North Africa: From nascent democracy to entrenched regimes

Five years after the Tunisian revolution, political frustration doesn't diminish progress

By Laryssa Chomiak

It was only half a decade ago that Tunisia dramatically ruptured with its dictatorial past. The self-immolation of a young produce seller in the country's impoverished interior brought to the fore decades of simmering dissent, culminating in the surprise departure of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali who had ruled for 23 consecutive years. Memories of a massive, nation-wide revolutionary movement — images of state violence against protesters, of young Tunisians passionately ripping down an omnipresent public cult of personality, of emotional cries calling for the departure of the dictator, of thousands pouring into the streets of Tunis on Jan. 14, 2011 — stir emotions to this day.

As Tunisia celebrates its fifth anniversary of the revolution, nostalgia for the euphoria of those moments are coupled with currents of discontent and frustration. Such complex and ambiguous feelings about the revolution and its aftermath are important markers for where Tunisia stands today. Yet discordant sentiments should not overshadow the courage and aspirations of this radically transformative moment in Tunisia's history.

Today's Tunisia is a far cry from that of late 2010. Public expressions of citizen demands and new political actors have transformed a previously tightly controlled political space and represent a radical rupture from country's dictatorial past. Jan. 14, 2011 shook an entire system with ideals that reverberated across the region, fundamentally changing the rules of the political game in Tunisia and beyond. It is this moment that Tunisians are celebrating and commemorating today.

Tunisia's 2010-2011 revolutionary movement was a volcanic reaction to decades of heavy political and social repression against dissenters, human-rights activists and workers, who developed a collective yearning for a just and inclusive political and economic order. However, progress toward implementing the "just order" imagined during the dark Ben Ali years has been jarred by spectacular fits and starts. The international spotlight remains fixed on Tunisia, though the country's process is often viewed through different lenses.

Many highlight Tunisia as a success story. Its first election cycle opened the political system to an Ennahda-led coalition of parties, which drafted a celebrated democratic constitution. The second election marked the first defeat of an incumbent Islamist government but also saw its first successful transition of power. The state's progress has been internationally celebrated with the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize and its place among the Forbes top-10 list of start-up friendly countries.

Other observers have focused on negative developments, including the assassination of two leftist politicians, ongoing attacks against security forces, the horrific acts committed against tourists at the Bardo Museum in Tunis and a beach resort in Sousse, the subsequent government crackdown, including arbitrary arrests, and increasing fears of the criminalization of public expression and protest. Moreover, Nidaa Tounes, the ruling party that won the 2014 legislative elections, is collapsing under the weight of infighting, with massive defection among its deputies and members of its political bureau.

While both optimists and pessimists have good reasons for their outlook, analysts' extensive focus on political achievements indicative of liberal democratic consolidation, or the linking of devastating events to a "reversal of democracy," have not only painted a limited and minimalist picture of where Tunisia stands today but have also influenced public opinion. Juxtaposing moments of success with trends of failure, has resulted in an emphasis of an epistemology of absence — the idea that something fundamental is missing in Tunisia, which needs rapid reform, particularly along economic

and security lines, to continue on its democratic track. Most devastatingly, the reform-focused emphasis based on absence and inadequacy, has contributed to popular sentiments of frustration with the post-revolutionary governments and potentially dangerous calls to bring the old order back.

Warnings of an unstable political transition have reinforced these sentiments and have called into question the revolutionary movement, its aspirations, dreams, courage, and most importantly, the fundamental achievements of Tunisians in the last five years. More profoundly, such doubts might explain the tacit acceptance by some of the return of former Ben Ali regime elements into politics, the economy and public life.

The fifth anniversary of the Tunisian revolution provides a moment to reflect and rethink the political trajectory of how a revolution is institutionalized and to separate the very real euphoria of a revolutionary movement from various forms of discontent with post-revolutionary governance.

The most notable achievement of Tunisia's Jan. 14, 2011 revolution — one that astonishingly seems to have been forgotten — is the space for political critique, assembly and speech that the revolution carved and has protected. In only five years, public debate in Tunisia has been marked by contentious and open discussions about previously taboo topics, including religion and political orders, rule of law, stability vs. reform, gay rights, national consensus and political compromise, artistic expression, and the meaning of revolution and a democratic polity. It is the revolution that has made such discourse possible.

Today, Tunisia is celebrating first and foremost a rupture from dictatorship and the dreams and aspiration that have flourished with that political opening. While the last five years have been marked by exemplary political achievements, Tunisians continue to grapple with the legacy of the old regime and the still-open wounds that it created. In the fall, a proposed economic reconciliation bill to grant amnesty to former regime figures stirred public debate and gave rise to a movement called Manich Msameh (I will not forgive). Such public reactions indicate that, despite important institutional advances toward transitional justice via law and the establishment of a Truth Commission, the political and economic abuses of Tunisia's dictatorial past continue to loom in the near memory. Not all Tunisians are willing to sacrifice consensual stability for social peace and public forgiveness.

Such sentiments have been perhaps most successfully addressed through artistic production that confronts citizens with a painful past. Films, such as "Sira'a" (Conflict) recount the political persecution, imprisonment and torture of Islamists, trade unionists and leftists. "Yalan bou el fosfate" (Cursed is the Phospate) shows the 2008 rebellion in the mineral-rich Gafsa region. Meanwhile, the film "Dicta Shot" and the National Museum of the State Security System, opened November 2015, lend insight into the workings of the former regime's security apparatus. At the museum, former political prisoners lead guided tours, recounting their stories of persecution, imprisonment and torture. Screened across Tunisia the evening before the anniversary, Leyla Bouzid's film, "A peine j'ouvre les yeux" (I Can Hardly Open My Eyes), tells the story of young musicians pushing the boundaries of the permissible through lyrics and poetry just months before the revolution. Endeavors like these continuously remind Tunisians of the open wounds still to be healed that transcend the high politics of parties, commissions and elections.

The 2011 revolution fundamentally changed the rules of the political game in Tunisia, and while it remains a source of contention and conflict, this achievement is irreversible. As painful testimonies and artistic representations remind us, today, unlike in 2010, Tunisians can publicly debate and disagree on their new political order. Tunisia is celebrating the anniversary of the end of silence: the irreversible effects of a revolution that has opened space for the outpouring of ideas, political ideologies, criticisms of policy and politicians, commentary and free speech. Public political space has changed radically from a controlled and repressive dictatorship to a significantly more open pitch

on which a battle of ideas can be loudly debated. Rather than foretelling any democratic demise, the ongoing struggle between Tunisia's past and future embodies the spirit of its revolution.

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What did Tunisia's Nobel laureates actually achieve?

By Monica Marks, Oxford University

Now that Tunisia's National Dialogue Quartet has won the Nobel Peace Prize, the political crisis it helped resolve in 2013 has become the focus of newfound scrutiny and fascination. Renewed attention is important, because the history of that high-stakes period remains a rough first draft. Once told in full, this story will offer instructive examples for Tunisia and other countries navigating choppy transitional waters. For now, though, the history of this period remains recent and raw, subject to simplified narratives spun by the Dialogue's participant protagonists.

So far, Tunisia's National Dialogue has been heralded as a case of "democracy saved," with Quartet members described as patriotic civil society organizations that placed collective over parochial interests. These organizations are understood to have thrown Tunisia a life preserver in a crisis moment, saving political actors from themselves. The Quartet has been cast as an example of civil society "outsiders," in cooperation with allegedly apolitical technocrats, rescuing elected government – both from its purported incompetence and from unelected opponents intent on dismantling democracy. The Quartet members – especially the UGTT, Tunisia's powerful trade union and the Dialogue's undisputed standard-bearer – are portrayed as standing midway between Tunisia's seemingly familiar secular actors and its "devil-we-know" Islamist political elites, yet simultaneously outside politics.

In this script, the heroic Quartet enables Tunisia to peacefully negotiate the Islamists out of power without completely eroding nascent democratic institutions. Tunisia avoids collapsing into chaos or crude coup-making, like Libya or Egypt, and its transition weathers the storm. Told this way, the lessons of Tunisia's National Dialogue story shine in bold, broad brushstrokes: strong civil society steps in to light the path forward and mediated consensus triumphs over conflict.

However, that's not quite what happened.

The National Dialogue occupied one pivotal moment in a three-way struggle for power among Tunisia's secular left, personified by the UGTT, its Islamist center-right, personified by Ennahda, and a range of political figures and economic elites connected to the old regime, personified by elements of Tunisia's now-ruling party, Nidaa Tunis, and its Employer's Association (UTICA). This three-way struggle has produced a counterbalancing effect that can check excesses of power, in which any two can offset gains or threats posed by the third. But it has also produced

a pattern of self-interested positioning in which these groups' political goals have subsumed the pursuit of core revolutionary goals, such as socio-economic dignity, institutional reform and transitional justice.

The Dialogue's initiator and leader was Tunisia's general trade union, the UGTT – a group whose secular unionist values represent many Tunisians, especially those on the left. From its founding in 1946, UGTT's leadership has seen the union as tasked with a special, dual role: defending the rights of workers, but also – and perhaps more importantly – guaranteeing Tunisia stays on a sovereign, "modern" path. The UGTT coordinated resistance against the French during Tunisia's fight for independence and is imbued with a huge amount of historical and popular legitimacy. Boasting 750,000 members in a population of just under 11 million, it also holds a powerful political bargaining chip: by calling a general strike, UGTT can grind the economy to a standstill.

Despite its legacy and large membership, however, UGTT's leadership was heavily co-opted under Tunisia's first two presidents, Habib Bourgiuba and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Ben Ali took co-optation to a new level, buying off UGTT's top brass with free cars, special access to loans and guarantees of legal immunity. The famous Gafsa mining basin protests of 2008 – whichanticipated Tunisia's revolution – began as a protest of local union activists against UGTT's corrupt national leadership. When revolution struck in December 2010, protests often started from local UGTT branches, but some protesters carried signs indicting union bosses' corruption.

After Ben Ali's departure, the UGTT was eager to re-establish its credibility and reassert political influence. At its December 2011 conference, the UGTT ousted its general secretary and other Ben Ali-era leaders. A reenergized union sought to assert itself as an independent force – one that could powerfully oppose, partner with or even supervise the role of government. This new mission created tension between UGTT and the Troika government. The Troika came to power through Tunisia's first democratic elections in October 2011, and was led by Ennahda, an Islamist party which had been banned for decades. Though it formed a coalition with two smaller, mostly secular parties, Ennahda's victory stunned many secularists, pro-union leftists, and political and economic elites.

UGTT's leadership had long viewed Islamists as a broad and blurry group inherently opposed to "modern" values. Ideological hostilities ran deep. Even some UGTT leaders imprisoned and tortured alongside Ennahda members under the regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali tended to label Islamism – rather than old regime authoritarianism – the main threat to unionism. "Bourguiba did what he thought he had to do… he defended republican values," Mongi Ammami, an adviser to UGTT's Secretary General who was imprisoned under Bourguiba, told me in 2014. "But Islamists have a totally different project, *khilafa* [building a caliphate]. It's a fascist discourse."

UGTT leaders also saw Ennahda as a political competitor intent on dismantling unionism. In the years following Tunisa's 2011 revolution, UGTT leaders alleged Ennahda – with the support of purportedly Islamist revolutionary militias, Salafi jihadis and even some members of the Troika coalition party CPR – was attempting to crush the union by infiltrating it from within and attacking it from without. UGTT held large protests against Ennahda in February and December 2012, in response to garbage dumpedoutside union offices and police firing birdshot on union-backed demonstrators respectively. UGTT's leaders strongly believed Ennahda was behind these abuses.

For its part, Ennahda claimed the UGTT was intentionally sabotaging Tunisia's economy to topple the Islamist-led Troika. Ennahda leaders I interviewed throughout 2012 and 2013 described UGTT leaders as ideologically prejudiced against Islamists. Many suggested UGTT's leaders were intentionally taking a hands-off approach to thousands of wildcat strikes happening throughout the country. Some even claimed UGTT, possibly with support from the RCD, was stoking these strikes to make governance an especially impossible job. Research has suggested such assertions, like some of UGTT's claims

against Ennahda, are untrue. Yet with the economy in post-revolutionary free fall, and thoroughly inexperienced in the art of governing, Ennahda leaders tended to approach the UGTT with fear and frustration – unsure how to transform what they perceived as obstructionism into constructive collaboration. One crucial mistake Ennahda leaders made was encouraging their supporters to counter-protest at UGTT demonstrations during 2012. Instead of cooperating to solve Tunisia's socio-economic challenges, UGTT and Ennahda spent much of 2012 locked in a destructive cycle of competing street protests that directly contributed to Tunisia's 2013 political crisis.

Ennahda placed itself in further opposition to the union by awarding public administration jobs to its own supporters. Ennahda leaders denied wrongdoing, claiming that winning parties in established democracies often exercise their prerogative to make political appointments. Yet such actions brought Ennahda into heightened conflict with the UGTT, which condemned it for threatening the public administration's neutrality. Some prominent members of UGTT, along with anti-Islamist parties like Nidaa Tunis and the Popular Front, went further, claiming Ennadha was covertly seeking to Islamicize the Tunisian state.

Escalating tensions between Ennahda and the UGTT played a central role in precipitating the National Dialogue, a project that began a full year earlier than most observers realize. UGTT began the first National Dialogue in June 2012 in an attempt to apply pressure to Ennahda, which its leaders perceived as jeopardizing both the union's strength and the "civic" (i.e. secular) character of the state.

In the months prior, Ennahda – freshly installed in the Constituent Assembly – had engaged in protracted, painstaking debates over whether or not the word "sharia" should appear in Tunisia's new constitution. These conversations generated identity-based controversy and engendered fears among secular and leftist Tunisians that Ennahda would railroad their views, imposing a majoritarian conservatism on the country. UGTT's intervention therefore found strong support among well-established secular civil society organizations that shared its suspicions regarding Ennahda. Two of these, the League of Human Rights and the Bar Association, helped UGTT convene the 2012 Dialogue, forming the base of what later became the Nobel-winning Quartet.

But the 2012 National Dialogue initiative faced strong pushback from Ennadha and its coalition partner, Congress for the Republic (CPR), a stubbornly revolutionary human rights-oriented party. Ennadha and CPR believed the Dialogue was an attempt by unelected actors to dictate the democratic political process. They were especially disturbed by the Dialogue's inclusion of Nidaa Tunis, an unelected party heavily represented by former members of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party of Ben Ali. Ennahda and CPR viewed the 2012 Dialogue not as a neutral, civil society process but as a vehicle for the old regime to influence Tunisia's freshly elected government and legislature.

However, their position grew less tenable after a series of destabilizing events, including the September 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis and two high-profile political assassinations in 2013. The first assassination, on Feb. 6, targeted leftist politician Chokri Belaid, a vocal critic of Ennahda and long-time defender of trade unionists. Though Islamic State militants later claimed responsibility, many secular and leftist Tunisians believed Belaid's assassination proved what they had always suspected: Ennahda's supposedly "moderate" Islamism was just a cover for an Islamo-fascist takeover. Thousands massed to accompany Belaid's coffin to the Djellaz Cemetary in Tunis, and UGTT declared a general strike. The second assassination, on July 25, targeted lesser known Arab nationalist MP Mohamed Brahmi.

Brahmi's assassination ground Tunisia's transition to a standstill. It also set the stage for a dramatic three-way power struggle, pitting Nidaa Tunis, sometimes in criticism of but often in agreement with UGTT, against Ennahda.

The political crisis of summer 2013 was inflamed and exploited by political elites, including UGTT. Nidaa Tunis

was especially well poised to exploit political tensions that, though brewing during 2012, boiled over following the two assassinations. While Tunisia's two best-organized political forces, UGTT and Ennahda, contributed to the development of these tensions, Nidaa Tunis – a charismatically led party with strong ties to the former regimes –capitalized on them the most.

Though Nidaa Tunis enjoyed the support of many Tunisian secularists, leftists and trade unionists, its political machine was fueled by ex-RCD money and manpower. Members of the Employer's Association, which joined the UGTT-led Quartet in August 2013, represented Tunisia's traditional economic elite, and many had a heavily vested interest in maintaining the status quo ante. Together, these groups represented large segments of Tunisia's old political and economic elite – an elite that felt cheated by the victory of three largely non-establishment parties in 2011.

For months prior to Brahmi's assassination, Nidaa's leadership had been calling for not just the resignation of the government but also the dissolution of Tunisia's core transitional body: the elected National Constituent Assembly. Beji Caid Essebsi, Nidaa's founder and president,appeared on Tunisian television February 7, 2013 – one day after Belaid's assassination – to demand the Assembly's resignation. Essebsi and other opponents of Ennahda claimed that replacing the elected Assembly with an unelected group of supposedly apolitical "technocrats" was necessary because the Assembly had overstayed its mandate and was therefore illegitimate. Incidentally, the Assembly's one-year mandate, which international experts labeled unrealistically short, was created by Tunisia's 2011 transitional government, which Essebsi headed .

Against these demands, the UGTT cast itself as a neutral mediator determined to negotiate a peaceful solution to the standoff. In August 2013, UGTT made the surprising decision to invite the Employer's Association, a group with which it had traditionally been at loggerheads, to form a 3+1 mediation Quartet leading the Dialogue. In September 2013, this Quartet presented Ennahda and Nidaa Tunis with a roadmap to resolve their differences through a two-way compromise. Ennahda and its Troika partners would leave government completely within the space of just three weeks, while the Assembly would stay on to complete the constitution and pave the way for Tunisia's 2014 elections.

UGTT and the Employer's Union, the Quartet's other heavyweight, were not neutral actors. Both overlapped politically and ideologically with Nidaa Tunis, and both shared Nidaa's goal of booting Ennahda from power. Yet under the UGTT's leadership, the Quartet opposed Nidaa's demand of dissolving the Constituent Assembly. Had it decided otherwise, Tunisia's transition would likely be in tatters.

The 2013 political crisis presented the UGTT with an important opportunity to regain "national savior" status, recouping lost credibility after decades of regime persecution and manipulation. UGTT burnished its reputation both locally and internationally through its successful mediation efforts. This so-called Bardo Crisis also presented UGTT with a platform on which to display its political and ideological weight. Indeed, though Ennahda ultimately succeeded in negotiating the terms of its exit, the UGTT's chief negotiator Houcine Abbasi did not shy from using union power to cajoledesired concessions.

Ultimately, the National Dialogue managed to quell the highly politicized three-way struggle that produced Tunisia's 2013 political standoff. The Quartet resolved this impasse without dissolving the Constituent Assembly – a crucial decision that helped keep Tunisia's transition afloat. The National Dialogue also forged a fragile consensus among Tunisia's major power players: the UGTT, Ennahda and Tunisia's traditional political and economic elites, represented jointly by Nidaa Tunis and the Employer's Union. Throughout the 2013 Dialogue and the crisis that catalyzed it, each of these groups asserted themselves as powerful forces on Tunisia's post-revolutionary stage, demanding to be integrated – or, in the case of the old elites, re-integrated – in Tunisian politics.

Despite overcoming a major political hurdle, the National Dialogue did little to concretely advance Tunisia's pursuit

of revolutionary goals, including socio-economic dignity, institutional reform, and transitional justice. Rather than collaborating to address these critical issues, the Dialogue's protagonists spent much of 2012 and 2013 aggravating, exploiting, and eventually resolving a diversionary political crisis. That crisis sapped political and civil society leaders' energies at a critical transitional moment during which far-reaching changes may have been possible.

With the Nobel Peace Prize, Tunisia's National Dialogue Quartet has been rightly applauded for helping Tunisia overcome a major political crisis. History should learn from their efforts. But history should also remember that the Dialogue's principal protagonists resolved a conflict that, to varying degrees, each one helped create, and that political power players were the primary winners in this saga. For average citizens to taste the fruits of Tunisia's revolution, their leaders must transcend opportunistic infighting that characterized 2012 and 2013 to enact far-reaching economic and institutional reforms. Long after global applause for the Quartet has faded, Tunisians will keep asking what, if any, dividends their revolution has delivered.

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Tunisia's labor union won the Nobel Peace Prize. But can it do its job?

By Ian M. Hartshorn, University of Nevada, Reno

On Jan. 22, Tunisians in the impoverished interior regions of the country took to the streets, demanding increased economic development. Five years ago, similar protests sparked a revolution centered on economic justice. The Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), a working- and middle-class-based labor union, played a leading role in the transition process that followed, winning the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize as part of the group of civil society organizations credited with preserving Tunisia's democratic transition.

For all these contributions, however, the UGTT is first and foremost a labor union, and the democratic transition has yet to achieve the economic gains of most concern to its constituents. Tunisia's unemployment rate is over 15 percent, worse than before the revolution, with more than half of college educated youth out of work. In a survey last month, 86 percent of Tunisians said the economy was bad or somewhat bad, the highest since 2011. The emergency measures promised by the Cabinet and appeals for calm from the president and prime minister may have ended protests for a moment, but structural problems persist.

Later this year, the UGTT holds its national congress, likely to coincide with regional and municipal elections throughout the country. With no presidential or parliamentary elections until 2019, national power will remain split between the Islamist Ennahda party and the governing Nidaa Tounes, which is riven by internal divisions. This means that the local elections and the UGTT national congress will be an important moment in determining the politics of economic reforms over the next few years. These elections will reveal the balance between competing forces both within the union and the

country: secular and Islamist, coastal and interior, left wing and conservative, with serious ramifications for the unemployed youth who drove the revolution and still await its material benefits.

The UGTT played an outsized role in the transition from authoritarianism to democracy in Tunisia. The idea of unions playing such a role in a transition isn't a new one, but it cuts against some recent global trends. Unions played a key role in the so-called pacted transitions in places, such as Spain and Portugal, where elites cut deals to usher in liberal democratic rule. Unions have lost some of their power in an era of unruly transitions to — and away from — democracy. Globalization has also restricted some trade unions' traditional power bases, leaving some to question whether they have any role to play.

The UGTT was a political force in the country before the country even existed, helping lead and organize the independence movement that freed Tunisia from French rule. During the long period of dictatorship under the regime of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the union played a dual role: loyal part of the regime apparatus and protector of political life under authoritarian rule. The role was an uneasy one, and the union was pushed by its more activist members to join the nascent uprising from 2010 to 2011.

Like all national institutions, the UGTT faced pressure to reform following the revolution. Its efforts culminated in a national conference held in the city of Tabarka in December 2011. This congress selected a new executive board, including unionists with long histories inside the organization as well as some more militant rank-and-file members. Thirteen new members were elected to the leadership, a record for the organization. Throughout 2012, tensions rose between the governing "Troika" of the CPR, Ennahda and Ettakatol and other political forces in the country. The UGTT took up the mantle of opposition, calling for two national strikes during the transition process. The conflict polarized the rank-and-file and some Ennahda-affiliated trade unionists left the movement. The February 2014 ratification of the new constitution helped heal some if not all of these rifts. The strength of the UGTT, as well as their failure to build a robust Islamist alternative, led many Ennahda trade unionists to rejoin the organization.

These overlapping roles as independence-era champions, revolutionary leaders and vanguard of civil society often leave the union struggling to do its most basic job: provide better lives for its membership.

The members of the union span the working and middle classes and are concentrated in the public sector. Economic malaise following the revolution, exacerbated by several assassinations and terrorist attacks, has led to continued high unemployment, and a call for increased flexibility to hire and fire from business leaders, and for potentially shrinking the public sector from budget-conscious politicians. Yet it remains unclear to what extent the UGTT has a plan to deal with any of these issues.

The UGTT can claim several victories on behalf of workers. It has reduced some aspects of the corrupt labor brokerage system that functioned as a patronage network for the old regime. It has reduced the number of employees on short-term, insecure contracts, which often required employees to sign their own resignation letter upon hiring. Successful negotiations raised the minimum wage in the public sector.

In an interview I conducted in July 2015, UGTT Deputy Secretary General Belgacem Ayari laid out an ambitious agenda for the union. It included revising the labor code to come into compliance with international standards, introducing new clauses for gender parity, making it more difficult for employers to lay off workers, and representing more workers in small and medium-sized industries as well as those in the informal sector.

But these accomplishments pale beside the continuing and growing economic problems facing Tunisian workers. The UGTT struggles with its inability to increase employment or to bring about real change in economic development policies in the country's struggling interior. The January

protests starkly illustrated the mounting frustration with the failure of the UGTT to address this economic stagnation.

These failures have led internal critics of the UGTT to question its political focus. As Adnen Hajji, a longtime UGTT activist from the country's industrial heartland, said, "The current situation is catastrophic. … The UGTT has changed its direction. … It is switching its role to a political one, which is sad."

A similar tone is echoed by others across the political spectrum.

In a January interview, Mohammad Lakhdar Laajili, a member of parliament from the Ennahda Party who sits on a committee for regional development, stated, "The challenge is unemployment as well as local and international investment. …We had an article for positive discrimination for the interior regions but have failed to implement it." When asked if long-standing issues of corruption in job placement in the interior region had abated following the revolution, Laajili said, "Of course not."

One of the main problems the UGTT faces is that so few of those protesting in the nation's interior are actually members. As Ayari reported earlier this month, the UGTT's strength is in the public sector.

The vast majority of impoverished Tunisians are either not working — with unemployment levels at more than 40 percent for young people in the interior — or working in the informal sector. While the informal sector includes black market activities, such as drug smuggling and human trafficking, much of it is more benign. Selling small goods without a government license, smuggling cars or industrial parts across the Algerian border to avoid taxes and tariffs, and agricultural work outside the official structures could all be described as the "informal sector" or "parallel economy."

In January, Mustapha Baccouche of the business federation UTICA said that "the parallel economy could grow to exceed legal commercial activity. … We need to bring it into the legal economy." Much of this parallel economy is concentrated in the interior region, along the border with Libya where smuggling is common. But efforts to legalize and formalize these workers has been a challenge for both the union and the business community.

The UGTT therefore faces a stark choice about its future political role. If the union decides to keep its energy and attention focused on its own members, many of whom are middle aged and middle income, the institution will separate itself from the great mass of unemployed youth who helped drive the revolutionary project. On the other hand, the union could recognize these members as the future of Tunisian labor and take a more explicitly class-based role. However, to do so would likely open it to accusations of political partisanship and further alienation from the business community and center-right parties, including Ennahda.

As the union continues to grapple with its role in post-revolutionary Tunisia, the leadership balances its, sometimes conflicting, commitments to the state and its membership. However, if the UGTT fails to connect with disenfranchised youth and unrepresented workers, the recent protests will unlikely be the last.

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How Tunisia's military has changed during its transition to democracy

By Sharanbir (Sharan) Grewal, Princeton University.

Five years after the Arab Spring, only Tunisia remains on the path to democracy. To explain the Tunisian success story, scholars often point to the Tunisian military, which, unlike other militaries in the region, supported its country's revolution and subsequent transition to democracy. Having been sidelined in the police state of now-ousted leader Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the military had little incentive to stand by or return to Tunisia's authoritarian past.

While much ink has been spilled on how the Tunisian military has influenced the democratic transition, little has been written on how the transition has influenced the military. New research published for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace finds that the long-marginalized Tunisian military has begun to see its position improve after the revolution. These changes point to a gradual restructuring of the polity away from Ben Ali's police state and toward one in which the various security apparatuses are more evenly balanced. This rebalancing may have important implications for Tunisia's capacity to confront its grave security threats, for the prospects for security sector reform, and for the likelihood of democratic consolidation.

When Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba, came to power in 1956, the coups he saw in Egypt, Syria and Iraq encouraged him to keep his own military weak and counterbalanced by the police and National Guard. This strategy was tenable in Tunisia, as there was a largely peaceful independence movement, no national army to inherit from the colonial era, and few external security threats throughout most of the 1960s and '70s.

The marginalization of the military intensified under Tunisia's second president, Ben Ali. A military general himself, Ben Ali briefly flirted with the military upon coming to power, but a fictitious military coup attemptconcocted by the envious police and ruling party in 1991 pushed him to sideline the military once more. For the next two decades, Ben Ali privileged the police materially and politically, leaving the military underfunded, underequipped and far from political power. By the time he was ousted in the 2011 revolution, the budget of the Defense Ministry was barely half that of the Interior Ministry.

Since the revolution, however, the balance between the military and police is beginning to be recalibrated. Faced with severe security threats, Tunisia's post-revolution leaders have been forced to strengthen the armed forces. The Defense Ministry's budget has increased more quickly than any other ministry since 2011, growing by an average of 21 percent each year. If current trends continue, it is set to overtake the Interior Ministry's budget and consume the largest share of the government's budget in six to seven years. The military has also enjoyed a steady stream of new weapons contracts and international partnerships, especially with the United States, which tripled military aid to Tunisia in 2015.

Accompanying the army's growing military might is greater political influence. As Tunisia transitioned to a parliamentary system, management of the military shifted from the personalized rule of previous autocrats to a shared responsibility between the president and prime minister. The institutional rivalry between these two executives over the military led each to appoint security councils and a military adviser, inadvertently institutionalizing a larger role for the military in national security issues.

Another indicator of the Tunisian military's growing political importance is its number of appointments to traditionally civilian posts. During Ben Ali's 23-year tenure, only one military officer was appointed as a governor. In just five years after the revolution, 11 current or retired military officers have assumed governorships, some for multiple terms in different governorates.

As the military's power has increased, Tunisia's leaders have been keen to promote loyal officers. Privileging loyalists is not a new strategy, but the changing face of Tunisia's political leadership has spelled a changing demographic composition of the top brass. Prior to the revolution, senior officers most often hailed from Tunis and the Sahel — the wealthy coastal region, which includes Sousse, Monastir and Mahdia, from which Bourguiba and Ben Ali hailed. These areas amounted to just 24 percent of Tunisia's population yet claimed nearly 40 percent of the officers promoted to the Supreme Council of the Armies under Ben Ali.

However, Tunisia's post-revolution leaders gained much of their support from the marginalized interior. In the wake of Egypt's July 2013 coup, these leaders, especially President Moncef Marzouki, ensured the military's loyalty by reshuffling the top brass to bring in officers from these historically underprivileged regions, signaling the end of the favoritism of Tunis and the Sahel.

Perhaps the sharpest break with the Ben Ali era has been the entrance of retired officers into Tunisia's robust civil society. Retired officers have capitalized on the newfound freedom of association to form a number of civil society organizations, lobbying the government and shaping the public debate over the military and its needs.

Retired officers provided guidance during the drafting of the 2014 constitution, consulted presidential candidates on defense policy, and successfully lobbied for transitional justice for officers caught up in the fabricated coup attempt of 1991. These retired officers in civil society are now pushing for a number of reforms to make the military more effective, among them a comprehensive defense policy to be produced by the Ministry of Defense then approved by the parliament.

While three terrorist attacks in 2015 put this issue on the back burner, Defense Minister Farhat Horchani recently renewed his pledge to produce a white paper on defense policy with the help of civil society, parliament and international partners.

These developments suggest that the long-marginalized Tunisian military is becoming a force in its own right. "Without a doubt, things have improved," said retired chief of staff of the armed forces Gen. Said El Kateb. "Ben Ali relied on the police. Now, each institution has seen its capabilities enhanced. The military has importance, the police has importance, the national guard has importance. Each has a unique mission to fulfill."

This rebalancing among Tunisia's security apparatuses — assuming it continues — could have major implications, foremost among them the strengthening of the military's ability to counter terrorism. Second, this rebalancing could spell the relative weakening of the police's lobbying power and potentially an opportunity to pressure the Ministry of the Interior toinitiate internal reforms.

Those interested in democracy may naturally be wary of the growing influence of the military in the new Tunisia. In the short to medium term, however, a military coup is unlikely given that the police and National Guard will remain powerful counterbalancing forces to the military.

The potential threat to democracy in Tunisia is less a coup emanating from the armed forces and more that the current president, Beji Caid Essebsi, could coopt the strengthened military and security forces to repress Tunisians on his behalf, allowing him to govern autocratically.

Growing disillusionment with the transition and a yearning for a strongman to impose order make this a distinct possibility, but the strength of Tunisia's civil society and the commitment of its major political parties to consensus and compromise give hope that this scenario will remain just a possibility.

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