

SCULPTING THE STATUE OF REVOLUTION AND DEMOCRACY: TUNISIA TEN YEARS ON

ANALYSIS



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As Arabs mark the tenth anniversary of their uprisings, scholars find endless interpretations of how to read them. Transitologists are yet to find their Godot – Arab Spring “democracy”. Ten years have been fraught with more counter-revolution than revolution? And of more authoritarian rule than democracy? To muse over this binarism that more or less animates most of the narrative on the fate of Arab uprisings is a tall order without the benefit of systematic and in-depth comparisons, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, this essay makes its mark on the first question, with special reference to Tunisia. In so doing, it seeks not definite answers on still an unfolding “revolution”, as can be gleaned by the protests of the past weeks in various parts of Tunisia. The idea is to highlight the specificity of Tunisia’s democratic transition and “revolution” whilst recording parting notes of generalizable value for other Arab Spring contexts.

One idea that may be of value here is how through constitutionally executed transition, aided by a robust civil society, including a century-old labor movement, Tunisia seems to have engaged in a hit-and miss process of dually “pacted-revolutionary transition”. Pacted because it has the imprimatur of constitutionality and democratic rules of engagement. Revolutionary because democratization has failed to tame the revolution. Contests and protests are continuous. Institution-building alone is not sufficient – as the Tunisian experiment demonstrates – to routinizing politics and normalizing state-society relations on the basis of popularly democratic processes, cadres, and institutions. The missing link in the chain is instituting parallel processes of distributive justice – i.e. leveling the playing field economically too – which are germane to the reproduction of “pacted-revolutionary” democratization.

Reifying “revolution” and/or “democracy”, universalizing it, i.e. giving it a human face after its long abstraction by authoritarian rule, may not prove human enough. Not for its detractors from without the Arab world who have reduced it into doom and gloom and narratives of “terror” and failed states and societies – as if revolutions are ever smooth or linear. Nor for its critics from within the Arab world who lament bygone putative “order” (and for some, even bygone dictators).

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Whither Restorative Justice?

Revolutionary discontent in Tunisia is multi-faceted. It is on the one hand an indication of the popular internalization of expectations and outlooks epitomized by the famed 2011 chants: *shughl, hurriyyah, karamah wataniyyah*: work, freedom, national dignity. On the other hand, the disaffection that comes to the fore annually in January reflects shortcomings in political performance over the past ten years. Acute deficiencies in what is termed here “restorative justice” are one striking aspect of this decade since Tunisia’s revolution took off. Used in criminal justice and school settings, restorative justice is considered to be victim-centered, inclusive of both victims and offenders, dialogical with regards to offenses and reparations, incorporating formal (e.g. courts) and informal (e.g. community-based) actors in decisions related to the offense.¹ The concept is adapted here as relevant to post-2011 Tunisia. A convincing, enduring praxis of restorative justice is vital to Tunisia’s democratization as it emerges from under the shadow of authoritarianism. Restorative justice, viewed thus, is two-pronged. First, it encompasses dealing with crimes perpetrated by the Ben Ali dictatorship. Transitional justice, encompassing corruption and various forms of repression against political opponents, dissidents, and critics, falls into this category.

Second, in addition to the transitional track, the use of “restorative justice” incorporates matters of social justice. It thus includes reversing and rectifying more structural infractions committed by the state that created and perpetuated socio-economic marginalization, often regionalized, since formal independence. This understanding draws attention to distributive responsibilities: clean water and air, safe and accessible infrastructure, education, healthcare, employment, and pensions. Abject failures in both types of breaches against citizen rights are widely recognized as unwitting invitations for public revolt in 2010-11. Since then, mantras such as *hurriyyah* and *karamah* may have become almost cliché. Their repetition over the past decade, however, does not diminish their importance or their abiding relevance. Political elites, scholars, and observers should take them as seriously as they were uttered by protestors—revolutionaries—who put their safety and lives on the line as they faced the tentacles and firepower of Ben Ali’s police state.

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Tunisia’s 2014 constitution is applauded as a milestone achievement for the country’s democratization. This game-changing document not only mapped out the new political system, but also laid the groundwork for important elements of restorative justice. Elected in fall 2011 and tasked with drafting the constitution, the National Constituent Assembly (*al majlis al-ta’sisi*), considered multifaceted justice as central to the democratic transition. The 2014 Constitution thus includes provisions for mitigating a number of imbalances wrought by repression and deprivation. Articles 12, 23, 40, 44, 47, 136, and 148 attend to “positive discrimination” between regions, “protec[ting] human dignity,” “decent working conditions,” education for children, regional development, and transitional justice, respectively. In 2013, the NCA passed the Transitional Justice Law that created the Truth and Dignity Commission headed by Sihem ben Sedrine. Its mandate was left to expire a few short years later. By the time the Commission published its final report in early 2019, the post-2011 Tunisian political establishment was—and still is—a long way off from enacting transitional justice.

That Tunisia’s political leaders more or less allowed the 10-year freeze on roughly \$67 million in Ben Ali assets to expire, despite being contacted by Swiss officials, is mind-boggling. Moreover, an estimated \$9 billion in wealth accumulated by the Ben Ali and Trabelsi clans remains at large.² Why, Tunisians might ask, have governments failed to take tangible steps at recovering such assets? Funds stolen by *‘isabat al-surraq* (band of thieves), as protestors dubbed the dictator’s family and their coterie in 2011, could in theory go a long way to plugging the numerous gaps in Tunisia’s budget, and its mounting public debt. Some of the money even fund development programs or bankroll employment for the jobless. Is the elusiveness of transitional justice due to (willful) state negligence, incompetence, naiveté, or all of the above?

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Scrutinizing restorative justice necessitates going beyond institutional and procedural trappings of Tunisia's post-2011 political scene. Consecutive elections (2011, 2014, 2018, 2019), articles of the Constitution, and the Transitional Justice Law do not on their own provide a complete enough basis for assessment. In the case of transitional justice, the late President Beji Caid Essebsi's "Administrative Reconciliation Law" passed by Parliament in fall 2017 has likely shielded many culpable actors from accountability. The highly controversial bill passed with 117 votes and 9 objections, including the support of most of the Ennahda bloc (Mosaique FM 2017)³.

The parliamentary vote, however, did not settle the matter. Debate over the bill prompted protests in the streets under the *menish msemihi*! (I do not forgive!) campaign (El-Hemmi 2017). Civil society groups including the Forum for Social and Economic Rights (FTDES), Lawyers without Borders, and parliamentary watchdog Al-Bawsala noted a year later that the law "obliterated the substance of transitional justice as outlined" and "lac[ked]...transparency" (FTDES 2018)⁴. Human Rights Watch added that the premise of the law, differentiating on paper between corrupt officials under the old regime and civil servants merely doing their jobs, is false (Human Rights Watch 2017)⁵. The debate continues in the exchanges⁶ between Sihem ben Sedrine and Mohammad al-Ghiryani (Speaker of Parliament Rached Ghannouchi's new adviser on "reconciliation" and former top-ranking RCD official). Combined with popular outcries, these barbs traded among widely-heard voices in the political and civil society class are noteworthy. It may not be an exaggeration to assert that the Reconciliation Law was an institutional step antithetical to restorative justice. It has done no favors for the country's democratization.

Protest, Protest Everywhere

Tunisia's two-pronged restorative justice has not regressed only in its "transitional justice" variant. Governments since the revolution have not given *social* justice enough attention. The distribution of development and other goods (employment, water, healthcare, infrastructure, education) remains lopsided. However, the publics who rose

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up to overthrow Ben Ali in 2011 have not been complacent about their socio-economic plight. It is here that protests offer an important analytical window into interpreting how the revolution has played out in Tunisia over the past decade. Some protests have taken the form of longer, sustained campaigns such as the Kamour (2017-2020) protests. Others included popular challenges to specific policies, such as the austerity budget of 2018 which elicited the civil society campaign *fesh nestannaou* (what are we waiting for?).⁷ Protest activity, then, is not unusual in Tunisia. It has become an almost expected type of informal political participation and engagement with the powers that be. It is not just the popular uprising precipitating Ben Ali's ouster in 2011 that is notable. The persistence of protest as a mode of 'bottom-up politics' has marked Tunisia's ten-year long experiment with democracy. These protests can thus be viewed as a barometer of public opinion of sorts. They signal to the political elite that for the deprived in particular, the socio-economic and the political are intertwined. They express frustration and impatience with the political elite who have not convincingly sought to execute the constitutional commitments to address intensifying inequality across the country. That is, Tunisians grow weary as restorative justice remains wanting.

What may be termed a cat-and-mouse game dynamic between protestors and the state, embodied in these contexts in its police forces, also seems to be a pattern. Earlier this month, police arrested roughly 200 youth football fans (many of them minors) protesting in front of Club Africain.⁸ The most recent bout of protests and rioting in January 2021,⁹ however, has generated extensive public debate. Despite the proliferation of public 'unruliness' over the past decade, this year outcries against the state appear to have taken a more violent form. The announcement of a four-day lockdown starting on 14 January, the anniversary of the revolution, evoked suspicions that the government sought to contain protest activity. Youth across the country, many of them minors, have engaged in rioting, looting, and the destruction of property, clashing with police. This unrest has been dispersed across Tunisia, from interior regions such as Siliana, where this latest series of protests erupted, to the capital Tunis's "misery belts" including the Tadhamon neighborhood. Repression by state police and security forces—tear gas, mass arrests of at least 600 according to the Ministry of the Interior, dragging people into vans, and the like—has elicited outcries among civil society. Even international watchdog organizations such as Amnesty International have spoken out against "unnecessary and excessive force against protestors."¹⁰

Youth Indignation

It may not be unexpected that seemingly all and sundry among Tunisia's political elites have converged in denouncing the violence and the *takhrib* (destruction) and *shaghab* (unruliness or misbehavior) of these indignant youth, *al shabab al-ghadib*. Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi's response has fallen flat. After days of silence, he gave a perfunctory speech¹¹ from behind the safety and quiet of his office desk, he reassured youth that "your voices have been heard and your anger is justified," cuing comparisons to Ben Ali's famous "ana fahemtkom" (I have understood you) as the revolution raged in January 2011. Mechichi then proceeded to denounce the violent expression of youth rage, complimenting the "professionalism" of the security forces. Literally reading his speech off typewritten pages, what the head of government did not offer in his brief six-minute address was any indication of how his government would respond proactively to the very youth whose frustration he acknowledged.

Tunisia's "technocratic" ministerial lineup was shaken up in recent days, now awaiting the administration of the formal oath by President Saied. There was no hint in Mechichi's speech how his government would seek to placate youth who had been let down by the expectations of change in the form of development, employment, and the dignified life promised in the 2014 constitution. Never mind that Mechichi, Saied's pick for Head of Government and a former interior minister himself, woefully overlooked the excessive force used by state security and police forces. Has the police state really receded since the 2011 revolution?

That other political elites have articulated disdain for Mechichi's words¹² may be beside the point. Across political spectrum, from Ennahda's 48th Shura Council statement¹³ to Abir Moussi's denouncements¹⁴ to Al-Tayyar al-Dimuqrati's comments,¹⁵ what emerges is an almost 'schizophrenic' reading of the situation. Attempting to separate lawful, "peaceful" protests enacted by day in the capital with clear protest slogans and demands, from unlawful *shaghab* (unruly mischief) and *inhiraf* (deviation) by night, may be an exercise in futility. It amounts to a cop-out by the political class who have, as all and sundry have recognized, failed to usher in the socio-economic, distributional demands of the 2011 uprising.

Marginalization persists, and deepens, across Tunisia. There is a symbolic dimension of these acts on the anniversary of the revolution. Youth protest and rioting to an extent further embodies the same revolutionary praxis of 2010-2011. It matters little that these

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youth do not clearly enunciate specific demands, that they have not organized into an identifiable civil society group or political collective. Youth rioting is not a phenomenon that is separable from the daytime protests demanding the publication of a complete formal list of revolution martyrs, or those calling for the government's resignation. (In fact, during these daytime protests, too, police have arrested activists and blocked protesters from reaching Habib Bourguiba Avenue.¹⁶) It is the more unruly symptom of simmering *naqmah* or indignation—a term widely used by the political class but perhaps insufficiently comprehended. Indignant youth, from Latin America to Southern Europe to yes, Tunis even ten years after the revolution, are the more disorderly face of popular discontent. Youth shorn of the tools of empowerment—education and especially employment—that could equip them to construct a brighter future for themselves rail against the state that has abandoned them, again and again. Perhaps they do not feel a need to spell out exactly what it is they rage about. Burning tires and smashing ATMs under the cover of darkness may detract from the civility acceptable to the country's political elites. But the violence of popular mobilization does not detract from the reality that the post-2011 political establishment has forsaken Tunisia's subalterns and its marginalized.

Youth rage may be commensurate with the dashed expectations of a revolution promising dignity, freedom, and social justice by a political class who pay no more than lip service to the subsistence needs of citizens. It is as though politicians are seeking to save face by purporting to endorse and accept the right to peaceful protest, guaranteed, after all by the constitution. The two, however, may intersect more than they diverge. The discourse valorizing the security forces and the state and warning against chaos almost instinctively leaps to protect the political and security establishment. Reports that protests and clashes in Siliana (where a shepherd was accosted by police) did not in fact involve looting or destruction of public or private property¹⁷ raise important questions. Where does "peaceful," "organized," and acceptable protest end and "unruly," "chaotic," "mischievous," repugnant rioting begin? Politicians' over-simplistic judgements may not square with the entanglement of the two, in motive and grievances if not in practice. This dichotomization is reminiscent of Bourguiba

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and Ben Ali's language about *agents provocateurs*. The Minister of National Defense's ominous warning that terrorists might "exploit the unruliness"¹⁸ feeds into the same playbook that securitizes dissent. Anti-state and pro-state is the new binarism.

Political talk of stabilizing the revolution, or rising to its demands, is vacuous year in and year out. The revolution is not over. It has never stabilized. It is ongoing. Tunisia is not in a "post-revolution" phase marked by the country's first democratic elections in 2011 or its new constitution and election law in 2014 or its second parliamentary and presidential elections of 2019. In Tunisia, the revolution continues—not as aspirational thinking to spur resistance momentum by activists in Sissi's Egypt or in a Syria reclaimed by Assad. The North African country's *thawrah* is literally still unfolding, something it would do well for the country's political class to recognize. It is as though Tunisia's revolution emancipated the elites, who now have the space to form parties, contest elections, fill parliamentary seats and ministry posts, and make the media rounds on Mosaïque, Shems, and Diwan FM. Yet the marginalized and deprived have not yet been liberated from the shackles of poverty and socio-economic exclusion. A *popular revolution* requires transformations not just in parliament but on the street, in the neighborhoods of the city's ghettos and the country's interior and south.

Electoral Reform: A Distraction or a Possible Solution?

Protest may be one symptom of the failure of Tunisian governments to govern responsively and responsibly as befitting the revolutionary aspirations of publics overturning decades of postcolonial dictatorship. It bears spelling out that protest as such is not an unhealthy feature of the country's democratization inaugurated by the 2011 revolution. Rather, it is part and parcel of what I call the "civic parallelism"¹⁹ that has generally made Tunisia's transition 'tick.' The formal-informal symbiosis among various political and civic actors (political parties, executive institutions, civil society actors such as the UGTT) also extends to "anomic" protest activity as a sort of bottom-up pressure on political elites and the functioning of political institutions.

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This diversity and plurality of political and civic forces and voices has withstood excessive centralization or domination by one political player, *within* and *without* the country's political institutions. Here might be a vista for exploring the democratic acquisition of good practices (e.g. bargain politics, consensus-building), still unfurling in Tunisia since 2011. Understood as a component of "civic parallelism," protest activity, riots included, calls for serious engagement by Tunisia's political elites. It may be greater synergy between formal and informal civic and political actors, rather than reform of the electoral law, that serves as an important well-spring for problem-solving in the face of mounting political and economic crises.

Political stagnation has been attributed to many things: the weakness of its political parties, a struggling economy, mushrooming foreign debt, deviation from the 2011 revolutionary mandate, the return of the *ancien regime*, etc. Sometimes explicitly, sometimes less so, protestors and youth mobilizing in the street seem to have recognized at least some of these pitfalls of Tunisia's ongoing transition. At the level of political elites, disparate voices across have increasingly turned to casting blame on the country's institutions. Either it is the hybrid political system (semi-parliamentary), or the election law that gives wide berth to independents and very small parties to gain a foothold in Parliament. Kaiss Saïed (in)famously campaigned on reworking the entire political and electoral system, in vague proclamations of a need to better represent "the general will." More recently, Ennahda's Rachid Ghannouchi has remarked that the current electoral system leaves the country "without a ruler" in the absence of generating a clear parliamentary majority or minority.²⁰ Others have proposed modifying the election law in the direction of single-member districts.²¹ In its much-debated national dialogue proposal,²² the UGTT identifies both the electoral and the political system (semi-parliamentary, with 'three presidencies,' etc.) as conducive to political inefficacy when it comes to socio-economic policy.

A decade of revolution and democratization thus provokes the conundrum of institutional reform. Modifications of the country's electoral reform (what kind?) would require, of course, a level of political consensus that is arguably dubious in this fragmented, fractious parliament. However, the more pressing question is: would institutional reform propel

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Tunisia's political actors and apparatus towards the searing imperatives of restorative justice? Or is it a political red herring, a convenient scapegoat by parties and politicians who seem to have had no problem with the electoral law in 2014 when they nabbed 69 seats (Ennahda) or 89 seats (Nidaa Tounes) in the legislature?

It is true that Tunisia's current electoral system produces no majority, only a plurality for even the largest political parties in the country. It also leaves much to be desired in terms of implementing guidelines on transparency and foreign funding. A report by *Mahkamat al-Muhasabat*, the audit tribunal tasked with monitoring the financing of political campaigns,²³ identifies a number of parties (including Qalb Tounes whose head, Nabil Karoui, was arrested again in December 2020 on money laundering charges), and MPs of violating campaign finance laws. Yet, the report concedes that it is difficult if not impossible to implement article 90 of the Basic Law on elections, to hold candidates and elected officials to account for breaking such laws.²⁴ Recognizing these and other shortcomings in the Basic Law on Elections is one thing. Leaping to overhaul hard-won institutions that have been tested for only 6 years or so in a new democracy is an entirely different matter—likely inadvisable.

In the broadest sense, incipient democratization (as opposite consolidation in established democracies) in the Arab Spring countries context should facilitate institutional and attitudinal shifts, preferably piecemeal rather than hurried, from singular rule (of party, ideology, or elite) to legally guaranteed and popularly vetted government. In this light, democratization theory in Tunisia cannot be turned into a reductive mold informed by modernization theory. Thus, disaggregation is in order. Democratization in fledgling democracies cannot tread the same route of consolidated democracies. Simply put, democratizing Tunisia must not raise the bar too high, in the pursuit of mimicking democratically functional, effective, efficient, and rational, good governance in countries whose transitions have evolved over longer historical time-spans.

Democratization in fledgling democracies must very poignantly mean institutional deftness that allows for responsiveness to local demands and needs in accordance with existing resources (material and immaterial). Therefore, pursuing a new reform agenda

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in Tunisia (political system, electoral law) must be geared towards as well as equipped with a different brand of rational public institutions and processes: entrenching good government principles that promote plural citizen engagement whilst inhibiting return to singularity, as described above. More specifically, this entails:

- 1- Democratization in a fledgling democracy should be guided and substantiated by *maximizing pluralism* as a guarantor of dispersion and sustained redistribution of power.
- 2- In this vein, Tunisia's fledgling democracy should *resist rushed political reform* (electoral law, political system) that could potentially benefit particularistic interests (ideological, personalist, and partisan).
- 3- Resisting the above equates with preventing a new or modified electoral law that could prove *disempowering to minor political forces and voices*. Some actors, even elected by the notorious largest remainder method (*akbar al-baqaya*), would never otherwise have an opportunity to enter the public fray except through the current electoral system. It is fallacious to think that elections always deliver empowerment. A new electoral law that aids the rise of a two-party system, à la the US's Democrat-Republican dyad, risks reproduction of ideological and elite-based patron-client networks set to fuel political monism, not inhibit it.
- 4- Reforming the electoral law to redesign the political system into a two-party system bodes not well for either a rich associational civil life or for attendant social accountability²⁵ as a social capital resource that guards against political singularity and a "predatory" two-party system.

Instead, it may be that an electoral system with minimal gatekeeping can help facilitate broader civic engagement that seeks to pressure elected officials and public bureaucracies to deliver the goods, as it were—from hospitals to better roads to clean water to employment. This is an alternative perspective on the electoral system, seemingly absent from the current political discourses. In other words, the electoral system is significant not just in terms of formal political representation; it can also potentially boost the potential for greater civic parallelism in Tunisia. Enhancing state responsiveness to input from civil society and other informal actors may enable greater social accountability,²⁶ to revitalize policymaking and public administration receptive to citizen oversight and demands.

Still six years since inaugurating its democratic constitution, any reform attempted to change or amend existing electoral laws must be justified only by improvement of inclusiveness (political and economic) and democratic consolidation. If the chief goal of electoral reforms is to modify the existing electoral system in order to disempower or exclude political minor actors, then the exercise is not warranted. Electoral reform that results in power becoming concentrated in a few parties may weaken modalities of holding majority parties accountable, much less answerable to wider constituencies. Rectifying some pitfalls of Tunisia's democratization, including its political sclerosis and a raucous partisan and parliamentary landscape, may in the end rest more on the agency of political actors, individual and collective, than on flawed political institutions. No political system is perfect, neither Westminster nor the US's two-party system. Tunisia can, and should, *own* its unique brand of politics, namely what is posited as its 'civic parallelism' where informal engages formal, where bottom-up meets top-down, and above all, where there is no single claimant to power—party or politician. Protestors and rioting youth are not the enemy. They are rather the oft-marginalized constituency of the political elite who have fallen short of paying them heed for an entire decade while paying lip service to "the revolution," its aims, and its accomplishments.

The November 2020 Tataouine agreement hinted at the possibility of receptiveness to protestor demands. The negotiation team in Tataouine was comprised of civil society and government: representatives of the Kamour movement, MPs from the governorate, UGTT and UTICA, experts (maybe economists or development specialists), etc. sitting across the table from the government delegation led by Moncef Ashour, who pledged not to depart Tataouine until an agreement was reached, palatable to both sides. Weeks later, the sides did hammer out an agreement that the government has pledged to honor this time.²⁷ Kamour's youth expressed initial excitement about the government finally putting its money where its mouth is, three years later after Chahed's Kamour Agreement that remained little more than ink on paper, spurring protests, sit-ins, and disruption of oil and gas production. The question of course is: will the government be able to fund this expensive yet well-deserved injection of attention and more importantly, state funds, to the under-developed, long-marginalized region with the highest unemployment rate in the country? That remains unclear, as Tansiqiyyat al-Kamour has plunged into renewed negotiations with the government after the latter's sluggishness in acting on its November pledges.²⁸ Moreover, a 'divide, conquer, and delay' strategy will not placate

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rebellious youth suffering cumulative deprivation across Tunisia's regions. The 13 million TND 2020 budget gap confirms the empty coffers of the state. January's youth rioters attest to the need for holistic development strategies that begin with true "listening" to the periodic outbursts of Tunisian subalterns.

Conclusion: Interpreting the Revolution

It is remembrance season in the Arab world. Not just Tunisia, but also Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria commemorate their 2011 revolutions in the first quarter of this year. What does Tunisia's revolution, its unfulfilled restorative justice, youth anger and rebelliousness, and its political inertia imply for other Arab settings struggling even more dramatically against tenacious Arab authoritarianism or even violent conflict? Ten years in, academics who "winterize" the Arab Spring²⁹ are available in abundance. The clamoring to identify the ills and pathologies of Arab societies who could not forge their path to emancipation seems renewed on this occasion of "one decade since...." The naysayers appear not just in the academy. There is also the political class catapulted into power by the revolution, but somehow disabuse themselves of any kind of recognition of the *thawrah*. Abir Moussi, head of Tunisia's Free Destour Party reviving Ben Ali's *tajammu'*, has referred for instance to the past decade as *al-ashriyyah al-sawdaa*, the "black decade."³⁰ This kind of populist, anti-revolutionary rhetoric, additionally exclusionary of ideological rivals such as Islamists, is not without popularity in Tunisia and perhaps elsewhere. Yet Moussi could not have been head of a party and a 16-member parliamentary bloc, freely elected, were it not for the 2011 revolution. Indeed, the repeal of the "political exclusion" law in 2014 reversed initial lustration that had prevented old regime members from party and election participation. It may be one example of Tunisian "civic parallelism" resulting from coalition-building and negotiation among disparate political actors.

It behooves onlookers, activists, researchers, and politicians alike to keep in mind that agentic popular mobilization, lighting up in Sidi Bouzid and subsequently tearing through the Arab geography, has forever transformed the trajectory and the political imaginary of

Here lies the specificity of Tunisia's experiment, with transferable value to other Arab settings with revolting and indignant publics. The marginalized require distributive justice. The bulk of the Arab populace is not just after the vote, but requires equalization in socio-economic terms. Youth everywhere in the region require employment

Arab states and societies. From Tunisia's democratically elected (or nominated) ruling class to strongman Sissi to Russia and Iran-backed Assad, the rule of thumb for political elites, ten years later, remains that moral protest to be ignored at its peril. Indignant publics still possess the latent power to shake things up, as Tunisia's "pacted revolutionary transition" implies. The challenge, of course, is to tap into the creative genius borne of legitimate claims to freedom and dignity that nurture popular solidarity. Here lies the specificity of Tunisia's experiment, with transferable value to other Arab settings with revolting and indignant publics. The marginalized require distributive justice. The bulk of the Arab populace is not just after the vote, but requires equalization in socio-economic terms. Youth everywhere in the region require employment. Complacency inspired by institution-building can provide a sense of false security. (Elected) elites can 'sculpt' a great democracy on paper, and then 'embody' it as the Tunisians have done. But what happens when the institutional "statue" of democracy does not live up to the needs of the people? They rebel, as the ongoing system/anti-system saga in Tunisia suggests. Yet it is this very revolutionary flame that keeps alight the search and struggle for Arab democracy.

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