



*Department of Political Science  
Major in Politics, Philosophy, Economics*

*Chair in Political Sociology*

**PUBLIC MOBILIZATION IN TUNISIA:  
AN UNCONVENTIONAL PATH TO SOCIAL AND  
POLITICAL CHANGE**

THESIS SUPERVISOR

Prof. Michele Sorice

CANDIDATE

Benedetta Zocchi

Matr.073732

ACADEMIC YEAR 2015/2016

PUBLIC MOBILIZATION IN TUNISIA:  
AN UNCONVENTIONAL PATH TO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE

Table of contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1 Political transformation in Tunisia.....</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 The multicultural roots of Tunisia.....	5
1.2 Bourguiba and the making up of national identity .....	6
1.3 Ben Ali's regime and the trick of modernity.....	8
1.4 The fall of the regime: the Jasmine Revolution .....	9
1.5 The end of the revolution and the path to stabilization .....	11
<b>2 Inside the Jasmine Revolution: actors and strategies of public mobilization.....</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 Women mobilization before and during the Revolution .....	13
2.1.1 Women between institutional and civic emancipation .....	13
2.1.2 Women versus the "Feminist state" .....	15
2.1.3 Democratic Association of Tunisian women .....	16
2.2 Youth as the driving force of the uprising.....	17
2.2.1 Education and unemployment: the crisis of Ben Ali's generation.....	17
2.2.2 The epiphany of the 17th December and the beginning of the Revolution of Dignity. ....	18
2.2.3 The youth and the Revolution of Dignity: civil society between street-and cyber-activism.....	19
2.3 Trade Unions: monitoring civic and institutional consents.....	21
2.3.1 Tunisian General Union of Labour: between notoriety and internal contrast.....	21
2.3.2 Trade Unions during and after the revolution.....	22
2.4 Tunisian civil society: merging interests for a bigger struggle .....	23
<b>3 The digital elite and the role of social media in the Revolution .....</b>	<b>25</b>
3.1 Tunisian ICT Development: modernization and control.....	25
3.2 Cyber activism and shared patterns of discontent .....	26
3.3 The blogs of the Revolution .....	28
<b>4 Putting the Tunisian experience in perspective: an unconventional attitude to political change.....</b>	<b>31</b>
4.1 Multiculturalism, moderation and pragmatism .....	31
4.2 A moderate Islamic tradition .....	32
4.3 A moderate military tradition .....	34
4.4 The prerogative of dialogue over conflict .....	36
4.5 The social modernity of the Tunisian population.....	38
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Riassunto .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>49</b>

## **Introduction**

The term “Jasmine Revolution” has been used to identify the wave of public mobilization, which in 2011 led to the establishment of a democratic government in Tunisia. First of the series of popular pro-democratic revolts in the Middle East and North Africa, the Tunisian uprising has been praised for the active engagement of non-institutionalized actors, the efficiency and moderation of the means of mobilization and the successful achievement of political and social change. These three elements have been remarkably recognized as the ones distinguishing the Tunisian experience from the other 2011 Arab Uprisings. Far from turning into a fight for power, the Tunisian revolution has represented the embodiment of the Arab Spring’s purpose, and a singular example of its complete democratic fulfilment. Surely, in evaluating the quality of the concrete achievements of this democratic transition one may argue that most of the socio-economic issues for which the revolution started in the first place, are persisting nowadays in the country, even though the political administration has changed. However, it would be naïve to analyse the quality of the Tunisian Democracy in such an early phase of stabilization, and we should wait for at least a decade to see the effective results. At present, what can be evaluated is the extent to which the Tunisian revolution has represented an unconventional experience of social revolt in the Arab world both in its modalities and in its outcomes.

In order to understand why and how the civil and institutional framework of Tunisia is so different from other countries in the Maghreb, my discussion about political and social development will include a background analysis of the ancient and modern history of the nation, a description of the crucial actors and strategies involved in the revolution and a focus on the role of the Web as shared platform of discontent and instrument of mobilization. Finally, in the last chapter, I will conclude with a general overview of the main elements that characterize the peculiar attitude of the Tunisian population towards social and political change.

The aim of this dissertation is to discuss the Jasmine Revolution in light of the most peculiar elements that made it a singular example of public mobilization in the context of the Arab Spring and to identify the reasons that have permitted such a moderate and inclusive political transition. Hitherto, I will argue that the success of the Tunisian Revolution is profoundly connected to a history of political modernity and pragmatism, a multicultural and advanced social background and the adoption of modern means of mobilization. It must be clear that I am not here attempting to evaluate the results of this social and political transition, nor am I taking a position in the debate over whether the Tunisian Democracy is an efficient one or not. Conversely, this paper will adopt a descriptive-analytic approach to discuss a peculiar historical fact in view of both its immediate and remote causes, the actors and the strategies involved, and the originality of the means adopted. At a second stage of this dissertation, I will also spend time on putting the Tunisia experience in a wider perspective,

considering the most evident anomalies that have led its political and social framework to evolve differently from other countries in North Africa and how they have influenced the making of and outcomes of the revolution. In the following chapters, the Tunisian society will appear as an “alien” in the Arab world; a strange mixture of Oriental and Occidental stimuli that have influenced the population since the earliest stages of its formation. This mixture prevented the creation of powerful extremisms and the establishment of a hybrid society that moved alongside the guidelines of pragmatism, modernization and dignity to push forward a political dream. Whereas pragmatism and modernity were crucial in the development of the means of mobilization, the reconquering of dignity was the common real objective bonding the whole population in the protest against the authoritarian government and in the achievement of the democratic transition.

## **1 Political transformation in Tunisia**

Since the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, Tunisia has taken important steps toward democratization becoming one of the few examples of Arab Spring successes. The reasons why Tunisia, differently from its neighbour countries, has been able to build stability out of the chaos of the revolts are many and rooted in both modern and ancient history. The settlement and interconnection of different civilizations contributed to make up a mixed and multicultural population, which always rejected to mirror the traditional identities of the Arab World, but rather, adapted its political character to the “pragmatic accommodation to the limitation and allocation of resources” (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2014, p. 234). Modern history saw subsequent Tunisian leaders promoting and sometimes even exasperating their pragmatism, increasing the desire of the population to find an ideological belonging. Indeed, the existence and persistence of different ethnic and cultural communities in the territory has not prevented the proliferation of a post-colonial nationalist sentiment. Right after the end of the colonial experience, president Bourguiba was the crucial political figure able to build a strong secular nation without relying on the very much popular Pan-Arab claims of the period, but rather focusing its politics on secularization and economic liberalization. Bourguiba ruled his country on the belief that a strong nation had to be independent and separated from Islam. Nevertheless, not surprisingly, his policy of eradication of the independent conservative religious unions through torture and execution only led to an increase in fundamentalist feelings. The following ruler of the country, President Ben Ali, succeeded Bourguiba with a coup d'état and gained the citizens consensus by promoting a gradual transition to Democracy. However, the concreteness of Ben Ali's ruling flowed far away from his promises, as he completely neglected the real problems of the country and based his government on political repression and international show-off of prosperity. The bad-administration of the growing unemployment problem; the rumors of corruptions related to both his family and himself; together with the absence of political representation, were the grounds over which the revolution was constructed in December 2010.

The Jasmine Revolution was the first and the less violent process of changing regime in the 21th Century in North Africa. Many others will follow and will be considerably more brutal. In January 2014, Tunisia had a new democratic constitution and in October of the same year, its first internationally recognized free and fair elections for a new government. Even though the country is still struggling with many social and economic problems and many see in today's government a masked perpetuation of the old regime; Tunisian Revolution remains one of the most positive examples of public mobilization and democratization in the Arab World.

## **1.1 The multicultural roots of Tunisia**

A discourse of political transformation must necessarily start with an analysis of Tunisian multicultural development. Thanks to its optimal geopolitical position, Tunisia has always played a crucial role in the Mediterranean. In the course of history, many different civilizations conquered and settled in the country. In particular, many historians such as Philip Naylor (2015) have strongly associated the interest in Tunisian territory with the strategic location of the city of Carthage. The city's position made it the centre of maritime trade in the Mediterranean as all ships crossing the sea necessarily needed to navigate between the coasts of Tunisia and Sicily. In 11000 B.C., the first important civilization to settle in Tunisia were the Phoenicians. According to Naylor (2015), The Phoenicians were able to make Carthage the most important naval port of the Mediterranean and defended it until a stronger power put its eyes on it. The three Punic Wars ended with the total destruction of the city and its annexation to the Roman Empire in 146 B.C. Carthage remained under the Romans until the Arab conquest in 648-669. From this period onwards, different Arab and Berber dynasties governed the country until in 1574 Tunisia was conquered by the Turks and annexed to the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans will remain in Tunisia until the 19th Century. During this period, Tunisia was ruled by the Husseini dynasty of "Beys". In 1857, Mohamed Bey proclaimed a document called the "Fundamental Pact", which affirmed rules and conditions regulating the relationship between the Bey and his subjects. According to Nathan J. Brown (2002), this extremely important document paved the way for the draw up of a constitution which will be granted in 1861 and represents the first written constitution in the Arab world. Prefaced by a declaration of rights, the constitution of 1861 proclaimed a hereditary monarchy with the presence of a Prime Minister to check and balance the role of the Bey. The constitution also established a Grand Council: a body combining judicial, legislative, fiscal and administrative functions. The document remained in force for only three years, but represented the first attempt of an Islamic country to establish a written legal, political and institutional framework to protect the subjects and operate some degree of control on the Bey. In 1881, the French troops occupied the Tunisian territory forcing the Bey to acknowledge Tunisia as a French protectorate in 1883. By the end of the 19th century, Tunisia distinguished between a wide set of different ethnic communities, including Turks, Arabs, Berbers and Europeans. In the view of the academic Moha Ennaji (2014), the very much different ruling of Romans, Arabs, Turks and Frenches contributed to shape an open-minded and multicultural population proud of the rich mixture of foreign and native influences that build their national identity brick by brick. Here lays one feature that makes Tunisia unique in the MENA territory: the proudness of diversity. Tunisian people never tried to blame or deny their complex and mixed origins. On the contrary, they took advantage of the strongholds of different civilization to build a national identity. Therefore, differently from other

Middle-Eastern and North-African communities, Tunisians seems not to be looking for a pure Arab, National or Islamic identity. This complex and unique social heritage is a necessary element to consider in discussing the 2011 Arab Spring mobilization as multiculturalism played an important role in the process of democratic transformation of the country. “In opposition to assimilationist or integrationist policies privileging the linguistic, religious, or cultural diversities of a single community, multiculturalism insists the state should protect and promote the identities of multiple ethnic and religious cultural groups within the polity” (Ennaji 2014, p. 17). In this sense, multiculturalism permits and promotes the respect and recognition of singular groups and it is therefore one of the most important strongholds that led Tunisian population to demand, and ultimately obtain their Democracy.

## **1.2 Bourguiba and the making up of national identity**

Decades after the establishment of the French Protectorate, Tunisians were still looking for their identity and for the creation of an independent and modern nation. The Middle East expert Dina Bishara (2014) describes the process that lead Tunisia to the independence as moderate and combined effort of political and labour movements. The Destour Party was created in 1920 with the aim of liberating Tunisia from French domination. In 1932, the party split and the Noe-Destour party under the leadership of Habib Bourguiba became dominant on the political scene. In the meantime, a well-organize labour movement emerged and spread around the country. According to Bishara (2014), these two forces worked together to finally reach independence in 1956. In that same year, Habib Bourguiba was declared the first president of independent Tunisia, established as a Republic.

In a paper presented at the Congressional Research Service, Arieff and Humund (2015) have argued that Bourguiba built the Tunisian Republic according to a strictly pragmatic approach applied to a rigorously secular policy. As the first to rule over an independent Tunisia, he felt responsible for the final recognition and establishment of a national Tunisian identity. “Bourguiba understood the national identity as being shaped by an openness to European and Mediterranean influences resulting from the repeated invasions and reinforced by the colonial interregnum”( Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2014, p. 235). European culture was part of Tunisian culture. A policy of reconciliation rather than xenophobia had to be implemented to construct a modern nation. Even though Islam was the official national religion, the government maintained its secular identity. Bourguiba himself governed the country following the precepts of liberalism, rationalism and secularity. More specifically, he believed that the mixture of Tunisian culture and French influences could enable the Nation to evolve and develop by providing the tools for economic regeneration and social modernization. The peculiar character of the Tunisian social and political identity was not devaluated by other Arab states.

According to Bourguiba, Tunisia was no more Arab than French, Turk, Roman or Berber. Arab identity was one among the others as Tunisia engaged with many and different foreign actors who contributed to shape and influence its formation. Inevitably, he always maintained ambiguous relations with other Arab leaders. While the rest of the Middle East was looking at Nasser as the leader of Pan-Arab unity, Bourguiba preferred to maintain its strong alliances with France and the U.S. and necessarily advocated for Arab moderation toward Israel. The call for pragmatism rather than ideology is the element for which Bourguiba is remembered as a unique leader in the Pan-Arab North Africa.

Another characteristic, which strongly marked Bourguiba's ruling, is his social modernity. In 1956, the Code of Personal Status issued a series of progressive laws aimed at diminishing the gap between men and women in different areas and establishing several women's rights. The Code gave women virtually equality with men, banned polygamy, allowed women to initiate divorce, introduced a minimum legal age for marriage and established women's right of education. In "Family Law Reforms in the Arab World", Charrad (2012) describes the document as remarkably radical and innovative for an Arab country and extremely criticized in the Arab world as blasphemy. Nonetheless, he also points out that the code will represent only the first of the many evidences of the political effort of Tunisian authority to recognize and enhance the role of the women as an integral and fundamental part of the community life. In a first moment, Bourguiba had been able to turn Tunisia into a singular example of modernity in the Arab world. Unfortunately in his later 15 years of ruling, his tendency to centralize power, accompanied by a considerable deterioration of the economy, led to the formation of an impatient liberal, anti-authoritarian opposition. Moreover, By the 1980s, Bourguiba started to become paranoid about his regime being threatened by an incoming Islamic revival and ordered tremendous assaults on the members of the Islamic Tendency Movement. In the meantime, high unemployment and low wages were devastating the country. Deeming it as the ultimate solution, on 7th November 1987 a constitutional coup started by Prime Minister Zine el Abidine Ben Ali deposed Bourguiba on the ground of mental incapacity to carry out his governmental duties. For several decades, Bourguiba was the centre of Tunisian political life, firstly as the father of independence and then as the father of the state. On the same day of the constitutional coup, Ben Ali became president and remained in power until the revolutionary mobilizations of 2011. This new leader continued to promote the filo-Western policy initiated by his predecessor focusing his ruling on strong alliance with occidental partners, increasing penetration into global markets and promoting secular values. Unfortunately, "In an almost Orwellian way, he cultivated and manipulated the country's international image as a modern technocratic regime" (Anderson 2011). In the meantime,

poverty and unemployment were devastating the country and the population were begging to suffer from political and social inefficiency.

### **1.3 Ben Ali's regime and the trick of modernity**

Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali was the chief of military security in Tunisia from 1964 to 1974. After a short period working for the embassy of Morocco, he was appointed head of National Security and subsequently became ambassador of Poland. Once he returned, he started his political career in Tunisia being firstly nominated state secretary for National Security and subsequently minister of the interior. President Bourguiba noticed his patriotic commitment and in 1986 appointed him Prime Minister. Once Ben Ali, following the coup d'état, ascended to Presidential Office in 1987, people expected greater recognition and openness towards religious groups and a slightly less filo-occidental attitude and indeed, in the first period of his rule, President Ben Ali made all the right steps. He implemented a National Pact, between government and opposition promoting what Perkins (2014) describes as a program of economic liberalization and gradual transition to Democracy. To give a sign of moderation, he released many political prisoners from jail, legalized several political parties and abolished presidency for life. While in foreign policy he aimed at maintaining the path initiated by Bourguiba, in domestic policy he wanted people to see him as different and innovative. He reformed and reconstructed the Socialist Destourian Party according to its new technocratic and liberalizing project and renamed it Constitutional Democratic Rally. The President initially tried to legitimize his rule by giving higher recognition to the country Islamic groups. However, even though he was expected to start a process of integration, in 1990 he started to launch signs of disapproval towards the most important Islamic movements. Accusing them to threaten domestic security and to practice political violence, in 1991, Ben Ali called for the elimination of the Islamic forces and banned the Nahada party. In analysing this second phase, the journalist Lisa Anderson (2011) has noticed that the President was exactly following the secular and pro-Western policy of its predecessor, continuing to deny the strong religious identity of the country. It was not by chance that Islamists soon started to claim, "The Government was prostituting the country for foreign exchange" (Anderson 2011). Ben Ali, like Bourguiba before him, failed in finding a compromise between his economic ambitions and the citizens' cultural and religious stances. Nevertheless, under Ben Ali rule, Tunisia experienced a steady process of economic growth, especially enhanced by a considerable investment in Tourism and several economic reforms. Unfortunately, on the other side of the coin, unemployment remained high and the interior of the country was much poorer than the coastal areas. In "Political Transition in Tunisia", Arieff and Humund (2015) have rightly argued that Bourguiba and Ben Ali

concentrated so much Tunisia politics on creating a perception of prosperity that they forgot to deal with the real problems of the country. However, these questions were hardly perceived by the public sphere. As many Arab leaders before him, Ben Ali monopolized the media. The face of the president was visible all across the country in huge posters and advertising. He used this propaganda to make people all around the country acknowledge his political commitment. He did not rule Tunisia. He was Tunisia. However, in the last decade of the 20th century, the support for Ben Ali started to decrease. Indeed, according to Arief and Humund (2015), the suppression of Islamic forces, the exasperated foreign policy and the scarce dealing with important internal issues were crucial in the spreading of growing discontent among the population. Under the surface of show-off politics, people also started to be more and more conscious of the personalist and predatory objectives of Ben Ali's family.

For several decades, Tunisians had looked for their identity struggling to mix Arab and European influences, subject to authoritarian show-off policies that denied the more complex realities of the country. In the meantime, the Nation was dilapidated by corruption, unemployment and poverty. Many would argue that it was thanks to one precise man that the situation changed. A normal citizen, suffering for government's inaccuracies and exhausted from political passivity. On December 17th 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the governor office. This extreme and provocative act woke up the passive population first in Tunisia and then all around the Middle East. Bouazizi died of his injuries on 4th January 2014. Ten days later, the government was forced to resign and he was celebrated as a national hero. Bouazizi is the martyr of the revolution and the initiator of a process of political mobilization that will change North African and Middle Eastern history forever.

#### **1.4 The fall of the regime: the Jasmine Revolution**

In the last paragraphs, I have analysed the most important historical events that marked Tunisia's political development. At the dawn of the 21st century, the country was facing a remarkable economic crisis and a stunning unemployment rate. Ben Ali had focused its entire policy on foreign investment and on the enhancement of the private sector. Consequently, tourism considerably increased the wealth of cities on the coastal areas. In those places, Tunisia appeared like a prosperous nation, on the path of industrialization and modernity. Unfortunately, in the internal areas, the country was still underdeveloped, un-urbanized and poor. This scenario was even worse if one considers that the population could not count on any political representation. Ben Ali completely repressed the opposition and was able to keep silent and suppress the few riots that took place around the nation. Political passivity seemed to pervade the population. In "Political Transition in Tunisia"; Arief and Humund (2015) describe the last period of the dictatorship as a moment in which citizens were unable

to participate in politics and corruption was tolerated as an ordinary phenomenon. An entire generation was born and raised under Ben Ali's regime and the previous one was still waiting for the fulfilment of the democratic transition he promised when he became President. In 2008, the government had its first warning sign when, in Redeyef, riots spread out among groups of young unemployed. The protest started when the CPG rigged the competition for job application by hiring exclusively candidates supporting Ben Ali. Revolts were brutally repressed by the police and ended with hundreds of arrests and four people killed. Even though the government was far from being concerned, in these events, an embryonal process of public mobilization was put in motion and a passive population was waking up.

The 17th December 2010 was a revolutionary day in Tunisian history. On this day, a man immolated himself for the sake of his people. Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi was a 26-years old street vendor born and raised in a small city called Sidi Bouzid. His activity was the only source of income for him and the eight component of his family. On 17th December 2010, during a market inspection, a police women sequestered some of the goods Bouazizi was selling, claiming that he did not have the necessary permission. The men tried to protest but ended to be verbally humiliate and slapped by the woman. When he went to the local governor office to denounce the fact, he was not even received. Bouazizi's story was not different from many other stories of Tunisian's citizens. He left high school to support his family, and abandoned all his ambitions to open a frustrating activity that did not satisfied him. The act he did on that same 17th December will put in motion an unstoppable domino effect in the whole Arab world. Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the governor office of his city. This action had an incredible resonance all around the nation. Tunisians mirrored in this man desperation, especially young people, facing his identical struggles. Suddenly Mohamed Bouazizi became a hero. He was the men who stood up against a corrupted government; the man who made himself being listened.

According to Lisa Anderson (2011), Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation was the key symbolic event that led to the spreading out of riots all across the country. Initially, the protest started in Sidi Bouzid, Bouazizi's hometown. In this first phase, the revolts in the south remained isolated as National state-controlled media remained silent in order for the protest to remain unexpanded. This did not prevented the legend of Bouazizi to spread all around the country. Soon, that ordinary man who set himself on fire became the ultimate representation of courage. According to the BBC (2011), in the only month of December, two other persons committed protest suicide: on the 22th, a protester climbed on an electricity pylon and electrocute himself. Later on, other men killed himself out of his difficulty to pay a debt with the state. These events increased anger among the population that saw these men as martyrs of the revolution. Nonetheless, the channels of information were changing. As

we will see in later chapters, social networks and forums were key elements to mobilize collective action and expand the revolution. On December 27th, the protest reached the Capital where more than 1000 citizens went on the street celebrating the martyrs and convicting the government. Initially, Ben Ali condemned the riots and did not consider people's demands. As Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2014) have point out, also in this occasion his main concert was international criticism. In order to comply with foreign diplomatic monitoring, which accused him of unproductive management of the revolts; he fired the minister of the interior, but continued to repress riots with violence. About a month from the start of the protest, finally Ben-Ali decided to comply with popular requests and offered concession in terms of social and economic reforms. Nevertheless, the revolution was already over the regime. Ben Ali was the embodiment of his unmaintained promises. As he did not grant Tunisia with a democratic government, Tunisians decided to take Democracy with their own hands removing any symbol of the old regime. On 14th January, after even the army had abandoned him to side with the people, Ben Ali was forced to flee the country. He announced new elections in six months and declared the state of emergency. The revolution had reached its objective. Tunisia were free and ready to be renewed.

## **1.5 The end of the revolution and the path to stabilization**

After President Ben Ali's departure, the former minister of Finance, Mohamed Ghannouchi took the guide of the country. The presence of another RCD leader led to a further escalation of riots, as people still expected a radical change. Violence and demonstrations continued in the Capital and in the major cities while the revolution was starting to be economically unsustainable for the citizens. Many houses were destroyed and people were running out of basic food and health commodities. On January 17th, the residual political forces that have remained in the country attempted to create a government. It had to be formed by a coalition including members of the opposition parties, members of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) and Civil Society representatives. Arieff and Humund (2015) have recognized in this government an attempt to unite the three stronger political forces of the country: youth, workers and opposition. However, the penetration and the collaboration with members of the RCD, warned the citizens that the political administration was re-shuffling but not mutating. New demonstrations against the national unity government took place following the 17th of January and UGTT representatives left the government the day after it was formed. On 20 January 2011, the government legalized all the banned parties and freed all the political prisoners; and on 7 February, the police forces were commanded to retire. However, these actions were not sufficient. People demanded for the complete cleaning of the government from former administration's members, and revolts continued to hit the country. Riots and demonstrations started to differentiate:

some were manifesting for a political change, some for low salaries, some for high taxes. What is sure is that every Tunisian citizen had a reason to protest for. After several evidences of public discontent, on 27 February, Ghannouchi resigned and was replaced by Béji Caïd Essebsi. On 9 March, the Rally for Constitutional Democracy was dissolved and the following month Ben Ali was charged with 18 different accuses. The first post-revolutionary elections for the constituent assembly were held on 23 October and ended with the victory of the moderate Islamist Ennahada Party. The constitution was adopted on 26 January 2014. This new constitution, presented Tunisia to the world as a new-born Democracy: it was based on a secular framing but recognized Tunisian's Muslim identity without legitimizing it as political. In the document, there is no mention of Islamic law, nor of Sharia. On the contrary, Tunisia is described as a "Civil State based on Citizenship, the Will of the People and the Supremacy of Law" (Tunisian Constitution, 2014). Many saw in the Tunisian case the beginning of the end of North African Dictatorships. On 23 November, presidential election were held with the victory of the new formed party Nidaa Tounes. The party was founded by former Prime Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi as "a big tent to rally diverse opponents of political Islam" (Congressional Research Service 2015) and a response to post-revolutionary political disorders. The second party with the majority of seats was the Islamist Al-Nahada. In the transitional period between 2011 and 2013, Al-Nahada had created a Troika with other two minor secular parties in order to underline their moderation and their willingness to compromise with other political forces. On 26 October 2017, the secular party Nida Tunes won the elections and it is still in power nowadays.

Five years after the Jasmine Revolution, Tunisia is still facing a high unemployment rate, and a significant rural-urban gap. Even though the Nation has experienced considerably less violence than other transitional countries and has reached a political stability (which appears to be still very far in countries such as Egypt, Libya or Syria); Tunisian are still waiting for the concretization of the constitution and for the consolidation of Democracy. With no doubts, the government still faces many problems to "unlock economic growth and job creation" (Congressional Research Service 2015); but Tunisia is yet considered a model for democratic progress all around the Arab World.

## **2 Inside the Jasmine Revolution: actors and strategies of public mobilization**

In the previous chapter, I have introduced the process of historical transformation of Tunisian politics, particularly referring to the main elements, which have taken the country to experience the revolutionary events of 2011. Hitherto, I have analysed the political transition from a mostly institutional point of view, mainly focusing on the most relevant historical factors that contributed to invert the status quo in the country. The Jasmine Revolution has been a combined effort of governmental opposition forces and non-institutionalized actors' engagement. The focus of this second chapter is exactly to identify the main non-governmental agents that took part in the revolution initiating a resilient process of public mobilization with the adoption of different strategies. Hither, the unit of analysis is the citizen. Indeed, the long-dated lack of political representation led to a process of de-alignment from party representation. Consequently, individuals started to rely their civic orientations and aspirations on identity politics. Especially starting from Ben Ali government, a variety of Civil Society organizations started to protest for higher status recognition. Most of them were interest-based or status-based groups. At the same time, an already well-rooted labour movement was becoming more and more influencing. Although these groups were focusing on the enhancing of singular categories' positions, they became the most important actors in the revolution, promoting wider values of democratization and human rights protection. In this section, I will identify the key actors that converged to put in motion the uprisings: Women, Youth and Trade Unions. Throughout different forms of participations, these three very large samples of the population were active both at the institutional and Civil Society levels in setting off a process of public mobilization.

### **2.1 Women mobilization before and during the Revolution**

#### *2.1.1 Women between institutional and civic emancipation*

African and Middle Eastern States are rarely celebre for their commitment to gender equality. Conversely, since the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, Tunisia distinguished for a high and peculiar recognition of women status both in domestic and political life. Alongside with the alignment to occidental economic models and with the making of strong alliances with Western countries, Tunisian first republican government necessarily had to comply with higher human rights standards. Immediately after the independence, on 13 August 1956, Bourguiba, proclaimed the Code of Personal Status (CPS). As I have already explained in the previous chapter, the CPS completely mutated the legal and domestic structure of gender roles within the society and the family and represented a unique document in the region of North Africa and in the age of Pan Arabism. In "Family Law Reforms in the Arab World", Charrad (2012) explains that this particular framework

also permitted women to participate in politics since a remarkably early phase of the country's post-independence stabilization. Women acquired the right of voting in 1959 and for the first time in 1983, a woman was appointed minister. As one can notice, the Tunisian legal system has regarded the role of the women as an important resource for both the domestic and civic frameworks. Part of the reason for this peculiar attitude towards women's rights stayed in the fact that Bourguiba and Ben Ali cared for maintaining their status of gender equality's promoters to delight their Western partners and, nonetheless, although women rights were very clear on paper, their enforcement in everyday life was much more complicated. Tunisian pre-revolutionary society remained traditional and, for some aspects, conservative in attributing to the women a secondary role in the household. Women could have a career, and enjoy equal rights but their social and cultural status remained linked to the family. On the other hand, Tunisian women highest desire was to see the rights expressed in the CDS actually implemented. Thereupon, it is not surprising that women were among the most important actors to participate in the revolution and subsequently in the process of democratization, as many women-made groups were able to link the struggle for emancipation to the one for social justice.

According to the politician Mehrezia Labidi (2012), during the Tunisian Uprising, women struggled to enhance their role both in a traditional and in an innovative way. On the one hand, they were able to broaden their household duties to support entire local communities during the various food shortage. Hither, families of the same neighbourhoods engaged in inter-helping each other sharing food and commodities. On the other hand, they were actively involved in the protest. In January, the intensification of the secret police violence led women to transgress their position, taking arms and participating in the protection of the blocks. In a journal article for *The Guardian*, Labidi (2012) explains that Tunisian women were also active in street protestations. On the day Ben Ali left the country, thousands of them left the household to participate in urban demonstrations. They wanted to be part of the revolution rather than passively observe it. They felt their rights were at stake as mothers, wives and individuals.

In the analysis of women's active participation in the Tunisian revolts, a particular element that distinguished Tunisian from other North African women is that a large part of them received an education. According to the UIS (2001), in 2001 women net enrolment in secondary school was 67% compared with men's 63%. Thanks to education, women matured a strong political commitment as well as an active civic engagement. In fact, as women were important during the uprising, they also played a fundamental role in the post-revolutionary state-building process. Indeed, many of the women who participated in the Revolution are now engaged in politics. The former political activist, Maya Jribi, became Secretary General of the Democratic Progressive Party. Famous Ben Ali's opposer Siham Badi, was appointed Minister on Woman Affairs in 2011. Jamina Zoghlam, who was

an activist on the Ennahda Movement is now a parliamentary member of the Ennahada Party and Head of the Committee related to the killed and injured during the revolution. These and many other women were and continue to be among the most important actors of political stabilization in Tunisia.

### 2.1.2 *Women versus the “Feminist state”*

Since the Independence, the “Feminist” Tunisian state has used a legislative and administrative mechanism to legally protect women’s rights and promote gender equality. In this context, the state has tried to prevent the creation of non-institutionalized feminist movements of opposition. Nonetheless, many are the Tunisian feminists to have seen in this mechanism nothing different from the very much popular Tunisian show-off politics used to comply with Western social and civil rights standards. Among these feminists, Amira Mhadhbi, a Tunisian activist, writes: “State feminism is essentially the systematic and explicit governmental exploitation of the feminist cause for political reasons narrowly linked to enhancing the image, prestige and ideological sustainability of the autocratic regime” (Mhadhbi 2012). Indeed, under Bourguiba. Any discourse of gender promotion had to pass for the Neo-Destour party. Only the legitimate non-governmental organizations for women rights, such as the National Union of Democratic Women (UNFD) were supported. The latter was born in 1956, the same year of Tunisian independence and of the promulgation of the Code of Personal Status. According to the Global Media platform OpenDemocracy (2012), in the beginning, the Union dedicated its action to awareness campaigns all around the country, in order to teach women to recognize the new rights enshrined in the Document, and their new role in the economic and social development of the country. Initially, the Union had a close relation with the governments of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Political institutions always supported and promoted the UNFD as the only legitimate body charged of balancing female role between social participation and family life. Government and Union were strictly linked also from an administrative point of view: the financial sustainment of the Union was conditional on the Government choosing the Union’s president. The pre-revolutionary role of the Union was therefore associated with governmental support. Under Ben Ali, alternative women’s groups were constantly repressed. In 1989, for the first time, independent female opponents started to operate on their own to inform women all around the country of the rights they enjoyed on paper, in order to highlight the gap between the CSP and reality. During the revolution, the women’s rights network mixed with many others defending more generally human rights and demanding for Democracy. Indeed, the revolts took women’s rights movement from a legal to a political level. In the transitional political environment that followed the Uprising, the project of a new Constitution and of new elections made the moment optimal for speaking up for gender equality. The principal demand was for an updating of the Code of Personal Status. When the Nahada Islamist party gained the majority of seats in the Constituent National assembly, all the

achievement women had reached from the independence were in danger. The party proposed a referendum to reconsider the CPS clauses regarding the right of adoption and the ban of polygamy. Moreover, Nahada also tried to substitute the principle of equality between men and women with that of complementarity. Many secular Feminists, especially from the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), were able to campaign against the party throughout media and street demonstrations. On Social Media, Nahada and ATFD engaged in a proper “media war” of caricatures and insults. Indeed, in the post-revolutionary landscape, the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women was the major actor to pressure the political forces in creating a constitutional framework sustainable and inclusive of women.

### *2.1.3 Democratic Association of Tunisian women*

The ATFD was created on 6 August 1989 as a non-institutionalized organization based on women membership and it is active still today as one of the most important promoter of gender equality. As referred by the ATFD official webpage “Femmes Democratés” (2012), the main objective of the Association is the fight against gender discrimination and the struggle for the creation of a democratic, progressive and feminist country in the respect of dignity and freedom. Autonomy, pluralism, human rights, laicity and solidarity are the principles over which the Association is founded, and the mission of the group is to spread the culture of gender equality on the economic, political and legal level. Initially, ATFD focus was the support to women victims of gender-based violence. Nevertheless, right from the beginning, The “Feminism” endorsed in the values of the association was not related to the emancipation of women over men. On the contrary, the Association includes the women as an unreplaceable, rather than unique, actor in the path to progress and Democracy (FemmesDemocratés, 2012). During the years of the revolution, the Association enlarged its social capital thorough the creation of a network of connections with the other political and intellectual elites of Tunisia. Strong links were created with other Civil Society organization; especially with the women section of the UGTT and the International Federation for Human Rights. Furthermore, a number of external resources were provided from UNDP and other non-governmental bodies to support the group. In the pre- revolutionary period, the main pressure strategy adopted by the Association was the integration of young women and the education to gender equality and Democracy. Hitherto, universities were places of debate where mixed-gender clubs were created to discuss important issues at stake. In the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period, the ATFD acquired celebrity throughout the adoption of Mass and Social Media. In 2013, in the period of constitutional drafting, the association sent experts to participate in TV shows, and employed social media staff to spread and influence younger generations. As I already mentioned, the AFTD was a crucial agent in the debate over gender equality versus the Islamist pushed concept of complementary

between men and women. Social and mass media were here an important instrument of mobilization. To address this problem, the Association operated also through street mobilization. The Women March on 13 August 2012 was an ATFD guided protest against the Ennahda party's proposal to include complementarity rather than equality between men and women in the Constitution. Many secular Civil Society organizations participated in the march to oppose the Islamist request. Nonetheless, ATFD also operated political pressure through institutionalized channels. The post-revolutionary formed oppositional party Nidaa Tounes included in his program the defence of Women as a no longer exclusive feminist problem, but as one of the main issue to address in order to achieve Democracy. The dual network of political opposition and non-institutionalized effort lead to the withdrawing of the concept of complementarity from the second draft of the constitution.

As we have seen, a discourse of public mobilization in Tunisia, inevitably involves the woman as one of the most important civic and social actor both in an institutional and in a non-governmental contest. In the course of history, Tunisian women had to front many struggles to safeguard the Code of Personal Status, the last one being the conservative view of the Ennahda party. In 2014, women actively participated in the presidential election and a large number of them actually supported Béji Caïd-Essebsi. The new Nidaa Tounes secular and progressive government gave hopes in a re-consideration and innovation of women's role in the achievement of Democracy. The accomplished results however, are quite limited. The current president of the ATFD, Ahlem Belhaj (2015), has pointed out that women remain vulnerable and weakly protected by the legal system. Another problem, according to AFTD member Neila Zoghlami (2015), is that women are not yet included in the public sphere of Tunisia. Media and governments are still strongly dominated by male figures and women still lack representation. Furthermore, domestic violence is still an everyday occurrence in most poor areas. Especially in the most rural zones, divorce is not even seen as an option, considering the social consequences arising with it. Notwithstanding the various governmental reforms and efforts, the problem of Tunisia remains the implementation of its extraordinary legal code. In the meantime, the status of women is still a work-in-progress matter.

## **2.2 Youth as the driving force of the uprising**

### *2.2.1 Education and unemployment: the crisis of Ben Ali's generation*

Ever since the formation of the independent Tunisia, young people were the principal actors of public mobilization. Under Bourguiba, youth enhancement and modernization were recognized as two interdependent variables necessary for the achievement of social progress. In this context, one of the main effort of the first Tunisian Republican government was exactly that of improving education as the main vehicle of state formation. New founding was addressed to public education and a new

Family Code was enhanced alongside the Code of Personal Status. In the 60s, a new welfare system was implemented, mainly aimed at expanding the public sector and creating new jobs. Youth were also included in political participation throughout the creation of state-sponsored, non-governmental associations such as the General Union of Tunisian Students. The strategy adopted by Bourguiba in the contest of youth enhancement was not different from the one he adopted in the context of women emancipation: youth were included in politics only under strict governmental control. In this way, Bourguiba efficiently neutralized dissents and complied with Western demands of moderation. “In exchange for regime loyalty, youth were provided with education, employment opportunities and social mobility.” (Paciello, Pepicelli and Pioppi 2016, p 3-19). In the following decade, the focus on social improvement will be surpassed by the adoption of a filo-Western neo-liberal doctrine, consisting in a large set of privatization policies that will implemented in light of trade agreements with western partners. Even though the government tried to mitigate the inevitable social cost of this new strategy, unemployment and regional inequalities automatically increased. As a positive effect, from the beginning of the 90s, Tunisia was globally recognized as an economic miracle. Under Ben Ali, the achievement of economic prosperity was echoing all around national media. Unemployment, in his words, was a consequence of the increase in population rather than of unsustainable economic reforms. However, as remarked by Professor Alcinda Honwana (2012), in the early 2000, the words of the leader were not anymore sufficient to contain the situation of social marginalization. In the poorest internal regions, that prosperity, so much celebrated by the media, never arrived. Indeed, because of the extraordinary improvement in the education system of the previous decades, many young graduates were left with no job opportunities. Often, they were forced to black market underpaid jobs or even illegal migration. Alongside with the removal of economic security, the authoritarian state had left youth with no role in society; it had left them with no purpose. It is for this reason that the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi was so incisive in the context of the revolution. He was a hero because he died for a purpose, and that was a purpose for which it was worth dying.

### *2.2.2 The epiphany of the 17th December and the beginning of the Revolution of Dignity.*

A great element in the analysis of Tunisian unemployment crisis in the decades before the revolution is the way in which the political administrations of the later 20th century dealt with education policies. Tunisian educational system allows any student that has passed the high school final examination to accede to graduate studies. The consequence of this apparently functional policy was a great imbalance between labour market demand and workers supply. In the last decades of the 20th Century, the number of skilled graduate triplicated, but the demand for skilled workers did not follow the same trend. In a report entitled “For a Better Integration into the Labor Market in Tunisia” the World Bank (2008) has calculated that in 2008, almost 30% of Tunisians between 20 and 24 years

old were unemployed and, among them, graduates were the most damaged. Furthermore, those lucky people who happen to be employed in skilled jobs, necessarily needed to make compromises with the so-called “Family”, namely, the mafia-type network created around the figure of Ben Ali and his wife, which controlled all the major public and private business in Tunisia. The widespread dissatisfaction among young people became evident with Bouazizi’s self-immolation. The reaction to this act was immediate: on the same day, hundreds of people gathered in the town to manifest their commitment to Bouazizi’s cause; to show that he was not an exceptional case of desperation; he was the norm. Several protests broke out, and as the national media remained silent, the activists relied on international and social media to inform people abroad and in other regions of the country. The turmoil continued even after government promised to take appropriate measures against unemployment. When Bouazizi died of his injuries, thousands of people attended his funeral. It was more a political demonstration than a sacral ceremony. Indeed, young people all around Tunisia engaged in a real process of catharsis, watching a man who preferred to die rather than continuing to live under the regimes’ condition. The first reason for which the revolts broke out was therefore humiliation rather than desperation. Indeed, the revolution was the re-conquest of the Dignity of Tunisian people. For this reason, among young generation, the Tunisian Arab Spring was never the “Jasmine Revolution”, but the “Revolution of Dignity” (Aleya-Sghaier 2012, 18-45). Bouazizi’s self-immolation led Tunisians to reflect about how thin was the line between an honourable death and a miserable life. Dignity was therefore the motor that moved the revolution, the epiphany of Tunisian People.

### *2.2.3 The youth and the Revolution of Dignity: civil society between street- and cyber-activism*

“The 2010-2011 Tunisian Revolution apparently represented a real explosion of the category of youth at all levels of the public debate.”(Paciello, Pepicelli, Pioppi 2016, p. 3-19). An entire generation was waking up and realizing to have the tools for fighting authoritarianism: anger, education and social media. These three elements were the driving forces of the uprisings. Anger was expressed in the street, education was used to pressure political renewal throughout Civil Society organizations, and social media were the site of cyber-activism. As I will better explain in the following chapter, cyber activism has been a crucial communication mean to escape the state-controlled broadcast. Internet was already very much popular among Tunisians in the earliest 2000s, as it was used to communicate with emigrated friends or relatives. When the revolution broke out, young people, already experts of social media, were able to turn a simple “leisure commodity” into a strategic means for revolution. Nevertheless, Civil Society was also an arena to demonstrate discontent. As unemployment affected mainly students’ future perspective and workers’ present conditions, these two actors gathered in fighting the system. Soon, all the regional and local student

association took part to the revolution, whether they were politically committed or not. In particular, The Union of Unemployed Graduates played an important role in this context. Founded in 2006 on the model of a similar Association in Morocco, the UDC had the right to work as its principal object of discussion. During the revolution, the association operated mainly through forms of unconventional participation as it became legal only in 2011. Sit-ins, boycotts, and street demonstrations were among the main strategies adopted. The Union had several earthquakes in different cities. Indeed, it was able to guide a nation-wide revolution by focusing on local struggles and local victories. Throughout a mainly advocative strategy, the Association drawn up on people's moral commitment. Beside the request for an employment reform, the element of dignity became crucial. Being young and unemployed was not only a matter of financial insecurity. The impossibility to maintain oneself or one's family was primarily an indecent condition for a human being. As a matter of fact, the revolution expanded the group's objectives to the fight against a corrupted government. The process of "objectives generalization" was common to many other Civil Society organizations. Women, workers, students and unemployed were all united against a bigger struggle that perhaps could end with a victory for all. As it often happens in transitional political periods, the revolutions turned singular gender, identity, religious and economic issue into a collective one. Young people felt particularly committed because their future was at stake as much as their present.

The Jasmine Revolution represented a concrete wake-up call for the Tunisian passive youth. Unfortunately, the hopes and aspirations young people matured with the uprising finished to die with it. Even though a process of institutional transition started and a democratic government was actually established, those changes remained in the political and administrative sphere. The social organization of the country practically remained the same and so did the average lifestyle of young people. Years after the Tunisian Arab Spring, many young citizens have manifested a feeling of marginalization. Indeed, they were middle-age old style politicians rather than young skilled post-revolutionary actors that formed the political class that resulted in the aftermath of the revolution. The generational gap between the old and the youth remained a crucial problem especially considering that the latter were the protagonist of the revolution. Today, the youth are still convinced that the revolution has been stolen from their hands for the building of a re-shuffled old style government. However, even though the political change did not reflected youth's aspirations, outside traditional politics, "they found other ways to remain active in constructing their country's future" (Parker, 2013). In post-revolutionary Tunisia, Civil Society remained the domain where youth could exercise their new acquired active role in the country development.

## **2.3 Trade Unions: monitoring civic and institutional consents**

### *2.3.1 Tunisian General Union of Labour: between notoriety and internal contrast*

The evolution of trade unionism in Tunisia is parallel to the development of the Tunisian General Union of Labour, UGTT. Active from 1946, the Union has represented a continuous oppositional counter-balance to institutional forces since the Bourguiba regime, “so that to be a unionist became a euphemism for being an opponent or an activist against the ruling party” (Omri 2013). An important element to consider when analysing the UGTT is its great internal division. According to the scholar Mohamed-Salah Omri (2013), especially in the decades after the independence, bad communication between central and local branches made consensus almost impossible so that in the end, the central authority necessarily had to take a political position, leaving the de-centralized divisions to maintain their autonomy as the midpoint of real trade union activism. By the time when independence was achieved, in 1956, the UGTT had existed for 10 years, and was already very much influencing. Resultantly, it played a remarkable role in preventing Bourguiba from taking full powers over the newly created regime. In the course of history, the UGTT has always maintained distances from politics and the administration was never politically based. Conversely, social and economic interests bound members on a sector basis. Nonetheless, between 1978 and 1985, the group manifestly opposed against a particular economic policy and engaged in protest. Later on, in the 1990s, the Union authority openly supported the political campaign of Ben Ali, while the local sections maintained a certain level of political independence. The balance between leadership integration and the autonomy acquired by the de-centralized branches muted in 2000 when Abdesalem Jerad took the leadership of the Union. Omri (2013) explains us that, under the new administration, the UGTT lost ground in terms of institutional influence but became much more organized on the inside. Nevertheless, the group remained extremely heterogeneous. According to this author, the great gap between central and local branches will also be manifest during the Gasfa Protest of 2008, when different subdivisions of the group took different positions, whether as activists or as supporters of the regime. As it lacked a specific political orientation, the UGTT central administration main pressure strategy has always been that of compromise and consensus. At the same time, the Union always needed to maintain a “peaceful” relation with the government. Workers unions, as for those defending Women and Youth rights, were strictly controlled and often managed by the political administration, and the case was not different for the UGTT. As a matter of facts, “UGTT has been the outcome of Tunisian resistance and its incubator at the same time” (Antonakis-Nashif 2015, 128-149). The participation of the Union in the revolutionary events was inevitable as

all the issues which led Tunisians to be unsatisfied by their government had to deal with demands that were already in the Union agenda.

During the revolution, the UGTT took a very manifest position siding the activists for social justice. It collaborate with many HR Associations and also with the previously described ATFD and UDC. Working on a local basis, the Union was a focal point of information and communication, and often the site of debate where activist were forged. In this regard, the Associations made a good use of its notoriety all around the country especially through the organization of mass-protests such as strikes and marches. Nonetheless, a major task of the Union was to guarantee the achievement of social change in the post-revolutionary transitional years.

### *2.3.2 Trade Unions during and after the revolution*

The complicated years before the Jasmine revolution were the perfect momentum to deal with internal contrasts within the UGTT. In this period, many militants of the Union split to create alternative associations representing labourers. Omri (2013) claims that three of these associations were particularly influencing and furnished a real counter-balance to the UGTT. The first one is the Tunisian General Labour Confederation, CGTT. Founded by Habib Guiza, a former member of the UGTT, the Confederation promoted pluralism throughout multiple ways of representations. Later on, In 2011 Ismail al-Sihbani, former secretary general of the UGTT, created the Union of Tunisian Workers as he was kicked out of the UGTT for internal struggles. Thanks to his former strong position, al-Sihbani was able to carry with him a considerable number of activists to start another similar activity with a larger degree of autonomy from the government. The third union was created responding to the need for religious representation. A group of Islamist Unionist created the Tunisian Work Organization sponsored and supported by the Ennahda Party. The emergence of minor and independent groups of working activists was not threatening too much the UGTT as it had something the others did not have: governmental support. Even though they were well organized and influencing, these unions remained with limited possibility of action until the Revolution. Nonetheless, the unionist motor of the revolution remained the UGTT: it represented the necessary resource in monitoring and guiding the revolts, in the mobilization strategies and in maintaining a mediating position with the transitional government that succeeded Ben Ali. However, the revolutionary experience demanded unions to operate together under the UGTT because acting separately would have been useless. In the transitional period succeeding Ben Ali regime, the UGTT has assumed an even more crucial mediating role both between different parties and between parties and people. According to Schimidinger (2013), three are the strongholds that led the UGTT to be such a crucial political and mediation actor in the transitional period. The first element deals with its history, particularly referring to the role it played in the independence. The Union has been present

in every important event that marked Tunisia political development becoming a first class civil institution. The second element is membership. As it is the oldest and better-organized union, in the post-Ben Ali era, when people were fervent with revolutionary ideas, membership almost doubled and the Union expanded in many previously unconsidered small cities. The Union constructed an umbrella organization both in geographical and in emotional terms. People trusted the UGTT and gave it the merit of having been able to carry on a relatively not violent uprising. Thirdly, under Ben Ali, union activism was the only kind of political activism a middle-class worker could aspire to. Consequently, activism and unionism almost became synonymous. Nevertheless, the Union has been active on many fronts including human rights and the fight for gender equality. In more recent times, the Union has been accused of neglecting major social issues in favour of their new political agenda. Even though many criticize the UGTT post-revolutionary political involvement, it must be said that in the course of history, the Union has been a particular and unique force able to cope with people demands without openly opposed the political administration during the revolution.

#### **2.4 Tunisian civil society: merging interests for a bigger struggle**

In this chapter, I have discussed the actors involved and the strategies utilized in the Jasmine revolution. As one may notice, all of the groups described have evolved throughout a well-organized civil society fostering identity-based and status-based civil rights. In a first phase, right after the independence, each group enjoyed a considerable recognition and representation in the state-controlled civil society network created by Bourguiba and perpetuated by Ben Ali. This network permitted the two dictators to both have a direct control on the groups and demonstrate a modern and permissive attitude. In a second moment, more or less a decade before the uprising, each of these groups started to claim for higher independence and for their rights to be effectively enforced. Here, the hypocrisy of Ben Ali started to come out. For decades, the Presidents of Tunisia masked their authoritarianism by permitting the evolution and the emancipation of identity-based and interest-based associations but never permitting them to grow outside the bigger wing of government. This mechanism was maintained thanks to the adoption of civil rights reforms that, even though very permissive on paper, never seemed to be implemented concretely. Inevitably, when this process became evident, each group started to become more radical and more intolerant towards the government. When the revolution broke out, everyone had its own struggle and everyone felt resented towards the political administration. However, differently from other experiences of Arab Spring, the Jasmine Revolution did not represented a momentum to enhance status-based rights. Conversely, the main strength of the Revolution stayed in all the interest- and identity-based groups to put aside their primary aims linked to their membership for the accomplishment of a bigger objective, namely,

political and social change. In this sense, the Jasmine revolution was a single common battle. The most important element to point out here, it that it was the Civil Society to prevent the revolution from turning into a fight for power. When the Revolution broke out, the Civil Society was ready and organized to fight a politics that, for too long, had repressed their civil rights. This was the crucial objective. Once the political administration would have been kicked out in favour of a new democratic transition, there, status based rights would have been a primary concern. Until that moment, the revolution, intended as a combined effort of political change came first. Indeed, the Civil Society represented a strong and powerful actor in the Jasmine revolution, bridging the needs for popular enhancement and the demands for political change.

### **3 The digital elite and the role of social media in the Revolution**

The history of a country and the social commitment of its people are the first elements to consider when trying to understand a revolt. For this reason, in the previous chapters, I have given an overview of the major events and the most important actors involved in the Jasmine revolution. Nevertheless, it is impossible to have a clear and complete account of the Arab Springs without considering the enormous impact of Internet on the making of and results of the various uprisings. Particularly in Tunisia, in the early 1990s the government introduced an ICT policy opening the doors of internet to the population. According to Anita Breuer (2012), the object of the regime was twofold: on the one hand, Ben Ali wanted to maintain its image of innovator in the eyes of the West. On the other hand, he could count on an additional tool of control and manipulation. Nonetheless, from the later 2000s internet became a precious commodity for Tunisians. In particular, social networks and blogs became very popular among the youth. In the same way as it happened in the West, soon, social media started to reflect new mechanisms of socialization and new ways to acquire celebrity. Bloggers, Singers, Dancers, all found their space on the web and became famous thanks to it. When the revolution broke out in 2010, social media moved from being a principally leisure commodity to a fundamental mean of communication and information among groups, cyber activists, citizens and international media. This chapter is exactly aimed at describing the process of evolution of the use of social media, from a socialization tool to an instrument of mobilization in Tunisia.

#### **3.1 Tunisian ICT Development: modernization and control**

Among the many elements that make Tunisia a unique example of modernization in North Africa, in the last decades of the 20th century, the position that the government took towards the ICT and Internet administration was very peculiar. Also in this context, Ben Ali undertook considerable investment and, as a result, from the 1990s onwards, Tunisia enjoyed the most developed telecommunications assets in the region. Nonetheless, from the late 2000s internet became a precious leisure commodity: “In 2008, Out of a population of 10.2 million inhabitants, nine out of ten Tunisians owned a cell phone. 84% of these users access the Internet at home, 75.8% used Internet at work, and 24% used public Internet cafés”(Arab Advisors Group 2008). With no doubts, the promotion of ICT was part of the wider regime’s strategy to comply with foreign western standards; strategy that resulted successful as in 2005 Tunisia hosted the UN World Summit on the Information Society. Nonetheless, under the surface, Ben Ali maintained a strict control also on telecommunication infrastructures. In 1996, the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) was established to monitor the internet users’ activities. Two years later, the government passed a law authorizing the ATI to access personal

information such as email contents, with the pretext of preventing accession to immoral or illegal material. The ATI was nothing more than the President asset to exercise control, avoiding to damage his image of modernizer. Indeed, Breuer (2012) argues that while in the majority of autocratic nations in North Africa, the introduction of modern telecommunication was marked by a state-own monopoly of ICT assets, Tunisian monopoly of information was hidden but very much efficient, so that blocked website resulted as a “page not found” (Breuer 2012). The agency “big brother” watch was not limited to technical monitoring. As the majority of the population used internet cafés, the owners of these activities were forced to register each customer’s data and were responsible for any of their clients’ internet researches. Censorship initially covered immoral and pornographic content; but as the regime noticed that internet could be a powerful instrument to express political dissent, it expanded to politically related material, such as blogs or opinions that were discordant with the regime position. The Gasfa protest in 2008 confirmed the regime’s worries. While national media remained silent about the protest, on the internet, and especially on Facebook, cell-phone made videos witnessing the events where everywhere, shared by internet activists. Resultantly, for several months, the government blocked Facebook on reasons of national security. In 2009, as the seeds of the revolution were growing in the minds of young activists, censorship became even more restrictive; expanding over every previously allowed sharing platform such as YouTube or WorldTV. Surely, the government strategy of preventing sharing and communication was successful in Gasfa, as the protest was relatively small and not so well organized. Nonetheless, the increase in censorship activity that resulted after Gasfa revolt had its main result in the maturation of an even more profound anger among alienated young people. The Internet was their only arena of expression. Whether for political debate, or simply for leisure activities, the online world was, for many, the only hope to believe in. During the uprising, being a cyber activist meant being a fighter in the revolution. Many of them risked torture or jail several times, some were arrested, and some others were killed. As censorship remained a constant problem, they also had to choose the right channels of visibility, such as international forums. In general, the web became an alternative battlefield in the struggle for political and social change.

### **3.2 Cyber activism and shared patterns of discontent**

“To understand the phenomenon of Cyber Activism in the Tunisian Revolution, it is important to keep in mind that it long predated the Arab Spring” (Breuer 2012). Decades before the Uprisings, the government openness towards internet infrastructures led to the maturation of a cyber-generation increasingly conscious of the resources available in the Web World. In the late 1990s, the internet became the reign of the youth in many different forms. Blogging and Social Media became the main

networks of expression, where people could share opinions over any topic. In this first preliminary phase, the focus of ICT users was not primarily political. Even though the Web was the largest domain of communication and information, the intrusive watchdog of the state remained an uncomfortable limit. Some accounts of political dissent emerged in forms of reflections over youth political alienation, or satiric web magazine; however, social networks and blogs mainly remained arenas of cultural sharing. Consequently, Internet became an alternative instrument of notoriety. People used web platforms to show their talents or to express their opinions about any topic, from sport to nightlife. Soon, a young cyber elite emerged, becoming dominant on the internet scene. In a first phase of impact between Tunisians and the world of internet, Breuer (2012) describes cyber actors as young well-educated middle class bloggers living or studying in the capital. Mainly for this reason, in this phase, blogging had a remarkable but limited impact, as it remained an arena of discussion for a certain kind of elites rather than for the public sphere in general. In the early 2000s, this almost exclusive mechanism will mutate. Alongside with the increase of Internet Cafés and ITC users, the escalation of discontent among Tunisian citizens turned the internet into an instrument to share individual frustration of everyday life and common discontent towards the political administration. Many of the same bloggers which previously used the Web as an entertaining platform, started to use their notoriety to give a voice and concretize the general problems of their generation: from unemployment, to poverty to political dissatisfaction. In this second phase, the Internet turned into a distinct form of public sphere, where people could almost freely express their shared feeling of humiliation and miss-representation. The Revolution of Dignity started exactly from this mechanism. The moment in which one's personal incapability to live a satisfactory life became collective; someone had to be held responsible.

In this phase, blogs became channels of information on governmental corruption and real rates of unemployment. Furthermore, they described the social and economic injustice that took place in poorer internal towns. Web platforms offered space to initiate a moral mobilization before a concrete one: a shared pattern of discontent was created before real action began at revolutionary level. Furthermore, the cyber-activists' efforts to communicate with a larger set of the public sphere was daily threatened by the strict and constant control of the ATI. In the late 2000s, many anticensorship groups emerged and, as they had limited possibility to operate on the national platform, they started to actively participate in international internet communities, such as Global Voices, to show Tunisian realities. In this context, bloggers moved from being web celebrities to heroes as they risked jail or even torture just for taking part in the flux of information. Whether they started with a political commitment or not, the protagonist of the Tunisian Web scene became the protagonist of the Revolution.

### **3.3 The blogs of the Revolution**

As I have already mentioned, independent blogs were among the principal revolutionary platforms of information and protest in the Tunisian Revolution. In this paragraph, I will describe three among the principal cyberspaces that contribute to construct and accelerate the process of public mobilization in Tunisia.

In the previous paragraph, I market the fact that the phenomenon of cyber activism exploded with the revolution but began decades before it. One of the first embryonal examples of cyberspace used for social renewal in Tunisia is Takriz. According to its Facebook page, which I found to be the most exhaustive source for getting information on this type of activism, the cyber group was created in 1998 and right from the start, it targeted political alienation among young people as both the cause and the consequence of the Ben Ali regime. Takriz was the first group to publically challenge governmental action on the internet. On its Facebook page, the group describes itself as “Tunisian cyber think/fight tank & street resistance network” (Takriz Facebook 2016). The blog was regardless of using brutal wording or street slang to accuse or insult governmental administration and this peculiar characteristic was one of the reasons for which it had so much success among Tunisian young people. In some way, the group of anonymous Takriz bloggers spoke the language of Tunisian youth, externalizing the anger those same young people were repressing. The page was a free space where anyone could share opinions or positions on any topic, with a particular focus on resisting the regime. Nonetheless, as the blog’s visitors increased, so did the suspicion of the ATI. For this reason, in 2002 the creators closed the page to re-open it on another internet platform two years later. Only in 2009, at the hedge of Tunisian discontent towards the regime, the group decided to re-open the page and, in the meantime, it secretly created and trained a group of street resistance to collect information and produce proofs of the regime corruption. In 6 year, Takriz had become Takriz Network and included both a cyber army and a street resistance. As the revolution started in late 2010, Takriz had hundreds of independent followers, which increased with revolutionary protest. Takriz was the only example of aggressive resistance in Tunisia and this characteristic will prevent it to maintain its consensus and celebrity in the post-revolutionary period. However, it remains true that this group represented the incubator of the youth suffering and was crucial in putting in motion the process of mobilization.

The independent web magazine Nawaat gave another important contribution to the uprising. Cyber Activists Sami Ben Gharbia and Riadh Guerfali created Nawaat in 2004 as a platform to provide information about human rights violations and regime corruption. This website is one of the first example of cyberspace used to inform nationals and foreigners about the real conditions of Tunisia and, as one can imagine, the group of bloggers participating in the project soon became among

the principal targets of the ATI. Nawaat main objective was exactly the same one that the regime was trying to prevent: to wake up passive and alienated Tunisian people and make them see the reality that National Media did not show. When the first wave of protest broke out in Sidi Bouzid, Nawaat did not miss the opportunity to become one among the central focal point of discussion and information about the events. The revolution represented the coronation of the objective Nawaat was created for: initiating a public mobilization against the regime. During the uprising, the cyber activists of the web magazine had not only provided a platform of information; conversely, they had revealed to the world the underlying causes of public mobilization. Articles and commentaries on Nawaat were not only describing what was happening in the smaller cities through videos or photos; conversely, a part of the magazine was dedicated to internal critical and explanatory points of view concerning what the protest was really going on for; including political opinions, statistical data and unrevealed governmental facts. The strategies and sources adopted were many. Part of the material was collected by posting videos and witnesses sent by anonymous citizens who took part in the revolts. Moreover, the blog was among the fundamental sources international media used to have a clear and true account of what was happening in Tunisia, especially when the regime was trying to shut down any other type of information channel. The intrinsic mission of this group of activists was to bridge social mobilization on the web and public mobilization on the street.

Though Nawaat gave a remarkable contribution to the Revolution, thanks to its political commitment, the most famous Tunisian activist blog started as a simple web journal and was written by a woman. Lina Ben Mhenni started her blog, "A Tunisian Girl", in 2007 as an attempt to describe the ordinary problems of a young woman in her country. Ben Mhenni was among those bloggers who initially approached the internet with no political commitment. In a first moment, the blog had the style of an online diary and Tunisian social problems were only described as affecting her position as a woman and as a student. In 2008, she participated in the campaign organized by many Tunisian bloggers to support people in Gasfa. According to the reporter Chamselassil Ayari (2012), in that occasion, Ben Mhenni had the possibility to see the brutality of the regime in "containing" the demonstrations, and she remained shocked by the amount of violence used by the police to repress the revolt. National Media threatened the Gasfa events as a singular isolated form of anti-regime extremism, pretending that the government was peacefully and efficiently managing the situation. In experiencing directly the lie behind the Ben Ali regime, Ben Mhenni decided to use her already famous web space to denounce human rights violations committed by the regime. In openly attacking the regime, she never tried to hide her identity. In 2009, the ATI accused the blog of violating censorship rules so that all the entries from 2007 onwards were deleted. Nonetheless, Ben Mhenni tried to be active on every social platform including Facebook and Twitter, continuously opening new

profiles to escape blockage. When in January the violence escalated on the streets of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, Ayari (2012) describes Ben Mhenni as one among the few bloggers present on the scene and an unreplaceable source of information for international media and activists in the capital. She travelled following the wave of the uprising, witnessing and documenting the extremes social gap between the capital and the internal cities. She posted on her blog pictures of death bodies and people beaten by the police. She was also active on the international platform “Global Voices” where she could report the facts without fear of censorship. Hither, Ben Mhenni was able to use the Web not only as a source of information; but also primarily as an instrument of empathy. By showing the brutality of Tunisian institutional forces, she managed to bring the revolution to everyone.

In conclusion, one can argue that the role of Cyber Activism in the Tunisian Revolution was twofold. First, it allowed for the creation of a shared network of discontent. Thanks to the presence of a web network of mobilization, young alienated people matured a moral engagement and an emphatic commitment. In the Capital, for example, the revolution first arrived virtually and became concrete in a second moment. People in Tunis did not suffer the same desperation than those in the centre of the country. They were aware of the unemployment crisis and of the regime’s not so fair conduct; but the majority of them could make a living anyway. Internet was the instrument to transmit the suffering and humiliation of a nation, to those who could not see it. An argument can also be made on the fact that Tunisian Revolution was the less violent in the Maghreb exactly because part of it was fought virtually, by well-educated young people who were aware of the political situation. The Tunisian Revolution was a genuine demand for transition to Democracy rather than a chaotic excuse to fill power vacuums. Indeed Cyber Activism was also the most efficient instrument to make the revolution viral. Both at the international and local level, blogs and independent web magazines became the first sources of information where state-controlled national media were trying to minimize the revolution. Also in this context, the internet served as an instrument of sharing knowledge. Nevertheless, to any extent, one cannot say that the Tunisian Uprising was entirely conducted on the internet. Conversely, bloggers have always wanted to underline their role of mediation and information; but they never took the merit of the revolution. Indeed, the experiment of the internet as a tool for public mobilization has undoubtedly worked. Blogs, Social networks and websites were instruments of the people, which perhaps prevented the revolution from escalating in extreme violence.

## **4 Putting the Tunisian experience in perspective: an unconventional attitude to political change**

At this point of my analysis, it should be clear that the Tunisian experience of public mobilization combined several unconventional elements regarding the actors engaged, the strategies adopted and the instruments for achieving political change. For this reason, scholars have been cautious in differentiating the Tunisian one from other revolutionary experiences in North Africa, and in the context of the Arab Spring. In the course of its historical and social development, the Tunisian population has often manifested an unconventional attitude to political and social change, managing to remain compact at every stage of national breaking point. Since from the early stages of the formation of a Tunisian identity, the various cultural, religious and social influences that formed the society have contributed to the development of a tolerant, multicultural and open population, which, without any particular extreme experience of nationalism, managed to create a nation, and, at last a democratic state. In this chapter, I will take into account some of the most evident anomalies that create a difference between the Tunisian population and other Arab ones and that led the Tunisian experience of public mobilization to be different from other experiences of Arab Springs. Here, my objective is not to make a comparison between this and other countries, but to identify the elements that have permitted Tunisia to achieve a democratic transition without falling into a dramatic bloodshed.

### **4.1 Multiculturalism, moderation and pragmatism**

As I have explained in the first chapter of this dissertation, the historical development of Tunisia is a fundamental element when considering the reasons for the modality and results of the 2011 mobilization. In particular, the various dynasties and population, which invaded and inhabited the country, led the Tunisian society to evolve throughout a merging of different ethnicities, languages, religions and popular traditions, setting the country's social and state building on the acceptance and appreciation of various cultural diversities. This mechanism prevented the intrusion of regional "pan" influences such as Nasser's "Pan Arabism" or the various "Pan Islamic" movements in the 20th century. In this context, Tunisia has always been an alien in the North African region, never responding to any particular supranational ideological or cultural trend. Consistently, during the colonial period, the Tunisian population never showed a particular hostility towards the French as other colonial states showed for their motherlands. In Tunisia, the rise of a sentiment of national belonging did not arise from the feeling of repression caused by the colonial invader. Conversely, the population was almost apathetic towards the French administration and the process that led to the country's independence was pushed forward by an active political opposition rather than by popular

mobilization. Only in the moment when the independent nation was established, so was the Tunisian identity. However, even after the independence, Multiculturalism remained the rock over which the society developed and the element which impeded the formation of any kind of extremism or nationalism. Consequently, it never was a particular ideological motion to guide the popular or political demands in Tunisia. Conversely, the political development of the country always turned around a pragmatic consideration of economic interests and popular needs, balanced with the necessary building of strategic alliances with powerful foreign actors. Whereas all the newly formed post-colonial African nations celebrated their independence reciting the rhetoric of the rejected invader, Tunisian first independent government had the good relation with France as the first point on its agenda. It is a fact that in every instances of political development, Tunisian population has always acted in an unconventional way in comparison with other Arab states, relying more on necessity than on ideology. This mechanism is also present in the Tunisian Uprising. The Jasmine Revolution came out of genuine popular demands rather than from an organized political movement. It was the result of a widespread dissatisfaction towards governmental inefficiency in dealing with social and economic issues rather than a fight against Ben Ali authoritarianism. In this sense, Democracy was not the goal, but the political tool to achieve social change. In the course of history, Tunisians have experienced so many different cultures and ideological stances that they have learned to separate the political sphere from the private one. A striking difference with African and Middle Eastern politics is that governmental leaders in Tunisia were not idolatrized or stigmatized on the ground of their eloquence or charisma. In two very much different ways, Bourguiba and Ben Ali remained in power until they were responding to popular demands. Here stays Tunisian political pragmatism: In every kind of formal or informal relations from the citizen-state one to the state-international one, the Tunisian strategy stays in the research for mutual and reciprocal advantage. The Jasmine Revolution results from the end of this advantageous relation and the demand for a new model. The rhetoric of pragmatism guided the revolution right from the start and was one among many reasons for which the latter did not fall into the institutional chaos of other Arab Uprisings.

## **4.2 A moderate Islamic tradition**

So far, it should be clear that multiculturalism is one of the primary principles over which the Tunisian society developed. The meeting and confrontation of various civilizations permitted the Tunisian society to find a common ground over which to evolve as a compact and homogeneous population. Indeed, despite the variety of communities that lived in the territory and the heterogeneity of the religious and cultural ideologies that influenced the society, from 1956 onward, modern Tunisian population acquired a homogeneous religious identity. In this dissertation, I have decided

not to dedicate an entire chapter to discuss the role of Islam in Tunisian political and social development. Indeed, religion is an important part of Tunisian history but it has never been a driving force of mobilization. However, I believe it is important to consider the Tunisian political, social and cultural attitude towards Islam as one of the marking distinctions that separates this state from other Arab ones, and, consequently, this experience of public mobilization from the other Arab Springs. Tunisian post-independence leaders have always struggled to maintain a separation between religious and political affairs. Bourguiba's pragmatic attitude was consistent with a secular approach to the country's public organization. The President implemented secular reforms that many criticized for resulting in direct opposition with basic Islamic precepts. The Code of Personal Status was a clear manifestation of Bourguiba's intent to create a social and political separation between Islam and law. When Ben Ali acquired the presidency, he tried to gain people's consensus on the ground of re-finding the religious identity so much neglected in Bourguiba's previous ruling. In a first period, the new President collected all religious groups into a ministry and re-imposed the observation of several religious rituals. In 1981, The Ennahda or "Renaissance" party emerged to represent the moderate Muslims. The party had admittedly renounced to violence as a means of conversion and publically rejected the Sharia as a form of Islamic law. Undoubtedly, Ennahda's bigger controversy, but also its bigger modernity, stayed in the fact that it arose as a political body representing a religious group, but without putting Islam on a political ground. Nevertheless, soon Ben Ali started to perceive the danger of having re-opened a door to political Islam; consequently, he banned the party a few years after its creation. Not differently from many other dictators in the Middle East, Bourguiba and Ben Ali adopted a very severe attitude towards political Islam. Religious extremism was refused as the most danger enemy of governmental stability and even the most moderate groups were forced to renounce their mission, abandon the country or hide. In most Middle Eastern countries, this inflexible approach towards religious fundamentalism had the opposite effect of leading to the formation of radical illegal networks hiding outside the state control and often ending up in terrorism. This was not the case for Tunisia. On the contrary, those few, weak singular groups that developed in the 1980s and 90s, were never able to grow strong enough to become a popular phenomenon. Conversely, they were irrelevant to Tunisian society, which, as should be clear so far, has never loved or accepted whatever kind of extremism. This however does not mean that the Islamic tradition did not played a fundamental part in the identity-formation of the Tunisian population. In particular, Tunisian religious tradition was strongly marked by a "deeply rooted historical commitment to moderate Islam" (Kranz, 2016). Tunisia is home to the mosque of *Uqba*, the first mosque in North Africa to follow the precepts of the *Maliki* school of Islamic Jurisprudence. This school interprets the Muslim religion as living a proper life under the teaching of Islam and is famous for its moderate attitude towards Islamic law. Following

Kranz (2016), this doctrine was very popular in every country of the Maghreb but nowhere as much as in Tunisia, it was deeply rooted in the historical evolution of the society. The school preached to live religion in one's own private sphere. In this sense, there was an Islamic Jurisprudence but it was to be applied by everyone on its own rather than by a political body. Here stays the difference between political Islam and Islamic jurisprudence: while the first is a necessary collective concept, the second, as in the case of Tunisia, can and must primarily be applied by singular individuals. The moderate Islamic tradition in Tunisia was therefore functional principally to "create a cultural identity in which Islam did not endanger progressive secular ideals, while continuing to play a very important role in people's' lives" (Kranz, 2016). In this sense, it would be hazardous to put the moderate attitude towards Islam as one of the elements that distinguished Tunisian public mobilization experience from the others. Islam in Tunisia did not regarded the collective sphere but rather the private one and it was never a common ground to create protest. Even when analysing the post-revolutionary Ennahda success at the 2011 National Constituent Assembly Elections, one should reflect on the reasons why the government that followed was a Troika including two secular groups. Even the most moderate of the Islamist party had a brief history of political success in Tunisia and, even in that event, it was a means to balance the transitions to another secular administration. Rather than an instrument of public mobilization, Islam has been crucial in the formation of the Tunisian singular citizen, contributing to the consolidation of its moderate attitude towards political and social change.

### **4.3 A moderate military tradition**

Until the breakout of the Jasmine Revolution, Tunisia never experienced a civil war, nor an international conflict. According to the researcher Sharan Grewal (2016), traditionally, Tunisia's authoritarian Presidents have preferred to manage the country's security by financing a disciplined police force and creating convenient diplomatic alliances rather than focusing on the maintenance of territorial control throughout a strong military. Until the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Tunisian Armed Forces remained marginal in both the political and social development of the country, permitting the Presidents in charge to maintain a direct control on security affairs. For many decades, these arrangements left the army with a ridiculous budget, a low-standard training and an almost inexistent political influence. Always on the side-line, the Tunisian Army has never attempted to rebel to its conditions. On the contrary, it silently marched alongside Tunisia's historical evolution, almost never making itself indispensable. When the Revolution started in December, the first street demonstrations in the south of the country were violently repressed by the Police and by the Tunisian National Guard. Until he could, Ben Ali tried to keep the Army outside the country security matters. Conscious of the Generals' dissatisfaction with their position, he feared that the army could become

a strong alliance for the protestors. Most soldiers were kept in the barracks and many of them were trained in the US. “A standard objective of such US military training was the development of professional norms” (Henry and Springborg 2011). Although this was a technique to leave the army with no role in the security of the country, the training was fundamental in giving Tunisian Army a strong discipline in military-civilian relations. To some extent, when the revolution broke out, “the military had no special stake in the regime’s survival and no strong reason to shoot fellow Tunisians on the regime’s behalf ” (Henry and Springborg 2011); conversely it had a professional and moral commitment towards the protection of civilians and a great resentment against the President. A remarkable episode, signed the end of any possible collaboration between the military and the government. As the revolts reached the Capital, Ben Ali commanded the Generals to employ the military to reinforce the security forces. On 14th January, just before fleeing the country, President Ben Ali ordered General Rachid Ammar to open fire on the activists demonstrating on the street; but Ammar opposed the command. In this occasion, General Ammar refused to commit to what he did not recognized as a legitimate authority. Left with no other political force, Ben Ali escaped in Saudi Arabia and finally the military set its active position in defending the people against what was left of the regime. From that moment on, Ammar became a national hero and he started to be identified as the country’s protector. Guided by General Ammar, the Tunisian Armed Forces finally were legitimately in charge of the security of the country. Security, in this case, did not only imply the peaceful control of the revolts. Conversely, the military took the burden of the economic and political consequences of the revolution, including the unemployment crisis, poverty, and the transition to Democracy. This was a process of social rather than political inclusiveness: General Ammar gave a strong sign of commitment with the citizens’ cause by refusing to respond to Ben Ali’s order. This commitment made him and the army an integrated part of the revolt. The army became the protector of the revolution and the guarantor of political innovation. It is important to say that the people permitted the inclusion of the army in the revolution. Civilians decided not to fear the military because it had never been part of the Ben Ali’s circle of trust and it had its own interest at stake in overthrowing the regime. Indeed, the renewed role of the Tunisian Armed Forces came only after the development of a new civilian-military relation. In this partnership, the military only had a supporting role: while the people were making the revolution, the army was ensuring the highest possible security. Most of the army activities included monitoring street protests, safeguard block and cities and counterbalance police violence. Differently from the Libyan or Egyptian military, the Tunisian Armed forces were neither able nor willing to be central actors in the revolution. Conversely, they believed it was the duty of the people to eradicate the regime. The role of the army was just that of securing the positive outcome of the revolution. At a deeper level, it would be naïve to claim that the army had a marginal

role in the Tunisian Revolution. Conversely, the main characteristic of the military revolutionary action was the attempt to let the uprising prosper while limiting violence. Differently from Egypt or Libya, in Tunisia, the army acquired the non-conventional role of bridging politics and civil society, defending people's interest and guiding the country to a democratic transition.

#### **4.4 The prerogative of dialogue over conflict**

Another anomaly, which distinguished Tunisian populations from other African and Middle Eastern ones, is the tendency to avoid conflict. This trend is observable at both a political and a civic level. Analysing Tunisian political development, one may notice that from 1956, Tunisia never experienced an international war, nor a civil confrontation. Whereas anywhere else in the MENA Region, states focused on strong military expenditures and powerful military partners, Tunisian international relations have always been a mix of diplomacy and show-off politics. Once in power, Bourguiba was very careful to choose its allies, and later on Ben Ali was as much as careful to maintain them. Tunisia's partnership with France, the United States and the West in general was a strategic choice, which granted some benefits but also implied some disadvantages. On the one hand, Tunisia had a market with the west, a strong military ally and a powerful political sustain; on the other, the county was completely excluded from partnership and relationships in the Middle Eastern and North African region. This was an ideological issue more than a concrete one. Because of the alliance with the US, Tunisian was indirectly sustaining Israel and this made it an impossible partner for Egypt, Libya or other countries in the region. Indeed, Tunisia had a foot in the West. This also allowed the government to set military expenditures at the minimum. Whereas in the case of a conflict Tunisia would have the US on its side, this eventuality was a priori prevented by the governmental priority of diplomacy over war. As Tunisian foreign relations proceeded on these premises, so did the internal ones. State to civic communications worked throughout an organized trade union and a wide civil society network. These channels were part of a very much filo-Western mechanism that put dialogue rather than protest at the centre of internal affairs. Especially in the first years after independence, demands were often satisfied with reforms (the Code of Personal Status being a crucial example of that). However, as the political administration settled and began to gain consensus, concrete responses to popular complains started to become weaker and weaker. It was people's dissatisfaction toward governmental reactions that led to the political change and the settlement of Ben Ali. The same mechanism repeated with the new President. The first years of Ben Ali administrations were accompanied

by the mantra of democratization and political change. Later on, a politics based on the cult of personality took over national stability. This time, however, the Tunisians did not fall in the trick of modernity: when people realized that their feeling uncomfortable towards the political administrations was a collective fact, there grew the necessity of a political change, this time, much more radical.

Even though the politics of dialogue was never a continuous and functional mechanism, it was fundamental in teaching Tunisians to adopt peaceful strategies to solve problems rather than grow with anger and fight with violence. Furthermore, it is important to point out that the construct of dialogue as a political and social mean has deeper and older roots in Tunisian historical development. Indeed, Tunisian people have never rely their dissatisfaction towards authority on the cult of violence. Also in these instances, multiculturalism plays a crucial part. In Tunisia, there was never a nationalistic rhetoric of “defending one’s own nation”, nor of “kicking out the invader”. Violence and war were never used to defend people from territorial or ideological invasion, because in Tunisian culture, there was no such thing as invasion, but everything represented an exchange: an exchange of culture, an exchange of interests. Therefore, whereas in near states violence was the practical mean to impose power and oppose to it, Tunisia maintained a moderated attitude during its whole historical development, always choosing compromise over conflict, never actually experiencing a war. When the Revolution broke out in 2010, this mechanism did not change. People wanted to be listened, they wanted the government to acknowledge the situation and change that. When they realize that this was not possible by maintaining the same administration, they asked for political change. Indeed, the Tunisian Revolution resulted to be a public mobilization rather than a civil war. The linear path that conduced Tunisia from protest to Democracy proceeded with a minor and very much symbolic army intervention on the side of citizens, the early withdrawal of a disorganized police and the absence of external intervention by foreign countries. People were the central actors actually at stake: Undoubtedly, this does not mean that the revolution moved the country out of authoritarianism without a minimum bloodshed. Conversely, The CNN has referred that according to a UN report, at least 300 people were killed during the uprising, and more than 1000 were injured (CNN 2012). Especially in the first month, the police was very harsh in repressing the revolts, but never on official order of the government. Violence was not a tool the government wanted to use to spread fear, but as asset to use in unconditional necessity. What is important to underline here, is that, even though they had their own martyrs, the Tunisians did not responded to violence with other violence. Boycotts, Riots, strikes, street and cyber protest and information were the weapons of Tunisians. Rather that the cult of violence,

Tunisians related of the cult of the martyrs to carry on the fight. To honour the martyrs did not meant to revenge them but to focus even more on the final objective: social and regime change. It is a fact that the experience of popular mobilization in Tunisia has been influenced by centuries of multicultural development and a natural tendency to genuinely protect the nation from extreme political, military and popular chaos. In addition, this element has been fundamental to permit the uprising to end in a concrete political change rather than fall in a fight for power.

#### **4.5 The social modernity of the Tunisian population**

In January 2011, the revolution had arrived in every part of the country and it was impossible not to feel part of it. Women, youth, children and old men, even in the most rural zones of Tunisia, all of them had a story about the revolution and all of them had matured a political consciousness. The Revolution also had this power: while before 2010 many Tunisian could barely recognize Ben Ali on the manifests, after the events of December, everyone had its own political ideals. Undoubtedly, one of the main marking characteristic of the Jasmine Revolution is its inclusiveness of all sectors of the population. The Uprising was in fact a popular one, initiated, perpetuated and concluded by civilians. People were the undiscussed protagonists of the revolt. At a deeper look, one may notice that there were few other actors involved in the Revolution. Except for some diplomatic warnings from France and the United States, there was no considerable international intervention in Tunisia. The only international actors that sided the revolution were the media, and only when informed by Tunisian bloggers and activists of what was happening in the country. Consistently, the role of the institutional internal actors was poor as well. The police, at the service of Ben Ali, was weak, corrupted, and almost disappeared when the President abandoned the country. The army, which until the uprising remained a marginal actor, only emerged after Ben Ali departure thanks to the charismatic figure of General Rachid Ammar who, after having refused to serve Ben Ali's orders, declared itself and the army at the service of the Revolution. However, even though manifestly on the side of the revolution, the military never covered a fundamental role, but only exploited the revolutionary wave to gain social influence. Even though they eventually took a position, both international and internal institutional actors played a minimal role in the uprising. Therefore, it was civic engagement that made the revolution and the democratic transition. In the second chapter of this dissertation, I have identified women, youth and trade unions as the principal actors of mobilization in the Tunisian. Throughout the practice of different strategies and the adoption of multiple channels, these agents worked together to achieve political change. The main element to consider when analysing these different groups is that the revolution temporary changed their primary objectives and

their way to deal with civic and institutional pressure. Women, youth and workers were fighting for their rights way before the uprising. Women opposed the hypocrite state feminism and demanded for higher consideration of the Code of Personal Status; youth were making pressure for a reform to deal with widespread unemployment and workers were complaining about wage systems and corruption. Indeed, in a country where the institutional administration was run by an appositely selected bureaucracy that served presidential over popular will, the accuses were many. At the point when the Revolution broke out, all of those complains became huge representations of a general unfitness of the government in every domain of the society. From that moment on, every group had, in addition to its interest-based complain, a general one, shared by the whole population. The Tunisian Arab spring was a success also because it saw different actors united for a singular scope: that of achieving political change. A twofold process must be discussed here. On the one hand, singular interest-based groups renounced to their personal demands to focus on the higher demand for popular change. On the other, they exploited the revolution to gain popularity and re-emerge stronger in a future moment of stability. In this sense, interest-based objectives were not put aside but only delayed. The revolution was the moment to achieve that political change that would have permitted all of these civil bodies to obtain their aims later on. For these reasons, it is legit to consider the Tunisian Uprising as the achievement of one objective to merge multiple interests. This element is very much important when putting the Tunisian mobilization in wider perspective. In great moments of social change, it may often happen that one group exploit a civil chaos or a political vacuum to impose its own demands as the primary objectives to be considered in a new system. However, this usually happens when there is a strong religious-based group or a very much powerful army. In Tunisia, both of these two elements are lacking. Conversely, Tunisian population has developed and evolved with the values of co-existence and collaboration. We found these aspects also in the process of collective public mobilization.

## Conclusion

*“The sons of our nation have demonstrated to the world once again that, by its peaceful nature which rejects all violence and extremism without exception, nothing can stop the desire of the people for freedom, democracy, and social justice.”* (Al-Taweer 2016).

These words have been used by the journalist Mohamed al-Taweer to celebrate the end of the Ben Ali’s regime and the popular victory of the Jasmine Revolution. I use this statement to conclude my dissertation because it perfectly catches the singularity of the Tunisian Population in its path to social and political change. Whereas the Revolution resulted from the tangible desperation embedded in socio-economic problems such as unemployment and corruption, it was “the desire of people for freedom, Democracy and social justice” (Al-Taweer 2016) to permit its fulfilment. Undoubtedly, the Jasmine Revolution has rounded over one very specific objective: the reconquer of dignity throughout the refusal of poverty, corruption and unemployment. This objective was common to every individual, from any social and cultural background. The peculiarity of this particular experience of protest stays exactly in the exceptional attitude to social and political participation that the Tunisian population has matured during history. The Tunisian society has evolved in the coexistence of multiples identities and the respect of individual dignity. This has permitted the emancipation of particular groups such as women, workers and youth that felt directly touched by the government negligence. Those actors made the most out of the tools that they had to act for social justice and it was exactly their engagement to turn a general passive feeling of discontent into a popular revolt. In this context, Internet had a central role as the place where to share experiences and organize protests and, most importantly, as the battlefield where to fight government with the weapons of information and knowledge. Furthermore, another extraordinary feature of this experience of protest is that, differently from most instances of popular uprising, it did not turned into a fight for power. The Tunisian Revolution was a product of the desperation of the damaged majority rather than of the imposition of the most powerful minority. As violence and extremism were never part of the Tunisian cultural background, nor were they the principal means to maintain political control. Conversely, the early establishment of a constitutional framework encompassing civil and political rights, the efficiency of the Civil Society network, and the “natural rejection of violence” (Al-Taweer 2016) prevented the Revolution to turn into a civil war.

In this dissertation I have discussed the most important and peculiar elements that guided the path to political and social mobilization in Tunisia. The final argument that emerges from this analysis is that there is not one specific reason for the successful outcome of the Jasmine Revolution, nor for the peculiar characteristics that distinguished it from other Arab Springs. Conversely, the Tunisian society has developed in a special environment, mixing tradition and modernity, western and eastern

values, dignity and pragmatism. In dealing with the many stimuli it received in the course of its history, it always adopted a moderate attitude, never taking an extremist position nor exposing itself too much. The Tunisian Revolution was in line with this moderate attitude. Even though the Tunisians were fighting for their dignity, the protest was not guided by passion, anger or power, but by a universal recognition that poverty and unemployment problems were a matter of political inefficiency and that it was the political administration to be responsible for social injustice. Hitherto, Democracy was instrumental to achieve both social justice and political freedom. Without evaluating the quality of the Tunisian democratic government, I have here analysed the most important elements which had led Tunisian Society to this remarkable political evolution which is the result of a unique historical path, a multicultural background and the development of a courageous and conscious society.

## Riassunto

Nel dicembre del 2010, in seguito a decenni caratterizzati da povertà, disoccupazione e corruzione, la popolazione tunisina ha avviato un processo di mobilitazione sociale finalizzato al rovesciamento del regime autoritario del presidente Zine el Abidine Ben Ali ed all'instaurazione di un governo democratico amministrato da una nuova classe politica. La rivoluzione tunisina è stata la prima di una serie di rivolte pro-democratiche nel Nord Africa ed ha rappresentato l'evento scatenante dell'ondata di disordini politici conosciuti come Primavera Arabe che hanno sconvolto il Medio Oriente. Nonostante l'intento comune di piegare i vari regimi autoritari a favore di forme di governo democratiche, nella maggior parte dei casi queste rivolte hanno portato a situazioni d'immobilità politica in cui una pluralità di gruppi estremisti, guidati o da ideologie politico-religiose o da prese di posizione militari, si contendono tuttora il potere, lasciando paesi come l'Egitto, la Libia e la Siria nel caos più totale. Tuttavia, malgrado la tendenza generale, la rivoluzione in Tunisia si è distinta sia per gli attori coinvolti, sia per le strategie utilizzate e sia per gli obiettivi raggiunti. Infatti, a cinque anni dalla rivoluzione, la Tunisia è uno dei pochi paesi Arabi a poter vantare un governo democratico e a mostrare i segni di un'effettiva evoluzione sociale e politica, a tal punto che la mobilitazione tunisina è considerata un'esperienza esemplare di cittadinanza attiva e di transizione democratica.

In sintesi, l'analisi condotta in questo elaborato identifica nel successo democratico tunisino il raggiungimento di un assai più vasto processo di sviluppo socio-politico che, sin dall'antichità, ha visto la società Tunisina evolversi attraverso molteplici stimoli culturali e politici e numerose influenze occidentali e orientali. L'insediamento di tanti popoli diversi nel territorio tunisino ha contribuito alla maturazione di una società multiculturale ed aperta, naturalmente orientata al rifiuto di tendenze estremiste, ed alla formazione di una classe politica pragmatica. Il popolo tunisino è, pertanto, sempre stato aperto al cambiamento e tollerante nei confronti del diverso. Da qui la creazione precoce di un sistema costituzionale orientato alla protezione dei diritti civili basilari ed alla strutturazione di una società civile robusta e moderna, consapevole delle proprie ragioni e perseverante nelle proprie richieste.

Questa tesi ha lo scopo di analizzare la rivoluzione tunisina alla luce dei più importanti eventi che hanno portato alla sua realizzazione ed al suo compimento finale, considerando, in particolare, lo sviluppo storico-sociale e culturale del paese, gli attori e le strategie di mobilitazione utilizzati nel contesto rivoluzionario e gli aspetti generali che hanno reso l'esperienza tunisina un esempio di rivoluzione non comune nella regione nordafricana. Nell'esaminare questi argomenti, ho adottato un approccio analitico descrittivo con l'obiettivo di individuare gli elementi storici e sociali necessari per investigare le modalità ed il successo della rivoluzione tunisina. Ho, quindi, scelto di articolare

l'elaborato in 4 capitoli, riguardanti rispettivamente; il processo di trasformazione politica in Tunisia; le strategie e gli attori coinvolti nella mobilitazione pubblica; il ruolo dei social media e del cyber-attivismo e, infine, un'analisi generale delle caratteristiche culturali che rendono la struttura politica e sociale tunisina un raro esempio di modernità nel contesto nordafricano. Nei paragrafi che seguono cercherò di riassumere i contenuti del mio elaborato di tesi con l'obiettivo di fornire una visione generale degli argomenti trattati.

### *Trasformazione Politica in Tunisia*

Per comprendere a pieno le peculiarità della società tunisina e dell'attitudine di quest'ultima al cambiamento socio-politico, occorre iniziare da un'analisi dello sviluppo storico del paese a partire dai primi popoli che si insediarono nel territorio. Per vari secoli, il territorio dell'attuale Tunisia, è stato conteso, conquistato ed abitato da alcune tra le più grandi civiltà. La città di Cartagine, per la sua posizione strategica che ne faceva anche il porto più importante del Mediterraneo, ha rappresentato la principale ragione di tale interesse. Nel 146 A.C. in seguito alle tre guerre puniche, Cartagine, conquistata dai Romani, è rimasta sotto il loro dominio fino alle invasioni arabe del 648. La regione rimane sotto il dominio arabo, interrotto da varie conquiste da parte di popoli barbarici, fino al 1574, quando viene annessa all'Impero Ottomano. Durante gran parte del regno Ottomano, la Tunisia è stata governata dalla dinastia degli Husseini, particolarmente tollerante e progressista tanto da concedere nel 1861, il primo esempio di documento costituzionale nel mondo arabo. Nel 1881, le truppe francesi occuparono il paese, trasformandolo, nel 1883, in un protettorato. Quella francese, è stata l'ultima di una serie di invasioni che hanno contribuito a plasmare l'identità tunisina. La popolazione dovrà attendere fino al 1956 per ottenere l'indipendenza ed affermarsi finalmente come nazione. Fino a quel momento, la Tunisia ha rappresentato il prodotto di un interscambio tra varie civiltà, ognuna con le proprie specificità sociali e religiose, le proprie ideologie politiche ed i propri stimoli culturali. Ciò ha consentito lo sviluppo di una società tollerante e multiculturale orgogliosa delle proprie radici miste e delle proprie diversità. Il multiculturalismo, lungi dal rappresentare un ostacolo, ha costituito infatti un motivo di orgoglio ed un importante elemento di definizione nazionale in un'ottica di promozione e rispetto delle singole minoranze.

Nel 1956, a seguito di una mobilitazione partitica interna, il politico Habib Bourguiba, posto fine al protettorato francese, diviene il primo presidente della Repubblica Indipendente della Tunisia. Il suo approccio pragmatico e la sua politica secolare sono stati fondamentali, in una fase iniziale, per la stabilità nazionale. Bourguiba ha fondato il suo mandato sul mantenimento di ottime relazioni sia con la Francia sia con gli Stati Uniti, sul rifiuto dell'estremismo religioso e sulla promozione dei diritti civili. La sua retorica ideologica elogiava l'identità tunisina come forgiata dall'incontro delle più grandi civiltà antiche e moderne. A suo avviso, queste radici andavano preservate e

rispettate nella costruzione della nazione. Nello stesso anno in cui diviene presidente, Bourguiba concede il Codice dello Statuto Personale, documento progressista, volto a promuovere i diritti civili delle donne e storico esempio di modernità sociale nel mondo arabo. Negli ultimi anni di governo, la tendenza di Bourguiba a centralizzare il potere e la sua concentrazione quasi esclusiva sul progresso economico del paese hanno determinato la proliferazione di una forte opposizione liberale ed, il 7 novembre 1987, in seguito ad un colpo di stato da parte del generale Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, che, nello stesso giorno, prese il potere, Bourguiba viene destituito. Sin dal suo insediamento, Ben Ali si è proposto come l'innovatore in grado di iniziare un processo di transizione democratica. Tuttavia, le sue promesse erano ben lontane dalla realtà. Al contrario di Bourguiba, Ben Ali ha messo al centro del suo mandato il culto della sua personalità insieme alla costruzione di una rete di personalità "fidate" da mettere a capo dei più importanti enti governativi, per esercitare il controllo su ognuno di essi. Nel frattempo, la povertà e la disoccupazione aumentavano drammaticamente.

All'inizio del 21esimo secolo la Tunisia attraversava una drammatica crisi economica; aggravata da una diffusissima corruzione, dall'impossibilità di partecipazione reale alla vita politica da parte dei cittadini e da un conseguente clima di generale passività. In tale contesto, il 17 Dicembre 2010, il venditore ambulante Mohamed Bouazizi decide di darsi fuoco di fronte al comune della sua città, Sidi Bouzid, dopo aver protestato invano per essere stato umiliato pubblicamente da una poliziotta, e privato della possibilità di esercitare la sua attività di commerciante. Questo gesto così radicale scatena la rivoluzione tunisina le cui ragioni affondano in decenni di povertà e di sopportazione di decisioni politiche impopolari che pesano gravemente sulle spalle dei cittadini tunisini. Il gesto di Bouazizi apre gli occhi del popolo tunisino che prende coscienza della situazione. Immediatamente si verificano rivolte nel sud del paese che si espandono a macchia d'olio, fino a raggiungere, il 27 Dicembre, la capitale. Il 14 Gennaio, dopo che anche l'esercito appoggia la rivolta, Ben Ali è costretto a lasciare il paese.

Dopo soli due mesi, la rivoluzione si è conclusa con lo stabilirsi di un governo transitorio e con una crisi economica ancora più drammatica. Il 23 Ottobre il partito islamico moderato Ennahda vince le elezioni per l'Assemblea Costituzionale e forma una troika con i due maggiori partiti secolari, rimasta al potere fino al 2013. Il 26 gennaio 2014 viene adottata una nuova costituzione ed, il 23 Novembre dello stesso anno, il partito secolare Nidaa Tounes forma un nuovo governo. A cinque anni dalla rivoluzione, l'evoluzione politica in Tunisia non ha portato equivalenti miglioramenti a livello sociale ma, nonostante il paese debba ancora affrontare una crisi economica molto grave, la mobilitazione pubblica tunisina rimane una delle più riuscite nella storia del mondo arabo.

### *Attori e strategie di mobilitazione*

La rivoluzione dei gelsomini è stata il risultato combinato di opposizione politica e attori non-istituzionali. Nell'assenza di gruppi estremisti e di forti forze militari, un ruolo fondamentale è stato svolto dai cittadini che ne sono stati i reali protagonisti. Grazie alla precoce instaurazione di diritti civili ed alla creazione di una società ben strutturata, all'alba delle rivolte, i cittadini avevano piena consapevolezza della necessità di un cambiamento democratico e degli obiettivi della loro battaglia. Va rilevato che tra i principali attori non-istituzionali protagonisti delle rivolte spiccano le donne, i giovani e i lavoratori.

Grazie al codice dello statuto personale, le donne godevano di diritti estranei al mondo arabo sin dall'indipendenza tunisina, e, da sempre, combattevano per il reale riconoscimento sociale e politico (piuttosto che legale) di questi stessi diritti, contro un governo ipocrita che, pur promuovendo legalmente la parità di genere, non si era mai impegnato nel promuovere lo sviluppo di una reale coscienza nazionale su questi temi. In questo contesto, gruppi come L'Associazione Tunisina delle Donne Democratiche e l'Unione Democratica delle Donne Tunisine hanno giocato un ruolo fondamentale nel periodo precedente la rivoluzione e durante la stessa, riuscendo a mobilitare una grandissima ed importantissima fetta della popolazione. Le donne tunisine hanno partecipato attivamente alle rivolte, condividendo gli ideali democratici e prendendo parte alle manifestazioni pubbliche. Senza rinunciare ai loro ruoli in famiglia, hanno operato nel contempo, come madri, mogli, attiviste e ribelli combattendo non solo per i loro diritti di donne, ma anche per i loro diritti di cittadine.

Nel primo decennio del 21esimo secolo, le nuove generazioni di tunisini sono state sicuramente le vittime più colpite dalla crisi economica. Migliaia di giovani laureati si sono ritrovati senza alcuna possibilità di occupazione con l'unica reale prospettiva di emigrare all'estero o lavorare in nero. Tale situazione, oltre a produrre la reale difficoltà di vivere in un paese che non garantiva la possibilità di provvedere a se stessi e alle proprie famiglie, ha determinato un senso generale e profondo di disperazione ed insoddisfazione riguardo le proprie vite. Per questo, la rivoluzione dei gelsomini è stata anche definita la rivoluzione della dignità in quanto ha rappresentato per i tunisini un fattore sostanziale per la riconquista del proprio orgoglio non solo come cittadini, ma anche come individui. Attraverso molteplici canali di mobilitazione, i giovani sono stati dunque i principali protagonisti della rivoluzione. Peraltro, le nuove generazioni oltre ad aderire e partecipare alle forme tradizionali di lotta e di militanza, sono state particolarmente attive attraverso l'uso di social networks e blogs, valorizzandone e sfruttandone le potenzialità di comunicazione e condivisione globale. Attraverso i social networks, migliaia di individui, organizzazioni, e gruppi ribelli hanno potuto entrare in contatto e cooperare per il raggiungimento degli obiettivi rivoluzionari. L'uso dei social e,

più in generale, del web ha determinato un vero e proprio campo di battaglia sulla rete, non controllabile con la forza, tanto che la rivoluzione è giunta al suo compimento senza conseguenze eccessivamente violente.

Il terzo e ultimo gruppo di attori che hanno preso parte alla mobilitazione sociale tunisina è quello dei lavoratori, costretti nella maggior parte dei casi ad orari estenuanti e retribuiti con salari minimi. La rivoluzione ha rappresentato un momento di cambiamento anche per loro. In particolare, il sindacato nazionale, l'Unione Generale dei Lavoratori Tunisini, ha giocato un ruolo centrale. Durante le due dittature che si susseguirono in Tunisia, l'Unione sindacale aveva sempre mediato tra gli enti governativi e la società civile. Durante la rivoluzione, la UGTT ha invece preso posizione al fianco degli attivisti collaborando informalmente con varie altre associazioni durante e dopo le rivolte, per garantire la prosecuzione e il raggiungimento dell'evoluzione sociale anche nel periodo transitorio post-rivoluzionario. Grazie all'eredità storica, alla struttura inclusiva ed al sistema centralizzato, l'unione diviene presto il punto di riferimento della classe media tunisina.

Donne, giovani e lavoratori hanno utilizzato varie strategie sociali per mobilitarsi contro la dittatura di Ben Ali. In particolare va sottolineato in questo contesto come ognuno di questi gruppi di cittadini, durante la rivoluzione, sia stato capace di rinunciare ad obiettivi primari basati sull'appartenenza ad una specifica classe/gruppo sociale, in favore del più ampio e più importante compimento della transizione democratica. Nessuno di questi gruppi infatti ha fatto prevalere i propri fini specifici nella consapevolezza che il conseguimento degli stessi fosse subordinato e consequenziale al consolidamento della democrazia. Tale posizione ha costituito un fattore fondamentale per evitare che la rivoluzione si trasformasse in una lotta di poteri tra i diversi gruppi della società civile ed ha consentito, nel contempo, l'attivazione di un processo di cooperazione e rispetto reciproco che è proseguito anche nei successivi anni di transizione.

#### *Il ruolo dei social media e la nascita dell'élite digitale tunisina*

Per una visione completa delle modalità d'azione e mobilitazione in Tunisia, è necessario analizzare l'impatto che le nuove piattaforme digitali ed i social media hanno avuto sulla popolazione tunisina prima e durante le rivolte del 2010/11. Sin dai primi anni 90, il desiderio di Ben Ali di apparire come un leader moderno e filo-occidentale lo aveva spinto ad introdurre una legge sull' ICT aprendo così le porte al mondo di internet. Sebbene l'obbiettivo del presidente fosse esclusivamente quello di mostrarsi in tutta la sua modernità, nei successivi anni, internet è diventato uno strumento prezioso ed irrinunciabile per i cittadini tunisini. In particolare, i giovani hanno imparato a sfruttare le nuove piattaforme di comunicazione come spazi dove mostrare i propri talenti e farsi conoscere, oltre che come strumenti di socializzazione. Inevitabilmente, questo processo ha condotto molto velocemente a identificare nello spazio web un luogo dove essere liberi di fare, dire o pensare

qualsiasi cosa. Di conseguenza, blogs e social network sono diventati “luoghi” di dibattito politico e di condivisione sociale nei quali i cittadini potevano confrontarsi sulle proprie situazioni di vita quotidiana. Alcuni blogs, come Takriz, Nawaat o A Tunisian Girl divennero punti di riferimento fondamentali per informare i cittadini sulla corruzione di governo e sulle varie rivolte locali (come ad esempio quella di Gasfa nel 2008), che venivano violentemente repressi dalla polizia e completamente ignorate dai media nazionali. Ovviamente, non passò molto tempo prima che Ben Ali si rese conto della pericolosità che comportava il concedere uno spazio d’espressione ai cittadini, sotto un governo autoritario e, dichiaratamente impopolare. Per questo motivo, pochi anni dopo aver introdotto la popolazione al mondo di internet, Ben Ali implementò una politica di censura, non solo volta al divieto di materiale pornografico o illegale, ma anche a quello di propaganda politica. Tuttavia, questa risposta governativa non fece altro che alimentare la rabbia dell’ormai consolidata classe di cyber-attivisti politici, che divennero improvvisamente etichettati come criminali. Quando scoppiarono le prime rivolte, questi stessi attori politici sono stati in prima linea per raccontare i fatti e per rendere partecipe tutta la popolazione degli eventi che accadevano nel sud del paese. Proprio grazie a loro la rivoluzione è entrata nelle case dei tunisini ed è diventata un atto di rivolta collettiva. Dove non arrivavano i media nazionali, arrivavano i social media; per questo, entità cibernetiche come Nawaat, Takriz e A Tunisian Girl sono state necessarie per incanalare le sofferenze e le umiliazioni di un’intera nazione e trasmetterle a chi non poteva vederle o le accettava passivamente. Sia a livello locale sia a livello globale, i blogs e le pagine web d’attivismo indipendente hanno rappresentato la più attendibile fonte d’informazione e di condivisione. Questa élite digitale è stata dunque in grado di usare le piattaforme digitali come un vero e proprio campo di battaglia alternativo in cui le principali armi erano rappresentate dall’informazione e dalla condivisione, ed il governo poteva entrare solo limitatamente. Sebbene dunque non sia corretto sostenere che l’utilizzo del web come strumento di militanza civica sia stato la sola ragione del successo della rivoluzione tunisina, va rilevato come questo abbia giocato un ruolo centrale soprattutto nel limitare conflitti violenti tra cittadini e forze dell’ordine ed abbia contribuito ad accelerare il processo di transizione politica.

### *Mobilizzazione e Rivoluzione: le peculiarità dell’esperienza tunisina*

Nei precedenti paragrafi, sono state descritte le cause storiche e le caratteristiche principali dell’esperienza rivoluzionaria tunisina. Al fine di fornire una conclusione coerente al presente elaborato, nell’ultimo capitolo, ho scelto di parlare di quelli che sono gli elementi che hanno reso il processo di evoluzione politica e sociale nel paese, un caso anomalo, sebbene degno di imitazione, nella regione del Nord Africa. L’identità nazionale tunisina è nata grazie all’incontro di culture, lingue e religioni differenti che hanno portato alla maturazione di una società multiculturale, e naturalmente volta alla tolleranza del diverso. L’assenza di tendenze estremistiche religiose, politiche e militari, ha

portato la prima classe politica tunisina, quella guidata da Bourguiba, a incentrare la propria retorica governativa su un approccio pragmatico, identificando nella creazione di forti alleanze la strategia ottimale per evitare conflitti. Questa strategia diplomatica è rimasta la chiave del cambiamento tunisino, non solo politico ma anche sociale. Difatti, quest'ultimo non è mai stato portato avanti né da conflitti né da lotte di potere estremiste. Al contrario, in Tunisia, non vi è mai stato posto né per una forte tradizione islamista, né per un esercito potente che potesse minacciare la stabilità governativa. Mentre nella maggior parte del mondo arabo, questi due estremismi hanno portato molte rivolte nate come popolari a diventare faide di potere tra gruppi diversi, questo non avvenne in Tunisia, dove la rivoluzione rimase sempre di dominio popolare. La retorica socio-politica tunisina, visibile nel pragmatismo governativo e nello spirito di tolleranza e cooperazione popolare, ha permesso alla nazione di evolversi usando le armi del dialogo e della diplomazia invece di ricorrere al conflitto. Allo stesso tempo, la modernità della società civile tunisina, radicata su un costante riconoscimento dei diritti dei cittadini, coltivata grazie ad un notevole senso civico ed evoluta nella scoperta delle nuove piattaforme digitali, ha generato una popolazione combattiva e determinata nel proprio obiettivo democratico.

### *Conclusion*

In questo elaborato, ho descritto gli elementi principali e distintivi che hanno segnato le maggiori tappe del percorso di cambiamento sociale e politico in Tunisia. L'argomento finale che emerge da quest'analisi identifica la società tunisina come un ibrido tra mondo arabo e mondo occidentale, forgiata dall'incontro di culture diverse e cresciuta sotto l'influenza di diversi stimoli politici, linguistici e sociali. La società tunisina si è evoluta tra tradizione e modernità, tra valori occidentali e orientali, tra ricerca di un'identità e retorica del pragmatismo. Sebbene la rivoluzione abbia dunque rappresentato il concludersi di un processo di transizione sociale e politica derivante da problemi concreti come la povertà e la disoccupazione, essa ha rappresentato per il popolo tunisino la riconquista di quella dignità lentamente persa durante le dittature. Ogni individuo, di ogni estrazione sociale si è sentito parte integrante del processo rivoluzionario; tale processo non è stato il prodotto dell'imposizione di una minoranza estremista, ma il risultato della cooperazione di una maggioranza popolare incitata e guidata alla transizione democratica da una società civile combattiva ed organizzata. La rivoluzione dei gelsomini lungi dal diventare una lotta di potere tra varie forze contrastanti, è rimasta di dominio popolare. In questo contesto, il tanto desiderato processo di democratizzazione ha rappresentato lo strumento, piuttosto che l'obiettivo, per muoversi verso la ricostruzione di una nuova identità tunisina basata sui valori di tolleranza, anti-estremismo e pragmatismo ed inclusiva della società civile all'interno dei meccanismi amministrativi e politici.

## Bibliography

- Perkins, K. (2014) *A History of Modern Tunisia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hinnebusch, R. and Ehteshami, A. (2014) *The Foreign Policies of the Middle East States* 2.Ed. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Naylor, P. (2015) *North Africa, a History from Antiquity to the Present*. Revised edition, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Brown, N. J. (2002) *Constitutions in a Non constitutional World*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ennaji, M. (2014) *Multiculturalism and Democracy in North Africa: Aftermath of the Arab Spring*. New York: Routledge.
- Bishara, D. (2014) *Labor Movements in Tunisia and Egypt. Drivers vs. Objects of Change in Transition from Authoritarian Rule*. Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs.
- Lewis, W. (1998) *The Multiple Identity of the Middle East*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998.
- BBC (2011) *Profile: Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali*. Available <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12196679> [Accessed February 12, 2016].
- Al-Jazeera English,(2014) *Revealing Tunisia's corruption under Ben Ali*, , <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/03/revealing-tunisia-corruption-under-ben-ali-201432785825560542.html> [Accessed March 6<sup>th</sup>,2016]
- Arieff A and Humund C.E., (2015) *Political Transition in Tunisia*. Paper prepared for member and committees of the Congressional Research Service Washington, DC: CRS Reports. Available: <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21666.pdf> [accessed 4 March 2016].
- Charrad M. M. (2012) *Family Law Reforms in the Arab World: Tunisia and Morocco*. New York: report for the United Nation Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development Expert Group Meeting. Available: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm12/PAPER-CHARRAD.pdf> [accessed 7 March 2016].
- Anderson, L. (2011) *Demystifying the Arab spring: parsing the differences between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya*. Foreign Affairs. Available: <http://pages.ucsd.edu/~phsmith/documents/Anderson-Demystifying-the-Arab-Spring.pdf> [accessed 9 March 2016].

- Tunisian Constitution, (2014). Translated by UNDP and reviewed by International IDEA.
- Breuer A. (2012) *The Role of Social Media in Mobilizing Political Protest: Evidence from the Tunisian Revolution*, Discussion paper for the German Development Institute. Bonn: German Development Institute. Available: [https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/DP\\_10.2012.pdf](https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/DP_10.2012.pdf) [Accessed 10 March 2016].
- Tunisian Constitution, (2014). Translated by UNDP and reviewed by International IDEA.
- Antonakis-Nashif, A. (2015) *Contested transformation: mobilized publics in Tunisia between compliance and protest*, Mediterranean Politics, 128-149, Taylor & Francis. Available: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13629395.2015.1081447> [Accessed 8 March 2016].
- Labidi, M. (2012) *Tunisia's women are at the heart of its revolution*, The Guardian. Available: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/mar/23/tunisia-women-revolution> [Accessed March 10, 2016].
- UIS, Unesco Institute for Statistics, Online Database. 2001
- Al-Araby (2015) *The Women Behind Tunisia's Revolution, January 15, 2015*. Available: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/features/2015/1/16/the-women-behind-tunisia-revolution>, [Accessed March 15, 2016].
- Mhadhbi, A. (2012) *State Feminism in Tunisia: Reading between the Lines*. Open Democracy. Available: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/amira-mhadhbi/state-feminism-in-tunisia-reading-between-lines> [Accessed 20 March 2016].
- ATFD, Femmes Democrat (2015), <http://femmesdemocrates.org.tn/>, [Accessed 26 March 2016].
- Mzioudet. H. (2015) *Women in Tunisia: Four Years After the Revolution*, The Media Line. Available: <http://www.themedialine.org/women/women-in-tunisia-four-years-after-the-revolution/> [Accessed March 27, 2016].
- Parker, E. (2013) *Tunisian Youth: Between Political Exclusion and Civic Engagement*, Tunisia Live. Available: <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/06/14/tunisian-youth-between-political-exclusion-and-civic-engagement/> [Accessed March 28, 2016].
- Paciello, M. C. Pepicelli, R. Pioppi, D. (2016) *Youth in Tunisia: Trapped Between Public Control and the Neo-Liberal Economy*, Power2youth papers, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). Available: [http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/p2y\\_06.pdf](http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/p2y_06.pdf) [Accessed 23 March 2016].

- Honwana, A. (2012) *Youth and the Tunisian Revolution*. Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum Available: [http://webarchive.ssrc.org/pdfs/Alcinda\\_Honwana\\_Youth\\_and\\_the\\_Tunisian\\_Revolution\\_September\\_2011-CPPF\\_policy%20paper.pdf](http://webarchive.ssrc.org/pdfs/Alcinda_Honwana_Youth_and_the_Tunisian_Revolution_September_2011-CPPF_policy%20paper.pdf) [Accessed 24 March 2016].
- World Bank Database (2008).
- Aleya-Sghaier, A. (2012) *The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity*, the Journal of the Middle East p. 18-45. Available [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254312259\\_The\\_Tunisian\\_Revolution\\_The\\_Revolution\\_of\\_Dignity](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254312259_The_Tunisian_Revolution_The_Revolution_of_Dignity) [Accessed 24 March 2016].
- Omri, M. S. (2013) *Trade unions and the construction of a specifically Tunisian protest configuration*. OpenDemocracy. Available: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/mohamed-salah-omri/trade-unions-and-construction-of-specifically-tunisian-protest-configuration> [accessed 20 march 2016].
- Schimidinger, T. (2013) *Unionism and Revolution in the Arab World*, chapter of *Trade Union in the Democratic Protest: 10 international Contributions*. Düsseldorf: Hans Böckler Stiftung.
- Arab Advisors Group (2008) *Tunisia's Internet users spent over US\$ 132.7 million in B2C e-commerce during the past 12 months*. Available: <http://www.arabadvisors.com/> [accessed 27 march 2016].
- Takriz, Facebook Webpage, Available: <https://www.facebook.com/takriz.net/> [accessed 15 March 2016].
- Nawaat (2015) [www.Nawaat.org](http://www.Nawaat.org) [ accessed March 15, 2016].
- Ayari, C. (2012) *Tunisian Girl, blogs for freedom and democracy*, Stuart Tiffen, dw.com. Available <http://www.dw.com/en/tunisian-girl-blogs-for-freedom-and-democracy/a-15174603> [Accessed March 16, 2016].
- Kranz, M. (2015) *The Tunisian Miracle: A Marriage of Moderate Islam and Secular Democracy*. University of Chicago: The Gate. Available: <http://uchicagogate.com/2015/01/20/the-tunisian-miracle-a-marriage-of-moderate-islam-and-secular-democracy/> [Accessed 4 April 2016].
- Grewal, S. (2016) *A Quiet Revolution: The Tunisian Military after Ben Ali*. Carnegie Middle East Centre, Regional Insight. Available: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2016/02/24/quiet-revolution-tunisian-military-after-ben-ali/iucy> [Accessed 12 April 2016].

- Henry, C. and Springborg, S. (2011) *The Tunisian Army: Defending the Beachhead of Democracy in the Arab World*, Huffington Post, The World Post. Available [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/clement-m-henry/the-tunisian-army-defendi\\_b\\_814254.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/clement-m-henry/the-tunisian-army-defendi_b_814254.html) [Accessed 12 April 2016].
- CNN (2012), *About 300 people killed in original Tunisian uprising*, U.N. reports, Available: <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/05/21/tunisia.un/> [Accessed April 3, 2016].
- Barany, Z. (2011) *Comparing the Arab Revolts ; The Role of the Military*. Journal of Democracy. Available at: <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Barany-22-4.pdf> [Accessed 14 March 2016].
- Penner Angrist M. (2013) *Understanding the Success of Mass Civic Protest in Tunisia*. The Middle East Journal, Volume 67, Number 4. Available: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/523897> [Accessed 3 April 2016].
- What Arab papers say (2011). The Economist Online. Available: [http://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/01/tunisias\\_revolution\\_arab\\_press](http://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/01/tunisias_revolution_arab_press) [Accessed 10 April 2016].