008 by hundreds of Tunisian journalists, the National Tunisian Journalists Union (SNTJ) had intended to replace the former Tunisian Journalists Association (AJT), aligned with the Ben Ali regime. From 2008 to 2011, the SNJT became one of the main vehicles for independent journalists to engage in collective political confrontations with the regime.

<sup>102</sup> The Tunisian Human Rights League reversed its stance two weeks after the creation of the Council. Having originally refused to participate, the league joined the Council. This reversal should be attributed to internal league politics. Significant numbers of its members were also members of political parties (from the far left to An-Nahda) and belonged to the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interview, Neji Bghouri, Secretary General of the National Tunisian Journalists Union (SNJT), Tunis, 4 March 2011.

<sup>104</sup> "The Council of the Revolution wants to take the legislative, executive, and judicial powers, and set itself up as a constituent power, even though it has no democratic legitimacy". Crisis

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<sup>96</sup> The January 14 Front consists of the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (PCOT), the Democratic Patriots Movement (WATAD), the Trotskyist Left-wing Workers League, the Nasserist Union Movement, the Baath Party, the Democratic and Patriotic Labour Party (PTDP) and the independent left.

<sup>97</sup> See "Déclaration constitutive d'un Front du 14 janvier" at <http://front14janvier.net/Declaration-constitutive-du-Front.html>.

<sup>98</sup> They ask to oversee the "development and implementation of legislation relevant to the transition period" and "the transitional government's actions related to managing its affairs". They also require that "the appointment of officials to high offices of state is subject to the Board approval". See "Tunisie: plusieurs partis et organisations appellent à la création d'un Conseil national pour la protection de la révolution", *Tunisie Agence Presse*, 14 February 2011; and the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution, *Déclaration générale*, 11 February 2011.

We refused many times that the CNLT act in a governmental fashion, opaque, like the Council of the Revolution. We developed the idea of the Council, of an authority that had neither decision-making nor an advisory role, but rather fulfilled what we called a government's obligation to consult. A Council that had a key role in the process, defining the main lines of action, but that would not be a de facto government.<sup>105</sup>

For the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution, the Ghannouchi government was still being too good to former RCD members. The fact that nineteen of 24 governors appointed in early February has been with the RCD suggests that a certain staying power of the political system of the former regime. Political and constitutional continuity was perceived as a barrier or an obstacle to the democratic process rather than as an important element of stability. From this perspective, neither civil society nor the street should be regarded as being in opposition to the power structure, but rather as an integral part of the power structure. Indeed, in the absence of democratic legitimacy for the government, the 14 January stakeholders saw themselves as the lone guardians of revolutionary legitimacy.

The issue of commissions followed a somewhat similar path. Intended to steer the democratic transition, three commissions were set up by the Ghannouchi government in mid-January: a Higher Commission for Political Reform, chaired by Yadh Ben Achour, a lawyer who resigned from the Constitutional Council in 1992; the Extortion and Repression Commission, led by a former president of the Tunisian League for Human Rights; and an Embezzlement Commission.<sup>106</sup> The commissions say they are open to civil society participation,<sup>107</sup> claim to be strictly composed of apolitical experts,<sup>108</sup> and assert that they will

postpone all important decisions – including constitutional amendments – until after the elections. Ben Achour, whose Political Reform Commission has the greatest responsibility, explains:

Our mandate is both simple and complex. I was appointed for one thing: holding elections in the shortest reasonable time. The work of the commissions should not be opaque, that is why we are thinking about a two-tier system: a first [tier comprised of] a circle of lawyers, judges, and experts, and a second circle open to civil society.<sup>109</sup>

Nevertheless, criticisms were quick to be voiced. If the government is allowed to expand the commissions to civil society figures to ensure their democratic character, it would be primarily about constituting expert teams of politically neutral individuals. From this perspective, the transition was simple. The government was relying on the work of commissions open to civil society participation; the Constitution was not suspended; and the president could issue decisions by decree. A “moral force” in the form of a Council of Elders, or even a Council of the Revolution, could well be created, on condition that it would be a purely consultative body with no decision-making authority.<sup>110</sup>

Part of the opposition disputed that the government had the legitimacy to make even these decisions and was fearful that, without an effective parliament,<sup>111</sup> the government would act without constraints. They countered that the transition was not apolitical, and that the work of the commissions necessarily flowed from a certain political vision. An opposition politician underlined that, “There is no role in decision-making afforded to the opposition against government [actions with which it does not agree], since there is no parliament. That's dangerous. It is as if we lived in a country without a legislature, where the

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Group interview, Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, member of the Tajdid movement, Tunis, 17 February 2011.

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interview, Omar Mestiri, Tunis, 5 March 2011. Mestiri is one of the founders of the National Council for Freedom in Tunisia (CNLT).

<sup>106</sup> A final commission came shortly afterwards. It focused on the recovery of financial assets of Ben Ali abroad. See “Tunisie: le Gouvernement provisoire concrétise des décisions déjà annoncées”, *Tunisie Agence Presse*, 19 February 2011. The commissions are at large, without decision-making authority, are appointed by the government, and are not government committees. Crisis Group interview, Mahmoud Ben Romdan, Tajdid movement leader, Tunis, 17 February 2011.

<sup>107</sup> According to Bouchra Belhaj Hamidi, member of the committee dealing with regime extortion, “Our commissions consisted of people from associations and human rights organisations, members of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, and the Human Rights League. The commission membership should remain open; this is not a closed process”. Crisis Group interview, Tunis, 10 February 2011.

<sup>108</sup> A minister summed it up this way, “We must keep it simple, with people of integrity”. Crisis Group interview, Radwan al-

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Noussair, State Secretary assigned to the Foreign Affairs Ministry, Tunis, 5 February 2011.

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interview, Yadh Ben Achour, President of the Political Reform Commission (renamed in early March the Higher Authority of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition), Tunis, 6 February 2011.

<sup>110</sup> For Maya Jribi, Secretary General of the PDP (which was a member of the coalition at the time), “It is necessary to let the government do its job. It's only a transitional government, for a short period of time, because if not, who makes the decisions? But, besides, you need the whole package: commissions that are open, above all, and that's what we want to push for at the PDP, a maximum opening towards civil society and the democratic forces challenging the powers that be”. Crisis Group interview, Tunis, 6 February 2011.

<sup>111</sup> On 8 February 2011, the Tunisian parliament delegated its powers to the President of the Republic, allowing him to issue decrees pursuant to Article 28 of the constitution.

executive performs both executive and legislative functions".<sup>112</sup> According to this line of thinking, it was necessary to limit the executive powers of government, and a Council (whether of Elders or of the Revolution) just for moral guidance and purely advisory would have no value.

The opposition demanded that the Council of the Revolution take on a quasi-legislative role, sharing responsibility for the transition with the government. One of the architects of the Council described this vision:

We speak of the Council as the 'pilot' of the transition. That is to say, in very concrete terms, a Council would have the power of overseeing activities, of proposing changes to them, and of suspending those activities, composed of all parts of civil society and of the opposition, and authorised by presidential decree. A Council with a political role. A government carrying out all of the sovereign duties and day-to-day management of the state. A technocratic government. Commissions, which must have technical objectives and whose decisions and requests would then be discussed with the Council.<sup>113</sup>

The debate in Tunisia set in opposition on the one hand those who, with the Council of the Revolution, said they were keen to press forward on and to continue the revolution, out of fear of having to deal once again with re-awakened spectres from the past – whether the RCD or the security apparatus – and on the other hand the government of Ghannouchi and the two opposition parties in the government, which had a different concern: the fear of losing through a radicalisation of the street even the gains of the January 14 revolution. The underlying question dominating the political field was the need to sort out what existing powers needed to be maintained and what countervailing forces the transitional phase would need to have incorporated into the functioning of government for the transition to succeed.

## **B. FEAR OF A POWER VACUUM**

From the beginning, the first government led by Ghannouchi was contested by the street. Demonstrations denouncing the presence within it of former RCD chiefs; of the team of 39 people in the government, fifteen were in fact members of the former ruling party. Figures such as Kamal Morjane, foreign minister, Ahmed Fréa, minister of the interior appointed 12 January before the fall of Ben Ali, or Mohammad Jegham, a former defence minister,

were targeted in particular. The government still wanted to be welcoming of the opposition, PDP leader Ahmed Nejib Chebbi inherited the portfolio of regional development; Ahmed Ibrahim of the Tajdid movement became Minister of Higher Education; Mustapha Ben Jaafar, secretary general of the Democratic Front for Labour and Freedom (FDTL) became minister of health, while three members of the powerful trade union, the UGTT, also joined the government.<sup>114</sup>

A wrong note jarred the performance as early as 18 January, when the UGTT quit the government. Mustapha Ben Jafaar stepped down as well. For him:

The procedure for announcing the new government functioned the same as it had under the old regime. The former Ben Ali government officials had not yet recognised by this time the realities of the revolution. They discussed the transition as if there was total continuity. An example of authoritarian manner of the prime minister, and the manner in which his cabinet was formed: it was his former government team who made all ministerial assignments, even who would serve as which minister. There were no negotiations on the distribution of appointments [among the parties] at any time.<sup>115</sup>

The Progressive Democratic Party and Tajdid, for their part, remained in the government. They explained that the fear of the power vacuum prevailed as well as the desire to avoid a "military solution". According to a PDP official:

The most important thing is that the government remains in place. The RCD was torn. There were many hesitant people who were envisaging scenarios of the restoration of the old regime. It was essential to reassure them and keep them on our side. It was the principle of rejecting overly drastic remedies.<sup>116</sup>

The Progressive Democratic Party put forth another argument to justify its presence in the government. Maya Jribi, its secretary general, explained:

What happened is more than an intifada but less than a revolution, and puts us in a delicate intermediate phase through which we are forced in part to build on what

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sami al-Tahiri, Secretary General of the National Secretary School Teachers Union, Tunis, 16 February 2011.

<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mustapha Ben Jafaar, Secretary General of the Democratic Front for Labour and Freedom, Tunis, 10 February 2011.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abdeljalil Badawi, UGTT leader, Tunis, 26 January 2011. According to Abdeljalil Badawi, the UGTT sought five ministries.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mustapha Ben Jafaar, former Minister from the first Ghannouchi government, and Secretary General of the Democratic Front for Labour and Freedom, Tunis, 10 February 2011.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, official of the Progressive Democratic Party, Tunis, 23 January 2011.

came before. The transition must be made on the basis of the present. That means on constitutional continuity, with the transition at the institutional level. Why? Because this revolution, although popular, did not provide a political direction. We must limit the damage and combine the political break with the past with the existing institutions.<sup>117</sup>

The Tajdid and the PDP, the last opposition groups to remain in the government, adopted a minimalist political agenda, noting a revolutionary break but committed to the necessity of constitutional continuity.<sup>118</sup> For Nejib Ahmed Chebbi, the PDP leader and minister of development, the government's job was to "maintain the institutions, keep the economy afloat, and prepare for elections".<sup>119</sup>

Faced with discontent, there was a cabinet reshuffle 27 January. As a token concession, it opened to "technocrats" and significantly reduced the number of RCD ministers. As with the PDP and the Tajdid, these technocrats were to minimise the political character of the government. One of Ghannouchi's ministers until his resignation, in charge of economic and social reforms, Elies Jouini said that it was important to:

Ensure constitutional continuity. Which is why the prime minister, two former RCD government members, and presidents of the two assemblies have remained. But again, this is a government that is only here for six months and is responsible for ensuring the transition, especially with the preparation of elections. I do not intend to stay.<sup>120</sup>

That said, and notwithstanding the government's technocratic intentions, the issues were not any less political<sup>121</sup> – among other things, how to organise the elections and what to do with the security and judicial systems – and affected

the balance of power between different political groups in the country. In its standoff with the government, a large part of the opposition denounced its lack of representation, referred to its own revolutionary legitimacy, and said that it feared a return to the past and the multiple networks not yet dismantled, inherited from the system of the former hegemonic party, the RCD. And it argued that neither the institutional continuity nor the quasi-opening to the legal opposition and to technocrats from outside of the system were sufficient rewards.

### C. FEAR OF THE PAST

The feeling that seemed to prevail among opponents of the regime is the fear of restoration or of confiscation of the revolutionary gains. In early February, Mohamed Ghoumani, an official of the Reform and Development Party, a political movement of the "Islamist-progressive" variety, summed things up this way:

Faced with a government that does not consult its former allies, faced with ministers that we do not know, we can only fear a scenario of confiscation of the revolution. We do not know where decisions are made. We do not know who is behind the prime minister, and as for him, we do not trust him.<sup>122</sup>

Concerns also focused on the security services and the police. Following the formation of the second Ghannouchi government on 27 January, demonstrators who occupied Place de la Kasbah – a square just west of the old city where a number of ministries are located – were dispersed violently by police. Even political groups serving in the interim government condemned the evacuation of the square. The Tajdid went so far as to demand, "the immediate opening of an investigation into the incidents of last night and informing the public of the results of the investigation."<sup>123</sup> In late January, Interior Minister Farhat Rahji spoke himself of a "conspiracy inside the security services". His ministry was attacked on 27 January by protesters who belonged to the security services.<sup>124</sup> The same day, the minister sacked 42 high-ranking security officials. Subsequently, there was unrest and demonstrations in provincial cities 5 and 6 February, including in Kef, Kebili and Gafsa; the police killed five young people during these

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, Maya Jribi, Secretary General of the Progressive Democratic Party, Tunis, 6 February 2011.

<sup>118</sup> An article in the Tajdid weekly summarised this point, simply, "a transitional caretaker government tasked with preparing elections". Sami Dachraoui, "Conseil de la révolution ou contre-révolution?", *At-Tariq al-Jadid*, 26 February 2011.

<sup>119</sup> Isabelle Mandraud, "Entretien avec Najib Chebbi", *Le Monde*, 3 February 2011.

<sup>120</sup> Elies Jouini, "La révolution tunisienne n'a pas de prix", *Nouvelobs.com*, 24 February 2011, <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/actualite/les-revolutions-arabes/20110224.OBS8603/interview-la-revolution-tunisienne-n-a-pas-de-prix.html>.

<sup>121</sup> A former Ghannouchi minister recognised it implicitly, "If the transition to democracy in and of itself was as simple as holding elections, this would not be a problem. For democracy to be meaningful, we need to organise elections within a socio-economic, political, and security context that has calmed down". Elies Jouini, "Construire une économie saine et transparente", *Hebdomadaire Réalités*, numéro 1312, 17 February 2011.

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohamed Ghoumani, Reform and Development Party official with "progressive Islamist" views, Tunis, 3 February 2011.

<sup>123</sup> "Communiqué au sujet des scènes de violences à la Place du gouvernement", *Tajdid Movement*, 29 January 2011.

<sup>124</sup> Perrine Mouterde, "Le Ministère de l'intérieur fait le ménage au sein des services de sécurité", *France24*, 2 February 2011, [www.france24.com/fr/20110202-tunisie-ministre-interieur-limoge-responsables-securite-incidents-milices](http://www.france24.com/fr/20110202-tunisie-ministre-interieur-limoge-responsables-securite-incidents-milices).

incidents,<sup>125</sup> which amplified the collective fear of the police. However, the government tried to give guarantees to the opposition, and 6 February suspended RCD activities; on 21 February, it was officially dissolved.<sup>126</sup>

But that was not enough. For the non-government opposition, it was not a question of occasional failures but of structural problems that only structural changes would solve. In early February, Moncef Marzouki, founder of the Congress for the Republic (CPR),<sup>127</sup> said that “a president who is a product of the former regime, a prime minister had that job before the fall of Ben Ali, and some technocrats cannot be considered a national unity government”.<sup>128</sup> It was the same story for Mustapha Ben Jafaar, a minister who resigned from the first Ghannouchi government:

There were bad signs. The way that the Place de la Kasbah was evacuated exhibited the tactics of the former regime. Part of the security apparatus was plotting. We are not paranoid, but when the interior minister himself speaks of a conspiracy in his own Ministry ...! There is no such thing as a semi-democracy. A state is not only the ministers. There are team players. But behind the scenes, we can find the RCD civil service. The people of the 1987 coup are all still there.<sup>129</sup>

As the opposition explains it, the security and political aspects of the transition are intimately connected; excessive institutional and constitutional continuity threatens the revolution, just as a too gradual dismantling of the security forces leaves them the opportunity to reorganise.

On the political stage, the arm wrestling intensified between the government and those who call on their revolutionary legitimacy to discredit it.

Finally, the government had to give ground in response to protests that partially bypassed the political parties. On 25 February a demonstration organised by groups networked

on Facebook assembled a crowd of nearly 100,000 people in front of the seat of government<sup>130</sup> – a figure higher than that of the demonstrations that preceded the fall of Ben Ali. But the online mobilisation is not sufficient to explain the size of the turnout. Local and regional committees of the newly formed National Council for the Protection of the Revolution did in fact call for the demonstrations.<sup>131</sup> Young people from Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Tala and Kef staging a “popular caravan” from central Tunisia<sup>132</sup> wanted to make the demands of Tunisians from the provinces heard on the occasion of “Kasbah 2”, and they occupied the square starting 20 February. The protests were also felt at the Manouba university campus, even though the university campuses were not involved in the uprising leading to the fall of the regime of Ben Ali.<sup>133</sup>

The profiles of the protesters varied. It included unemployed youth from central Tunisia, political and trade union activists, students, and youth recruited online. The slogans on the banners carried by the crowd focused on the “resignation of the Ghannouchi government” and the election of a “constituent assembly”.<sup>134</sup> According to one of the protesters, “Even if Mohammed Ghannouchi is not the worst of the former regime, it is unacceptable that he be in the government. He was a minister for Ben Ali for fourteen years. We don’t understand why he’s still there”.<sup>135</sup> The deaths of five demonstrators in Tunis only increased the non-governmental opposition’s distrust of the government and radicalised the positions of those who were present.

On 17 January, after several changes in his team, Ghannouchi announced his departure. He was quickly replaced by Beji Caid Essebsi, a former minister under Bourguiba who had never participated in the Ben Ali government. The opposition pressed harder. The UGTT called for the resignation of the entire government and denounced “the government’s inability to guarantee the safety of the citizens and the people”.<sup>136</sup> An-Nahda stated that “the government has lost any justification for its continuation”, after having “ignored the demands of the people and used

<sup>125</sup> Agence France-Presse, 6 February 2011.

<sup>126</sup> “Le gouvernement demande la dissolution du Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique”, *Tunisie Afrique Presse*, 21 February 2011.

<sup>127</sup> Former president of the Tunisian Human Rights League and Tunisian opposition figure, Moncef Marzouki is the spokesman of the Congress for the Republic, banned until 2011, composed, like the Progressive Democratic Party, of former left-wing activists, Islamists and liberals.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tunis, 3 February 2011. The number two of the Congress for the Republic was emblematic of this view; he said that there needed to be a “total rupture”. Crisis Group interview, Ryad al-Ayadi, Deputy Secretary General of the Congress for the Republic, Tunis, 3 February 2011.

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mustapha Ben Jafaar, a minister who resigned from the first Ghannouchi government and Secretary General of the Democratic Front for Labour and Freedom, Tunis, 10 February 2011.

<sup>130</sup> “Manifestation à Tunis contre le gouvernement de transition”, *Agence France Presse*, 25 February 2011.

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interviews, members of local committees for the protection of the revolution in Kasserine and Bizerte, late March and early April 2011.

<sup>132</sup> Crisis Group interview, protesters from Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine and Tala, 25 February 2011.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group interview, students from Manouba University, Tunis, 11 March 2011.

<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group observations, Place de la Kasbah, 25 February 2011.

<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group interview, female protester, Place de la Kasbah, 25 February 2011.

<sup>136</sup> Statement of the UGTT Executive Office, 27 February 2011.

excessive force by using tear gas and shooting live ammunition that killed and wounded protesters".<sup>137</sup>

The end of the Ghannouchi government did not only demonstrate the failure of a plan to build the democratic transition on an edifice of constitutional continuity, when that constitution was already obsolete. It also displayed the new balance of political power in the country. Alongside the former political parties of the legal opposition that had joined the government, like the Progressive Democratic Party and the Tajdid, new political forces that had once been banned like the Islamists and the extreme left, repressed like the Bar Association, or marginalised and sometimes instrumentalised like the UGTT, now could make their voices heard and throw their weight into the political game. It is also in this way that we should interpret the creation of the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution and its confrontation with the Ghannouchi government. It displayed a new balance of power where political groups, labour unions, and associations have decided to influence the restructuring of the Tunisian political landscape and influence it for a long time.

As for the continuing unrest in the interior of the country during this period, marked by strikes and demonstrations, and the street protests of 25 February, notable for the young age of the protesters, they show that the social actors involved in the insurgency of January 2011 intend as well to continue to weigh in on politics. This intent to shape politics is based on the principle of "revolutionary vigilance", as articulated by protesters who affirm their desire "not to see the revolution confiscated".<sup>138</sup>

#### IV. REASONS FOR HOPE AND PITFALLS TO AVOID

##### A. THE LONG ROAD TO COMPROMISE

Ghannouchi's resignation appeared for a time as a failure for this model of transition – a failure even more obvious since it also affected the so-called legal opposition, the PDP and Tajdid. Indeed, Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, leader of the PDP, also resigned two days later from his post as minister, denouncing all at once the delays, "foul-ups and procrastination"<sup>139</sup> by a government uncertain of the way forward and by the Council of Revolution, raising the spectre of an institutional and political vacuum. On 1 March it was the turn of Ahmed Ibrahim, secretary general of the Tajdid Movement, to submit his resignation. That said, the resignation of the PDP and Tajdid leaders also seems to have been motivated by prosaic considerations. In effect, the new government's commitment to Beji Caïd Essebsi that none of its members would run for office in the next elections likely encouraged their departure.<sup>140</sup>

Failure, however, is relative. On 3 March, President of the Republic Fouad Mebazaa announced elections for a National Constituent Assembly on 24 July. The next morning, the Place de la Kasbah sit-in in front of the seat of government was lifted, and the protesters were satisfied. One of them explained, "Our demand for an election of a constituent assembly was met. But we will remain vigilant, and we are really to re-engage".<sup>141</sup>

The UGTT Executive Board also announced the suspension of planned demonstrations and strikes and said that "the priority of the next steps is to participate (...) in the development of the new electoral law that guarantees the elections and their transparency in order to break once and for all with the sinister practices of the past."<sup>142</sup> The same day, the new Prime Minister Beji Caïd Essebsi introduced the new governmental roadmap. The 1959 constitution was suspended, and members of the government and the interim president will not stand in the forthcoming elections. The discourse against the former regime hardened,

<sup>137</sup> "Démission de Ghannouchi: communiqué", An-Nahda Movement, 28 February 2011, [www.nahdha.info/arabe/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=4476](http://www.nahdha.info/arabe/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=4476).

<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group interview, protesters at Place de la Kasbah, Tunis, 25 February 2011.

<sup>139</sup> "Tunisie: Nejib Chebbi met en garde contre un putsch militaire", *Tunisie actualités*, 1 March 2011, [www.tunisieactualite.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=4662&Itemid](http://www.tunisieactualite.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4662&Itemid).

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, leader of the Progressive Democratic Party, Sbeitla, 29 March 2011.

<sup>141</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tunis, 4 March 2011.

<sup>142</sup> Statement of the UGTT Executive Office, 4 March 2011.

with the prime minister going so far as to accuse Ben Ali of high treason.<sup>143</sup>

The prospect of a constituent assembly within four months, with a deadline of 24 July, was encouraging for the protesters because it confirmed the presidential address of the day before. They had succeeded on the issue that was closest to their hearts, the election of a constituent assembly. Moreover, in suspending the constitution, the prime minister recognised the exceptional nature of the transition period. The debate that had polarised the first period of transition – between the logic of constitutional continuity, which had to ensure first and foremost a presidential election, and the revolutionary logic that favoured a constituent assembly – was outmoded. But the institutional imperatives were now separated from the purely constitutional issues.

The key compromise also affected the Commission on Policy Reforms. The Commission was re-baptised “The Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and the Democratic Transition”. The new name was symbolically important because it combined “revolution”, “reform” and “transition”, and in that way would represent the end of the dichotomy between revolutionary logic and legalist logic. The creation of the Higher Authority would attempt to go beyond the logic of the opposition between the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution and the existing institutions.

This was done at first by the complicated and controversial expansion of the Higher Authority. If for its President Yadh Ben Achour the Higher Authority “was the result of a long process of negotiation between the government, the president, and the political groups and trade unions”,<sup>144</sup> its 72-member composition was contested. It was primarily the method of appointment that was criticised by members of the Higher Authority, some of them saying they were not consulted about their own appointments, having learned about it by telephone after the official list were published on 15 March.<sup>145</sup> After that, it was the lack of representatives of young people and of the provinces that has been criticised even from within the Higher Authority. The first meeting of the Higher Authority proved to be

unsuccessful; its Council called for a review of the Higher Authority itself before it should take on reforming the electoral laws.<sup>146</sup>

In the end it was not until 7 April that the Council of the Higher Authority was expanded. It now included 155 people, representatives of twelve political parties and eighteen trade unions and associations, as well as “national figures” and representatives of the regional groups, of youth, of the interior provinces, and of the “families” of the victims of state security, referred to as “martyrs”.<sup>147</sup> Notably, the Council also included in its ranks a representative of Tunisian diaspora in France.<sup>148</sup> Based in Tunis, the Authority established local branches in the governorates.

The compromise also affected the functions and powers of the respective institutions. The government remained the only executive and decision-making power, but the now expanded Higher Authority became at that point the steering committee of the transition; it would define the electoral law and organise the elections for a national constituent assembly. Based in Tunis, it now had local offices in the governorates. According to the Presidential Decree of 6 April, it was also for the Higher Authority to define the future constituencies and prepare the lists of voters.<sup>149</sup> It worked on two levels. There was the Higher Authority's Council of Experts, composed of lawyers working on electoral law and its implementation, and there was the Authority's Higher Council, made up of unions, political

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<sup>143</sup> “M. Caïd Essebsi: rupture définitive avec l'ancien régime et suspension de la constitution de 1959”, *Tunis Agence Presse*, 4 March 2011.

<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group interview, Yadh Ben Achour, President of the Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition, Tunis, 10 March 2011.

<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gilbert Naccache, member of the Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition, Tunis, 23 March 2011.

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<sup>146</sup> Crisis group interview, Kamal Jendoubi, member of the Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition, Tunis, 24 March 2011.

<sup>147</sup> “Liste des membres de l'Instance supérieure pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution, la réforme politique et la transition démocratique”, *Tunis Agence Presse*, 7 April 2011. This composition is still temporary. The Council is still waiting for the appointment of representatives of twelve governorates, as well as farmers.

<sup>148</sup> Tareq Ben Hiba, resident in France and president of the Tunisian Federation for Citizenship on Both Shores (FTCR), assumed that role. The first nomination of a representative of the diaspora, Kamal Jendoubi, who had fought for it to ensure that the Authority's Council had representatives from the “Euro-Mediterranean human rights networks, and not just the diaspora in France”. Crisis Group interview, Kamal Jendoubi and Tareq Ben Hiba, members of the Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition, Tunis, 22 and 24 March 2011. The Higher Authority was also open to other associations connected to Tunisians overseas. Lakdar Ellal represents the Association of Tunisians in France (ATF), an organisation close to Tajdid. Two associations of Tunisian emigrants close to An-Nahda, The Free Voice and Tunisian Solidarity, also participate in the Authority.

<sup>149</sup> “Adoption du décret-loi relatif à la haute Instance pour les élections”, *Tunis Agence Presse*, 6 April 2011.



groups, associations and community leaders, which could look, endorse, or instead reject and amend texts submitted by the Council of Experts. Texts accepted and voted on by the majority of the Authority's Higher Council were then forwarded to the Council of Ministers and the Presidency of the Republic for approval by decree.<sup>150</sup>

The Higher Authority has therefore less of a decision-making role and more of a consultative role. Some human rights and civil society organisations that had maintained some distance at first from the government and from the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution felt satisfied with the compromised forged around the notion of "the consultative obligation".<sup>151</sup>

The situation of *de facto* dual legitimacy – that of the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution on the one hand and the government on the other – was no longer really appropriate. The National Council for the Protection of the Revolution no longer existed, although in some cities, local committees to protect the revolution created in the month of February continued to exist. These committees often took care of administrative tasks under the former administrative councils.<sup>152</sup> The main organisations of the former National Council for the Protection of the Revolution (UGTT, the Bar Association, and An-Nahda) were integrated into the Council of the Higher Authority.<sup>153</sup>

The radical left of the January 14 movement was itself divided; two of its founding political parties, the Democratic Patriots Movement and the Democratic and Patriotic Labour Party, were represented at the Higher Authority (by Choukri Belaid and Momammed Jmour respectively). In the end, only the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party ultimately refused to participate in the Higher Authority, preferring the old formula of a Council of the Revolution.<sup>154</sup>

The Higher Authority was not a miniature parliament. Its first major achievement was that the Forum unanimously adopted a new electoral law on 12 April.<sup>155</sup> The electoral law also included the principle of gender equality, a position endorsed by all of the representatives with ties to the Islamist movement An-Nahda.<sup>156</sup> It would allow immigrants who have Tunisian nationality to vote in elections for the constituent assembly. Finally, one of the major areas of disagreement within the Higher Authority's board – namely the eligibility of former members of the RCD to run for the Assembly – was resolved in favour of the more radical representatives. Officials who had responsibilities in the RCD or in Ben Ali governments during the last 23 years would be ineligible.<sup>157</sup> However, the electoral law adopted by the Council of the Higher Authority still has

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<sup>150</sup> Executive power remained in the hands of the presidency and the government. In this way the Higher Authority, in especially the Council, performs transitional legislative functions, since they are the ones who revise and must accept the draft laws to be adopted by the president of the Republic.

<sup>151</sup> Crisis Group interview, Omar Mestiri, founding member of the National Conference for Freedom in Tunisia and a member of the Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition, Tunis, 5 March 2011.

<sup>152</sup> On 9 April a constituent congress of local committees for the protection of the revolution was held in Nabeul, attended by 140 delegates. See Tunis Agence Presse, 9 April 2011. Since 14 January municipal councils, made up of members of the RCD, no longer meet. In several cities (Tala, Redeyef, Bizerte, Nabeul), it is local councils for the protection of the revolution that took over municipal duties, but also security duties (Tala), in the absence of police, the majority of police stations having been burned down. These local councils rely mainly on local UGTT branches. Crisis Group observation in Kasserine in late March 2011. Crisis Group interviews, members of the local council for the protection of the revolution, Bizerte, April 2011.

<sup>153</sup> The Council of the Higher Authority did not consist only of organisations formerly in the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution. Organisations that had previously refused to participate in the Council of the Revolution (the National Council for Freedom in Tunisia or the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women), just as the Progressive Democratic Party and the Tajdid Movement, former members of Mohamed Ghannouchi's government, also participated.

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<sup>154</sup> "The purpose of these proceedings is to torpedo the National Council to Protect the Revolution and destroy it, so that the government can act without constraints. This was the case with the appointment of prefects under the Ghannouchi government, and it is still the case with Beji Caid Essebsi, in the appointment of delegation heads, security officials, the diplomatic corps, in the granting of visas to the parties, and in the lack of transparency surrounding the dissolution of the police force". Statement from the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party, 15 March 2011.

<sup>155</sup> The law favoured a proportional representation voting system, not a plurality voting system. It favoured political parties at the expense of independent candidates. In this system, there were several seats in each constituency, unlike plurality voting system constituencies where there is only one vacant seat. Young lawyers and constitutional experts, who participated in the events at the Place de la Kasbah in February 2011, formed an association called Manifeste (Manifesto). Advocates of the plurality voting system, they denounced the election list as a "coup of political parties at the expense of regions and provinces, where independent candidates and youth representatives would not be able to run". Crisis Group interview, Jawar Benmbareck, Professor of law and founding member of Manifeste, la Marsa, 9 March 2011.

<sup>156</sup> Three members of An-Nahda participated in the Higher Authority (Noureddine Bouheiri, Sahbi Attig and Farida Abidi), as well as two representatives of associated organisations (the International Association to Support Political Prisoners (AISPP), and Houriat wa Insaf). A female representative from the Bar Association is also a member of the Islamist movement.

<sup>157</sup> One of the main groups opposed to this policy was the Progressive Democratic Party. Crisis Group interview, Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, Sbeitla, 29 March 2011.

not been promulgated by the president of the Republic, who could also veto certain provisions of the draft law.<sup>158</sup>

The long march of democratic transition had several achievements: an electoral law paving the way for constituent elections, a consensual and enlarged Higher Authority steering the reform efforts by consensus, and a government that, even if its legitimacy was sometimes challenged, was recognised by the major social actors. The specificity of the Tunisian transitional period was therefore to focus on a Tunisia affected by clashes and fluctuating power relations, but also by a series of consenses reached, resulting in a logic of integration. This was neither an army nor a government alone driving the process, but rather a heterogeneous mixture of institutions, political forces, unions, and associations, on whom was now incumbent, through clashes followed by negotiations, the task of guiding the country toward democratic rule.

The transitional period was from the beginning subject to the consensus of political and social actors, who were all invested in the process. The four-month interim period leading to elections in late July required a permanent agreement of the representatives participating in the Higher Authority.<sup>159</sup> Any division in the Higher Authority might

well taint the proper functioning of the democratic process, with the time remaining for elections being so short. The democratic transition was also dependent on an unstable situation. The social and economic causes of the revolution still remained a time bomb.

## **B. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REALITIES**

The current concern in economic milieus is palpable and deepening.<sup>160</sup> With the drop in tourism due to instability and rising oil prices, material conditions are likely to worsen. The influx of tens of thousands of refugees from Libya only increases these fears and seriously complicates the situation of Beji Caid Essebsi's government. Having produced a domino effect in Egypt then Libya, Tunisia has experienced the unexpected boomerang effects of regional instability (skyrocketing oil prices and the tourism crisis), as well as the repression of opponents of Colonel Qaddafi, the civil war and the international military intervention taking place on its borders. Tunisia's central and southern regions are not only facing a massive influx of tens of thousands of refugees, but their local economy based on commerce and trade with Libya is in ruins.

The support of the international community to the threatened Tunisian economy is real. The European Commission was prepared to double its aid for the years 2013-2014,<sup>161</sup> and the United States, speaking through Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, pledged in mid-April to support Tunisia materially and financially.<sup>162</sup> In late April, Alain Juppé, in charge of French diplomacy, promised to unlock some €350 million.<sup>163</sup> As for the UN, it committed mainly to assisting the Tunisian government in coping with the influx of tens of thousands of refugees since mid-February.<sup>164</sup> However, this support seems poorly co-

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<sup>158</sup> In late April, the electoral law was still the subject of negotiations between the president, the government, and the Higher Authority. One issue of contention concerned the period of ineligibility of former RCD members, which could be lowered from 23 to ten years. For supporters of the hardline position, it is a matter of thwarting the efforts of former RCD leaders who have already reorganised themselves, including by creating new political parties such as the Watan Party, led by former ministers Ahmed Frea and Mohammed Jegham, or the initiative led by Kamal Morjane. For supporters of the more moderate line, who want to lower the period of ineligibility to those that served only during the last ten years, it is a matter of not penalising former RCD members, or people close to the party, who having supported Ben Ali in the beginning, were able subsequently to distance themselves from the regime. Crisis Group interview, members of the Council of the Higher Authority, Tunis, 24 April 2011.

<sup>159</sup> The delay in the final composition of the Higher Authority, and thus in the adoption of the electoral law, meant that the technical preparation for elections now had to be accomplished in less than four months. According to the president of the high Authority, Yadh Ben Achour, "We are working on a comprehensive plan for the elections, and the practical task is gigantic. We have to create a new electoral list, to have computer systems in place, and reorganise voter registration. We are working in a time frame that is very short, and we must at the same time move forward in a consensus fashion". Crisis Group interview, Tunis, 10 March 2011. If the elections could not be held on 24 July they would then be postponed to the fall, with Ramadan starting at the end of July. The only political party that was calling for the postponement of elections in October was the very party that had opposed the creation of the Higher Author-

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ity, the Tunisian Worker's Communist Party (PCOT). And that could inaugurate a new period of institutional instability.

<sup>160</sup> Fitch Ratings lowered the risk rating on Tunisia's long-term debt. See "Tunisie: Fitch abaisse la note, perspectives négatives", Agence France Presse, 2 March 2011.

<sup>161</sup> "Tunisie: l'aide financière de l'UE au titre de l'année 2012-2013 sera double", Maghreb emergent, 1 April 2011, [www.maghrebemergent.com/actualite/fil-maghreb/2788-tunisie-laide-financiere-de-lue-au-titre-de-lannee-2012-2013-sera-doublee.html](http://www.maghrebemergent.com/actualite/fil-maghreb/2788-tunisie-laide-financiere-de-lue-au-titre-de-lannee-2012-2013-sera-doublee.html).

<sup>162</sup> "Tunisie/ Etats-Unis: à Tunis, Hillary Clinton apporte le soutien des Etats-Unis à la Tunisie nouvelle", Radio France International, 13 March 2011.

<sup>163</sup> "La France va fournir à la Tunisie une aide de 500 million de dollars", CRI Online, 21 April 2011, <http://french.cri.cn/621/2011/04/21/402s242720.htm>.

<sup>164</sup> The number of refugees from Libya is now estimated at nearly 75,000 people. See "L'ONU aide Tunis et le Caire à gérer l'arrivée de milliers d'étrangers venant de Libye", UN Press Office, 1 March 2011, [www.pfcmc.com/apps/newsFr/storyF.asp?NewsID=24599&Cr=Libye&Cr1=](http://www.pfcmc.com/apps/newsFr/storyF.asp?NewsID=24599&Cr=Libye&Cr1=).

ordinated; the Carthage Conference on Political and Economic Reforms, which was supposed to bring together Tunisia and donor countries in March, was postponed for “two or three months”, primarily because of political instability in Tunisia.<sup>165</sup> Finally, if the assets of Ben Ali's family abroad have been largely frozen, there is the possibility of recovering some or all of them. Demonstrations were held for this purpose in Tunis at the Swiss Embassy to protest the slow pace of their processing of this demand, even though Switzerland was one of the first countries – just days after the departure of Ben Ali – to freeze those assets.

For 2011, the figures are alarming. According to a document released by the transitional government in early April, growth is forecasted to range between 0-1 per cent, with a budget deficit of 5 per cent.<sup>166</sup> Mustapha Kamel Nabli, governor of the Central Bank of Tunisia, said in mid-April that for the first two months of 2011, industrial production had decreased by 13 per cent, and industrial investment intentions dropped by 36 per cent.<sup>167</sup> According to the Ministry of Vocational Training, the unemployment rate, officially estimated at 14 per cent for the year 2011 by the former government of Ben Ali, could well rise in the summer to 19 per cent, or roughly 700,000 people, including more than 160,000 unemployed university graduates.<sup>168</sup>

In the opinion of Fathi Chamkhi, a UGTT member and leader of a campaign by Tunisian associations for cancellation of Tunisia's external debt, the situation is “catastrophic”. He argues that the government should suspend the portion of the debt associated with Ben Ali's private accounts and that he considers “illegitimate”,<sup>169</sup> a claim

defended by the most powerful trade union, the UGTT.<sup>170</sup> A Western diplomat also believes that:

The economic situation will be disastrous for the medium term. Even if there is a democratic stabilisation, you can predict a return to social discontent. The global economic crisis coupled by the Libyan crisis means that investment by the international community may have serious limitations.<sup>171</sup>

The transitional government of Beji Caid Essebsi seeks to address the emergency. He is attempting to establish effective state policies, particularly in terms of job creation and social welfare.<sup>172</sup> But it is truly a race against time. Between the tinderbox of short term economic and social demands and government measures being slowly put in place, there is a real risk of resurgent social protest, especially in the central provinces.

Meanwhile, political parties are making these social and economic issues a campaign issue four months before the elections. Building on a strong network of political activists in the south, with local offices in the centre and the south, and now detached from its governmental responsibilities, the Progressive Democratic Party is campaigning for the national constituent assembly in the affected areas of Kasserine, Sid Bouzid and Gafsa by highlighting the need for “accelerated development policies in the areas abandoned by the state”.<sup>173</sup> Symbolically, the An-Nahda party opened its first local office in Sidi Bouzid 28 March, in the presence of its leader Rached Ghannouchi, also denouncing the sorry state of affairs in the affected

<sup>165</sup> “Tunisie: report de la conférence internationale sur l'après Ben Ali”, Repères maghrébins, 7 March 2011, <http://fr.almagharibi.com/570.uPx>.

<sup>166</sup> “Programme social et économique à court terme du gouvernement transitoire”, 1 April 2011.

<sup>167</sup> “Situation économique délicate mais pas désespérée”, *Tunis Agence Presse*, 12 April 2011.

<sup>168</sup> Zeyneb Dridi, “Tunisie: déblocage des subventions pour 127,000 chômeurs dans les prochains jours”, *Business News*, 4 April 2011, [www.businessnews.com.tn/details\\_article.php?a=24211&temp=1&lang=fr&t=520](http://www.businessnews.com.tn/details_article.php?a=24211&temp=1&lang=fr&t=520).

<sup>169</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tunis, 17 February 2011. Fathi Chamkhi is a member of RAID-ATTAC Tunisie, an association linked with the Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt (CADTM), whose main demand is the forgiveness or re-evaluation of foreign debt in developing countries. In a 20 March letter from RAID-ATTAC Tunisie and the Union of Unemployed University Graduates to the governor of the central bank, Mustapha Kamel Nabli, they stressed that “the audit which should cover the entire debt of Tunisia and should include representatives of Tunisian and international civil society, as occurred in Ecuador in 2007-8, will shed light on where borrowed money is located, the circumstances surrounding the conclusion of loan agreements, the conditionalities on these

loans, as well as their environmental, social, and economic impact”. See “Pour un moratoire immédiat et unilatéral sur la dette publique de Tunisie. Une lettre au gouverneur de la Banque Centrale de Tunisie”, RAID-Attac Tunisie et Union des diplômés chômeurs de l'Université (UDUC), 20 March 2011.

<sup>170</sup> Ghazi Ben Mabrouk, “L'union générale tunisienne du travail lance une campagne pour l'annulation de la dette externe de la Tunisie”, 4 April 2011, [www.attounissia.com.tn/details\\_article.php?t=41&a=28490&temp=1&lang&w](http://www.attounissia.com.tn/details_article.php?t=41&a=28490&temp=1&lang&w).

<sup>171</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Tunis, 10 March 2011.

<sup>172</sup> The plan presented in April for the transition period envisages, “an exceptional public service recruitment program (20,000 jobs), support for 200,000 young people through interventions under existing policy mechanisms, including the Amel program (a program established by Mohammed Ghannouchi's government on 22 February 2011 which pays 200 dinars (about €100) to young unemployed university graduates and the doubling of the amounts allocated to public programs in the regions”. See “Programme social et économique à court terme du gouvernement transitoire”, 1 April 2011.

<sup>173</sup> Crisis Group interview, activists of the Progressive Democratic Party in the region of Kasserine and Sbeitla, 27 and 28 March 2011.

central regions.<sup>174</sup> From the left to the Islamists, themes of social and regional development have become a leitmotif of political discourse.<sup>175</sup> The goal is to mobilise the electorate around themes they consider important.

Since the January 14 revolution, social demands did not go away. In the central regions, they are combined with other more political issues such as the demand for justice for the “families of the martyrs”.<sup>176</sup> Strikes have also affected the entire country regularly and continuously since mid-January. In late March, there were still unemployed workers in Gabes in the south blocking the operations of a cement factory in the city to make known their demand for work,<sup>177</sup> while throughout the month miners in Gafsa blocked the transportation of phosphates.<sup>178</sup> In mid-April, taxi drivers in the city of Sfax went on strike. The strikes even affected Tunis, although with greater irregularity.<sup>179</sup>

The most obvious contrast is between the central regions and the capital. Since 14 January, cities in the provinces seem frozen in time. Tags and graffiti on the walls calling for the fall of the RCD have not been painted over, and police stations burned down during the riots remain as is. Due to the centrality of the issue of unemployment, strikes are less the weapon of choice in the regions than are sit-ins, public protests, and even hunger strikes.<sup>180</sup> In Kasserine,

Tala and Sidi Bouzid, downtown squares are still the place of permanent sit-ins, mostly involving unemployed young people around makeshift tents, which display photos of the “martyrs” of the revolution.<sup>181</sup> On 30 March a demonstration in Sidi Bouzid drew nearly 2,000 people. Demands focused on jobs for unemployed youth and on trials for the perpetrators of abuse and violence during the December 2010 and January 2011 demonstrations.<sup>182</sup>

If the protest tactics are seldom violent, they can occasionally turn into riots. On 19 and 20 April, for example, in the Regueb municipality, not far from Sidi Bouzid, young people took to the streets, burning tires and blocking roads. Again, the demands turned out to be twofold: a demand for job opportunities, on the one hand, and, on the other, a demand for legal action against police officials who gave the order to fire on the crowd during the December 2010 uprising.<sup>183</sup>

The demand for social justice continues to be combined with the demand for political justice. According to a trade union leader in Kasserine:

We continue the sit-ins for two main reasons. First, social justice. Young people are unemployed, and there is no social safety net. Second, political justice. The families of the martyrs in Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, and Tala filed complaints in court against the torturers and murderers, and then nothing happens. We are afraid of the confiscation of justice, and an amnesty for the criminals of December 2010. This is our biggest fear, because it is the population of the south that, because of its socio-economic situation, paid the most dearly in terms of the numbers of martyrs and of the wounded.<sup>184</sup>

On 29 March, in Kasserine, events similar to those in Sidi Bouzid, and related to the socio-economic situation, the status of unemployed university graduates, and justice of the “families of martyrs”, brought together downtown hundreds of protesters.<sup>185</sup> If the central provinces get credit for the uprising, they are also where the human cost in terms of deaths and injuries was the highest. It is therefore not surprising to see socio-economic demands and demands

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<sup>174</sup> “Tunisie: Rached Ghannouchi inaugure le siège d’An-Nahda à Sidi Bouzid”, *Espace Manager*, 28 March 2011, [www.espacemanager.com/politique/tunisie-rached-ghannouchi-inaugure-le-siege-d-ennahda-a-sidi-bouزيد.html](http://www.espacemanager.com/politique/tunisie-rached-ghannouchi-inaugure-le-siege-d-ennahda-a-sidi-bouزيد.html).

<sup>175</sup> For Hamma Hammami, leader of the Tunisian Worker’s Communist Party (PCOT), “the current economy of Tunisia is a victim of dependence on foreign capital .... The Economic choices of the former regime has exacerbated regional disparities. Three quarters of the investment have been made in coastal areas”. And even the leader of An-Nahda denounced, taking cue from one of the radical left’s key themes – namely the denunciation of international financial institutions, “the submission of the economy without limits to the instructions of the International Monetary Fund ... which promoted the disparity between the country’s regions and a massive increase in unemployment, especially among university graduates”. “Ennahda, Tajdid et le PCOT se prononcent: quel projet socio-économique pour l’après-transition?”, *Réalités* (weekly), Number 1319, 7 April 2011.

<sup>176</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tayyib Jillali, UGTT member from Sidi Bouzid, 25 March 2011.

<sup>177</sup> “Poursuite du sit-in dans la zone industrielle de Gabès”, *Tunis Agence Presse*, 25 March 2011.

<sup>178</sup> Crisis Group interview, Adnan Hajji, UGTT member from Gafsa, 9 April 2011.

<sup>179</sup> The period from late March to early April was marked, for example, by a long garbage workers strike in the capital in favour of higher wages.

<sup>180</sup> Unemployed youth in the city of Kasserine began a hunger strike for ten days in late March 2011. Crisis Group interviews,

young unemployed university graduates in Kasserine, March 2011.

<sup>181</sup> Crisis Group observations in Kasserine, Tala and Sidi Bouzid, March and April 2011.

<sup>182</sup> “Jour de colère à Sidi Bouzid”, *Tunis Agence Presse*, 30 March 2011.

<sup>183</sup> “Retour au calme dans la délégation de Regueb”, *Tunis Afrique Presse*, 20 April 2011.

<sup>184</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abdelwahad al-Homri, member of the UGTT secondary school teachers union of Kasserine and Tala native, 28 March 2011; victims of police brutality in Kasserine, 28 March 2011.

<sup>185</sup> Crisis Group observation in Kasserine, 29 March 2011.

for justice for police brutality collide in those areas. Time also plays a detrimental role there on judicial and governmental institutions. The demands for justice, like those for social equity, are immediate, but the response time is long.<sup>186</sup>

In its efforts to manage social movements, the government is also handicapped by the absence since 14 January of the police.<sup>187</sup> It has been replaced by an army not always knowing how to administer from day to day a social, political and administrative situation that sometimes gets out of control.<sup>188</sup> Since early February, Omar Belhaj Sleiman, a military man, is the head of the Kasserine governorate.<sup>189</sup> He admits that:

The situation is particularly difficult. The army is not prepared for this situation of day to day management [of local affairs]. There are socio-economic demands, and on top of them political demands. We need to find in municipalities and among representatives<sup>190</sup> independent people to handle administrative affairs, people that display competence and neutrality, and who are

not objected to by the population, linked to the police, or had too much responsibility under the RCD. Some municipal government offices are still empty, without local councils.<sup>191</sup> It is a burdensome time for the army because we were not ready for this, and we are doing our best.<sup>192</sup>

In turn, the administrative and political vacuum, particularly in among local representatives and in municipal councils, strengthens the rule of the UGTT. In fact, it is often the union locals that fill the void. Their representatives are the main interlocutors of the government. The UGTT local sections relay the needs of the population, and in some towns, they support the wounded victims of the December and January clashes, or the “families of the martyrs”, by organising collections at the local union headquarters.<sup>193</sup>

The geographical contrasts mentioned above weigh heavily in relations to socio-economic demands. If the administration is still failing due to the departures of former city councillors linked to the RCD, if the demands of the people combine all at once the socio-economic issues and resentment towards the police, unemployed university graduates organised into different associations working with UGTT union locals focus their discourse on regional disparities with an aggressive bitterness towards the capital and coastal regions.

A UGTT study in August 2010 but published only in April 2011 reveals that for the governorate of Sidi Bouzid, the unemployment rate is twice the national level, with notably an unemployment rate of 44.7 per cent among women university graduates.<sup>194</sup> Socio-economically-based anger is likely to result in real political regionalism. Young unemployed university graduates decry “the looting, by the large northern cities of Sfax, Bizerte and Tunis, of the central regions”.<sup>195</sup> For Souhad Saadli, head of an association of unemployed university graduates in the governorate of Kasserine:

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<sup>186</sup> In early April the national Commission on Abuses began to release its preliminary findings, particularly those concerning the provinces. According to the president of the Commission, “The crimes were actually organised .... These regions are neglected and the situation is alarming with regards to social and economic development. It is even explosive, which requires urgent action. We must build crisis centres to provide assistance to affected families”. Taoufik Bouderbala, *Le Temps*, 13 April 2011. The first conclusions of the commission officially recognised the use of snipers by the police during the riots of December and January 2011. It should be noted that, as in the insurrection itself, it is often the lawyers who are often the go-between for these social protests with the capital. Thus, lawsuits against officials involved in police brutality were carried forward by 25 lawyers on 2 April 2011. In a press conference held at the National Union of Tunisian Journalists, this group of lawyers filed a complaint against certain RCD officials and the Ministry of Interior, which would be considered at a hearing the following day by a judge in Tunis. Crisis Group observation at a press conference of the “group of 25 lawyers”, Tunis, 2 April 2011.

<sup>187</sup> The only visible police in the central region are the traffic police. The army is responsible for all security tasks whenever they occur.

<sup>188</sup> Military governors, seconded from the Defence Ministry, have been stationed since late February in the governorates of Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Kairouan and Sousse.

<sup>189</sup> The military governor says he was “seconded from the Defence Ministry for the interim period” and that he will resume “military duties once the new governors are appointed by the transitional government after the constituent assembly elections”. Crisis Group interview, Omar Belhaj Sleiman, Governor of Kasserine, 27 March 2011.

<sup>190</sup> The delegations are an intermediate administrative level between municipalities and the governorate. There are 264 delegations, spread over 24 governorates.

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<sup>191</sup> Municipal affairs are currently managed by municipal officials, in the absence of municipal councils normally in place in provincial towns. Governors and socio-economic partners – often the UGTT – negotiate municipality by municipality the establishment of interim councils, pending municipal elections.

<sup>192</sup> Crisis Group interview, Omar Belhaj Sleiman, Governor of Kasserine, 27 March 2011.

<sup>193</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abdelwahad al-Homri and Sidaoui Bouraoui, UGTT members from Kasserine and Tala, 28 March 2011; Crisis Group interviews, victims of police brutality in Kasserine, 28 March 2011.

<sup>194</sup> “Etude: Sidi Bouzid: une région à l’écart du développement”, *Tunis Afrique Presse*, 24 March 2011.

<sup>195</sup> Crisis Group interviews, unemployed university graduates from Kasserine and Tala, members of the al-Karamah association, late March 2011.

Young people have no chance. The regions of Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid do not have universities, and young people leave to study in Sousse, Tunis, to the north.<sup>196</sup> The Kasserine governorate doesn't even have a university hospital. Their families have to cover their expenses during their studies. When they return, they become unemployed, because there is no industrial infrastructure, no campus, based on which we could build to create jobs, no tourism infrastructure, even though we have one of the largest Roman sites in Tunisia in the region of Kasserine.<sup>197</sup> But there is only one hotel for the entire region, and the region has no services: no trains, no public transport, disastrous road infrastructure and no highway. The state has always despised us.<sup>198</sup>

Beyond the risk that socio-economic demands produce new riots, there is also a risk that the strong sense of regionalism leads to a political separation between the north and the central and southern regions. That could result in a discourse denouncing the "elite" politicians from the capital or well-developed coastal regions. The Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Goals of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition has included since early April in its council representatives of the regions, including some members of local sections of the UGTT.<sup>199</sup> But the Higher Authority is itself only temporary. Both the future constituent assembly and the interim government that it will form should include representatives of diverse regions. The economic and social issues since 14 January appear to be more and more political. Social movements in the central and southern regions, which are economically and socially marginalised, are no longer demanding just an end to underdevelopment. The affected areas will, more and more, have to resolve these

issues through political representation and regional re-balancing in the decision-making process.

### C. THE ISSUE OF ISLAMISM

The return of political Islam to Tunisian politics is not one of the minor tasks of the political transition and is one of the major challenges. The movement is still the subject of a sometimes contradictory discourse among political actors. Sometimes Islamists are portrayed as scary, and sometimes they are recognised as an integral part, if not indispensable, of the democratic transition. Recognising this ambiguity, An-Nahda seeks all at once to reassure its partners and to expand every kind of connection with them, by joining with them within institutions, such as within the Higher Authority.

Among the Arab Islamist movements, An-Nahda stands out by the way in which it deals with other political forces and by the diversity of its intellectual heritage. Heir to the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) founded in the early 1980s, the party An-Nahda (Renaissance) is part of the Tunisian Islamist landscape distinguished historically by pluralism and, more recently by its openness to other political cultures. The most striking aspect is that An-Nahda integrates themes near and dear to other political forces, and by doing this, seeks to put those who are concerned about Islamism in the country at ease, in a country that has made remarkable progress on key issues such as woman's rights.

It is also primarily on this subject that the movement seeks to make strong symbolic gestures. In particular, it affirms since the early 1990s that it does not want to question or modify the Personal Status Code,<sup>200</sup> a position officially reiterated during its first news conference since the fall of Ben Ali on 8 February,<sup>201</sup> and that it tried to put forward at regular intervals, its support for the role of women in the political process.<sup>202</sup> Mounia Ibrahim, a member of the Executive Board and head of the Office of Women for An-Nahda, says:

The movement is working on a social and economic agenda for women's rights, with, in particular, propos-

<sup>196</sup> Most of the Tunisian public universities are in fact concentrated in northern and coastal regions. For the central region, only the cities of Kairouan, Gafsa and Gabes have public university campuses.

<sup>197</sup> The region of Kasserine includes, in fact, one of the best preserved Roman sites in Tunisia, Seifetula, between Kasserine and Sbeitla. The site does, however, have only one tourist hotel for the entire region.

<sup>198</sup> Crisis Group interview, Souhad Saadli, unemployed university graduate, head of the local chapters of the al-Karamah association for the governorate of Kasserine, 29 March 2011.

<sup>199</sup> Local personalities like Adnan Hajji, member of the local Gafsa section of the UGTT and former leader of the uprising of the Gafsa and Redeyef mining area in 2008, and Samir Rebhi, one of the trade union leaders of the city of Kasserine, are members of the Higher Authority since early April. For Adnan Hajji, "We need to leave behind not only the Ben Ali system, but also the Bourguiba system. The first two presidents of Tunisia came from the Sahel region to the north. The interior regions have never been represented politically. We must leave behind the system of the old regime both economically and politically". Crisis Group interview, Adnan Hajji, 3 April 2011.

<sup>200</sup> Having come into force in 1957, the Tunisian Code of Personal Status notably prohibits polygamy (Article 18) and recognises the principle of divorce mutual consent (Article 31), and also sets a minimum marriage age of eighteen for both spouses (Article 5).

<sup>201</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tunis, 8 February 2011.

<sup>202</sup> An-Nahda released a statement on 8 March 2011 – International Woman's Day – calling for a strengthening of their role in Tunisian political life. Its Executive Office, established on 8 February, includes two women among its thirteen members, and its Consultative Committee has four out of 33.

als for concrete measures, such as the implementation of a salary for housewives, so they can achieve financial independence.<sup>203</sup>

Another significant feature, the intellectual and political journey of An-Nahda is not reducible to that of the Muslim Brotherhood, to which it is related, however, ideologically. If the influence of the writings of Hassan al-Banna or Sayyid Qutb is obvious,<sup>204</sup> its principal leader, Rashid Ghannouchi, a former Arab nationalist, was originally influenced as much by the thirdworldist ideas of Ali Shariati,<sup>205</sup> by the experience of the Shiite Iranian revolution, and by the writings of the Sudanese Islamist thinker Hassan Turabi.<sup>206</sup> This reflects a broader trend in Tunisia. In the 1980s, outside of An-Nahda, a progressive Islamist movement emerged around the magazine *15/21*.<sup>207</sup> By 1994, An-Nahda was also engaging in dialogue with Arab nationalist and left-wing movements, being one of the founders of the Nationalist and Islamic Conference, whose conference has been held every year since in Beirut, Lebanon.<sup>208</sup>

The mixing of Islamism and other political forces takes different forms. In the 1990s and 2000s, members of the Islamist movement joined secular political groups, such as Moncef Marzouki's Congress for the Republic and the

Progressive Democratic Party of Nejib Chebbi.<sup>209</sup> Above all, in the absence of authorisation for political activities, party activists in Tunisia had to get involved in the associative and professional organisations.<sup>210</sup> The experience of immigration to France and Britain also contributed to the exposure of the movement to other political orientations. Some members of An-Nahda joined both Muslim and non-Muslim associations and worked with political parties, unions, and French and British associations.<sup>211</sup>

Finally, in 2005, An-Nahda signed the October 18 Platform alongside the democratic and liberal left.<sup>212</sup> In this sense, the dialogue since October 2005 between the Tunisian left-wing opposition – Progressive Democratic Party and the Congress for the Republic – and the Islamists have played a key role in opening up debate and discussion and mitigating mutual mistrust. The common agenda upon which they agreed at that time includes the rights of political prisoners and the freedom of the press. It is in this sense that experts have described An-Nahda as demonstrating a form of “Islamism unlike any other”.<sup>213</sup>

With the onset of the uprising, An-Nahda sought to reassure those that doubted them, aware of the suspicions that persist and of the fact that the movement represents only

<sup>203</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tunis, 8 April 2011.

<sup>204</sup> Hassan al-Banna, a schoolteacher from the town of Ismailia, Egypt, was the founder, in 1928, of the Muslim Brotherhood. Sayyid Qutb, hung in 1966 in one of Nasser's prisons, was a member and intellectual of the Muslim Brothers, but is considered the father of radical Islamism. See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005, [www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/037-understanding-islamism.aspx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/037-understanding-islamism.aspx).

<sup>205</sup> An Iranian intellectual, Ali Shariati died in 1977 and had developed ideas at the crossroads between Shiite political Islam and thirdworldist nationalist and leftist ideas during the 1960s and 1970s. He was notably the translator of the anti-colonialist franco-martinician author Franz Fanon into Persian.

<sup>206</sup> Hassan al-Turabi was the leader of the Sudanese parliament in the late 1980s. An Islamic religious scholar, his thought contains strong references to Arab nationalism, contrary to the philosophies of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>207</sup> Composed of former Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters of the Islamic Tendency Movement, the journal *15/21* (15 for the fifteenth century since the Hijra, or journey of the Prophet Mohamed from Mecca to Medina, upon which the Muslim calendar is based, and 21 for the twenty-first century of the Christian calendar) and the progressive Islamist movement, led by Salah Eddine Jurchi and Hamida Enneifer, developed during the 1980s, a set of ideas halfway between Islamist ideas and those of the left.

<sup>208</sup> Rached Ghannouchi was in fact one of the founders of the Nationalist and Islamic Conference and initiative bringing together Islamist and Arab nationalist parties in Beirut around the theme of dialogue between Islamist and secular groups. The initiative was launched in mid-1990 by the Centre for the Study of Arab Unity, a research centre and publishing house based in Beirut.

<sup>209</sup> This was the case for example for a leader of the Progressive Democratic Party like Hamzah Hamzah, former member of the PDP central committee, who joined the organisation in 2004. He nonetheless resigned from the PDP in late January 2011 because of disagreements he had with the governing and institutional strategy of Nejib Chebbi. Nevertheless, he did not rejoin An-Nahda. Another PDP leader, Mohammed Hamrouni, also a former member of the Islamist movement, left Nejib Chebbi's party in late January to protest against the governmental policies of the party.

<sup>210</sup> Some An-Nahda activists have been particularly invested, for example, in the Tunisian League for Human Rights and the National Conference for Freedom in Tunisia. In the capital, the An-Nahda movement is particularly well represented in the Bar Association. Crisis Group interview, Samir Dilou, An-Nahda member and representative of the International Association for the Support of Political Prisoners in Tunisia (AISPP) on the Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Tunis, 11 February 2011.

<sup>211</sup> The French Muslim Collective (CMF), a French Muslim Association close to the Swiss intellectual Tariq Ramadan, was able to accommodate members of An-Nahda. The Collective has been particularly involved since the early 2000s in the international movements against globalisation and has worked with political parties and associations of the French left.

<sup>212</sup> Signed by two leaders of An-Nahda, Ziad al-Douletli and Samir Dilou, the October 18 Platform demanded the legalisation of political parties, freedom of the press, and the release of all political prisoners. It brought together left-wing and secular parties, independents and Arab nationalists. See Lotfi Hajji, “The 18 October coalition for Rights and Freedom in Tunisia”, op. cit.

<sup>213</sup> See Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Le syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali* (Paris, 2003).

part of the political and social spectrum.<sup>214</sup> An-Nahda disclaims any desire to dominate and rejects the idea of an Islamic state. A member of the movement explains this behaviour:

We learned from our own experience, but also from the experiences of others, from what happened in Sudan, in Algeria, and elsewhere. We must not go too far, and we should not aim to take power. It was the fundamental error of Islamist movements. We should send positive signals to the international community, with democracy as the defining principle.<sup>215</sup>

Its historic leader, Rached Ghannouchi, waited two weeks before returning from exile in London, and when he did, he was remarkably quiet in tone. As its secretary general said, "We do not want a return to Khomeini. That would have been a provocation". Generally speaking, the movement was desperate to avoid arousing fears. He added:

We have in mind the Hamas precedent, the fear of dictatorship of the majority. We are conscious that by isolating ourselves, we can endanger ourselves. We do not want to be again in a situation of polarisation. And for this we are ready to make concessions.<sup>216</sup>

The party said it was willing to not to run a candidate for president and to have "a presence only limited to Parliament, not to exceed 15 per cent, and even if it took not running candidates in all the regions".<sup>217</sup>

Remarkably, since 14 January, no political actor officially opposed the participation of An-Nahda in the political game. This lack of hostility reflects both its current respectful behaviour and the effect of the various past dialogues between Islamists and other opposition movements. The success of the strategy of having party activists join human rights and other associations also contributed to the easing of apprehensions and collective fear.

However, if there is indeed a dynamic of dialogue between An-Nahda and large swaths of the Tunisian political spectrum – from the former legal opposition to the illegal – the movement still scares some people. Fears, in other terms, have not entirely dissipated. It is mainly the Tunisian feminist movement, structured primarily around the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women founded in 1989 and

now represented in the Higher Authority that has the greatest concerns. First, feminist activists highlight past positions of An-Nahda; they say that its current acceptance of the Personal Status Code hides poorly its past refusal of that same code. Some call this position Islamist "double talk"<sup>218</sup> seeking to allay fears without changing the basic ideology.

A second source of distrust is the attitude of An-Nahda towards secularism. Before the fall of Ben Ali, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women still called for the abolition of the reference to Islam in the first article of the constitution.<sup>219</sup> But even if An-Nahda is likely to take a position in favour of the Code of Personal Status, it rejects the repeal of this constitutional reference to Islam. While defending its "religious leadership" and conceiving itself as a "political party" seeking to work within a "constitutional framework", "in the shadow of the state", An-Nahda intends to defend the "Islamic heritage" from a "reformist perspective between Islam and modernity".<sup>220</sup> This position always feeds the distrust between the most secular factions of the political space and the Islamists.<sup>221</sup>

These fears about the Islamist movement are finally reinforced by memories of clashes, some of them violent, between Islamic militants and the Tunisian left on Tunisian campuses during the 1980s,<sup>222</sup> or the occasional use of political violence by An-Nahda activists in the early 1990s.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Bouchra Belhaj Hamidi and Saïda Guerache, members of the leadership of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), February and April 2011.

<sup>219</sup> The first article of the Tunisian constitution specifies that the "religion of Tunisia is Islam".

<sup>220</sup> Interview with Rached Ghannouchi (Part 1), An-Nahda movement leader, *Tuniscope*, 1 April 2011, [www.tuniscope.com/index.php/web-tv/2405/ghannouchi-1](http://www.tuniscope.com/index.php/web-tv/2405/ghannouchi-1).

<sup>221</sup> Together with the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, the Tajdid movement remains one of the most hostile to the An-Nahda movement. The Tajdid activists often use the term "extreme religious right" to characterise the entire Islamic movement, including An-Nahda. Crisis Group interview, Tajdid movement activists, February and March 2011.

<sup>222</sup> In the 1980s, most student activists of the left and extreme left operated within the General Union of Tunisian Students (UGET). Former members of the UGET often report that during these years there were violent clashes between Islamist activists from the Islamic Tendencies Movement (MTI), later renamed An-Nahda. Crisis Group interviews, former activists of the Revolutionary Communist Organisation (OCR, a new defunct Marxist group) and former members of the UGET, Tunis, 18 March 2011.

<sup>223</sup> At his 8 February press conference, the An-Nahda leader Rashid Ghannouchi acknowledged the responsibility of the movement for the events of Bab Souïqa in Tunis in April 1991. In that incident, a local RCD office was attacked by Islamist militants, and a guard was burned to death.

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<sup>214</sup> "We must be realistic. What happened in Tunisia was a surprise to everyone. Politicians and political parties came in after the fall of Ben Ali". Crisis group interview, Habib Ellouz, member of the An-Nahda Movement, Sfax, 10 February 2011.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamadi Jabali, Secretary General of An-Nahda, Tunis, 25 February 2011.

<sup>217</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ziad al-Douletli, member the An-Nahda leadership, Tunis, 3 February 2011.



Reflecting these suspicions, left-wing and secular organisations, and foremost among them the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, held in Tunis on 19 February a demonstration of several hundred people in favour of a “secular Tunisia”.<sup>224</sup> An-Nahda was not specifically mentioned, but the target was implicit; the male and female protesters decried one by one “fundamentalism”, “fanaticism” and “Islamism”.<sup>225</sup>

The success of dialogue between the Islamists and the rest of the political spectrum and its gradual integration into the political game could be constrained in the future not only by secularist concerns, but also by religious concerns. For An-Nahda is not alone on the Islamist stage. In March and April 2011, Hizb ut-Tahrir<sup>226</sup> organised street demonstrations in the Tunisian capital and collective prayers in front of the Interior Ministry.<sup>227</sup> On 18 February in Tunis, brothels were attacked by groups of young people chanting Islamic slogans. The same scene was repeated in Sfax on 28 February. Finally, the country witnessed the emergence of a Salafi fundamentalist movement<sup>228</sup> of which the importance and the public presence still remain unknown.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> “Manifestation pour une Tunisie laïque”, Agence France-Presse, 19 February 2011.

<sup>225</sup> Crisis Group observations during a demonstration for a secular Tunisia, Tunis, 19 February 2011.

<sup>226</sup> Hizb ut-Tahrir, or the Liberation Party, was founded in 1953 in Amman. It was a party with an international dimension and operated in the Arab world, Europe and Central Asia. Hizb ut-Tahrir does not recognise the principle of the nation-state and calls for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate, the election of a Caliph by all of the Umma (Muslim community), and a policy based on Islamic law. According to members of the movement, the Tunisian section was created in the early 1980s and was subsequently subjected to severe repression. The same party members deny any attempt to use political violence and say that they are peaceful. Crisis Group interview, members of Hizb ut-Tahrir during a party demonstration, Tunis, 1 April 2011. On 12 February, the first demonstration of the party was organised in Tunis around the demand for an “Islamic Caliphate”. Crisis Group observations at the demonstration for an Islamic Caliphate, 12 February 2011. See also videos available on the Internet at: [www.dailymotion.com/video/xh1a0m\\_marche-pour-khilafah-en-tunisie-12-fev-2011-hizb-ut-tahrir\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xh1a0m_marche-pour-khilafah-en-tunisie-12-fev-2011-hizb-ut-tahrir_news); [www.dailymotion.com/video/xh1a0m\\_marche-pour-khilafah-en-tunisie-12-fev-2011-hizb-ut-tahrir\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xh1a0m_marche-pour-khilafah-en-tunisie-12-fev-2011-hizb-ut-tahrir_news); <http://califatblog.blogvie.com/2011/02/15/march-for-khilafah-i-tunesien-12-feb-2011-arrangeret-af-hizb-ut-tahrir/>. Hizb ut-Tahrir was one of the first political parties since the revolution not to be legalised. It was denied on 12 March because of the rejection of democracy in its founding principles.

<sup>227</sup> A week earlier, a fundamentalist demonstration of several dozen people had gathered outside the synagogue in Tunis.

<sup>228</sup> The Salafist movement can be defined as a contemporary trend within Sunni Islam, which emerged in the late 70s. It was at first a movement of missionary character, revolving around

All of these occurrences are likely to awaken collective fears. Some feminists fear that in the future An-Nahda will move closer to radical Islamist currents and will radicalise its discourse in favour of an Islamic society.<sup>230</sup> An-Nahda could find itself trapped in the intersection between two conflicting traffic patterns. If it is too reformist and moderate, it could be subject to criticism from more radical elements for its strategy of working within existing institutions and could be overwhelmed by a groundswell from its base. If it is too radical, and engages in dialogue with the Salafists,<sup>231</sup> An-Nahda could just as well lose the investment it has made in developing a cache of respectability with some of its partners. An-Nahda has to compromise between several competing interests: to reassure Tunisia's political parties and associations while avoiding being overwhelmed by new religious activists.

For now, however, the integration of An-Nahda into the political system and a process of dialogue with former adversaries seem to work. The movement became an official

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the idea of “moral rearmament” based on a specific literal reading of sacred texts and inspired by Saudi Wahhabi ideology. Hostile to nationalism, it also has a transnational conception of the Community (Umma) of Islam. On the definition of Salafism, see Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit.<sup>229</sup> According to a former “progressive-Islamist” activist, now a political analyst and member of the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH), “Salafism is everywhere and nowhere at once. It has no known leaders. For the moment, there is no scientific or partisan study on the reality of Salafism in Tunisia, and the data from the Interior Ministry are partially falsified. What is absolutely certain is that there is one indicator: the prison population. During the last six or seven years, it has been the Salafists who have paid the price of arrests, not the other currents. The estimated number of prisoners linked to the Salafist movement is between 2,500 and 4,000 youth. These are only estimates based on the work of the human rights movement coupled with that of lawyers, jurists and some newspapers”. Crisis Group interview, Salah Eddin Jouchi, member of Forum al-Jahez, former “progressive-Islamist”, Tunis, 15 February 2011. In the absence of reliable data from the Ministry of the Interior, it is still unclear whether the arrests made in recent years actually correspond to the dismantling of organised groups or simply “the arrests related to having a leaflet at home or a book banned by the authorities”. Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Bouchra Belhaj Hamidi and Saïda Guerache, officers of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), February and April 2011.

<sup>231</sup> For Habib Ellouz, a founder of the An-Nahda movement, “These trends represent therefore a challenge for An-Nahda and for society in general. Now we have to talk to the Salafists, including those with very radical ideas, while rejecting their ideas and their behaviour. We cannot eliminate these factions without a process of dialogue with them”. Crisis Group interview, Habib Ellouz, An-Nahda member, Sfax, 10 February 2011.

political party 1 March,<sup>232</sup> it now has a legalised weekly publication, *Al-Fajr* (Dawn).<sup>233</sup> The former government of Mohammed Ghannouchi, like that of Beji Caid Essebsi, opened a dialogue with the movement, and An-Nahda participated in the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution, often siding with the left and the extreme left, its former opponents of days gone by. Today, An-Nahda is part of the Higher Authority for the Realisation of Objectives of the Revolution charged with preparing the future elections for the constituent assembly. If the feminist associations are still distrustful, they found themselves nonetheless voting 11 April alongside the Islamist party for the principle of gender equality in the constituent assembly elections.

This prudent policy, in which the party seeking to find its place in the Tunisian political landscape based on consensual political action, is also due to another final factor; it is still a party that is still fearful. In the 1990s, An-Nahda was the main target of the Ben Ali regime. Most of the leadership was decapitated by the great trial of the summer of 1992, during which 279 members of the movement were tried in military courts. 49 were sentenced to life imprisonment while thousands of low-level supporters were imprisoned.<sup>234</sup> In 2008, a report by the U.S. State Department noted that despite the release of almost all activists of An-Nahda, violations of their human rights persisted after their release from prison.<sup>235</sup> For Mustapha Ben Jafaar, leader of the Democratic Front for Labour and Freedom (FDTL), Tunisian political actors must go “gently with An-Nahda, to integrate them peacefully into the political game. It’s a party that first wants guarantees of its right to exist and that is afraid”.<sup>236</sup>

This complex and nuanced reality explains the current positioning of An-Nahda. To this we must add another

factor. Even though it is now a legalised party, it still has to unify and homogenise its leadership, decimated and scattered in the early 1990s across several countries, with part of its leadership based in France and the United Kingdom, and respond to the demands of its former base regarding the future of its former political prisoners.<sup>237</sup> The movement itself recognises that it is now an unstructured party that must gradually adapt to the new national reality and to its legal resurfacing.<sup>238</sup>

In a fragmented and diverse Islamic landscape, the issue of dialogue with An-Nahda is even more complex. The legalisation of the party and multilateral contacts between the organisation, the government, and other political parties and associations reflect a largely positive dynamic of integration, based on mutual assurances. A party that is entering the democratic and political landscape, recognised by all actors, even if still arousing suspicion, An-Nahda is nonetheless no longer on its own. And radicalisation of a small faction of the Islamic movement could lead to a resurgence of strong and practically uncontrollable secular and religious passions.

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<sup>232</sup> “Communiqué: le mouvement An-Nahda obtient son visa légal”, An-Nahda Movement, 1 March 2011, [www.nahdha.info/arabe/home.html](http://www.nahdha.info/arabe/home.html).

<sup>233</sup> The first issue of *Al-Fajr* was released on 9 April 2011.

<sup>234</sup> See Bruno Callies de Salies, “Les deux visages de la dictature en Tunisie”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 1999. According to an official of an association of support for prisoners close to An-Nahda, there are no longer any party activists in prison. Crisis Group interview, Samir Dilou, party member and President of the International Association to Support Political Prisoners, Tunis, 11 February 2011.

<sup>235</sup> The report mentions in particular the harassment “of family members of Islamist activists by making sure that they are denied employment, education opportunities, commercial permits, and permission to move around, and this because of activities of their relatives. In addition, family members of activists are subjected to police surveillance and interrogation”. “Rapport sur les droits de l’homme: 2008”, <http://french.tunisia.usembassy.gov/root/nouvelles/nouvelles-de-washington/rapport-droits-de-lhomme-2008.html>.

<sup>236</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tunis, 10 February 2011.

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<sup>237</sup> Samir Dilou, party member and president of the International Association for Support of Political Prisoners said about this: “Our discussions with the government or with political parties and trade unions are not necessarily about the role of government commissions or the shape of the democratic transition or the Council of the Revolution, etc. We talk a lot with the government about former prisoners, their social integration, that is a very central issue for us. We negotiate for example reparations for their families”. Crisis Group interview, Tunis, 11 February 2011.

<sup>238</sup> The party’s secretary general admitted that one of the priorities of An-Nahda is to “restructure”. Crisis Group interview, Hamadi Jabali, Secretary General of An-Nahda, Tunis, 5 February 2011. In another interview, he states that “by force of circumstances, our movement was fragmented. Most of the leaders were in prison .... Frankly, what surprised us was the ease with which our organisation was disrupted to the point of not being able to communicate with its members”. Zyed Krichen, “Entretien avec Hamadi Jabali, Secrétaire général d’An-Nahda”, *Réalités* (weekly), 1311, 10 February 2011.

## V. CONCLUSION

Several months after 14 January, the reforms undertaken – although they still seem insufficient to some people – allow us to take stock of the progress. If the page will never be completely turned with regards to the past, and if the legacy of Bourguiba 1956 will persist, at least in part, a new social and political contract is being negotiated. Faced with this challenge, the country has considerable advantages. Among them, a well-developed landscape of associations and trade unions, political parties representing a wide range of ideological positions, and pluralism that is more than just beginning. The fall of the dictator did not leave a political vacuum, quite the contrary.

The mobilisation of unemployed university graduates in the affected areas of the centre and the south, like that of the middle and upper class young people during the Tunisian insurrection, testify to the emergence of a new political generation. Few people long to return to the days of Ben Ali, or really want a return to the old order. Bringing together the business community, established elites overwhelmed by the politics of the ruling Ben Ali and Trabelsi families, precariously employed workers, the unemployed, young students, former opponents (be they lawyers, trade unionists, or defenders of human rights), the Tunisian revolt has been a rare moment of national unanimity.

Among the advantages enjoyed by the country is the integration of Islamists into the political game. The positive signs are there and give reason to hope for a peaceful, democratic transition. In particular, An-Nahda's concessions, real and undeniable, notably on the issue of women's rights and a *de facto* dialogue between all political forces, all ideological tendencies together, suggest the implementation of a new social contract that is the result of a broad consensus.

Finally, despite clashes during the months of January and February between the non-governmental opposition and the transitional government of Mohammed Ghannouchi, who has since stepped down, politicians were able to show a remarkable ability to compromise. The creation of the Higher Authority is a sign. Despite the missteps of March – the government's lack of communication as well as the Higher Authority's insufficient representation at the latter – adjustments were made. Of course, nothing was entirely worked out. The deadlines are short and uncertain, and the elections for a national constituent assembly that needs to pave the way for a second republic are to be held in just under four months (23 October). This will require that the Higher Authority, pilot of the transition, succeed in forging a consensus on important questions. Delay could leave the country with a potential political and institutional vacuum.

Of course, problems persist and in some cases have worsened. A deteriorating economic situation, combined with social problems that gave rise to the uprising, could cause additional protest movements arising from the most precarious strata of society. Between the short time needed for legitimate social mobilisation and the long time needed for necessary reform, the gulf is great. Moreover, it is the economically depressed areas that paid the highest price from police repression in December and January. The demand for social justice overlaps with the demand for political justice. A democratic transition sticking to the sole issue of civil liberties could well find themselves impacted in the future by the wrath of the provinces in the political arena, because the original problem – underdevelopment – remains unresolved and the feelings of injustice still run deep.

There is therefore primarily a socio-economic emergency. The Ghannouchi and Essebsi governments have taken important steps, but in the future Tunisia will have to benefit from not only the help of the international community, but also a spirit of partnership between all national political and social actors. Rather than responding piecemeal to a systematic logic of power relations by expressing their anger, it might be better for activists to work upstream in the political process with government, unions, the unemployed and representatives of the business community. All of these social actors should be discussing and already working together on an economic emergency action plan and enjoying substantial support from the international community.

The latter could start by working on debt relief to help Tunisia reinvest its available funds in social programs. They should ensure that the assets of the Ben Ali family held abroad are returned to the Tunisian government in a timely fashion. The international community has made some significant gestures, especially in terms of humanitarian aid to refugees from Libya. But the economic aid should be better coordinated internationally and made part of a global plan. This aid should be discussed in a cooperative fashion with the Tunisian government, but also with civil society movements as well as associations and trade unions.

Since the demands of people in the provinces are not only related to social issues, but also to the issue of political representation, it is up to the political parties, who benefit from the party list system of proportional representation, to include in their party lists independent candidates from the provinces. The restoration of trust between young rebels in economically precarious circumstances of the interior regions, on the one hand, and the country's institutions on the other, will depend on the desire for comprehensive reform and for partnership. Moreover, it does not play out only in the realm of political representation.

Security and justice sector reforms are also essential to restoring confidence.

Democratic transition also requires a sense of transparency. The various commissions that were set up – covering abuse, violence and corruption – as well as the Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution are encouraging signs. But it is not enough that they function and that they produce results. It is also necessary that these results be made known, publicised, so that they consolidate public confidence in the transitional institutions. An increased sense of coordination, as well as mediatisation and provision of information, involving the commissions, the Higher Authority and the government, could strengthen the link between the population and the transitional institutions.

As for the Islamism issue, finally, mutual fears persist, especially between An-Nahda and the most secular fringes of the political spectrum. The dialogue is marred by distrust. This can be overcome because, in general, the conflict between Islamists and secularists at first seems to be less about real current political disagreements as much as suspicions carried over from the past. The best way to overcome this problem rests in an honest and organised dialogue, so that the stakeholders can know the positions of the respective parties, and in particular on the most contentious issues, namely women's rights. Hence, there is an interest in seeing Islamist, feminist, progressive and liberal movements hold real, well-organised discussions.

The Tunisian transition represents a double challenge that is democratic and socio-economic. The way and the degree to which these two challenges are effectively addressed will determine the success of the current experiment. To this end, the current dynamics of participation already in place, combining political, labour, and associational forces, is already promising.

**Tunis/Brussels, 28 April 2011**

## APPENDIX A

### MAP OF TUNISIA



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## APPENDIX B

### GLOSSARY

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AISPP	The International Association to Support Political Prisoners, led by Samir Dilou, is close to the Islamist Movement An-Nahda.
An-Nahda	An-Nahda (Renaissance) is the main Tunisian Islamist group. Created in the early 1980s as the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), led by Rached Ghannouchi (Rashid Ghanoushi), MTI was significantly repressed in the 1990s by the regime of Ben Ali. The An-Nahda is now legalised.
ATF	The Association of Tunisians in France is one of the main organisations of Tunisian immigrants.
ATFD	The Tunisian Association of Democratic Women is the primary organisation of Tunisian feminists. It was founded in the late 1980s.
ATUGE	The Tunisian Associate of <i>Grandes Ecoles</i> (leading graduate schools outside of the regular French public university system) was founded in 1990. It includes the Tunisian graduates of major French schools.
CNLT	The National Council for Liberties in Tunisia was founded in 1999. It is headed by Sihem Bensedrine and Omar Mestiri.
CNPR	The National Council for the Protection of the Revolution was founded in February 2011, in opposition to the transitional government of Mohammed Ghannouchi.
CPR	The Congress for the Republic is a political party founded in 2001. Member of the illegal opposition under Ben Ali, it is chaired by Moncef Marzouki, a doctor who was president of the Tunisian League for Human Rights in the early 1990s.
FDTL	The Democratic Front for Labour and Freedom (Liberties), founded in April 1994, is a social democratic political party, member of the Socialist International (SI). It is chaired by Mustapha Ben Jaafar, a former opponent of Ben Ali.
FTCR	The Tunisian Federation for Citizenship on Both Shores is one of the principle associations of Tunisian immigrants in France.
GEAST	The Group for Study and Socialist Action was founded in the 1960s, around the magazine <i>Al-Afaq</i> (Outlook). The GEAST gave rise to most groups of the Tunisian radical left during the 1970s.
Hizb ut-Tahrir	The Freedom Party is an international Islamist movement advocating the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate.
Houria wa-Insaf	Liberty and Fairness is an association that defends human rights and is close to the Islamist movement An-Nahda.
January 14	The January 14 Front is a group of Tunisian radical Marxist left-wing and Arab nationalist movements, founded after the fall of Ben Ali. It includes the PCOT, the Movement of Democratic Patriots (Watad), the League of Left-wing Workers (Trotskyist), the Nasserist Union Movement, the Baath movement, the Democratic and Patriotic Labour Party (PTDP), and the independent left.
LTDH	The Tunisian Human Rights League was formed in the late 1970s. It is a member of the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH).
October 18	Created 18 October 2005, this coalition includes the Progressive Democratic Party, the Tunisian Coalition Workers' Communist Party, the An-Nahda Islamists, and several independent figures in the legal and illegal opposition to Ben Ali. Its main demands were for the legalisation of political parties, freedom of the press and the release of political prisoners.
PCOT	The Tunisian Worker's Communist Party, founded in the late 1980s, is today one of the main organisations of the Tunisian Marxist radical left. It has a Maoist orientation, and is currently led by Hama Hammami.
PDP	The Progressive Democratic Party, founded in 2001, is a political party of the centre left that was a member of the legal opposition under Ben Ali. Its main leader is Nejjib Ahmed Chebbi.
RCD	The Democratic Constitutional Rally is the former ruling party of President Ben Ali. It is the heir of the Neo-Destour (Constitution) Party, founded by the former first president of Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba.
SNJT	The National Union of Tunisian Journalists, headed by Neji Bghouri, was founded in 2008 as the first trade union of independent journalists under the Ben Ali regime.



Tajdid	The Tajdid (Renewal) movement, founded in 1993, is the heir of the former Tunisian Communist Party. Under Ben Ali, it was part of the legal opposition. Its Secretary General is Ahmed Ibrahim.
UGET	The General Union of Tunisian Students is the main student union. In the 1980s, an alternative union close to An-Nahda was created, the Tunisian General Union of Students (UGTE).
UGTT	The Tunisian General Labour Union was founded in 1946. It participated in the National Constituent Assembly of 1959. It was the single trade union federation alongside the employers association UTICA (the Tunisian Unions of Industry, Commerce and Crafts) until the fall of Ben Ali. It is now chaired by Abdessalam Jrad.
Watad	The Watad (Democratic Patriots) are one of the leading parties of the Tunisian Marxist radical left. Operating inside the UGTT, the Watad organisation is represented today by two political parties, the Movement of Democratic Patriots, led by Shukri Belaid, and the Democratic and Patriotic Labour Party (PTDP) of Mohammed Jmour.