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Contested transformation: mobilized publics in Tunisia between compliance and protest

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ABSTRACT

A variety of civil society actors played a major role in the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia that ousted President Ben Ali, but its influence waned in the course of the following transformation process. This article looks at different forms of expressions of contentious politics and non-institutionalized movements, framed here as ‘mobilized publics’, that have intervened in the political process in Tunisia. It proposes that there are significant differences in their respective views on the transformation and the role that they can play in it, and hence the approaches to activism that they chose. Three case studies of mobilized publics – in the field of gender justice, socio-economic justice and transitional justice – are examined according to their different degrees of institutionalization, resources and strategies. The analysis shows how struggles for socio-economic justice and transitional justice have been marginalized and discredited as disruptive by a political elite that wagered on increasing polarization.

With the ousting of Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, new political actors and various forms of participation began to emerge in a society previously restricted by a complex security and censorship system. At the same time, existing civil society organizations and activist networks that had operated in secret or subject to severe restrictions were able to expand their activities. Reform of the association law in September 2011 under the interim government of prime minister Beji Caid Essebsi liberalized civil society and led to a vibrant landscape of initiatives, unions, associations and various types of other organizations.

Researchers and donor organizations have tended to describe civil society as a uniformly supportive actor in the Tunisian transformation process (Deane, 2013). In particular, the strong Tunisian General Labour Union (Union générale tunisienne du travail, UGTT) has been extolled for its mediating and stabilizing role (Chayes, 2014). Such narratives are generated by research agendas focusing

on the institutionalization of revolutionary demands and democratization processes from a normative perspective (Zemni, 2015: 1f). In contrast, this paper looks at a variety of civil society actors, expressions of contentious politics and non-institutionalized movements, framed here as 'mobilized publics', that have intervened in the political process in Tunisia, proposing that there are significant differences in their respective views on the transformation and the role that they have played in it (Asseburg & Wimmen, 2016). Some of these actors have rejected the use of the terms *transition* and *transformation*, referring instead to the current period as a revolutionary phase, as their demands and needs – defined by unemployment and job insecurity and a lack of health and transport infrastructures – have not been met.

This article looks at different forms of political action and contentious politics as well as mobilized publics' visibility in the public sphere and their capacity to impose their agendas and demands on political decision makers. Have mobilized publics influenced the political transformation? If so, how, and what has made some of them more influential than others? Three case studies of mobilized publics with different degrees of institutionalization, resources and strategies are examined to answer these questions: the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates, ATFD), the Union of Unemployed Graduates (Union des diplômés chômeurs, UDC) and the protest gatherings for the 'martyrs' of the revolution that had attracted attention by April 2014 but remained too informal to even acquire a unifying name. These mobilized publics are part of an ever-growing number of initiatives and associations that have sprung up since 2011. Their selection was geared to represent three different fields or sets of issues in which protest activities and struggles occur – gender justice, socio-economic justice and transitional justice – as well as different modes of activism, ranging from advocacy through formal non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to labour mobilization to informal activist structures engaging in public protest.

In analysing protest dynamics in Tunisia during the Ben Ali era, Allal (2012: 822f.) distinguishes two types of oppositional forces from 2007 to 2011. On the one hand, collective social protests against the regime increased in the centre of the country, in particular following the 2008–09 Gafsa revolts, sparked by the corrupt employment policies of the Gafsa Phosphate Company and followed by a major crackdown by security forces on the villages in the mining region (Gobe, 2010). On the other hand, what Allal calls the democratic opposition, members of associations and political opposition forces pushing for pluralism and liberalism, were increasingly fed up with the organized plunder of the country by the Ben Ali clan. Following this distinction, the ATFD clearly fits into the second category and the UDC into the first, while the mobilization for the martyrs represents a new type of entirely informal, ephemeral contestation that temporarily coalesces around a specific issue and challenges and resists state authority rather than engaging it. Drawing

on resource mobilization theory, the three mobilized publics are here also categorized according to the different types of resources they employ: socio-organizational, cultural and moral (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). In doing so, revolutionary legitimacy is framed as a moral resource on which mobilized publics rely.

Specific turning points for the mobilized publics during the three phases of the transformative process help to identify the changes and constraints that have shaped their strategies. The first phase of the transformation is the constitutive one, during which the Higher Commission for the Fulfilment of Revolutionary Goals, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition (*Haute instance pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution, des réformes politiques et de la transition démocratique*, HIROR), an interim government body created through a 17 February 2011 emergency decree issued by interim president Fouad Mebaza and convened on 6 March, took a leading role. The commission was the product of various institutionalization processes that followed Ben Ali's ousting and consisted of the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution (*Conseil national de protection de la révolution*, CNPR) and the Political Reform Commission (*Commission supérieure de la réforme politique*). The 14 January Front (*Front du 14 Janvier*), consisting of leftist opposition forces, was the first attempt at institutionalizing the street protests. The Front, after initially rejecting the idea, eventually joined the CNPR established on 11 February that also included human rights organizations, Ennahda, the UGTT and the lawyers' bar organization (Zemni, 2015).

The legal scholar Yadh ben Achour headed HIROR, which was constituted according to a complex quota system of representation of different political and societal forces. It included representatives from the CNPR, the Committee for Political Reform (established by prime minister Mohamed Ghannouchi), representatives of the regions, the political parties, unions, associations, families of the martyrs and nationally well-known personalities (Pickard, 2014: 260). The three mobilized publics under scrutiny here were also represented. The commission's formation marks the first turning point for the analysis here, as it was designed to organize the 'shift from revolution to election' (Zemni, 2015: 6). It laid important ground rules for the next steps in the political process by developing a new electoral code. Yet its composition mirrored the country's struggle over inclusiveness and shaped the dynamics of the subsequent process. The emergency decree establishing HIROR declared its sessions closed to the public. The institution roughly doubled its members, to 155, between March and April 2011 after conflicts from within and outside it (Borsali, 2012: 269). The main issues were whether and to what extent involvement in the commission afforded the different representatives of mobilized publics tangible influence on the transformation process that they could use in pursuing their respective causes or whether participation in it was merely a discursive form of inclusion that offered little or no discernible leverage.

The second phase is the period following elections for the National Constituent Assembly (*Assemblée nationale constituante*, ANC) on 23 October 2011, after which Ennahda formed the interim Troika government with two smaller, secular and social democratic parties: the Congress for the Republic (*Congrès pour la république*) and the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (*Forum démocratique pour le travail et les libertés*, Ettakatol). From this point onwards, the assembly became the legitimate institutional body shaping the transformation process and drafting a new constitution. Access to deputies consequently became an important resource for mobilized publics trying to influence the transformation process from within, while others used contentious actions or media campaigns on the outside. Demonstrations in central Tunis were banned, and in Siliana, protests and strikes against the government and its local governor (from Ennahda) were violently repressed in November 2012, leaving some 200 protestors injured. Prime minister Hamadi Jebali re-interpreted the famous 'Dégage!' (Get out!) chanted by the protestors as a synonym for 'chaos' (Horchani, 2012).

The Bardo protests in summer 2013 represent a turning point that led to the third phase of the transformation, characterized by a conservative, consensus-oriented culture that paved the way for elections between October and December 2014. In July and August 2013, opposition forces – including Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia), which would later emerge from the elections as the winner – took over the square in front of the parliament in the Bardo quarter of Tunis, disavowing the legitimacy of the constitutional process, as the deadline for drafting the constitution had long since expired. They also protested against the Troika in the aftermath of the killings of opposition figures Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi. Sixty members of parliament suspended their participation in the ANC and joined the protest, also known as the Errahil (Departure) sit-in. The protests were followed in August 2013 by the formation of the Quartet – composed of the UGTT, the Tunisian League for Human Rights (*Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme*, LTDH), the employers' union (*Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'artisanat*) and the National Bar Association (*Ordre national des avocats*) – which initiated a national dialogue to overcome the political deadlock. Ennahda eventually took part in the dialogue for the sake of national consensus, after boycotting previous initiatives, citing Nidaa's associations with the old regime as its reason.

Three different strategies of the mobilized publics are emphasized in this article: exerting political influence within institutions and on the politically relevant elite (PRE) by engaging directly with political decision makers (Asseburg & Wimmen, 2016); gaining access to and using information and communication channels and media which are linked to different 'discursive legacies', which 'define the questions politics should answer' and can challenge the hegemonic symbolic repertoire of the state (Marx Ferrée, 2012: 4);¹ and addressing the gap between the capital and the rest of the country, as decentralization and

the urban–rural divide were among the main drivers of the 2011 uprising and earlier protests and are often neglected in the analysis.²

The first kind of strategy, exerting influence in institutions and on the PRE, demands a high degree of human resources, as networks with the PRE are an important requirement for ensuring access to various political and social gatherings and assemblies, where lobbying commonly occurs. Due to the centralized nature of the system, in which media and political power networks and institutions are all based in Tunis, this strategy only functions when the mobilized publics have representatives in the capital. The second type of strategy, media strategies, has increasingly become the focus of research.³ The uprisings that swept the Middle East and North Africa in 2010 and 2011 encouraged an interdisciplinary approach between communication theory, social media studies and social movement theory – disciplines that had previously been linked by van de Donk's (2004: xiv) groundbreaking work on cyber protest exploring how 'the internet ... changed the internal and external organization of social movements'. Especially during revolutionary or transformative processes, the visibility of mobilized publics enhances their capacity to put pressure on and bargain with authorities to shape the outcomes of these processes. As Benhabib (1992: 79) puts it, 'The struggle over what gets included in the public agenda is itself a struggle for justice and freedom'. Media access and its use as a strategy are examined here, as they are decisive for the internal organization of the movements and campaigns, in addition to being the main vehicles for shaping and mobilizing public opinion and pushing for responses from political decision makers. The third type of strategy, overcoming the urban–rural divide, is particularly important. While political decision-making centres and the main actors in civil society were all based in Tunis, epicentres of the mobilizations were sometimes elsewhere. Since the 2010–11 uprisings, Tunisians have more openly addressed the socio-economic divide along the geographical partition of the capital and the coastal areas versus the centre, west and south. As the spark of the revolutionary process originated in Sidi Bouzid, a town in the centre of the country, it became mandatory for politicians claiming revolutionary legitimacy and for civil society organizations and international actors to take a stance in favour of decentralization and empowerment of 'formerly neglected regions'. Mobilized publics as well as other actors have had to take into account the regional–capital divide to generate inclusive support and achieve popular legitimacy and credibility.

The three case studies are presented using the same structure for each: they start with a profile of the mobilized public in question (history, membership and alliances), and then their resources are analysed, with particular emphasis on those listed above. This is followed by identification of the strategies on which they have relied. The analysis is based on interviews with activists and representatives of the mobilized publics, including family members of victims of the revolution active in the martyrs movement as well as journalists who

closely followed the mobilizations. The interviews were conducted in several regional capitals in Tunisia between 2012 and 2014. The article also draws on earlier research and participatory observation between 2009 and 2010, official documents and data obtained from the Tunisian National Statistical Institute (Institut national de la statistique, INS). Social media played an important role in obtaining information on events on the ground, as independent bloggers often take over the role typically played by the mass media, informing journalists, researchers and politicians. At the same time, such information was often biased and highly subjective, and thus requires a high degree of contextualization to be used for analysis.

ATFD: women bargaining at the centre

The Tunisian Association of Democratic Women is an independent organization founded in 1989 by a network of feminist activists that emerged around the Tahar Haddad cultural club in the old city of Tunis. In keeping with the club's mission and namesake, the debates conducted in this circle were inspired and guided by socialist thought.⁴ While the ATFD was officially recognized and registered as an association during the Ben Ali era, its members were subjected to surveillance and intimidation, and informers infiltrated their meetings. Until 2012, its activities remained limited to the capital.

While assisting women to defend their rights in cases of gender-based violence, the ATFD also spoke out for human rights in general and the civil rights of all citizens. Only women could become members, but male supporters were recruited through members' networks of family and friends. The feminist struggle was thus linked to the larger struggle for democracy, pluralism and social justice. Close ties were established with other advocacy organizations, such as the LTDH, which operated in secret under Ben Ali, the International Federation for Human Rights and the women's section of the UGTT. In 1989 the ATFD protested against Islamist attempts to challenge the personal status law (Code du statut personnel, CSP), an important codification of women's rights, in the run-up to the elections in which the Islamists participated as independent candidates (Borsali, 2012: 243ff.).

A human rights approach and struggle for the equality of men and women has been at the centre of the ATFD's core values. All members are expected to subscribe to these principles, expressed in the charter of the association, thus guaranteeing a degree of internal consensus. Membership rules require that two members vouch for any new applicant. In autumn 2014, the number of active members stood at around 150 to 200. The selectiveness of the association has enhanced internal cohesion, which served the organization well in negotiations with party officials and deputies, especially in the first and second phases of the transformation. Careful selection of members and internal consensus can be considered a socio-organizational resource. On the other hand, these

mechanisms have also encountered criticism for being elitist. The ATFD has been able to rely on an excellent pool of human resources, as most of its active members are highly educated professionals (lawyers, psychologists, etc.), often with work experience in international organizations. Networks that connect them to the intellectual, economic and political elite of Tunisia, often dating back to school and university, serve as another important resource in the form of social capital. The organization has been able to rely on a variety of funding sources, ranging from the United Nations Development to membership dues.

The ATFD has made an effort to integrate the views of young women and to introduce itself to non-members by setting up a mixed gender youth club, which was part of the Ilhem Marzouki Feminist University,⁵ established in 2009 in Tunis and open to all interested men and women. Even critics who consider the ATFD 'too bourgeois' or out of touch with the economic problems of society acknowledge its integrity under Ben Ali's rule. This history of activism has provided it with a significant degree of credibility as a moral resource, in particular among the liberal camp and in the civil society landscape, which it helped pioneer.

Hence, as well as due to their extensive track record of expertise on women's issues, members of the ATFD have established access to conventional mass media and have been invited as experts to participate in TV discussions and similar public forums. They have also used social media to inform, communicate and mobilize for their goals. Possessing sufficient financial resources, the ATFD has been able to employ a staff member charged with optimizing its social media strategy since 2013. This was an important tool for mobilization during the constitution-drafting process, including for the crucial demonstration for women's rights on 13 August 2012 and providing background on central debates, such as the controversy over gender equality versus the concept of complementarity, pushed by the Islamists.

Saida Ben Garrach represented the ATFD as an organization on HIROR, while Ahlem Belhaj, the ATFD's president at the time, was appointed as a 'national personality' to the same body alongside other respected feminists. Through the commission, they contributed to the decision to introduce the principle of gender parity on electoral lists for the 2011 polls, an initial success in influencing the terms of the transformation process. During subsequent stages of the transformation, the ATFD continued to rely on its socio-organizational resources to develop strategies and to directly influence the constitutional process. For instance, in 2013 the organization produced its own draft constitution, mainly concerning the issues of rights and liberties (as per the first section of the constitution) and sent it to the deputies and the president of the ANC. This led to an invitation to a hearing at the ANC, where the group was given the opportunity to clarify its suggestions. While one of the articles on gender mainstreaming was integrated into the final text, others were included after being significantly diluted. For instance, instead of criminalizing physical, sexual and moral violence against women in public spaces, article 46 of the 2014 constitution only calls on

the state to 'take the necessary measures to eliminate violence against women'. Although the ATFD was thus not successful in pushing for criminalization, its members were important actors in defining boundaries between what is considered private and public, definitions that feminist thought considers 'central to the reproduction of power relationships and the reinforcement of gender inequalities' (Ghannam, 2002: 80).

In addition to these constructive contributions to the policy debate, the ATFD also used street mobilization to pressure decision makers. A turning point for this mobilized public crucial for the outcomes of its engagement was the women's march on 13 August 2012, in which the ATFD linked Tunisia's National Women's Day to a protest against Ennahda's proposition that the constitution declare women 'complementary', instead of equal, to men. A week ahead of the march, the ATFD published a joint communiqué with a number of other civil society organizations and the UGTT, profiting, in this case, from their network resources and extensive circulation on social media.⁶ Three days before the march, it held a press conference with the Association of Tunisian Women for Research on Development (Association des femmes tunisiennes pour la recherche sur le développement) and the LTDH. This assured additional coverage by traditional media ahead of the march (Ghorbani, 2012: 54). Instead of Avenue Bourguiba, the organizers decided to march along Avenue Mohammed V to avoid a confrontation with authorities, as a ban on demonstrations on Avenue Bourguiba was still in place.

The organizers mobilized tens of thousands of people in the capital and across the country, notably in Sfax.⁷ Apart from civil society organizations and activist groups, the coalition, calling for a clear stance on women's rights, also included political parties, prominent among them the newly formed opposition party Nidaa Tounes. The defence of women's rights thus was no longer an exclusively feminist cause. It became an occasion at the social level to unite those opposing the project of an Islamic state and on the political level those opposing the Troika government. While Ennahda professed to recognize the CSP, it stood accused of reintroducing inequalities at the constitutional level through its complementarity clause. Ennahda's opposition was able to take advantage of the rallies,⁸ as chants for gender equality alternated with slogans against the Islamist party. The same identity-based constellations reappeared during the Bardo protests one year later, when the march in celebration of women's day joined the Errahil campaign calling on the Ennahda-led government to resign. Beyond the march, activities mobilizing against the complementarity clause included the organization of debates with women deputies across the country. In the end, the combined public pressure resulted in the idea of complementarity being withdrawn from the second draft of the constitution (Ghorbani, 2012).⁹

To address regional discrepancies in the lives of women in Tunisia after Ben Ali's ousting, the ATFD decided to expand its activities beyond the capital, opening new branches in Bizerte, Kairouan, Sfax and Sousse. For the expansion, the

ATFD was able to draw on existing relationships with partners like the UGTT and LTDH to establish new networks and reach out to women who did not know of the organization or who would have been reluctant to seek help from it due to social barriers and defamation campaigns by the old regime and Islamist groups. To give but one example of its expansion, the ATFD office in Kairouan, the fifth holiest city in Islam, employs the same agenda and strategies as the one in the capital. In addition to practical assistance, documentary work on violence against women that the ATFD had been pursuing (more or less freely) under Ben Ali acquired a new dimension by gathering data from additional regions, painting a more complete and differentiated picture of the issue.

Thanks to the ATFD's human and socio-organizational resources, the organization assumed an important role in preventing reversals in the legal status of women pursued by Islamist actors who had assumed a strong position in the PRE after 2011 (Gray, 2012). To this end, it drew on networks of social relations and on the credibility it had acquired through work under the ancien régime that allowed it to achieve high visibility through social and traditional media alike and hence considerable influence on public opinion. The ATFD's struggle for women's rights turned highly political and became subject to party politics with the growing polarization of the political landscape and the formation of Nidaa Tounes as an opponent of Ennahda. The decision of former ATFD president Bouchra Bel Haj Hamida to run for parliament in the October 2014 elections on the Nidaa Tounes list was declared a personal decision – she had run for Ettakatol in the 2011 elections – yet it nonetheless established associations between the organization and the party in the public's perception. Regardless, Bel Haj Hamida won a parliamentary seat, so the ATFD's access to political and decision-making processes improved even further.

At the same time, feminist organizations and individual ATFD members have been targeted on social media with fierce attacks and abuse. Under Ben Ali, as well as during the period after his ousting, the ATFD faced defamation campaigns and adopted an aggressive communications strategy to counter them. For example, in 2013 a campaign by the ATFD for Tunisia to adopt the Convention for the Eradication of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women drew attacks by the Ennahda-led Ministry of Religious Affairs, claiming that the organization was defending homosexual marriage. The patriarchal, oppressive structures visible in these attacks can be seen as part of a 'soft repression' (Marx Ferrée, 2005: 147) – that is, the exclusion of specific issues and voices from the public sphere by ostensibly free media that nonetheless reproduce structures of oppression, patriarchal and other.

UDC: advocate for unemployed graduates

The Union of Unemployed Graduates was founded in 2006 on the initiative of the very active and influential General Union of Students of Tunisia (Union

générale des étudiants de Tunisie, UGET), based on the model of a Moroccan association established two decades earlier. According to the UDC's own definition, it defends the right to work and campaigns for actions to fight unemployment. The academic environment from which it originated only offered its members a small margin of manoeuvre in the highly restrictive context of the Ben Ali era. The link between unemployment and student activism was direct: activists organized in the UGET were often blacklisted and hence ineligible for most positions – one of the strategies by which the Ben Ali regime deterred people from contentious politics. Although local chapters of the UGTT offered support when the UDC was still operating underground, there were nonetheless confrontations between them, for instance during the uprisings in Gafsa in 2008, when slogans against the UGTT were chanted (Allal, 2014).

The union became legal in 2011 and by late 2014 counted some 10,000 members in 24 locations across the country. In addition, the UDC has been able to rely on many more supporters identifying with it, including people without a university degree. In 2013 the union organized a series of internal elections for the boards of its regional offices to streamline its activities and make better use of members' expertise. The UDC also sought to connect with similar organizations in the region, in particular in Algeria and Morocco. For instance, a first Maghreb-wide forum for unemployed graduates was scheduled for 20 February 2013 in Algiers, but Algerian authorities suspended the meeting at the last minute, arresting and deporting 11 participants. The union has positioned its struggle in a global context and adopted a general critique of the dependencies inherent in the international economic system. Its members have also expressed solidarity with unemployed youth in southern European countries.¹⁰

The main forms of contentious action employed by the UDC have been the organization of sit-ins and blockades of factories, boycotts and demonstrations. Hunger strikes have also been used as a form of ad hoc protest against specific employment policies and have been documented online. The UDC has been a driving force behind such protests nationwide and has remained committed to the demand for work first formulated during the 2008–09 protests in Gafsa, as well as the 2010–11 uprising (Allal, 2012). The changes initiated after Ben Ali's ousting allowed it to operate legally and therefore expand its activism, relying on its socio-organizational resources, mainly consisting of its nationwide network. The union's activities have often focused on local struggles, such as protesting against the employment policies of a specific company or factory, and have thus varied according to location, as have its networks and personal affiliations. There have also been unaffiliated mobilizations, organized independently by unemployed activists and only later backed by the union.

With its advocacy strategy, the UDC has addressed one of the main aspects of unemployment – lack of employment among graduates – and hence of social discontent in the Middle East and North Africa (Achcar, 2013). Between 1989 and 2008, graduate unemployment rose from around 5 per cent to more than

20 per cent (Achcar, 2013: 34). In Tunisia, according to the INS, the overall unemployment rate stood at 15.2 per cent in the first quarter of 2014. Compared to the rate of 18.3 per cent in 2011, this suggests some improvement. The absolute number of unemployed graduates increased, however, from 202,300 in 2011 to 241,300 in 2014 (Institut national de la statistique, 2014), and the discrepancy between the coastal areas and the interior continued to grow.

The UDC has been able to draw on the moral resources that it attained through its active role in the build-up to the 2011 revolution. It appeared in the spotlight for the first time outside Tunis during the 2008–09 Gafsa revolts, where members organized sit-ins in front of UGTT premises. In 2009, it established a regional branch in Redeyef (Gafsa governorate), where mobilizations against corruption and for dignity and employment had been violently suppressed. The regional branch in Sidi Bouzid was founded in December 2010, again directly linking a new structure to ongoing protests and thus obtaining revolutionary legitimacy.¹¹ Initially, it operated inside a UGTT branch. In Redeyef and Sidi Bouzid, the UDC operated at the epicentre of bottom-up protests by mobilized publics.

Beyond the grass-roots level, the union also engaged in the formal transformation process and entered national coalitions to push its agendas. When HIROR expanded its membership in April 2011, the UDC sent a representative and thus had the opportunity to lobby for unemployed academics among a broad spectrum of organizations in Tunisian society. Unemployment was thus included in the commission's charter as one of the urgent issues to address. On the other hand, the UDC was later excluded from decision-making processes, for example, in the ANC, not unlike other mobilized publics.

Yet, through exposure, the organization emerged as the main and authoritative source on unemployment. The media as well as ANC deputies sought information from it, enabling it to influence public debate. In this context, its specialized knowledge can be understood as a cultural resource (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004: 126). This was especially important as a lack of material resources limited the UDC's capacity to conduct systematic media work. Social media were used as a low-cost alternative as well as for logistics and organization. Like many other groups, the UDC created Facebook groups for its regional sections, which allowed members to document and co-ordinate their activities and keep in touch with other regions. A lack of resources to develop a media strategy turned out to be a disadvantage, as in 2012 the UDC's national Facebook page was compromised by Islamist 'hacktivists'.¹²

Martyrs' Day (9 April) 2012 became a turning point when the police in Tunis violently repressed a demonstration for the right to decent work that had been called by the UDC and joined by activists from outside the city. The violence triggered further mobilizations, including by human rights groups and independent activists, which were met with more repression. The harsh reaction by the state was interpreted as a message to keep demonstrations by protestors

from marginalized regions out of the capital. Since 2011, sit-ins have been organized by the respective sections of the UDC in front of state-owned companies – such as the Tunisian Chemical Group (Groupe chimique tunisien) in Skhira, Sfax, and the Gafsa Phosphate Company in Om Larayees and Redeyef – blocking the export of phosphate products with the intent of pressuring companies for employment. These sit-ins were regularly targeted with tear gas and dispersed by security forces. President Moncef Marzouki condemned the protests as disruptive to the Tunisian economy, describing them as ‘anarchic’ and representing a ‘slow suicide’ (Dreistbach, 2013).

Against the backdrop of progress in the political transformation process, the question of how to interact with political parties became pertinent for the UDC. As Léger (2013) notes, there are clear differences between the regional, action-oriented sections of the UDC, which stress their political independence especially vis-à-vis political parties, and the more strategically minded members of the national office, whose discourse and actions are more inspired by political and party ideology. In fact, the UDC’s causes have often been picked up by politicians from left-wing parties for inclusion in speeches and platforms, thus turning these politicians into intermediaries between the UDC, the centres of decision making (Higher Commission, ANC) and the media. Although the UDC has remained formally independent, there have been evident links to the Tunisian Workers Party (Parti des travailleurs tunisiens). Most of the UDC’s founding members were and some have continued to be members of the former Worker’s Communist Party (Parti communiste des ouvriers de Tunisie), now part of the Popular Front. The Popular Front has addressed unemployment and functioned as the UDC’s conduit to the broader public sphere and to political decision makers. During crackdowns and arrests of UDC members by the police, the Front also organized legal support. This strategy of twofold membership in a social movement and a formal political party has offered clear advantages, not least in terms of material resources. On the other hand, UDC members have acknowledged that they have often been perceived as the ‘little helpers on the ground’ and that different actors have an interest in incorporating and instrumentalizing the anger of unemployed youth.¹³

The 2013 Bardo protests represented another turning point for the UDC. The union was a driving force behind the protests demanding the dissolution of the ANC and the government. The group co-operated initially with the UGTT, but when the labour union formed the Quartet and proposed the road map without dissolution of the ANC, it refused to go along with it. Instead, the UDC and UGET joined forces to launch a Day of Anger on 30 September to impose the original agenda of the protests. This constituted a clear split within the broader movement that had made such protests possible. Rather than participating in the consensus-building process that prepared the ground for the technocratic caretaker government under Mehdi Jomaa, the UDC continued to call for direct political action against the rising cost of living and

the sidelining of social issues, such as the situation of the unemployed. The violent repression the UDC faced mirrors the marginalization of this mobilized public even after Ben Ali's ousting. At the same time, candidates of the two major parties, Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, appropriated the UDC's themes during the election campaign in October 2014 in an attempt to increase their revolutionary legitimacy.

Support for the martyrs of the uprisings: mobilizations from the margins

The ad hoc mobilizations on the issue of the martyrs have been addressing justice and compensation for those killed or injured by security forces during the uprisings in 2010–11.¹⁴ The victims of state repression themselves as well as their families have been the primary forces behind these mobilized publics. Two representatives of the movement were involved in HIROR, but their participation was not fruitful for the cause and thus cannot be considered a turning point. Mobilizations and pressure increased from outside formal institutions, however, especially after the dissolution of the Essebsi-led government following elections in October 2011. Along with other activists and lawyers, the families created a support committee for the defence of the martyrs. Since there was never a formal structure involved, the number of participants can only be estimated. According to activists, in late 2014 the core group of supporters and organizers included some 150 people in addition to their families. They have also received support from the Group of the 25 Lawyers, or Collective of the 25, a group of human rights lawyers who coalesced immediately after Ben Ali's departure to prosecute those responsible for the abuses of the old regime.¹⁵ One of the lawyers, Omar Safraoui, took over an important role in public communication and at the same time served as the president of the Independent Body on Transitional Justice (Haute instance indépendante de la justice transitionnelle). Members of the UDC's national organization and local sections also backed the mobilizations.

Since the revolutionary process claimed victims across the country, the organizers did not have to contend with the urban–rural divide (as the ATFD did), finding resonance in small towns as well as the capital.¹⁶ Like the UDC, they have also been in a position to claim revolutionary legitimacy representing an important moral resource, as they or their relatives paid for their participation in the uprising with their health and sometimes their lives. To reach a larger (and international) audience, supporters of the martyrs for the revolution staged protests that addressed the stagnating process of transitional justice and the lack of reform in the police and justice sectors. Because the activists had little direct access to decision makers and decision-making processes, their repertoire has been restricted to contentious action, while the allied Group of the 25 Lawyers has successfully pushed for reform of transitional justice laws.

Hunger strikes, also used by the UDC, have been among the most effective tools for creating visibility, attracting media attention and pressuring decision makers to engage with their demands. The hunger strike that started on 23 April 2014 lasted for two weeks. Despite the efforts of a follow-up body – the Committee for the Follow-up and Coordination of the Hunger Strike of the Families of the Martyrs and Injured of the Revolution (Comité de suivi et de coordination de la grève de la faim des familles des martyrs et des blessés de la révolution) – to co-ordinate the action and communicate demands, the hunger strike largely failed to get the media's attention and to mobilize other publics in solidarity. In general, it has remained a challenge for the martyrs campaign to mobilize wider publics for their cause. One reason is that the families and victims have at times been stigmatized as opportunists seeking financial compensation, and thus not considered a force working towards a larger political objective within the greater framework of transitional justice. They have, however, received increasing support for protest events from independent activists, lawyers and associations, and on occasion the UGTT, all of them feeling that the authorities' handling of the issue of accountability flagrantly contradicted the principles of the revolution.

The decentralized structure of the protests has made social media the most suitable mode of organization and co-ordination for them. Facebook in particular has been used as a platform for discussion and as infrastructure to organize actions, to call for attendance at trials and the like, with some groups and event sites attracting more than 1,000 virtual supporters. The association's well-known bloggers, who used their media presence and followership to draw attention to the sit-ins and hunger strikes, have helped to increase pressure on the government.

The interactions between the martyrs campaign and the PRE have been highly ambivalent. Before the October 2011 elections, the issue of the revolution's martyrs was a topic that endowed those politicians who adopted it with revolutionary credibility. By the end of 2012, the ANC had decided to compensate persons wounded during the 2010–11 uprisings and to set up a fund for compensation. Subsequently, protests sprang up in Redeyef to demand compensation for the victims of the 2008 uprisings, which arguably had prepared the ground for the 2010–11 events. On the discursive level, the new republic gave credit 'to the blood of our blessed martyrs' in the preamble of the constitution,¹⁷ but decentralized mobilized publics, such as the campaigns for the martyrs of the revolution, have lacked the channels of direct participation or access to formal politics needed to make use of such symbolic declarations in terms of realizing concrete material benefits or legal proceedings for perpetrators of violence against protestors. The Truth and Dignity Commission, an independent institution created within the legal framework of the 2014 constitution, was charged with investigating cases of torture and killings under the regimes of Ben Ali and his predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, from 1955 until 2013. In an

ongoing debate, it has also considered whether all those killed by state actors during this period should be considered martyrs. Yet the mere establishment of the commission, after months spent discussing its precise composition, and the renaming of the Ministry of Human Rights to include 'transitional justice' in its title indicate that institutional actors have felt compelled to appear committed to the issue although concrete outcomes are yet to be achieved.

A turning point that ushered in new dynamics for the campaign occurred on 12 April 2014, when the Military Court of Appeals in Tunis reduced from 20 years to three years in jail the sentences of prominent security officials which had been imposed in 2012 for causing deaths and injuries of protestors during the 2011 uprisings in Greater Tunis, Kasserine, Sfax and Thala. The ruling caused an uproar not only among the families and actual victims of violence by security forces, but also mobilized other organizations, including the International Federation of Human Rights, and independent human rights activists. In a press conference on 14 April, Omar Safraoui, organizer of the support committee, characterized the verdict as a 'second murder of the martyrs' (Chennaoui, 2014).¹⁸

At the same time, the prominent activist Azyz Amami launched the campaign 'Me Too, I Burnt a Police Station', to attract attention to the plight of scores of citizens – most of them young men, but also a 73-year-old woman – facing criminal charges or having been sentenced for acts of violence against state property, as an expression of their anger at the repressive security apparatus.¹⁹ According to national news outlets, by April 2014 authorities had indicted more than 130 persons on such charges (Lussato, 2014). Most trials ended in limbo, with court sessions adjourned for bureaucratic reasons, but also because of ad hoc protests by supporters outside courthouses. The protests for the release of prisoners have often been backed and organized by the local UDC and have frequently been followed by arrests.

Although, at first glance, the mobilizations discussed here appear to deal with two different situations – on the one hand, compensation for young men and women injured during the uprising and for the families of those killed, and on the other, 'criminalization' of protestors who attacked state property and institutions – they can be treated as two sides of the same coin, as they address the same core issue: the search for accountability and the notion that the authorities have not dealt properly with events.²⁰ It is also important to note that the victims of police violence during the uprisings were mostly from lower-class backgrounds, which means that they had few material resources or channels for participating in politics and pressing their demands, but had to rely on moral and cultural resources instead. As a consequence, their strategies of influence put them in confrontation with the authorities.

Fear of a return of the old regime and of restorative tendencies have driven and united these mobilizations. In combination with their lack of influence at the political and decision-making levels, this has resulted in a confrontational discourse. At the same time, this mobilized public has also strategically kept its

distance from the PRE, to avoid being instrumentalized and to preserve its moral resources. On 12 April, the evening before the protests against the release of the former chiefs of security staged in front of the presidential palace, Amami announced on his blog, 'A war is coming, and this time we will hit first'.²¹ By adopting the terminology of 'war', activists were expressing their fundamental opposition to the trajectory of the transformation process and trying to shake up the repressive consensus that had begun to emerge after the 2013 agreement between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes to establish a technocratic government. The authorities took the bait and, instead of responding to the political challenge, attempted to discredit its authors. After a TV appearance in late April 2014, Amami was arrested on drugs charges. The manoeuvre backfired, however, as the obvious similarity to repressive practices used during the Ben Ali era validated the underlying criticism of the activists against the transitional authorities, creating a wave of solidarity among independent activists that led to Amami's eventual release and also to publicity for the cause he was advocating.²²

On 2 June 2014, the ANC finally passed a law decriminalizing revolutionary acts between 17 December 2010 (marking the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi) and 28 February 2011 (when the prime minister of the provisional government, Ghannouchi, stepped down after protests and was replaced by Essebsi). The law officially recognizes a period of revolution during which violence was acceptable, thus delimiting a period of legitimate uprising. While this shows that the mobilized publics discussed here were able to have a direct impact on institutions' decisions, critics have denounced the law as a measure to contain the revolution by giving it a definite start and, more important, an end point, after which revolutionary activity is considered impermissible. Thus taking part in contentious action, such as the local protests that have continued to be organized throughout the marginalized regions, has again become punishable.

The trajectory of the martyrs campaign and the fight against the criminalization of protest have escaped the usual logic of transitional phases, as these movements' demands have not been addressed by successive governments. Their media strategy has been weak, and they have had to constantly fight to establish a presence through traditional media and in the official discourse. Their visibility has thus depended on events such as election campaigns, court trials, campaigns launched by members, and so on. Although establishment of the support committee can be considered an attempt to institutionalize and structure demands, further institutionalization has not taken place. This lack of formal institutions and structures, on the other hand, has allowed activists from other camps to join in, providing resources and including other causes.

Conclusion

Post-2011 Tunisia offered more possibility for political participation, which has also been reflected in a more pluralist media landscape. Both developments

have had an important effect on the transformation of public spheres and the political culture (Antonakis & Mahdhaoui, 2014). All the mobilized publics examined here had the 'explicit objective of exerting immediate influence on the political process' (Asseburg & Wimmen, 2016), but their success was highly dependent on the resources at their disposal. The concept of mobilized publics is indeed helpful in capturing the different dynamics of the relationship between the politics of contestation and the PRE and includes actors with a small degree of institutionalization. This approach was used in combination with resource mobilization theories to deconstruct the image of civil society as a monolithic block. After a period of decentralized uprisings driven mainly by local impulses, with limited hierarchies and structures, increased institutionalization enhanced the possibility for some mobilized publics to participate in political decision making, as in the case of the ATFD. At the same time, ideology-based activism, used as an identity marker for partisan politics, replaced the action-based mobilizations that dominated during the first revolutionary phase, especially in the capital. Civil society organizations that had established structures before the uprisings and were not perceived as having been co-opted by the dictatorship had particularly strong credibility, which they drew on as a resource. This also applied to formerly clandestine mobilized publics, such as the UDC, which were able to expand and formalize their structures after 2011.

This contribution also shows that the resources of credibility and revolutionary legitimacy by themselves did not guarantee political influence in Tunisia. Rather, as in other countries of the region, mobilization and demands for economic and transitional justice were sidelined throughout the transformation period (see, e.g., Alwazir, 2016). Their marginalization can be explained by the strategies these mobilized publics used or by their lack of resources, such as access to the PRE and the media. Hunger strikes, sit-ins and blockades were easily framed as disruptive and hence de-legitimized by the PRE.

Mobilized publics pushing for policies based on symbolic identity markers, such as martyrdom or gender, were potentially made vulnerable to co-optation and instrumentalization, especially when they lacked resources and access to decision makers and processes. Polarization along ideological battle lines made sticking to meaningful policy debates a serious challenge. The ATFD handled this challenge by focusing on its area of expertise, fighting a legal battle and refusing to compromise on its issues. The different alliances of the ATFD and UDC shaped their resources and strategies. The networks established by the ATFD with the labour unions, and the affiliations between the UDC and the Workers Communist Party were particularly strong, because they were born in the political context of the authoritarian regime and shared a history of resistance. As becomes clear from the case of the UDC, establishing an alliance with political parties can make an impact when lobbying for a specific issue, but does not have to lead to co-optation, and can actually produce a long-term alliance of ideologically compatible organizations fighting for similar objectives.

At the same time, in this instance, little has been achieved in terms of concrete measures to address unemployment and a soaring cost of living. The difficulty of integrating these demands systematically seems to be symptomatic of an elite whose consensus politics was established on the common ground of a neo-liberal economic program.

It is important to note that mobilizations have overlapped more easily in the marginalized regions (e.g. in the case of relations between the UDC, UGET and support for the martyrs), as a common goal was to enhance visibility in national politics and to demand progress for their respective governorates. This has echoed the structural marginalization of mobilized publics in the regions, even vis-à-vis their representatives in the capital. On the other hand, new types of resources have been emerging for marginalized mobilized publics. While the families of martyrs and victims of state violence operated with next to no resources, they received support from actors who have been positively associated with the 2011 revolution and backed by many different parts of society, especially youth, those from a lower-class background, human rights and civil liberties NGOs, and so on. Another major asset has been the cross-regional approach of the movement. Yet the success they achieved has at best been partial, as the decriminalization of contentious action was restricted to a narrow window of time around the 2011 events, and no satisfactory compensation has been forthcoming for the victims.

Some mobilized publics have moved into Tunisia's PRE. They are an empirical illustration of the overlap between the two categories of mobilized publics and PREs as discussed by Asseburg and Wimmen (Asseburg & Wimmen, 2016). The UGTT, for instance, advanced into the circle of the core elite by drafting the road map and leading the way out of the dangerous impasse that the transformation process had reached in August 2013. The ATFD, on the other hand, gained sustained access to and influence on decision-making processes touching on its specific expertise and agenda, and may thus now be counted among the third and even the second circle of the PRE. The polarization of the political sphere also affected the mobilized publics, which had to position themselves within the dynamics of the (staged) confrontation between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes. Yet, while associating itself with the demands of the ATFD helped Nidaa Tounes to emphasize its liberal agenda, the other two mobilized publics discussed here did not easily fit into either camp. As the political sphere turned increasingly bipolar, their demands found little resonance and were thus marginalized and discredited as disruptive.

At the same time, the turnout for the parliamentary and presidential polls in October and November 2014 casts doubt on the assumption that the demands the mobilized publics had been pushing for were channelled effectively through participation in elections. Rather, an abstention rate of 40 per cent of registered voters in the parliamentary elections demonstrated a lack of trust in the established institutions. Significantly, the lowest turnout occurred in Sidi Bouzid,

where the abstention rate was 52 per cent according to the INS.²³ These figures mirror the continuing and in some instances deepening disparities between the centre of the country and the coastal areas. Gana et al. (2012), in their study on the 'geography of voting' in Tunisia, note the relatively weak participation in the centre of the country in 2011. While discursively included, these citizens have not begun to identify with the political order established since the uprising. The transformation remains contested.

Notes

1. Marx Ferrée (2012: 4) notes in regard to the study of social change, 'Material legacies of movement mobilizations in the form of institutional resources matter, but so do the *discursive legacies* that define the questions politics should answer, making some seem common sense and others absurdly radical' (emphasis added).
2. Allal (2012: 824) considers this a socio-territorial and generational double cleavage characterizing protest actions in Tunisia.
3. See for example Rodgers (2009); in regard to the regional context, see Lerner (2010).
4. Tahar Haddad is considered the 'father of Tunisian feminism'. A notary public, he was also close to the labour union movement.
5. Named in honour of the feminist writer and sociologist Ilhem Marzouki, who died in 2008. It is not a university in a classical sense, but a space to discuss feminist thought and women's issues and to organize training courses.
6. The communiqué – also signed by representatives of the Association of Tunisian Women for Research on Development, the LTDH, Amnesty International and the National Council for Freedoms – was published on organizations' respective Facebook pages. See for instance 'Communiqué commun ATFD, AFTURD, Amnesty International, LTDH, CNLT, UGTT', <https://fr-fr.facebook.com/notes/association-tunisie-tol%C3%A9rance/communiqu%C3%A9-commun-atfd-afturd-amnesty-international-ltdh-cnlt-ugtt/358043447598389> (accessed 4 November 2014).
7. Estimates varied drastically, ranging from 10,000 to 200,000 participants (Ghorbani, 2012: 55).
8. On the dynamics between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, see Boubekeur (this volume).
9. This was the analysis expressed by most members of ATFD as well as other observers in interviews.
10. For more information, see the interviews with Maher Hamdi, a member of the UCD's National Provisory Bureau, and Sabra Chraïfa, a UDC activist: 'La des diplômes-choeurs: Présentation de l'Union des diplômés-choeurs – UDC (mars 2012)', *Solitaires International*, no. 8 (autumn 2012), http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/docs/2013/09/09/tunesie_la_des_diplomes-choeurs_udc_mars2012.pdf (accessed 5 November 2014).
11. Mohamed Bouazizi, the street vendor who set himself on fire in December 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, was at first (incorrectly) depicted as an unemployed university graduate. This led to stronger identification with him by young educated protestors during the uprising.
12. For a discussion on hacktivism, see Coleman (2010).
13. The potential to instrumentalize this anger, often stemming from a lack of prospects in the job market for youths, and vulnerability of this group to radical

ideas can also be seen in the context of Islamist recruitment. Solving socio-economic issues can be considered a priority in preventing breeding grounds for radicalization.

14. According to the official report published in May 2012 by the Fact-Finding Commission on Abuses Committed from 17 December 2010 until the End of Its Mandate in April 2012 (also called the Bouderbala report, after the commission president), 338 people were killed and more than 2,000 injured during the uprisings between 17 December 2010 and March 2011 (Bouderbala, 2012).
15. See Antonio Galofaro's radio portrait about the group for ir7al.info: 'Nous sommes des vrais avocats!', 25 July 2011, <http://www.ir7al.info/?p=2887> (accessed 5 November 2014).
16. For more detailed information, see Bouderbala (2012).
17. The precise meaning of the term *martyr* was left undefined.
18. Henda Chennoui is one of the few journalists extensively covering the issue of the martyrs.
19. See Azyz Amami's blog, 'Message to every revolted soul on this earth', 12 April, <http://azyz405.blogspot.de/2014/04/message-to-every-revolted-soul-on-this.html> (accessed 5 November 2014).
20. It is not unusual to find overlapping involvement. For example, the brothers Khaled and Issam Omri, accused of setting fire to a police station in December 2010, also lost their brother Mohamed Omri, who was shot dead in Kasserine during the same events.
21. See Amami, 'Message to every revolted soul on this earth'.
22. The charges, denied by Amami, were for the use and possession of cannabis. In response to his arrest, the head of the government, Jomaa, referred to Amami as a 'nice guy' and spoke of the need to adapt relevant legislation to the 'realities of our society', but avoided mentioning the selective use of this legislation to target dissenters and the issues that Amami had been promoting.
23. See detailed statistics on the website of the independent election commission, Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Elections en Tunisie, <http://www.isie.tn/statistiques> (accessed 26 December 2014).

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