

Challenges and Stakes of State and Societal Resilience in Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

Tunisia is experiencing an unfinished transition. The country suffers from growing indebtedness, low growth and investment rates as well as high unemployment, especially amongst young graduates. Social protests, particularly in the poorer internal regions, are consequently on the rise. The threat of terrorism, particularly along Tunisia's borders, adds to Tunisia's difficulties. Against this backdrop, three main challenges confront state and societal resilience in Tunisia can be singled out: security, smuggling and corruption, and economic hardships. While these factors threaten the country's transition, there are also positive drivers that can actually strengthen Tunisia's resilience, namely the country's bureaucratic tradition and legacy of state-led reforms as well as the role of civil society, which favours the national dialogue and facilitated the historic compromise between Islamists and secularists that has been key to Tunisia's political transition since 2011.

Tunisia | Economy | Domestic policy | Civil society | Resilience

keywords

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Introduction

If we conceive of political transition as a thoughtful, peaceful and pragmatic transformation that remains open to the future,¹ we can affirm that Tunisia is going through a historical phase that is both promising and perilous. The fall of the old regime has paved the way for the institutionalization of pluralism and civil liberties after decades of authoritarian rule. Free elections were held, a new Constitution adopted and several representative and independent bodies created. The transitional process is underway and reforms are on the agenda to attain a new semi-parliamentary and semi-presidential political regime in Tunisia.

Going through an unfinished transition, the country is currently in a critical period due to difficulties related to economic, social and security factors. The growing indebtedness and low growth and investment rates are hardly helping to reduce high unemployment, especially amongst young graduates. As a result, there is an increase in social protest movements in the internal regions that are suffering most from social disparities. In addition, there are threats caused by terrorism, particularly along Tunisia's borders. National security is being adversely affected by the situation in neighbouring Libya, which has become a stronghold of radicalized militias.

Faced with all these challenges, the state and society have deployed strategies of resistance to sustain the social and political order in Tunisia. Importantly, state and society are not to be separated but should be approached together. Society is the result of social, economic, psychological and cultural interactions forming a system and including a control and command apparatus, with the state mediating

¹ Pascal Chabot, *L'âge des transitions*, Paris, PUF, 2015, p. 21-24.

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· Paper produced in the framework of a project entitled "The EU's New Resilience Agenda in the MENA Region", November 2017. Copyright © Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS).

in all interactions. More concretely, the existence of the state depends on the citizens – whose coexistence within a state depends on the state apparatus itself.² There is thus no need to separate the state from society, even if each of these historically situated entities has its own autonomy and particular structure. In reality, assessing the challenges to resilience urges us to take into account the complexity of the relations between state and society on the one hand and the different levels and entanglements of society on the other.

What is resilience if not the ability of state and society to adapt, regain their initial aptitudes and overcome various upheavals and crises? Using the concept of resilience serves primarily as a tool to analyse the situation at the national and regional levels. In fact, most studies so far have underestimated the ability of the social and political system to persist despite the upheavals experienced during the transition period. The proof is that the state and society in Tunisia have not collapsed, as was the case for Libya right after the fall of Gaddafi, or Syria and Yemen, which both descended into civil war.

According to the new Global Strategy of the European Union entitled “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe”,³ resilience is understood as the opposite to fragility, being defined as “the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises”.⁴ This definition is corroborated by the fact that resilience is necessarily linked to growth and development within the framework of democracy, and not to the tendency of adaptation or a rehabilitation of authoritarianism. A sharp nuance creates a demarcation between approaches that justify authoritarianism and the relativist view of resilience that favours the attainment of democracy. The two views illustrate how resilience is a normative concept, as well as being an analytical tool and a strategic vision.

This prescriptive direction becomes clear when resilience is related to the concept of effectiveness and to the notions of resistance and flexibility or rehabilitation. Basically therefore, resilience can be used as a concept to improve sociological analysis and political governance, signalling a means to emerge from ambient disorder or crisis through attaining a new equilibrium different from that established during the authoritarian regime. The new equilibrium hopes to ensure economic growth and political pluralism, while the old equilibrium reproduces the authoritarian order.

² Edgar Morin, “Le mot société”, in *Sociologie*, 2nd ed., Paris, Seuil, 1994, p. 88. Cf. Same for the complexity paradigm, Edgar Morin, *La tête bien faite. Repenser la réforme, réformer la pensée*, Paris, Seuil, 1999.

³ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, <https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/node/339>.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 23.

Theoretician of complex systems Robert Ulanowicz believes that the optimal behaviour of a system lies in the balance between efficiency and resilience. In fact, “resilience allows the system to maintain itself despite disturbances”. It requires real complexity, attention to the various relationships between the elements of the system.⁵ Effectiveness and complexity are thus the two constitutive elements of resilience to be analysed by adopting a historical perspective of state politics in the framework of its organic relations with society.

For the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the relevance of the resilience approach lies in the attention it gives not only to the resistance of the social system to state control but also to the state’s capacity to persist, and to preserve itself against internal and external threats. On this basis, it is possible to appreciate the interlinkages between state and society, addressing them simultaneously on the basis of their complexity and respective roles. Similarly, the challenges to resilience will be discussed in relation to “drivers” or “facilitators” in order to grasp their links and overall impact on the state and society in Tunisia. Just as there are challenges to resilience, there are also positive contributors to resilience at the state and societal level. Overall, then, the double question underlying the analysis in the context of Tunisia will be the following: resilience of whom and resilience to what?

Resilience will be addressed in its national public policy framework, taking into account three main challenges confronting state and societal resilience in Tunisia: security, smuggling and corruption, and the rise of social protest movements paralysing the national economy. The analysis will then move to highlighting a number of “positive drivers” for state and societal resilience in Tunisia, namely the country’s bureaucratic tradition, reforms and state reformism as well as the role of the civil society, which induced the national dialogue and facilitated the historic compromise between Islamists and secularists that has been key to the progression of Tunisia’s political transition since 2011.

1. Challenges to state and societal resilience

Three major challenges are affecting state and society during the current transition period. These existed before the revolution but were not as intense, in both qualitative and quantitative terms, as they are today. Challenges are associated with the turbulent and uncertain situation on different levels, from security to the political and socio-economic aspects. The country is threatened by terrorism, smuggling and corruption in addition to the political instability caused by the rise of social protest movements. For each challenge, the paper will seek to identify its

⁵ Pascal Chabot, *L’âge des transitions*, cit., p. 66; Robert Ulanowicz, “Le nouveau paradigme de la durabilité”, in *Transitions*, No. 2 (2009), p. 16-17, <http://anthropopedagogie.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Transitionsww-2.pdf>; Bernard Lietaer, Robert Ulanowicz and Sally Goerner, “Options for Managing a Systemic Bank Crisis”, in *S.A.P.I.E.N.S.*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2009), p. 7-8, <http://sapiens.revues.org/747>.

external manifestations that constitute real and potential threats, while illustrating the logics of resilience developed against it, by the state and society.

1.1 The security challenge linked to terrorism and national security

Since the advent of the 2010–11 revolution and the beginnings of the process of democratic transition, Tunisia's security environment has worsened considerably. Tunisia has provided the largest contingent of jihadists, officially estimated at around 3,000 fighters by the Tunisian Ministry of Interior,⁶ located in the conflict zones in Syria, Iraq and Libya. Foreign research and information centres, such as the New York-based Soufan Group, have doubled the estimate.⁷ Similarly, the United Nations has noted that Tunisians outnumber other Arab countries in the number of citizens fighting with extremist groups across the region.⁸ Whether these estimates are correct or inflated remains unknown, however.

It is true that terrorism already existed in the old regime, as proven by the murderous attacks in Djerba in 2002 and Soliman in 2005. However, the phenomenon has grown in recent years through local, regional and international networks and in military zones such as the Chaâmbi Mountain and along the border with Libya. The terrorist phenomenon has indeed become globalized, propelling powerful and mobile organizations like Al Qaeda and Daesh or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that have the logistics, territories and strategies to attack and demoralize states.

Tunisia has emerged as a privileged target for terrorists of radical Islamist leanings because of its secularist tradition, its emancipatory revolution and its democratic transition so far successfully carried at the political level. The objective of these terrorist organizations is to undermine the territorial integrity of Tunisia's modern state, weaken the legitimacy of political actors and challenge the Tunisian economy based on tourism and trade with Europe by spreading fear and radical ideologies.

After attacks targeting the symbols of the "taghut" or "iniquitous government" of police, the national guard and the army, terrorism led to the assassination in 2012 and 2013 of two left-wing political leaders known for their criticism of political Islam. Later, in 2015, attacks reached key tourist spots, including the Bardo Museum and the Imperial Hotel in Sousse. In fact, the tourism sector lost more than one million visitors after the Bardo and Sousse attacks, compared with 2014. There is some recovery now, but the sector continues to suffer in terms of infrastructure,

⁶ Yamna Salmi, "Year after Attacks, Daesh Threat Receding in Tunisia", in *Anadolu Agency*, 11 March 2017, <http://v.aa.com.tr/768985>.

⁷ Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, December 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/?p=24281>.

⁸ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination on its mission to Tunisia* (A/HRC/33/43/Add.1), 2 August 2016, p. 1, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/33/43/Add.1>.

foreign exchange services and receipts.⁹ As for the national economy, its growth rate went from 5 percent under the old regime to a low rate ranging between 1 and 2 percent over the last seven years, with a significant decrease in investments and increased inflation rate and external debt.¹⁰

The aim of these attacks is to bring the economy to its knees and destabilize the state, particularly by splitting border regions such as those in the south, including Ben Guerdane and Remada where radical groups sought to occupy the cities and announce a Salafi emirate. Such groups have also targeted Western regions such as Kasserine, Jendouba and Kef, taking up residence in the mountains and regularly carrying out raids and attacks on security forces. Still, the terrorist strategy has failed in its objective to establish an emirate by occupying territory, despite the pressures on the economy and the general security environment.

Faced with these efforts by radicalized armed groups, Tunisians have demonstrated a significant ability to resist destabilization and forestall a descent into chaos or civil war. A major reason for this is the country's commitment to national and republican values. In fact, on the one hand, the army was helped by the local population to defeat the 2016 attempted occupation of the town of Ben Guerdane, located in the extreme south of Tunisia. On the other, the security forces succeeded in dismantling terrorist cells and in bringing down the elements embedded in the Chaâmbi Mountain near Kasserine, on the Algerian border.

The city of Ben Guerdane is a symbol of resistance to jihadist terrorism, illustrating the combined resilience of the state and society. During the attack by a terrorist commando from Libya that aimed to occupy the border zone, local citizens aligned with the army to defeat the terrorists. The event provides a window on the strength of national unity and the organic link between state and society in the case of countering radical extremism and terrorism in Tunisia.

The resilience of civilians and the authorities is increasingly becoming a policy of survival. It is actively helping in the security domain as well as in the construction of more equitable governance structures. The threat to Tunisia and to the whole of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is undoubtedly connected to the Libyan situation, where rival governments in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica have hitherto been unable to find a compromise to stabilize the country. As long as terrorism finds refuge in Libya and in the conflict zones of the MENA region it will be difficult to neutralize this global phenomenon. In addition, national resilience requires coordination at the regional and international levels in the fight against terrorism, while paying particular attention to solving the dual origin of jihadism,

⁹ "Tunisia sees 30 percent tourism growth in 2017", in *Reuters*, 21 March 2017, <http://reut.rs/2nNOito>; Patrick Scott, "Tourists Return to Tunisia, but Slowly", in *The New York Times*, 15 May 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2qmaLu>; Tunisia's National Institute of Statistics (INS), *Tunisie en chiffres 2016*, May 2017, p. 32, <http://www.ins.tn/en/node/3453>.

¹⁰ *Moniteur du commerce international (Le MOCI), Tunisie: Données générales*, <http://www.lemoci.com/fiche-pays/tunisie>.

namely the psychological vulnerability resulting from socio-economic exclusion and ideological radicalization through mosques and fundamentalist imams.

1.2 The political challenges of smuggling and corruption

Smuggling and corruption are linked to terrorism – a phenomenon that is both local and global – occurring as they do in the border areas and in transit locations for goods, such as commercial ports. While it is true that terrorist networks are deployed everywhere, they are particularly active along the borders, because of their porosity and the emergence of new forms of economic and political deregulation in line with globalization.¹¹

Southern Tunisia has been a centre for contraband for decades, especially in connection with the oil wealth of Libya, which favoured a low-cost consumption and the movement of merchandise and people on both sides of the border. An informal economy of smuggling took shape along these regions, while authorities in the two countries chose to look the other way as a means to ensure stability and the sustenance of border communities that rely on such trade. In the context of this political economy, the movement of goods, fuel and currency was accompanied by an enrichment of intermediaries and “big shots” that, after the 2011 revolution, were transformed into “Mafia clans” orchestrating a whole “smuggling system”. That system combines illegality with legality, and citizens and control agents to reproduce a “necessary evil” for the survival of the economic and political order.¹²

The size of the informal economy is such that, in the absence of official statistics, experts estimate it to account for more than half of the transactions in the national economy. In fact, according to the Tunisian think tank Jossour, the shadow economy has gone from 35 percent in 2012 to more than 55 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2016.¹³

The current national unity government, which includes the main political parties, has begun a fight against corruption. Initiated by the government of Youssef Chahed in May 2017, the initiative was followed by strong measures including the arrest of several “bigwigs” of the parallel economy. However, this action, which is being carried out in connection with the “Carthage Pact” signed by political parties and civil society, has not changed the situation of the parallel economy which continues to operate.

¹¹ Jenny Rafluk, *Terrorisme et mondialisation. Approches historiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, p. 363 sq.

¹² International Crisis Group (ICG), “Tunisia’s Borders: Jihadism and Contraband”, in *ICG Middle East/ North Africa Reports*, No. 148, 28 November 2013, p. 9 sq., <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/1018>.

¹³ Radhouane Erguez (ed.), *Le secteur informel en Tunisie*, Tunis, Jossour, March 2016, <http://jossour.org/?p=3893>; Stephen Quillen, “Informal Economy Presents Tunisia with Thorny Issue”, in *The Arab Weekly*, No. 117 (30 July 2017), p. 19, <http://www.thearabweekly.com/Economy/8983/Informal-economy-presents-Tunisia-with-thorny-issue>.

Corruption undermines the institutions of the state, the formal and informal economic circuits and the relationship of trust between state and society. The confirmed links between smuggling and terrorism have alerted the authorities and public opinion to the urgency of adopting a national strategy to protect the economy, security and democratic transition. The strategy is blocked because of clientelism and corruption, reflecting a conflict affecting economic elites from the coastal regions that are increasingly being challenged by businessmen in the border regions.¹⁴

The challenge of combating corruption is twofold: first, to reduce protest movements in southern Tunisia, especially in the Tataouine-El Kamour region, which experienced extreme tension during the first half of 2017; and second, to confer political legitimacy on the government of national unity at a time when consensus is under severe strain, both inside and outside the ruling coalition.

The fight against corruption was preceded by the establishment of the National Anti-Corruption Authority (INLUCC) by Decree Law No. 2011-120 of 14 November 2011. The mission of this body, which replaced the Commission to Investigate and Combat Corruption and Misconduct (CNICM), is to propose appropriate policies to eradicate corruption, particularly among members of former leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's family. Yet, since the revolution, corruption has become somewhat "democratized", extending well beyond the corrupt and co-opted elites close to the former president.

Despite the importance of its mission and the progress made – according to Transparency International, Tunisia gained three points in 2016, ranking 75th at the world level¹⁵ – INLUCC suffers from a lack of human resources and equipment. The anti-corruption policy of the government therefore remains embryonic in terms of the handling of transmitted dossiers by the Ministry of Justice and the establishment of a constitutional body for good governance and the fight against corruption. The war against corruption, an objective that was included in the "Carthage Pact" which gave birth to the national unity government led by Youssef Chahed, was only concretized by the *coup de théâtre* involving the arrest of several barons whose names are publicly known for their links with the contraband communities. Since then, there has been increased control of the administration over financial transactions. Effective anti-corruption policies, however, which are symptomatic of the resilience of the state and society, have so far been limited since the government has not yet tackled the sources of corruption within the administration and the centres of power.

¹⁴ International Crisis Group (ICG), "La transition bloquée: corruption et régionalisme en Tunisie", in *ICG Middle East/North Africa Reports*, No. 177, 10 May 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/5455>.

¹⁵ Transparency International, "Tunisia", in *Corruption Perceptions Index 2016*, January 2017, <https://www.transparency.org/country/TUN>.

1.3 Social protest movements for employment and development

The Tunisian revolution that began on 17 December 2010 with an act of self-immolation by Mohamed Bouazizi and led, on 14 January 2011, to the fall of the Ben Ali regime, has become an ideal model of social protest for other MENA countries. The social protest movement taking shape in the border area of south-eastern Tunisia with Libya, is a movement aimed at meeting the demands of employment and dignity. As such it is a movement that denotes, at this particular level, the resilience of civil society. However, it is being manipulated by smuggling networks and political movements.

The two “lobbies” seek to weaken the state, add pressure to its economy and the legitimacy of its elites, and heighten security threats, particularly those emanating from neighbouring Libya. The movement is thus ambivalent in its vocation and its ambitions, highlighting how spontaneous social protest movements that are not organized and structured can represent both an asset and a challenge to resilience – in Tunisia as elsewhere.

Other protest movements emerged before the fall of the former regime, particularly in the Gafsa mining area in 2008. Nevertheless, the protest movement of 2010–2011 is the only one involving the local, national, regional and global levels. In fact, starting from the city of Sidi Bouzid, the movement spread to all Tunisian cities and even to neighbouring and distant Arab countries such as Libya, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. There are also similarities with the global movement of indignation that took place in the public squares of many cities in Europe and the world starting in 2011.

There exists a conjunction between the particular situation of Tunisia and other Arab countries on the one hand, and the universal demand for citizenship and development on the other. Such conjunction reflects not only the resilience of society and the state to the drifts of authoritarianism but also the importance of civil society, with the main actor being young educated people who are connected via the new information and communication technologies (NICT).

This “digital generation” is at the heart of the social and political mobilization that emerged and developed in response to social and regional disequilibriums. We are talking about civilian movements, of a peaceful nature, directed towards a strong demand for work and development. They reveal the deep economic, social and political crisis that is shaking Tunisia and the whole region of the Maghreb, where social and spatial inequalities are remarkable.

In April 2017, in the south-eastern border region of Tataouine, not far from Ben Guerdane, there was a strong social mobilization to demand work, dignity and the end of economic, social and political marginalization. Similar, though smaller, mobilizations were also taking place in most parts of the interior, where investment and employment are lacking. Faced with these social movements, the national state

is powerless. It has neither the financial nor the political means to find solutions and to defuse this kind of crisis. It can sometimes, as was the case in El Kamour and Kebili, partly neutralize tensions through dialogue and by recognizing the legitimacy of the demands – to which the authorities can only provide temporary and insufficient solutions. In fact, the number of jobs demanded by the protesters falls beyond the capabilities of the government due to a serious economic crisis caused by declining investments, and the government's promises reflect this gap.

However, such movements can spread to other areas, given that other categories and regions share similar problems of unemployment and exclusion. The new protest movements are the expression of deep psychosocial frustration caused by feelings of socio-economic exclusion and marginalization, particularly in under-developed zones of the Tunisian interior and border regions. The main demands of these protest movements concern employment and dignity. The strong demand for social justice – and consequently, redistribution of resources and incomes – places these movements in the historical process of unfinished "Arab revolutions".

As a cradle of political revolution leading to change of regime but not change of the system, Tunisia has witnessed relative success related to the demand for freedom, during its ongoing democratic transition. However, demands for work and national dignity are still not met. The latter is a major challenge for the political transition which is risking social and economic collapse and consequently the failure of the democratic experience. How can Tunisia counterbalance these challenges, if not by employing those same drivers of resilience inherited from the past and which are resurfacing in the demands of the present?

2. Facilitators for state and societal resilience

There are three foundations of the Tunisian state's resilience as an institution that is entangled with society in a set of special relations characterized by political domination and ideological hegemony. First, state and society influence each other mutually even though there exists in Tunisia a centralizing and bureaucratic tradition through which the state subjects society and prevents dissent from threatening the social and political order. The situation is more remarkable in Tunisia than in the rest of the countries in the region because of its urban geography, as well as the civil (non-military or religious) history associated with the processes of state formation in Tunisia.

The second foundation of resilience is the Tunisian state's tradition of reforms and reformism that has produced a "median society" composed of a large educated and emancipated middle class. This social class is backed by a culture of openness and moderate Islam that is a founding characteristic of the Tunisian state and society ("*Tawnassa*" or "Tunisianity").

Finally, the success of Tunisian civil society actors in building a national dialogue, resulting in the sealing of a “historic compromise” between Islamists and secularists, has served as a guarantee against violence in consolidation of the democratic transition – and consequently, has furthered the resilience of both state and society.

2.1 The centralized bureaucratic tradition

The collapse of the Ben Ali regime did not lead to a collapse of the Tunisian state. The main reason for this lies in the continuity of the administration, as evidenced by the smooth succession of the head of state achieved in a short time span and with exemplary effectiveness. Tunisia’s bureaucratic tradition with its hierarchical administration is grounded in an administrative, political and military elite groomed in modern schools. This tradition goes back to the Polytechnic School of Bardo founded by Ahmad Bey in 1840. Khayreddin Pasha, among others, was educated there before becoming the first Grand Vizier to the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul.

Khayreddin himself founded the Sadiki College in 1875. It was in this institution of modern education that the ruling elite of Tunisia was taught. Habib Bourguiba, the first president of independent Tunisia from 1957 to 1987, was enrolled in the Sadiki College for his primary and secondary studies before passing his baccalaureate at the Carnot High School established by the French and going to France to continue his studies in law. Most senior administrators also pursued their higher education in France, becoming engineers, doctors, lawyers and state clerks, carrying out important administrative and political positions back home in Tunisia.

Other national leaders were educated at the National School of Administration shortly after independence. The national state thus has a structured administration, with a French Napoleonic tradition. It is a somewhat bloated but on the whole effective administration that is capable of providing necessary services to citizens and thus tends to enjoy their trust.

State expenditures for the public administration are particularly high in Tunisia, however. The public sector workforce was further augmented with the 70,000 recruitments made by the Ennahda party between 2010 and 2012 – mainly in the low-skilled categories – and a wage increase of 13 percent on average. This inflated state expenditures from 10.7 percent of GDP in 2010 to 12.5 percent in 2013, equal to nearly 60 percent of tax revenues and 30 percent of the state budget. This, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), places Tunisia “well above” most countries in the world. With 795,000 state employees – including 180,000 in state-owned enterprises – the public sector accounts for almost a quarter of the active workforce.¹⁶

¹⁶ Nabil Ben Ameer, “Fonction publique en Tunisie: Réduire les effectifs et améliorer la productivité”, in *Kapitalis*, 14 October 2014, <http://www.kapitalis.com/kapital/25179>.

This large administration, and particularly lower-level bureaucrats and local authorities, was separate from the circuits of corruption associated with the Ben Ali family. Shortly after the downfall of the Ben Ali regime, the loosening of state authority led to a crisis in the administration, as witnessed by repeated strikes and sit-ins throughout Tunisia, even though basic services were provided without interruption.

Following the revolution, three other defects of the Tunisian administration emerged. These included the spread and “democratization” of corruption; the inexperience and incompetence of Islamist politicians and bureaucrats rehabilitated by the troika government (the alliance between three Tunisian parties – Ennahda, Ettakatol and Congress for the Republic or CPR – that ruled the country between 2011 and 2014); and a retrenchment of state authority that has increased the detachment of certain regions and segments of the population.

According to the president of the anti-corruption body, 90 percent of cases concern the administration, and corruption affects 25 percent of public procurement.¹⁷ This means that the Tunisian administration, which has a tradition of bureaucracy and historical resilience, is increasingly threatened, especially as the liberalization of economic, educational and service industries such as transport risks marginalizing the administration while enhancing corruption within the private sector.

In reality, the issue of administrative reform is linked to that of good governance, incorporating both technical dimensions (recruitment vs. voluntary retirement, reduction of budgetary expenditure, and restructuring of services, control and recovery) and the political dimensions of decentralization and financial autonomy of institutions and regions.

Even if decentralization is *included* in the new constitution, there is still a lack of enforcement texts and bold political reforms that would ensure a definitive interruption of the welfare state of the past, which is arguably no longer sustainable. The other urgency of administrative reform is the question of taxation, which is characterized by high levels of evasion and fraud because of the weak technical and human resources of the administration as well as taxation inequality (withholding tax vs. compulsory income tax return). The inequality of taxation is verified at the level of the civil service which is subjected to a high rate of taxation, while the private sector and all liberal professionals (doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, etc.) effectively pay less taxes when compared to their income. Not to mention the informal sector that escapes state taxes entirely. As a result, tax evasion is costing Tunisia 7 billion dinars annually (approx. 2.4 billion euros).¹⁸

¹⁷ Abderrazek Krimi, “Chawki Tabib: La corruption touche 25% des marchés publics”, in *Kapitalis*, 9 April 2017, <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/?p=90537>.

¹⁸ “Finances: L'évasion fiscale fait perdre à la Tunisie 7 mrd de dinars annuellement”, in *Webmanagercenter*, 7 April 2016, <https://www.webmanagercenter.com/?p=169079>.

The current government intends to launch a new strategy for the modernization of the public administration and public services, through a civil service law that will put an end to the administrative burden and inefficiency of employees in terms of services and benefits.

Despite its fallings, the Tunisian administration continues to hold, thanks to the concerted conjunction of historical tradition, adaption of contemporary democratic values and resistance against internal and external threats that aim to weaken the state and its legitimacy.

2.2 Social reforms and the state reformist tradition

Tunisia, which was part of the Ottoman Empire while enjoying the status of an autonomous "Regency", was crossed, culturally and ideologically, by two reformist currents: a conservative current that wanted to preserve the country's Islamic identity and a modernist current that sought to adapt to the spirit of the times. Khayreddin Pasha led the second trend and spurred political reforms consisting of the abolition of slavery (1842), the adoption of a fundamental pact (1857) recognizing the equality of all citizens irrespective of religion and a liberal Constitution (1860) limiting the absolute power of the authorities.

After the resignation of Khayreddin as chief minister in 1877, the conservative current eventually superseded the modernist movement. Even though the country became a French protectorate in 1881, the reformist movement continued to have much following among the elites.¹⁹ At the beginning of the 20th century, a Tunisian Youth Movement was created based on the Turkish model, leading ultimately to the inception of the nationalist movement with the founding of the Destour liberal party (1920) by Sheikh Abdelaziz Thaâlbi and Bourguiba's Neo Destour (1934).

Once in power, the nationalist elite set out to build an independent state, in accordance with the reformist and modernist model. Thus, a cascade of bold reforms emerged and transformed the social and political landscape of Tunisia. Among these was the adoption of a Personal Status Code that abolished polygamy and instituted civil divorce, giving women the right to choose and decide on marital status. This measure, revolutionary for an Islamic country, was followed by a reform of the judiciary that abolished the religious courts and by a reform of the schools (1959) that established their free and compulsory nature. In addition, a health reform was introduced in 1960, authorizing contraception and family planning, not to mention the voting rights granted to women in 1956 and the right of all Tunisians to decent housing. Through these reforms, the state transformed Tunisian society from top to bottom, stimulating modernity and the rise of a larger

¹⁹ See multiple historians' researches, particularly those of Béchir Tlili: *Les rapports culturels et idéologiques entre l'Orient et l'Occident, en Tunisie, au XIXème siècle (1830-1880)*, Tunis, Université de Tunis, 1974; and *Etudes d'histoire sociale tunisienne du XIXème siècle*, Tunis, Université de Tunis, 1974.

middle class. Reforms and reformism of the state have produced a “median society” composed of a large, educated and emancipated middle class, backed by a culture of openness and moderate Islam – founding characteristics of “Tunisianity” or “*Tawnassa*”.

However, these reforms were imposed from above, led by the charismatic leader Bourguiba, who monopolized power and the political scene for more than three decades. Reformism was transformed into an ideology of the state and provoked a backlash in the form of the emergence of the Islamist current that reconnects with the conservative reformist spirit and challenges the legitimacy of Bourguiba’s legacy.

In spite of this opposition and criticisms against the excessive centralization of power under Bourguiba, the moderate Islamist-leaning Ennahda party has recently changed its opposition to the modernist reforms, deciding to separate the religious from the political. Ennahda was thus transformed into a political, civil and democratic Islamic party, following the model of Christian Democratic parties in Europe.

This new orientation, which remains to be proved by political practices in the long term, is not new to Tunisian Islam, a moderate and consensual form of Islam belonging to the Malikite and Asharite currents. The orientation is also derived from the historical openness attached to Tunisia’s position as “crossroads of civilizations” within the Mediterranean, situated as it is between East and West.

This reformist spirit has not dried up over time, as demonstrated by the adoption, in July 2017, of a new law on violence against women.²⁰ Pressure to enact the new law resulted from a national feminist movement in support the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Additionally, in 2014, Tunisia withdrew its reservations over the full implementation of the CEDAW Convention, including reservations relating to the transmission of nationality (Article 9 (2)), marriage and divorce (Article 16) and the choice of residence (Article 15 (4)).²¹ An additional step has been taken thanks to the initiative of the President of the Republic to create a National Commission to review discriminatory articles at the legal level. This tackles the inequality of inheritance (a woman inherits half of what a man does) and the prohibition of marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man, in order to ensure total equality between the sexes.

The implementation and spirit of these reforms allows us to rethink state–society relations, approaching the social contract from a new perspective, as the reforms

²⁰ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Tunisia: Landmark Step to Shield Women from Violence*, 27 July 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/node/307144>.

²¹ Khedija Arfaoui, *Tunisian Women Take Major Steps to Implement the CEDAW*, 9 March 2014, <http://www.icanpeacework.org/?p=990>; UN Women website, *Declarations, Reservations and Objections to CEDAW*, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reservations-country.htm>.

promoted by the state are not only vertical. They also correspond to an evolution of society, since the status of women has changed considerably in recent years. This is evidenced by the higher female success rate compared to that of men in schools and universities, with the school attendance rate of girls in and their success rate outperforming that of their male contemporaries. In addition, there is an increasing rate of women's access to high economic and political decision-making positions, estimated to be 30 percent across all sectors and 40 percent in the public sector, not to mention their active participation in the revolution and social protest movements.²²

The reformist symbiosis between state and society does not, of course, exclude the persistence of inequalities in the relations between men and women, especially rural women who are the pivot of the agriculture sector and yet receive less in terms of wages, inheritance and political participation, from which they are often excluded. That said, the situation is likely to change in the upcoming years based on planned reforms on many levels including law, women rights, the new education reform that has been going on for three years, the growing role of the media – old and new – and the blooming of spaces for cultural and visual expression, such as the Street Art, theatre, painting and cinema outpouring in public spaces, free from the censorship of the old regime.

2.3 Civil society, national dialogue and the historical compromise between Islamists and secularists

The rise and expansion of Tunisian civil society is the result of a long-term historical process that dates back to the mid-20th century, with intellectual debates on the role of the state in implementing legal and political reforms. Throughout the 20th century, the public space was strengthened by news coverage via newspapers and other information media (radio, TV, Internet), as well as the emergence of political parties and labour unions. The French protectorate and the post-independence Tunisian state have tried to control the public space using repressive measures, but they have also contributed to its expansion through the generalization of education and the spread of popular culture.

Civil society was closely monitored, but it imposed itself through associations and other organizations representative of trade unions and political tendencies that resisted colonial ideology and the dogma of single party rule imposed by the Bourguibian regime. During the 1970s and 1980s, the culture of human rights asserted itself and the ruling body had to contend with the first Arab association for the defence of human rights, namely the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), established in 1976. The contradiction between the authoritarian police state and Tunisia's growing pluralistic society became clear and is directly linked to the exercise of individual and public freedoms.

²² Tunisia's National Institute of Statistics (INS), *Rapport national genre Tunisie 2015*, May 2016, <http://www.ins.nat.tn/fr/node/3123>.

The collapse of the Ben Ali regime paved the way for the consolidation of civil society. As a multi-stakeholder structure for all non-governmental organizations, civil society took part in democratic public life without directly engaging in the electoral process. Therefore, it was granted the status of partner, above political conflicts. Diverse and pluralistic, Tunisian civil society is composed of many actors, the most important of which is the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT).

For historical reasons related to the role it played in the national movement, since its creation in 1946 – and later, as a structure of reception and protection of freedoms during the reign of Bourguiba and Ben Ali – the UGTT has enjoyed a special prestige in society. It is seen as the essential partner in social and political negotiations, especially since it includes trade unionists representing different socio-professional categories (workers, employees, civil servants, teachers, doctors, etc.). Practically nothing is done in Tunisia without the UGTT. Political actors are aware of this and have become increasingly so during circumstances of alliance or conflict with the UGTT. Such was the case during the reign of the troika, with the tripartite government dominated by the Islamist Ennahda party.

During the sit-ins at Bardo in 2013 and 2014 (Bardo I and Bardo II), the political opposition and civil society – whose pivot is the UGTT – exerted strong pressure after the assassination of two leftist deputies, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, calling on the Islamist government to resign. They were successful in launching the National Dialogue negotiations that finalized the constitution and formed an independent government to organize free elections in 2014, won by the secularist party Nidaa Tounes. This result was the product of a genuine national dialogue between Islamists and secularists organized by a quartet formed by the UGTT and three other civil society organizations: the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the bar association (Tunisian Order of Lawyers) and LTDH.

The quartet was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 for its role in the success of the national dialogue and the implementation of a “historic compromise” between the Islamists and secularists in Tunisia.²³ This compromise made it possible for Tunisia to overcome the bipolarization of political life, avoid the scenario of political violence, adopt a consensual and pluralistic constitution, organize free elections and ultimately ensure the peaceful transfer of power after Islamist parties lost the 2014 parliamentary elections.

National dialogue resulted in a consolidation of the democratic transition through the perseverance of civil society and political parties. Dialogue continued with the signing of the “Carthage Pact” in August 2016 by eight political parties gathered in

²³ Maha Yahya, “Great Expectations in Tunisia”, in *Carnegie Papers*, March 2016, p. 3, <http://ceip.org/2aWmbT2>; Nobel Prize, *The Nobel Peace Prize for 2015: National Dialogue Quartet*, 10 December 2015, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2015/press.html.

a coalition. The pact led to the creation of a national unity government with the support of the two trade unions of employees (UGTT) and of employers (UTICA). This is a political achievement and proof of the resilience of civil society, which has overcome individual and partisan interests to protect the young democratic experience born in the wake of the 2010–11 revolution.

The national dialogue has yet to be translated into action on the social and economic levels, which remain significant challenges to both state and society resilience in Tunisia. If left unchecked, the combination of socio-economic woes and declining trust and political legitimacy of state actors risks undermining Tunisia's fragile transition, potentially leading to a failure of the democratic experiment.

Conclusion

Resilience, which is both resistance and rehabilitation to new situations and challenges, can be seen in the particular case of Tunisia through the issues and challenges of security and terrorism, the economy of smuggling and corruption as well as social protest movements. These are the three major challenges faced by both state and society. For each challenge, the state and society have developed strategies of defence and survival which make it possible to outline and contain the problem in order to avoid the collapse of the social and political order. The battle is never won in advance, and challenges constantly threaten the construction that is taking place. However, there are safe and robust protection approaches that make it possible to climb the slope and overcome obstacles, whatever the nature of the threat. Among the means of transcending these challenges is Tunisia's bureaucratic tradition, which enables the state to maintain itself through the rational organization and continuity of services. In addition, state-driven reforms in relation to the evolution of society are likely to create a new dynamic that consolidates the process of change and democratic transition. Finally, the dynamics of Tunisian civil society, the result of a long historical process, allowed for a genuine national dialogue between various political actors which succeeded in sealing a "historic compromise" and thus avoiding the risk of violence or an abrupt failure of the democratic transition.

To summarize, Tunisia, which has been ingenious in establishing political dialogue, is currently at a turning point faced with a new challenge that may well overshadow the significant progress achieved so far. This challenge relates to the urgent need to reduce unemployment and social and regional inequalities. If Tunisia succeeds in bringing together a pact of economic and social solidarity, it will not only be able to reduce the protest movements that are blocking the production apparatus and weakening the legitimacy of state institutions, but also restore the authority of the state on the basis of a more inclusive and sustainable social contract. Ultimately, the task at hand is that of building and reinforcing trust between state and society, as it is this trust that acts as the fundamental glue keeping the social and political-institutional order intact. Only by strengthening

the bonds of trust and mutual responsibility can the Tunisian state and society hope to build a more resilience future. Identifying and strengthening those indigenous actors that have characterized Tunisia's historical processes of state formation and consolidation, and that have allowed the country to advance and overcome internal and external challenges, should be considered a starting point to help foster state and societal resilience in Tunisia, while simultaneously also supporting the country's democratic transition.

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