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## Tunisia's Endangered Exception: History at Large in the Southern Mediterranean

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### Abstract

This article explores some facets of the relation between Tunisia's post-independence political bequeathals and the legacy of a political memory that, today, is being sabotaged and rendered fugitive, not least through the acts of terror that have recently hit the country and crippled its tourist economy. Arguing that Tunisia's democratic trajectories are at stake today and risk being "orphaned" of their history of reformist precedents accrued over the past one hundred and fifty years, the author reflects on the current political state of play in Tunisia and makes a case for a restored dialectic of interchange with specific luminary tenets of Tunisia's late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century enlightenment movement. The engendering of political subjectivities in post-revolutionary Tunisia and the piecing together of its multifaceted national imaginary require today what Balibar would term a «differentiation» of the change towards a non-despotic democratisation brought about in 2011.

### Keywords

Reformism - Political Memory - *Ijtihad* - Tunisian Exception - Destourian Thought

*There can be no other place in the world  
where you grasp better than you do here the curious parallelism  
between the soldier's watch and the mystic's deliberate dreaming [...]  
why shouldn't it be the site of a harmonious accommodation  
between the abiding presence of a spiritual outlook implanted in its countryside  
and the modern world's passion for change?*

(Duvignaud and Kahia 1965, 13, 21)

*Mais, en nous, résonnent encore le chant âcre de la  
déraison, l'ample folie des eaux vives et l'astre  
aveugle de la foi.*

(Majed 2013, ch.10)

On the 16th of January of 2016, the impoverished, rural west-central town of Kasserine in Tunisia was home to a very distressing event – the latest in a series of its kind that happened elsewhere in Tunisia after 26-year-old Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire on December 17 2011 at Sidi Bouzid, another of the country's towns with the highest rates of unemployment and lowest average income per capita. This time round, the incident in Kasserine, (itself a hotbed of anti-despotic sentiment during the Jasmine uprising that ousted Zine el Abidine bin Ali) involved Ridha Yahyaoui, a 28-year-old unemployed man who was turned down when he applied for a position with the Tunisian public service. In a moment of profound anguish, Yahyaoui scaled an electrical pole and electrocuted himself (*The Economist* 2016). Ridha Yahyaoui's self-immolation occurred in the wake of a number of other suicide attempts in Kasserine and elsewhere – acts of despair that stemmed from the dire fiscal situation Tunisia finds itself in today, after its already weather-beaten tourist economy received a strategic blow following last year's terror attacks on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, at a tourist beach resort in Sousse, and in central Tunis itself, just off the capital's main avenue.

In a brief statement to Reuters news agency, Yahyaoui's father Hathmane pointed out that «Ridha killed himself because he lost hope [...] I have lost my son, but I warn the authorities, my son will be the new Bouazizi and his death will create more protests for work and dignity» (Amara 2016). The emerging statistical data on the state of Tunisia's economy in 2016, does, at first glance, seem to lend plausibility to Yahyaoui's desire for a "new Bouazizi" and a new wave of «street-level politics» (Brennan 2015). The country's current unemployment rate stands at more than 15% – worse than the unemployment situation prior to the 2011 uprisings. Around a third of young people in Tunisia today are jobless. New graduates need an average of six years to obtain a steady job and, according to World Bank figures, half of all Tunisia's graduates are still unemployed at 35 years of age (*The Economist* 2016). On-the-ground sources now suggest that over 400.000 Tunisians have lost their jobs in the tourism sector as a direct result of cancelled holiday bookings in the wake of the Bardo and then the Sousse shootings – and counting. Directly or indirectly, tourism in Tunisia accounts for about 15% of GDP and 14% of the total workforce (*The Economist* 2016).

But, much as Yahyaoui's and others' gestures of despair are symptomatic of this bleak economic turn, the public response to them was a far cry from the nationwide sense of empowerment triggered by Bouazizi's self-immolation five years ago. Sentiments in Tunisia today are divided even with regard to Bouazizi's own act and the ensuing convulsions – political, economic, social and constitutional – it unleashed. Ambivalent responses to the current situation are strong – as is the implicit interrogation of various facets of the discursive inheritances and political legacies that have characterized the post-independent nation, some of which have returned to possess –

and often to haunt – the political sphere that emerged after ben Ali's fall and the subsequent collapse of the country's first freely-elected government, led by the Islamist *Ennahda Movement* party, in January 2014. In this article, I would like to explore the question of political memory and its dialectic of interaction with Tunisia's present, fledgling democratic formation. This relation is underpinned by a constitutionalist ethos that today looks increasingly nomadised, and risks being "orphaned" of an eminent history of reformist precedents accrued over the past one hundred and fifty years. The article will, therefore, seek to revisit the specific state of play outlined some years ago by Larbi Sadiki, namely, that in Tunisia «The mirror images between past and present struggles are dazzling. The liberation ancestry's moral flame, emancipatory passion, and resistance against colonialism are deeply etched in Maghrebi common memory» (Sadiki 2008, 110).

### **Vertical interchange and a memorial precedent**

Various strands of critical, historiographical and cultural-anthropological thought on the modern and contemporary Mediterranean have repeatedly flagged transactional relations of trade, barter, bilateral diplomacy and other forms of reciprocity as salient paradigms that have characterized relations and defined and redefined historic cross-border and cross-regional rapports along the littoral<sup>1</sup>. But to dare transfer the question of a tried-and-tested "horizontal" reading of the geopolitics of reciprocity in the Mediterranean region onto a postcolonial discursive plane confronts us with a specific problematic. The region's current desolation in relation to its antecedent and familiar ideological discourses increasingly requires specific modes of harnessing the region's dynamics of interchange as a matter of tapping the trans-temporal intersections between past and present practices through which the political has been and is being worlded<sup>2</sup>. To speak of a postcolonial Mediterranean today entails, amongst other labors, the delicate task of diversifying or at least expanding the range of significance of this historic paradigm – of interchange as *also* a cross-temporal political relation – to accommodate a patently vertical reading of it: a dialectical trade-off between the memory of past (pre- and post-independent) political legacies, and the flux of a present that is as yet to pronounce and commit itself firmly in their regard, one that is now patently seeking to negotiate its path through the pitfalls and the disenchantments occasioned by the political past's on-going *revenants*.

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<sup>1</sup> The activity of exchange, trade and reciprocal commercial and other relations is variously exemplified and engaged with, for instance, in Fernand Braudel's epic work on the region's geo-human strata and, later, discussed by Nicholas Purcell and Peregrine Horden's in their *The Corrupting Sea* as well as David Abulafia's more recent *The Great Sea*.

<sup>2</sup> An intriguing study in this regard is Wendy Brown's *Politics out of History*, where she lays out in detail the notion of a "postprogressive" political time (Brown 2001).

As Iain Chambers has argued in *Mediterranean Crossings*, his work on the postcolonial Mediterranean, «the horizontal plane of representation remains perpetually vulnerable to a vertical axis where we are pulled into the sedimented depths of time where bodies bleed, birth and death occur, lives are lived» (Chambers 2008, 11). The vista on the present-day political state of play in Tunisia offered here arises precisely from the need to approach the question of the country's post-colonial Mediterraneity as a multi-lateral and cross-temporal political dialectic that subscribes to what Étienne Balibar has discussed as the «heteronomy of heteronomy» of political modernity (Balibar 2002, 1). In present-day Tunisia, this double-heteronomic relation takes the shape of a discursive agonism between the country's post-colonial and post-independent trajectory on the one hand, and the ongoing unstable post-regime moment on the other, spawning in the process a dialectics wherein, to quote Balibar's own explication «the conditions to which a politics relates are never a last instance: on the contrary, what makes them determinant is the way they bear subjects or are borne by them» (Balibar 2002, 1).

How does one begin to grasp the dynamics of such a dialectic of interchange in terms of its ongoing engendering of political subjectivities in the current Tunisian transition, wherein the anteriority of political memory itself informs a sustained effort to grasp the modes of political possibility it holds forth, even as it stands up to their very scrutiny? This question takes us directly to the popular designation of post-2011 Tunisia as *l'exception Tunisienne*, a notion largely taken to signify Tunisia's relative successes in beginning to re-construct a constitutional and representative-democratic polity in the wake of bin Ali's ousting. One consideration that, in my view, lies at the very kernel of the so-designated "Tunisian exception" is the basis for social organization which the post-ben Ali polity began to re-discover, a thought-framework that can be traced back to Tunisia's late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reformist movement. This "enlightenment" movement, or *nahda*, was spearheaded by social activists, politicians, scholars, public intellectuals and trade unionists such as Farhat Hachet – founder of the historic *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (1946), one of Tunisia's main syndicates –, Abdelaziz Thaalbi, Tahar ben Achour, who pitched the importance of the reading of Islamic law, doctrine and sacred texts as a labor of the intellect, and Tahar Haddad, whose work made foundational arguments towards the social emancipation of women in Tunisia and the broader Muslim community. The movement advocated, amongst other aspects, a raft of necessary social freedoms and civic rights, «a more equitable relationship between genders», a strong welfare society and the belief that a strong economy will need to be predicated on an equally strong social-emancipatory ethos (Perkins 2014, 140).

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It was this reformist and emancipatory ethos that Tunisia's first President Habib Bourguiba deployed and drew upon as a roadmap, both for his seminal post-independence-policy decisions as President as well as his introduction of a whole gamut of social reforms, the establishing of a functional welfare society, a Personal Status Code without precedent in the Muslim world that established social and gender emancipation on numerous counts including divorce legislation, a renewal of relations between the country's main trade unions and government, as well as the establishing of the Neo-Constitutional Party, or Neo-Destour, which in many ways, and despite the often devious means by which Bourguiba maneuvered it, furnished the required strength to oversee Tunisia's tough postcolonial transition<sup>3</sup>. It is, in part, owing to his success in translating the ethos of the *fin de siècle* Tunisian reformist movement into a comprehensible public form of knowledge that many Tunisians today, when evaluating the hindsight of the intervening ben Ali years (1987-2011) are not prepared to judge Bourguiba's tenure as severely as it might deserve. Bourguiba's own insidious and often ruthless brand of despotism is often subsumed into the historic (and sometimes mythic) retrospect that would have his political trajectory depicted in some quarters as the most exemplary period for the country since its independence. It is certainly not an accident of destiny that the modernizing, reformist and secularist frame of mind spawned under his leadership, often referred to as *bourguibisme*, is perceived as a legacy the rightful ownership of which is a major bone of contention amongst the main parties currently represented in Tunisia's Assembly of the Representatives of the People.

Perhaps one of the most recent signs that an emancipatory-reformist agenda is ongoing at grassroots level in Tunisia today was the immediate reaction to the latest terror attack to befall it: Daesh's on 7 March 2016 assault and armed clashes at Bengardane, a town on Tunisia's Libyan border. The attack, which left 55 people dead, was possibly even more insidious than both Bardo and Sousse because Daesh here were not only seeking to strike fear, but to actually carve out an autonomous militarized enclave within Tunisia itself, one that would give it a base from which to carry out operations including weapons-smuggling into Tunisia (*Al Jazeera* 2016). Among the dead at Bengardane, besides the Daesh militants and the Tunisian security and military reinforcement officials, there were also seven private citizens. What happened at Bengardane (even though various major media outfits failed to report it) is that several of the town's inhabitants went out, arm in arm with the security forces, to ward off the Daesh attack, directly risking their lives, and some of them died in the crossfire.

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<sup>3</sup> For more historiographic detail on Bourguiba's reforms, see Perkins, and in particular the section subtitled 'The Transformation of the Social Environment', 140-6.

That people from one of the lowest-income-earning and highest-unemployment areas of the country have actively chosen not to destabilize the country's hard-earned democratic and constitutional mechanisms, and to take "street-level" ownership of the security crisis in the face of an otherwise inadequate security apparatus, without actually destabilising the term of government and thereby giving the Islamist *Ennahda* Movement a fighting chance to govern, is very significant. Even as many people are aware that Daesh has been getting stronger in Tunisia by feeding on the country's massive unemployed cohort, the current popular sentiment gives credence to a widespread resolve through which «Democracy has [...] become consolidated – routinised behaviourally, attitudinally, and constitutionally» (Storm 2013, 272). The patent unwillingness to destabilize the country's currently delicate democratic *pluralisme* testifies to an itinerary that, as Storm suggests, «takes time» (Storm 2013, 272), and is being negotiated in Tunisia in a cumulative manner, as an onerous calibration of consensus that accrues slowly and through sheer experience, rather than some foreign "democratic" or constitutional import that can be surgically implanted. The "routinization" and firmness of a liberatory desire is not only underpinned by the legacy of Tunisia's *fin de siècle* reformism, but also, and despite its flawed implementation, bridged into a post-colonial modernity through Bourguiba's own reformist effort. In this sense, the events at Bengardane reaffirmed the horizon of a sustained public agenda in Tunisia today – one that seems intent, however, on subtracting itself from the despotic methodology Bourguiba deployed to implement his reformist policies. Both Storm and Alcinda Honwana are, I believe, correct in primarily diagnosing not a democratic deficit in present-day Tunisia at grassroots level, but the increasingly evident inability of its current political class to deliver on specific practices and expectations of post-Jasmine democratization (Storm 2013, 270-2; Honwana 2013, 193).

While a "routinization" of democracy arising from the social base seems to represent a crucial step for Tunisia today, this also comes with a widespread, quasi-implicit sense that «[i]t is no longer the time of "power to the people" and the politics of the street or the square» (Honwana 2013, 195). So much, it would seem, for the prospect of another Bouazizi, at least not in the shorter term. Besides the eerie silence that now reigns in many of the country's hotels and tourist resorts, from Hammamet to Sousse to Tabarka near the Algerian border, the capital itself is quieter than it was a little over a year ago, before the Bardo attack. Along Tunis' central thoroughfare, the *Avenue Bourguiba*, in the old kasbah, across Lafayette, at the bohemian hangout of *Cafè l'Univers*, the younger cohorts talk about the situation over a *kahua* or *te bil-lous*. Rifts deepen and tempers sometimes flare. There is an impatience with the current disagreements crippling the *Majlis* (the Assembly) and its posse of compromised politicians who have «quickly move[d] in to occupy the institutional vacuum» that

followed from ben Ali's exit (Honwana 2013, 195). And this impatience is coupled with what seems to me a political inclination to disparticipate in the face of a representative-democratic model that, having raised high expectations following the plurality mandate given to Beji Essebsi's "big-tent" coalition *Nidaa Tounes* in October 2014, is now feeling increasingly unable to address the welfare, employment and social security concerns that are escalating as the country's coffers dry up.

But more importantly, the impatience and the disparticipatory takes are symptoms of an ongoing conversation, of a persistent, even daily exchange of sentiments many in Tunisia are conducting today with a political memory that has repeatedly, over more than a century, held forth what Balibar would term «the [revolutionary] proposition of equal liberty», and its consequences, ones that present a crucial crossroads for the country today. On the one hand lies the recognition that «it is impossible to conceive and institute equality [...] based on despotism (even "enlightened" despotism) or on a monopoly of power» (Balibar 2002, 3). This itself is a crucial criterion upon which Tunisia's *shabab* have chosen both to oust ben Ali and to avoid embracing Bourguiba's mixed legacy (reform-by-despotism) wholesale. On the other hand stands the condition described by Balibar as the «reciprocity clause» of any egalitarian horizon, namely, that «No one may be liberated or elevated to a position of equality – let us say, may be emancipated – by an external, unilateral decision, or by a higher grace. Only reciprocally, by mutual recognition, can this be achieved» (Balibar 2002, 3-4).

While the dialectic of the two propositions might, under more serene circumstances, have been perceived as an adequate model to chart a way forward for the country's governance, it is the latter, the problematic of *reciprocity* affecting the Tunisian representational system, that today holds forth the demand not to emancipate the state from single-person (Bourguiba) or single-party (ben Ali) despotism (Sadiki 2010, 121), but to re-organize and free both its current representational praxis *and* its structures of governance along the lines of the Balibarian relation of reciprocity within the country's highest institutions<sup>4</sup>. This labor will require both the governing and opposition groups to grasp at resources of intra-party and intra-individual principle, belief and resolve that may lie beyond literal or *prima facie* adherence to Tunisia's constitution, its wording, enshrinements and stipulations. Tunisia today is, as Majed would argue, a laboratory of democratic practice in and for Arab societies. In his moment, that of leading the country out of its colonial period, Bourguiba could afford

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<sup>4</sup> In an engagement with Hamid Dabashi's work in the wake of the 2011 uprisings, Caroline Rooney notes that the former «aptly proposes that the Arab Spring serves to reconvene the understanding of democracy» (Rooney 2015, 52). In the case of Tunisia, the democratic change brought about by ben Ali's ousting, and that resulted in the first freely-elected government (and its failures), is now at another crucial juncture – it needs to be opened up and freed of its inheritor parties' individual agendas, precisely in terms of inevitable "differentiation of change" broached by Balibar – a question I engage with here as a central aspect of the essay's argument.

to pitch himself, even without actually stating it, in the traditional role of a *wali al-amar* – a paternal figure and leader who assumed responsibility for and towards a community in post-colonial transition. He did not even need to derive this positioning from its conventional religious sources of legitimacy: on the contrary, Bourguiba's legitimation of his paternalistic attitude derived precisely from his post-colonial and reformist credentials. Ben Ali himself, though certainly not to *bourguibiste* proportions, occupied this role in the eyes of many, not least due to the economic accomplishments in his first years of presidency. But what Tunisia achieved in 2011 was precisely a deconstruction (and a nation-wide critical revisitation) of the *wali* role – henceforth, the country's democratic structures will need to forge ahead on the long-term premise of a democracy without its *wali*.

### Refusing the Call

I raise the basic question (following Balibar, Storm and Honwana) of Tunisia's ongoing need to review its approach to its structures of democratic governance, both at government, ministerial, civil service and crucially at Assembly level, because it is now very clear that what has been taking place between the different factions in the *Majlis* over the past months no longer truthfully reflects or respects the manner, or indeed the direction, that the various sectors of the electorate wished to be represented after the October 2014 elections that gave *Nidaa Tounes* [Call of Tunisia] its parliamentary plurality. *Nidaa Tounes* was offered a relatively enthusiastic electoral response with a mandate to divert the perceived danger of having *Ennahda* and its "troika" government agree upon and articulate an Islamist or Islamist-leaning constitution, opening up the possibility that the country's hard-earned rights and freedoms would be tampered with<sup>5</sup>.

But at present, the strength (both parliamentary and popular) of *Nidaa Tounes* is flaking away fast. Within Beji Essebsi's government, which continues to sustain an avowedly "secularist" agenda for the State, there is also an ongoing and now increasing willingness to collaborate with *Ennahda*. Currently, *Ennahda* is being represented in cabinet by a Minister with a powerful portfolio. Essebsi's compromise with *Ennahda* has and will continue to create new tensions. Almost 40 members of the left-wing bloc of *Nidaa Tounes*'s tenuous majority recently left its parliamentary bloc because they refuse to make any compromise with *Ennahda* – a compromise, however, which the more right-leaning factions within *Nidaa*'s broader movement are more prepared to make. The memory of former dissident, liberal and long-term human

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<sup>5</sup> See Storm 2013, 279. For a detailed and incisive commentary on the Hamed Jbaali and Belaïd affairs and the fear of regression into religious authoritarianism, as well as the state of power distributions in Tunisia after bin Ali, see Storm 2013, 277-85.

rights activist Moncef Marzouki's coalition of convenience with *Ennahda* in 2011 is still smarting. The parliamentary members that left *Nidaa's* governing bloc represent a third of its parliamentarians. The schismatic group is loyal to Mohsen Marzouk, *Nidaa's* secretary-general, who believes the President's son Hafedh Essebsi is moving to create a governing dynasty (*The Economist* 2015). As Maha Yahya has observed, in *Nidaa Tounes* today there is «no unifying ideology, no political programme, no socioeconomic vision» (*The Economist* 2015). Marzouk's bloc wants *Nidaa* to firmly re-assert its secularist credentials. If these tensions are not resolved soon or deteriorate further and the split becomes unbridgeable, this may well make *Ennahda* the largest party within the *Majlis*, thereby affording it a newly-found vigor and authority (*The Economist* 2015). Analysts such as Steven Cook have argued that if Essebsi's government «survives [till the 2019 general elections], as expected, that may be its biggest accomplishment» (Cook 2015, np).

Today, in fact, the *Ennahda* party itself appears to be all the wiser, having learnt various lessons at its own expense over the past four years. The present fractures in *Nidaa* come slightly too early for Tunisia's Islamist political outfit. *Ennahda* seems intent on allowing the governing party to run its full term of government till 2019, then make a bid for government itself. It is right now collaborating with *Nidaa*, supporting many of its proposals tabled to the Assembly, backing a raft of policies and the promulgation of laws that do not necessarily sit well with some of its own vaunted credos. But *Ennahda* is as yet desisting from presenting itself as a major actor in the political arena, and its efforts are currently more focused, in fact, on re-building its public image as a more democratic-centrist outfit. Its members are coaching themselves, getting an insider experience of government, learning the ropes, getting to know the emerging mechanisms of democratic governance and how they function and their effects and impacts on public opinion. In other words, *Ennahda* is preparing to be the real governing party in Tunisia in a few years' time. It is on the inside of the administrative machinery, and learning fast. Of course, few in Tunisia have any illusions as to what *Ennahda's* business is – that of promulgating a politicized Islam. But with Beji Essebsi currently seen as doing badly, and his erstwhile majority that seems increasingly weak, the Islamist bloc is slowly but steadily regaining a sense of presence both within the Assembly and across numerous governorates, as well as consolidating its traditional electoral strongholds<sup>6</sup>.

In other words, *Ennahda* is striving to show its potential constituencies that its leaders and functionaries have learnt from what happened two years ago when they couldn't govern after a political deadlock — one that resulted, among other issues, from the

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<sup>6</sup> I wish to thank poet Moëz Majed for the invaluable perspectives presented in this paragraph, and which he kindly shared with me.

assassination of left-wing activists and politicians such as socialist activist Mohamed Brahmi, and Chokri Belaïd. The convoluted case of the investigation itself into the latter's killing is indeed a perfect metaphor for the general feeling that grips Tunisia today: in Moëz Majed's words, «People are waiting but they don't know what, exactly, they are waiting for». To sum up, therefore: both Tunisia's representative-parliamentary setup as well as its prospects of new and unshackled party formations are currently beholden to a situation wherein «The young activists who participated in and led the revolution suddenly find themselves battling to define a new political role and to carve new spaces of intervention». They refrain from joining formal political parties and have to work around old political models that they despise, using street politics and civil society organizations as their institutional settings. As Aditya Nigam points out, after the protests and revolutions, Tunisian society is «living in an interregnum when the old forms of politics have become moribund and obsolete but new ones have not yet emerged [...] Something, clearly, is waiting to be articulated in this relentless refusal of the political» (Honwana 2013, 195).

### **The question of “change within change”**

This “psychopolitical” gulf, to use Isaac Prilleltensky's term, that has opened up in the wake of 2011, with the inherent difficulties it presents in a community's calibration of a basic consensus, across fractures and old wounds that currently interpellate the collaborative will of various ideological factions within Tunisia's *Majlis*, is currently afflicting not only Tunisia but indeed, and in variegated and context-specific ways, the entire post-2011 southern Mediterranean littoral, from Syria to Egypt to Libya to the Maghribi states. In a sense, the southern Mediterranean today represents a burgeoning, Balibarintimation of a “history at large” – not “at large” in a generic sense, but in the literal meaning of historic opportunities initiated by the Jasmine uprisings, and offered up across the littoral in 2011, that currently remain fugitive, just as their national imaginaries have been rendered nomadic. «Politics», Balibar has written, «is not the mere changing of conditions, as though it were possible to isolate them and abstract from them so as to obtain purchase on them, but it is change within change, or the *differentiation of change*, which means that the meaning of history is established only in the present» (Balibar 2002, 12).

For Balibar, an effective meaning to a post-revolutionary politics obtains from differentiated social relations – from an indispensable strengthening, that is, of the social contract itself – as a direct consequence of radical change within those underlying conditions that would have *a priori* inhibited or compromised the possibility of social liberation. This question is pertinent today across the North African littoral, and especially so in Tunisia, where the current, seemingly «endless refusal of the

political» diagnosed by Nigam bears directly onto the question of establishing a more honed and specified meaningfulness to the recent rejection of despotic rule. Political disparticipation today, and especially so by the same age cohort that spearheaded 2011, signals an ongoing awaital for the right conditions under which a “differentiation” of the change brought about by the Jasmine uprising would entail rethinking and reconceiving the very nexus that binds the electorate to its representative institutions, and vice-versa. While Tunisia's citizens of diverse persuasions today retain the emancipatory ethos, they are sending signs of impatience with its custodians themselves – a ruling cohort increasingly perceived to be window-dressing and lip-servicing the country's newly-minted constitution.

As Storm, as well as Honwana, have indicated in their respective analyses of the country's recent dynamics of party-formation and political participation, no political party has yet truly emerged that is formed by politicians who have not previously been part of other political parties, or coalitions, or have not served under Bourguiba or ben Ali, or have in any way set up a party that is, to use Nouri Gana's words, «policy-seeking» rather than «office-seeking» (Gana 2013, 26; Honwana 2013, 158, 192-202; Storm 2013, 270-78). Most political parties, Storm argues, are as yet without a clear governing or at least policy program and have tenuous links with civil society and their constituencies at best, and their concern is still largely with the parliamentary distribution of power, «who governs and who will govern» (Storm 2013, 271) and who retains the prerogative of popular legitimacy.

These and other divisions in Tunisia today are serving to enfeeble Balibar's principle of reciprocity both horizontally, across the country's deepening social trenches and class-economic disparities, as well as vertically, weakening the present lawmakers' mandate to uphold the dialectical relation with a reformist past that their constituents entrusted them with. Moreover, in lodging themselves deep within a convalescing national imaginary, the attacks at the Bardo and at Sousse have sought to exploit the delicate nature of citizen subjectivity in Tunisia – one that currently, to use Jacques Rancière's notion of a “dissensual” politics, evinces «a being that is at once the agent of [political] action and the matter upon which that action is exercised» (Rancière 2010, 29). «If there is anything “proper” to politics», Rancière observes, «it consists entirely in this relationship, which is not a relationship between subjects, but between two contradictory terms that define a subject. Politics disappears the moment this knot between a subject and a relation is undone» (Rancière 2010, 28-9). Understood in Rancière's terms, *dissensual politics* spawns a subject characterized through the intersection of both actorship and receptivity, political agency and/as assimilation. It is this elemental, dissensual relation that Tunisia's detractors are trying to dismantle, but by this very same virtue, one can begin to perceive the merits that make this political relation so amenable to assault.

### Of reciprocity and dissensus

But what, one would be justified in asking, could a dissensual relation conceivably look like in a country like Tunisia today, one in which the disillusionment with the promise of a revived secular nationalism is fast sinking in, and the recourse to a certain «theologico-political» consciousness – to appropriate Denis Guénoun's term to our context – is regaining a slow but steady presence (Guénoun 2013, 29)? How can political subjectivity in Tunisia move to a rethinking of the relation between dissensus and reciprocity, such that new political forces can organize and mobilize, including party-formation at and from grassroots, *shabab* and civil-society levels? Sadiki himself, writing just two years before the Jasmine uprising, shed an important light on this question when he opined that «[t]he fault-line in Tunisia [today] happens at the expense of potentially viable political identities [...] which cannot be mediated only through democratic rule» (Sadiki 2008, 123). This trajectory might very well suggest that a re-assertion of the (Rancièrian) irreducibility of contradictory terms (the auto-definition of his political subject), one that can therefore perform both within and counter-to the democratic setup, might well be a way towards effecting the (Balibar) differentiation within change that a “routinised” democratic consensus now requires as a matter of delivering on the aspirations of the “Tunisian exception”.

It is very significant, in this regard, that in his maiden address as new party leader of *Nidaa Tounes*, Beji Caïd Essebsi offered up, as Honwana notes, «a speech astutely punctuated by *suras* [verses] from the Quran, insisting that “there was no clergy in Islam” and that “the Muslim Tunisian people do not need a government that behaves as a religious guardian or delivers sermons”» (Honwana 2013, 157). The very subtext of Essebsi's speech back then suggested, as a matter of achieving a hitherto elusive consensus, a preparedness to fold into the ethos adopted by Bourguiba when the latter formulated the Personal Status Code, described by historian Kenneth Perkins as «the most innovative legal reform in the Muslim world since the abolition of the sharia in Turkey in the 1920s» (Perkins 2014, 140). As Perkins notes, Bourguiba «took pains [...] to portray himself not as sweeping aside Islam, as had [Turkey's] Atatürk, but rather as reinterpreting it through [a practice known in Tunisia as] *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning. [...]» (Perkins 2014, 140). Essebsi, like Bourguiba before him, was in fact trying to harness one of the most important reformist moves advanced by Tahar ben Achour, the activist and academic who spoke of an Arabo-Muslim identity for Tunisia, one that approaches and reads the sacred texts through the practice of *ijtihad* or «independent reasoning» (Perkins 2014, 140) itself: what he envisioned as an *intentionaliste*, or a more responsibly subjective and self-critically charged, as opposed to a conventionally *rigoriste* reading of Islamic doctrine and the Qur'an (Majed 2015). Ben Achour's championing of an autonomous interpretation of the Qur'an as a matter of subjective individual responsibility was nothing short of a revolutionary step which

Bourguiba himself embraced as a basic blueprint for the post-independence reforms he implemented, albeit to his own political ends.

But post-revolutionary Tunisia would require a very different approach that must consist of a marked “differentiation”, a pronounced parting with the *bourguibiste* brand of reformism. In the first place, an adequate re-implementation of *ijtihad* and its orbiting legacies, indeed the legitimacy itself required to bring about such a scenario, now belongs not to the veteran political bourgeoisie, some of them survivors from Bourguiba's own ranks. The generational cohort that spearheaded the Jasmine uprisings across Tunisia – and the southern Mediterranean – following Bouazizi's founding act will need to revert to a form of destourian thought, a *pensée destourienne* as opposed to a *politique destourienne*, that can evacuate itself from and operate outside the strategic circuit of Bourguiba's, and to an extent ben Ali's, utilitarian and populist appropriations of the paradigm. Many Tunisians continue to be receptive today to *ijtihad* and its intentionalist mobilization of ethico-political intellect as a means of retaining an Arabo-Muslim identification: one that would allow for the cherished ethos of reading the political world, social morality, normative issues and questions of governance through both subjectively and collectively interpretive and critical approaches towards democratizing social thought and Islamic morality itself.

A significant key to restoring moral authority to power in Tunisia today, therefore, might be nestling within the dialectical nature of *ijtihad* itself – and with the political memory it carries as an important marker of Arabo-Muslim identification. Its reformist approach entails the grafting of individual liberty and equity onto the religious, onto its ethical demands and its moral standing. But on the other hand, *ijtihad* recognizes the importance of religious demands, not as fearsome or overbearing dogmas but as responsible means of taking individual liberty to task. This “check-and-balance” dynamic can restore a much-needed political ethic and can possibly entice sectors of an ever-growing disparticipant electoral tier into action. Indeed, a Tunisian definition of “liberal democracy” in future may very well end up rallying and consolidating around this dialectic. Perceived as an integral part of a broader politics of post-destourian thought, *ijtihad* can hold forth a more realistic roadmap to a post-2011 social thought in Tunisia than any generic notion of “secularism” itself – which is barely spoken of in the country even as it features constantly among the quick-fix terminology employed in international coverage of Tunisia.

As political factions in Tunisia today contend over who appears to own the *bourguibiste* legacy best, one will need to consider the issue of party-formation itself as a question not of flaunting destourian politics as some new middle-class superstructure, but of starting to suggest a destourian thought as a survey map for political organizing at base rather than superstructural levels. Tunisia today continues

to have a vocal cohort of civil society organizations and social movements of varying capabilities that, in Honwana's words, now «seem to be fighting to return power to the political arena, as young protesters question established credos and organise themselves differently, acting with transparency on consensus-based decision making and establishing horizontal and more equitable relationships within their movements» (Honwana 2013, 197). New political nuclei need to be encouraged to grow from among «the young Tunisians who were instrumental in [...] overthrowing ben Ali [as well as] the people of the interior and the most disadvantaged regions of the country», creating at the very least, as Honwana notes, a believable opposition that strives to resolve the economic disparities that continue to cripple today those «marginalised by the former regime» (Honwana 2013, 159).

What I have been calling “destourian thought” in reformist-philosophical terms will need to be translated into a post-destourian effort that will see civil society groups institute new fora at community-organization level, with a view to reopening dialogue both with the country's institutions of governance and with the country's legacy of social and economic reformism. This will entail curbing the vitiating power-mongering initiated under Bourguiba and institutionalized by ben Ali. These new social forces are entirely possible: only last October [2015], the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, a united front of four civil society initiatives and groups including two syndicates, the UGTT and its rival UTICA, were awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace (Borger 2015).

On the streets of Bejà, at Nebel, in La Marsa, in the old bookshops of Lafayette, at La Goulette, people say it's a tough shot, but possible. The sobs I heard echoing across the Bardo Museum's *Salle de Carthage* a year ago were not some prophecy of desolation, but the cry of a country intent on getting back on its feet in the dignified halls of a post-revolutionary national consciousness. As my friend Moëz Majed – perhaps Tunisia's finest living poet – would put it, this country, like many other violated human conglomerations across the Mediterranean, no tyranny has ever lasted long enough to engulf it. It is the master that will eventually sink or disintegrate within its waters, become like it, marry its children. Like the waves chopping beneath Charles the Fifth's now-silent fortress at La Goulette, the tyrant will come, and the tyrant will go. The Tunisian name for La Goulette, in an almost identical rendition to my native (and pluri-colonised) Maltese, is *Halq el-Wad* (The Valley's Mouth). It is not only the aggressor's landing spot. It is also the historic chasm that engulfs him<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> It bears noting that post-2011 scholarship in and about Tunisia is vast and impossible to do justice to in this space. Critical analyses include Hatem M'rad's *Le Déficit Démocratique sous Bourguiba et Ben Ali*, Mustafa Kraiem's *la Révolution Kidnappée*, Salah Kasmi's *Tunisie. L'Islam locale face à l'Islam importé*, Samir Amghar's *Le Salafisme d'Aujourd'hui*, the interviews with Abdelmajid Charfi in *Révolution, Modernité, Islam*, Rejeb Haji's *De la Révolution*, and Pierre Puchot's *La Révolution Confisquée*.

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PARTE II: VISIONI, NARRAZIONI, SCONFINAMENTI/

*PART II: VISIONS, NARRATIVES, TRESPASSINGS*



