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Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

**Approaches to explain political transitions:
the case of Tunisia**

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Abstract

EN: The so-called ‘third-wave’ of political transitions opened the way for a burgeoning literature on democratisation processes. In contrast, in today’s world political change is numerically dominated by the opposite process of autocratisation, to which political scientists devote increasing efforts to understand. In this PhD dissertation by compendium we want to fill a gap by integrating the study of democratisation and autocratisation dynamics in political transitions. We understand transitions as an open-ended process of gradual change from an autocracy to a different polity, democratic or not. The objective of the thesis is to analyse what factors determine the autocratic or democratic character of political transitions from an agency-based perspective. To answer this question the thesis uses case-study methodology with the Tunisian transition (2011-2022) as our focus. The case allows us to study both democratisation and autocratisation dynamics as well as to analyse the role of political actors, domestic and external, in the transition. Data collection has relied on semi-structured interviews and supplementary primary and secondary resources. The PhD dissertation concludes stressing the importance of consensus among domestic actors in the (un)doing of democratic institutions. When conflict paralyzes the implementation of reforms, illiberal and populist actors might gain weight, polarize society, and give an autocratic turn to political transitions.

CAT: L’anomenada tercera onada de transicions polítiques va obrir la via a una vibrant literatura sobre els processos de democratització. En contrast, avui en dia, el canvi polític està numèricament dominat pel procés invers d’autocratització, al que cada vegada més investigadors i investigadores dediquen esforços a comprendre. En aquesta tesi per compendi volem omplir un buit en la literatura integrant l’estudi dels processos de democratització i autocratització en transicions polítiques. Entenem les transicions com a processos oberts de canvi gradual des d’un règim autocràtic cap a un altre tipus de sistema polític, democràtic o no. L’objectiu de la tesis és analitzar els factors que determinen el caràcter autocràtic o democràtic de les transicions polítiques des d’una perspectiva centrada en el rol dels actors polítics. Per donar resposta a aquesta pregunta la tesis utilitza la metodologia del cas d’estudi amb Tunísia (2011-2022) com a focus

principal. El cas d'estudi ens permet estudiar tant dinàmics de democratització com d'autocratització així com el paper dels actors polítics domèstics i externs en la transició. La recopilació de dades s'ha realitzat a través d'entrevistes semiestructurades i, de forma complementària, a través d'altres fonts primàries i secundàries. La tesis conclou destacant la importància del consens entre actors polítics domèstics en la construcció (i demolició) de les institucions democràtiques. Quan el conflicte paralitza la implantació de reformes, les elits populistes i il·liberals poden guanyar pes, polaritzar la societat i donar un gir autocràtic a les transicions polítiques.

ES: La llamada tercera ola de transiciones políticas abrió el camino a una vibrante literatura sobre los procesos de democratización. En contraste, hoy en día, el cambio político está numéricamente dominado por el proceso inverso de autocratización, al que cada vez más investigadores e investigadoras dedican esfuerzos en comprender. En esta tesis por compendio queremos llenar un vacío en la literatura integrando el estudio de los procesos de democratización y autocratización en transiciones políticas. Entendemos las transiciones como procesos abiertos de cambio paulatino desde un régimen autocrático hacia otro tipo de sistema político, democrático o no. El objetivo de la tesis es analizar los factores que determinan el carácter autocrático o democrático de las transiciones políticas desde una perspectiva centrada en el rol de los actores políticos. Para dar respuesta a esta pregunta, la tesis utiliza la metodología del caso de estudio con Túnez (2011-2022) como foco principal. El caso de estudio nos permite analizar tanto dinámicas de democratización como autocratización, así como el papel de los actores políticos domésticos y externos en la transición. La recopilación de datos se ha realizado a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas y, de forma complementaria, a través de otras fuentes primarias y secundarias. La tesis concluye destacando la importancia del consenso entre actores políticos domésticos en la construcción (y demolición) de las instituciones democráticas. Cuando el conflicto paraliza la implementación de reformas, las élites populistas e iliberales pueden ganar peso, polarizar la sociedad y dar un giro autocrático a las transiciones políticas.

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1. Introduction

Political transitions have experienced a historical change of tendency in the last decade. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) have noted how the number of countries transitioning from autocracy to democracy have in recent years been overtaken by those going through the reverse transition. The trend of illiberalism and autocracy is on the rise worldwide for the first time since the Second World War. This is not only manifest in Global South countries or young democracies which may for their different structural reasons find difficulties in upholding and consolidating democratic practices. There have also been periods when mature democratic countries have strayed from the democratic path or experienced a decrease in the quality of democracy. The relevance of studying political transitions and to understand the underlying dynamics of reversed democratic transition processes is thus greater than ever.

This doctoral thesis by compendium endeavours to contribute to the state of the art in the political transition literature on de-democratisation processes. We will do so by gaining theoretical and empirical insights into a single case study of a transition process which began on, but eventually erred from, the path of democratisation: Tunisia. The political transition in this Maghreb country – which started with the Tunisian Revolution in 2011, opening up a phase of democratic reforms for the first time in the country's history – entered into a new phase in 2021.¹ The Tunisian President, Kaïs Saïed, dismissed the prime minister, suspended the parliament and expanded his powers with a series of decrees.² Most notably the president concentrated all state powers in the office of the

¹ We use the terminology of Tunisian Revolution in this doctoral dissertation, as it is the one used in Tunisia, as opposed to 'Jasmine Revolution' or similar more often employed in the Western media.

² On 25 July 2021, the president resorted to article 80 of the constitution which enables him to use special powers in times of crisis. Although this article establishes that the acts of the president are to be controlled by the parliament and the constitutional court, these mechanisms were not put in place.

presidency, including the judiciary and the electoral authority, and suspended the application of the 2014 Constitution. Moreover, in early 2022 judicial authorities launched a series of legal persecutions against political opposition leaders.

In July 2022, Tunisians voted a new constitution in a referendum boycotted by the opposition. The text further expanded the powers of the president and consolidated one-man rule in the country. The Tunisian political transition has thus experienced a set of grave reverses over the past year. Hence, it constitutes an excellent case of a country which in its early stages of democratisation appeared to take a leaf out of the liberal democratic transition playbook, but for reasons that we will explore below have still ended up in a less than democratic outcome today.

The present work is thus motivated by its interest to investigate the *explananda* for what determines the eventual direction of political transitions. By using the Tunisian case we want to answer the following research question: what are the political dynamics that determine the outcome of a political transition? The overarching objective of this doctoral thesis is to study the interaction between the main political actors intervening in the Tunisian transition during the period 2011-2022, and how they relate or not to the (un)making of democratic institutions. The actors covered in our study include the domestic political elite – political parties, civil society organisations and state institutions – as well as external actors – in particular the European Union (EU).

This doctoral thesis has the following structure. First, there is a broad introduction into the topic of political transition, the case of the Tunisian transition, methodological explanations and a summary of the research papers as well as their respective conceptual contributions. In what follows, the three research papers that compose the thesis by compendium are reproduced in their entirety. They can be read separately but, together,

they present the key features of the political transition by following both a chronological and thematic structure. The doctoral thesis thereafter is rounded up in a set of conclusions.

Section 1: Political transitions and the case of Tunisia

1.1. Political transitions

Political transitions can be defined as periods of transformational interregnum between two distinct political orders. Such periods can be short, such as the power transitions between one type of democratic government to another. On other occasions the transition is drawn out over longer periods of time. This would be the case of, for example, the political transition which ensues in post-independence and/or conflict scenarios, after social revolutions or coup d'états, or the transition between an authoritarian rule to a democratic one. The precise starting point and ending point of a political transition are, however, a matter of dispute in political transition theory. Some scholars perceive political transition to start upon the fall of the old order or authority system (see Dahl, 1971; Johansson-Nogués, 2013; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Schmitter and Sika, 2017; Stepan, 2018). Others hold that transition starts at a point during the last stage of the former regime, or pre-transition period, in the form of a set of 'iconic events' which herald the beginning of the transition (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015; Pridham, 1991). The endpoint of any political transition is also a matter of dispute in the literature. Most authors would agree that political transition ends when 'the operation of the new political structures can start to be institutionalised' (Fukuoka, 2013: 994). However, at what point that institutionalisation firmly sets in is open to interpretation. Some would hold that this moment comes when the transition government assumed power, while yet others sustain that the endpoint lies more in milestone events as can be the promulgation of a new

constitution, the wide social acceptance of the new regime and/or a successful warding off of opponents to the transitional leaders (Linz and Stepan; 1996; Whitehead, 1991).³ Political transitions can thus be hard to delimit conceptually, but they are without no doubt extraordinary periods of transformation of a political system. As such they are both a window of opportunity for positive change as well as of uncertainty. Inevitably a lot hangs in the balance for the future of a political community.

Transitional political theory came into the forefront with the ‘third wave’ of democratisations which occurred from the 1970s to the 1990s, when Southern European, many Latin American countries and later on Central and Eastern European countries were immersed in processes of democratisation (see e.g. Karl, 1990; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Pridham, 1991). The transition literature has, for this reason, been dominated by accounts of democratic transitions and mostly based on (liberal) democratic transition theory. Rule of law, parliamentarianism and checks and balances are identified as the institutions that are essential to a minimal definition of democracy in line with Dahl’s polyarchy (1971; see also Linz and Stepan, 1996; Bunce, 2000; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; Putnam et al., 1993). The eight criteria for polyarchy are clustered into three groups of freedoms and rights that give citizens the opportunity to formulate and signify preferences, and have them weighted equally by government (Dahl, 1971: 3).⁴ This perspective equated democratisation with (democratic) transition. Hence, very often it did not consider autocracy or hybrid regimes as possible outcomes of transitions, but as

³ The transitions of Spain and Italy are useful to illustrate this point (see Whitehead, 1991). While in the first case the transition is commonly argued to have ended with the coming into power of the Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) in 1982. In contrast, in Italy the open and gradual character of democratisation after occupation makes it more difficult to establish an end date for the transition.

⁴ These are freedom to form and join organisations, freedom of expression, right to vote, eligibility for public office, right of political leaders to compete for support and votes, alternative sources of information, and institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference (Dahl, 1971: 3).

deviant cases where the transition had been halted by anti-democratic forces willing to return to the *statu quo ante*.

However, even if the transitional political theory was mostly focused on democratisation processes, the possibility of de-democratisation has never been absent from the literature. The most serious risk of de-democratisation, in the context of political transitions, came from military coups, and their likelihood was associated with a fragmented and polarised political elite, a weak civil society and a politically-oriented military (see Dahl, 1971; Linz and Stepan, 1996). Later on, scholarship has started to pay attention to the phenomenon of autocratisation *per se*. This new branch of transition theory has become increasingly relevant in the literature as for the first time since the 1940s the number of countries transitioning from autocracy to democracy is outnumbered by those going through a reverse process of autocratisation (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019: 1103). Research into the ‘twilight of democracy’ (Applebaum, 2020) is thus increasingly focused on ‘how democracies die’ (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). According to this new literature, while military coups continue to take place, the current trend of autocratisation is dominated by democratic backsliding in which the military usually have a secondary role. Instead, democratic backsliding is characterised by being a process leaded by democratically elected civilian officials who gradually undo the checks and balances that define liberal democracy, erode civil and political rights and contest the independence of electoral commissions (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021: 3-4; see also Bermeo, 2016). Unlike in a military coup, de-democratisation does not have the explicit objective to put an end to the democratic game. On the contrary, political leaders often start this process in the name of democracy, but use the term in order to validate the unmaking of the institutions and the rights that are essential to liberal democracy. The result of this kind of transition can be illiberal democracy (Merkel, 2004; Zakaria, 1997).

These are systems which do not fully conform with Dahl's polyarchy criteria but allow the existence of a viable opposition. Another possible outcome is competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Lucan, 2010), where the only democratic criteria retained are elections but in a context of very limited opportunities to challenge the ruling party.

Here we take a leaf from the new budding branch of political transition theory and look at the different patterns, forms, and outcomes of transitions, including both democratisation and autocratisation. Following the approach of the 'third wave' scholarship on democratisation, we do so by focusing on the role of political actors in political transitions. In the next subsection we present the alternative approaches to the agency-centred perspective on political transitions, to then further elaborate on the research that has looked at the role of political actors, domestic and external, to explain their outcome.

1.2. Actors in political transitions

Why political transitions occur have been theorised in the academic literature in many different ways. One of the major *explananda* for political transition has been structural, for example, economic development (Lipset, 1959; Przeworski and Limongi, 1997). Here the model of the various so-called 'Asian tigers' of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Japan, South Korea, etc.) has been extensively researched to determine whether sustained economic growth helps usher in democracy or, on the contrary, whether long-term economic expansion allows autocrats to remain in power. Economic growth, or lack thereof, is thus seen as one of the major factors which has contributed to consolidating democracy or an authoritarian retrenchment. The political transition literature can also be said to be dominated by accounts of how transitions are prompted by socioeconomic demands from

the population and how these are shaped by inequalities in income and land distribution (see e.g. Boix, 2011). In a similar vein, the modernisation literature explains different outcomes in transitions depending on the relative power of social classes, associating liberal democratic outcomes to the relative strength of the urban bourgeoisie (Moore 1966; Skocpol, 1979). Other authors focused on the political culture to explain variability in political systems and the likelihood of transitions ending in democratisation or in autocratisation. For Almond and Verba (1963), the civic political culture, present in Anglo-American societies, was the most favourable to democracy. Similarly, Putnam et al. (1993) put the accent on social capital as the main factor explaining the quality of democracy, and looked at the history of Italy to explain subnational differences. The other side of the coin was the culture of authority obedience allegedly present in Muslim countries (Bellin, 2004).

However, these culturalist perspectives have lost appeal as they have been widely criticised for being considered essentialists and reductionist. Instead, they have been substituted by more refined observations combining different structural elements. One example is Diamond's (2010) explanation on the resilience of authoritarianism in the Middle East (or lack of transitions to democracy) based on rentier states' political economy, regional geopolitics and the development of repressive states, which has been later retaken to explain de-democratisation after the 2011 Arab uprisings (see Bank and Busse, 2020). Finally, other authors have pointed to the ideological foundations of the nation as the main element in determining the democratic character of a political transition. For instance, it has been observed that democratisation was able to take root in societies where nationalism as a state founding ideology integrated different subgroups of society and, regardless of religion or ethno-political identities, considered all citizens as full members of the political community (Tilly, 2007). In contrast, there where an

exclusive form of nationalism was developed we find autocratisation. In South and Southeast Asia, this would explain the divergent paths of Malaysia and India after decolonisation (Tudor and Slater, 2021).

These different theorisations of transitions share a focus on the long-term structural factors determining the outcome of political transitions (see Capoccia and Ziblatt, 2010). The present work acknowledges the importance of many of the above factors (economic, social, ideational, historical...). However, we believe that political actors play an especially important role in determining whether a political transition moves ahead in the direction of democracy or autocracy. The focus on actors is also justified for the fact that macroeconomic trends, albeit important in transitions, do not produce by themselves specific institutional outcomes. Our argument is thus that political actors are indeed the real builders, or demolishers, of democracy and democratic institutions in the context of political transitions. The open nature of transitions is what gives political actors the agency to shape the polity of the future, be it democratic or not. We thus understand political transition as an open-ended process, which primarily depends on political actors' choices during 'critical events' of the political transition (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007; Dogan, 2010). The different choices by the actors are what will yield the outcome of transition. Following this perspective centred on agency, political transition is understood as the aggregated result of the decisions and interactions of specific political actors and their observable consequences in institutions in the short and medium term (Bunce, 2000).

The literature following this agency-centred perspective put the focus on the different constellation of actors that traditionally play an important role in these moments. Their relative strengths, such as support in society, capacity to mobilise different types of resources and use veto powers are key in accounting for the outcome of political

transitions. When using these resources, they dispose of a number of strategic options regarding how they relate to other political actors. In the context of the transition, actors can be divided into moderate and radical depending on their willingness to reach agreements between different factions, and even allegedly political enemies, be them the elites of the former regime or the democratic opposition (Stepan, 2018). The result of the transition will be the sum of the relative power of actors, measured in terms of their resources, and the strategy they follow. In this game, domestic elites, in particular political parties, are the key actors. Their capacity to promote change and de-legitimise the old regime is a necessary element in democratisation, as much as their weakness facilitates autocratisation (Dogan, 2010).

However, external actors also play their part in this political game and we thus include them in our study of the Tunisian transition (Dahl, 1971; Gunitsky, 2018; Pridham, 1991). Transitions depend firstly on domestic factors but they take place in a given international context, which sometimes determines the scope of political change. Moreover, domestic actors establish linkages with external actors, in our case the EU, in order to acquire resources and win leverage at home (Nouira and Redissi, 2018; Zardo, 2020; Zardo and Cavatorta, 2019).

The outcome of political transitions is not a given as they are open-ended processes susceptible to be modified by autocratisation and democratisation dynamics. It is possible that the elites of the former regime retain enough legitimacy and influence to re-impose autocracy after a first moment of democratic renewal. Other times, democratic forces are strong enough to consolidate change and moderate elements of the former regime who end up accepting the legitimacy of the new political system (Dogan, 2010). Very often, however, the outcome is not a clear victory for one faction or another, but a jumble in which compromise dominates and many elements may remain ambiguous for

a certain time (see Linz and Stepan, 1996). The process of political transition implies that the old order is disappearing, but this may overstate the extent of change. An existing political regime, or parts thereof, may simply reinvent itself, or pretend to do so, to gain advantage in the transitional process. Or, the existing political order could be divided and there will be a contest within it to see which kind of regime succeeds. In the following subsections we analyse the role of domestic political elites and external actors in political transitions and we relate them to different types of transition.

1.2.1. Domestic actors in political transitions

The first set of actors that we will consider here are the domestic ones. Domestic actors are arguably one of the central factors in explaining the outcome of any political transition process. Even in cases where democratisation followed a military occupation and the external dimension of the transition was thus important, like in Japan, Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany, the experience acquired by political actors in the past was key in providing domestic actors with the skills and knowledge to rebuild democratic institutions (Dahl, 1971; Gunitsky, 2018). In other contexts, like in Afghanistan and Iraq, transitions to democracy by occupation did not consolidate, among other reasons, because political actors did not have this kind of experience and were too weak or too divided to secure democratic change (Dodge, 2013). Other times, like in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, geopolitics was key at the beginning of the transition. After the shadow of a Soviet intervention was cleared in the context of the abandonment of the Warsaw Pact, democratic change could start. However, in the following phase, the role of domestic actors was paramount in determining the outcome of the transitions (Bunce, 2000; Dimitrova and Pridham, 2004; Lewis, 2001).

We have identified here three groups of domestic political actors that play a key role in political transitions – the political elite, the organised civil society and the security forces- both in democratisation (see Linz and Stepan, 1996) and autocratisation processes (see Velasco et al., 2021). First, in terms of political elite, both new and old actors intervene. New political leaders come to the front and new political parties are formed, very often drawing upon members from the social movements which constituted the political opposition during the previous regime (Lewis, 2001). Political parties are essential organisations in democracy, thus their importance in political transition and in democratic consolidation (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 3; see also, Field, 2006; Stepan, 2018). During elections they convey the ideological preferences of electors and at the same time they fulfil the task of shaping public opinion. Three additional basic functions of political parties are crucial in the context of transition. First, the legitimacy of the new political system will depend to certain extent on the ability of political elites to respond to the demands of citizens. Secondly, attitudes and expectations of citizens regarding the polity are not solidified yet, and political parties thus have the responsibility to educate the public in the functioning of the democratic political system. Third, once in government, political parties need to deliver public policy. Their success in doing so effectively will depend on their capacity to maintain cohesion among their ranks and to adopt and implement agreements with other political parties. On the contrary, autocratisation is facilitated when political parties have weak organisations, their political action is not rooted on social demands and fragmentation erodes government efficacy (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). In these contexts, anti-democratic actors might gain weight and challenge the legitimacy of the new political system arguing that it brought bad governance and ineffective public policy (Dogan, 2010; Velasco et al., 2021). The passage from opposition movements to political parties is thus a critical point in the

transition, and it conditions the aftermath (Lewis, 2001). Political activists can be successful in ousting dictators from power, like in the case of the Eastern European Colour Revolutions or the Arab uprisings. However, it is important that soon after political elites move from goal-oriented movements to political parties which implement democratic reforms (Schmitter and Sika, 2017). For instance, in Egypt, secularist political parties were weak and badly organised. Hence, they relied on the military to protect their political objectives in front of the Islamists.

Another important factor associated with political elites in transitions is the relative strength and the continued political activity of actors associated with the previous regime. If agents associated with the former regime lack legitimacy, or are barred from politics, the political transition might fall rather exclusively into the hands of the former regime opposition movements and any new actors that might be enabled by the new political context. If the elements associated with the former regime retain certain legitimacy and strength on the domestic scene, they will contribute to shaping the nature of the transition process (Linz and Stepan, 1996). In this case, the moderation of the former elites and their transformation to supporters of the new political regime is key to determine the outcome of the political transition. If that it is the case, they might contribute to the stabilisation of democracy (Field, 2006). Otherwise, if such moderation is not attained in at least part of the former elites, the transition might take an autocratic turn if they reach power through democratic elections or through a coup with the help of the military. The organisation of the old elites into political parties can thus be ambivalent, risking to devoid the new institutions of their democratic nature, but sometimes necessary to provide institutions with solid legitimacy. The key factor here is consensus on the basic contours on the new democratic polity between democratic opposition and part of former elites (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Stepan, 2018). Otherwise, new research has identified that

the creation of antagonistic poles in democracy is the leading mechanisms of democratic backsliding (see Graham and Svolik, 2020; McCoy et al., 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019). In the context of political transitions, this is more relevant as checks and balances are not fully implemented, and the institutional setting is at best partially in place. If that is the case and political parties perceive politics as a zero-sum game, there is a risk of autocratisation. In essence, democracy cannot flourish if it is not accepted as the 'only game in town' by all relevant political parties, nor in absence of some common beliefs about functioning of the polity (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Velasco et al., 2021). The Spanish transition to democracy is a case in point here (Preston, 1987). Democratisation was possible thanks to an overwhelming consensus between left-wing opposition forces and moderate figures of the former regime who integrated party politics. This consensus made possible the democratic constitution of 1978 and the socio-economic agreements of La Moncloa.

Second, civil society actors are also important in political transitions. In particular, the mobilisation or non-mobilisation of civil society organisations is of crucial importance in the political transition as they apply political pressure on the political elite in different stages of transition. Indeed, the often-prescribed demobilisation of civil society in the aftermath of the social revolution or conflict which lead to the political transition can put at risk any progress towards democracy and render autocratisation easier (Bunce and Wolchik, 2006; Stoner and McFaul, 2013). Also, the strength of civil society determines the willingness of the old elites to transition to democracy and accept democracy, or at least, step down from state power in the early moments of the transition. For instance, in Poland, the transition started by the mobilisation of the trade union Solidarity. In this case street protests were accompanied by accommodation by ruling elites, who in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union relaxed repressive measures.

In the Hungarian and Czechoslovak cases, discussions between civil society and incumbent elites also favoured the dismantlement of the former regime with few concessions to the members of the former regime. On the other hand, in contexts where liberal civil society did not have leverage, because it was not influential in large parts of society, it was not able to effectively act as a dogwatch of the new democratic institutions. This was for example the case of Egypt, where the first years of the democratic transition were dominated by the polarised struggle between Islamists and the elites of the former regime (Schmitter and Sika, 2017).

Thirdly, the supporting role of the security apparatus, mainly armed forces and police, is key to the outcome of the political transition (see Agüero, 1998; Allal and Vannetzel, 2017; Hunter and Vega, 2022; Schmitter and Sika, 2017). In the context of the Cold War, the military could seek support of one of the two poles to put an end to political transitions. After the 1990s, the relative loss of appetite in the US for military interventions, and Russia's diminishing power, reduced the resources available to the military and the chances to (re-)impose autocracies ruled by generals (Schmitter, 2018). In parallel, the professionalisation of the military, including civilian control, has been associated with democratisation (Karl, 1990). This has been more relevant in cases where the interest of military could be diverted to supranational military operations, led by NATO, the UN or the EU (Schmitter, 2018: 600). For instance, Spain successfully professionalised its military after the failed coup of 1981, which threatened to put an end to its political transition towards democracy. The professionalisation of the Spanish armed forces was reinforced by the international engagement of Spanish troops in multilateral organisations, redirecting their attention from domestic political goals. Other times, political transitions started after military defeat and the mobilisation of both political parties of the opposition and civil society. In Argentina, the military capitulated

to the demands of opposition groups in the context of the Malvinas war. Similarly, in Greece, the military-led government negotiated with the opposition after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. In contrast, more recently, in Thailand and Myanmar, the military maintained the reigns of the transition and, when they felt that their power was endangered by civil authorities, they ended democratisation efforts with a coup in 2014 and 2021 respectively. The power of the opposition parties and civil society, in these cases, was not enough to curb the authoritarian impetus of the military. In the case of police forces, their role in the transition is also connected to the degree they resist reform by the new political elites. As in the case of the military, they can sometimes act as authoritarian enclaves, maintaining practices contrary to human rights, and acting as a pressure group that seeks to impair democratic change (Allal and Vannetzel, 2017). Very often, democratic consolidation is attained when police forces accept their role as an apolitical actor, as opposed to their role in the former regime as repressors of political dissidence (Hunter and Vera, 2022; Linz and Stepan, 1996).

We will focus on the political elites and their role both in the opposition and in state institutions. We do not devote much attention to the domestic security forces and civil society in Tunisia. Both actors in overall played smaller roles in the transition compared to political elites, albeit their significance peaked at different points of time of the transition. In the case of civil society, it was important in the first moments of the revolution against former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011. Grassroots members of the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT), Tunisia's most important trade union, were among the first to mobilise against the regime. Then, human rights organisations and the business organisation joined the ranks of the UGTT in order to put pressure on political elites to reach a consensus between different political parties on the 2014 Constitution (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015; Mohsen-Finan, 2021). However,

the agreements that shaped the political system of the Tunisian transition were primarily adopted in the sphere of political elites. Afterwards, political elites were both responsible for the lack of democratic consolidation and for the authoritarian turn of 2021. In terms of the military, their role was key in the very beginning of the transition, when they decided not to intervene in favour of Ben Ali and thus let his regime collapse. They were important again in the summer of 2021, when they took the side of President Saied in the context of the closure of the parliament. Besides these two moments, the Tunisian military has tended to abstain from participating in politics, which in a way helped them preserve their legitimacy as a neutral state institution (Bou Nassif, 2015).

1.2.2. External actors in political transitions

Aside domestic actors, external actors, such as donors, international financial institutions, military allies and cooperation or trade partners, can also play a role in political transition processes by promoting democratic change or supporting autocratic tendencies. During the Cold War, in the context of political transitions, both superpowers supported and funded their respective allies, without regard for the outcome of the transition, democracy or autocracy. Hence, US' democracy promotion was criticised for its double standards, sometimes supporting democratic political parties, like Christian Democracy in Italy, other times supporting antidemocratic forces, like the military in Latin America (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Pridham, 1991). The financial and political assistance the US was providing to new or fragile democracies, whether in Europe, Latin America or in the Third World, was perceived as an ideological tool to impede the spread of communism (Hook, 1998). Newly independent countries, whether in Africa or Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, also perceived democracy promotion with certain concern as it appeared to be an instrument for former imperial powers to maintain political influence over their erstwhile

colonial subjects. In the case of the USSR, its role in contexts of political instability, like transitions, was in turn to support communist parties aligned with the Komintern and, in its European sphere of influence delimited by the Warsaw Pact, intervene militarily to stop popular uprisings, like Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. At the end of the Cold War such debates appeared to be relegated, at least momentarily, to the annals of history, as more countries around the world opted for democratic regimes and created a demand for Western democracies to supply help to support the transition phase (Cox et al., 2000; Mcfaul, 2004; Carothers, 2010; Hook, 1998). However, external efforts to promote democracy in the context of political transitions has been increasingly countered by illiberal actors. This latter development has been apprehended by international relations scholars, who have moved from studying the diffusion of liberal (democratic) norms in the international system, to reflect on their contestation in a post-liberal and uncertain order in the making (Barbé, 2021; Börzel and Zürn, 2021; Johansson-Nogués et al., 2020).

External actors have tried to influence the outcome of political transitions in different ways. Although, as stated before, the engagement of domestic actors is a necessary condition in political transitions, the external dimension and its linkages with internal politics are also of importance and have merited the attention of transition literature (see e.g. Dandashly, 2018; Khakee and Wolff, 2022; Nourira and Redissi, 2018; Pridham, 1991; Zardo, 2020). First, external actors might try to influence the politics of transition by giving material and discursive support to the actors they perceive to be close to their interests. The impact on the transition will depend on the democratic credentials of the local actors. Most often, states willing to promote democratisation have identified civil society actors, such as human rights organisations, as their partners. This bottom-up approach is influenced by the idea that a strong civil society is essential during the

transition and the consolidation phases. A key US institution in this kind of democracy assistance is the National Endowment for Democracy, which usually took the form of NGO-based projects (Carothers, 2010; Crawford, 2007; Dimitrova and Pridham, 2004). Complementary, political parties, trade unions and business organisations have also been the target of democracy assistance programs. In these cases, given the stronger political character of these organisations, they usually receive the support from foundations of their counterparts from democratic countries. A case in point here is the role of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in providing financial resources and training to Spanish and Portuguese socialists during the transitions in both Southern European countries (Pridham, 1996). Other times, the support political actors receive can be discursive. This can take the form of explicit public messages of support to political leaders or civil society organisations. If they come from the part of well-known and respected international figures, they can have an impact on the legitimacy of political actors willing to democratise the state. Alternatively, external discursive support can also be given to leaders who are engaged in autocratisation processes in the context of transitions. One example is the support given to Egypt's Al Sisi by the leaders of the Gulf Monarchies immediately after the 2013 coup (Debre, 2021). External actors can also intervene to deter political transitions by precisely countering democratic uprisings led by civil society and opposition parties (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2015). In this case, the strategy would be the contrary, support the state elites in their repression strategies against bottom-up pressures for democratisation. Important cases here are the Russian intervention in Kazakhstan to restore order in the context of massive demonstrations against the autocratic regime of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in early 2022, and Saudi Arabia's intervention in Bahrain in the context of the Arab uprisings of 2011 (see Libman and Obydenkova, 2018). Alternatively, when popular mobilisations succeed, autocracy

promoters might organise disinformation campaigns against actors leading democratic change, and support local actors favouring autocratic outcomes. This has been the case in the context of the colour revolutions in the post-soviet space, with Russia targeting groups perceived as ‘pro-Western’, and in parallel supporting ‘pro-Russian’ political actors on the ground (Ambrosio, 2007).

Next to direct support for domestic actors, material and discursive, external actors engage with political transitions by using conditionality. In contrast with the direct assistance, or opposition, to different domestic actors, conditionality is influenced by a state-centric conception of transitions and is primarily focused on changing institutions from a top-down perspective. Conditionality involves benchmarking and monitoring of reform milestones in state apparatuses by an external actor, typically a state or a multilateral organisation, in exchange of increasing economic and political incentives in the form of trade, development aid, financial assistance or the promise of political integration in a supranational organisation (see Dimitrova and Pridham, 2004; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008; Zardo, 2020). Conversely, conditionality can also be ‘negative’ as it might imply sanctions or the withdrawal of positive incentives if democratic achievements are undone, what is termed the ‘carrot and stick’ approach to political transitions. The paramount case of external engagement following this scheme is the EC/EU, although other actors like the US, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank also apply conditionality in their programs. As early as 1962, the Birkelbach Report of the European Parliament established that the new member states of the European Communities (EC) ought to be democracies. Since, in the context of political transitions in Europe, domestic political elites have acknowledged that democratisation was to be met with the positive economic and political incentives provided by EC/EU convergence and integration. For instance, in Southern European

countries, Portugal, Spain and Greece, many business elites stopped perceiving autocratic rule as a source of stability and a way to control the labour movement when a political transition process set them firmly on the path of democracy and integration with the EC (see Pridham, 1990). Also, the EU offered elites of former autocracies of Eastern and Central Europe the prospect of integration in exchange of implementing the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria (Ethier, 2003; Kopstein, 2006). Conversely, autocratic external actors can also apply the same logic to transitions and, in turn, incentivise autocratisation (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2015). Similar to democracy assistance, autocratic practices are very often promoted by regional organisations, like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) (Libman and Obydenkova, 2018). For example, political leaders who decide to suppress the opposition can be rewarded with an intensified cooperation by external actors who also perceive this opposition as a threat to their own interests. This was the case, again, of the Gulf Monarchies like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the context of the Arab uprisings. Autocratisation, notably with the suppression of Islamist parties, was accompanied by an increase of financial support and bilateral cooperation (Debre, 2021).

Concerning the treatment of external actors in the thesis, hereafter we focus on the role of the EU in the Tunisian political transition. Other external actors have played a role in assisting democratic change, like individual member states and the US, but both in terms of budget and influence, the EU appears as the first among the actors engaged in the country at several levels (see for e.g. Khakee and Weilandt, 2022; Nourira and Redissi, 2018; Rivera-Escartin, 2020; Rivera-Escartin and Johansson-Nogués, 2022; Zardo, 2020). Here too there were other external actors pushing for an illiberal or anti-democratic agenda in Tunisia. Most notably, the autocratic turn of President Saïed has been backed

at the discursive level by United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. These states perceive the Islamists of *Ennahda*, the main opposition to Saied, as backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, a region-wide social-cum-political movement which has fomented domestic political opposition in most countries across the region. Hence, they have supported Saied's move away from parliamentary democracy and his strategy to exclude *Ennahda* and other opposition parties from the dialogue process to draft a new constitution. This support to President Saied has been explicit in different official visits and statements. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been contacted by Tunisian authorities in order to seek financial assistance. President Saied has sought alternative sources of credit to the IMF, whose governors have put political conditions linked to the reestablishment of parliamentarism. However, it is uncertain if this support is going to have a more tangible impact in the political system and thus, we focus on the more evident role of EU foreign policy by analysing both intended and unintended effects on the transition.

In the following subsection we turn to describe how the interaction between different political actors, both domestic and external, influence the outcome of the transition. We put our focus on the type of transition that is dominated by transaction between former elites and the democratic opposition and explain autocratisation risks associated with it.

1.3. Typologies in agent-centric political transition processes

Following this agent-centred perspective, the direction of the political transition will very much depend on the relative strength of political actors and how they use the resources that are available to them. Transition times are crucial because the result of power

struggles will influence in the political system that is in the making through path dependencies. Scholars have analysed different patterns or modes of transition depending on the nature of relations between political actors, and how these have shaped the outcome of the transition in the long-term consolidation (Field, 2006; Karl and Schmitter, 1991; Munck and Leff, 1997, Rostow, 1970). One of the underlying assumptions of much of the literature on transitions has been that the mode with which political transitions are created has important implications for the stability of the newly emerging polyarchies.

In an important article for the literature Munck and Leff (1997) categorised modes of transitions according to two criteria. First, they looked at which kind of actor initiated the transition. If it belonged to the incumbent regime elite, it was a transition ‘from above’, and if it belonged to the opposition, it was a transition ‘from below’. The second criteria was the relation between democratic opposition and incumbents elites, from direct (and even violent) confrontation to accommodation. Between these two extreme types we find different levels of transaction, where regime and opposition play a roughly equal role in system transformation and they are compelled to pact the terms of the new democratic polity (see Schmitter, 1991; Welsh, 1994). In the Tunisian case, the transition started from below. The massive mobilisation that began in December 2010 was the cause of the collapse of the autocratic regime. It was an unexpected turn for the incumbent elite and it forced Ben Ali to leave the country on 14 January 2011. However, despite of the revolutionary character of the first moments of the transition, transaction between part of the elites of the former regime and different opposition groups became the main distinctive trait of the transition, and the idea of consensus adopted at the beginning of the transition marked political developments in the following years. This path that followed Tunisian political elites, transaction or pact, was an option among others (limited reform, social revolution) and it inevitably had consequences in the future.

Hence, in this section we focus on transition characterised by transactions between opposition and incumbent elites and their different results.

Transitions by transaction were particularly effective in contexts where the ‘appetite for democracy’ was not widespread in society, despite the existence of well-organised opposition groups (Bunce, 2000). In these cases, to consolidate democracy, it was necessary to pact in order to reach a viable consensus on the democratic institutions, the form of government, and on the implementation of the reforms necessary to reform the autocratic structures of the state (Linz and Stepan, 1996). For example, in Southern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, with the exceptions of Portugal and Costa Rica, Bunce (ibid.) argues that transitions by transaction involved the creation of several stops from autocracy to democracy in order not to activate anti-democratic responses, like the possibility of a coup, in the former elites. In many cases this strategy made the process feasible as it did not scare conservative actors that favoured limited reform, but did not necessarily imagine that the final outcome of the transition would be democratic consolidation. This process involved divisions within the elites that supported the former regime. Part of the leverage of the democratic forces during the transition consists in exploiting these divisions in order to create wider alliances that isolate the most conservative elements and engage with reform-oriented groups within the state apparatus (see Preston, 1987). In the Tunisian case, opposition forces decided to pact with members of the elite of the former regime but who have distanced themselves from Ben Ali. A prominent example is Béji Caïd Essebsi, who as prime minister led the country to the first democratic elections despite having been foreign affairs minister under Bourguiba and president of the parliament under Ben Ali. Later on, members of the former regime joined the ranks of *Nida Tounis* and governed together with *Ennahda*, their long-time political enemy in the pre-2011.

On the other hand, we can conceptualise that the reverse of political transition by transaction is a polarised transition. Scholars working on the dynamics of de-democratisation have signalled how the creation of antagonist political poles generate the conditions under which democratic backsliding takes place (McCoy et al. 2018; McCoy and Somer, 2019; Svobik, 2019). This is more relevant in transition countries. In these cases, the checks and balances are partially implemented, or not in place yet, and thus there are no institutional limits to the action political elites that want to curtail political rights (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). A case in point is Egypt as political actors, both Islamists and secularists, perceived political action in terms of a zero-sum game. When the Islamist won the elections, their government action and their role as majority force in the constituent assembly alienated secularist parties and civil society. In turn, part of the political elites opposed to the Islamists sided with the military as their only resort to block the attempts to change the political system without consensus (see Kırdış, 2018).

If political actors can tame polarisation, transitions through transaction provide legitimacy to the new institutions, at least in the short and medium term. However, there are also risks associated with integrating members of the former regime in the democratic game. When the democratic forces are not strong enough to impose their conditions the democratic character of the new regime is not a given (ibid.). Sometimes these situations create protracted hybrid systems, which lay in a grey zone between democracy and autocracy for years (see Morlino, 2010). Transitions in Latin America provide good examples of these dynamics. In the Chilean case, for instance, the transition was initiated in 1988 with a referendum won by the opposition, which started the transition ‘from-below’. Nevertheless, the transition was impaired by the creation of ‘authoritarian enclaves’, institutions and officials within the state apparatus that the new elected authorities were not allowed to reform or dismiss. The old Chilean elite could always

make use of a menace of a return of the military to establish limits to the new democracy. This was primarily manifested in the acceptance by the democratic opposition of the 1980 Constitution, the continuation of Pinochet as commander-in-chief of the army until 1998 and his designation as senator-for-life (Fuentes, 2000). In the Spanish case, the price to pay was the absence of reparation for human rights violations committed during the dictatorship, as the amnesty law covered both political prisoners and state officials. Another was the continuation of anti-democratic practices, in particular in the security apparatus, and the creation of authoritarian enclaves in the military, that endured until the failed coup of 1981. In the case of Tunisia, the transaction mode of the transition had similar consequences for democratisation. One involved the role of the Truth and Dignity Commission, the body in charge of transitional justice. The scope of its action was severely downplayed due to lack of funding and the non-implementation of the recommendations of the final report concerning the reform of the security apparatus (Mohsen-Finan, 2021). Transactions between *Ennahda* and *Nida Tounis* allowed the continuity of individuals in the ministry of interior who have had responsibilities in human rights violations in the past and, to a certain extent, reproduced these practices under the new political order (see Allal and Vannetzel, 2017).

Lack of reform in the context of transitions by transaction can sometimes be tackled by external actors. They can play an important role by supporting and giving leverage to the political actors that favour reform and thus gain influence over the outcome of the transition process. Scholarship has used the concept of ‘anchoring’ to make reference to the idea that states and other political actors interested in promoting democratic rule might want to secure democratisation in a given country by increasing the level of contacts and bilateral cooperation with the transitioning country (Whitehead, 1991). In the case of Southern, Eastern and Central European countries, democratisation

was made in parallel with integration to the EC/EU. Integration was used here as the ‘anchor’ to democracy through which a non-democratic periphery transforms its state structures in order to converge with a democratic core (Barbé and Johansson-Nogués, 2003; Johansson-Nogués, 2004; 2018; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier; 2004). In the Tunisian case, we analyse how the EU tried to play this role of democracy ‘anchor’ in the country by providing enhanced bilateral cooperation in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This kind of external activity interacts with the domestic political dynamics of the transition by transaction and favours those actors that want to implement democratic reforms (Zardo, 2020). On the other hand, external actors might also want to ‘anchor’ autocratisation by providing assistance to incumbent elites or political parties that do not favour democratic views over the transition of the country (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2016). This has been the case of Russia in Eastern Europe. When demonstrations started in Belarus in 2020, Moscow offered its support to President Alexander Lukashenko and waved the possibility of a military intervention to avoid democratic change.

In the section that follows we describe the main events in Tunisia’s political transition. While democratic change seemed to take root after transaction between political elites and the adoption of the democratic constitution by consensus, political deadlock characterised Tunisian politics after this important milestone (see Redissi et al, 2021). As a result, the transition remained open and its outcome contested. After July 2021, we have seen a new trend, autocratisation in the form of gradual democratic backsliding, which has consolidated with the adoption of a new constitution in July 2022.

Section 2. Background: the political transition of Tunisia (2011-2022)

On 17 December 2010, anti-regime protest started in the small town of Sidi Bouzid, in central Tunisia, after the self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi. The protest did not remain circumscribed to the regional level, as it had happened in the past. A new generation of political activists made Bouazizi symbol of the Ben Ali's regime grievances and successfully mobilised the youth and the disenfranchised on the internet across the country (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015). Moreover, the role of grassroots members of the UGTT was important in escalating the mobilisation at these early moments of the transition (Mohsen-Finan, 2021). They provided the experience they had acquired in past protests, like in Gafsa in 2008, and articulated the wave of anti-regime sentiment that swiped the country (Yousfi, 2015). On 27 December, the first big demonstrations were organised in Tunis, and in the following days they had spread to all major cities.

In front of this situation, Ben Ali first opted to repress the mobilisations through police brutality and to equate protestors to terrorists and paid foreign agents. But, as the amplitude of discontent augmented, he tried to combine this strategy with concessions, like the reshuffle of his cabinet on 29 December and the announcement of the creation of thousands of new jobs. In a last attempt to tame the protests, on 12 January, the interior minister was ceased, and the prime minister announced that protestors incarcerated since 17 December were going to be released. But demonstrations continued and became more political, demanding the end of the regime and targeting the headquarters of Ben Ali's party, the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (RCD). On 13 January, Ben Ali announced in a televised speech that he would not opt to a new presidential term in 2014. On 14 January, he dissolved the government, announced that elections were going to be organised in six months and deployed the military to assist the police in controlling the situation in the street. However, on the ground, the military refused to suppress the protests. In the evening of the 14 January, high ranking military officials suggested the

president to leave the country for his safety. As Ben Ali did so, political change could start. In the rational of the military, the regime had always benefited the police in detriment to the military when it came to funding and promotions. Hence, they had more to win than to lose in the event of major political reshuffle (Bou Nassif, 2015).

Having lost the support of the military, Ben Ali left Tunisia for Saudi Arabia and the political transition started (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015). The last prime minister of Ben Ali, Mohamed Ghannouchi, continued in his position and the speaker of the parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, became interim president. On 17 January Ghannouchi formed a national unity government with ministers of the RCD, opposition figures belonging to secularist parties, and members of the UGTT. However, next day, part of the ministers belonging to the opposition and the UGTT ministers resigned to protest the inclusion of members of the RCD in the government. Following these pressures and given the continued mobilisation in the street, on the 27 January the RCD members left the government. Between February and March, Ben Ali's party was dissolved, political parties were legalised, and political prisoners were freed. However, the street continued to demand the departure of Ghannouchi, associated to Ben Ali. On 27 February, he resigned following the killing of five protesters and Béji Caïd Essebsi was appointed as prime minister by the interim president.

Béji Caïd Essebsi, foreign affairs minister under Bourguiba and president of the parliament under Ben Ali between 1990 and 1991, became the prime minister that was going to command the transition until the first democratic elections in October 2011 (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015). The objective of the Essebsi's Government of Transition was to negotiate with the opposition the conditions under which the constituent elections were going to take place. In this sense the Tunisian transition started as a revolution in the street, which the regime elites had not foreseen, but very soon became a transition by

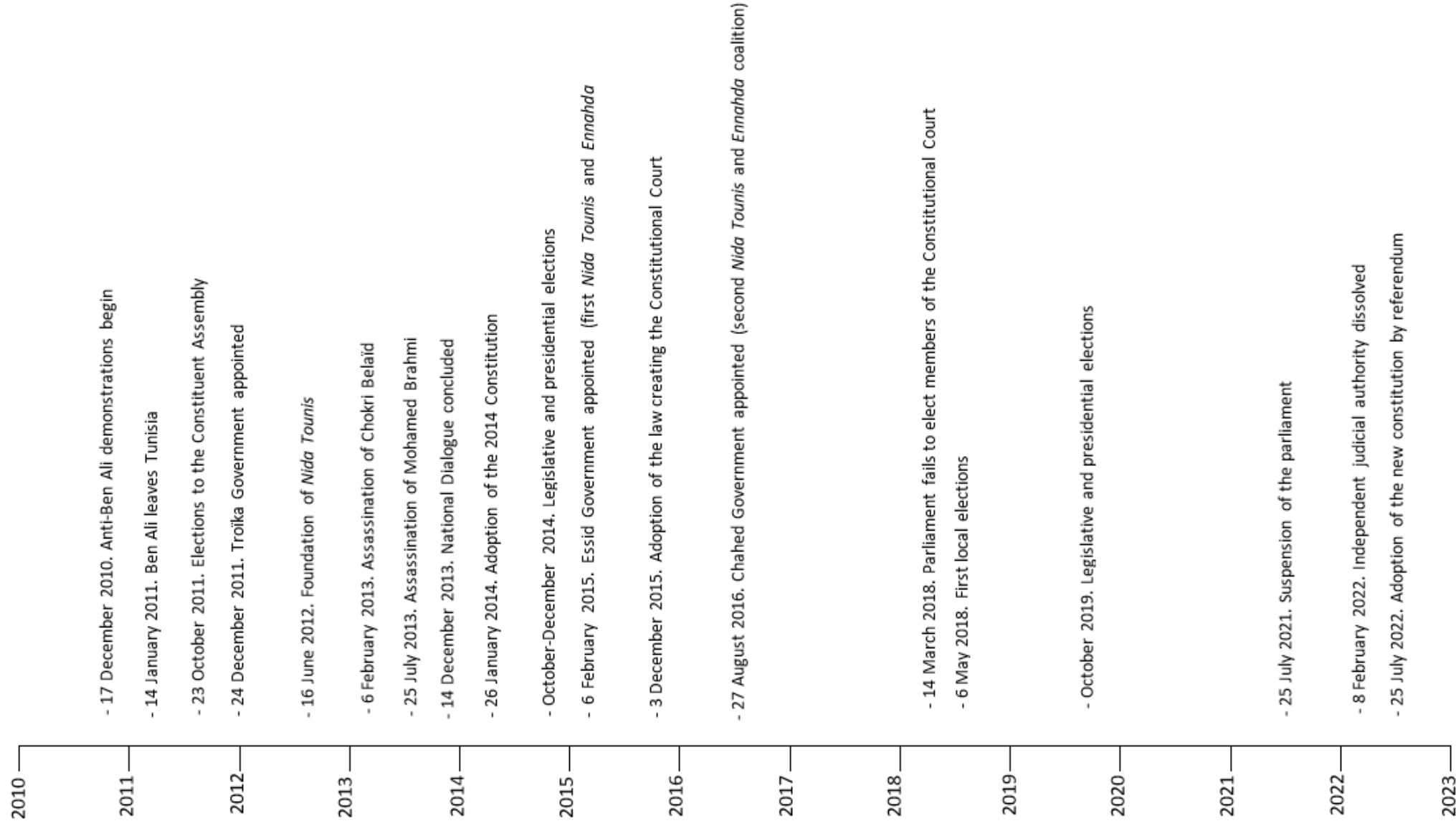
transaction or pact between part of the incumbent elites and the opposition (Mohsen-Finan, 2021; Schmitter, 2018; Stepan, 2018).

In the democratic opposition, there were debates on the convenience to pact with the Essebsi Government or not (Bras and Gobe, 2017). Left-wing parties under the leadership of Hama Hammami, the historic leader of the Communist Party of the Tunisian Workers, were in favour of a clear rupture, claiming the pre-eminence of the revolutionary legitimacy over the continuity of the institutions. Small secularist parties, as well as the UGTT and the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme*, were instead in favour to negotiate with the reformist elements of the regime. In turn, *Ennahda*, the biggest opposition force, hesitated between these two positions (Mohsen-Finan, 2021). A middle ground solution to these debates was achieved with the fusion of an official commission for political reform, composed by experts and created on 17 January by Prime Minister Ghannouchi, and the *Conseil de Défense de la Révolution*, a committee created by opposition forces. The new institution was given a long name, *Haute Instance pour la Réalisation des Objectifs de la Révolution, de la Réforme Politique et de la Transition Démocratique* (HIROR), which reflects its double legitimacy, that of the continuation of the legality and that of the revolution and the 'mobilised street' (Bras and Gobe, 2017). The HIROR was composed by experts, political parties and civil society organisations. It produced the legislative framework for the organisation of free and fair elections to elect the constitutional assembly.

In October 2011 *Ennahda* won these elections but did not obtain an absolute majority. This fact played in favour of democratisation because moderate Islamists had to pact with secularist forces to create a new government in charge of the stabilisation of the country. The so-called Troika Government was formed under the leadership of Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali (*Ennahda*), and with the presence of ministers from two secularist

political parties, the *Congrès pour la République* (CPR) and the *Ettakatol*. Moreover, Moncef Marzouki (CPR) became the new president of the country and Mustapha Ben Jaafar (Ettakatol) was appointed the speaker of the constitutional assembly. In the period that followed, former Prime Minister Essebsi found himself leading the opposition to *Ennahda* and to the Troika Government. He united moderate secularist around his figure and created a new political party, *Nida Tounis*, including members of the former regime and of the democratic opposition.

Figure 1: Chronogram of the Tunisian transition (2010-2022)



The years that preceded the adoption of the 2014 Constitution were marked by terrorist attacks and political assassinations by radical Islamists. *Ennahda*, in charge of the ministry of the interior, was accused by *Nida Tounis* of being too soft with Salafist groups responsible of these acts. In addition, the self-proclaimed Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, local groups usually formed by hard-line Islamists, attacked civil rights groups and art exhibitions. Moreover, the Troika Government not only lacked experience in democratic practices, but was also frequently wrought by to political confrontations between the coalition parties, and hampered by the continuity of clientelistic practices (Krichen, 2018). In 2013 the political situation became very tense after the assassination of two prominent left-wing politicians, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi.

In this context, the opposition, leaded by *Nida Tounis*, decided to boycott the constitution drafting process and demanded the resignation of the government and the dissolution of the constituent assembly. Nevertheless, the intervention of civil society rechannelled the political crisis and created the conditions that allowed to finish the drafting of the constitution. The UGTT, the Tunisian League of Human Rights, the business organisation *Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat* (UTICA), and the Bar Association, united under the name of the National Dialogue Quartet and stimulated dialogue between political parties. Finally, an agreement was reached, and for their intervention these civil society organisations were awarded with the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize. As a result of the political pact, the *Ennahda* prime minister resigned, the drafting of the constitution was finalised, and new legislative and presidential elections were organised.

The parliament ratified the new constitution in January 2014, almost unanimously, giving birth to the Second Tunisian Republic. The situation of political rights and freedoms radically changed if compared to Ben Ali times. Tunisia became the only Arab

country to be ranked as ‘free’ by the Global Freedom Index of Freedom House. However, after the adoption of the constitution and the holding of legislative and presidential elections in 2014, the lack of change in several policy domains started to become evident to the eyes of citizens and experts (see Bréssillon and Meddeb, 2020). After this second set of elections, Tunisian politics was dominated by coalition governments of national unity between *Nida Tounis* and *Ennahda*. But these coalitions lost the opportunity to implement important reforms to consolidate democracy and enhance the material conditions of Tunisians. In 2019, electors turned to populist options in the third set of democratic elections. Kaïs Saïed, an independent that run with an anti-establishment platform, won the second round of presidential elections with more than seventy per cent of the votes. From 2019 to 2021, Tunisian politics was again marked by paralysis and instability in government and parliament, as we cover in more detail in our publications (see below).

In 2021 President Saïed started a conflict with the parliament and the prime minister over the limits of their respective constitutional powers. In a context of mounting polarisation, this political crisis escalated, and it set the context in which President Saïed broke with the 2014 Constitution. Since the events of 25 July 2021, the president has been gradually dismantling checks and balances in the country. The parliament was *de facto* suspended and, on 8 February 2022, President Saïed dissolved the independent judicial authority to assume the power to appoint and dismiss judges. Independent civil society and opposition political parties continue to function. However, it is clear that the political transition has taken an authoritarian turn and the pressure on the opposition to President Saïed is mounting. In January, a court launched a case against many of the political leaders of the transition for ‘electoral crimes’, among them Rached Ghannouchi (leader of *Ennahda*), Youssef Chahed (*Nida Tounis*’ prime minister from 2016 to 2020) and

Hamma Hammami (a prominent left-wing leader) (La Presse, 2022). In addition, Moncef Marzouki, President of the Republic from 2011 to 2014, was sentenced to four years of prison *in absentia* for having criticised President Saied (Blaise, 2021). Significantly, in 2021 Tunisia was downgraded from ‘free’ to ‘partly free’ in the Global Freedom Index, reflecting recent institutional changes in the country. In July 2022, the autocratic shift was consolidated with the adoption of a new constitution that concentrates powers in the presidency. All major political parties boycotted the referendum that approved the constitution, and civil society organisations have criticised the lack of checks and balances in the new text.

Having summarised the major critical events in the Tunisian transition, in the next section we explain the methodological approach we have followed in our study. The three research papers that compose the thesis by compendium cover these events have resorted to different methodologies to cover these events and contribute to understanding the factors that account for (de-)democratisation processes in political transitions.

Section 3: Methodology

The thesis makes use of case-study methodology to answer the overarching research question of what determines the eventual direction of political transitions. Case-study methodology can be defined as the ‘intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a large class of (similar) units’ (Gerring, 2004: 342). In our research we carefully analyse the most relevant factors that, from an agency-based perspective, shaped the political transition in Tunisia from 2011 to 2022. In particular, the thesis looks at the relations between political actors (both internal and external) to elaborate a thick historical description of the events that have characterised Tunisian politics since 2011.

These insights allow us to connect in a precise way the empirical observations with the concepts used in the democratisation and autocratisation literatures (Coppedge, 2012; Lamont; 2015; Morlino, 2015). By using causal logics, we determine the relation between the independent variable (interactions between political actors) and the dependent variable (democratisation/autocratisation). This knowledge is aimed at explaining the outcome of the political transition in Tunisia and, from a theory-oriented perspective, contribute to understand the political dynamics in other transitioning countries.

In the first paper we answer to what extent consensus adopted in the transition affected long-term democratic consolidation. Here the case-study methodology helps us establish the relations between events and concepts in political transitions, and in doing so, contribute to theory-building on the factors that make transitions strand. In the second paper, the focus is put on how polarisation around Tunisian foreign policy in the region became a necessary element of de-democratisation after July 2021. Here we use the case-study to unpack the different elements of this polarisation process and identify what made it dangerous for democracy in the Tunisian context. Next, the third paper looks at how inconsistencies in EU's democracy assistance affected the transition. To answer this question, we conduct a cross-case analysis by illustrating different inconsistencies in three domains of EU foreign policy. With this methodology we aim at providing a comprehensive and nuanced vision on the different fields of action of the EU in Tunisia when it comes to supporting the political transition. In all the three papers the thesis follows an interpretivist perspective. We also defend that, while the knowledge derived from the interpretation of our observations, the kind of theoretical and empirical connections found in the three papers can be generalised to, or at least tested in, other cases. These generalisations can be 'big', applicable to cases of democratisation and

autocratisation across time and space, or ‘bounded to the region’, when the factors analysed are specific to Arab and or Muslim societies (Bunce, 2000: 704).

When it comes to data collection, the thesis uses interview material, primary sources and secondary literature with the objective to triangulate data sources. A total of 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted online in the fall of 2020 and face-to-face in the spring of 2021 in Tunisia. Interviewees are members of prominent civil society organisations from Tunisia, members of international organisations, activists, local politicians and experts. They were selected because they have played an active role in the political transition in Tunisia or due to their expert knowledge. When quoted in the research papers, their names are not provided to protect their anonymity, and we only indicate the name of the organisation for which they work or have worked if we possess explicit consent. Otherwise, the text gives a general information on the interviewees, and the date and place of the interview. Regarding primary sources, we collected data from documents produced by international and local civil society organisations working in Tunisia in the fields of democracy and human rights. We also used documents produced by political parties and public institutions, including the presidency, the prime minister and the parliament. In the case of external actors, we reviewed the documents produced by the EU in relation to Tunisia and regarding the promotion of democracy and human rights in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Finally, the thesis uses secondary literature to contrast and complement the primary sources. Secondary literature includes academic accounts on the political transition in Tunisia and expert analysis produced by a big variety of organisations.

In the next section we provide a summary of the three research papers that compose the thesis by compendium. We highlight their respective research questions, the

political actors they focus on, and the key factors they analyse in explaining change in the context of the political transition.

Section 4: Summary of the papers

The PhD dissertation follows the structure of the doctoral thesis by compendium. The research papers that constitute it aim to answer the general research question by exploring different dimensions of the political transition in Tunisia (see table 1). Moreover, they engage differently in the analysis of the role of internal and external actors and in the factors explaining change in the transition from an agency-centred perspective. The following table summarises the research questions of the specific papers and the actors and factors they discuss.

Table 1: Summary of the content of the thesis by compendium

General research question (RQ)	What are the dynamics that determine the political transition (process)?	Key actor	Key factors in explaining change in political transition
RQ paper 1	To what extent can consensus adopted in the transition affect long-term democratic consolidation?	Domestic actors	consensus politics, consensus democracy, pact,

			institutional paralysis
RQ paper 2	How polarisation became the principal cause for the derailing of the democratisation process in Tunisia?	Domestic actors	Politicisation, polarisation, illiberal populism, de-legitimation
RQ paper 3	How do inconsistencies in EU's democracy assistance affect the transition?	Domestic and external actors	(in)consistent democracy assistance, non-supportive conditionality, lax or no implementation

First research paper: Tunisia's democratisation process: when 'consensus democracy' undermines democratic consolidation

The first research paper traces the evolution of pact and consensus politics in Tunisia, from 2011 to 2021, by focusing on domestic political elites (Rivera-Escartin, 2022). Transaction between moderate Islamists and secularist political parties is identified as the main factor that contributed to the initial democratic transition in Tunisia. But this form of political transition based on pact is questioned by emerging actors after the adoption of the 2014 Constitution and, especially, after the 2019 presidential and legislative

elections. First, the research paper analyses the role of political elites after 2011 and their efforts to negotiate the constitution of 2014. The focus is put on the pact between opposition groups, with an emphasis on the transactions among secularist parties and *Ennahda*, as well as with moderate members of the former regime, like Béji Caïd Essebsi and his political party *Nida Tounis*. Consensus on the democratic character of the constitution, as well as on the enrichment of human rights and civil state was key in adopting the text with an overwhelming majority. Secondly, the article focuses on the limits of transitions by transaction or pact after 2014. *Ennahda* and *Nida Tounis*, which had for long presented themselves as antithetical political parties, agreed on the creation of a government of national unity in order to implement the constitutional provisions. However, in the period between 2014 to 2019 they were unable to implement the reforms needed to consolidate democratic change due to the gridlock produced by the lack of consensus politics.

Two reforms prescribed by the 2014 Constitution are used as heuristic tools to analyse the degree of democratic consolidation in the country, understood as the implementation of the accords adopted in the transition. These are the creation of the constitutional court and the decentralisation process. In both cases the mismatch between the institutional setting accorded in the 2014 Constitution and consensus politics generated deadlock among the political actors tasked with the implementation. This paralysis by the agents impeded the consolidation of democracy. We argue that this lack of consensus is one of the keys in explaining why the transition stranded and, eventually fuelled the surge of new political elites with anti-establishment and illiberal perspectives in the elections of 2019 and the democratic backsliding process initiated in 2021. First, the political crisis derived from paralysis legitimised the political actors opposed to the democratic institutions created by the 2014 Constitution, which were increasingly

identified by political actors like President Saied and the *Parti Destourien Libre* as the source of the problems of the country. Secondly, the lack of implementation of the checks and balances intrinsic to these reforms facilitated the democratic backsliding process initiated by the president in 2021.

The conceptual contribution of the paper, which builds upon the distinction between consensus democracy and consensus politics, allows us to generate three hypotheses to be tested in other political transitions by transaction or pact. First, the absence of consensus politics among key agents in a transitioning country will produce political paralysis if the institutional setting has the characteristics of consensus democracy. Second, in consensus democracies, long-term democratisation will depend on the effectiveness of consensus politics during the transition. This means that different political elites need to concur on the necessity of democratic change, but they also need to agree on the core reforms that are required to make the democratic polity function. Thirdly, when the lack of consensus politics produces deadlock, new illiberal elites might replace the incumbent elites and give an autocratic turn to the political transition. President Saied dismantled the institutions of consensus democracy arguing that they had only produced institutional paralysis and political division.

Second research paper: Polarisation and democratic backsliding: the case of Tunisia

The second research paper of the thesis by compendium focuses on the impact of polarisation in the political transition (in elaboration). Recent research has identified a strong relation between polarisation and democratic backsliding. However, polarisation does not automatically lead to this outcome. Some research has even highlighted the positive effects that polarisation may have on democracy in terms of introducing new

topics in the public agenda and improving public policy. The puzzle thus becomes under what conditions polarisation becomes harmful for democracy. We use case study methodology to analyse how, in Tunisia, polarisation became the principal cause for the derailing of the democratisation process. To do so, we unpack the concept of polarisation and identify three dimensions that are key in assessing the risks polarisation might pose to democracy: how divisive is politicisation associated to polarisation; the nature of the relations between political adversaries; and the legitimacy of democratic institutions. We expect polarisation to potentially lead to democratic backsliding when politicisation reinforces existing party cleavages; political adversaries are considered as ‘enemies’ or ‘traitors’; and the legitimacy of democratic processes and institutions is put into question.

The article puts the focus in the period that goes from the 2019 legislative elections to the beginning of democratic backsliding on 25 July 2021. It is important to study these years because they were marked by the rise of illiberal populist politics. We argue that polarisation during this time set the context in which President Saied could initiate a democratic backsliding process. More precisely, we study the campaign that the opposition party *Parti Destourien Libre* (PDL) carried against *Ennahda* after the 2019 elections. The PDL, defender of the political heritage of Ben Ali, depicted *Ennahda* as a foreign agent and a terrorist organisation by politicising Tunisian foreign policy in the region. The object of this politicisation was the international connections of *Ennahda* through the Islamist transnational movement of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the region, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt are declared enemies of the Muslim Brotherhood, while Turkey and Qatar support it. Importantly, this regional divide around the Muslim Brotherhood overlaps with the Islamist-secularist cleavage in Tunisian domestic politics, with the PDL aligning itself with the position of the anti-Muslim Brotherhood coalition and *Ennahda* with the pro-Muslim Brotherhood group of states.

The polarisation resulting from the PDL's campaign against *Ennahda* fulfilled the three conditions to derail the political transition. First, the PDL brought the debate on Tunisian foreign policy to the streets by organising protests and sit-ins. Moreover, the PDL repeatedly demanded the president to illegalise *Ennahda* in line with anti-Muslim Brotherhood measures taken by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The strong linkages between this foreign policy issue and party cleavages reinforced polarisation around it and derailed civil society calls to go back to consensus politics. Second, as cross-partisan ties were gradually eroded by polarisation, political agents started acting under the logics of 'zero-sum' politics. The growing polarisation around the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood poisoned the relations between state institutions, namely, the parliament, headed by *Ennahda* leader Rachid Ghannouchi, Prime Minister Mechichi, and President Saied, who increasingly opposed the former two. Third, the PDL successfully contributed to the de-legitimisation of parliament. Polarisation impacted parliamentary life, with mounting verbal and physical violence inside the chamber, and the boycott of parliamentary debates linked to Tunisia's foreign policy by the PDL. The party wanted to stage the decadence and chaos of the democratic institutions of the 2014 Constitution, which were the fruit of consensus politics between moderate Islamists and moderate secularists. In this context, on 25 July 2021, the Tunisian president suspended the parliament and dismissed the government, concentrating all powers in the presidency. President Saied justified such measures by pointing at the scenes of chaos and violence lived inside the parliament.

Third research paper: Supporting the Tunisian transition? Analysing (in)consistencies in EU democracy assistance with a tripartite nexus model

The third research paper of the thesis by compendium discusses the role of the EU as an external actor in the political transition and its interactions with domestic actors (Johansson-Nogués and Rivera-Escartin, 2020). The article contributes to the study of the EU's democracy assistance in the Maghreb by revisiting the concept of inconsistency. Scholars have resorted to it in order to make reference to the contradictions that surge when EU's objectives in its foreign policy clash against each other. This framework is often associated with the so-called democratisation-stability dilemma as the EU tends to focus in promoting regime stability at the price of rendering democracy assistance ineffective. Nevertheless, this conceptualisation falls short to account for the effectivity of democracy assistance. This is due to democratisation being used both as *explanandum* and *explanans*, thus risking to generate tautological results. Aiming to produce an alternative to the dichotomous and traditional approach to inconsistency, our contribution at the theoretical level sheds light on the concept by proposing three alternative nexuses of analysis: security/stability, formal/substantive democracy and elite/non-elite engagement.

Regarding our empirical contribution, the results portray a nuanced picture of EU's democracy assistance that differs from the image of the EU as the anchor of the transition in an adverse geopolitical landscape. While the EU has certainly invested a big economic and political capital in assisting the democratisation process in Tunisia, important inconsistencies emerged in the three nexuses of analysis hindering the effectivity of these EU efforts. Examples of these are the reinforcement of security sector actors with a poor human rights record, the negotiation of an unbalanced EU-Tunisia trade agreement, and the obliteration of Tunisia's interests in the field of migration. While the EU retained certain consistency in its efforts to support Tunisia's nascent democracy, for

example in terms of civil society support, some of its policies collided with these good practices and diminished their effectivity.

Our analysis of EU's impact on the transition depends on the issue area studied. When it comes to supporting civil society actors, our assessment is positive. the EU showed to be able to provide human rights groups and social actors with legitimacy as reliable partners of the Tunisian government and the EU and very often provided them with financial means to implement programs designed to increment social awareness on human rights and democracy. However, in other areas the EU was either ineffective or it had a negative effect on the transition. Regarding security sector reform, EU's program was well-intentioned, but it was not implemented due to discrepancies with the ministry of interior on the need of reform and to political instability in Tunisia. Regarding EU trade and mobility policies, the EU failed to adapt its priorities to Tunisia's socioeconomic interests. Instead of a positive conditionality based on the 'more for more' principle, Tunisia found tougher migration policies from the side of the EU. Regarding trade policy, the EU did not convince Tunisian elites and civil society of the economic opportunities that a new trade agreement would create in the country. Finally, EU's agency in what regards the transition has to be nuanced. In all issue areas the alignment of Tunisian and EU's interests was key in the (un-)successful deployment of democracy assistance activities. While recognising EU's prominent role as an external actor in Tunisia, we must admit that the course of the transition was mainly dominated by the political dynamics of domestic elites. The Tunisian elite acted as 'gatekeepers' in terms of whether EU's democracy assistance was going to have a positive or negligent impact on the Tunisian political transition.

2. Research papers

2.1 Tunisia's democratisation process: when 'consensus democracy' undermines democratic consolidation?

Rivera-Escartin, A. (2022), Tunisia's democratisation process: when 'consensus democracy' undermines democratic consolidation?, *Third World Quarterly*, 43:2, 414-431.

Abstract: Consensus between moderate Islamists and moderate secularists is usually judged as the touchstone of democracy in Tunisia. However, after a decade, the 'Tunisian model' is questioned, as institutional and economic crises have become the norm in the country. The aim of the article is to look at how consensus adopted in the transition affected long-term democratic consolidation. To answer this question, the article unpacks the concept of consensus considering, on the one hand, the institutional architecture of consensus democracy and, on the other hand, the practice of consensus politics. The case study is used to identify the patterns generated by the interaction of these two dimensions of consensus through time. Two reforms prescribed in the 2014 Constitution, the creation of the constitutional court and decentralisation, are taken as heuristic tools to examine democratic consolidation. In both reforms the mismatch between institutions and politics of consensus produced deadlock and non-consolidation. It is in this context that, in July 2021, President Saied dismissed the government and suspended the parliament with the intention to put an end to consensus democracy.

Keywords: Tunisia, consensus, democratisation, consolidation, Arab uprisings

Introduction

14 January 2021 marks the 10th anniversary of the revolution that triggered the only democratisation process born out of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Scholarship has tried to explain the uniqueness of the Tunisian transition in regional terms by focusing on different important factors, such as civil-military relations -a small army detached from the regime's political economy-, a relatively high human development index and strong urban middle class, as well as a lack of deep ethno-political cleavages (see Brynen et al, 2012). These factors contributed to a democratic transition based on consensus building between moderate Islamists and moderate secularists. Consensus, in other words, became the touchstone of the democratisation process (Stepan, 2018). The search for consensual solutions to political crisis has even saved the country from undoing its democratic achievements during moments of high tensions during the transition (Ibid.). The 'Tunisian model' has been praised internationally, most notably, with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.

Democratisation is an open-ended and non-linear process, however. Ten years after the Arab uprisings, the Tunisian democracy, once described by donors as an example for the region, is under strain. Since the adoption of the 2014 Constitution, and especially after 2019, Tunisian politics has increasingly been characterised by stalemate and repeated setbacks in the implementation of important reforms (see Geisser and Allal, 2018). The political impasse has degraded the legitimacy of political parties, challenged the benefits of consensus and nourished populism.¹ It is in this context that President Kaïs Saïed announced on 25 July 2021 that he had dismissed the prime minister and dissolved

¹ Interviews, civil society members, October-December 2020, online, and April-June 2021, Tunisia.

the parliament with a *sui generis* interpretation of article 80 of the constitution. The president justified these measures with the intention to allow tribunals to investigate cases of corruption among members of parliament, who had until then enjoyed legislative immunity. Also, he has stressed that his intention is to move away from the consensus model of the 2014 Constitution which, together with political parties, he deems responsible for the country's political deadlock (Mosaïque FM, 2021).

The experience of the Tunisian model resonates with scholarly debates on the role of consensus in democratisation processes. The literature tends to praise power-sharing arrangements, at least in the short-term. However, there is no agreement on the advantages and disadvantages that consensus democracy might have after years of development. The question of time is important, as decisions on the institutional setting taken during critical moments, like the 2011 uprising and the adoption of the constitution in 2014, can influence subsequent political outcomes. Bearing this in mind, the article looks at how consensus adopted during the transition has affected long-term democratic consolidation in Tunisia. We will argue that President Saïed's dismissal of the prime minister and the parliament has its roots in the failure to consolidate democracy in the country. Hence, the article unpacks the concept of consensus by considering both the institutional architecture of consensus democracy adopted in the framework of the 2014 Constitution and the practice of consensus until July 2021. The interplay of these dimensions of consensus provides insights on democratisation in Tunisia, and makes it possible to generate hypotheses testable in other contexts. Moreover, despite the size of the country, the ten-years rise and demise of the Tunisian model has been followed with attention by potential democratisers and autocrats of the region.²

² Interview, Tunisian expert, June 2021, Tunis.

In what follows, the article presents the conceptual framework and the methodology section. Next, the empirical section explores the interaction between the consensus dimensions. First, the transition phase from 2011 to the adoption of the 2014 Constitution, and secondly, the consolidation phase from 2014 to July 2021. The article ends with a discussion of the main observations and their theoretical implications.

Consensus and democratisation

The democratisation literature sees consensus between different social and political groups as a necessary element in the aftermath of a regime change. The primary and the most immediate objective of democracy supporters is to secure the rules that will shape the political system. It is necessary, in the early moments of political transition, that the main political parties agree that the result of the elections will be respected and that turn over will be done peacefully. This is what Huntington (1991) has called the ‘two turnover test’ of effective democratisation. The literature thus predicts that the ‘pacted transition’, i.e. democratisation agreed by consensus among different elites, as the type of transition most likely to succeed (Karl and Schmitter, 1991; Munck and Leff, 1997; Field, 2006, Stepan 2018). This perception is reinforced by studies analysing the outcome of the third wave of democratisations. Munck and Leff (1997) reached the conclusion that other types of transitions, e.g. democratisation by imposition, by reform or by revolution, are prone to regime destabilisation and return to authoritarianism. For the political transition scholars, the important determining variable of democratic survival is thus the cross-party consensus in conjunction with important social actors like business organisations and trade unions. From their study of Eastern European transitions, Bunce and Wolchik (2006) add massive mobilisation, funding elections and an apolitical army to this equation. Similarly, Stoner et al. (2013) concur that the democratic consolidation depends

on mass mobilisation and an active civil society, and warn against transitions that are merely elite-based. Stepan (2018) identifies very similar patterns in the case of the 2011 Arab uprisings, by comparing different outcomes in Egypt and Tunisia. In other words, democracy emerges in the short term when there is a non-interventionist military, a cross-party consensus between secularists and moderate Islamists, as well as an active civil society and a mobilised public.

However, when it comes to the long term, there is no agreement on the impact that consensus might have on democratic consolidation. On the one hand, for Karl and Schmitter (1991, as quoted in Field, 2006: 206), enduring democracy is most likely to take hold in a ‘pact/consociational democracy’. Similarly, for Linz and Stepan (1996), democracy consolidation is the achievement of consensus on democratic principles in everyday life. This can be reflected in political behaviour and attitudes, as well as in the constitutional setting, common agreements about governance procedures and rule of law. Moreover, they acknowledge the importance of good government performance in the legitimisation of the new democratic system and argue the need of consensual economic policies and low polarisation on economic matters. Linz and Stepan (Ibid.: 9) thus conclude that consolidation ‘require[s] less majoritarian and more consensual policies’. Likewise, several authors have stressed the necessity to settle divisive identity conflicts in a consensual way to consolidate democracy (Morlino, 1998; Field, 2006; Graham et al., 2017).

On the other hand, the literature fears the long-term effects of consensual pacts on the quality of democracy (Field, 2006: 2; see also Bochsler and Juon, 2021). For instance, McEvoy (2014) has contended that power sharing in deeply divided societies might provide peaceful arrangements and stabilise newly born democratic institutions in post-conflict contexts. However, this type of communitarian arrangements might end up

institutionalising past grievances and triggering new political crises on the legacies of conflict. It is thus important to consider the importance of the passage of time here. Consensus in the early phase of adoption of institutions might give way to later deadlock in the implementation phase, producing governance gaps or lack of action in policy areas such as health or education (Horowitz, 2014; McCulloch, 2017). This is always a possibility when the requirement of consensus is not satisfied due to the existence of entrenched veto players. In the case of Lebanon, for example, Fakhoury (2019: 11) has raised concerns about ‘the power-sharing formula’s proneness to deadlock, its dependence on the external environment as an avenue for partisanship and sectarian leverage, and its weak responsiveness to demands from below’. Similar fears have been raised in different contexts, including Belgium, South Africa, Northern Ireland, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Macedonia (see McEvoy, 2014; Graham et al., 2017; Bochsler and Juon, 2021). These negative accounts are usually associated with the deployment of consensus in very diverse societies, which then takes the form of consociationalism. In the case of Tunisia, although the country does not have deep ethnopolitical cleavages, the transition was also marked by power sharing to avoid conflict between secularist and Islamist parties (Stepan, 2018). After 2014, it is argued in the same line that this formula turned into a ‘bargained competition’ (Boubekeur, 2016). Political parties stop worrying about public policy and instead became focused on ‘conquering’ and distributing positions in the administration among their followers (Somer, 2017). The result was deadlock, or a ‘blocked transition’ (Redissi et al., 2021).

In academia and public debate the concept of consensus has taken on different meanings, sometimes making difficult trying to discern its impact on democratisation. Hence, unpacking the concept appears as a necessary first step to examine how consensus adopted in the transition can affect long-term democratic consolidation. As it emerges

from the academic debate, consensus can be understood as having two distinct dimensions. First, the concept refers to ‘consensus politics’, meaning the day-to-day political practice of reaching agreements between important political actors. It has been used in this sense by authors that focus on the benefits of political and social consensus in delivering stability and good governance (see Linz and Stepan, 1996; Field, 2006; Stepan, 2018). Secondly, consensus is also inherent to the polity or the institutional architecture of ‘consensus democracy’. Following Lijphart (1999a), consensus democracy, in contrast to the majoritarian model of democracy, is characterised by executive power sharing in broad multiparty coalitions, executive-legislative balance of power, proportional representation and corporatist interest groups.³ Researchers who warn of the effects of consensus on consolidation have put forth the argument that power-sharing institutions diminish the quality of democracy because they create deadlock and too many veto players (see Horowitz, 2014; McEvoy, 2014; McCulloch, 2017).

The two dimensions of consensus, which refer to politics and polity, mirror Lijphart’s differentiation between ‘coalescence and compromise’ in executive power sharing (Lijphart, 1999b: 7). In other words, the existence of formal mechanisms of consensus democracy (coalescence) does not exclude the possibility that political actors will use them to block democratic reform. The presence of consensus politics (compromise) is thus analytically independent from the institutional architecture of consensus democracy, which might help to tame divisive dynamics or not (Wolff, 2011). Complete unanimity in political affairs in democracy is neither possible nor desirable. However, it is likely that when democratising countries adopt the formula of consensus

³ In the federal-unitary dimension, consensus democracy is characterised by federal and decentralised government, two equally strong chambers, a rigid constitution, judicial review of constitutionality and an independent central bank. These characteristics might vary depending on the characteristics of given countries. For example, small and relatively homogenous countries tend to be more central in the unitary-federal continuum and have asymmetrical legislative chambers or one chamber, like Tunisia.

democracy, politics of consensus becomes a necessary element for the good functioning of institutions. On the contrary, politics of exclusion reinforcing socio-political divisions in society might hinder any prospects of democratisation, as Tudor and Slater (2020) recently found in a cross-country study. The objective of the article is to contribute to the understanding of democratisation by clarifying the interaction effects of consensus politics and consensus democracy on long-term democracy consolidation.

Time and periodisation are important to understand the interplay of these two dimensions of consensus. Following Horowitz (2014), the article uses the distinction between adoption and implementation of power-sharing institutions to establish the periodisation of democratisation and distinguish between transition and long-term consolidation. The delimitation of these periods is justified by the ‘criticalness’ of three events in the Tunisian democratisation process (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007; see Marzo, 2019 for the Tunisian case). The first period begins on the 14 January 2011, when after a month of protests President Ben Ali left the country. This moment marked the beginning of the transition phase, during which the institutions of the new democracy were debated. The transition period ended with another critical event, the parliamentary vote adopting the constitution on 26 January 2014. The second period is marked by attempts to achieve long-term consolidation, understood as the implementation of the accords adopted during constitution drafting. Our analysis ends on 25 July 2021 when, as mentioned above, President Saied suspended the parliament and dissolved the government. The literature holds that consensus politics need to prevail in the transition phase in order to allow the adoption of consensus democracy (see Munck and Leff, 1997; Field, 2006, Stepan 2018). However, while the institutional architecture of consensus democracy designed during the transition remains, politics can take a different direction after the adoption of agreements. Hypothetically, this mismatch, between the polity adopted in the past and the

course of politics, can block democratic consolidation in the long term. When politics are polarised, political actors can use veto powers any time consensus democracy offers them the possibility to do so, and political conflict between institutions can block reform. Hence, democratic consolidation is weakened as agreements on democratic reform adopted in the past are not implemented.

Methodology

The article uses a case-study methodology to carefully illustrate the theoretical and empirical connections, that combined, illustrate the democratic transition and (non-)consolidation in Tunisia (Morlino, 2015). By doing so, the article contributes to an early stage of the research cycle which aims at identifying relevant patterns for theory-building (Coppedge, 2012). Given that consensus is the core element of the ‘Tunisian model’, the case study can offer important insights on the role of consensus in democratisation processes, and help generate new hypotheses to be tested in other contexts. The data used to compose the case study is derived from the triangulation of academic secondary sources, grey literature, and interview material comprising twenty-six semi-structured interviews conducted online in the fall of 2020 and in person in Tunisia during the spring of 2021. Interviewees include members of prominent civil society organisations working in the fields of democracy and human rights, local politicians, activists and experts. They were selected given their direct knowledge of socio-political dynamics and policy-making processes in Tunisia, or because they have had an active role during the democratisation process. The identity of participants is not revealed in order to preserve their anonymity. End notes provide information on the place and date of the interview, the category of the interviewee and, only when explicit consent was acquired, the organisation to which they belong. Finally, the article complies with research ethics and data protection standards.

As already argued, the timeframe of the Tunisian democratisation process includes both a transition phase, from the 2011 Revolution to the adoption of the 2014 Constitution, and a democracy consolidation phase that started afterwards. Admittedly, ten years is not a long span of time as democratisation comes with ups and downs and, indeed, it can be a lengthy process, if it ever ends. While acknowledging that this is a potential limitation, the time frame allows us to apply the abovementioned periodisation and analyse the role of consensus in non-consolidation. Two reforms, the creation of the constitutional court and the decentralisation process, are used as heuristic tools to assess democratic consolidation understood as the implementation of agreements adopted in the transition phase of democratisation (see Horowitz, 2014). During the transition period, political parties agreed to include them in the 2014 Constitution. At the eyes of the constituent assembly their importance lied in that they ensure checks and balances and division of powers both vertically and horizontally.

Concerning the constitutional court, it is a very much needed institution in a semi-presidential system like the Tunisian as it mediates between the prime minister, the president, and the parliament. This is even more urgent when, like in the Tunisian case, there are frequent cohabitations (i.e. prime minister and president from different parties) and very often individuals or political factions are more important than party structures. Moreover, the court would have played a crucial role in protecting fundamental rights by controlling the constitutionality of legislation and of executive acts. In the case of decentralisation, an entire chapter of the constitution is devoted to local powers, providing legal personality to municipalities, regions, and districts (article 132), giving them democratic legitimacy through local elections (article 133), effective powers under the principles of subsidiarity (article 134) and fiscal autonomy (article 135). In contrast with the 1959 Constitution, that concentrated power and resources in Tunis, the new text

envisaged to tackle development disparities between the capital and the regions, as well as to foster democratic practices at the local level.

In what follows, the article analyses the genesis of consensus democracy in Tunisia, from 2011 to 2014, paying close attention to constitution drafting. Power-sharing practices between moderate Islamists and moderate secularists provided an institutional setting close to Lijphart (1999a)'s ideal type of consensus democracy. At the same time, the construction of the institutional architecture was accompanied by national dialogue in moments of high tension that could have halted the democratisation process at its very beginning. Then, the article moves to examine non-consolidation with the examples of two important unaccomplished reforms: the creation of the constitutional court and decentralisation. During the 2014-2021 period, the interplay of consensus democracy and (the lack of) consensus politics generated deadlock.

The making of consensus democracy in Tunisia (2011-14)

Although the democratisation process in Tunisia was initiated in the street and had the appearance of a 'revolutionary transition', using Karl and Schmitter (1991)'s terminology, it soon turned into a 'pacted transition'. The inner circle of the Ben Ali regime was expelled from power and the dictator had to seek refuge in autocratic Saudi Arabia. However, some of the cadres of the regime, especially those that had held high ranking positions in the Bourguiba era, were reintegrated into the political life of the country and filled the ranks of secular conservative parties. Béji Caïd Essebsi, foreign affairs minister under Bourguiba and president of the parliament during Ben Ali, became prime minister in February 2011. In the early months of the transition, the Essebsi Government worked with the *Haute Instance pour la Réalisation des Objectifs de la*

Révolution, de la Réforme Politique et de la Transition Démocratique (HIROR),⁴ the commission charged with the organisation of the elections to the constituent assembly (Murphy, 2013). In the HIROR, there were discussions on whether to pact with part of the elites of the former regime or to follow a more revolutionary path. Also, among left-wing secular activists, there was the debate on the convenience of entering the HIROR and striking a political deal with moderate Islamists of *Ennahda*. However, moderate options won these internal debates. This was in part thanks to trust building between different opposition groups under the 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms, created in 2005 (Stepan, 2018), and foremost, the idea that ‘all members shared a common objective, [deliver democratic change,] and could not deceive the [mobilised] street’.⁵

In this context, political parties including *Ennahda* and secular groupings such as the *Congrès pour la République* (CPR) of Moncef Marzouki and the *Ettakatol* of Mustapha Ben Jaafar agreed to pilot the transition in a consensual way. Early cross-party agreements were key in delivering a new institutional setting based on the idea of consensus. The HIROR eventually decided to use a proportional electoral system for the first legislative elections of October 2011 for the constitutional assembly. *Ennahda* won the elections but did not fully control the chamber, where the party enjoyed a plurality of seats and not an absolute majority. The proportional system, characteristic of consensus democracy, allowed the existence of a blocking minority composed by a variety of secularist parties, and Salafists did not obtain representation. Power sharing was also present in the formation of government. The Troika coalition was created, headed by *Ennahda* Prime Minister Hamada Jebali, and with the presence of independent and CPR

⁴ HIROR was composed by opposition parties, including *Ennahda*, academics, and prominent civil society organisations such as the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l’Homme* (LTDH), the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT) and the *Union Tunisienne de l’Industrie, du Commerce et de l’Artisanat* (UTICA).

⁵ Interview, former member of the HIROR, June 2021, Tunis.

and *Ettakatol* ministers. This pattern was replicated in the other key institutions, as Marzouki from the CPR obtained the presidency with 153 parliamentary votes out of 202 and *Ettakatol*'s Ben Jaafar became the speaker of the constitutional assembly. Despite *Ennahda* having won the 2011 elections, it did not present a candidate for the presidency for the explicit purpose to share power with secularist parties of the Troika. By willingly limiting its control of state institutions, *Ennahda* wanted to ensure its own survival, which would have been menaced by secularists if the latter felt endangered by zero-sum politics (Kirdiş, 2018).

This consensus politics continued during the constitution drafting process and proved to be key in the adoption of consensus democracy. Critical points such as religion-state relations were the object of broad agreements. Foremost, *Ennahda* and secular parties agreed on the civil character of the state. Article 2 describes Tunisia as a 'civil state based on citizenship, the will of the people, and the supremacy of law', making no reference to religious-based *sharia* as a source of law.⁶ This point was not problematic in the discussions as consensus had already been established on this in the framework of the October 18 Coalition during Ben Ali times. When there was disagreement, the text was left vague and open to interpretation in a sort of consensus by default where political parties agreed to disagree (Lavie, 2019). This is the case of important Article 1: 'Tunisia is a free state, independent and sovereign, Islam is its religion, Arabic its language and the Republic its regime'. It is a matter of interpretation if the reference to Islam is a sociological description or a recognition of the influence of religion on civil affairs.⁷ Nevertheless, the text successfully strikes an equilibrium between different sensibilities, which reflects how state-religion relations are constantly negotiated in day-to-day politics

⁶ Author's own translation from French from the 2014 Constitution.

⁷ Interview, senior member of the LTDH, October 2020, Tunis (online).

and life.⁸ This kind of compromises also appear in Article 49, which determines under which circumstances fundamental rights can be limited in a ‘civil and democratic state’, including for the vague objective of respecting ‘public morality’. This equilibrium is again found in Article 6. While the state has the duty to ‘protect the sacred’, it prohibits ‘apostasy accusations’.

The result of this consensus politics is what Stepan (2018) has termed the ‘twin-tolerations’ between moderate secularists and moderate Islamists, as both camps made concessions during constitution drafting. This is due to the Tunisian political landscape, where moderate Islamists have to compete with other political traditions such conservative secularists and left-wing currents with long and well-rooted traditions in the country. Also, there are numerous local human rights organisations, which are very vocal and have a strong influence in public debates (Kirdiş, 2018). Moreover, *Ennahda* made efforts to present itself as the paradigm of moderation (Izquierdo Brichs et al., 2017). At its 2016 congress it explicitly rejected the label ‘Islamist’ and instead embraced the concept ‘Muslim democrats’, so as to put distance with the Muslim Brotherhood. Those members of the party that opposed the Code of Personal Status left *Ennahda* and integrated *Al Karama* coalition, its main electoral competitor in the Islamist camp. Hence, the ideological distance between conservative secularists and *Ennahda* is relatively short and more symbolical than practical, as their positions in economic policy and civil liberties sometimes do not differ (McCarthy 2019). As a matter of fact, the secularists can be as conservative as the Islamists.⁹ For instance, former Prime Minister Youssef Chahed (2016-2020) of secularist *Nida Tounis* was radically opposed to expanding the rights of

⁸ Interview, senior member of the *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* (ATFD), May 2021, La Marsa.

⁹ Interviews, civil society members, April-June 2021, Tunis.

the LGBTI community, a position echoed by President Saied, who is a secularist independent.¹⁰

In addition, as observed in other democratisation processes (see Bunce and Wolchik, 2006; Stoner et al., 2013), a key catalyser of consensus democracy is civil society. In August 2012, a first version of the constitution was made public triggering a debate on draft Article 28, which contained the term ‘complementary’ to define the role of women in relation to men. Massive women demonstrations protested the reference, which was understood by the public as a concession to *Ennahda*. Following these events, the terminology was changed to ‘equal’ (Article 21 in the 2014 Constitution). As argued by Charrad and Zarrugh (2014), this moment of mobilisations was the proof of the emergence of bottom-up feminism in public debates. By contrast, women rights had in the past been used as a source of legitimation for authoritarian ruling by Ben Ali and Bourguiba.¹¹ This state or top-down feminism produced the progressive Code of Personal Status of 1957 but alienated the feminist autonomous movement. Devoid of state patronage, activists took to the streets after 2011 in a ‘sudden eruption of a public sphere’ (Ibid.: 232; see also Johansson-Nogués, 2013). Civil society organisations were therefore able to set the agenda of constitution drafting concerning women’s rights and secured progress made in the past with the Code of Personal Status. *Ennahda* acknowledged the importance of this mobilisations and took note of the fears that the party’s position had produced in part of the Tunisian society, which suddenly mobilised. Again, consensus politics appeared decisive. The Islamist party backed off and agreed with moderate secularists on Articles 21 and 46, which secured the principle of equality and women’s rights respectively. *Ennahda*’s objective was to neutralise discourses that pictured them

¹⁰ Interview, senior member of a LGTBI organisation, October 2020, Tunis (online).

¹¹ Interview, senior members of feminist organisations, April-June 2021, Tunisia.

as being against women's rights. Finally, feminist mobilisation resulted in a constitution that in this respect has the highest standards in the region and does not differ from other democratic constitutions.¹²

A second important episode requiring the intervention of civil society happened in 2013, at the final stages of constitution drafting. The Troika Government had promised that the constitutional assembly would deliver a final draft of the document one year after the election. However, this deadline soon revealed to be unattainable. The opposition, gathered around the figure of Essebsi and its party, *Nida Tounis*, started to demand the dissolution of the constitutional assembly and the resignation of the government. Moreover, the security situation sharply deteriorated during 2012 and 2013 due to terror attacks by radical Islamist groups. *Ennahda*, in charge of the ministry of interior, was increasingly criticised for its alleged indulgence towards violent Salafist groups.¹³ In 2013, two prominent left-wing activists were killed by radical Islamists prompting demonstrations demanding to stop the drafting of the constitution and the end of the Troika Government. However, during these moments of high tensions, important civil society organisations united under the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet¹⁴ and stimulated consensus politics in the form of cross-party dialogue. These efforts reduced the political tension and allowed the adoption of the constitution.¹⁵ Again, *Ennahda* followed the strategy to limit its own power to secure the democratisation process and its own survival. The Troika resigned and a technocratic government was formed. This

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Interviews, political activists, April-June 2021, Tunisia. See also the report by International Crisis Group on 'Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge' of 13 February 2013.

¹⁴ The LTDH, the Order of Lawyers, the UGTT and the UTICA. They were awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.

¹⁵ Interview, senior member of the UGTT, October 2020, Tunis (online).

facilitated the adoption of the constitution, which was passed by an overwhelming cross-party majority (Marzo, 2019).

Also, in this context of high tension, *Nida Tounis* leader Essebsi and *Ennahda* secretary general Ghannouchi agreed on a semi-presidential model with the intention to insert consensus democracy in the constitution, eventually limiting their powers in case of an electoral victory in the legislative elections but not in the presidential elections. *Ennahda* even accepted not to present a candidate to the presidential elections of 2014, the first under the new constitution, paving the way for cohabitation between a government headed by *Ennahda* and a presidency controlled by *Nida Tounis* (Boubekeur, 2016). As a result, the 2014 Constitution reserves all policy areas to the prime minister, which freely appoints and dismisses all minister, except for the foreign affairs minister and the defence minister, which must be agreed upon with the president. The good functioning of the government requires the collaboration of the prime minister, the president and parliament, and there are constitutional mechanisms of mutual control. The president has few powers besides foreign policy but can call new legislative elections and referendums on international treaties, human rights issues and the civil code. The president can also delay legislation by demanding a second reading of a law or activating a review by the constitutional court. As for the parliament, it can start an impeachment process with a two-thirds majority and it elects the prime minister with an absolute majority vote, in practical terms needing cross-party support. Finally, the position of the prime minister is strengthened by the mechanism of the constructive vote of no-confidence, which requires that the opposition agrees on a consensual candidate that gathers a majority in parliament. Finally, the constitutional court is charged with solving the legal conflicts that might arise between the prime minister, the president and parliament and, in turn, each of them elects one third of the members of the said court.

These checks and balances are of high importance given that, as in Lijphart (1999a)'s ideal type consensus democracy, the Tunisian party system is characterised by an increasing fragmentation since 2011, which is reflected in parliament due to a proportional voting system.

Between 2011 and 2014, politics of consensus stabilised the democratic transition by avoiding majoritarian politics based on 'winner-takes-it-all'. These practices allowed political parties, together with civil society organisations and a mobilised public, to adopt the consensus democracy enshrined in the 2014 Constitution. Long-term consolidation proved to be more problematic than the transition phase, however. The next section looks at the implementation problems that arose between 2014 and 2021 by looking at two key reforms prescribed by the 2014 Constitution: the creation of the constitutional court and the decentralisation process.

Consensus democracy without consensus politics (2014-2021)

After the adoption of the constitution, Essebsi won the presidential elections and *Nida Tounis* became the first party in parliament with a plurality of 86 out of 217 seats. However, Essebsi had to seek the support of its rival *Ennahda* (69 seats) to form government, even if during the electoral campaign he had presented himself as the bulwark against Islamists. In turn, *Ennahda* had mobilised its electorate by pointing at the links between *Nida Tounis* and the former regime. However, both parties agreed on a coalition government under the leadership of Habib Essid (*Nida Tounis*) in the name of consensus politics, again. *Ennahda* only obtained one minister and continued the strategy of avoiding being perceived as 'conquering' the state at the eyes of its adversaries (Somer, 2017). In 2016, a motion of no confidence replaced Essid by Youssef Chahed, of *Nida*

Tounis too, due to discrepancies between President Essebsi and the prime minister, of the same party. From 2016 to 2019 elections, Chahed headed a national unity government with an enhanced presence of *Ennahda* ministers this time. Yet, power sharing did not allow the implementation of important reforms as consensus politics was substituted by cross-party vetoes and political deadlock. After the 2019 legislative and presidential elections, consensus politics became even more difficult as polarisation increased in parallel with the popular support for the *Parti Destourien Libre* (PDL), which is opposed to the 2014 Constitution and to the inclusion of moderate Islamists in Tunisian politics. Moreover, the prime minister, president and president of parliament collided on the limits of their respective constitutional powers, again blocking reforms and hindering the democratic consolidation.

The constitutional court

The deterioration of consensus politics, especially after 2019, severely affected the implementation of the constitutional court. In 2015 parliament passed the law that implements Article 118 of the constitution with a large majority, establishing the contours of the new court and its election mechanisms. The president, the judicial authority, and the parliament elect four members each. However, its implementation has been blocked as the large majorities and agreements required by consensus democracy have not been accompanied by consensus politics. The parliament has not completed the election of its share, which must be done by a reinforced majority of two thirds. In 2018, the main political parties agreed on four candidates, among them coalition partners *Ennahda* and *Nida Tounis*. When the vote took place, however, only one judge could be appointed. It appears that many members of the parliament did not respect what had been negotiated by their political groups (Attia, 2018). The reason why has to do with the precarious

internal cohesion of parties. Except for *Ennahda* and small left-wing groups, they are political platforms for individuals eager to pursue a career in politics, usually connected with important business sectors.¹⁶ It is common that members leave their political group in the middle of the legislature to form others. In some cases, they do not show up in parliament.¹⁷ As stressed by Yardımcı-Geyikçi and Tür (2018), the erratic party system paralyses or slows the work of parliament, otherwise in charge of dynamising the democratisation process. Moreover, these individualistic attitudes have eroded the legitimacy of political actors and the meaning of consensus politics.¹⁸ If in the transition phase consensus was understood as exceptional politics in exceptional times, in the face of low political performance during the consolidation phase, consensus has increasingly been perceived as a symptom of a corrupted elite that is only able to agree on the distribution of state prerogatives (Mccarthy, 2019).

After the 2019 presidential and legislative elections cross-party agreements became even more complicated. Given the perceived bad results of the *Ennahda-Nida Tounis* coalition, this set of elections took place in a context of general questioning of consensus politics to the extent that some observers started to speak about the end of the ‘Tunisian model’ (see Brésillon and Meddeb, 2020). In the parliament, political fragmentation has increased with the split of the moderate secularist camp into several small parties. Moreover, populist platforms at the extremes of the political spectrum have gained weight, like the radical Islamist party *Al Karama* and the radical secularist of the PDL. In the presidential election, Kaïs Saïed obtained an overwhelming victory with anti-establishment slogans. The polarised and fragmented parliament gave a weak government headed by Elyes Fakhfakh, which lasted less than a year. Then Prime Minister Mechichi

¹⁶ Interview, member of Arab Reform Initiative, September 2020, Tunis (online).

¹⁷ Interview, senior member of *Al-Bawsala*, September 2020, Tunis (online).

¹⁸ Interview, senior member of the UGTT, October 2020, Tunis (online).

obtained the support of a very diverse pro-government coalition composed of *Ennahda* and smaller secularist groups in the name of consensus and power sharing. However, divisions remained in the parliament and between state institutions, thus further paralysing the implementation of the constitutional court. President Saied repeatedly clashed with Prime Minister Mechichi and President of Parliament Ghannouchi on their respective constitutional powers. In January 2021, the president decided not to sign the nomination of new ministers, appointed by the prime minister and ratified by parliament, arguing that some of them had been allegedly involved in corruption affairs. The institutional crisis escalated when in April 2021, the president used his constitutional power to block and resend to parliament a reform of the law on the creation of the constitutional court consisting in lowering the threshold to elect members in a second vote from two thirds to three fifths. In May, parliament voted again in favour of the law changing the voting system, but again without agreeing on the members of the court.

In the absence of the constitutional court, the conflict between the branches of power could not be resolved, and the presidency used its powers to veto any solution to the conflict. Moreover, on 18 April 2021, President Saied opened another front in his stand-off with the prime minister – also interim minister of interior in the absence of a newly appointed minister – in the field of security. In a discourse in front of senior police officers, Prime Minister Mechichi and President of Parliament Ghannouchi, President Saied affirmed that he was from then on the head of ‘all armed forces’, including the police, and not only the military, which until then had been under the power of the government (Al Watania, 2021). The president’s reading of Article 77 of the constitution is that when the text refers to the competences of the president, foreign policy and ‘armed forces’ (*forces armées* in the French version), it also includes the interior security forces like the police as arguably ‘they are also armed’. In this new contention between the

various branches of the state, the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT) proposed a return to national dialogue, similar to the consensus politics that made possible the finalisation of constitution drafting in 2013. However, parliamentary fragmentation and fears of the electoral consequences for engaging in consensus politics meant that these calls went on unheard. It was in this polarised context, that on July 2021, President Saïed dissolved the parliament and the government.

Decentralisation

The decentralisation reform prescribed in the constitution followed a similar path to the creation of the constitutional court. Legislative change was slowed due to discrepancies within the government majority in parliament. Then, the implementation of decentralisation was stopped due to different views on the issue inside the Chahed Government and after 2019, due to the institutional conflict between Prime Minister Mechichi, supported by *Ennahda*, and President Saïed. Again, the interaction between the institutional setting and the lack of consensus politics produced reform deadlock. The decentralisation reform was inserted in the 2014 Constitution to complete the democratisation process by electing local councils and also to address the big development gap between historically disadvantaged rural regions and Tunis. Prior to the 2014 Constitution, around 70% of Tunisia and one third of the population was ‘non-municipalised’, meaning that there was no formal local authority that could mediate between these communities and the state administration based in distant Tunis (Tarchouna, 2019: 9). In 2016, the ministry of local affairs and environment created 86 new municipalities in the country (264 municipalities in 2013, 350 in 2016) (International Crisis Group, 2019: 8). Then, the first milestone in the implementation of the

decentralisation was the adoption of the legislation that would put into practice Chapter VII of the 2014 Constitution and give these municipalities real powers.

However, the Local Government Code was passed only in April 2018, after four years of parliamentary debates. In this case, the lack of consensus politics within the Chahed Government, and between *Ennahda* and *Nida Tounis* in parliament reflected a centre-periphery cleavage in Tunisian politics (Yerkes and Muasher, 2018). *Ennahda* was in favour of an ambitious reform and the celebration of local elections as soon as possible.¹⁹ *Nida Tounis* was, in contrast, more moderate in their defence of the reform and tended to side with state bureaucrats, like governors, or state officials in the ministry of interior and ministry of finance.²⁰ While claiming that the reform needed time and that state institutions had to be protected, they were fearful of losing control of the local clientelistic networks inherited from Ben Ali's party (International Crisis Group, 2019). They argued that decentralisation had the risk of putting power and resources into the hands of unexperienced politicians and feed local clientelistic structures that would contest the state (Yerkes and Muasher, 2018). The lack of consensus on these issues produced long debates in the parliament and the continued postponement of local elections. The result was that the code was approved just weeks before the elections, held in May 2018, and elected members of council did not know beforehand what the 'rules of the game' would be.²¹ Also, the agreed code between political parties involved serious limitations of the powers of the local councils, which afterwards revealed crucial in making the tasks of local authorities difficult. For example, it was agreed that members of local council would not receive a salary from their work for the municipality, and the

¹⁹ Interview, Mayor (*Ennahda*), April 2021, Ben Arous governorate.

²⁰ Interview, former deputy Mayor (independent), April 2021, Tunis governorate.

²¹ Interview, senior member of the *Fédération Nationale des Communes Tunisiennes* (FNCT), May 2021, La Marsa.

mayors would only receive a small pay. In the years that followed, it has been common that members of the council and mayors resigned because they face a trade-off between professional and political life, provoking paralysis in local councils.²² Moreover, the new legislation on decentralisation was in contradiction with the pre-2011 legislation on the role of governors, appointed by the central government in the regions. While there was an agreement on the code, political parties that opposed decentralisation blocked the new legislation that would have allowed to reform the role of governors. Instead, they have usually clashed with local councils, implementing financial *ex ante* controls without a clear legal framework.²³

Since the adoption of the code, local councils can make use of their competences in areas such as urban planning, garbage management or water sanitation. However, after 2018, implementation problems started from the side of the executive, as confronting views on decentralisation moved from parliament to the government. Some state officials propose *déconcentration*, the territorialisation of services provided by the state in Tunis, as a middle ground solution between centralisation and decentralisation, or as a previous step before giving more powers to local and regional councils.²⁴ In addition, there is the fear that decentralisation disproportionately benefits *Ennahda* given that it was the winner of the 2018 local elections and controls more than a third of local councils, including Tunis and Sfax (Ibid.). Hence, for a significant part of Tunisian bureaucrats and secularist parties, defenders of ‘Bourguiba’s modernist heritage’, decentralisation poses a double risk, the ‘Islamisation’ of society and the dissolution of the republican state apparatus.²⁵ The result has been deadlock, as measures needed by local councils have been blocked

²² Interviews, local politicians and senior member of the FNCT, April-June 2021, Tunisia.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Interviews, senior members of *Avocats Sans Frontières* (ASF) Tunisie, October 2020, Tunis (online).

²⁵ Interview, senior member of the *Forum Tunisien des Droits Économiques et Sociales* (FTDES), September 2020, Tunis (online).

by the ministries of finance and interior, including the provision of logistic and financial means, as well as the transfer of human resources from the central administration to municipalities.²⁶ Moreover, out of the 40 decrees (executive orders) that accompany the implementation of the Local Government Code, only 30 have been issued.²⁷ After the 2019 elections, the paralysis in this domain was complete, with the political agenda being occupied by the institutional crisis between President Saied, Prime Minister Mechichi and the President of Parliament Ghannouchi. For example, the appointment of new governors was delayed and thus the coordination mechanisms between the local and central levels paralysed in several governorates.²⁸ All in all, the setbacks the process is suffering might lead to a ‘cosmetic and wobbly decentralisation’ (International Crisis Group, 2019: 1). As local councils find it difficult to live up to the citizens’ high expectations, those actors opposed to reform, sometimes connected to the former regime, see their political position reinforced.²⁹ After July 2021, more uncertainty and paralysis has been added to the implementation of the decentralisation reform with the suspension of government and parliament.

In contrast to the transition phase, the progressive decay of consensus politics after 2014 hindered long-term democratic consolidation. The mismatch between politics and the institutional architecture produced a deadlock in the implementation of reforms. Entrenched political actors used the power-sharing institutions of consensus democracy that were adopted in the transition phase to paralyse the creation of the constitutional court and the decentralisation process with the result of obstructing democratic consolidation. Political paralysis and conflict between institutions was then used by

²⁶ Interviews, local politicians and senior member of the FNCT, April-June 2021, Tunisia.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Interview, Mayor (*Ennahda*), May 2021, Ben Arous governorate.

²⁹ Interview, former deputy Mayor (independent), April 2021, Tunis governorate.

President Saïed to legitimise the measures of 25 July 2021. In turn, these were facilitated by the lack of implementation of constitutional checks and balances after 2014 in the form of the abovementioned reforms. The next section discusses the theoretical implications of these accounts.

Discussion

Between 2014 and 2021, there was consensus democracy without consensus politics in Tunisia. This observation allows us to formulate different hypotheses to be tested in other contexts, and provide new theoretical insights on the relation between consensus and long-term democratic consolidation.

First, it can be argued that consensus democracy without consensus politics produces reform deadlock and democratic non-consolidation. In the Tunisian case, power-sharing practices were in place, like the formation of coalition governments and semi-presidentialism, but political actors did not work together effectively to deliver key reforms. As identified in the literature, political actors can use the institutions of consensus democracy adopted in the transition phase to block the implementation of reform (Horowitz, 2014; Boubekour, 2016; McCulloch, 2017, Fakhoury, 2019). However, the use of veto powers by political actors can be analytically differentiated from the polity itself. From the case study, it can be theorised that non-consolidation does not directly derive from the institutional setting of consensus democracy. It is rather the combination of the institutional architecture of consensus democracy and the lack of consensus politics that does not allow the implementation of important reforms. The outcome of consensus democracy is likely to be what political actors make of it, and not the deterministic result of a given institutional design.

Secondly, it is likely that consolidation of consensus democracy will depend on the effective practice of consensus in everyday political life. The dual conceptualisation of consensus highlights that for democratic consolidation to happen under consensus democracy, not only it is necessary that citizens and political actors agree that democracy is the most preferable type of regime (see Linz and Stepan, 1996), but also that there is enough common political ground to allow the implementation of enduring democratic reforms. The Tunisian case showed that consensus politics is required in critical moments for the adoption of institutions, such as in 2011 or the final stages of constitution drafting. Yet, during the consolidation phase, it is also necessary that consensus politics accompany the implementation of accords adopted during the transition (see Horowitz, 2014). This point is important as consensus democracy is often prescribed by donors and researchers to achieve long-term democratic consolidation (McEvoy, 2014). Nevertheless, the focus is seldom put on the everyday practice of consensus politics, which might be determining for democracy consolidation through the implementation of checks and balances.

Finally, there is the risk that deadlock empowers political actors who favour a hyper-majoritarian type of democracy or who openly defend the exclusion of other actors from politics. In Tunisia, after years of reform deadlock, President Saïed annulled consensus democracy using political paralysis as a justification. This observation is again connected to an important question present in public and academic debates: can majoritarian institutions deliver better results than consensus democracy in terms of democratic consolidation? How majoritarian institutions react to the lack of consensus politics in democratisation contexts still needs to be tested. Nonetheless, the double conceptualisation of consensus might provide useful insights to answer this question. If the lack of consensus politics combined with consensus democracy produced non-

consolidation, in theory, majoritarian institutions combined with exclusion politics might facilitate democratic backsliding (see Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). The move of President Saied, and the insistence of the PDL to exclude *Ennahda* from political dialogue, can be read as a push for an extreme version of majoritarianism, that if sustained in time, might undo democratic achievements in Tunisia. This scenario is plausible given that checks and balances were not fully implemented between 2014 and 2021.

Conclusions

The aim of the article was to look at how consensus adopted in the transition affected long-term democratic consolidation in Tunisia. To answer this question, the article unpacked the concept of consensus considering, on the one hand, the institutional architecture or polity of consensus democracy, and on the other hand, the practice of consensus politics. The interplay of the two dimensions was analysed in the transition period of the democratisation process, and in the consolidation phase that followed. Two reforms prescribed in the 2014 Constitution, the creation of the constitutional court and decentralisation, were taken as heuristic tools to examine democratic consolidation in the long term. Power-sharing practices were in place, like the formation of coalition governments, but political parties did not work together effectively to implement these reforms. Consensus democracy without consensus politics produced deadlock and non-consolidation. Finally, this situation empowered actors who favour hyper-majoritarian institutions, increasing the risks of democratic backsliding.

Future research might aim to identify the deep causal factors of democratic (non)-consolidation, in particular the causes behind the lack of consensus politics in Tunisia in the period 2014-2021. As it emerges from the analysis of the two reforms, at least two

potential explanatory factors need to be clarified. First, political fragmentation in the secularist political camp made consensus politics very difficult regarding the constitutional court. Secondly, problems encountered in the implementation of decentralisation seem connected to ideational factors behind Tunisia's state-building process. Hence, future research might want to apply a *longue durée* approach to regime change, which integrates a socio-political and a historical perspective (Allal and Vannetzel, 2017). Moreover, the fact that covid-19 severely impacted Tunisia's tourist-dependent economy highlights the importance of the structural and economic factors that sustain democracy in the long term. Finally, as time gives a broader perspective on recent events in Tunisia, future research will certainly account for changes in the political system, as well as explore the deeper causal factors behind them.

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Table 2. Annex research paper 1: interviews

Category	Organisation	Date and place
Expert 1	Anonymised	September 2020, online
Civil society organisation	<i>Forum Tunisien des Droits Économiques et Sociaux (FTDES)</i>	September 2020, online
Civil society organisation	<i>Al Bawsala</i>	October 2020, online
Civil society organisation	<i>Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT)</i>	October 2020, online

Civil society organisation	<i>Shams</i>	October 2020, online
Civil society organisation	<i>Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme (LTDH)</i>	October 2020, online
Civil society organisation	<i>Avocats Sans Frontières</i> (ASF) (1)	October 2020, online
Civil society organisation	ASF (2)	October 2020, online
Civil society organisation	<i>Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates</i> (ATFD)	April 2021, La Marsa
Local politician	La Marsa city council	April 2021, La Marsa
International development organisation	Anonymised	April 2021, Tunis
Activist	Anonymised	April 2021, Tunis
Local politician	<i>Fédération Nationale des Communes Tunisiennes</i> (FNCT)	April 2021, La Marsa
Expert 2	Anonymised	May 2021, Tunis

Local politician	Teboursouk city council	May 2021, online
Local politician	Radès city council	May 2021, Radès
Expert 3	Anonymised	June 2021, Tunis
Activist 1	Anonymised	June 2021, Tunis
Transitional body	<i>Haute Instance pour la Réalisation des Objectifs de la Révolution (HIROR)</i>	June 2021, Tunis
Cartoonist	Anonymised	June 2021, Tunis
EU project	Anonymised	June 2021, Tunis
Activist 2	Anonymised	June 2021, Tunis
EU project	Anonymised	June 2021, Tunis
Unemployed	Anonymised	June 2021, Tunis
Think Tank	<i>Observatoire Tunisien de la Transition Démocratique (OTTD)</i>	June 2021, Tunis
Activist 3	Anonymised	June 2021, Tunis

2.2 Polarisation and democratic backsliding: the case of Tunisia

In elaboration

Abstract: Recent research has identified a strong correlation between polarisation and democratic backsliding. The creation of antithetical groups in society is a necessary element in this type of autocratisation process. Nevertheless, the conditions under which polarisation becomes harmful for democracy have been overlooked in the literature. By resorting to case study methodology, the article analyses how polarisation became the principal cause for the derailing of the democratisation process in Tunisia. The article contributes to the autocratisation literature by identifying three conditions under which polarisation becomes a risk for democracy: politicisation reinforcing pre-existent party cleavages; zero-sum politics based on ontological contestation ('either us or them'); and the systematic de-legitimation of democratic institutions and processes. In Tunisia, the polarisation campaign started by the *Parti Destourien Libre* (PDL) fulfilled these conditions and created the context in which President Saied could start a democratic backsliding process.

Key words: polarisation; politicisation; democratic backsliding; Tunisia

Introduction

Polarisation is very often described both by scholars and practitioners as one of the major causes of democratic backsliding (see Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2021; Diamond, 2021; McCoy et al. 2018, Roberts, 2021; Somer et al., 2021). The images of enraged protesters

taking the US Capitol by assault on 6 January 2021 have popularised this idea, and become the symbol of a democratic erosion trend currently taking place at the global level. It has been argued that the gradual unmaking of democratic institutions, visible in cases ranging from Brazil, Hungary, Turkey to the Philippines, crucially depends on the consent of polarised citizens who justify the kind of radical and illiberal measures involved in this type of autocratisation process (Svolik, 2019). However, as we will argue, there is no patent or automatic link between polarisation and democratic backsliding. Studies indeed show that polarisation can at times be a positive force to strengthen democracy, as it may stimulate crucial political debate and advance agendas to improve on public policies. The theoretical conundrum thus becomes: under what circumstances does polarisation become dangerous for democracy?

This article will, by ways of case study methodology, identify the factors that participate in the formation of a polarisation that fuels autocratisation. To do so we unpack the concept of ‘pernicious polarisation’, the kind of extreme polarisation necessary in democratic backsliding (McCoy and Somer, 2016.: 235), and define three dimensions that, together, can make polarisation a risk for democracy, i.e. politicisation under conditions of pre-existent party cleavages; zero-sum politics based on ontological contestation (‘either us or them’); and the systematic de-legitimation of democratic institutions and processes. Here we use the case of Tunisia to explore the development of these dimensions of polarisation. In particular, we are interested in the period that precedes democratic backsliding to identify the conditions under which polarisation develops (Ibid.). In Tunisia this timeframe can be delimited between the 2019 elections, which were generally held as free and fair but marked the beginning of illiberal populist politics in the country, and the 25 July 2021, when President Saïd suspended the parliament *sine die*. The latter date marks the beginning of a democratic backsliding

process that, one year later, culminated in the adoption of a new constitution consolidating autocratisation. The article is structured in the following manner. Section 1 explains the conceptual framework, further unpacks the dimensions of polarisation and provides some methodological explanations. Section 2 applies this methodology to the Tunisian case. Section 3 analyses the empirical and theoretical lessons learnt from polarisation leading to democratic backsliding in Tunisia. Finally, we offer some conclusions summarising our argument and main findings.

Unpacking polarisation

As regime change from democracy to autocratic rule still happens in the form of military *coup*, there is evidence that the decline in levels of democracy in the world is more and more associated to democratic backsliding: anti-democratic decisions taken, paradoxically, by democratically elected politicians in polarised societies (see Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). The process encompasses three different institutional dimensions of gradual change: executive aggrandisement, the erosion of political and civic rights, and the loss of independence of the election commission (Ibid.). In Tunisia, from 25 July 2021 to 25 July 2022, President Saied engaged in democratic backsliding in the three of them. First, on 25 July 2021, emergency powers were used to suspend parliament and dismiss the prime minister (Human Rights Watch et al., 2021; I Watch, 2021). Since, the president has governed by decree and gradually unmade the remaining institutional checks and balances. In February 2022, it was the turn of the judiciary with the elimination of the independent judicial authority, and in June 2022, there was a purge of ‘opposition’ judges (EuroMed Rights et al., 2022). Regarding political and civic rights, civil society organisations and political parties continue to function, but there have been cases of indictment and detention of journalists, activists and opposition politicians, often

prosecuted in front of military courts for criticising the president (Amnesty International, 2022). Finally, in April 2022 the election commission lost its independence. This step came before the vote on a new constitution on 25 July 2022, which consolidated the authoritarian turn of President Saied (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Besides the institutional dimension of democratic backsliding, there is also a socio-political dimension to which this paper will devote its attention: polarisation. Given the gradual nature of this kind of autocratisation process, elites need to polarise society before and during democratic backsliding to be able to justify each step in the unmaking of democratic institutions (Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2021; Diamond, 2021; Roberts, 2021). In the Tunisian case, popular support for Saied has remained high throughout the process. Many citizens see the president as the only honest politician and defend the dismantlement of a political system they consider inefficient and corrupt. Polarisation is thus a necessary element in democratic backsliding (see Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2021; Diamond, 2021; McCoy et al. 2018, Roberts, 2021; Somer et al., 2021). However, it does not always lead to this outcome. While the literature has devoted lots of attention to the relation between polarisation and democratic backsliding, it has seldom analysed under what conditions polarisation becomes harmful for democracy. In this paper we use case study methodology to identify the conditions that propel the formation of a polarisation that erodes democracy. In doing so, we want to avoid aprioristic accounts on polarisation and its impact on democracy. Liberal political theorists have argued that consensus, and not polarisation is what democracy needs to thrive. In contrast, thinkers of radical democracy have contended that polarisation is needed to advance social justice and enhance democratic practices (see Zürn, 2019). Here we move away from these debates and admit the possibility of both potentially ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ impacts of polarisation on democracy (see McCoy and Somer, 2019; McCoy et al, 2018). Our

argument is that the outcome will depend on the strategic choices of political actors. In what follows, we unpack polarisation by identifying three dimensions that are key in detecting the potential ‘negative’ impact of polarisation on democracy: how divisive is politicisation associated to polarisation, the nature of the relation between political adversaries and the legitimacy of institutions. We expect that political actors might find it easy to engage in democratic backsliding when politicisation is anchored on structural cleavages in society, politics follows a ‘zero-sum game’ logic, and there is a strong delegitimation of democratic institutions. Without the concurrence of the three conditions, we posit that polarisation will not be harmful for democracy. But, together, they create the necessary context element that illiberal elites use to justify democratic backsliding (Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2021; Diamond, 2021; McCoy et al. 2018, Roberts, 2021; Somer et al., 2021).

First, politicisation is conceptualised as the process of making an apolitical matter political (Zürn, 2019). Very often, it is referred to involve an increased salience of a given issue, the expansion of audiences and actors concerned (De Wilde et al. 2016: 4). Salience involves an intense evocation of a given topic in the public sphere by political actors, like civil society and political parties. This takes place in the form of a wide range of speech-acts in settings like the mediated public sphere, parliament and street protest (De Wilde, 2011). Political actors engage in debate with others that have divergent positions and who, at their turn, increase the salience of the topic by expressing their contrasted views. Politicisation then might produce polarisation if it is anchored in existing political cleavages, or used to create new ones (Zürn, 2019; De Wilde et al., 2016). When positions are crystallised, they can form poles defined by opposed views on the given issue. Polarisers try to increase the salience of topics related to any issue-area, use them to engage with other rival actors, and expand their audiences (De Wilde and Lord; 2015; see

also De Wilde et al., 2016). However, this occurs in a specific democratic context which is marked by well-rooted political conflict. The intensity of the resulting polarisation will thus depend on the ability of polarisers to establish solid linkages between the politicised issue and socio-political conflicts structuring party politics (McCoy et al., 2018). However, politicisation has an ambiguous impact on democracy. It can revitalise political debates by introducing new topics and making political parties position themselves around them (Jenkins, 2011). As argued by De Wilde et al. (2016: 14), ‘intermediating factors, like the institutional surroundings and country-specific economic and cultural conditions in which politicisation unfolds,’ are crucial in explaining its effects.

The ‘pernicious’ character of polarisation will also depend on the second dimension of polarisation, the nature of the relation between political opponents. On the one hand, polarisation might provide citizens who already identify with one of the poles with a heuristic tool to situate themselves in the debate on the new issue, and have a framework to understand what are the stakes at play and how they might affect political life (McCoy et al., 2018). The debate on the new issue might be constrained to a matter of public policy choices and both poles, defined by cleavages, might propose alternative policies regarding the issue. If this is the case, the impact of polarisation is positive as it has the potential of enhancing the quality of political discussion and public policy. On the other hand, polarisation might have negative consequences for democracy when the division between poles does not only revolve on public policy choices (raising or lowering taxes, for instance), but it is presented as an ontological contestation (‘either us or them’). Then politics becomes an existential conflict between those who belong to an original and pure political community (the nation, the people...) and those who allegedly seek to destroy it. In these cases, as McCoy and Somer (2016.: 235) argue, ‘polarising politics ... tak[es] on a life of its own, eviscerating cross-cutting ties and nonpartisan

channels for compromise'. If that is the case, polarised citizens might continue to prefer democracy over autocracy in abstract terms (McCoy et al., 2018). However, in front of a trade-off between partisanship and the basic elements of liberal democracy, they are eager to give up on the second (Graham and Svolik, 2020; Roberts, 2021; Svolik, 2019). The rational is that if the political community is endangered and democratic institutions cannot protect it, it is justifiable to dismantle checks and balances and give more power to an illiberal elite that can defend the nation or the people through other (non-democratic) means.

This divisive polarisation might put tension on the democratic system, but it might not be enough to trigger a process of democratic backsliding. Even when polarisation creates a sharp division between the 'us and 'them' and political adversaries are presented as 'enemies' by illiberal populist, democratic institutions might be speared. We posit that a third dimension is needed in a polarisation leading to democratic backsliding, which is the de-legitimisation of democratic processes and institution, be them parliament, electoral independent commissions, or the judiciary system. Repeatedly, in different contexts, illiberal populists have attacked electoral rules, decisions by judges, and even laws approved by parliament deeming them illegitimate. For instance, Bolsonaro confronted the fairness of the voting system in Brazil, alike Trump in the US, and one of Orbán's first measures was changing the election law to redraw districts and to expand the voting rights of overwhelmingly pro-Fidesz Hungarian minorities living abroad (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). In other cases, like in Bolivia and Venezuela, the govern clashed with parliament and the decisions of the legislative power were bypassed by the executive (Ibid.). All in all, before democratic backsliding can start, democratic institutions need to be attacked for not being fair or for malfunctioning. In these cases,

the politicisation of the polity does not aim at reform, but at de-legitimising checks and balances with the view to dismantle them.

In what follows, the paper uses case study methodology to identify the factors that made polarisation ‘pernicious’ for democracy in the Tunisian case. The data collected to inform the analysis consists of minutes of parliamentary debates, the observation of social media accounts, interview material and secondary literature, including press reports. The minutes are retrieved from the online archive of *Al Bawsala*, a civil society organisation that meticulously monitors and stores discussions in parliament. The interview material consists of twelve semi-structured conducted in the fall of 2020 (online) and face-to-face during 2021 and 2022. Interviewees are members of prominent Tunisian civil society organisations and experts working in the field of democracy and human rights. The identity of interviewees is not disclosed in order to preserve their anonymity. However, Annex 1 indicates their category and in some cases, when an explicit permission was granted, the name of the organisation to which they belong.

The case study puts the focus on the polarisation campaign of the *Parti Destourien Libre* (PDL), staunch defenders of Ben Ali heritage, against *Ennahda*, moderate Islamists. In particular, the empirical part describes how the PDL politicised Tunisian foreign policy towards the foes and allies of the Muslim Brotherhood -the transnational Islamist movement to which *Ennahda* is usually ascribed-.¹ The PDL used this issue to polarise politics, depict *Ennahda* as a traitor and foreign agent, and de-legitimise the parliament. Admittedly, the PDL only had sixteen members in parliament between the 2019 legislative elections and the dissolution of the chamber in July 2021. Moreover, other opposition parties, like the Democratic Current and the People's Movement, repeatedly

¹ Supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood being Qatar and Turkey and opponents the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Egypt (see Cherif, 2020).

criticized the Islamist party. Even Mohamed Abbou, former leader of the Democratic Current, was the first to call upon President Saied to activate emergency powers to curb corruption practices. However, these other secularist parties were not given as much media attention. The PDL achieved this status by being very active and disruptive both in the streets, organising sit-ins in front of pro-Muslim Brotherhood organisations, and in parliament, boycotting several sessions. For instance, Abir Moussi, the PDL's leader, gained national and international visibility by attending the chamber with a motorcycle helmet and a bulletproof vest to protest Islamist-led insecurity (see Speakman, 2021). In addition, since mid-2020, the PDL regularly appears as the first option among Tunisian voters in opinion polls, something that gave it a bigger strength than its relatively small weight in parliament would suggest. Finally, and most importantly, the PDL successfully managed to reduce Tunisian politics to a choice between 'us' or the chaos of Islamist rule. Eventually, President Saied alluded to the 'chaos' and incidents that have occurred inside the parliament to justify the necessity to suppress it (Saied, 2021). In essence, Moussi's party set the context in which President Saied initiated the gradual unmaking of democratic institutions.

Finally, we acknowledge that the economic situation, worsened by the impact of the covid-19 pandemic, and the general dissatisfaction with the political class that ruled the country since 2011 were key in creating the conditions in which the PDL could successfully deploy its polarisation strategy. Nevertheless, here we follow an agency-centred perspective. The paper addresses polarisation by looking at the actions of different agents. We argue that, despite the importance of structural factors, political actors were the ultimate (un)makers of democratic institutions. Now we move to analyse the different dimensions of polarisation in the Tunisian case. The first empirical subsection pays close attention to changes in politics after 2019 Tunisian legislative and presidential elections.

In this context the PDL politicised Tunisian foreign policy in the region by linking it to the Islamist-secularist cleavage. In the second empirical subsection, the article describes how the relations between state institutions were tensioned under the logics of ‘zero-sum politics’. The third empirical subsection illustrates how politicisation was directed from foreign policy to challenging the legitimacy of the democratic system in Tunisia.

Polarisation in Tunisia

Bringing foreign policy to the street

The politicisation of foreign policy around the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia did not really emerge as a salient topic in domestic politics until 2019. Before, there was the widespread suspicion that all major parties, from all the political spectrum, were receiving foreign support to some extent, moderate secularists allegedly being funded by the alliance formed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia and Islamists by pro-Muslim Brotherhood Qatar and Turkey.² Nevertheless, consensus politics during constitution drafting and then in the form of the government coalition between moderate seculars and Islamists of *Nida Tounis* and *Ennahda*, contributed to a relatively weak politicisation of foreign policy at the elite level (Boubekeur, 2016). Moreover, the foreign policy of Tunisia, under *Ennahda* minister Abdelssalem (2011-2013) and *Nida Tounis* minister Jhinaoui (2016-2019), was focused at attracting foreign investment, from all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members indistinctively and to ensure Tunisia’s neutrality regarding the conflict in Libya, where the differences between Qatar and the UAE were colliding most virulently (Abderrahim et al., 2018). Hence, before 2019, the politicisation of foreign did not completely overlap with the Islamist-secularist cleavage, as there were

² Interviews with various members of CSOs, 2020, Tunis.

more examples of Tunisian unity than disunion, something which astonished the Gulf monarchies, accustomed to work through proxies in non-democratic contexts but not in a free party system (Cherif, 2018).

However, things changed after 2019 elections, which were marked by a context of general *mise en cause* of consensus politics. The Chahed Government (2016-2020), supported by *Ennahda* and *Nida Tounis*, had many difficulties implementing its reform agenda, like the creation of the constitutional court and the decentralisation process (Rivera-Escartin, 2022). On the economic front, the democratic system was not delivering on the material conditions of Tunisians, which were expected to improve along the exercise of political freedom. High unemployment and high debt were instead the norm producing a general sense of disillusion with the new institutions and above all political parties.³ The contestation of consensus politics derived from these frustrations was well identified by politicians at the extremes of the political spectrum. Populist actors gained strength at the 2019 elections and Kaïs Saïed won the presidency with an anti-establishment discourse (Bréssillon and Meddeb, 2020). After the resignation of Prime Minister Fakhfakh, who headed a short-lived government in 2020, *Ennahda*, what had been left of moderate secularists and some deputies of the radical Islamists *Al Karama* supported the formation of the Mechichi Government in September 2020. As a result of the creation of a heterogeneous pro-government coalition and political fragmentation, the PDL found itself as the first force of the opposition with only sixteen seats and started enjoying an important media coverage. The objectives of the PDL were clear, contest consensus politics and denounce the ‘Islamisation of the state and society’.⁴ To do so, the PDL and its leader Abir Moussi relentlessly attacked *Ennahda* with the aim to increase

³ Interview material, fall 2020 (online) and spring 2021 (Tunisia).

⁴ Interview with senior member of FTDES, September 2020, online.

the intensity of the Islamist-secularist cleavage. However, its focus was not public policy or the conservative tendencies of the Islamist party. Instead, the PDL opted to start a campaign to exclude *Ennahda* from politics by pointing at their international connections. To do so the party politicised foreign policy around the regional conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia on the Muslim Brotherhood, and linked this issue with the cleavage between Islamists, depicted as ‘pro-Muslim Brotherhood’ terrorists, and the secularists, portrayed as true Tunisian patriots.⁵

In the summer of 2020, the PDL brought to parliament a resolution to include the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated organisations, allegedly *Ennahda*, to the country’s terrorist list. The PDL was mimicking the same move made by the UAE and Saudi Arabia in 2018 in the context of the blockage of Qatar. Eventually Egypt and other allied countries labelled the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation. Moreover, the initiative of the PDL had a wide coverage by Emirati and Saudi broadcasters, presenting Moussi as the only voice of the opposition in Tunisia (Grida, 2020). In an interview with Emirati channel Al Arabiya, Abir Moussi affirmed that ‘[t]he list will lead anyone with ties to [terrorists], regardless of whether these are direct or indirect, and will place the perpetrator in the category of terrorists. This point disturbs the Muslim Brotherhood organisation in Tunisia because their relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood and organisations led by the Brotherhood personalities are solid’ (Naar, 2020). As evidence of these relationships, PDL points at the presence of *Ennahda* members in the Tunisian branch of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), a Qatar-based organisation which is actually composed by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and has close contacts with Tunisian Islamism (see Benrjeb, 2018). When the bureau of parliament rejected to discuss the resolution, the PDL moved on to the next step of what

⁵ Observation of the Facebook sites of Abir Moussi and the PDL.

appears a well-designed campaign against *Ennahda*, consisting in linking political Islam to terrorism and Qatar and flagging the presence of the IUMS in Tunis as the prove. While the IUMS offices in Tunis were opened soon after 2011, the organisation did not become a target of political discussions until 2020. Interestingly, this happened at moment when IUMS' activities in the country had apparently decreased if compared to the years following the 2011 Revolution.⁶

The question of the IUMS gained importance in the politicisation of the regional conflict. The PDL successfully linked the organisation and the international disputes around it with domestic politics. In September 2020, the party took to the streets to demand 'strong measures against terrorists, the ones that fund them and their bosses', again linking Tunisian Islamism with terrorism and Qatar patronage (Nemlaghi, 2020). Also, Moussi announced that her party had presented a request to illegalise the IUMS in front of the Tunisian justice, but on 11 November, a judge decided to dismiss it. The height of politicisation was then reached, with news from Tunisia being echoed by Qatar as well as by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and their respective allies. Also, religious authorities of Saudi Arabia and the UAE issued *fatwas* on the 11 and 25 November respectively signalling that the Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organisation, something that was denied by the president of the IUMS based in Qatar, as media close to the Muslim Brotherhood reported. On the top of that, the PDL started a sit-in in front of the IUMS headquarters in Tunis, which lasted from 16 November to 9 March 2021. The party installed a tent where supporters would gather every day showing slogans such as 'no to the Islamic State' and 'free Tunisia, terrorists out'.⁷ Moussi regularly appeared at the site, where she addressed her followers and the press. On 23 November, she announced at the

⁶ Interview with Tunisian expert 2, June 2021, Tunis.

⁷ Observation of the Facebook sites of Abir Moussi and the PDL.

sit-in that her party was going to present another resolution in parliament including the Muslim Brotherhood and the associations linked to it to the country's list of terrorist organisations. Again, in December, the resolution was rejected by the parliament's bureau, which the PDL denounced as an anti-democratic move from the part of the president of parliament, *Ennahda*'s historic leader Rached Ghannouchi.

The discourse pointing at *Ennahda* and the government's anti-democratic practices mounted when a judge ordered the dissolution of the sit-in at the request of the IUMS. As the PDL did not follow the orders of the judge, police dismantled the party's tent using disproportionate force and injuring several journalists in the process, as reported by the Tunisian Journalist Union (SNJT). The reaction of authorities was rapidly used by the PDL. Moussi remained in the sit-in to face the police during the intervention and reinforce the message of an anti-democratic government supported by *Ennahda* (Mosaïque FM, 2021a). At that point, the PDL accused the political class, in general terms, of turning a blind eye to radicalism and putting democracy and the nation at risk. These accusations did not only concern *Ennahda*, but increasingly the Mechichi government and called the presidency to protect citizens from Islamists. All in all, after 2019 elections, the PDL was successful in politicising foreign policy. Moreover, Moussi polarised the public debate by connecting the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood with the Islamist-secularist cleavage and by portraying Islamists as traitors. Hereafter we analyse the consequences these dynamics had for the well-functioning of democratic institutions and their legitimacy.

Increasing tensions between state institutions

The prime minister, the president and the president of parliament, the three highest authorities in the country, tried to project an image of unity outside the country despite growing polarisation at home. However, their movements were unsuccessful and the presidency and *Ennahda* gradually appeared to be defending the interests of opposed poles in regional conflicts. In February 2020, Qatar's emir Al Thani was received in Tunis by President Saied to discuss Qatari investments in Tunisia and the situation in Libya. At that time a number of treaties on economic cooperation were signed by the two parties. In turn, President Saied made a three-day visit to Qatar in the midst of the PDL campaign against the IUMS in November 2020, trying to maintain an image of unity with other state institutions. Emir al Thani was the first head of state Saied visited after his election in October 2019. Their meeting was again intended to discuss the security situation in Libya and foster Qatari investment in Tunisia's ill-performing economy. In this sense, the Tunisian position was to try to take advantage of the Gulf conflict from a position of neutrality and spur an investment competition between members of the GCC. However, under the pressure of the PDL, this idea of unity was eroded and became a façade.⁸ When the accords signed with Qatar were going to be ratified by parliament, the PDL started a campaign against them, accusing the government and the presidency of selling the country to 'new forms of occupation' and their *Ennahda* allies (Jelassi, 2021a). PDL's attempts to politicise the accords were successful as the moderate secularist party *Qalb Tounis*, one of the main supports of the government in parliament, changed its position and announced that it would vote against the ratification of the treaties. To avoid a political defeat for the pro-government majority in parliament, Mechichi decided to withdraw the vote on the treaties from the agenda.

⁸ Various interviews, June 2021, Tunis.

Politicisation also affected relations with Egypt. In April 2021 President Saied pursued a three-day visit to Cairo to discuss peace efforts in Libya and Egypt's conflict with Ethiopia on the Nile. Again the three state institutions tried to maintain an image of unit. For instance, a senior leader of *Ennahda*, Nouredine Bhiri, affirmed in a talk show that they supported the visit of the president and that the party was not concerned with conflicts inside Egypt. Upon his return, President Saied was received at Carthage airport by Prime Minister Mechichi and Mayor of Tunis Souad Abderrahim, from *Ennahda*. However, the divide between state institutions was growing along with the politicisation of foreign policy in the region. The visit to Egypt was interpreted by many observers as a move against *Ennahda* from the part of the president given Egypt's repression against the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and the country's position regarding Qatar.⁹ Moussi sarcastically demanded Saied to obtain the dossiers of the Muslim Brotherhood and the IUMS from Al Sissi, which Egypt considers terrorist organisations. The interpretation in pro-Muslim Brotherhood press was also that the visit was a move against *Ennahda*, and *Al Karama* also assumed that the visit was part of anti-Islamist strategy.¹⁰ Also, Saied's compliments to Al Sissi and the calls to reinforce cooperation on counter-terrorism worried Islamists in Tunisia.¹¹ In the following days, the president affirmed that '[t]here is a major manoeuvre taking place in our time, and a process intended to divide society into categories', again understood in pro-Muslim Brotherhood media as an allusion to *Ennahda*'s external relations (Middle East Monitor, 2021).

Politicisation also expanded to Libya-Tunisia relations, maybe the scenario where Tunisian neutrality was most demanded by political elites and diplomats (see Abderrahim et al., 2018). In May 2020, Ghannouchi, acting as the president of parliament, called the

⁹ Various interviews, June 2021, Tunis.

¹⁰ Parliamentary minutes of 4 May 2021 as retrieved from *Al Bawsala* database.

¹¹ Interview with International Development organisation, April 2021, Tunis

head of the Libyan internationally-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), Fayez al-Sarraj, to congratulate him for a military victory in front of the Libyan National Army (LNA) of General Haftar. As the GNA was supported and armed by Qatar and Turkey and the LNA by Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the call was severely criticised as a breach of Tunisia's policy of neutrality vis-à-vis the conflict. On 3 June, the PDL successfully politicised the issue by organising a debate in parliament on parliamentary diplomacy, which turned into a debate on Ghannouchi's call to Al-Sarraj and *Ennahda*'s international allies. The president of the parliament received severe criticism from parties across the political spectrum, including those supporting the government like *Qalb Tounis*, and from left-wing parties, which issued a hard joint statement. However, the reasons behind criticism and the tone changed from one party to the other. The PDL continued its rhetoric associating *Ennahda* with terrorism and warning about the destruction of Tunisian state institutions by the Muslim Brotherhood. In contrast, other members of parliament accused Ghannouchi of bypassing the presidency's competencies in foreign policy and reminded him on Tunisia's well-established policy of neutrality regarding Libya.¹²

The idea that Tunisian foreign policy should be a space of consensus, continuity and pragmatism prevailed for some time. The president and the government tried to maintain cordial relations, in appearance, with all the important regional players. This stance regarding intra-Arab conflicts had been the traditional position of Tunisia in the past, especially regarding Libya, where regional actors collided most virulently through proxy militias (Mansour, 2020). However, the strategy did not last in the context of polarisation and deterioration of relations between high state institutions. Increasingly, President Saïed warned of the risks of dismembering the unity of action of the state in

¹² Parliamentary minutes of 3 June 2020 as retrieved from *Al Bawsala* database.

foreign policy, with indirect allusions to *Ennahda* and the president of parliament. When it comes to the approach of the Islamist party in foreign policy, it was based on the projection of an image of continuity and pragmatism. This was part of a larger strategy to detach itself from the Muslim Brotherhood and tame fears inside Tunisia and in the West (Mecham, 2019). In his remarks to parliament, Ghannouchi performed *Ennahda*'s strategy of moderation and made a call to political consensus. Also, he took note of the criticism by members of parliament.¹³ However, for the party it was difficult to strike a balance between, on the one hand, maintaining good relations with the international allies of political Islam and, on the other hand, defend a Tunisian agenda based on *raison d'Etat*.¹⁴ In this polarised context, Moussi's party continued to perform well in polls, being Tunisians' first option in case of imminent legislative elections. All this, despite the PDL's explicit calls to ban Islamist parties and revoke the 2014 democratic constitution. The next section traces how the object of politicisation shifted from foreign policy to the democratic polity, eroding the legitimacy of parliament.

The de-legitimisation of parliament

Increasingly, the PDL shifted the object of politicisation from the debate on foreign policy, with demonstrations in the street in front of the IUMS, to the democratic polity, de-legitimising its institutions. In March 2021, the trade union of parliament employees demonstrated against the PDL. They accused the party of repeatedly depicting them as 'infiltrated agents' of Islamist parties (La Presse, 2021a). In turn, Moussi accused the president of parliament, Ghannouchi, of plotting against her security. The leader of the PDL started to assist parliamentary sessions wearing a motorcycle helmet and a bullet-

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Interview with Tunisian expert 2, June 2021, Tunis.

proof vest, blaming the PDL's political rivals of 'supporting terrorism' and putting her life at risk. These dynamics intensified in the following months and reached a tipping point during the weeks prior to the events of 25 July 2021. For instance, in the parliamentary sessions of 14 and 15 June 2021, PDL members stopped the hearing of ministers and the vote on international agreements with France and Kuwait by using loudspeakers in the chamber. They accused the pro-government majority of high treason for 'selling the country to foreign parties' and 'Islamising the parliament' (Jelassi, 2021b). On 29 June, parliament was set to vote the ratification of commercial agreements with Qatar for a second time, and the creation of a Tunisian bureau for the Qatar Fund for Development. That time, members of the PDL did a sit-in inside the house and succeeded to paralyse the session, which needed to be transferred to a secondary room. The agreement was eventually voted and passed next day. The party stressed that it wanted to avoid the '*cheikh* of the Muslim Brotherhood [referring to Ghannouchi] to sell the parliament to suspicious foreign financial associations that infiltrated the national sovereignty', again linking foreign policy to the Islamist-secularist cleavage.¹⁵

At the same time, *Al Karama* tried to further polarise politics in parliament by presenting itself as the nemesis of Moussi's party. In the context of the chaotic session on the agreements with Qatar, a former member of the party and an active member beat Moussi inside the chamber. Civil society organisations and most political parties, including *Ennahda*, condemned the aggression against Moussi. However, this extremely polarised environment nourished by both extremes in parliament created a spiral of silence which did not allow alternative discourses to be heard. Moussi and the PDL thus became the centre of public debate.¹⁶ Moreover, moderate actors feared losing ground in

¹⁵ Observation of PDL's Facebook site, 29 June 2021.

¹⁶ Various interviews, April-June 2021, Tunis.

front of radicals and sometimes showed contradictory and mild reactions regarding anti-democratic attitudes.¹⁷ For instance, Ghannouchi, in his role of president of the parliament, was accused of being too timid in his condemnation of the aggression against Moussi. Other times, *Ennahda* tamed its moderation in order not to appear as a weak political party in front of its constituency (see Mecham, 2019). Moreover, some of its sympathisers copied the tactics of *Al Karama* and the PDL. For instance, the SNJT denounced several aggressions against journalists covering a pro-government demonstration organised by *Ennahda* (Reporters sans frontières, 2021).

In the context of increasing polarisation and tensions between the high state institutions over the limits of their respective constitutional powers, prominent civil society organisations, Prime Minister Mechichi and Ghannouchi tried to change the political dynamic. For instance, the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT), Tunisia's main trade union, proposed a national dialogue to stop polarisation and institutional conflict. This plan mimicked the consensus politics that made possible the adoption of the 2014 Constitution in a very tense context marked by political assassinations.¹⁸ However, counter-polarisation strategies appeared ineffective (see Somer et al., 2021). PDL's straightforward response to the UGTT was the presentation of a political memorandum defending the reconfiguration of the political system, through dialogue with secular civil society and parties, but explicitly barring Islamists from politics.

Finally, the polarisation in parliament was key in establishing the context in which the events of the 25 July 2021 took place. As disorder, bad manners and even verbal and physical violence augmented inside the chamber, the president increased his allusions to

¹⁷ Interview with Tunisian expert 1, June 2021, Tunis.

¹⁸ Interview with senior member of UGTT, October 2020, online

‘political divisions’ and ‘corrupted politics’, spreading the idea of a failed political system. Later, President Saied explicitly mentioned the aggression against Moussi and ‘the chaos’ inside parliament as a reason for suspending the legislative body on the 25 July 2021. For instance, in a televised speech, during minutes the president showed pictures of incidents between parliamentarians inside the chamber (Saied, 2021). The gradual de-legitimisation of the democratic polity also attained the military and the security apparatus. In his regular contacts with the troops and police officers, the president highlighted how the government and the political class had mistreated them (Ben Salah, 2021). President Saied reminded officials of the role of the president as head of the security forces and recalled the responsibility of the military in preserving the unity of the state (Ibid.). On 25 July 2021, the protests against *Ennahda* and the Mechichi Government were used by President Saied to legitimise the triggering of Article 80 of the constitution, which was used to ‘freeze’ parliament and dismiss the prime minister. Importantly, police and military sided with the president and blocked the buildings of the parliament to Ghannouchi. After 25 July 2021, the PDL’s strategy of politicisation of the regional conflict on the Muslim Brotherhood resonated in the acts of the President Saied. The moves of the presidency were not criticised by the PDL as they were perceived to be sharing a ‘common enemy’, *Ennahda* and the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁹ One of the first measures concerned the Qatari channel Al-Jazeera. Its offices in Tunis were seized by the police and shot down (Amnesty International, 2022). Since, prominent *Ennahda* members have been indicted or put under house arrest, and the funding of the party is also investigated by judicial authorities (European Forum, 2022).

In the aftermath of the 25 July 2021, both the PDL and President Saied argued that the 2014 Constitution needed to be changed in order to move away from a system

¹⁹ Interview with member of civil society organisation, October 2021, Other.

that contributes to ‘power fragmentation’, in words of a senior adviser of the president (Mosaïque FM, 2021b). When it comes to the PDL, Moussi considers that the 2014 Constitution represents the ‘system of the Muslim Brotherhood’ and needs to be dismantled (La Presse, 2021b). However, it is worth noting that as the gradual steps of democratic backsliding unfolded after the 25 July 2021, the PDL increasingly antagonised with the president to the point that the party openly criticised Saied for the autocratic turn in the country.²⁰ In particular, the PDL was opposed to the permanent closure of the parliament, the postponement of legislative elections to December 2022, and the adoption of a new constitution without the participation of secular political parties, being the PDL the first choice in electoral polls. Moreover, despite Saied’s repeated attacks against *Ennahda*, Moussi considers that the president is not tough enough in dealing with Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood (Dahmani, 2022).

Discussion

We identified three dimensions of polarisation that contributed to democratic backsliding in Tunisia: politicisation reinforcing pre-existent party cleavages; zero-sum politics based on ontological contestation (‘either us or them’); and the systematic de-legitimation of democratic institutions and processes. First, in Tunisian politics, the Islamist-secularist cleavage has dominated democratic politics and since 2011 it has structured the democratic party system along different positions on the relation between religion and the state. This cleavage has given different radical and moderate secularist and Islamist parties which, nevertheless, sometimes have similar positions in the right-left cleavage (Boubekeur, 2016). Hence, political actors can easily construct the other as an alien of

²⁰ Ibid.

the national political community, either by depicting rivals as opposed to the secular or the Islamic tradition of the country. Those issues that overlap with the Islamist-secularist cleavage can be taken by polarisers, who establish a ‘linkage’ between the politicised issue and the structural conflict (De Wilde et al., 2016). Foreign policy in the region can thus be politicised at home and used to polarise public opinion along this cleavage. Besides external actors’ impact on democracy, the construction of foreign policy as a politically contentious field emerges as a very relevant object of study in democratisation and autocratisation processes (see Gerschewski, 2021; Johansson-Nogués and Rivera-Escartin, 2020).

Second, the debate on Tunisian foreign policy in the region turned into a question of belonging to the political community, menacing the inclusiveness of the political system and thus its democratic character. The PDL used the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood to create a sharp division on a specific and tangible topic which was flagged to distinguish between the ‘own’ and the ‘enemies’ (McCoy et al., 2018.). Alternatively, the discussion on *Ennahda*’s foreign policy preferences would have had a positive impact on democracy if it had remained within the parameters of a debate on public policy choices, potentially enhancing transparency and government (see Jenkins, 2011; Zürn, 2019). However, this kind of ‘positive’ polarisation requires that opposing poles represent alternative visions in a debate on a given policy-issue. Polarisation then loses its harmful character, even if the division on the politicised topic might continue to overlap with cleavage structure. Instead, in Tunisia the PDL created two mutually exclusive poles under the logics of zero-sum politics, and gradually dragged the president to this framework.

Thirdly, the de-legitimation of democratic institutions was part of the polarisation process prior to democratic backsliding. The PDL was successful in repeatedly boycotting

the works of the parliament with sit-ins and loudspeakers, as well as challenging the neutrality of the staff of the house and of the security personnel. The risk of delegitimisation is particularly relevant in new democracies like Tunisia given that checks and balances remain fragile or have not been fully implemented (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; McCoy and Somer, 2019). President Saied could use the image of decadence projected by parliament to justify the exceptional measures democratic backsliding requires. In doing so, he did not face the resistance of the constitutional court as its judges had not been elected (see Rivera-Escartin, 2022). Finally, discussions on institutional design or the polity are a necessary step in the early years of democratic transition. However, key political actors need to reach a minimum consensus on the functioning of democracy and adopt the accords that make institutional mechanisms work in a stable way (Stepan, 2018). In the longer-term these accords need to be implemented consensually if they are to endure. Polarisation can conflict with the latter when the acceptance of democratic institutions becomes salient, and the public sphere is polarised around the inclusion or exclusion of political rivals (see Tudor and Slater, 2020).

Conclusions

Between 25 July 2021 and 25 July 2022, the unmaking of democracy in Tunisia involved several steps through which President Saied gradually emptied of content checks and balances. Nevertheless, this institutional dimension of democratic backsliding needed to be preceded and accompanied by a socio-political dimension, elite-driven polarisation. Pernicious polarisation was a necessary element in this process. We found that the harmful character of polarisation will depend on how the polarisation process unfolds in three dimensions. First, a given policy-issue is politicised and linked to structural party cleavages. In our case, the question of the Muslim Brotherhood overlaps with the divide

between secularist and Islamist. It was thus very difficult for political actors who advocate for consensus to break the dynamics started by the PDL. Secondly, political adversaries are depicted as enemies or traitors, thus as not meriting political rights. The PDL repeatedly described *Ennahda* and Islamists as foreign agents and terrorists, whereas it only recognised secularists as truly Tunisian. Thirdly, democratic institutions are de-legitimised arguing that they are biased or dysfunctional. In Tunisia polarisation resulting from the politicisation of foreign policy had a pernicious effect on democracy when the parliament became the target of polarisers. In this case, the regional conflicts around the Muslim Brotherhood progressively were conceived as a matter related to the democratic polity instead of foreign policy. The issue was brought from the street to parliament, where there were scenes of chaos and violence.

A paramount example of the de-legitimisation of democratic institutions was the parliamentary debate on the creation of a Tunisian bureau for the Qatar Fund for Development at the end of June 2021. Members of the PDL blocked the session by occupying the seats reserved to the presidency of the chamber. Abir Moussi defended the act as the only way to avoid the selling of the country by the Muslim Brotherhood. As discussions resumed the following day in parliament, Moussi was physically aggressed inside the chamber by a member and a former member of *Al Karama*. In this context of deterioration of parliamentary politics and perceived bad governance, thousands took to the street on 25 July to demonstrate against the government and *Ennahda*. That evening, President Saied announced the freezing of the work of the parliament and the concentration of all state powers in the presidency, contravening constitutional provisions, according to human rights organisations (see Human Rights Watch et al, 2021). The de-legitimisation of parliamentarism was then used to justify the concentration of powers in the executive or, in other words, to justify democratic backsliding.

Finally, the three dimensions of polarisation can also be used to identify when polarisation becomes a risk for democracy and prevent democratic backsliding. The targeting of political rivals as enemies not worthy of participating in politics and the deterioration of the image of parliament should be signs of alarm. Further studying these dynamics can contribute to counter autocratisation and help consolidate democracy in the region and beyond. Moreover, in Tunisia, protracted economic crisis and the perception of widespread corruption practices certainly played a role in taming the resonance of the calls of moderate actors among society. Ultimately, many citizens were reluctant to defend the democratic system of the 2014 Constitution because they perceived it as a corrupt regime. Together with the idea of consensus, good governance and the provision of material means to the general population emerge as key elements in preserving democracy.

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Table 3. Annex research paper 2: interviews

Category	Organisation	Date and place
Civil society organisation	Arab Reform Initiative	September 2020, online
Civil society organisation	<i>Forum Tunisien des Droits Économiques et Sociaux (FTDES)</i>	September 2020, online

Civil organisation	society	<i>Al Bawsala</i>	October 2020, online
Civil organisation	society	<i>Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT)</i>	October 2020, online
Civil organisation	society	<i>League Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme (LTDH)</i>	October 2020, online
Civil organisation	society	<i>Avocats Sans Frontières</i>	October 2020, online
Civil organisation	society	<i>Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD)</i>	April 2021, Tunisia
International Development Organisation		Anonymized	April 2021, Tunisia
Expert 1		Anonymized	June 2021, Tunisia
Expert 2		Anonymized	June 2021, Tunisia
Expert 3		Anonymized	June 2021, Tunisia

Civil society organisation	Arab Reform Initiative (follow-up)	October 2021, other
Expert 2	Anonymized (follow-up interview)	February 2022, other

2.3. Supporting the Tunisian transition? Analysing (in)consistencies in EU democracy assistance with a tripartite nexus model

Johansson-Nogués, E. and Rivera-Escartin, A. (2020), Supporting the Tunisian transition? Analysing (in)consistencies in EU democracy assistance with a tripartite nexus model, *Democratization*, 27:8, 1376-1393.

Abstract: This article puts forth a new heuristic model for analysing the EU's democracy assistance to non-accession countries. The EU's democracy assistance has predominantly been scrutinised in academia through the so-called democratisation-stability dilemma, whereby allegedly the EU is found to single-mindedly promote regime stability to the detriment of democracy. Nevertheless, we argue that this conceptualisation falls short of analysing the full dynamics of EU democracy assistance. Our contribution provides an alternative to the traditional conceptualisation of EU democracy assistance, by proposing three alternative nexuses of analysis: formal/substantive democracy, elite/non-elite engagement and security/stability. We apply this new analytical framework to the study of EU's democracy assistance to Tunisia from 2011 to date. While EU's political and financial investment in the transition has been considerable in the three nexuses, negative interaction effects have generated several inconsistencies that affected several areas of EU's democracy assistance.

Keywords: democracy assistance; EU foreign policy; Tunisia; inconsistencies

Introduction

The European Union's (EU) institutions and different EU member states have taken a strong interest in the Tunisian transition to democracy since the Jasmine or Tunisian Revolution in 2011. Tunisia held the country's first-ever democratic elections to nominate members of the constituent assembly that same year. In 2014 the new constitution was approved by national referendum, and presidential and parliamentary elections were held. Tunisia's first local ballots took place in 2018, and its second set of presidential and parliamentary elections were held in 2019. The EU has warmly welcomed the decided efforts by the Tunisian people to leave former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's more than 20 years of authoritarian rule behind. The Tunisian transition is depicted by the EU as 'a source of hope', 'an example for other countries' and 'a symbol of democratic change' in an area of the world otherwise characterised as plagued by instability and violence (European Commission and HRVP, 2016; European Parliament, 2017; EUGS, 2019). It has been posited that Tunisia's successful transition into a prosperous, peaceful and stable democracy could have the potential for triggering positive reverberations throughout North Africa and the Middle East (EUGS, 2016). The EU has therefore asserted that it has a 'strategic interest to have a strong, democratic and stable Tunisia as its neighbour' and that it is willing to 'use all its instruments to support the Tunisian people, accompany the electoral process, promote human rights, support democratic and socioeconomic reforms, improve security and strengthen civil society' (European Commission and HRVP, 2016; European Commission, 2018).

The EU's perception of its own role as a staunch 'supporter' of the Tunisian democratisation process, echoes its efforts over past decades to assist other democratic transitions whether in accession countries, European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) countries or elsewhere. Scholars have taken note of how the EU's ambition to prod on

incipient democratisation processes, and/or lend conditional support to effectuate change in democratising or authoritarian contexts, has grown since the 1990s (Youngs, 2009). However, different in-depth or comparative case studies over the same time period have also found many features of the EU's democracy assistance in third countries inconsistent or even questionable (Bicchi, 2014; Börzel and van Hüllen, 2014; Pace, 2009; Youngs, 2009). Such authors have offered several explanations for why the EU does not always succeed in its professed aim to support democratic transitions. Many accounts nonetheless centre on the inconsistency produced by the so-called democratisation-stability dilemma, a trade-off that renders efforts in democracy assistance void due to EU's prioritisation of regime stability (Börzel and van Hüllen, 2014; Börzel and Lebanidze, 2017; Youngs, 2009). While we find such arguments stimulating, for our purposes we believe this explanation too narrow, as we will elaborate on below. Hence, here we will outline an alternative model for analysing (in)consistencies in EU democracy assistance, by exploring the EU's support for the Tunisian democratic transition in the past decade. For this purpose, our article does two things. First, we re-conceptualise (in)consistency in EU democracy assistance. Our goal is to move beyond the stasis of the democratisation literature, by proposing an innovative, tripartite nexus approach. Second, the article maps out the dynamics of the different nexuses and how they affect the EU's democracy assistance to Tunisia. The added value of our argument compared to existing literature is that it bridges intra- and extra-EU elements influencing democracy assistance, as well as accounts for changing practices over time. Furthermore, it provides a full and cross-sectorial account of EU assistance to Tunisia as opposed to the partial, sector-specific views hitherto predominant in the literature.

The article is based on a cross-case analysis, drawing upon EU official documents, interview material, speeches by Tunisian elite and civil society as well as secondary

literature. The first section provides a literature review and sets out the conceptual framework. The second section explores the empirical evidence through the optics of the three nexuses, while in the conclusions we reflect upon EU democracy assistance to Tunisia since 2011 and the theoretic insights derived.

(In)consistencies in EU democracy assistance: practice and theory

It has been argued that the EU did not become a significant referent in democracy assistance until the 1990s (Youngs, 2009). The implosion of the East bloc and the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War was to become EU's first true test as a concerted supporter of democratic transition in third countries.¹ The post-Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe turned to the EU and its member states for technical and financial assistance after a wave of pacific revolutions ushered in democracy (Barbé and Johansson-Nogués, 2008; Dimitrova and Pridham, 2004; Ethier, 2003; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008). The scope of the EU's democracy assistance was later broadened and incorporated into various other policy frameworks encompassing non-accession states, such as the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the 2000 ACP-EU Partnership Agreement (also known as the Cotonou Agreement) and the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy.² The focus of the EU's democracy assistance in these early years was on technical support for elections, as well as on reforms to stimulate good governance and market liberalisation (Youngs, 2002). EU methodology, whether in enlargement or third countries, relied on a combination of political or economic conditionality, i.e.

¹ Although it could be argued that the conditionality linked to the European Communities' Association Agreements during the Cold War was a form of proto-democracy assistance, as the prospect for economic association with the Community was only open to countries with demonstrated commitment to democracy (e.g. Greece, Portugal, Spain and Turkey).

² The ENP encompasses the following countries: Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Moldova, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and Ukraine.

incentives ('carrots') or threat of sanctions ('sticks'), as well as firm criteria and timelines for reforms ('benchmarking') (Del Sarto and Schumacher, 2011).

All throughout these first decades, however, the EU's democracy assistance was consistently critiqued for its top-down approach to democracy assistance, which relied on an almost exclusive engagement with third-country elites (Bicchi, 2014; Bremberg, 2016; Johansson-Nogués, 2017). Critique was also levelled at the EU's unwillingness or inability to marshal EU instruments in a timely and efficient manner conducive to sustainable democratic change. Despite the growing censure, it was not to be until in 2011 and in the context of the Arab uprisings – of which Tunisia was at the forefront – that the EU would begin a more thorough overhaul of its democracy assistance.³ The European Commission and the HRVP recognised that the events in the southern neighbourhood indicated that 'EU support to political reforms in neighbouring countries has met with limited results' prior to 2011 (European Commission and the HRVP, 2011a). Hence, it was felt that 'a new approach is needed to strengthen the partnership between the EU and the countries and societies of the neighbourhood: to build and consolidate healthy democracies, pursue sustainable economic growth and manage cross-border links' (Ibid.). The carrots for democratic reform were now substantially boosted, while the sticks were quietly abandoned. In the ENP context, the EU extended incentives for democratic reform and consolidation in the form of cooperation aid, mobility and trade, the so-called 'more for more' strategy. Finally, the non-elite, especially civil society organisations, were given a more central role. The European Commission argued that '[a]n empowered civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system and is an asset in itself' as it

³ For a lucid critique of this overhaul see Natorski (2014).

contributes ‘to more effective policies, equitable and sustainable development and inclusive growth’ (European Commission, 2012).

Despite reforms, however, the reports of the alleged failures of EU democracy assistance efforts persist and hence warrants our closer attention here (Bicchi, 2014; Börzel and van Hüllen, 2014; Börzel and Lebanidze, 2017; Dandashly, 2018; Natorski, 2015; Pace et al., 2009). Our starting point for building a model for analysing the EU’s democracy assistance to Tunisia since 2011 is to unpack the EU’s lack of consistent support for democratisation in third countries. Inconsistency, in the broader EU foreign policy literature, refers to the unintended resultant of the collision of two or more policies that have divergent and/or incompatible objectives or resulting practices (Conceição-Heldt and Meunier, 2014; Natorski, 2015; Nuttal, 2000). Inconsistency is thus to be found when there is a discrepancy between stated policy objectives or between objectives and practice. It could be argued that inconsistencies naturally abound in public policy and are endemic to politics and public administration to a point where ‘consistency’ becomes a policy ideal, subject to epistemic tension between different social collectives (Natorski, 2015). In the area of the EU’s democracy assistance, inconsistency has most frequently been found in, and assessed on the basis of, different apparent moral trade-offs among policy objectives. One such trade-off is the democratisation-stability dilemma. The inherent logic of this dilemma is that two policy objectives with alleged incompatible objectives are pursued at once (democracy and stability).⁴ Scholars have noted the tendency for stability to trump democracy in EU democracy assistance in most third country contexts. They therefore pessimistically posit that “the EU’s approach of ‘stabilisation first’ will not even in the long run translate into more intensive democracy

⁴ The origin of the dilemma is based on the assumption that promoting democracy in authoritarian states entails the risk of destabilisation since transitions and regime change can go together with political turmoil and even sometimes violent conflict (see Börzel and van Hüllen, 2014).

promotion efforts” (Börzel and van Hüllen, 2014: 1044; see also Börzel and Lebanidze, 2017; Freyburg, 2012; Powel, 2009). In a different set of literature, authors have identified further dilemmas affecting democracy promotion: democratisation vs. peace-building, democratisation vs. state-building and democratisation vs. socio-economic development (Grimm and Leiniger, 2012). In all the above sets of dilemmas, the former term is argued as being an objective which stands as a logical opposite to the latter. The consensus in the literature for this reason appears to be that democratisation cannot be pursued simultaneously to these other objectives. We find such accounts a good starting point, but affected by certain shortcomings. In our view the dilemma literature overstates the logical ‘either-or’ opposition between the two objectives, as it is difficult to envision functional democracy developing in absence of, for example, stability or socioeconomic development. The inherent assumption of this literature is also that consistency in EU democracy assistance depend on the level of political liberalisation of a country. Low levels of political liberalisation are expected to prompt more inconsistency in EU democracy assistance, while consistency, conversely, is the norm in contexts where democratic practises have become more consolidated. We have not been able to corroborate this latter assumption in relation to our case study on Tunisia. Finally, we also note that the bulk of the dilemma literature is steadily trained on intra-EU sources of inconsistencies – whether stemming from EU institutions, the use of EU instruments or specific EU member states’ preferences – without due consideration for local conditions in the recipient country. There is thus a tendency to overlook other potentially important and concurrent explanatory factors in the EU’s (in)consistent democracy assistance equation, such as the politico-legal or economic preferences of local elite, civil society actors and/or the presence of additional foreign donors or powers. Here we bridge intra- and extra-EU elements influencing democracy assistance by considering both intra-EU

dynamics (institutions, instruments and member states) and elements external to the EU (e.g. domestic dynamics in the transition country).⁵ For these combined reasons, we here propose an alternative approach, without losing sight of some the key insights provided in the dilemma literature.

Our model is based on a tripartite analytical framework. We find three nexuses crucial for understanding the inconsistencies in EU's democracy assistance in the areas of the substantive/formal, the elite/non-elite and finally the security/stability. We hold that each term in the respective nexus refer to an ideal concept that, far from being antithetical, interacts with its twinned term. The two coupled terms are thus not logical opposites or conceived of as engaged in an 'either-or', zero-sum game. Rather, we understand them as having an interaction effect on each other and their resultant is a co-production of that effect. The interaction between the two terms produces (un)intended outcomes which may affect the external actor's ability to support democracy in third countries (Richter, 2012). The novelty of our heuristic device is thus that it combines three prominent nexuses in democracy assistance, while most accounts limit themselves to a single dilemma. We are thus able to provide a broader picture of most democracy assistance scenarios, as these three dynamics tend to be present at once. We also open the door to re-situating the academic debates away from inconsistencies between stated objectives, towards a more nuanced reflection on consistencies and inconsistencies – i.e. '(in)consistencies' – resulting as a combination from the interaction between various policy objectives, as well as practice, as they play out in a policy scenario. A final additional value of our tripartite analytical model is that it allows for adding further issue areas into the analysis of democracy assistance, hence providing a broader scope of cross-

⁵ With the notable exception of Pace et al. (2009). However, in contrast to our pursuits here, they study inside-out and outside-in factors by bracketing either the 'inside' or the 'outside' impact of democracy assistance.

sectoral overview. The focus in most accounts of EU democracy assistance has been on specific issue areas, mostly on financial instruments (Dandashly, 2018; Freyburg, 2012; van Hüllen, 2019). Here, with the help of our analytical framework we can explore the politics of further issue areas in a cross-cutting manner. In continuation we will explain each nexus in more detail.

The first conceptual pair is formed by *formal/substantive* perspectives of democracy affecting the EU democracy assistance. *Formal democracy* encompasses the basic components of democratic processes such as elections, rule of law, division of powers and good governance. Formal democracy also includes rights that are directly associated with participation in the public sphere found in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, such as freedom of speech, information and assembly (Carother, 2010; Kurki, 2015). The EU expressed its objective to pursue ‘deep and sustainable democracy’ with neighbouring countries in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings. For the EU, a deep and sustainable democracy entails the right to vote ‘accompanied by rights to exercise free speech, form competing political parties, receive impartial justice from independent judges, security from accountable police and army forces, access to a competent and non-corrupt civil service’ (European Commission and the HRVP, 2011a). We understand *substantive democracy* to be where institutions provide the material background conditions that allow the optimal and effective exercise of the above enumerated political rights, together with the rights included in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Substantive democracy associates the quality of democracy with prosperity, the welfare state and low rates of socioeconomic inequality. The EU recognises the importance of this dimension, as it is held that ‘democracy will not take root’ unless there is an ‘inclusive and sustainable economic growth and development’ to accompany it (European Commission and HRVP,

2011b). This was also the main gist of the EU's 2011 initiative for a Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity for southern Mediterranean countries. It was held that '[p]olitical and economic reforms must go hand-in-hand and help deliver political rights and freedoms, accountability and participation'. Therefore, job creation, economic revitalisation and growth and social protection are 'crucial to ensure the sustainability of political reforms' (European Commission and HRVP, 2011c).

The second conceptual nexus we discuss here is the one between *elite and non-elite engagement*. The *elite engagement* consists of the interaction between the democracy promotor and the transitioning country's political or socioeconomic elite through institutionalised dialogue. This is the mainstay of the most common formulas of democracy assistance used by the EU and most international donors, as partnering up with the elite is seen as crucial to ensure the political commitment to and implementation of legal and institutional reforms in the political liberalisation process (Johansson-Nogués, 2006; 2017; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008; van Hüllen, 2019). The *non-elite engagement* consists of direct interaction between the democracy promotor and civil society organisations (CSOs) or economic actors in countries in democratic transition. Alternatively, this level of engagement can consist of decentralised dialogues between CSOs and economic actors representing the democracy promotor with their homologues in countries immersed in democratising processes (Crawford, 2007; Dimitrova and Pridham, 2004; Holthaus, 2019). Having an active involvement of CSOs and economic actors is seen a desirable feature in a liberal democracy, whether for these actors to function as a policy 'watchdog' or to help to supply public sector services in areas neglected by governments, or both. The EU's attention to non-state actors in democratising contexts has increased since 2011 as it has acknowledged that '[a] thriving civil society can help uphold human rights and contribute to democracy building and good

governance, playing an important role in checking government excesses’ (European Commission and HRVP, 2011c). Hence, the EU provides democracy assistance ‘aimed at developing the advocacy capacity of CSOs and increasing their ability to monitor reform and participate effectively in policy dialogues’ (Ibid.).

The third and final conceptual pair is the *security/stability nexus* which refers to two socially constructed concepts present in most Western donors’ democracy-assistance discourse and practice. The concrete meanings of these two concepts may vary from donor to donor. As for the EU and its member states, scholars have noted that the term *security* spans a broad range of notions. Security, at its most basic, reflects a material understanding of security and hold connotations such as the long-term absence of insecurity, whether in the forms of conflict, violence, emergent threats or destabilizing illicit border flows (Dandashly, 2018; Hanau Santini, 2013; Johansson-Nogués, 2018). However, EU democracy assistance is also frequently premised on the necessity to build positive, holistic safeguards against insecurity or vulnerability in the deeper sense and the longer term. The European Commission has noted ‘the importance of ensuring human rights, rule of law and inclusive democracy to avoid alienating communities and creating conditions of insecurity’ (European Commission, 2006). The European Union Global Strategy, EU’s main foreign and security policy strategy document, affirms that peace, as well as existence of underlying institutional and societal strengths in partner countries addressing vulnerabilities and underlying structural risks across many sectors (energy, environment, etc.), are ‘key for prosperity and democracy’ as well as indivisible from sustainable and inclusive development (EUGS, 2016). *Stability* refers to the shorter-term premise of stabilisation associated with EU’s democracy assistance. In essence, stability entails the temporary absence or suspension of conflict, of large-scale social, political or economic turmoil or of threats. In the regulation establishing an Instrument Contributing

to Stability and Peace, for example, EU's short-term stability promotion is circumscribed 'to contribute to the prevention of conflicts and to ensuring capacity and preparedness to address pre- and post-crisis situations [...] specific global and trans-regional threats to peace, international security and stability' (Council of the EU, 2018).

Each nexus thus represents a set of coupled concepts which, as a result of their interaction, impact the EU's democracy assistance. We therefore posit that when both terms in each nexus are present and pursued in mutually reinforcing fashion or in fair balance with each other a positive-sum interaction effect ensues, whereby the EU's democracy assistance tends toward more consistency. However, when there is an absence of one of the two or an imbalance between the coupled terms, a negative-sum interaction effect is produced; the resultant of EU's democracy assistance then tends toward inconsistency. There are thus two different interaction effects in each nexus – positive-sum or negative-sum – determining the outcome (consistency or inconsistency) of the democracy assistance. The three nexuses will, in continuation, be applied to the case of the EU's democracy assistance to Tunisia with a multi-sectoral approach. The question that the next section is trying to answer, through the prism of the three nexuses, is how (in)consistent has the EU been in assisting the Tunisian democratic transition from 2011 to date.

(In)consistencies in EU democracy assistance to Tunisia

Formal/substantive nexus

Soon after the fall of Ben Ali's regime, then High Representative and Vice President Catherine Ashton pledged the EU's readiness to assist the process of planting 'the roots of deep democracy' in Tunisia by paying heed to both formal and substantive aspects of

democracy (*The Guardian*, 4 February, 2011). To this end, in 2011 the EU launched a Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity which included Tunisia and all southern ENP partners (European Commission and HRVP, 2011c). The Partnership was later followed-up by the country-specific EU-Tunisia Partnership Priorities and its accompanying Action Plan (2013-2017), in which the EU vowed to support Tunisia in the implementation of a formal democratic institutional setting, consolidating rule of law and transparency in local administration (EEAS, 2012). 7 percent (31 million euros) of funds allocated to Tunisia in the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI) were mobilised to foment the formal dimension for democratic transformation and institution building between 2011 and 2013, including technical assistance in the organisation of the elections of 2011 and later work of the constituent assembly (Court of Auditors, 2017; European Parliament, 2016). The EU also expressed a strong desire to foment the right conditions for substantive democracy. Indeed, emphasis in the 2013-2017 EU-Tunisia Action Plan was clearly placed on economic and social integration (EEAS, 2012). A lion share of the ENPI in this period (73% in 2011-2013 and 62% in 2014-2015) was allocated to stabilise the Tunisian economy which had been severely affected by the revolution (Court of Auditors, 2017). From 2014 onwards aid efforts were put towards regional and local development, mainstreaming social justice, inclusiveness and poverty alleviation as well as support for small and medium businesses (European Parliament, 2016).

For all purposes, the EU's democracy assistance in these early years then appeared, at least on paper, to lend consistent support for Tunisia's democratic transition. The Action Plan and the supporting financial instruments evoked a good balance between support for formal as well as substantive elements of democracy. However, there are several indicators that the efforts on the formal democracy stagnated by 2014 and that a

complex set of dynamics affecting substantive democracy accelerated. The stagnation of the formal dimension was partly a consequence of internal political dynamics in Tunisia. The post-2011 period has been characterised by a fragmented political landscape. Tunisian coalition governments, frequently lasting less than a year, and frequently characterised by strong tension among the various coalition partners, never sat long enough to address needed fundamental political reforms like the establishment of the constitutional court or decentralisation of the state, which could have strengthened the formal dimension of democracy.⁶ The delays or inadequate reforms in the formal dimension of democracy also had a notable knock-on effect on the prospects for deepening substantive democracy, as the needed institutional set-up and/or planning for job creation and welfare programs could not be properly achieved.

However, it is pertinent to note certain EU practices related to the formal/substantive nexus also affected the consistency of its democratic assistance. In the aftermath of the 2011 Revolution, various EU member states, and other foreign creditors, began issuing demands that the nascent democratic Tunisian government assume responsibility for the 15 billion dollars foreign-owned debt accumulated during Ben Ali's regime.⁷ In 2013, the Tunisian government reluctantly agreed to a bailout package administered by the International Monetary Fund to service the Tunisian public debt. The bailout affected both the formal and the substantive dimensions of democracy. At the formal level, the legitimacy of the Tunisian democratic institutions was undermined as the government was seen as too readily yielding to foreign pressure to have the Tunisian people foot the bill of Ben Ali and his family's excesses. Some sectors of the public had

⁶ We counted 12 significant cabinet reshuffles from 2011 to 2020, including 7 changes of prime minister.

⁷ In July 2012, a proposed bill for a debt audit was submitted to the national constituent assembly, and President Marzouki announced shortly afterwards that there were plans to an inquiry into whether loans extended by foreign creditors to the Tunisian state during the Ben Ali regime were embezzled by regime supporters and/or the dictators' family.

held out their hopes to that the Tunisian government would make good on its 2012 pledge to hold an independent audit of the public debt, to establish whether liabilities should fall on the Tunisian state or on the former dictator and his family. The loss of the government's legitimacy in the formal dimension was further exacerbated as the prospects for substantive democracy began to dim. The bailout package entailed significant austerity measures, producing socio-economic hardships for Tunisian citizens in the form of increased unemployment or cuts in public spending. Popular resentment over the austerity measures and the erosion of the prospects for substantive democracy translated into a number of strikes or protests marches in the country. In a general strike on 2019, almost coinciding with symbolic date of the anniversary of the Tunisian Revolution, the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* – Tunisia's oldest and most prominent trade union – put words to a widespread public sentiment that 'the international financial community [is] obstructing the path of political reform and democratic transition that our people have called for over the past eight years' (UGTT, 2019).⁸ The Tunisian public perception was thus that the bailout package destabilised both formal as well as substantive democracy.

Another example of where the formal/substantive nexus cause inconsistency in the EU's support for Tunisian democratisation can be found in the EU's push for launching negotiations with Tunisia on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) in late 2015.⁹ DCFTA has the explicit aim to enhance elements of substantive democracy such as sustainable growth and employment creation through market access, improvement of the investment climate and ongoing economic reforms in

⁸ Authors' own translation from Arabic.

⁹ The DCFTA covers goods, including agricultural produce, capital and services as well as a series of changes in the legal frameworks regulating areas such as technical barriers to trade, sanitary measures, investment protection, public procurement and competition policy.

the country. The logic of DCFTA reveals the strong belief – some say bias – within the EU that market liberalisation and economic growth are essential motors of democratic transition. There is a belief in EU capitals and institutions, shared by many Western democracy promoters, that the legitimacy of any democratic political system is closely linked to the soundness of a country's economic performance. However, while the Tunisian government was initially onboard with DCFTA, the public unease soon became evident as the latter feared economic readjustments in the short to medium term, similar to the bailout, which would only further increase unemployment and potentially cause the destruction of traditional industries and local agriculture.¹⁰ In the eyes of the Tunisian public, there was a risk that the EU's DCFTA offer could have threaten to derail the spirit of the Tunisian Revolution and further undermine the prospects for formal and substantive democracy.¹¹ Hence, yielding to public demands Prime Minister Youssef Chahed announced in 2019 that he would not accept the DCFTA agreement and/or continue negotiations, if the EU did not modify different aspects of the agreement (Chahed, 2019). This represents a curious case of (in)consistency in EU democracy assistance. The DCFTA, designed to support the democratic transition through market liberalisation, has not been finalised. However, the EU democracy assistance can still be seen as consistent, as the DCFTA negotiations generated the unintended effect that good democratic practices in Tunisia were reinforced. The EU's DCFTA offer created a mutually reinforcing effect between formal and substantive democracy, as it sparked a lively public debate on the link between economic liberalisation and social justice and that governmental accountability to the public subsequently improved as it tried to match

¹⁰ For example, the analysis of DCFTA indicate that, even with a proposed exemption period of 10 years, the influx of EU agricultural products into Tunisian markets (meat, milk and cereals) would cause negative effects on local production and destruction of jobs in local companies. Moreover, the macroeconomic impacts such as elimination of tariffs would produce a reduction of state revenues and thus impact Tunisia's capacity to spend in social programmes (Grumiller et al., 2018).

¹¹ Interview with Tunisian senior official, January 2019, Brussels.

public demands to policy.

In sum, the consistency of the EU's support for the Tunisian democratic transition has been conditioned by a series of interaction effects produced in the formal/substantive nexus. As political fragmentation increased in Tunisia after 2014, aspects of formal and substantive elements of democracy were left unimplemented or unreformed, negatively affecting both Tunisian democracy reforms and the EU's ability to consistently support such reforms. The negative dynamics were further compounded by external creditors' insistence on debt service. However, in the context of the EU's DCFTA we find an unintended positive interaction effect in the formal/substantive nexus, which has served to enhance democratic practices in Tunisia.

Elite/non-elite nexus

We find that there was a largely positive interaction between the twinned concepts in the elite/non-elite nexus, although also here (in)consistent outcomes in EU's democracy assistance to Tunisia have occurred. Since 2011 Tunisian elites, civil society organisations and economic actors have on the whole shared the objectives to accomplish a democratic transition in the country and this consensus has made interaction largely fluid.¹² The EU has supported the dialogue between the elite and non-elite in Tunisia by ways of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights,¹³ and the creation of the *Programme d'Appui à la Société Civile en Tunisie*, a generously funded ENPI program designed to spur the dialogue between state authorities and CSOs. Moreover, in 2013 the EU launched a flagship initiative to facilitate dialogue between Tunisian elites

¹² Interview with Tunisian senior official, January 2019, Brussels.

¹³ Since 2011, around 2 million euros are allocated on quasi-annual basis to CSOs through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights.

and non-elites in the form of the Tripartite Dialogue.¹⁴ This initiative, implemented by EuroMed Rights, offered a unique space of consultation between governmental authorities, CSOs and the EU before it was ended in 2019.¹⁵ Another EU-sponsored initiative has been Jamaity.org, an online platform created in 2014, which brings together more than 1,600 Tunisian civil society organisations and provides useful information on EU projects and funding opportunities (Colombo and Meddeb, 2018).

Nevertheless, while the elite and non-elite interaction in Tunisia have dramatically improved since 2011, in part due to EU democracy assistance initiatives, there is also evidence for the EU collusion with the Tunisian government that has caused some negative interaction effects. One area where interaction between elite and non-elite have met substantial obstacles was, for example, in the context of the consultations for the EU-Tunisia Mobility Partnership Agreement of 2014. The Mobility Partnership envisioned to provide visa facilitation for e.g. Tunisian students, NGOs and businesspeople, in return for a commitment to readmission of undocumented migrants reaching the EU from its territory (Cassarino, 2014; Zardo and Abderrahim, 2018). The problem for Tunisia's civil society and economic actors became that, although mobility is an issue of broad societal importance, the consultations for the Mobility Partnership were held strictly between the EU and the Tunisian government. Hence, contrary to stipulations of good democratic practice, relevant NGOs were neither consulted nor granted access to such talks. For this purpose, Tunisia's most prominent human rights organisations, together with a number

¹⁴ It is worth noting though that the EU's democracy assistance to Tunisia after 2011 was initially fraught with all the normal teething problems of civil society access to EU funding calls and overreliance on professionalised NGOs which the EU's democracy assistance has suffered from in most third-country contexts. In Tunisia, it was alleged that EU calls for projects were too difficult to fulfil for local organisations with no specific technical expertise in this kind of bureaucratic procedures (see Noura and Redissi, 2018). Moreover, Tunisian CSOs found linguistic and symbolic barriers to EU funding, given that much of the documentation and guidelines produced by the EU Delegation in Tunis were only available in French, as opposed to Arabic or Amazigh (see Weilandt, 2019).

¹⁵ Interview with senior official of the European Commission, January 2019, Brussels.

of European NGOs, condemned ‘the lack of transparency in the [Mobility Partnership] negotiation process which did not involve civil society actors’ (EuroMed Rights et al., 2014). The dynamics in the interaction between elite and non-elite grew worse as the EU began to exhort the Tunisian government to restrict undocumented migration in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis and the rise of the populist radical right in several EU member states (European Commission, 2018). In 2018 the EU proposed to finance UN-administered camps on Tunisian soil for undocumented migrants rescued at sea or even to act as first ports of call for asylum seekers before they reach EU territory (Rivera-Escartin, 2020). Tunisian CSOs and economic actors have been vocal in their critique of such EU propositions. They oppose such migration camps and in general any externalisation of EU border control into their country’s territory as, to their mind, such practices do not only undermine the legitimacy of the sovereign, democratic institutions of Tunisia but they also fail to provide adequate safeguards to protect human rights (EuroMed Rights, 2019). Moreover, CSOs also critiqued how the EU-Tunisian talks once again failed to live up to good democratic principles of public consultation and further undermined open and good communication between elite and non-elite.

In sum, interaction between Tunisian elites and non-elites and governmental accountability to the public have improved in the past decade. The overall positive-sum dynamics of strengthened democratic practices has enabled the EU’s democracy assistance to maintain certain consistency. However, the lack of elite and non-elite dialogue in the area of mobility and migration camps have caused tensions. The EU’s and the Tunisian government’s preference for not including civil society in certain politically loaded debates undermined the prospects for a broad social and democratic consensus on matters of migration. This has caused turbulence in the democratic transition and (in)consistencies in the EU’s democracy assistance.

Security/stability nexus

In reference to the security/stability nexus, internal Tunisian and external (mostly EU) political dynamics shifted initial positive interaction effects to negative, producing a (in)consistent resultant in the EU democracy assistance. The first years of the Tunisian transition were marked by insecurity, ranging from political pre-election turmoil in early 2011, the massive arrival of refugees from the Libyan civil war, to the clashes with Salafists in 2012-14, when followers of Ansar Al-Sharia committed a number of terrorist attacks. This initial period was also marked by discussions on how to build a democratically accountable police and military (Hanau Santini and Cimini, 2019). The EU advocated for a reform of state institutions and strongly encouraged public debate on security sector reform (Bouagga, 2018). The EU's position was to promote a restructuring of the police, the military and the judicial system, alongside relevant legislation, in order to transform the former regime's repressive approach to security and replace it with a democratic human security approach. While keeping an eye on the abovementioned short-term risks to stability, the EU defended a good balance in the security/stability nexus and fostered a positive-interaction effect.

However, after the assassinations of left-wing political leaders Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi in 2013, the focus within Tunisia shifted from security sector reform to ensuring effectiveness of the police forces in the short term (Ibid.). Hence, the main obstacle to reforming state institutions became a shifting Tunisian domestic view of security forces and the prioritisation of stability over long-term security (Hanau Santini and Cimini, 2019). These domestic dynamics were reinforced by the approach of important external actors, such as EU member states Germany, France and the United

Kingdom in the framework of the G7.¹⁶ In contrast to the EU institutions, they chose a security assistance strategy based on training and equipping Tunisian police and military in order to increase their capabilities and short-term effectiveness in public-order management (Ibid.). However, as the security situation further deteriorated in the country in 2015, with the terrorist attacks at the Bardo Museum, in Sousse and against the Presidential Guard, the EU institutional approaches shifted and fell in line with the Tunisian government and the G7 EU member states. The EU now declared the Tunisian democracy as ‘fragile and fac[ing] serious risks’ such as Salafi jihadism, the return of foreign fighters from Syria, the destabilisation of Libya (a usual rear-base for terrorist groups operating in Tunisia) and internal political fragmentation (European Commission and HRVP, 2016). This shift in the EU’s democracy assistance was reflected in the EU-Tunisian strategic priorities for the period 2018-2020 (European Commission, 2018). The lopsided focus on the short-term stability comes at the cost of long-term security and hence causes a negative interaction effect in the security/stability nexus. The focus on stability and efficiency of security forces, over security sector reform, makes the EU and its member state complicit with Tunisia in practices which might not be conducive to its transition towards a mature democracy. The focus on stability reinforces those actors within the security apparatus who are opposed to human security-based security sector reform and who favour the repressive culture characteristic of the Ben Ali regime (Durac, 2018). Tunisian CSOs have indeed expressed concerns over police abuses of the counter-terrorism law and of the state of emergency prerogatives since 2015 (see OMCT, 2019). The Tunisian branch of the World Organisation Against Torture affirms in its last report on arbitrary administrative control measures that ‘the security threats that Tunisia has

¹⁶ The G7 was a multilateral coordination platform for international donors in the Tunisian security sector. In 2015 it became the G7+6 as the original members were joined by the EU, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

faced [...], and the authorities' response to these dangers, have continued to dampen initiatives to curb systematic abuses of human rights since 2011' (Ibid.).¹⁷ In this sense, a positive step in the direction to try to restore a more holistic approach in the security/stability nexus has been the reactivation of the *Programme d'appui à la réforme et à la modernisation du secteur de la sécurité de la République tunisienne* (PARMSS). The first EU-Tunisian PARMSS meeting was held in 2019 and there is a general commitment among the parties to try to re-engage with Tunisian security sector reform, although concrete steps and time schedule are still pending. Tunisia's efforts to reform of its security forces, if confirmed and sustained, will likely become an important milestone in the country's pursuit of consolidating the Tunisian democratic transition.

In sum, in the security/stability nexus, the EU initially helped to foment positive interaction effects, but when the Tunisian government, supported by the G7 including determined EU member states, shifted priorities after a series of events in 2013 and 2015, short-term stability in the form of police effectiveness began to overshadow longer term human-security concerns. This entailed that EU became complicit in fomenting a negative interaction effect, which affected the consistency of EU democracy assistance. While references to concerns over the state of emergency and other practices not conducive to democracy (e.g. torture) regularly show up in speeches made by the EU or its member states, practices on the ground in Tunisia indicate a tacit support for status quo. With the reactivation of PARMSS, however, there might be grounds to argue that Tunisia and the EU are jointly trying to move towards a better balance in the security/stability nexus which, if confirmed as a trend, would have positive effects both for the Tunisian transitions as well as the consistency of EU democracy assistance.

¹⁷ Authors' own translation from French.

Conclusions

The EU has declared itself to have a strategic interest in the success of the Tunisian democratic transition and allocated substantial amounts of democracy assistance to support the country in its aspirations. However, although the Tunisian government, its civil society and the EU have been largely united in their will to consolidate the democratic transition, the EU's support to Tunisia has been marked by several (in)consistencies. In the formal/substantive nexus we found both negative as well as positive interaction effects which produced resultant (in)consistencies in the EU's democracy assistance. Despite the EU wanted to establish a positive balance between substantive and formal dimensions of democracy promotion, reforms did not advance due to political instability in Tunisia and EU's position in debt services and trade. However, EU-Tunisia relations in these dimensions paradoxically spurred democratic debate in the country. In contrast, in the elites/non-elite nexus, we found an overall positive-sum interaction that strengthened democratic practices. This has enabled the EU's democracy assistance to obtain certain consistency, albeit important tensions in the areas of mobility and migration camps. Finally, in the security/stability nexus we again find a combination of positive and negative interaction effects. The latter has been the dominant trend from 2015 onward as foreign donors, including the EU, and public opinion in Tunisia shifted its preferences from long-term security sector reform to short-term stability concerns.

Our model helps us understand the (in)consistencies of EU's democracy assistance in Tunisia as the resultant of different actors and dynamics, and not solely as the outcome of contradictions between EU's stated objectives and actions. The advantage of this analytical approach is that it allows to grasp the complexities of democracy assistance beyond dilemmas and trade-offs and may cover more ground than simply

focusing on formal democracy promotion. We believe that our model and insights could be generalizable to other democracy promoters (e.g. the US or individual European countries) as well as to other countries undergoing democratic transition. Our findings are consistent with the scholarship which try to shift the analytical focus away from the notion of unidirectionality between democracy promotor and democratising country, based on coercion or transactional conditionality, to the more Habermasian and consistent democratic practice of donor-recipient interaction based on negotiation.¹⁸ Where we potentially differ with the latter is that we are a bit less optimistic about that the outcome of such negotiations will always be good-faith support of democratic transition. Power asymmetries can still affect outcomes in certain areas of debt service, e.g. mobility and the prioritisation of short-term security assistance in the case of Tunisia. Our heuristic model also usefully contributes to open up debates over whether the democratising country has more ‘agency’ and control over its transition, and thereby less constrained by structural forces or foreign donors, than the traditional scholarship on democratisation has granted. In the Tunisian case study, and even with all the ups and downs and external pressure imposed on the country since the revolution, local elite and non-elite actors appear to be reasonable able to mould and shape the democratic transition. Such insights are key both to understanding the success or not of democratic revolutions, but also to prompt further reflection on whether democracy promotion (externally imposed) is at all a viable policy in the 21st century.

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¹⁸ See the special issue by Poppe et al. (2019).

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3. Conclusions

The general objective of this thesis by compendium was to study the factors that determine the direction of political transitions. The research was motivated by the observation of an increasing trend of autocratisation in the world. Although not a new phenomenon in history, it represents a significant change compared to the moment of democracy expansion that prevailed at the end of the last century with the so-called ‘third wave’ of democratisations, affecting many countries in Europe, Latin America and South-East Asia. In these cases, civic movements and opposition parties were able to oust longstanding autocratic regimes and often gradual change to democracy could be consolidated after some early moments of political uncertainty. Moreover, transitions were accompanied and encouraged by change in the international system with an increasing role of external democracy promoters and a more robust human rights regime. Today, in contrast, more states endure the opposite kind of transition to autocracy. Abrupt change in the form of military-coup continues to take place in weak democracies or hybrid regimes. But, most often, autocratisation is characterised by the gradual decay of democratic practices. Unlike coups, the process of democratic backsliding is led paradoxically by democratically elected officials who, once in office, unmake checks and balances and expand executive powers. Elections might continue to take place, but their fairness is no longer assured as state institutions are mobilised to support the elites that are already in power. In parallel, the international liberal order, which expanded together with democratisation, is under pressure by populist illiberal leaders. They contest any kind of interference on domestic affairs, in particular when it comes to rule of law and human rights.

Bearing these elements in mind, the research papers that compose the thesis by compendium have approached political transitions by integrating both democratisation and autocratisation dynamics. We conceive political transitions as an open-ended process of gradual change from an autocracy to a different type of polity, which can be democratic or not. In contrast, the main focus of the ‘third wave’ literature was democratisation and, many times, the terms transition and democratisation were thus used as synonyms. Researchers discussed the role of diverse domestic actors in democratisation from pre-transition, to transition and democratic consolidation and considered that a transition had ‘failed’ if its outcome was autocracy or a hybrid regime. Instead, here we have looked at a different phenomenon, political transition, and studied a broader set of outcomes after the collapse of an autocratic regime. Our approach is less normative than the third wave’s as we consider autocratisation as a possibility, and not merely as a deviant case from what is considered a normal path in (democratic) transition.

Political transitions are important periods in a country’s history. Different forces measure their strengths and compete to leave their mark in the new political system in the making. The resolution of the debates that emerge then might have consequences for the generations to come. Hence, by definition, transitions are times of institutional and political uncertainty when everything seems possible. This open nature of transitions is what makes the study of political actors key in determining the factors that condition their outcome. The contingent and seemingly chaotic character of change in transitions, as opposed to the predictability of normal day-to-day politics, enhances the explanatory power of agency over other factors. In the PhD dissertation we have not downplayed the importance of structural variables in the literature, including economic, social, historical, and ideational. We acknowledged that these factors condition the context in which political actors take decisions and constrain the options available to them. For instance,

researchers have associated high development levels with higher chances of democratic consolidation. However, we also argued that transitions are a window of opportunity that allow actors to change the institutional context in which they operate. At the end of the day, political actors, and not context factors, are the real (un)makers of democratic institutions through specific decisions and actions. Democratisation and autocratisation researchers have identified three groups of actors playing an important role in political transitions: political elites, civil society organisations, and the security forces, especially the military. Their positions in transitions can go from social revolution to continuity and entrenched defence of the autocratic regime. The resources that actors have at their disposal, including material resources and popular support, will determine their capacity to shape the contours of the new polity and its autocratic or democratic character, including the grey zones that lay between autocracy and democracy.

To answer the overarching research question of the PhD dissertation on the factors that influence the democratic or autocratic outcome of political transitions, we used case-study as our main methodology. The intensive study of the Tunisian transition has allowed us to establish the conceptual and empirical connections that characterised this case as well as to generate hypotheses testable in other transition processes. The selection of Tunisia obeys the double criteria of encompassing democratisation and autocratisation in a relative short span of time, from 2011 to 2022. Moreover, it allows us to look at the role of both domestic and external actors, with the EU as a good example of democracy promoter. In sum, the Tunisian transition went through a first phase of democratisation from 2011 to 2014, not absent of dire conflict, autocratic practices and setbacks, but which culminated in the adoption of the first democratic constitution of the country. Not for nothing, Tunisia was ranked as the only ‘free’ country among Arab states by the Global Freedom Index of Freedom House. From 2014 to 2021, we witnessed a phase of

failed democratic consolidation characterised by few advances in the implementation of democratic reforms and strife between political factions in parliament and government. This situation opened the door to new elites that surged in the 2019 legislative and presidential elections. Anti-establishment and illiberal discourses dominated the political landscape between 2019 and 2021, with mounting polarisation in the street and inside parliament. Finally, in July 2021, President Saied initiated a de-democratisation process with the suppression of parliament and the enlargement of his executive powers beyond the limits established in the 2014 Constitution. This process culminated with the adoption of a new constitution in July 2022. Human rights organisations and political parties in the opposition have described the text as autocratic for its disregard for checks and balances and for the concentration of power in the hands of the president.

By observing the interactions between political actors, we could explain the outcome of the transition and contribute to better understand gradual change from autocracy to democracy and vice versa. In the Tunisian case, among the three groups of actors -political elite, civil society, and security actors-, we devoted our attention primarily to the political elite, including political parties and state institutions. While civil society and the military played very important roles in specific situations during the transition, we argued that political elites were the most important builders and demolishers of democratic institutions in the country. We were able to analyse the role of the political elites attached to the old regime, and those who were in the opposition. Also, within both groups, we differentiated between radicals and moderates, this is those wanting to negotiate with the other camp and those who did not in the context of a transition by transaction. In addition, when accounting for these dynamics, we considered international political actors. Our objective was to establish the linkages between the domestic level and the role of democracy promoters, in our case the EU. In what follows

we present the empirical results and theoretical reflections that stem from the thesis by compendium. We end these conclusions with some reflections on the writing process and on future research avenues in the field of democratisation and autocratisation studies regarding Tunisia and beyond.

Empirical results

In the Tunisian case, we showed how consensus between moderate Islamists and moderate secularist political parties was the main factor that contributed to democratisation between 2011 and 2014. First, members of the former regime and opposition parties were able to agree on the legal framework of the first democratic elections. Then, conservative Islamists and centre-left secularist parties decided to share power in the first elected government. Finally, opposition and the government majority come to an agreement on the text of the constitution, which was approved almost unanimously. This does not mean that this period was absent of conflict, though. In 2013, a security crisis, including the assassination of prominent left-wing political figures, put democratisation at risk. In that context, the opposition threatened to boycott the constitution drafting process. However, a cross-party agreement, including the resignation of the prime minister and a calendar for the celebration of new elections, allowed the adoption of the 2014 Constitution. In contrast, between 2014 and 2021, politics were characterised by a lack of consensus between government and opposition, between political parties supporting the government, and even within political parties. As political stalemate became more apparent at the eyes of citizens, new political elites emerged in the 2019 elections to contest the consensus that gave the 2014 Constitution. President Saïed won the presidential election with an anti-establishment and anti-corruption discourse that was particularly effective among the disenchanted youth of the

country, who felt betrayed by *Nida Tounis* and *Ennahda*. In the legislative elections, the PDL obtained its best results and succeed in becoming the loudest voice against the coalition government formed in 2020.

To empirically test the degree of democratic consolidation between 2014 and 2019, we analysed the implementation of two important democratic reforms that the 2014 Constitution mandated to implement. The first reform was the creation of the constitutional court. The role of this tribunal includes settling conflicts between state institution on their different powers, overlooking the legality of legislative and executive acts, and protecting the fundamental rights of citizens enshrined in the constitution as a last-resort tribunal. However, fragmentation in parliament and political parties' inability to reach consensus made impossible the selection of the judges that were going to integrate the tribunal, and thus the court remained inoperative. We argued that this was a symptom of lack of democratic consolidation as the role of the court is directly connected to democratic checks and balances. Moreover, this facilitated democratic backsliding after July 2021. When President Saïed suspended the parliament and progressively engaged in executive aggrandisement, the presidency did not find any obstacles from the part of the judiciary system despite a series of ostensibly unconstitutional acts.

The second reform that we analysed in the first research paper was decentralisation. In this case the 2014 Constitution devotes an entire chapter to the reform of local and regional administration. The explicit objective was to reduce regional disparities in terms of development and access to public services as well as to democratise the local levels of the public administration. After a long legislative process, political parties agreed on the legal framework of decentralisation and in 2017 the first local elections were organised. However, the complete implementation of decentralisation was effectively stopped afterwards. Municipalities were never granted the powers to freely

use their budgets with excessive *ex ante* financial controls by the central administration. Also, human and financial resources were not transferred from Tunis to the regions, giving local administrations new responsibilities but not new resources to match them. At the political level, the implementation of decentralisation was blocked due to discrepancies within government, namely between *Ennahda* and *Nida Tounis*, on the scope of the reform. Secular parties and the high bureaucracy feared that municipalities could act against the central government. On the other hand, *Ennahda* wanted to speed the process as it enjoyed a stronger electoral base in the regions compared to *Nida Tounis*. All in all, the decentralisation process did not advance much between 2014 and 2021, which hindered vertical checks and balances and local democracy. When President Saïed started the democratic backsliding process, one of the first measures was to definitively stop decentralisation, a move the 2022 Constitution has ratified.

The second paper that composes the thesis by compendium showed how the PDL established the parameters of the political debate in Tunisia between the 2019 elections and the events of 25 July 2021. We argue that this period was crucial to understand the political dynamics that allowed President Saïed to engage in a democratic backsliding process. In essence, the polarisation initiated by illiberal political elites was a necessary element in the authoritarian turn of the transition. More specifically, we found that pernicious polarisation prior to the 25 July 2021 was linked to the politicisation of foreign policy. The PDL repeatedly attacked *Ennahda* for its allegiance to the Muslim Brotherhood, the transnational Islamist movement. This question has been part of Tunisian political debates since the beginning of the transition in 2011. However, it was not until 2019 and the surge of the PDL in the legislative elections that the issue was intensively politicised. The PDL argued that *Ennahda* was a foreign agent guided by the regional actors supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, namely Turkey and Qatar, and

aligned itself with the discourse of the international enemies of the Islamist movement, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

First the party mobilised its supporters in the street, organising anti-*Ennahda* protests and sit-ins. For the PDL it was easy to politicise this issue as it overlapped with the Islamist-secularist cleavage in Tunisian politics. The PDL accused *Ennahda* of trying to Islamise the Tunisian society and of being a terrorist group funded by foreign powers. Moreover, the PDL presented secularists as the only truly Tunisians. Second, in this context, institutional relations between the presidency, the prime minister and the president of the parliament, *Ennahda*'s leader Ghannouchi, sharply deteriorated. Gradually, President Saied emulated anti-*Ennahda* rhetoric repeating that important political actors in the country were sold to foreign nations. Finally, polarisation eroded the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Geopolitical rivalries were brought from the street to parliament and polarisation was intensified with mounting accusation of treason and terrorism inside the chamber. Any legislative initiative or act of the president of parliament connected to Tunisian foreign policy in the region was sharply criticised and amplified by the PDL. To break the consensus on these issues, the PDL boycotted parliamentary sessions, staging sit-ins and using voice amplifiers in the premises of parliament. Eventually, radical Islamists from *Al Karama* coalition beat PDL's leader Abir Moussi inside the chamber. It was in this extremely polarised context that President Saied suspended the legislative power, making explicit allusions to these incidents. During the democratic backsliding process initiated on 25 July 2021, the PDL and President Saied appeared to be defending increasingly opposed positions regarding the institutional reforms supported by the presidency. However, President Saied made *Ennahda* its first political enemy in line with the PDL. The increasing repression against

the members of the Islamist party was justified, again, by alluding to *Ennahda's* connections to the Muslim Brotherhood, terrorism and foreign funding.

In parallel to the dynamics dominated by domestic elites, in the third research paper the thesis looked at the role of external actors in political transitions. Our research has been primarily concerned with the role of the EU in Tunisia as the main democracy promoter in the country and the region. Such self-proclaimed role has been contested and criticised. Many scholars have suggested that the EU fails to promote democracy in non-accession countries given that it prioritises stability over democratisation. However, in the case of Tunisia, as endogenous democratic change started in 2011, we reconsider the validity of the so-called democracy-stability dilemma. We acknowledged that the EU did spend an important political and financial capital in trying to assist democratisation in the context of the political transition. Nonetheless, we found several pitfalls in the EU's democracy assistance in Tunisia. They were related first to intra-EU inconsistencies. The EU prioritised the support of dialogue between elites and civil society with the intention to empower non-elite organisations in the context of the transition. However, these same groups were not in favour of EU's increasingly restrictive stand regarding migration and trade, and argued that the EU was failing to provide positive conditionality to Tunisia in the form of favourable cooperation agreements. Also, we explored (in)consistencies related to the interaction of domestic and external factors. In the EU foreign policy literature, this last dimension has sometimes been neglected in favour of EU-centred explanations of European inconsistencies in democracy assistance.

The perspectives of domestic and external actors on what democracy is, what policy areas should be prioritised and what are the strategic objectives of domestic and external elites, might differ and even collide. We found this type of dynamic when it comes to the security sector reform. While the EU was encouraging the inclusion of a

human rights perspective in the role of security apparatus of the country, the priority of Tunisian elites was to favour EU assistance to police and military in terms of equipment and training. Eventually, the program designed to accompany the reform of the security sector failed due to these discrepancies. Finally, inconsistencies also emerged because of conflict and discrepancies among Tunisian domestic elites, and between them and domestic civil society organisations. For instance, the EU appeared to balance between promoting formal aspects of democracy at the institutional level, with the support of the Tunisian economy in the framework of its democracy assistance programs. However, instability in Tunisian governments, which usually lasted for very few years, and the even faster changes in the ministries, made the implementation of the EU-Tunisia Action Plan for the transition very difficult. This tendency was accentuated after 2019, with increasing fragmentation in the domestic political elites, and the emergence of disputes between state institutions. In sum, EU's agency and impact on the transition was mediated by domestic actors' interest in engaging with the EU in areas of mutual concern. Other times, in particular regarding migration and mobility, the EU's impact was rather negative as it advanced its interests over the priorities of Tunisian governments and civil society, who were deceived by the lack of application of the 'more for more' principle in these areas. In what follows we present the main theoretical reflections that derive from the PhD dissertation.

Theoretical reflections

The thesis considered the factors that contribute to democratisation in the context of political transitions from an agency-centred perspective. In this sense, it continues the tradition of 'transitology' literature in the context of the 'third wave' of democratisation in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America. The results of this research

concur with the idea that domestic actors are central in determining the outcome of the transition. The political elite organised in political parties appears as the key actor in the transition. When looking at their role, an important factor in determining the democratic character of the transition is their ability to reach consensus among different political groups along the ideological spectrum, sometimes including reformists elements of the former authoritarian regime. The likelihood of democratisation in the context of a political transition depends on the acceptance of the new democratic game by a wide part of the political elite. If that is not the case, the possibility of democratic breakdown through a coup, or by a gradual process of democratic backsliding remains high. Hence, in the early stage of the political transitions, we coincide with the democratisation literature on the necessity to reach consensus among political parties on the bases of the new polity, if their objective is to consolidate democracy. However, ‘third wave’ researchers have usually overlooked how politics of consensus at the elite level evolves through time in the context of transitions by transaction or pact. In the first research paper of the thesis by compendium we delved into the question of how consensus adopted in the early moments of the political transitions shapes the democratic character of the transition years after.

With this idea in mind, we unpacked the concept of consensus by differentiating between the institutions of consensus that are put in place in the context of the political transition, and the politics of consensus, the political game between elites. The first observation we made is that the mismatch between institutions and politics produces deadlock in the political transition. As pointed in the literature, consensus politics is key in the creation of democratic institutions during the transition. In the Tunisian case they were enshrined in the 2014 Constitution. But, once the contours of the polity have been agreed, for democratic consolidation to take root, politics of consensus needs to continue

to be the main political game of the transition. In its absence, like in the Tunisian case, disagreement between political elites might conduce to paralysis, and the reforms necessary to democratise the state will remain unimplemented. Hence, in the long term, the democratic character of the political transition will not exclusively depend on the shared preference for democracy among elites who, as famously put by Linz and Stepan (1996), believe that democracy is ‘the only game in town’. Our contribution underlines that it is also necessary that the political elites agree on the basic lines of the reforms that need to be implemented throughout the transition process. These will be related to the creation of checks and balances and mechanisms of democratic accountability. In the Tunisian case we analysed two key reform areas that are connected to these dimensions of democratisation: the creation of an independent constitutional court, and the decentralisation process. Finally, we theorised that political deadlock or paralysis in the context of the political transition might result in the erosion of the legitimacy of democracy at the eyes of citizens and importantly, foster the emergence of new political elites that might not share the objective to democratise the country.

This brings us to the second strand of literature to which the thesis wants to contribute, which investigates transition processes from democracy to autocracy or autocratisation. In the second research paper we engaged with the literature on democratic backsliding. Researchers have considered the factors that make democracies (new and mature) collapse, and we mobilised these observations to analyse autocratisation in the context of political transitions. Democratic backsliding is usually described as a gradual process that involves, at the institutional level, the concentration of power in the executive branch, the erosion of political and civic rights, and the weakening of the independence of the electoral commission. In parallel, at the elite level, illiberal leaders politicise new topics in order to polarise society around them. Polarisation is important in autocratisation

because it sets the political context in which the drastic measures comprised in democratic backsliding are taken. Polarisation involves the creation of opposed political groups on the grounds of their position on a given policy-issue. A normal phenomenon in the democratic game, polarisation can be pernicious for democracy when the two poles are defined in exclusive terms, either ‘with’ or ‘against us’, and when the ‘other’ is deprived of any political legitimacy. In these cases, political adversaries are not treated as full members of the political community, but as enemies or traitors. Illiberal elites engage in pernicious polarisation to justify the exclusion of adversaries from politics. Once in power, they defend the unmaking of checks and balances that protect political minorities with the pretext that the government defends the general will of the nation, and that no legal limits can be put upon it.

Our contribution in this field sheds light on the conditions under which polarisation feeds autocratisation. We identified three necessary factors. First, illiberal elites use their agency to politicise new topics and bring them to the political agenda. Nevertheless, they need to connect them to structural conflicts in society to be able to polarise society. These cleavages derive from long-term state-building dynamics and differ from one context to another. In Tunisia, the Islamist-secularist cleavage was used to build the two camps of an intense polarisation that accompanied autocratisation. Second, the intensity of polarisation depends on the nature of relations between political adversaries. If the politicised issue touches upon public policy alone, polarisation might not be damaging for democratic institutions. In this case politicisation might even reinforce accountability mechanism. However, polarisation becomes pernicious for democracy when the politicised subject is used to divide society between ‘us’ and ‘them’ following the ‘zero-sum logics’ of friend-enemy relations. In these cases, there is the risk that polarisation is used to exclude adversaries from the political game. Thirdly,

polarisation becomes harmful for democracy when it attacks the legitimacy of democratic procedures and institutions. Before illiberal populists can start democratic backsliding, it is necessary that they challenge the fairness of the political system. In the context of political transitions, we found that if polarisers come to power, it is easier for them to engage in democratic backsliding than in consolidated democracies. The open character of the transition makes institutional limits to government weaker and thus there are more opportunities for illiberal elites to challenge the legal limits to autocratic rule.

The first and the second research papers of the thesis by compendium contributed to the study of democratisation and autocratisation dynamics by focusing on the role of domestic political elites. In contrast, the third research paper complements this perspective by studying the role of an external actor, the EU, in the Tunisian political transition. In particular, our contribution aimed at conceptualising the different dimensions of democracy promotion and how inconsistencies in foreign policy impact these external efforts. With this purpose, we elaborated three nexuses of analysis and applied them to the Tunisian case. The nexuses encompass different understandings of democracy assistance present in the EU practice and discourse. Instead of focusing on dilemmas or ‘either-or’ dimensions, we use nexuses as a heuristic tool to conceptualise the relation between dimensions of democracy that are not antithetical. In this line, we posit that consistency or inconsistency in democracy assistance is the result of the interaction of these nexuses. When both concepts in the nexus are developed in a balanced way, we find a positive-sum effect that results in consistency. On the contrary, when one dimension is developed at the expenses of the other, or when one is neglected, we interpret that there is negative-sum effect and we find inconsistency. Moreover, our conceptualisation of (in)consistency encapsulates the interaction between external and domestic political actors and how these linkages impact the political transition.

The first nexus we presented was the formal/substantive perspective of democracy present both in EU democracy assistance and in Tunisia. The formal dimension refers to the institutions of democracy, such as checks and balances and free and fair elections, while the substantive dimension refers to economic and social rights. The second nexus refers to elite and non-elite engagement. The first dimension refers to EU's top-down approach of negotiating with political elites in democracy assistance practice, and the second to EU's objective to engage with civil society groups. Finally, we conceptualised the security/stability nexus. Security refers to long-term human security and stability refers to short-term lack of turmoil. Our new conceptualisation allowed to assess how inconsistencies hinder democratisation efforts when we detect tensions or contradictions between different foreign policy objectives in the external actor. We theorised that inconsistencies emerge in the interaction between domestic and external actors, first, due to different understandings of what democracy is, and what need to be the contours of the new democratic polity. Secondly, inconsistencies also emerge due to discrepancies or lack of consensus among domestic actors. This observation connects our contribution on the role of the EU with the conclusions of our analysis of domestic political elites. Polarisation among domestic elites hinders the prospect of an effective democracy assistance by an external actor, while consensus makes EU foreign policy more effective. Again, besides the existence of EU-related inconsistencies in democracy promotion, we highlight the importance of domestic political elites in the transition process, even when it comes to the effectivity of external assistance.

Concluding remarks

The attention of this thesis was devoted to the interaction dynamics between different elite groups to analyse their effects on the political transition. First, we found that

consensus between political parties was key in creating the democratic institutions of the Second Tunisian Republic and in giving a democratic constitution. Political parties overcame moments of high tension in the street, including the assassination of political leaders, and calls to dismantle the constitutional assembly. But, unlike Egypt, where the military ended the political transition in a context of high polarisation, in Tunisia, moderate Islamists, left-wing secularists and moderate members of the former regime successfully reached an agreement on the contours of the new political system. In January 2014, the new constitution was adopted by almost a unanimous yes in the constitutional assembly. However, we also found that this consensus did not last. *Nida Tounis* and *Ennahda* shared power, but they did not govern together when it comes to the implementation of the democratic reforms that the constitution mandated. This situation created a serious political deadlock and, after 2014, the image of the new ruling elite progressively deteriorated.

In the second set of elections of 2019, illiberal and populist actors opposed to the ‘political establishment’ made an important surge with the election of President Saied and the rising support for the PDL. Political instability and deadlock aggravated, and the presidency collided with the prime minister and the presidency of the assembly on their constitutional powers. Also, in this context, polarisation and dissatisfaction with the political elite mounted. In parliament there were moments of chaos, with sit-ins, boycott of votes and even violence. President Saied used the de-legitimisation of parliamentarism to defend the concentration of powers in the presidency on 25 July 2021 or, in other words, to justify democratic backsliding. Moderate political actors tried to go back to consensus politics, but they were unable to restore an inclusive cross-party dialogue. Protracted economic crisis and the perception of widespread corruption practices certainly played a role in taming the echo of these calls. As a matter of fact, many citizens

were reluctant to defend the democratic system of the 2014 Constitution and gave their support to the new text in 2022.

Also, regarding the domestic and international linkages, we found that EU assistance in Tunisia was secondary to determining the outcome of the transition if compared with the role of domestic actors. One key lesson for democracy promoters is the importance of spurring internal consensus in order to ensure the effectivity of efforts dedicated to assist the transition. The EU tried to accompany this process and in doing so it reinforced dynamics conducive to democratisation that were already present in the country. However, when conflict paralysed reform, the EU found itself without the capacity to provide enough incentives to domestic elites and to mediate in internal crises. Moreover, there were inconsistencies in democracy assistance that can be solely attributed to the EU. This is particularly clear in the fields of trade and mobility, where the EU was reluctant to satisfy Tunisian demands of more cooperation in exchange for more democratisation. Finally, the autocratisation process initiated on the 25 July 2021 has its origins again in the political dynamics of domestic elites. In this case, we focused on the role of the PDL as a polarising actor and how its discourses on the necessity to exclude the political parties of the establishment, especially *Ennahda*, eroded the legitimacy of parliamentarianism and facilitated the democratic backsliding process initiated by President Saïed in July 2021.

Looking back, the thesis would have benefited from a longer field work and from more interviews. However, the covid-19 pandemic obliged us to reduce the time spent in Tunisia. We tried to overcome this problem, to a certain extent, with online interviews. In terms of the perspective adopted in the thesis, we must admit that the focus on political actors has diverted our attention from other possible explanatory factors of political transitions. We did not take a long-term perspective on structural variants, like state

formation processes in the Maghreb, including the weight of colonial legacies. Also, future research avenues on transitions might want to explore citizens-state relations at societal level, how citizens perceive the state and how they perceive their capacity to change policy or to participate in politics. Finally, we did not give much space to the economic dimension of the transition. In particular, there is little doubt that the external shock of the covid-19 pandemic has complicated the consolidation of democracy in the country. Bad economic performance, together with political instability, had the effect to equate at the eyes of big segments of the population democracy with ineffective governance. The Tunisian transition will be surely shaped by these and other structural dimensions that future research might want to study. But, as we have argued in this thesis, despite the undeniable importance of context-dependent factors, elites and common citizens do have the agency to shape political systems. In Tunisia, since December 2010 and for the last twelve years, events have proved so. Democracy and autocracy are possible outcomes of this long and protracted transition, which until today remains open and permeable to the will of the Tunisian people.

The dynamic nature of the transition leaves the door open to new emerging questions. It is uncertain what is going to be the role of domestic political elites in the new institutional framework of the 2022 Constitution. It remains to be seen how political opposition to Saied evolves, and to what extent it can operate freely in the country. In the absence of real checks and balances, the autocratic character of the new regime will depend on this. Although Tunisia does no longer follow the script of liberal democracy, the contours of the new regime are not clear, especially given the vagueness of the 2022 Constitution on many points. The level of repression of the new political system might fluctuate depending on the strategy of political elites in power, first and foremost President Saied. When it comes to the study of external dynamics, the EU's and US'

response to democratic backsliding in the Tunisian case have not been studied yet, neither the role of other important players in the region who have supported President Saied, like Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Finally, President Saied has equated any criticism on the new regime to a form of illegitimate external interference against Tunisian sovereignty. For instance, Tunisia has left the Venice Commission after a negative report by the Council of Europe on the 2022 constitutional referendum. However, it is not clear yet if President Saied is going to fully engage in the contestation of the liberal international order, following the playbook of today's illiberal leaders, or instead mimic Ben Ali's strategy of supporting liberal values outside the country, especially when dealing with European partners, while repressing human rights and political dissidence at home. In any case, after ten years of democratic experience (2011-2021), it might be difficult to contain the aspirations of the Tunisian people of freedom and dignity through authoritarian means.

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