Abstract

Title: Confronting Authoritarianism: Order, Dissent, and Everyday Politics in Modern Tunisia

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This dissertation is a study of contestation and resistance under authoritarianism based on field research conducted in Tunisia (2008-2010) and Ukraine (2007 and 2009). The central objective of this study is to shed light on forms of contestation and resistance that exist under closed political systems through a careful analysis of a select sample of individuals engaged in protest politics through extra-institutional channels. My purpose is to explore the understudied case of Tunisia under Zine Abedine Ben Ali before the January 2011 Jasmine Revolution. More specifically, to what extent was the sudden burst of large-scale protest against the authoritarian rule of ex-President Leonid Kuchma culminating in the 2004 Orange Revolution in the Ukraine relevant to an understanding of the sudden reversal of the Tunisian dictatorship?

I argue that meaningful forms of contestation and resistance do exist under closed political systems, but they need to be located beyond formal political institutions. With elections in the Middle East and North Africa increasingly being co-opted by the state and civil society severely compromised, oppositional forces have had to turn elsewhere to have their voices heard. In this dissertation, I trace
alternative political identities, forms of micro-contestation and attempts at direct resistance against the state. In particular, I examine extra-institutional political spaces, including soccer stadiums, subversion in print-publications and performing arts, internet mobilization campaigns via Facebook and Twitter, as well as loosely-organized street-based protests and strikes. The authoritarian state, I argue, does not always revert to repression of oppositional voices but also engages in a subtle dialogue with regime challengers. Such a dialogue can result in the opening of some areas, such as internet censorship and freedom of press, which are important platforms for the advancement of alternative and oppositional politics.

On January 14, 2011, the Jasmine Revolution erupted in Tunisia followed by similar waves of resistance across the Middle East and North Africa. Where applicable, I link pre-Jasmine Revolution contestation to the widespread resistance that followed Ben Ali’s resignation.
CONFRONTING AUTHORITARIANISM:
ORDER, DISSENT AND EVERYDAY POLITICS IN MODERN TUNISIA

By

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To Prince, Penelope, and LKK
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<tr>
<td>ASM</td>
<td>Association de la Sauvegarde de la Médina de Tunis (Association for the Protection of the Medina of Tunis)</td>
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<td>CPG</td>
<td>Compagnie Phosphates de Gafsa (Gafsa Phosphate Company)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Le Club Africain de Tunis (Sports Club founded in 1920)</td>
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<tr>
<td>EST</td>
<td>L’Espérance Sportive de Tunis (Sports Club founded in 1919)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEPI</td>
<td>Middle East Partnership Initiative</td>
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<td>NDI</td>
<td>National Democratic Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCOT</td>
<td>Parti Communiste des Ouvriers Tunisiens (Tunisian Workers’ Communist Party headed by Hamma Hammami)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSD</td>
<td>Parti Socialiste Destourien (Socialist Destourien Party, successor to the Neo-Destour in 1964, headed by Habib Bourguiba)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCD</td>
<td>Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (Constitutional Democratic Rally, successor to the PSD in 1988 until March 2011, headed by Zine el-Abedine Ben Ali)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UGET</td>
<td>L’Union Générale des Étudiants de Tunisie (General Union of Tunisian Students)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UGTT</td>
<td>L'Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (Tunisian General Labor Union)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPNB</td>
<td>L’Union de la Propriete Nue et Batie de Tunisie (Tunisian Union of Bare Ownership and Development)</td>
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Introduction

In 1914, Swiss-born painter Paul Klee (1879-1940) traveled to Tunisia with his contemporaries Albert Macke and Louis Molliet, a journey that would mark a turning point in his artistic life and career. Paul Klee, a close friend of Wassily Kandinsky and colleague at Bauhaus later, is known for his combination of primitive, semiotic and surreal art. Yet the playful, naïve and colorful images often associated with the artist, were inspired by his sojourn in Tunisia that included residence in the idyllic Mediterranean village of Sidi Bou Said, travels to the country’s religious heart of Kairouan, as well as excursions to the seaside resort town of Hammamet. Many art historians believe that the radiant colors of Tunisia, its vibrant red earth tones, bright shades of turquoise, splashes of white washed houses and lush flora awakened Klee’s sense of color and his gradual severing of color from form.

Paul Klee’s representation of French-controlled Tunisia and his affirmation that his experience radically changed his artistic vision, hardly mirrors the image political scientists have long maintained about this North African police state, especially during the twenty-three year reign (1987-2011) of President Abedine Zine Ben Ali. Until January 14, 2011, when a popular uprising that has come to be known as the Jasmine Revolution\(^1\) overthrew the Ben Ali regime, the political portrayal of Tunisia was dreary and hopeless. As protests continue to sweep across the Arab world, inspired in great measure by Tunisia’s brave and politically savvy youth who played a vital role in mobilizing citizens to take the streets, social scientists and

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\(^1\) Jasmine is considered to be the national flower of Tunisia. Prior to labeling the uprising in Tunisia as Jasmine Revolution, the events were referred to as ‘Mohamed Bouazizi Revolution’ and ‘Facebook Revolution.’
policy makers alike have begun to rethink the factors that catalyzed the protests. Similar to Tunisia, youth and oppositional groups in Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Bahrain, Morocco, Iran, Libya\(^2\), Saudi Arabia and Yemen are demanding reforms, both political and socio-economic. To be sure, there is already a clearly discernable variation in demands articulated by protesters across countries and within cases. In Tunisia, waves of protests were initially framed within a socio-economic narrative as protesters were holding up baguettes signifying unhappiness with increased food prices that soon assumed an explicit anti-Ben Ali direction. In Egypt, the Papyrus Revolution following Tunisia’s success was clearly marked by anti-Mubarak sentiments. Protesters in Bahrain and Yemen are also explicitly directing their grievances against incumbent elites, combining both political and socio-economic demands for change. In Jordan, protesters so far have been articulating demands for substantive changes in government, primarily a fair electoral law and an elected prime minister, but have not publicly voiced any anti-Abdullah sentiments.

Despite the dramatic revolution in Tunisia, similar to the ostensibly surprising colored revolutions in Eastern Europe between 2000 and 2005, analytical attention has been, in my opinion, wrongly focused on easily identifiable catalysts to explain the sudden and unexpected waves of protests. When Mohamed Bouazizi, the young Tunisian produce seller in the South-central town of Sidi Bouzid, set himself on fire on December 17\(^{th}\), 2010, protesting confiscation of his goods and public humiliation inflicted by a civil servant at the municipality, a wave of protests broke out across Tunisia’s rural South. To date it remains unclear whether Bouazizi’s dramatic public

\(^2\) At the time of writing, Libya has spiraled into a dreadful state of emergency, as pro-Qaddafi forces are violently attempting to quash a resistant rebellion.
act sparked the waves of protests that reached the capital Tunis a month later on January 14, 2011, or whether the catalyst was Ben Ali’s order for police forces to use live ammunition killing unknown numbers of young, frustrated protesters in the rural South. Neither event provides a comprehensive explanation for what actually brought the protests on - at least their rapid snowballing to a national scale - especially as political analysis in the last few months has isolated the most recent Tunisian protests from years of contentious political activity that did exist under Ben Ali’s iron rule.

**Design of Research & Conceptual Categories**

The central objective of this study is to identify and examine individuals and groups who contest authoritarian politics in order to shed light on forms of contestation and resistance that do exist under closed political systems. Where are meaningful alternative political spaces located from which organized alternative and oppositional voices can grow? Can alternative and oppositional voices push for a dialogue with the authoritarian state and elicit some level of response in the direction of reform, however limited? This study is motivated by the proclaimed surprise expressed by analysts of large-scale contention in cases where such activity was seemingly unthinkable. I will trace forms of micro-contestation, including alternative political identities, implicit or hidden as well as explicit contestation that can eventually lead to a public break-through of resistance in authoritarian contexts.

Under authoritarianism, politics extend far beyond the official realm of the state, traditional political institutions and civil society organizations, reaching into

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3 I refer here to the definition of the state articulated by ‘bringing the state back in’ scholars (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1985) as a ‘subjective system of decision-making,’ treating the state as a category of analysis distinctive from society.
the everyday life of ordinary citizens. The flow of political power is observable in the reproduction of dominant political narratives within the curricula of primary education as well as traditional censorship, corrupt business practices, and harassment. A recent journalistic account summarized this condition in Tunisia in the following way: “During Mr. Ben Ali’s 23 years in power, the [ruling] party’s activities were not limited to politics; it had tentacles in all aspects of Tunisian life.”

The ability to carve out spaces for alternative politics beyond those transmitted by the state, then, remains significantly more difficult than under less repressive political conditions, especially opportunities for somewhat representative and pluralist state-society relations. I argue that despite repressive political conditions, alternative political spaces exist and innovative avenues for contestation are negotiated between everyday citizens and the state, or its institutions. Specifically, I examine both the mundane and explicitly political practices of ordinary citizens in challenging authoritarian politics. The contentious micro-practices that will be discussed in this dissertation include non-violent mobilization efforts via Facebook and Twitter even before the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, formations of alternative political identities juxtaposing phony nationalist state narratives, and subversion in mainstream media

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This definition is reflected in the literature on authoritarianism in the Middle East and elsewhere, with the caveat that institutions of the state oftentimes co-opt social forces. However, in my own analysis of authoritarian states, I remain sensitive to more critical definitions of the state, especially those that recognize the blurred boundaries between state and society (Mitchell, 1991; Migdal, 2004) and treat these categorical complexities as transmission mechanisms of political power.

and the performing arts. I will also discuss widespread forms of political avoidance, including the refusal to vote and economic self-help networks, which constitute contentious political acts themselves, especially in cases where participation in phony elections, for instance, is mandatory. These explicit and hidden practices, I contend, shape meaningful alternative political spaces that attract widespread popular support. Authoritarian states, in turn, react by either co-opting and re-fashioning oppositional ideas or movements or gradually relaxing control over some political and social practices. The dialogue of domination-contestation that unfolds opens a window into the complex relationship between authoritarianism and the political life of ordinary citizens.

The utility of extricating the hidden domination-contestation dialogue between states and social actors within closed systems, lies in delineating an additional explanation for understanding political change, in addition to studies of regime-type (Penner-Angrist, 2006; Lust Okar, 2005), bottom-up contestation (Tilly, 2007; Pratt, 2008).

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5 I will also reference protests in the Southern mining city of Gafsa, which have been on-going and supported by some of the same oppositional actors that participated in subsequent protest mobilization initiatives. Gafsa, like Benghazi in Libya where anti-Qaddafi protests broke out most recently in February 2011, has historically been a city of contention, even prior to Ben Ali’s rule.

6 Political science work on repression and dissent employing quantitative methods has likewise considered the relationship between repressing states and dissenting groups (Davenport, 1995, 1996; Lichbach, 1984, 1987; Moore, 2000). However, as statistical testing is largely dependent on readily available data extracted from mainstream and open sources (i.e. The New York Times Index), the examined relationship is generally open and not hidden, i.e. the “sequential interaction” between states and dissenters examined by Moore (2000). Such data sets thus lack crucial information on cases where the dialogue between states and dissenting actors is neither open, readily available, nor reported in the mainstream press. Simply put, reporting in cases like Tunisia pre-2011, Syria, Saudi Arabia, etc. is not necessarily reliable thus weakening available data. In Tunisia, for instance, the Ben Ali regime never reported on on-going protests in the mining town of Gafsa.
socio-economic preconditions necessary for successful regime transformation (Moore, 1966), or onset of political or economic crisis (Haggard and Kaufman, 1995). The relationship between socio-economic development, especially education and access to new technologies, and the ability to create and creatively utilize spaces (for instance Facebook groups or media subversion) to challenge incumbent political elites remains especially important in comparing domination-contestation or contentious state-society relations across cases. The ‘size’ of the domination-contestation dialogue, then, becomes an important indicator for political change, yet admittedly difficult to quantify or measure. While ordinary citizens in Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt, Eritrea, Belarus for instance, might feel equally disillusioned with their political elites, the ability to pressure for change can vary based on prior dialogues, whether hidden or overt, with incumbent leaders. In Egypt, for instance, a sequence of oppositional moments from the “We are all Khalid Said” campaign, to the April 6th youth movement, overlapping with Kefaya! (Enough!), has been in an on-going dialogue with the regime, much more so than similar moments of contention in Tunisia.

Throughout this dissertation, I illustrate how approaching these practices as instances of a domination-contestation dialogue alerts us to the fact that a wide range of actors are pushing back at the state and that they are doing so in a way that is recognized by the regime. I link these instances to contemporary events in post-

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7 James C. Scott has written that for social analysis, “one can discern an understandable variation in the open declaration of claims from below whenever states or elites seemed less implacably hostile to such claims. Here there is no question of variation in the level of political courage or bravado, but rather the level of perceived danger in speaking out” (1990: 219).
Jasmine Revolution Tunisia to show a logical trajectory of political contestation that cannot be isolated to a single moment, as, for instance, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010. In my analysis of contestation beyond the realm of official politics, I conceptualize the stretching of boundaries along two lines:

*Culmination of Contestation*

Moments of strong political contention, such as popular revolutions, can be the endpoints of diverse and overlapping grievance-based movements and informal political practices that develop over time and ‘depend’ on political opportunity structures (i.e. fraudulent elections). Often times these moments are treated as unexpected events that mark the ‘beginning’ of contentious political activity. On the democratic transitions paradigm, for instance, these are treated as ‘openings’ and analysis begins here rather than probing contentious activity before. Nonetheless, even Adam Przeworski, who generally subscribes to a minimalist definition of political participation, referred to such openings as the ‘beginning of the melting of an iceberg,’ rather than isolated events (1991).

*Social Non-Movements or the Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary*

Borrowing this concept directly from Asef Bayat, the intensity of ‘social non-movements’ or ‘the quiet encroachment of the ordinary’ can contribute to explaining variation in state-society relations and the ‘size’ of the domination-contestation dialogue. Social non-movements, or the mundane practices of countless individuals, likewise constitute the lived circumstances that can culminate and snowball into grievance-based protests, as experienced in Ukraine (2004), Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), Iran (2009, 2011), Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Morocco, Bahrain, Libya,
Saudi Arabia and Jordan (2011), among scores of other cases. For instance, as individuals grow more resentful of economic and political conditions, like the youth movement in Tunisia, their contentious practices appear more likely to gain support beyond student groups and other disenfranchised youth and spark grievance-based protests among more segments of society. Similar dynamics can be discerned in pre-Orange Revolution Ukraine, a movement that was initiated by disenfranchised youth and students and quickly attracted scores of other supporters, including middle-class business owners, the elderly, celebrities, even security forces that began to defect from the state. More repression thus invites more transgression, especially as the size of the disenfranchised is increasing rapidly and as the army and security services are not readily signaling their willingness to severely crack down. Most recently this was the case in Ukraine (December 2004), Tunisia (December 2010-January 2011) as well as Egypt (January-February 2011).

A broader analytical definition of political contention invites for a systematic categorization of activities that do not immediately appear to be of political consequence. I organize my collected data as avoidance, implicit contestation, and explicit contestation, which I develop in three empirical chapters.  

In *Dynamics of Contention*, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) divide contentious politics into two broad categories – contained and transgressive contention – to include more contentious political activities beyond the popular category of revolution, as well as beyond the dichotomy of institutional and unconventional politics. In dividing contained and transgressive contention, the authors argue that the distinction “allows [them] to emphasize transgression within institutions as well as many routine activities of external challengers” (7). The contentious political practices and activities discussed in this dissertation would predominantly fall into the transgressive category as they involve newly self-identified political actors (activists) and innovate collective action (i.e. facebook groups), however, activities falling into
Avoidance

Avoiding mandatory political participation constitutes resistant acts because it explicitly indicates a dismissal of the carefully crafted and phony politics of dictatorial regimes. Not participating in elections or regime-sponsored events signifies in itself a public act of disobedience or sheer refusal of a narrative that seeks to inscribe each and every citizen with a particular mode of political behavior or political ideology. James C. Scott specifically writes of the open refusal to comply with hegemonic performances or discourses as “dangerous acts of insubordination,” in which a single act of defiance symbolizes a broader rejection of apparent consent (1990: 205). Avoidance of dominant politics and political practices is likewise widespread, constituting parts of social non-movements, and comprising activities such as dodging elections, choosing not to participate in regime-sponsored events like the many conferences, meetings, festivities and celebrations orchestrated by Ben Ali’s Rassemblement Constitutional de la Democratie (RCD) party, the formation of alternative identities and allegiances such as identity debates among soccer fans during games, and economic-self help activity.

Implicit Contestation

Under the regime of Ben-Ali, implicit forms of contestation constituted the most widespread and commonly practiced acts against the state, including subversion in media and performing arts, gossip, satire and widespread political jokes. Both state and non-state actors might recognize the content as forms or spaces of contestation. Meanwhile, the political messages within these seemingly hidden forms of the non-movement category or subversion do not fit neatly into either the contained or transgressive categories.
contestation can also be denied by both actors, a principle reason why there are indeed so widespread.

**Explicit Contestation**

Explicit contestation until the Jasmine Revolution was significantly limited, yet nonetheless present in non-violent and creative e-mobilization campaigns via Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites, traditional strikes in the Southern mining town of Gafsa, columns in the oppositional press *Al-Mouatin* entitled “Citizens not Subjects,” illegal movements including the *Parti Communiste des Ouvriers Tunisiens* (PCOT), its informal student wing, the formerly outlawed Islamist Party an-Nahda⁹, limited contention within the Tunisian Lawyer’s Association (*Conseil de l’Ordre national des avocats tunisiens*) and the Student Union (*UGET, L’Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie*).

The purpose of organizing my argument along the three conceptual categories of avoidance, implicit and explicit contestation is not to force different forms of real-life contestation into abstract categories of analysis. Rather, I seek to clarify the different levels of contention and show how they can be interconnected at moments. In other words, implicit and explicit forms of contestation cannot be divorced from the lived circumstances within which they were generated, an off-stage social space that was carefully carved by subordinate groups. Scott writes of such social spaces from which hidden and later explicit contention grows as “achievements of resistance [themselves]; they are won and defended in the teeth of power” (1990:119). Yet, I remain careful not to claim causality between, say, avoiding phony elections,

⁹ _An-Nahda_ was legalized in February 2011 following the return of its exiled leader Rachid Ghannouchi.
journalistic subversion and mobilization via social networking sites. I also do not claim to predict when various forms of contestation culminate into revolutions or national-wide resistance. My contribution is much more modest as I map existing contentious practices and show instances where such practices do elicit state response. Categories of analysis such as these are thus useful in mapping and organizing the wide variety of contention that exists under authoritarianism, while also recognizing the overlap of different contentious activities. In soccer stadiums, for instance, fans chant about alternative identities opposing the nationalist narrative of the state thus avoiding the pervasive narrative of the state. But soccer chants can also develop into explicit rejections of the police or the police state. Most recently, observers noticed that during the protests in Tunis and Cairo, protesters who grew tired of shouting anti-Ben Ali or anti-Mubarak slogans intermittently opted for soccer songs while women sporadically complemented revolutionary cries with popular wedding whistles.

**Scholarly and Case-specific Context**

Political scientists and specialists on Tunisia have argued for well over a decade that virtually no meaningful oppositional or contentious activity has existed in Tunisia, thus concluding that the small North African police state was plagued by a lingering and poignant paradox: high levels of socio-economic development and no political mobilization in the direction of mobilization, at least on the part of the middle class, defying Barrington Moore’s famous “no bourgeoisie, no democracy” (Alexander, 2010; King, 2010, 2003; Hibou, 2006; Bellin, 2004, 2002; Entelis, 2004; Ferrié, 2003; Anderson, 2001; Grimaud, 1996). In my ethnographic field-based
research in Tunisia between 2008 and 2010, I concluded otherwise: the paradox was flawed because Tunisia’s population has been and is indeed willing to challenge the ubiquitous and dictatorial politics of Ben Ali. The question was thus not if but how?

Throughout my time in Tunisia, I have uncovered meaningful spaces of contention as well as individuals and groups who have always been willing to actively challenge Ben Ali’s authoritarianism. The dichotomy in the last two years of Ben Ali’s rule, that of a phony and omnipresent political system including an ever-growing public political cult of personality and a paralyzed, alienated and increasingly ridiculing population, sparked my interest to uncover the more complex dynamics underlying the country’s authoritarianism.

Tunisia’s authoritarian politics under Ben Ali’s regime were indeed a constant reality to the country’s citizens and visitors alike. Ben Ali, who swept to power by a constitutional coup d’état on November 7, 1987 deposing the country’s aging first President, Habib Bourguiba, established what would become one of the most repressive states in the region. In an effort to provide justification for his rule, he also created an ever-growing political cult of personality saturating public spaces in cities, towns and rural areas with kitschy political paraphernalia, casting a political shadow over the country’s natural beauty, its impressive history, and dynamic population. Tunisian citizens, scholars and analysts alike have been frustrated by the regime’s refusal to transform its impressive market-oriented reforms, which have helped construct one of the Arab world’s most socio-economically progressive nation, into genuine political liberalization usually associated with such progress. Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia’s first President (1956-1987), was instrumental in promoting
liberal economic reforms through a program of flexible modernization coupled with a pro-Western foreign policy, yet in his three decades of rule, he also institutionalized authoritarian political processes and practices.

Bourguiba justified his benevolent or benign form of authoritarianism in the name of fighting colonialism, leading Tunisia to independence, building a modern nation-state, and rapidly advancing socio-economic reforms. His authoritarianism was reflected in a monolithic party and state structure, buttressed by the gradual co-optation of other political, social and economic institutions. Faced with increasing unpopularity and bread-riots in the last years of his rule, the “supreme combatant,” eventually lost his populist touch when he refused to tolerate dissent and widespread popular disenchantment.

Ben Ali nurtured and significantly advanced the authoritarian political groundwork that he inherited from his predecessor, while presenting an image to the West as a great reformer. Despite domestic societal challenges and criticism from the international human rights community for his illiberal political policies, Ben Ali opted to advance a manipulative strategy that coated an increasingly robust version of authoritarian rule with democratic rhetoric. Ben Ali swiftly co-opted key economic actors especially from the expanding private sector, instituting a legacy of neoliberal economic reforms which consolidated rather than loosened his grip on power (Cammett, 2007; Bellin, 2002; White, 2001; King, 2001, 2010). Compared to Bourguiba’s benign authoritarianism, the Ben Ali regime solidified a corporatist-authoritarian system understood as:

extensive government control over labor through corporatist mechanisms in the new market arrangements. Patron-client ties between rural notables and
the small peasantry keep the state anchored in the countryside, civil society is kept on a short leash, and repression is utilized to control subordinate groups when necessary. [An] exceptionally powerful executive that dominates a weak legislature and judiciary characterizes the regime institutionally. (King, 2001: 5-6).


Political science research on Tunisia, therefore, focused primarily on the authoritarian institutions of the state, the extreme repressiveness of the regime, and the new strategies invented on part of the regime to solidify power (Alexander, 2010, 1997; King, 2010, 2003; Brownlee, 2007; Penner-Angrist, 2006, 1999; Pripstein-Posusney & Penner-Angrist, 2006; Pratt, 2006; Bellin, 2004, 2002; Heydeman, 2004; Camau & Geissler, 2003). In other words, political dynamics were solely analyzed from the perspective of an omnipresent state that engineered elections, laws, constitutional amendments, party politics and the country’s political economy while deploying severe repression against all forms of dissent. The events leading up to the January 14th Jasmine Revolution, however, have radically changed our approach to contentious politics in Tunisia, the Arab world and beyond the region to other political late-developers. This dissertation is based on eighteen months of ethnographic field-based research in Tunisia between 2008 and 2010, completing the research segment just months before the revolution in 2011, and six months of
fieldwork in Kyiv, Ukraine (2007 and 2009) to understand waves of mobilization efforts prior to the 2004 Orange Revolution from a comparative perspective. The argument and methodological approach is also informed by nine months of previous field research in Rabat, Morocco (2001-2002). In Tunisia, I identified, interviewed, befriended and observed those very individuals who helped mobilize a loosely organized movement or crowd that eventually brought down the Ben Ali regime. My argument contributes to previous work on the politics of Tunisia, the Middle East, and studies of authoritarianism more generally in suggesting that spaces of contention have been present and vibrant with the potential to influence dominant politics, such as the robust authoritarian practices of Ben Ali.\footnote{“Locating Political Identity in Tunisia: Space, Spectacle & Contestation,” presented at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association (Boston, MA, November 21-24); and “Contesting Order in Tunisia: The Crafting of Political Identity,” presented at 2009 European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions (Lisbon, Portugal, May 2009) as well as the Centre d’études maghrébines à Tunis (CEMAT) Scholar’s Meeting in Tunis, Tunisia (June 2009).} In this dissertation, I will chart the mechanisms by which alternative political spaces have been shaped, even prior to the December 2010 protests. These spaces, I argue, have allowed citizens to engage in contentious politics beyond membership in opposition parties sanctioned by the regime, and to form alternative political identities opposing the ubiquitous political narrative imposed by the Ben Ali regime. To this effect, I examine the creative and daring means by which journalists, activists and novelists, subverted the omnipresent yet phony Ben Ali narrative, while ordinary citizens avoided the narrative altogether, formed alternative identities, or paid loyalty elsewhere. I argue that the arduous task of identifying alternative politics, hidden transcripts, and explicit attempts at contestation that oftentimes go unnoticed under authoritarian political conditions,
grants us an invaluable glimpse at the agents who can bring about regime transformation as well as provide insights about the realities of a post-transition political order. This kind of study is especially insightful in cases where little reliable information exists about the dynamics of elite-level politics. As Valerie Bunce (2003, 1995) so aptly wrote in her critique of the dominant transitions paradigm (Rustow, 1970; Schmitter and O’Donnell, 1986; Di Palma, 1990; Karl, 1990; Przeworski, 1991; Karl and Schmitter, 1991; Haggard and Kaufman, 1995; Whitehead, 2001) any analysis of bargaining and pact-making that occurs among political elites is virtually impossible in cases where the players are unknown. Surely, we can identify some of the political elites involved in the bargaining process as well as assume their preferences and strategies (whether they are committed to the rules of the game or are simply vying for power irrespective of democratic rules). However, in contexts where the stakes of political engagements are very high -- such as in authoritarian or non-democratic contexts -- identifying preferences of elites will result in imprecise and incomplete assumptions as information about elites and their relationship to society is largely unavailable (Jowitt, 1992; McFaul 2002, Collier, 1999, Wood 2000).

As a student of comparative politics, I am driven by questions of political development especially their accompanying paradoxes and the unevenness of political change. I am particularly interested in uncovering and understanding the competing images we have of the systems we study rooted in our analytical and methodological convictions, the antagonistic narratives imposed by states and mediated by their governed populations, and what these competing views mean for
our understanding of broader questions such as state-society relations, civil society, and political participation.

I am intrigued by the political motivations of citizens living under robust authoritarian conditions in challenging omnipresent political orders. Studying contentious and oppositional politics under authoritarianism is challenging and difficult, as locating meaningful alternative political discourses and practices beyond those produced by illegitimate political elites and unpopular political processes requires long-term and in-depth political ethnographic research. Yet in uncovering microscopic contentious politics practiced by ordinary citizens even in such closed police states as Ben Ali’s Tunisia, we simultaneously reveal new political practices and relationships that help us rethink the study of authoritarianism.

Scholars of Soviet-era politics, society and culture agree that under authoritarian conditions, *everything* becomes political, meaning that official politics are purposefully channeled into mundane life patterns\(^{11}\). Routine life practices such as purchasing homes or newspapers, travel patterns, registering cell phones, interactions with neighbors, friends, shopkeepers, all become politicized and ensnarled in repressive bureaucracies, networks of corruption or vitally dependent on regime loyalty. The concept of everything as political, then, refers to the tentacles of power, whether in the form of a dominant party or institutions, reaching into mundane practices and lives of individuals. While not overtly political in the minimalist sense (Schumpeter, 1942; Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub and Limongi, 2000), these ‘lived

\(^{11}\) Even Robert Dahl famously stated that “politics touches everything,” of course referring to liberal democracies.
circumstances,’ as James C. Scott writes, constitute the conditions in which collective action is generated and solidified (1990).

In the last decade, studies of authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa have compellingly scrutinized the extension of the state, whether the security or Mukhabarat state (Bellin, 2002, 2004), the neo-liberal or new patronage state (Amar, forthcoming, King, 2010, Cammett, 2007; Marshall, 2010), or the traditional repressive state increasingly curbing oppositional parties (Lust-Okar, 2005; Heydeman, 2007; Albrecht, 2007; Wegner 2007) and independent interest formulation (Pratt, 2007; Langhor, 2004). Within this literature, others have examined political processes, such as municipal or national-level elections that explain variation in authoritarian stability (Benstead, 2008; Brownlee, 2007 Pripstein-Posousnney, 2005; Penner-Angrist; 2005). Research has even revisited immediate post-colonial political institutions to explain variation in political outcomes and system durability (Ayubi, 1995; Penner Angrist, 2006; Pratt, 2007), including early international influences (Yom, 2009; Kienle, 2005; Sayyd, 2007). These sophisticated studies have offered compelling explanations for complex and frustrating political outcomes, mainly the intensification and refashioning of authoritarian politics. At the same time, few studies have considered the very areas where meaningful political contestation beyond elections has become and will become possible.\textsuperscript{12}

A principle explanation for the overall gap in considering politics, especially political contestation, beyond the officialdom of the state or the limited categories of

official civil and political society (Jamal, 2009; Langhor, 2004; Entelis, 1997; Norton, 1995;) among scholars of Middle Eastern politics is partly empirical and partly analytical. Empirically, it remains difficult to identify the hidden discourses of unofficial politics, those very voices that fundamentally seek to restructure the political order and commit to a new non-authoritarian system of governance, whether democratic or not. Data on informal politics is largely unavailable and locating meaningful alternative and oppositional politics can be time-consuming and costly. We only need to revisit the frustrating experiences of former Sovietologists, even before the research design or scientific turn in the study of politics (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994), to understand the arduous task of convincing scholarly audiences of the advantages gained in listening to such voices as Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik, Jan Patočka, Levko Lukyanenko, among others. The glimpse such dissident writers granted us into the daily struggles of the Soviet citizen, their economic and political survival strategies, the obliteration of private and public lives resulting in Havel’s famous ‘divided souls,’ surely did not predict the outcome of nuclear non-proliferation treaties between super powers during the Cold War, nor did we better understand the preferences and constraints of Soviet leaders. But the mundane and quotidian experiences that such writers chronicled in oftentimes semi-fictitious settings help us explain the post-Soviet experience, the so-called democratic birth pangs, the return to authoritarian Soviet-style politics in some post-Soviet states such as Ukraine in the 1990s, Belarus or some Central Asian states, and the barriers to democratic political cultures post-transition (D’Anieri, 2007; Way, 2005; D’Anieri, Kravchuk, Kuzio, 1999; Kubicek, 2000; Tismaneanu, 1998; Wilson, 2002). Most
importantly, dissident writings help us understand the blurred boundaries between state and society as experienced by individual citizens within authoritarian conditions, and can help us rethink where contentious political activities occurs, whether in mundane copying mechanisms or explicitly directed against the state.

Analytically, the debate of what constitutes political practice and space oftentimes limits our categories of analysis to elections or the formal institutions of the state, however weak or illegitimate (Wedeen, 2008). Is the widespread phenomenon of informal or semi-informal economic-self help activities necessarily political (Kamrava, 2003; Singerman, 1995)? Do loosely organized networks, organizations and movements (i.e. Facebook groups and Twitter threads) constitute meaningful political spaces substituting the role of civil society in some contexts 13? Can alternative socio-political identities formed in large-scale public events parallel to a ubiquitous political identity imposed by the state, such as soccer games, challenge or contest any aspect of a prescribed political order? Expanding analytical categories beyond the traditional political realm whether the state or in its minimalist form as elections and the broader associational realm including unions, clubs, associations and guilds (Putnam, 1994; Cohen and Arato, 1994; Diamond, 1999), not only blurs our conceptual boundaries but also complicates the possibility for variable-oriented research. How can we conceptualize, measure, codify, even count the thousands of daily mundane activities practiced by millions of citizens into categories that allow for correlation with larger national-scale political outcomes? Asef Bayat,

13 It should be noted that this debate continues even after the Jasmine Revolution. Analysts still disagree about the impact of social networking sites in influencing mobilization, even though the Tunisian Revolution was first referred to as Twitter or Facebook Revolution.
whose methodological approach to political contention informs the macro-framework in chapter four, convincingly categorizes these practices as “social non-movements,” a telling political practice he calls the ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (2010). Political science work, however, has so far been reluctant to theorize practices that are ostensibly non-political or un-measurable, leaving such studies primarily to anthropology (Abu-Lughod, 1990, Apter, 1999, 2007) or the sociology of contention (Tilly, 2007) with some notable exceptions (Scott, 1990; Wedeen, 1999, 2008; Mitchell, 1990; Ismael, 2006; Singerman, 1995). One reason for this omission is that mundane and hidden practices which do not explicitly or overtly engage the state to challenge the authoritarian political order, and more precisely do not explicitly seek to promote liberalization and democracy, are often treated as irrelevant political phenomena and thus not worthy of careful study or analysis. Even explicit practices that do engage the state through internet mobilization or illegal protest activities, yet oftentimes occur outside of the realm of formal political institutions, receive less analytical attention as they tend to stretch beyond the contours of conventional categories of analysis. Hidden practices and extra-institutional political engagement, however, can be of crucial utility in understanding the continuity of heightened political moments such as public resistance and revolutions, the lived circumstances from which contention burgeons, and the political motivations of those actively involved, including possibilities for political liberalization.

The idea that democracy is the necessary political outcome, or Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” (2006), continues to be challenged by scholars critical of the analytical, conceptual and practical utility of the classic democratic transitions
paradigm (Carothers, 2002, 2004; Bunce, 2003, 1995). In short, students of
democratization began realizing in the mid-1990s that countries often do not move
steadily along the authoritarianism – liberalization - regime transition - democratic
consolidation continuum, but rather stall in-between stages, revert to authoritarianism,
emerge as hybrid-regimes, or completely fall off the paradigm. Following the break-
up of the Soviet Union and the newly negotiated political orders in independent post-
Soviet states, Eastern European area specialists began examining new categories,
such as hybrid regimes, electoral authoritarianism, pseudo democracies, feckless
pluralism (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Way, 2005). Beginning in the late 1990s and
continuing today, scholars of the Middle East and North Africa revisited the
institutional dimension of the authoritarian phenomenon (Yom, 2009; Brownlee,
2007; Lust-Okar, 2005; Pratt, 2007; Bellin, 2002, Heydeman, 1999), initially in
response to studies employing cultural variables or explanations to explain the Middle
East’s democratic deficit (Fish, 2003; Huntington, 1997; Norris and Inglehart,
2004).

Despite the widespread critiques of the democratic transitions paradigm,
political science work continues to be driven by the democracy question, whether we
examine authoritarianism’s durability or moments of political change. In other
words, we choose to only study those actors, practices and institutions that have the

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14 For a compelling critique of the transitions paradigm, see Jillian Schwedler’s *Faith in Moderation*, chapter 1 (2006).
15 Experts of Middle Eastern politics who spent years conducting in-depth field-
research in various cases employ significantly different analytical lenses to the study
of authoritarianism in the Middle East than non-specialists focusing on questions of
regional exceptionalism in terms of political economy, gender, religion and various
indicators or culture.
potential to advance democracy – elections, civic norms, civil society, democratic political culture, rule of law – rather than study contentious political practices themselves (Schwedler, 2006). Even in the most recent waves of protests that swept across the Arab world, the democracy question continues to dominate journalistic and scholarly debate – while democracy is certainly a dominant narrative articulated by protesters, the distinction between pro-democracy and anti-regime rhetoric remains real, a distinction that will presumably become more pertinent in the post-Ben Ali and post-Mubarak contexts. In examining political contestation only through overt contests over democratic practices and institutions, especially elections and multi-party systems, we overlook scores of meaningful moments and actors that can help answer important and misunderstood questions: where can we locate meaningful political contention in closed political systems? Who challenges authoritarian politics and which particular institutions, political actors, or narratives? How do individuals carve out spaces of contention? Can such individuals and groups participate in post-transition political orders as we have witnessed following the collapse of the Soviet Union? By extending these questions beyond an investigation of agents, institutions, practices and processes that can bring about democracy, we can identify practices that can affect the rules of the political game. Such practices might not be perfectly democratic (such as free and fair elections or town hall meetings) but nonetheless participatory and communal, forging group solidarities, even separating individuals from the ubiquitous narrative of the authoritarian state.

In my examination of political contention under closed political orders, I contribute to the growing debate on Middle Eastern authoritarianism by
systematically analyzing forms of political contention outside of the institutional realm of the state. Citizens of authoritarian states face surveillance in all aspects of life, their daily movements, personal engagements, family interactions, telephone and internet communications, travel patterns, and so on. It is for this reason that sociologist Hank Johnston (2001) stresses the importance of distinguishing between speech acts and public talk in closed and open political systems.\(^{16}\) Any word or concept uttered in authoritarian political systems is filled with hidden, multiple meanings and messages, all of which need to be interpreted against an official, ubiquitous and pervasive political narrative. Political plight is reflected in quotidian conversations, artistic expression especially in the performing arts, contemporary comedy and political satire, reproduction of symbolic narratives and oral traditions, and in exaggerated daily recounting of economic hardship. Yet even in those conversations and statements that are not necessarily subversive, we can discern dismissive sentiments of the political order, whether in the subtle mocking of ruling political elites, the sidestepping of political commentary with flippant gestures, or the obvious dismissal of discussing anything political in a context where politics indeed reach into everyday practices. For James Scott (1990), these conditions constitute the lived circumstances of everyday politics, the very conditions that form the basis of meaningful political contention. Once we consider the lived circumstances of authoritarian politics, Lisa Wedeen argues that we can identify ‘signs of

\(^{16}\) I generally do not subscribe to a closed-and-open dichotomy (typically referring to democratic vs. authoritarian systems), and believe that political practices can be similar across political systems (Tilly, 2007). Johnston’s insight, however, is useful in carefully analyzing public speech and discourse under authoritarian political conditions.
transgression’ (1999) many times motivated or ‘invited’ by the phony and illegitimate
public display of politics. Others have examined lived circumstances and self-help
network as political categories worthy of analysis, arguing that participation in
informal or semi-formal activities parallel to official politics or economics,
constitutes important political phenomena (Kamrava, 2003, Singerman, 1995, Bayat,
2010, Ismail, 2006).

Organization of Argument

In the following chapters, I will examine Tunisia’s spaces of contention under
the rule of Ben Ali, the individuals and groups involved in carving out such spaces,
and the means by which participation in contentious politics is generated. I define
contention under authoritarianism as a broad category, including all activities that do
not fit squarely into the constructed and forced political narrative of the state. Chapter
two presents a historical glimpse at the mundane forms of contention in the late
colonial period, chronicling the ways in which Tunisian citizens living under the
protectorate challenged French-administered urban plans to re-construct and
modernize Tunis, the capital city. Chapter three considers the Tunisian state under
the regime of President Zine Ben Ali since his coming to power in a constitutional
coup d’état in 1987, especially his cult of personality that has increasingly loomed
over public space throughout the country itself. The chapter juxtaposes two pervasive
narratives – one constructed by the Ben Ali state and rooted in a new form of
neoliberal Islamic nationalism, and the other perpetuated by tens of thousands of
Tunisian citizens through the medium of soccer and allegiances to soccer teams. The
fourth chapter, the study’s comparative angle, compares mobilization efforts and
political contention in pre-Orange Revolution Ukraine to moments of contention in Ben Ali’s Tunisia, including the nation-wide protest against unemployment and lack of opportunities for the country’s youth which began in December of 2010 and resulted in the ouster of President Ben Ali at the time of writing. Chapter five considers the most recent narrative of resistance in Tunisia as the Jasmine Revolution was unfolding, linking the 2010-2011 contentious events to previous attempts of organized contention and moments of transgression. The concluding chapter introduces politics of contention from a spatial perspective, summarizing the various themes developed throughout the dissertation. I will conclude this dissertation with a discussion of Tunisian politics post-Ben Ali and suggest areas for further and time-sensitive research, based on my own approach to the politics of contention.

Case Selection

The primary case guiding my inquiry is Tunisia under the twenty-three year rule of President Ben Ali from November 7, 1987 until January 14, 2011. Before the Jasmine Revolution, Tunisia was hailed as a paradoxical case, one exhibiting comparatively high levels of socio-economic development yet little to no incentive for political mobilization, defying the classic “no bourgeoisie, no democracy” formula developed by Barrington Moore (1966). Tunisia is not only an understudied case but also one that lends itself to examining this particular development paradox and probing contention under authoritarianism. To this effect, Tunisia also proved to be a compelling case to uncover microforms of political contestation in the form of the hidden contestation-domination dialogue between social actors and authoritarian politics. As a late-developer in terms of political liberalization, I examined other
cases beyond the Arab world that could provide clues to my research in Tunisia. Similar to the Ben Ali years in Tunisia, Ukraine under President Kuchma (1994-2004) was considered to be in a state of “creeping authoritarianism” with little opportunities for independent interest articulation and even less chance for a transition away from Kuchma’s illegitimate-style of governance. Yet as the Colored Revolutions swept across the post-Soviet world in Serbia, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, spilling into Lebanon’s less-successful Cedar Revolution, renewed attention was paid to the possibilities for popular bottom-up forms of contestation that can affect the rules of the political game beyond elite negotiations and intra-regime political splits. Before researching resistance to the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, I interviewed Orange Revolution activists in Kyiv that mobilized thousands of Ukrainians to take to the streets in the winter of 2004. My findings of contention in Tunisia under Ben Ali are applicable to other authoritarian political systems, and I hope that more political ethnographic research in the future can uncover these important spaces of contestation, in which citizens clash with their authoritarian leaders, whether implicitly or explicitly.
Chapter 2: Contesting the City

Maybe we can show government how to operate better as a result of better architecture.

- Frank Lloyd Wright

Was sind schon Städte, gebaut, ohne die Weisheit des Volkes.
(What are cities, built, without the wisdom of its citizens)

- Bertold Brecht, 1953

The history of Tunisia, a small country on the Southern Mediterranean rim wedged between Algeria to the west and Libya to the east, has been chronicled from the 12th century B.C. arrival of Phoenicians, who, according to myth, founded the glorious city of Carthage in 814 B.C. under Queen Dido’s reign. Tunisia’s historical, cultural and religious experience is generally traced through Roman, early Islamic, Medieval, Ottoman and French protectorate periods. In 1881, the French occupied Tunisia, ousting the dynastic Turkish Beys (kings) who had incorporated Tunisia as

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an autonomous republic of the Ottoman Empire for over 300 years (1574-1881). The French protectorate lasted for seventy-five years from 1881 until 1956, until a Tunisian nationalist movement, the Neo-Destour, headed by the young and charismatic Habib Bourguiba led the country to independence on March 20, 1956. Tunisia’s colonial experience under the French was significantly less detrimental and violent than that of neighboring Algeria, with less social disruption and a legacy of positive reforms. Bi-lingual education initiatives implemented by the French opened the door for Tunisian elites to study at universities in France, and develop the necessary skills to form a successful nationalist resistance movement that eventually achieved independence (Entelis, 2007). Habib Bourguiba became the first President of the independent Tunisian Republic, heading the ruling Neo-Destour party and renaming it in 1964 to Liberal Constitution Party (Parti Socialiste Destourien or PSD). On November 7, 1987 Bourguiba was deposed in a medical coup d’état by his then-Prime Minister, Zine Abedine Ben Ali, who renamed the PSD once again to Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD) in 1988 and stayed in power until January 14, 2011, when he fled the country amidst a popular uprising.

The political history of Tunisia’s independence movement and early post-colonial period has been documented in great details by historians and political

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18 Destour means “Constitution” in Arabic.
19 General Ben Ali was first brought into government by Bourguiba in 1984 as the Minister of National Security, constituting the first military officer to hold power in independent Tunisia. Ben Ali was appointed Prime Minister in 1987 after a short-lived career by Rached Sfar who replaced Mohamed Mzali in 1986. Mzali was dismissed after six years in office amid bread riots following government mandated increases in the price of food.
20 Following on-going protests after the Jasmine Revolution of January 14, 2011, a number of RCD officials resigned amidst mounting popular pressure, followed by a March 9, 2011 court ruling for the dissolution of the RCD.
scientists alike (Perkins, 2008; Entelis, 2007; Clancy-Smith, 1994; Anderson, 1986; Brown, 1974; Rudebeck, 1969; Micaud, Brown and Moore, 1964; Moore, 1964), as has the period of post-independence state-building and Bourguiba’s politics of modernization until Ben Ali’s coup in 1987 (Entelis, 1974, 1975, 2004; Stone and Simmons, 1976; Stone, 1982; Tessler, 1985; Zartman, 1991; Hopwood, 1992; Brown, 2001). As a historical backdrop to this dissertation, I will fuse decisive political moments in the late colonial and post-independence period into a story of shaping and contesting the capital city.

This chapter is a historical and analytical exploration into citizen’s involvement in contesting the late colonial city of Tunis, at a period when French power was waning due to a war of independence in neighboring Algeria, a strong nationalist movement in Morocco, and a rapidly rising populist independence movement in Tunisia. In telling the story of a city, I depend on findings from archival research in the National Archives of Tunisia, conversations with urban planners and architects, as well as contemporary ‘public space activists’ to chart citizen involvement in contesting, defining, and re-imagining the city, usually the primary site of political contention (Bayat, 2010, 1997; Singerman and Amar, 2006). While the city is surely not the sole site of political contestation and resistance (O’Brian & Li, 2006; Scott, 2009, 1985), it has nonetheless constituted the primary unit of analysis in political research on the Middle East and North Africa (Schwedler, 2010; Bayat, 2009; Singerman, & Amar, 2006; Singerman, 1995). This chapter is buttressed by work in architectural theory (Rowe, 1999; Jones, 2009), urban planning (Elsheshtawy, 2004; Bechir, 2004; Hajer, 2001; Belhadi, 1990) and urban studies.
(Imrie & Street, 2009; Sklair, 2009; Ben Joseph, 2009; Dovey, Woodcock & Wood, 2009). I examine, as part of the analysis, letters of protest submitted by interest groups and private inhabitants to colonial authorities, contesting urban reconfiguration such as extensions of avenues and boulevards, sanitation, and the compression or expansion of public space.

Critical analysis considering the politics of the Middle East and North Africa from a spatial perspective has recently responded to two emerging and already dominant research trends: a focus on the strength of the authoritarian state on the one hand, and the spread of terrorism or regional security threats on the other. In the past two decades, authoritarian states in the Middle East, especially Tunisia and Egypt, have transformed themselves into paradoxical neoliberal systems of rule (i.e. economic freedom without political freedom). Authoritarian leaders employ democratic rhetoric while strengthening the internal security apparatus and liberalizing domestic economies through strategies and programs that primarily benefits powerful political and economic elites as well as some segments of the military and security services (Amar, 2011; Marshall 2009). This type of dichotomous state behavior has likewise compressed forms of political contestation and resistance into hidden and obscured spaces that frequently escape the attention of social scientists. Students critical of research programs overlooking the meta-narratives of mundane and alternative politics under authoritarianism have invited a new research agenda centered on Middle Eastern cities, where a large percentage of contestation against dominant political orders occurs. The “Cairo School of Urban Studies” in particular has produced an exceptional collection of essays, contemplating
Cairo as a site to scrutinize the shifting practices, movements and coping mechanisms by ordinary inhabitants in response to uncertain flows of politics, economics, and social configurations (Singerman and Amar, 2006; Singerman, 2009). The contours of the city, then, map the spaces of political theater, where squares, streets, neighborhoods and cultural institutions become venues for political contest and resistance (Bayat, 1997, 2010). This new research agenda primarily considers the neoliberal city, or global mega-city (Singerman, 2009; Koonings and Kruijt, 2009), in which citizen struggles are articulated against the paradoxical neo-liberal political order as it entrenches inequalities, hierarchies and exclusion (Schwedler, 2010). In this chapter, however, I am less concerned with the morphing of Tunis from a post-colonial city into a neoliberal city (which has occurred to a lesser extent than have Cairo, Dubai and Tangier), and more intent on providing a glimpse into the participation of citizens in urban reconfiguration during the last years of French colonial rule. Neoliberalism in Tunis has doubtlessly been met with resistance by its inhabitants, particularly the “mall-ification” of Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the central space of the Jasmine Revolution, and other cultural spaces within the capital, providing a fruitful research terrain for students interested in the politics of urban space. At the end of this chapter, I will briefly discuss some important political-spatial changes in the capital following ex-President Ben Ali’s ascension to power on November 7, 1987.

Vernacular Contest

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21 I would have traced citizen involvement in redefining and restructuring Tunis in the post-colony as well, however, during my time in Tunis (2008-2010), most post-colonial era archives had not yet been opened to researchers and the public.
Seventy-five years of French colonialism impacted Tunisia quite differently than neighboring Algeria, which gained independence after a complex decolonization war between the French and intensifying Algerian resistance movements from 1954-1962. Modernization reforms in Tunisia allowed for the rise of an educated, bilingual Arabic and French social and economic class, transforming itself into an important nationalist movement, first the Destour and later the break-away Neo-Destour movement that eventually negotiated independence. Nonetheless, even under a softer protectorate, the French prioritized the interests of European settlers over those of Tunisians, allowing primarily French and Italian settlers to purchase land and, consequently, displace rural Tunisians. The colonial administration likewise encroached upon economic and commercial life, while performing a decisive role in constructing the metropolis of Tunis. As Tunisian defiance fueled by the Neo-Destour against the French protectorate was growing increasingly contentious, a fascinating debate ensued about the spatial organization of the city.

Tunis today, similar to other cities reconstructed under French colonialism, is broadly divided between an old, Arab city, the Medina, and a new, modern and functional French city, or Ville Nouvelle. In Tunis, similar to Rabat, Marrakesh and Fes in Morocco, as well as Sfax in Southern Tunisia, the Medina is connected to the

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22 One of the most detailed discussions of the Destour and Neo-Destours rise, including internal negotiations and relationship with European powers as well as other Arab states (the League of Arab States) can be found in Kenneth J. Perkin. 2008. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. Cambridge University Press.; see especially chapters 3 and 4.
23 Medinas themselves are organized logically by trade, security, religious space, living quarters, etc. (Gottreich, 2006), however, the French colonial city was organized in the spirit of Haussmanization, a project involving both beautification as well as sanitation.
new city by way of a broad and vibrant tree-lined boulevard, today’s Avenue Habib Bourguiba. The central avenue, however, was a highly contested urban space, constructed, negotiated and transformed by the French, even before formally colonizing Tunisia in 1881 (Kenzari, 2004). In 1870, eleven years before the French formally established the protectorate by forcing the Bey of Tunis to sign the Treaty of Bardo or Treaty of Ksar Said, the long stretch between the 8th century Medina and the Lake of Tunis leading out to the Mediterranean was simply called Promenade de la Marine à Tunis. Eventually, La Marine was going to become the most important route of the metropolis, linking the capital to the Lake of Tunis, the port of La Goulette, the Gulf of Tunis and the Mediterranean Sea (Kenzari, 2004). According to French urban plans, the sole building on La Marine was the French Consulate, and the promenade itself appeared in an aquarelle by A. Crapelet published in the 1865 magazine *Le Tour du Monde* (Ben Becher, 2003: 11). Already by the 1840s European merchants began moving to Tunis, mainly French and Italians, establishing new schools, small hotels, and other establishments that would spatially and socially separate them from the Muslim population inhabiting the medina. Within a couple of decades, European capitalist and industrial advancements and Tunisia’s growing debt led the way to colonial dependence. In 1858, the French Consul Léon Roche solicited the Bey’s authorization to construct a French consular residence on the main *La Marine*, which had already developed into a bustling and vibrant space itself (Ben

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Becher, 2003: 12). In less than a decade, the Ville Nouvelle was constructed by the French, offering a new architectural scheme and character that notably distanced itself from the spatial logic of the Medina, with its straight roads, wide boulevards, multi-story buildings and modern facades. The French consulate, *Le Maison de France*, built by engineer Colin and designed by architect Caillat, was completed and inaugurated in 1861 in the presence of the Bey, and until this day houses the French embassy. With the increased commercialization of the avenue throughout the early twentieth century and the earlier establishment of a train system in 1872 linking La Marine with the port town of La Goulette and the affluent Northern suburb of La Marsa, on the other side of the Lake of Tunis, La Marine swiftly became the commercial, social and cultural city center. In 1881, however, the French administrator, mandated by the mastermind of colonial expansion Jules Ferry to force the Tunisian Bey into the Treaty of Bardo, split La Marine into two spaces, changing its name to Avenue de la France between the medina and the French consular residence, and renaming the Southern part of the avenue to carry the name of Jules Ferry. Under the French, Avenue Jules Ferry became the epicenter of cultural and nightlife activity with the construction of a municipal theater in 1910, a casino and winter garden *Le Palmarium* housing a skating ring in 1911, cafes, bakery shops,
tea salons, hotels, banks, boutiques and stores, restaurants, flower and phone shops (Ben Becher, 2003: 39-54). The Ville Nouvelle was rapidly expanding in all directions encircling the Medina, with its wide boulevards, urban apartment complexes, shops, restaurants, tramway systems, until Tunisian independence in 1956. With the elation emanating from independence and the Neo-Destour’s success, Avenue Jules Ferry was renamed Avenue Habib Bourguiba, though the section between the Medina and the French embassy remains Avenue de la France until this day. After Zine Abedine Ben Ali took power in 1987, he promptly moved a majestic statue of Habib Bourguiba that stood at the square connecting Avenue de la France and Avenue Habib Bourguiba, across the Lake of Tunis to the port town of La Goulette. Further down the avenue, Ben Ali constructed a towering clock at the center of the new Place Novembre 7 strategically situated between the Ministry of the Interior and later the ostentatious party headquarters of his Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD).

Returning to the colonial era, the rapid modernization and urbanization of Tunis especially since 1881, however, did not occur without contention by the city’s inhabitants, and especially adherents of the Tunisian nationalist Neo-Destour movement. Under French rule, an urban crisis was bubbling, as the colonial powers were less inclined to invest in urban development for the local Tunisian population, and not addressing decaying housing and sanitation issues in the Medina. This urban and social segregation eventually backfired as ordinary Tunisians would identify and support with a nationalist movement that was led almost exclusively by Tunisia’s elite. The French were rapidly occupying the city’s space and ushering in
functionality through the extension of major avenues, parts of which continued to be occupied by private citizens. The appropriation of new public space was legitimized via decrees in which space was gifted to the municipality by citizens, rendering the city a first ‘public space’ (Belhadi, 1990). For instance, in an 1892 decree, the director of city planning declared that a small portion of a street between Avenue de Paris and the road leading from Tunis to La Goulette currently occupied by a Mr. Eliaou Lemama, has now been declared as a public space, and will be incorporated into the public, municipal system. Mr. Lemama, according to the decree ceded his ownership of a small part of the major boulevard for public utility that will allow for the extension and connection of two important roads. The director of urban planning then graciously offered the new public space to the President of the Municipality of Tunis, writing that Mr. Lemama’s civil act is of great benefit to the city at large as well as the on-going extension project approved and spearheaded by the municipality.

In thousands of such decrees, French administrators legitimized the absorption of a city, reconstructing it into a public space under the management of the new Municipality of Urban Planning that would direct the rapid modernization of Tunis.

It was a political realignment in the 1940s, however, that allowed Tunisian citizens to become more involved in political, economic as well as spatial decisions. The Neo-Destour movement, by that time, was already engaged in a contentious relationship with colonial administrators, clearly carving out strategies to steer the country towards independence. In 1947, a new resident general by the name of Jean

\[26 \text{ Le decret du 20 août 1892. Secretariat du Gouvernement Tunisien. Les Archives Nationales de Tunisie.} \\
27 \text{ Letter from Le Directeur des Traveaux to Monsieur le Président de la Municipalité a Tunis. 22 Julliet, 1892. Les Archives Nationales de Tunisie.}\]
Mons arrived in Tunis, and immediately met with all factions of the nationalist movement to embark on a political reform program of “co-sovereign” government. Mons’ loosening of control over Tunisia has been attributed to his socialist background, and in his political reform plan he envisioned a Tunisian prime minister under the supervision of the French general secretary, who would preside over a mixed Tunisian and French assembly, with more Tunisian representation than before (Perkins, 2008: 111). The plan, however was rejected by the Neo-Destour and powerful French voices alike, with Tunisians demanding more autonomy while the French who accounted for a mere seven percent of the population, remained unwilling to surrender their interests to Tunisians. The gradual failure of the 1947 reforms not only propelled the reemergence of the Neo-Destour as a political force to be reckoned with, but also attracted the support of Amin Bey, who hoped for the kind of popularity Morocco’s King Mohammed V’s enjoyed, should he align with the nationalists against French control (Perkins: 2008: 118). Habib Bourguiba, who at the time was living in Cairo, was assured by Mons that he could safely return to Tunisia, prompting Bourguiba to lay out a new Neo-Destour program, supported by Amin Bey, that would redefine Tunisian-French relations, placing more meaningful power into the hands of Tunisians while protecting French interests.

At the height of the increasingly contentious relationship between the nationalists and the French administration as well as within factions of the nationalist movement itself, the tone of contentious politics also trickled into the debates of how to amend and spatially rearrange the capital of Tunis. Between 1950 and 1951, the Tunisian Engineering Association (Fédération des Associations d'Ingenieurs de...
Tunisie) organized a series of meetings and lectures about varying approaches to urban developments, historical themes of spatial organization delineating between political authority, inhabitants and economy, and debating contemporary examples cross-nationally. The theme of the series of meetings concerned the development of modern cities using urban development models from Europe and Brazil, with particular attention to citizen-government relations as well as individual liberties of citizens within changing spatial environments. How are citizens and inhabitants impacted by the movement of power, changing spaces of economic production, new industrial zones as well as centralized civic spaces? The participants were keenly concerned with the possible restrictions on the rights and liberties of property owners, especially limiting the rights to construct without a consensus on rules and regulations. The problem, they argued, was simply identifying the point at which one can limit individual liberties to construct and develop, if such construction inhibits the city’s collective advantage. In other words, constraints on the individual rights of property owners are legitimate, if such constraints carry collective benefits for an urban community.

Oftentimes, the conference participants concluded, citizens easily forget that in their relationship with the government, individual liberties are not absolute, and that liberties exist solely within the institution of the law. That law, of course, represents a consensual agreement between citizens and their government, and within its powers of limitations, the law simultaneously permits the exercise of equal

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liberties and rights for all citizens. Modern life carries with it requirements on part of citizens that did not exist 150 years ago. The culture of citizenship has since this date progressed and allowed an understanding of new rules and regulations: liberties, including the rights of property owners have changed since the last century, permitting for regulations that move beyond the benefit of an individual to the benefits of an entire citizenry or community (L’Amenagement: 7).

The results of the year-long series of lectures and conferences indicated an interesting shift from the appropriation of property by the state and its decision to reconstruct and modernize urban space, to the consideration of barriers imposed upon individual rights as well as liberal ideas of surrendering rights for the common good, a general will, or a common life world. The meeting sponsored by the engineers, then, broached the making of urban, public space at a time of increased contention and political transition, which, according to Peter G. Rowe is defined by “a muddled uncertainty about appropriate relationships between the state and civil society” (Rowe, 1999: 35). When it came to political discussions about modernizing the city, a more antagonistic interaction between French authorities and Tunisian participants ensued.

In 1951, a controversial plan (Programme d’Amenagement de la Ville de Tunis) to modify the city of Tunis was drafted by a group of French urban planners, engineers, and other civil servants appointed by the municipality of Tunis. The plan sought to extend the city through new suburbs and address the problem of the traditional Medina regarding barriers to modernization and sanitation. By that time, Tunisian resistance to the French was increasingly fueled by the Neo-Destour
movement as well as other nationalist factions, and the urban planning proposal was strongly protested by both ordinary inhabitants of the city as well as the newly-founded Union of Tunisian Landlords (UPNB, l’Union de la Propriete Nue et Batie de Tunisie). A series of contentious deliberations occurred that year between the French administrators and a few Tunisian nationalists29, primarily S.E. Bouhageb from the family of Tunisian reformer Sheikh Salem Bouhageb (1827-1924) who advocated that modernity should remain compatible with Arabo-Islamic tradition. The question of the Medina, which was largely left out of the construction and rapid modernization of the Ville Nouvelle, dominated much of the debate, providing for remarkably interesting insights into openly voiced arguments and opinions that were laced with questions of domination, subjugation, and foreign interference.

At a meeting convened on June 19, 1951 by Général Hayder, both Tunisian critiques and French justifications were solicited to a proposed plan for the reconstruction of Tunis. S.E. Bouagheb, the Tunisian participant, immediately announced his contempt of the plan, blaming the city municipality for the rampant poverty in the Medina, arguing provocatively that the Medina itself had been purposefully left out of previous modernization schemes. The French participants quickly dismissed Bouagheb’s attack and responded with their articulation of the socio-spatial, economic and psychological problem defining the gap between the new and old city. “The social condition of poverty is such that we cannot expect from

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these people that they transform themselves into the kind of capitalists that can proceed by themselves with the required repairs of the city.”  

This statement, articulated by M. Clavel, most clearly indicated a rejection of Tunisian ambitions to take matters into their own hands. First, by referring in disparaging fashion to Tunisian inhabitants of the Medina as *ce gens là* or “these people,” he established a clear social distinction from the modernizing French capitalist and possibly even the Tunisian elites. Clavel further explained that a capitalist mind naturally carries a sense of responsibility (in this case for urban repairs), which *ce gens là* simply did not possess. This lack of capitalist and entrepreneurial spirit, Clavel noted confidently, was the root of the city’s sanitation problem. The proposal ultimately suggested a comprehensive yet vaguely articulated “airing of the city,” to overcome detrimental problems of hygiene.

Once the controversial plan was made available to the public, a number of concerned citizens as well as the Tunisian Union of Landowners (UPNB) responded with letters to the city municipality as well as the Ministry of Urbanism and Housing. The UPNB in particular voiced its concern that the plan itself was saturated with hidden ambitions, benefiting French colonial interests over those of all inhabitants.  

First and most importantly, the UPNB argued, the methodology was faulty as a broad survey among citizens was not conducted that inquired about citizens’ urban needs. Those most affected by a restructuring plan, such as architects and landlords, were

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likewise not consulted during the development of the new proposal. Nor was a recently created and approved Architects’ Society (Fédération des Sociétés d’architectes de Tunisie\textsuperscript{32}) consulted in any of the negotiations and debates, prompting the Society itself to send a letter of protest to the Ministry\textsuperscript{33}. For this reason, the UPNB protested with its utmost opposition the autocratic mentality of the project developers who had showed a complete disregard for the basic liberties and rights of property owners and citizens. The plan was thus a strategy against the rights of private property and the community, solely benefiting the ambitions of a colonial state (Protestation, 2-3).

The UPNB further attacked the intentions of the drafters, writing that, “the authors probably fell out of the sky and believe that Tunis is a dot somewhere in the Saharan desert, where lions freely stroll in the city’s streets” (4). The criticism here is of the authors reflecting ambitions articulated in Paris, not taking into account the needs of Tunis’ inhabitants, especially Tunisians residing in the Medina. Beyond the inability or unwillingness to take into account local needs and socio-cultural urban dynamics, the UPNB also charged French civil servants with attempting to manipulate city zoning and not considering important communal spaces that should serve all city inhabitants. Again, Tunis is “neither located in the desert not does the landscape resemble Normandy, where manicured gardens and parks line major roads.” Rather, the UPNB claimed, there are important spatial and developmental issues that need to be negotiated with current property owners as well as concerned

\textsuperscript{32} Partie non-officielle: ADMINISTRATIVE GENERALE, Tunis, le 16 Novembre, 1949. Les Archives Nationales de Tunisie.

\textsuperscript{33} Tunis, 28 Mai, 1951. Les Archives Nationales de Tunisie.
citizens who would be negatively effected by the proposed plan. The UPNB’s challenge was supported by dozens of private letters sent to the municipality and ministry, charging the proposed plan to block the natural development of a city, its economy, as well as living arrangements.

The spatial debate about Tunis during late colonialism, then, offers a glance at debates about new organizations of public as well as civic life. Meanwhile, the resistance by Tunisians to predominantly French conceptions of urbanism and modernity with regard to the organization of space and place mirrored other political struggles that were underway in Tunis. The late colonial city, then, resembled the beginning of a vague civic realism, defined as “a concept based on the belief that it is along the politico-cultural division between civil society and the state that the urban architecture of the public realm is made best, especially when the reach of both spheres extends simultaneously up to a civilization’s loftier aims and down to the needs and aspirations of its marginalized populations” (Rowe, 1999: 34-35). The political vibrancy underpinning the debate of urban space in the late colonial period stands in stark contrast to contemporary Tunis and its expanding, glitzy yet autocratic manifestations defining the Ben Ali era, void of any citizen-involvement in constructing and re-shaping the city.

*Urban Space in the Post-Colony*

By 1955, the Neo-Destour led by the charismatic Habib Bourguiba was well on its way to gaining independence from France, both as a result of its internal strength as well as regional entanglements. Domestically, Bourguiba, the Supreme

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34 Author’s interview with A., Tunisian architect, March 2010, Tunis.
Combatant (Al-Mujahid Al-Akhbar) as he was referred to in the heyday of his political popularity, was able to rally hundreds of thousands of ordinary Tunisians with eloquent and powerful speeches framed within a passionate rhetoric of nationalism and subjugation to French rule (Perkins, 2008: 130). In Morocco, the French were pressured to negotiate a new nationalist government, reinstating King Mohammed V, a supporter and symbol of the Moroccan nationalist struggle who was sent into exile just two years before. With Morocco’s independence on the horizon, France strategically shifted its attention to the intensifying rebellion in Algeria, prompting Habib Bourguiba to demand independence, which France granted Tunisia on March 20, 1956.

The question of the city was subsumed under the larger modernization project introduced by Habib Bourguiba, the socio-economic success of which distinguishes Tunisia from its Moroccan and Algerian neighbors until this day. As the French began their departure from Tunis, the restructuring and modernization of the city became predominantly a Tunisian affair, notwithstanding on-going contestation between inhabitants and city authorities.

The economic and political upheaval defining the immediate independence period was most certainly mirrored in spatial implications, especially mundane illusions that accompanied independence (Belhadi, 1990). Population shifts and urban migration, rapid development and modernization, incoherent political choices, an increasingly diversified economy, amelioration of daily life and concurrent explosion of new needs and desires defining the tumultuous and complex post-colonial era, impacted the space of the city as well. Urban space became the epicenter of political,
social and cultural struggles, yet suffering from contradictory logics of reorganization (Belhadi, 1990: 34-35). The Medina in particular underwent what the French term *taudification*, or the gradual decaying into a slummy area as its upper and middle-class residents began occupying the *Ville Nouvelle* while the Medina transformed itself into a new living quarter for rural migrants (Kenzari, 2004). As part of Bourguiba’s modernization program, he supported a process of slum clearance which was framed by the young post-independence government as a “rekindling of national esteem” (116). This modernist approach to spatial organization, however, resulted in large-scale destruction of the Medina’s historical fabric primarily to facilitate vehicular movement, and by 1967 the newly created *Association de la Sauvegarde de la Medina* (ASM) fully halted the modernist agenda (117). The ASM in collaboration with UNESCO and the World Bank continuously pushed the government (both Bourguiba and later Ben Ali) to safeguard the Medina’s historical and architectural spaces while empowering residents to refurbish the old city’s physical space and economic activity.35 Bourguiba’s government viewed any spatial reorganization project as part of larger political and economic modernization schemes.

After less than a decade following independence, the political career of Habib Bourguiba was marked by a gradual increase in authoritarian tendencies, concisely summarized by Kenneth J. Perkin’s chapter subheading, “state in the service of the party, party in the service of the President” (2008: 130). Bourguiba is often remembered if not venerated for promoting market-oriented liberal economic reforms and pursuing a pro-Western foreign policy within a framework of adaptive

35 Interview with S., public space activist, Tunis, April 2010.
modernization. In fighting colonialism, achieving independence, quelling domestic political tensions and struggles (one of which almost resulted in civil war immediately following independence) and contriving national unity, Bourguiba was also decisive in institutionalizing incipient centralized if not authoritarian political practices. He consolidated power in the form of a monolithic party and state structure, of which he was first the prime minister then President, relegating government responsive to the President rather than the legislature. Even though Bourguiba’s charismatic appeal and populist agenda earned him support among a tolerant citizenry, the supreme combatant increasingly grew distant from a restive population that was questioning his authoritarian drift.

The contradictory legacy of economic openness in the absence of political liberalism was not merely continued but became entrenched by Bourguiba’s successor Ben Ali. Political scientists have written of the illiberal character of Ben Ali’s regime by examining the co-optation of key economic players that inhibited political liberalization (Alexander, 2010, 1997, 1996; King, 2010, 2003; Bellin, 2004, 2002; Cammett, 2007; White, 2001; Murphy, 1999). Neo-liberal economic reforms pursued by Bourguiba in the 1970s and 1980s and accelerated by Ben Ali since his coming to power have ultimately reinforced authoritarian rule. How? Even Ben Ali relied on domestic crises to legitimize his excessive political control, especially in the name of fighting terrorism following the 2002 bombing of a synagogue on the island of Djerba.

The Ben Ali regime, however, has also embarked on a massive restructuring of the city of Tunis, in the name of progress and development, two pillars of his
rhetoric of political change (chapter 3). Some of the most radical changes have been the construction of the affluent neighborhood of Berges du Lac to the east of the capital, hugging the Lake of Tunis between the city and the Northern suburbs. With the financial assistance of Bank Ettamwil Tounsi Saoud (BEST Bank) a Saudi-Tunisian offshore operation and its affiliate Al Baraka created in 1987 by Salah Kamel, Berges du Lac houses many foreign businesses, the U.S. and other embassies, luxury apartments, shops and restaurants, but where no alcohol is served as negotiated with the Saudi investors. Just a bit further north, an Emirati-funded enclave called Tunis Sports City was negotiated with investors in May 2007, builders and the Tunisian government. The philosophy behind this opulent gated-community project was to create luxurious living quarters for Tunisians and visitors alike, located in the midst of sports spaces (golf courses, tennis courts), recreational and green spaces. However, as the 2008 global financial meltdown trickled down to investors from the Arab Gulf, the project has been put on hold indefinitely.

The spread of flashy urban enclaves under the Ben Ali regime reflects the gradual movement of Tunis towards a global mega-city, propelled by the Tunisian government as well as international investors, primarily from the Arab Gulf. Ben Ali, however, did not abandon the Medina and colonial city of downtown Tunis, but rather embarked on a radical spatial-political re-organization beginning in August of 2000 (Ben Becher, 2003). In the 1970s, a number of new hotels began dotting the urban landscape, most notably the towering modernist Africa Hotel on Avenue Habib

Bourguiba, radically transforming the city’s skyline. With its eight stories, it nonetheless represented a previously foreign form of architecture to the city.

By the time Ben Ali came to power, the city had naturally been transformed since the French encirclement of the Medina from the mid-19th through the mid-20th century. Under Bourguiba, the PSD37 party headquarters were strategically constructed close to the Prime Ministry and the Casbah housing other ministries and the Parliament (Bourguiba was prime minister from 1956-1957 and then became head of state in July 1957 when the ruling PSD abolished the powerless baylical monarchy and declared Tunisia a republic), anchoring the walls of the Medina opposite the Porte de France or Bab Bhar (Gate to the Sea) which opens to Avenue de France and Avenue Habib Bourguiba. Resembling the architectural style of the main library at UC San Diego in its early modernist style, the PSD and later RCD party headquarters were abandoned by Ben Ali, and moved to the other end of Avenue Habib Bourguiba in 2001, leaving the former headquarters to be occupied by the city’s municipality.

The new construction of the RCD party headquarters by acclaimed architect Taufik Ben Hadid, radically changed the character of downtown Tunis. The flashy and hypermodern building, located at the intersection of Avenue Bourguiba and Avenue Mohammed V (the second largest boulevard), but faces the Ministry of the Interior on one end, and the Medina on the other. In August of 2001, the year Tunisia hosted the Mediterranean Games, Ben Ali inaugurated the face of the new city, overwhelmed by the gigantic RCD party building, a new November 7th square at the round-about between the party building and the Ministry of the Interior, with a

37 The Neo-Destour was renamed as the Parti Socialiste Dusturien (PSD) at a party congress in Bizerte in 1964.
The colossal clock tower mounted on the square presiding over Avenue Habib Bourguiba. The arabesque clock tower integrates modernism with Tunisian traditional architectural art, lights up at night surrounded by somber fountains accentuates the city’s and political change (Ben Becher, 2003).

The neoliberal and starchitectural style of Tunis, distinguished by the unavoidable RCD party building, is reminiscent of other authoritarian cities, where autocrats have most recently “developed a taste for modern architecture” (Lacayo, 2008: 55). Departing from previous forms of “pachyderm neoclassicism” preferred by dictators who wanted to display an image of enduring empire, dictators now opt to transform public spaces into high-modernist enclaves (55). When Taufik Ben Hadid, the architect of the sumptuous yet imposing party headquarters was asked in an interview how the construction represents power in space, Ben Hadid answered: “I sought to integrate my project into the landscape of Avenue Mohamed V, designed by Oliver Clément Cacoub, which was conceived as an ensemble of different ways…my project is part of this modernist continuity which began in the 1960s, while opening it also to the central Avenue Habib Bourguiba to be visible and accessible to strollers.”38

In the absence of public processes determining the reconfiguration of cities, including the restructuring of a post-colonial order into a neoliberal cityscape through

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citizen participation as we witnessed in the later colonial period which presumably continued throughout the early years of the post-colony, Tunis under Ben Ali has been reconfigured through the “architecture of autocracy” (Lacayo, 2008:53). The strollers, Ben Hadid refers to above, are primarily the ordinary Tunisians rushing to work or spending their mornings and afternoons in cafes on Avenue Habib Bourguiba quietly debating politics, especially the rumors of Ben Ali and his notorious in-laws. Thus the imposing architecture of the RCD party building, which was mostly ignored by those passing by, served a physical reminder of political authority and power, rather than architectural aesthetics to be admired. The authoritarian spatial configuration of some parts of Tunis and its omission of citizen participation in the making of space and place, marks the physical backdrop against which this study is positioned. Yet, as will be argued in the following chapters, ubiquitous authoritarian politics in practice, rhetoric and symbolism (either through political cults or architecture) invite transgression and resistance by their sheer presence.

On January 14, 2011, Tunisians began tearing down the visual cult of personality idolizing Ben Ali, by removing and tearing down gigantic posters, trashing the mandatory portraits displayed in all shops, cafes, restaurants and offices, and, most dramatically, jumping the gates of the RCD headquarters to dismantle the golden, shiny, super-sized letters spelling RCD in Arabic above the building’s entrance. Just a year prior, on February 13th, 2010 when I arrived in Tunis for my

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final field-research trip, a Tunisian friend picked me up at the airport past midnight and took me on an early morning stroll down Avenue Habib Bourguiba. As we neared Place 7 November and the bright clock tower, I quietly glanced towards the RCD headquarters, distracted by the radiant red letters on its top spelling the party’s name, casting an eerie light onto the boulevard. Noticing my tired glance, K. laughed and whispered, “Don’t worry, he’s still there, he’s not going anywhere.”
Chapter 3: Competing Spectacles

All forms of tampering with human beings, getting at them, shaping them against their will to your own patterns, all thought control conditioning is, therefore, a denial of that in men which makes them men and their values ultimate.

- Isaiah Berlin

On November 7, 2008, Tunisia celebrated the 21st anniversary of President Zine Ben Ali’s ascension to power by a bloodless coup d’état and its proclaimed birth of democracy in 1987. To mark the festivities, the President, who rarely appears in public, delivered a forceful speech in the capital’s newly constructed, ultra-modern soccer stadium “Stade 7 Novembre,” a few kilometers outside of Tunis in the town of Radès, home to many foreign shipping and freight companies. Radès, an otherwise bland and industrial suburb of Southern Tunis, had recently been connected to the bustling capital by the country’s most modern and publically anticipated bridge, an engineering innovation presented as a gift from the President to the Tunisian people.

The President’s festive and spectacular speech was, as it was in the previous twenty years, choked full of laudatory references to his successful provision of social progress, economic development, political liberalism, as well as a reconciliation of

40 The rhetoric of democracy was likewise part of the independence movement as well as President Habib Bourguiba’s rule from independence in 1956 until 1987. President Ben Ali’s usage of democracy compliments numerous other descriptors for the moment he came to power: ‘awakening,’ ‘enlightenment,’ ‘new era of progress,’ ‘democratic spring,’ ‘period of opening,’ among others.

41 The “Goulette-Radès Bridge” is a 141 million dinar (approximately $95 million) initiative primarily funded by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), who invested 120 million dinars in the project. The bridge the first cable-stayed of its kind in Tunisia and Africa will, according to www.tunisiepro.net, a Tunisian news agency, the bridge “undoubtedly gives the capital an aesthetic dimension worthy of big North Mediterranean metropoles.
Tunisia’s Arabo-Islamic identity with the country. In all of his twenty-one speeches, Ben Ali clearly set himself apart from his predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, who led the country to independence in 1956 and ruled for thirty-one consecutive years. What distinguished Ben Ali’s otherwise metaphorical proclamations from previous announcements thinly concealing rapidly increasing authoritarian tendencies, was a firm declaration that Tunisia had been and would be protected from the most recent global financial crisis, that tourism, one of the country’s largest sources of revenues, would not be affected, that foreign companies would continue to invest, and that Tunisians would continue to benefit from social and economic progress, all thanks to his ushering in democracy on November 7, 1987.

The political spectacle was accompanied by a flurry of posters, flags, light fixtures displaying in bright purple or red\(^\text{42}\) the number seven, adorning streets, office buildings, squares, parks, schools, restaurants and cafés. An accompanying and noticeable increase in Ben Ali paraphernalia in the form of super-sized posters and photos as well as banners reading messages thanking the President for his leadership and service, cluttered public spaces days before the November 7th anniversary. The carnivalesque display of political symbolism and the sheer amount of kitsch adorning the national celebration raises the question, ‘who buys this stuff?’ Certainly not the two thousand, or so, invited spectators, mainly government officials and students,

\(^{42}\) Red is Tunisia’s national color. Purple is royal and apparently President Ben Ali’s favorite color which now distinguishing his era from that of his predecessor. Some Tunisian cynics have analyzed the symbolic dimension of color as purple representing the mixing of ‘democratic blue’ to the traditional red. Others have labeled Ben Ali’s coming to power as “Le Coup Viole(t)” where violer means ‘rape’ or ‘violate’ and violet means ‘purple,’ but both words are pronounced the same. Thus, the coup is regarded as a political violation.
who filled a small section of the Radès stadium, built for a crowd of 60,000. Cameras during the staged televised event never inched from focusing on the President standing before his crowd, concealing the 58,000 empty seats. Nor did ordinary Tunisians bother to even mention the political event, let alone acknowledge the presence of the year’s most hefty political spectacle. The smothering of public spaces in political paraphernalia (Wedeen, 1999), nor the daily newspaper, radio and television coverage, appeared to resonate in everyday conversation.  

Instead, Tunisian men, women, students, professionals, families, children were busy gearing up and debating the November 9th soccer derby between Tunis’ archrival teams, Club Africain and Esperance, an event that would take place in the same stadium, only forty-eight hours after the President’s anniversary speech.

In this chapter, I will discuss Tunis’ soccer stadium as a space of deliberation where alternative political identities are formed through fans’ contestation in

43 Here I do not claim that I surveyed thousands of Tunisians about their sentiments and awareness of the national holiday. Rather, I point to the gap between the state’s narrative embodied in public display of political paraphernalia and media coverage and the absence of public debate. While public debate is normally propelled by large new economic initiatives (i.e. the launching of the country’s first Islamic bank, Banque Zitouna, in May 2010, high-profile foreign investment plans such as the Goulette-Radès Bridge, Tunis Sports City, among others) or major international events, lavish national celebrations are rarely discussed publicly.

44 I treat identity as a fluid category, constituted by social practices and subject to change. Individuals, groups and the state all engage in the construction of identity, whether social, political, regional, religious, nationalist and so on. Identity is thus constructed by different actors for different purposes. The state engages in strategic identity construction -- nationalist, Islam-based, economic – to produce a certain type of citizen. Citizens, such as the team supporters discussed in this chapter, engage in alternative processes of identity formation that do not fit squarely with the dominant ideological agenda of the state. These identities, I contend, are alternative and constitute different spaces of meaning beyond the ubiquity of the authoritarian state. For conceptual clarity, identity formation denotes a process such as debate or contestation. Identity, alternative identity, social or socio-political identity are
contrast to the dominant nationalist narrative of the state. In Ben Ali’s Tunisia, the state’s dominant narrative and its embodiment in a ubiquitous cult of personality was rooted in two distinctive strategies: economic liberalism and a reconciliation with Islam.\(^{45}\) The state, therefore, was actively involved in the creation of citizens that are both neo-liberal and Muslim, meaning receptive of free-market economics (Hazbun, 2008) and the state’s refashioning of Tunisia’s Islamic heritage.\(^{46}\) Yet, many oppositional actors argued, that the Tunisian state under Ben Ali in fact lacked a coherent ideology, that the state exemplified an ideological “empty shell” engaged primarily in policing and exercising control, while consolidating its own economic and political interests. The absence of a coherent state ideology carried four overlapping meanings: (1) official state rhetoric was not channeled into public policy and was therefore considered to be frivolous, illegitimate or ‘empty;’ (2) the Tunisian state was not monolithic but rather an aggregate of antagonistic state strategies, (3) coercive state practices were masked with liberal political rhetoric, and (4) the erratic change from pluralism to neo-liberal economic reform/privatization to political stability and then to reconciliation with Islam does not lend itself to a unified state categories of analysis that are fluid, meaning that I analyze them at a specific moment but recognize that through debate and contestation they can change.

\(^{45}\) I problematize the neo-liberal/Islamic dichotomy in a different chapter, through an examination of privatization initiatives that strategically use Islamic rhetoric. This, I argue, is an effort to divert public support from popular, oppositional, and now-outlawed moderate Islam-based opposition movement to the re-fashioned Tunisian state. I am, however, sensitive to the distinction between imposing ideology to consolidate political power and adopting political ideology for the type of service and policy a state is engaged in (as in Western European party politics). It is this distinction that led numerous of my respondents to conclude that Ben Ali’s regime is indeed ‘without ideology.’

\(^{46}\) The Ben Ali regime was clearly distinguishing itself from the secular modernization trajectory of the Bourguiba government (1956-1987).
ideology. While those who opposed the strategies and practices of the Ben Ali regime regarded state ideology as ‘empty’ or ‘illegitimate,’ the state itself might have been in the process of manipulating and absorbing the range of social identities available (Laitin, 1998). As ordinary individuals were engaged in the construction of social identity, whether religious, nationalist, urban, rural, imaginary, class-based, educational, familial and so on, the state itself was strategically recognizing and absorbing some of these forms of identification to garner support and recognition. The recent state-led projects for reconciliation with Islam and a rethinking of nationalism, for instance, played on an increase in religious identification in Tunisia.

Soccer stadiums constitute one of the country’s few public spaces where collective speech was significantly more free than most other venues, where social identities were debated through symbolic contestation between team supporters, and where governance was at moments delicately challenged. Such processes of identity formation through debate and contestation among thousands of citizens are exemplary of alternative political practices and spaces which occur outside of the institutional realm of the state and are fashioned by groups and individuals coping with authoritarian political orders. State strategies that seek to mold regime-compliant citizens, whether authoritarian, neo-liberal, religious, and so on, are habitually part of complex political projects to consolidate power. Yet the mechanisms by which citizens are produced and the means by which such state-led

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47 On Friday March 4th, 2011, the Africa Cup game was held in Tunis, the first soccer game after the Jasmine Revolution. The game, for the first time since 2009, was preceded by a spectacle in which fans of Club Africain unfurled flags of all Middle Eastern nations that are currently experiencing bottom-up protests. Following the flags, team supporters unfurled the word Houria, meaning ‘freedom’ in Arabic.
projects are contested, even resisted, are rarely found in political science studies of civil society in recently transitioned societies nor are they considered in research on the sustainability of the authoritarian state (Brownlee, 2007; Penner-Angrist, 2006, 1999; Pripstein-Posusney & Penner-Angrist, 2006; Pratt, 2006; Bellin, 2004, 2002; Heydeman, 2004; Camau & Geissler, 2003; King, 2003; Alexander 1997). My intent is to chart the processes by which alternative, popular identities are formed in opposition to the dominant and ubiquitous narrative of the state. I am not suggesting that the discovery of alternative identities necessarily results in an organized voice of resistance and therefore immediately shifts state-society power balances (though it can). Rather, I show how regime tactics to inscribe power within citizen-subjects and produce public compliance are punctured with alternative means of identity formation and expression.

Performing Politics/Fashioning Citizens

President Ben Ali’s political spectacle, or cult, was indeed omnipresent, and had evolved into a cult like that of Hafiz al-Assad analyzed by Lisa Wedeen in *Ambiguities of Domination* (1999). At the time of Wedeen’s publication, however, the Tunisian cult appeared less pervasive (Wedeen, 1999: 158) in part because Ben Ali had only been in power for a little over a decade, consumed with steering the country towards socio-economic progress (Cammett, 2007; Hibou, 2006; Perkins, 2008; Entelis, 2005, 2004 (a), 2004 (b); King, 2004; Bellin, 2002) while dismantling any remaining traces of adulation for Tunisia’s first and more charismatic President,

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48 Here I am talking about recent work on the authoritarian syndrome in the Middle East and North Africa. A rich body of literature exists on the creation of citizen-subjects under the Soviet Union by dissident novelists, poets and social critics.
Habib Bourguiba.\textsuperscript{49} Tunisia’s public display of political power epitomizes Andrew Bell’s analysis of Cicero and the Roman spectacle of power: “In any polity where citizens or subjects have some aesthetic contact with the comportment of their leaders, those leaders will find that some of their power is dependant upon the spectator’s view of them; even the power of such autocrats may be weakened if there is jeering not cheering in the streets” (1997:2). Ben Ali’s pervasive political cult and its accompanying political rituals, served as vehicles to achieve two specific ends, (1) to force compliance and fabricate adulation as discussed in Wedeen’s study of Syria, and (2) to construct a new national project rooted in neo-liberal political economics and Islam, for Tunisian citizens to re-identify with the country’s second post-colonial regime. I discuss the trajectory of Ben Ali’s neo-liberal political project elsewhere, its strategies to privatize religious and cultural spheres\textsuperscript{50}, and will only briefly summarize some of the recent tactics to constructing a new state-led political narrative.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{49} The distinction between the cult of Bourguiba and Ben Ali is significant: Bourguiba, the country’s first post-independence leader ruled with political charisma, albeit depending on increasingly authoritarian practices, especially towards the end of his rule. Bourguiba’s political cult was based on his successful program of rapid modernization as well as his charisma, both at home and abroad. Ben Ali’s political cult, on the contrary, evolved into an omnipotent force, physically unavoidable, yet not grounded in charismatic leadership. The cult also increasingly absorbed culturally resonant symbols, including Tunisia’s history beginning with Carthage, twentieth century modernization and progress, and most recently a program to reconcile the country with Islam. Unlike Bourguiba who was a conspicuous public persona, Ben Ali rarely appeared in public, substituting appearances with images and symbols in public spaces.


\textsuperscript{51} The melding of private and public spheres through nationalism and religion is not unique to Tunisia, even though privatization of religion is a first-time phenomenon in the republic. According to my colleague and friend Robert Parks, “the Algerian
The social science literature discussing ideological and instrumental state dominance and its effect on citizenship, resistance, and social, cultural, political and economic identities has in the last two decades shifted to identify spaces where state interests and citizen responses are most contentious (Slyomovics, 2005; McLagan, 2002; Wedeen, 1999; Murray, 1998; Combs-Shilling, 1989; Debord, 1967). Susan Slyomovics, for instance, problematizes the Moroccan creation of a Justice and Reconciliation Commission, arguing that the monarchy is ‘performing human rights’ in its policies of addressing atrocities committed against Marxist and Islam-based political movements in the 1970s and 1980s (2005). The establishment of an institutional space for redressing state-led crimes in the form of a Justice and Reconciliation Commission has been met with resistance by both victims and families of the forcefully disappeared. States ‘perform human rights,’ Slyomovics writes, to pacify the most virulent regime critics, while seeking domestic and international endorsement to enhance their political image. In his work on public space in Berkeley, California, Don Mitchell writes of the irreconcilable visions of public space by activists and city authorities. Official authorities view public space as “a controlled and orderly retreat where a properly behaved public might experience the spectacle of the city” (1995:115). Non-state actors, on the other hand, understand public space as “marked by free interaction and the absence of coercion by powerful institutions…an unconstrained space within which political movements can

regime doesn’t have a developed cult of personality, but employs Islamist-tinged nationalism to blend the two spheres.”
organize…” (1995:115). In short, dominant political orders and projects are often met with resistance by groups and individuals. State strategies to control public space and institutions, or to construct omnipresent narratives embodied in cults of personality as discussed by Wedeen, not only represent political domination, but also function as sites of contestation. In scrutinizing how such state projects are inscribed in public behavior and speech, how public compliance works or does not work, and how citizens find avenues for resistance, we begin unpacking some of the most dynamic elements of contentious state-society interactions in authoritarian regimes.

The political spectacles and rituals accompanying public authoritarian and dictatorial politics, including parades, marches and national celebrations that demand mandatory citizen participation and forced quiescence, are especially telling of the political conceptions of everyday citizens; both in their undisputed participation as well as their carving out of alternative spaces of expression.

Some of the mechanisms linking authoritarian rituals and regime-compliant citizens are discussed in Mabel Berezin’s study of Italian fascist political rituals. Berezin argues that in rejecting other political ideologies, say democratic liberalism, the fascist political project eliminated distinctions between private and public self, giving way to the construction of a new fascist political community (Berezin, 1997). This political project manifested itself symbolically in patterns of public spectacles

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52 Mitchell’s description of public spaces is influenced by Lefebvre’s (1991) distinction between *representational space* and *representations of space*. Representation of space refers to controlled, ordered, and planned space such as monuments, court-house squares, public parks, etc., however as people make use of these spaces, or appropriate them, they also become representational spaces.
and rituals (in opposition to church or family practices, for instance), aiming to create a new fascist citizen. (Berezin, 1997: 6-7).

Constructing national-political identities is of course not limited to fascist, dictatorial or authoritarian political projects, and can be observed in current international democracy-promotion programs. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) as well as European Union Neighborhood policy, to cite a few, are allocating funds to local and national-level development programs that seek to construct agents of democracy through economic empowerment (micro-credit programs), civic education (textbooks, mock-governance practices in primary schools, teaching of alternative historical narratives), among other vehicles that facilitate new political projects (capitalist, post-colonial, anti-terrorist, pro-democracy, etc.). Yet, as Berezin so eloquently points out, the ideological motivations of different regimes, say authoritarian or liberal political orders, can generate noticeably different outcomes: in cases where regimes seek to fundamentally re-construct national-political identities, as in the case of fascist Italy, the elimination of a private-public self is central to fashioning a new type of citizens. Unlike liberal democratic values that stress the separation of the public and private self (Habermas, 1996) to help achieve a common good, authoritarian strategies attempt to absorb private ideas, practices, beliefs into a

53 For a critique of constructing ‘agents of democratization’ see Timothy Mitchell, Keynote Address, “Foucault and Middle East Studies – The Virtues of Recalcitrance: Democracy from Foucault to Latour,” UCLA, April 29, 2009. Developing programs designed to fashion democratic agents are grounded theoretically in traditional political transitions paradigms. Democratic agents (or civil society agents), whether individual, organizational, or at the state-level, can either: (1) resist the incumbent regimes and pressure for change; (2) consolidate democracy immediately after transition, (3) help create investment-friendly environments for foreign investment as well as membership in global trade regimes.

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unified political project. The clash of the political project and personal beliefs, or rather the moment a political ideology is inscribed within an individual seeking to transform her into a citizen or subject, can be observed in behaviors of obedience, contention, or resistance. In his famous essay *The Power of the Powerless* (1989), for instance, Vaclav Havel describes the condition of a “divided soul,” a state experienced by the average citizen who is simultaneously loyal to a regime (if the regime provides material well-being) as well as loyal to personal opinion. The loyalty to personal opinion, then, is not necessarily destroyed by Soviet ideology (Michnik, 1987, 1988; Kundera, 1967, 1980, 1984; Tismaneanu, 1994; Lukyaneno, 2009), but rather relegated to either personal contemplation or private or collective hidden discourse (Scott, 1990).

Political ideologies and projects to constitute citizens are thus complicated and varied, their strategies comparable in their imposition of a dominant political narrative over alternative categories of collective identification. Yet, unlike the fascist rituals discussed by Berezin or Wedeen’s analysis of Asad’s cult, the narrative of the Ben Ali spectacle was peculiar in its naïveté and over-emphasis on socio-economic service delivery. Ben Ali’s lack of political charisma and rhetorical knack explains, in part, the intensification of public cult paraphernalia. The cult was crafted through primitive images (nation-wide posters and images depicting the president, statues of the number 7) and textual production (*La Press, Le Renouveau, La Presse, Al-Horria, Es-Sahafa*) continuously reinventing the story of how the President has provided Tunisians with economic development, social progress, and protected the country from imminent terrorist threats. Ben Ali thrived on the moment he came to
power, November 7th, 1987, claiming that he brought much needed order and development to the country, rescuing it from political and moral deterioration. The moral deterioration has been the subject of most recent programs to ‘reconcile Tunisia with its Islamist past’ and the 2007 “Pact Jeunesse” (Youth Pact) that prepares Tunisia’s youth for political life through participation in the ruling RCD (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique) party activities. Increases in visual cult paraphernalia choking public space especially during national holidays, when the cult not only consists of photos, but also of banners and light-fixtures thanking the President for his service to the country, and the enormous, glowing representations of the number “7” adorning university buildings and government offices, indicate a dialogue within the cult itself as well as a detachment from popular discourse. While Wedeen argues that the ‘cluttering of public space’ with cult paraphernalia is a formula for public obedience where, in the case of Syria, love for Asad’s cult is simulated not necessarily felt (65), I argue that the more naïve Ben Ali’s cult fills a state-society void through primitive and absurd
images, operating alongside robust authoritarian political and economic practices. In Syria, Wedeen argues, citizens are fluent in the language of the cult, which also allows them to mock and resist the political spectacle. While select, mainly affluent Tunisians are likewise fluent in Ben Ali’s cult, through obedient practice rather than language, others exhibit ambivalence towards the cult’s sheer absurdity. The public inscription and performance of the Ben Ali cult, is instead more visible in economic practices of private enterprise, companies choosing political symbols to publically exhibit their endorsement of the regime -- “Seven Air,” “Seven Gel,” “Seven Sky Café,” “Café November 7,”\(^{54}\) -- as well as Tunisian and foreign companies purchasing advertising space in government-controlled newspapers thanking Ben Ali and his wife or family for their continuous support.\(^{55}\) The two-pronged strategy of inducing fear through increasingly dictatorial practices in areas of economic development, privatization, political opposition and producing public obedience through a naïve political spectacle, has been a deliberate attempt to reconstruct a new Tunisian political self: A citizen who is frightened and depolitisized, yet at the same time adulates and thanks his creator and economic provider.

Whether or not Tunisians collectively adored their President is less significant than their performance of the cult, whether supportive or resistant. The affected

\(^{54}\) In the late 1990s, telephone numbers in Tunisia were extended by adding a 71. Seven stands for November 7\(^{\text{th}}\). In French, soixante et onze (71 one, spelled out sixty and eleven), makes one think of eleven. Thus, the addition of 71 to phone numbers reminds of “seven-eleven” or the 7\(^{\text{th}}\) of November. I thank Robert Parks for reminding me of this twist.

\(^{55}\) In a conversation with a French business owner in down-town Tunis, he said that displaying photographs of President Ben Ali in office spaces no longer suffices, and that he is required, at least twice a year, to purchase space in La Presse, the French-language government daily, thanking the President and his family for their support.
atmosphere of RCD party events, especially the theatrical performances by speakers and ‘randomized’ commentators within the audience indicated an understanding of compliance among those who chose to partake in these events. On March 18-19, 2009, for instance, the ruling RCD party organized an international youth colloquium in the resort town of Hammamet, inviting international youth activists from France, Lebanon, Syria, Germany, Spain, England, Libya, Guinea, among other countries, as well as Tunisian professors and students, party members and professionals involved in youth issues. The elaborate, technologically sophisticated, and well-attended event was opened by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdelwahab Abdallah, who lauded “Tunisia’s distinguished youth” and President Ben Ali for creating a model of integrating youth in political life that would provide a blueprint for other countries seeking to mobilize their young populations. In the words of the Minister:

In Tunisia the development of youth and its integration has been a key aspect for His Excellency President Ben Ali…Tunisia’s future can only be build by involving its youth. His Excellency President Ben Ali’s accomplishments and reforms have ensured the participation of youth in public and political affairs….The involvement of youth also strengthens national identity. Tunisia is built on a pillar that requires participation of youth in national development. His Excellency President Ben Ali decided that 2008 will mark the year of dialogue with youth, and present an excellent opportunity for Tunisia’s youth. The international charter on youth represents what our youth believes, and as a creation of His Excellency President Ben Ali, will be a model for other international initiatives….We are yearning for changes, and part of this change is the need to reinforce the role of youth in developing its society and move away from the stereotyped ideas of past generations and embrace global challenges.57

56 The minister is referring to Ben Ali’s 2008 Pact Jeunesse (Youth Pact), and his declaration that 2010 will be the international year of youth. In response, the illegal Marxist/pro-worker student organization PCOT, called itself sarcastically the POCT Jeunesse.
57 Opening ceremony Le Colloque International des Jeunes, speech by Abdelwahab Abdallah, Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs (March 18-19, 2009; Hammamet, Tunisia).
The Minister’s sycophantic speech was not intended to represent the ambitions of Tunisia’s young generation, a generation that largely feels disengaged from political life and yearns to emigrate to Europe, but rather to reveal new strategies the RCD is developing to absorb the country’s young population, one that is as detached from the previous regimes of Bourguiba as it is from Ben Ali’s Tunisia. The conference continued for two days, in which Tunisian professors, experts and international delegates delivered speeches in the same tone as that of the Minister, followed by rehearsed comments by Tunisian high school and university students, who were brought to the conference from Tunis’ public institutions, supplied with opulent hotel rooms, lavish dinners, and recreational activities at the hotel pool and around the resort town. In a conversation with a young volunteer, she remarked that her participation was driven by her nationalism and love for Tunisia, though when asked what she meant by ‘her nationalism’ she answered “the love for the President.” The volunteer’s response echoed the banners embellishing the conference hall, “To serve our country with sincerity and devotion in all fields of life.” The means by which the regime lures Tunisia’s youth and enforces their adulation is a strategy to attract students to the party, divert them from increasingly contentious activity on university campuses including the L’Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie (UGET, the student union)58 or illegal student movements, and politicize them in a regime-sanctioned manner.

58 While the UGET is no longer as contentious as it was in the 1970s and has been absorbed into the state, a recent waves of strikes (2008-2009) with respect to low
State projects such as the Youth Pact are viewed by critics as lacking in ideology and serving solely an instrumental purpose. This apparent absence of a coherent political ideology on part of the RCD was echoed in many interviews I conducted with intellectuals, journalists, students, and ordinary Tunisians. A well-known editor stated it clearly:

In terms of the RCD, it has in fact no program or ideology. In this, it differs greatly from Syria’s ruling Baath party. The new Youth Pact has to be regarded as strategic rather than ideological. Young people targeted by the Youth Pact do not know any other political system but the incumbent one. They are not aware of the nationalist aspect of Bourguiba’s political program and that of the PSD (Parti Socialiste Destourien, changed to RCD after Ben Ali came to power). The RCD, through initiatives of the Youth Pact is involved in changing history, in changing the Tunisian success story from a nationalist-developmental narrative to a neo-liberal economic history.  

A., a Tunisian student supporter of the illegal Parti Communiste des Ouvriers Tunisiens (PCOT) compared the RCD to a service provision organization rather than a political entity. Their strategy, A. said, is to integrate as many citizens as possible, and when considering the Pact Jeunesse, the regime is targeting a population that has only known the Ben Ali regime. Bourguiba, to young Tunisians, is a past legacy, something that belongs to a different generation. By integrating youth into ‘political life,’ the regime is deliberately pulling young voices into their particular way of doing politics. In a more contentious response, political activist T. referred to the Youth Pact as simply “perverse,” likened to Nazi-era youth mobilization initiatives. “It’s a program to inculcate youth,” he says, “and those who participate are bought with a

stipends and increased tuition fees instigated by the UGET attracted students that have increasingly become disenfranchised with other campus policies.

59 Authors’ interview. Tunis, May 2009.
60 Author’s interview. Tunis, April 2009.
61 Author’s interview, Tunisia, June 2009.
free hotel stay, a couple of lunches, some gifts, a party or access to a hotel pool.”

Similar to other responses of regime critics, T. maintained that state-initiated programs, like the Youth Pact, have little to do with youth. Rather, they are attempts to absorb those who do not know anything else into the dominant political system. The difference between the Ben Ali and Bourguiba era is that despite his increasingly authoritarian style of governance in the late 1970s and 1980s, Bourguiba governed via history. This style of governance, or rather regime tactics to seek popular legitimacy, was rooted in the pre-independence Young Tunisian nationalist movement, which Bourguiba led. Yet in his presidency, Bourguiba also commissioned historians and academics to trace Tunisia’s history, to glorify Hannibal and Tunisia’s Carthaginian past through institutions such as the Hannibal Society, to map-out Tunisia’s historical proximity to Europe and its exposure to modernity and progress. T. points out repeatedly that Bourguiba did not have to create the naïve and ludicrous political spectacle that Ben Ali has been constructing since coming to power in 1987. Yet, the Ben Ali regime has strategically built upon Bourguiba’s legacy of economic and social progress, and super-imposed a new political spectacle that clearly differentiates the Ben Ali era from that of his predecessor. The Ben Ali political spectacle, while naïve in its representation, was not necessarily lacking in any meaningful ideology but was rather constructed upon historical and political processes that are disconnected from the political strategies of the current regime. Initiatives, such as the Youth Pact discussed above, are only the most recent regime strategies to produce a new de-politicized Tunisian citizen, one who is loyal Ben Ali, and one who locates Tunisia’s economic and social progress in the activities of the
incumbent leadership. The political spectacle, thus, represented the dialogue between state and society: in return for obedience and loyalty, Ben Ali continuously “gifts” Tunisia with opportunity, progress and development. Images portray the President reaching out to the masses (always giving), his hand covering his heart (holding the country’s needs at heart), his hands clasped (together we can progress), his arms opened (giving all to his country), his arms opened over the construction of new bridges and highways in large cities and over crops and innovative agricultural techniques in rural areas. In the image, below, for instance, the message reads “From the constants of change, sustainable development for a healthy environment, a service to the future generations.” These representations of public service on part of the head of state are then answered by the same cult, with banners reading, “We love Ben Ali,” or “We Thank Our President.” The powerful exchange of representations of achievements and public loyalty embodied in the political cult of Ben Ali symbolized the dominant narrative of the Tunisian state.
Contesting the Dominant Narrative

The dominant narrative of the Tunisian state is challenged individually by a number of activists, academics, novelists, political cartoonists, and journalists most of whom are engaged in what James C. Scott has termed “Hidden Transcripts.” Lisa Wedeen argues that political spectacles, such as that of Asad in Syria, invite transgressions, thus, the Syrian official narrative is both a site of domination and one of contestation (67). In her study of the Italian fascist political project, Berezin draws attention to the delicate difference between representations of power and ‘realities of power’ (7). Can states, irrespective of their ideological projects, impose political identities on their citizens? Studies like that of Wedeen and Berezin contend that the mere performance or representation of power, such as political rituals or public participation in political spectacles, do not constitute observable implications for the reality of power. Political spectacles invite transgressions not only because of their phoniness, but also because citizens who are forced to partake in them are products of alternative socio-historical, sub-national, regional, urban and competing political practices and institutions. Official state narratives are thus sites of contestation as the dominant narrative is constructed for the sole purpose of superseding pre-existing historical, cultural, political and social practices and identifications. Regime strategies constructing political cults vary in their absorption of prior historical and political facts, where historical moments are at times co-opted to glorify incumbents or completely eradicated and minimized.
The official Ben Ali narrative was primarily engaged in crafting a new sense of national belonging and citizenship centered on the reconciliation of Tunisia with certain elements of its history, such as Islam, that were suppressed by Bourguiba. To be a Tunisian citizen meant to be loyal, loving of and obedient to the new Ben Ali regime. Loyalty and love for a leader is obviously not a distinctive Ben Ali strategy. What defined the Ben Ali strategy were the particular historical moments, narratives and symbols that he selected and imposed on his population. The reformulation of the meaning of citizenship or national belonging began with Ben Ali’s decision to change the dominant party name from PSD (Parti Socialist Destourien) to RCD immediately upon assuming power, followed by a re-shuffled parliament, creation of new organizations and institutions serving as cultural arms of the ruling RCD party, printing of new primary school textbooks in which Tunisia’s ‘national birth’ begins in 1987 instead of 1956 (independence from France) or any other significant historical moment, and absorbing of scientists, academics, writers and artists into the cultural realm of the refashioned state. Political science work on Tunisia in the last two decades has chronicled the increasing “robustness” of the Tunisian state (Redissi, 2007; Hibou, 2006; Entelis, 2005, 2004 (a), 2004 (b); King, 2003; Camau & Geisser, 2003; Bellin, 2002; Beau & Tuquoi, 1999; Alexander, 1997; Stone, 1982) by examining the processes and mechanisms of institutional co-optation (parties, unions, private enterprise, civil society organizations), and looked for areas of contestation primarily within these institutions (i.e. opposition parties) with pessimistic conclusions. In charting the evolution of the dominant political narrative of the Ben Ali regime, including its accompanying political cult and construction of cultural and
social institutions to forge a new cadre of Tunisian citizens, I will treat the dominant state narrative, rather than isolated political institutions such as parties, as the principle site of political contestation. As mentioned above, the Ben Ali cult invited transgressions because it imposes a dialogue through its ritual: “Progress for my nation,” – “Thank you Mr. President,” “We love Ben Ali.” Through the vehicle of a dominant state narrative, including its institutional manifestation in party politics and civil society organizations, the ex-regime sought to achieve a comprehensive curbing of public participation in political life. Some of the locations and means by which the dominant narrative was contested will be discussed in the remainder of this essay.

Tunisia’s Soccer Stadiums

Spectator sports play a crucial role in dictatorial settings, as they constitute an area where state power and societal response most visibly interact. Ancient sayings, including “give them bread and games” (*Panes et Circenses*) or “the louder they shout in the circus, the quieter they’ll be in the streets”\(^{63}\) provide insight into one explanation for the dichotomy of virtual silence “in the streets” and extreme levels of collective expression during sporting events. Dictators allow for a space of expression outside of the institutional realm of the state, for citizens to mobilize collectively on

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\(^{63}\) The concept appeared in Roman poet Juvenal’s *Satire X* (10-17-81), where he writes of the Roman populace relinquishing its birth right of political involvement, “…we sold our vote to no man, the people have abdicated our duties…” (late first, early second century). The satire equally referred to the Roman practice developed under Gaius Sempronius Gracchus (123 BC) of giving free wheat and access to costly circus games, a practice that was upheld by subsequent Roman Emperors. Similar concepts were chronicled by German writer and Egyptologist Georg Moritz Ebers (1837-1898) in his *A Thorny Path*, “The louder they shout in the Circus, the quieter they act in the streets…” a phrase that also referred to keeping women quiet; as well as in Franco’s Spain, *Pan y Toros* (bread and bullfight), in 19th and 20th century Russia, *Khleb I Zreleshte* (bread and spectacle), and finally in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. 
issues that are not of immediate political significance, such as allegiance for a sporting team or an individual athlete. The relationship between sports and politics is, however, more complicated than this.

In his study of Tunis’ soccer derby, Franck Moroy discusses the intricate linkage between official politics and soccer in Tunisia (1997). Tracing the foundation of the country’s two largest teams – *L’Esperance Sportive de Tunis* (EST) and *Le Club Africain* (CA) – to political movements and personalities in colonial Tunisia, Moroy analyzes the soccer team’s political significance in crafting a Tunisian not French identity, the soccer club as a site for the production of political and socio-economic belonging, as well as the nexus between involvement in soccer clubs and subsequent high-level political positions. In recent years, social scientists of the Middle East and North Africa have been paying closer attention to the role of soccer and other spectator sports in forging political identifications (Lopez, 2009; Sorek, 2003; Silverstein, 2000; Moroy, 1997(a), 1997(b)) as well as creating and debating categories of belonging. Even in popular literature, the linkage between soccer and global political trends has gained attention, as, for instance in two books entitled *How Soccer Explains the World: An [Un]likely Theory of Globalization* (Foer, 2004) as well as *Soccer Against the Enemy: How the World’s Most Popular Sport Starts and Fuels Revolutions and Keeps Dictators in Power* (Kuper, 1994, 2006). In his chapter on soccer in the Arab and Muslim world, Simon Kuper writes:

For a young man in the Middle East, obliged to spend his leisure time hanging around with other young men, soccer is often the only recreation. That’s why in Tripoli, the Libyan capital, games between the two biggest clubs draw crowds of 100,000 – more than anywhere in Europe except occasionally Barcelona or Real Madrid. […] Yet the game does help us understand this secretive region. In societies like Libya, Iran, and previously in Saddam
Hussein’s Iraq, where there is no freedom of press, no legal dissent, and hardly any foreign journalists, soccer can reveal the undercurrents (286).

Kuper does not discuss in any great detail the ‘undercurrents’ except the transgressions of forced gender boundaries, such as women dressing up as men in Iran and slipping into soccer stadiums. In his discussion of Tehran’s Azadi stadium, on the other hand, Foer engages the social effects of the popular game, though his definition of “soccer revolution” in Tehran mirrors a now common Orientalist or East-West dichotomy, in which soccer fans and their behavior represent the secularist pro-Western and modern revolt against an oppressive Islamic state. He locates in the behavior of soccer supporters the “roots of a nationalist uprising against Islam” especially as soccer fans who are exposed to “the Western way of life” during coverage of international games recognize “the Islamic world’s own humiliating lack of modernity (222-223).” Foer is confident that the ‘football revolution’ in Iran marks the moment at which “people first realized that they could challenge their theoretical rulers (221).” The linkage Foer draws between political secular nationalism and resistance to religious autocracy in Iran is exaggerated yet he nonetheless draws attention to the more complex political phenomena that can be observed in soccer stadiums under closed political conditions. As he mentions in his prologue, “[soccer] is often more deeply felt than religion, and just as much part of

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64 In attending soccer games in Tunisia, I observed large numbers of fans praying in designated areas within the stadium throughout the game. In addition, chants often make reference to God including ya’Allah and ya’Ra’abi, while one popular Club Africain soccer songs begins with the shahada, or declaration of faith. The difference, of course, can be attributed to the secular-nationalist autocracy of the Tunisian state as opposed to Iran, among many other explanations, however, my intent here is show that the Islam-secularist dichotomy is indeed more complicated than analyzed by Foer.
the community’s fabric, a repository of traditions. During Franco’s rule, the clubs Athletic Bilbao and Real Sociedad were the only venues where Basque people could express their cultural pride without winding up in jail. In English industrial towns like Coventry and Derby, soccer clubs helped glue together small cities amid oppressive dinginess” (4). The ‘undercurrents’ Kuper speaks of, are therefore the complex socio-political debates that often occur outside the official narrative, and can be found, among other areas, in soccer stadiums.

In Tunisia, derby games between EST and CA are sold out weeks before the games, drawing crowds of 60,000 fans. No other public event draws crowds of this size, 65 and the spectacle that accompanies the games warrants discussion. Moroy, in his research, has repeatedly referred to the soccer club as a political space, a space for both the materialization of politics as well as political expression: “Le club est un espace de

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65 Author’s interviews with Mohammed Kerrou (anthropologist); Abdelaziz Belkhodja (novelist, publisher, and son of former Minister and Esperance President Hassen Belkhodja), Abdelkadr Zghal (sociologist), and Hamadi Redissi (political scientist). I repeatedly asked during these interviews whether there is another Tunisian public event drawing equally large crowds, whether sporting, cultural, or political, and all respondents confirmed the predominance of soccer games, as well as its socio-political implications. Besides the stadium crowds, cafes overflow with fans watching the games, newspaper and weekly journal articles significantly increase their soccer coverage, and public debate is consumed by soccer politics pre- and post-games.
mise en forme de la politique et un lieu d’expression du politique” (1997: 10). The soccer game, Moroy argues, becomes a pretend-conflict, a theatrical ‘affair of the city’ where the game means a lot more than simply scoring goals. In the sense that soccer clubs represent socio-political and economic tensions in post-colonial Tunisia (Tunis vs. Sahel; Tunis vs. Tunisien), the soccer stadium constitutes a space and opportunity for individuals to define and debate their sense of territorial as well as socio-political belonging. Similarly, Laura Fair writes:

[f]ootball like taarab and other popular pastimes in colonial Zanzibar, became a central terrain for the development of alternative discourses of power and society….Island men utilized football to challenge the public transcript of British domination; they trounced their ‘overlords’ before thousands of spectators, openly defied European referees, and adopted the networks of club football to meet class, communal and nationalist goals….By the early 1920s, football had become a central component of the urban experience. It was pivotal to the development and transformation of individual, neighborhood, and communal identities.

Socio-political identity debates during soccer derbys are visually most pronounced during what fans call pre-game “spectacles” or the public contestation of each team’s identities as well as the identities of team supporters:

Figure 3.6. Pre-game Spectacle, Club Africain, Radès, March 2009

their intelligence, socio-economic status as well as degree of team support. Before the March 2009 derby, for instance, Clubists unfurled a gigantic cloth with a picture

66 “The club is a space for the formation of politics and a space for political expression.”
of Mona Lisa and a banner reading *C’est le charme de notre club qui fait sourire la jaconde* (“Our team’s charm makes Mona Lisa smile”), and *Espérance* fans answered with a likewise large display of an eagle, reading *L’aigle n’a que deux couleurs* (“the eagle has only two colors,” meaning those of *Espérance*). In response, *Clubsists* unfolded one by one, large cloths displaying renowned scientists, including Newton and Einstein. While *Clubsists* were utilizing symbols of intelligence and knowledge, *Espérance* fans dismissed their ‘weak symbol’ with one of strength. Instead of challenging *Espérance*s strength, *Clubsists* opted for symbols of knowledge, intelligence and progress, contending common prejudices that *Club Africain* supporters are generally less educated, less sophisticated, as well as less successful. This subtle identity contest between team supporters signifies a debate that not only exists among soccer fans (“even though you might be the stronger team, we have the power to make Mona Lisa smile”), but likewise among everyday Tunisians: education versus status (or proximity to the state) as well as intelligence versus professional success.

Identity contests among fans are also found in songs and chants that specify a sense of belonging to the city.\(^\text{67}\) During the March 2009 derby, supporters of *Club*

\(^\text{67}\) For an innovative and compelling discussion of political identity formation through song, chant and dance during protest moments, see Jillian Schwedler, “Cop Rock: Protest, Identity and Dancing Riot Police in Jordan” (2005). Unlike the case discussed here, Schwedler examines the competing national identities among Jordanian protestors and police during riots and protests. While we are likewise concerned with
Africain, the team traditionally supported by blue-collar fans residing around Bab Jedid in the medina, would sing:

We come from every place in the medina, Bab Jedid, the Kasbah, and Sabaghrine. Our dream is to win; Club African please fulfill our dream and give us happiness. We are so trashed and ready to fight. White and red, like our hearts, we want the championship.

In their chant, Club Africain supporters are claiming crucial areas of the medina that include their traditional home base (Bab Jedid, whereas Esperance fans traditionally reside by Bab Souikha), the Kasbah (the location of governmental power), as well as Sabaghrine (and up-and-coming commercial district). Even though Club Africain fans might not directly live in the areas specified in the song, they are, through the vehicle of their team, making claims to areas of Tunis that define changing political as well as economic trends. Fans solidify their commitment, With our souls and blood, we will always trust you and be faithful to you, if, of course, the soccer team wins the match allowing Club African supporters to occupy the streets and areas defined in chants. Besides making claims to physical spaces in Tunis, fans also chose nationalist rhetoric in their chants – we are ready to fight, our hearts, our souls, our blood – a rhetoric that is not found in any other public discourse. The sole other producer of such nationalist concepts remains the Tunisian state, which continuously competing visions of national identity, especially between state and non-state broadly defined, Tunisian national or political identity formation rarely occurs through direct contestation between, say police and protestors, as discussed in Schwedler’s study.

68 Sabaghrine is a quarter in the medina located near the tanneries. The tannery quarter (Rue El Jeld) of the medina has been completely restored by various foundations, and now houses luxurious restaurants such as Dar El-Khayrat, Dar El-Jeld, as well as high-end galleries, book stores, coffee houses, and boutique hotels or Maison d’Hautes. This area of the medina also borders the Kasbah, the seat of the majority of ministries.
uses rhetoric such as “faithfulness to the country,” “love for this glorious land,” “[Tunisian] dignity is indissociable (sic) from [the nation’s] dignity,” as well as “[Tunisia] remains glorious and invulnerable forever.”  

The proclamation by fans of trust and faithfulness to a soccer team as well as claiming of physical space and debating socio-economic realities through symbolic exchanges are indications that collective identity formation occurs outside of the dominant narrative produced by the state. The introductory story in this essay juxtaposed the nation’s November 7th celebration and the subsequent soccer derby to illustrate the disparity between an unequivocally dominant, yet phony narrative of democracy and progress and another, public, collective and contentious debate about Tunisian social, political, and economic identity.

Transgressions to the dominant-nationalist Tunisian narrative manifested themselves in verbal aggressions against the police (which, of course, constitute the most visible dominance of the state) as well as in some legal transgressions. Similar to other authoritarian regimes, the police was generally avoided and never challenged, questioned or confronted in day-to-day affairs. Fans, for example, do not refrain from throwing flaming torches or hurling water bottles throughout the match, risking high fines and multiple-year imprisonment. In addition, fans destroy the physical space of the stadium if unhappy with a referee decision or to show disappointment with their teams. Unless such acts result in physical injuries to soccer players, referees, or the scores of police men patrolling the playing field as well as stands, police forces usually allow the continuation of the game. Fans who are courageous enough to

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69 Tunisian Youth Pact Declaration, November 7, 2008 (Tunis, Tunisia).
engage in torch and bottle hurling, are immediately protected by their fellow fans not allowing police officers to identify the throwers. During soccer games in Damascus, Wedeen argues, fans likewise throw bottles targeting referees, though revert to Assad’s language of the cult in their chants to protect themselves (66). During the March 2009 derby, EST fans ripped out a row of eight stadium seats, throwing it toward the playing field. Days before the match, some EST fans demolished areas of the CA home stadium the day a CA player’s mother passed-away, causing authorities to ban the pre-game spectacle, fearing violent responses on game day.70 Teams on both sides nonetheless performed the spectacle, irrespective of police directives. Even so, soccer radicalism in Tunis’ stadiums does not mirror that of the Glasgow Celtic-Ranger divide, for instance, though the country’s most pronounced declarations of allegiance can be found in “ultras” behavior and songs.71 Ultras represent the teams’ most radical supporters who live in the teams’ traditional home bases (Bab Souika and Bab Jedid72), who actively participate in the writing of songs, the production of chants, as well as the conceptual creation of pre-game spectacles. In a brief interview with three EST ultras in Café Esperance, I asked the teenage fans why they were sporting identical baseball caps with Nazi swastikas, to which they answered “because we want to show the world we’re radicals!” CA fans, on the other hand, sing:

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70 *La Presse*, mars 1, 2009.  
72 These two parts of Tunis’ medina also house the respective club centers, EST and CA cafes, as well as many shops selling team paraphernalia. They are, however, far removed from the touristic and affluent spaces of Tunis’ medina.
We are the fanatics of C.A., the mafia of centre ville ("mafia aasimiyya") armed with a racist mentality. We are the magic team, allez, allez, fortza CA. We don’t care about anyone, we circle the city and the virage with our arms.

Or, during games, CA fans encourage each other:

*Go, go boys, fight your war and tell the world to fuck off.*

While these radical declarations are meant to mobilize fellow fans, they also imply the protection and policing of certain areas of the city, a task performed exclusively by Tunisia’s police. The last chant especially, is a pure fan mobilization tactic that has little to do with the actual soccer team. CA fans also sing “we don’t care about anyone” meaning fans of the opposing team as well as police forces that would stop them. Another CA song that directly challenges police power speaks to collective fan agency as well as commitment to socio-political identity:

*Hey police, hey police, we are the people without fear, everywhere the team goes, the Virage\(^{73}\) fans follow. This is our history and we live like this. Esperance fans are scared of us, because we are a phenomenon.*

In their radical songs and chants, fans target the police specifically, though the Tunisian state under Ben Ali and the police have become indistinguishable. While the politics of former soccer club presidents, their relationship to powerful institutions of the state, as well as their political ambitions are often times debated in public, President Ben Ali was rarely addressed in public discourse. On one occasion in 2004, however, it has been rumored that soccer fans mocked his son’s so-called immaculate conception to the melody of Madonna’s “Like a Prayer.” It is unclear whether Ben Ali’s increased appearance during large games with his son was related to the 2004

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\(^{73}\) The virage refers to the rowdiest section of the stadium, where tickets are also the cheapest.
incident. Regardless, a newspaper article in May of 2009 called the President’s son presence a great surprise, referring to the son’s as a “royal child,” “a small angel in white” always at the side of his father, a symbolic representation of all Tunisian children. The same article mentioned that sport represents the largest challenge of modern times – competition, victory, triumph, glory and values. At the core of these values is the celebration of the child, thus we were gifted with two celebrations on game day: that of soccer and that of the child.74

A Space for Civic Identity?

Scholarly and journalistic writings on Tunisian politics have in the last two decades, almost exclusively, focused on the authoritarian character of the Tunisian state and the absence of any independent, collective forms of expression or organization. While studies on the material strategies of the authoritarian states are well-developed (i.e. maintaining the country’s fiscal health, increased police and military force, co-optation of private enterprises, etc.) little work exists on the political cult of President Ben Ali, its contradictory neo-liberal and Islamic agenda, and the cult’s effect on quotidian political identities. The changes in Ben Ali’s dominant political narrative signified shifts in the regime’s strategies to consolidate power and, subsequently, invite new, alternative forms of political identity formation. In recent years, regime strategies to construct citizen-subjects have become more pervasive and visible, inviting new critical studies on the effects such strategies have on the political conceptions of everyday Tunisians.

The spatial dichotomy between dominant order and lively public debate in Tunisia was most clearly observable in the competing spectacles of political cult and soccer. The location and formation of alternative socio-political narratives and debates are not limited to the soccer stadium, or course, and can be found in subtle journalistic transgressions, agendas of radical, often illegal political activists, workers’ strikes in the country’s mining towns (Allal, 2009), as well as everyday forms of resistance, including political jokes, anecdotes, refusal to vote in bogus elections and yearning to emigrate. Yet nowhere is the contest as visible, ostentatious, shrill and collective as in the soccer stadium. The analysis of pre-game spectacles above shows that political identity debates in stadiums can also be more sophisticated than the vulgar brawl often accustomed with the popular spectator sport. While the identification with a soccer team and subsequent socio-political divisions is heightened during highly contested games (as is the case during protests, revolutions, and other forms of collective political expression), it nonetheless represents a space where a ‘limited civic’ dialogue is taking place, a dialogue that previously could not have been found in the web of state-controlled civil society organizations, for instance. I define the term ‘civic’ here as practices pertaining to citizens, and more explicitly, the formation of collective identities through deliberate and communal activities. Political ethnographies of the Middle East are increasingly considering deliberate spaces contesting dominant state narratives, whether examining the effects of satellite television on public debate (Lynch, 2007; Mernissi, 2004; Anderson & Eicklelman, 1999); Q’at chews in Yemen as spaces for deliberating issues of communal importance (Wedeen, 2008); or the emergence of new Islamic counter-
spheres (Hirschkind, 2006; Kerrou, 2007). In Syria, Wedeen contends, public compliance to and performance of Asad’s political cult functions in a limited sense as civic behavior (65). While the Tunisian state under Ben Ali was likewise invested in the construction of obedient ‘civic’ behavior in public, the alternative political identities, which have been formed collectively in Tunisia’s soccer stadiums through debate among team supporters as observed in songs, chants, and pre-game spectacles are rooted in long-standing, historical debates in Tunis and Tunisia. The contentious dialogue concerning national, sub-national or urban belonging, is civic, albeit limited, in that such identities have been formed publically and involve a substantial segment of the country’s population.

The linkage between membership in associations, including sporting clubs, and the fostering of civic norms among members is a central concept within seminal studies of civil society (Putnam, 1994). Tunisia’s first President, Habib Bourguiba, understood the soccer club to be both, an area for individuals to liberate their passions as well as an establishment for civic education. “The sports club is an educational establishment for the rational organization of pleasures, games and community life….through participation and membership, man becomes a useful citizen (un citoyen utile)” (Moroy, 1997: 14). Studies of civil society, by now, have been heavily criticized for the assumption that civil society organizations are structural producers of civic norms (Tarrow, 1996), that organizations are often agents of exclusion, mainly women and minorities (Howell & Pearce, 2002). Moroy’s study, the only comprehensive work on Tunisian soccer and politics, also treats the soccer club as a unitary organizational actor, which reflects high-level political power games while
representing agonistic versions of Tunisian socio-political identities. Yet he nonetheless acknowledges that soccer in Tunis is first and foremost a collective affair of the city (Milza, 1996 in Moroy, 1997: 10), and thus constitutes a civic space.

If the Ben Ali’s state, through its omnipresent political spectacle and coercive tactics sought to de-politicize Tunisians citizens, then what it actually achieved was to alienate Tunisians from state ideology and style of governance. Unlike the grim accounts of every-day life in political dictatorships produced by value surveys and research on authoritarianism or problems of political transitions, evidence from Tunisia shows that the relationship between state and society has been indeed more complex than political science work concludes. Tunisians, as well as citizens of other closed political systems (i.e. Ukraine and Georgia pre-2004 colored revolutions), were neither de-politicized nor apathetic, however, the politics of identity formation, collective mobilization, and alternative forms of expression had to be located outside of the traditional realm of socio-political institutions. The widespread popular snubbing of elaborate political spectacles, including celebrating a concocted birth of the nation or bogus elections, for participation in a national soccer craze, exemplifies one of the mechanisms by which Tunisians contested the regime’s order. In an interview with a business executive in the spring of 2009, he suddenly looked up at a portrait of Ben Ali, a mandatory display in all office, shops, cafes, and public institutions. “You know which picture should be up there?” he asked me. I smiled as he points to a photo of him and Pelé (Brazilian soccer star) shaking hands. “That is my real President,” he sayed jokingly. Lowering his voice, he continues, “I hate this way of doing politics, its always in your face, as if you need to remind me of
something at every moment rather than perform legitimately.” As we leave his office he turns around, salutes the President’s portrait and whispers, “God Save the Queen.”
Chapter 4: Implicit Contestation & the Myth of Political Apathy

*Crisis is simply the intensification of daily lives.*
- Georg Lukács

*This spectre of dissent has not appeared out of thin air.*
- Vaclav Havel, 1978

*How is it possible that so many people immediately understood what to do and that none of them needed any advice or instruction?*
- Vaclav Havel, New Years Day 1990

*Razhom Nas Bahato!* ("Together we are many"), echoed through the streets of Kyiv as hundreds of thousands Ukrainians took over Kyiv’s central square *Maidan* during the 2004 Orange Revolution protests. Years later the phrase ‘going out on Maidan’ (*Weyite na Maidan*) remains synonymous with mobilizing and protesting, even if unrelated to the political events that stimulated the Orange Revolution. On Tunis’ central Avenue Habib Bourguiba, *Tous Unis* or *T.Unis* ("All Together") paralleled the sentiments of popular unity that defined the 2004 civic moment in Ukraine. Tunisians, who endured Zine Abedine Ben Ali’s repressive rule for twenty-three consecutive years, audaciously shouted *Ben Ali Dégage!* (Ben Ali Step-Down!), *A Bas Ben Ali!* (Down with Ben Ali!), even *Ben Ali Assassin!* (Ben Ali Murderer!),

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76 Quoted in Scott (1990), p.221.
77 In an interview with Olena Ajvazovs’ka, a former Orange revolution activist who helped spearhead the radical Black Pora! movement between 2002-2004, she contended that even though the rules of the political game have changed since the events of 2004, people will never ‘go out on the Maidan again.’ The most common explanation is widespread disappointment with the pro-Western Orange Revolution leadership that was voted out of office in the January 2010 election and replaced with a more Russian-leaning government. Ms. Ojvazovs’ka now heads a new civic organization called OPORA and is actively involved in helping NGOs and foreign assistance organizations identify areas for the dissemination of civic norms. Author’s interview, October 13, 2009, Kyiv, Ukraine.
marking the protest slogans of the January 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2011 Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the first popular uprising ousting an authoritarian leader in the Arab world. The popular cry \textit{Ben Ali Dégage!} quickly travelled to Cairo’s Tahrir Square, where non-Francophone Egyptians held up signs \textit{Mubarak Dégage!} and \textit{Game Over!} demanding Hosni Mubarak’s departure, inspired by Tunisia’s success. At the time of writing, Tunisians and Egyptians alike are supporting Libyan protesters and citizens undergoing one of the region’s most brutal state-led crack-downs since the Algerian civil war of 1990-1998, likewise calling for Mummar Qaddafi to \textit{Dégage!}

To be sure, scholars of widespread civic mobilization, protest and revolution are increasingly scrutinizing the spatial dimension of contentious politics and the particular urban spaces activists and supporters choose to voice their concerns (Bayat, 2010, Schwedler & Fayyaz, 2010; Mitchell, 1994).\textsuperscript{78} “Streets of discontent,” as Asef Bayat terms it, are the strategic and symbolic locations that bring together activists and ordinary individuals in an epidemic spirit that threatens the authorities of the state (Bayat, 2010: 161). The threat to authority is the snowball effect that such discontent can arouse: activists take on streets and squares that attract shop keepers, workers, individuals running errands or strolling the city, potentially cumulating into the kind of mob as in Belgrade, Kyiv, Tehran, Tbilisi, Beyrut, Cairo, even Sana’a, Manama, Algiers, Benghazi and Tripoli, which disrupts the city’s flow, functionality and order. The street is the chief locus of politics for ordinary people, those who are structurally absent from the centers of institutional power,” writes Bayat (2010: 167).

\textsuperscript{78} The \textit{New York Times} featured an interactive map of downtown Cairo during the 18 days of protests, titled “The Battle for Tahrir Square.”
In this chapter, I will turn to the widespread implicit and mundane political practices that exist under orderly conditions, prior to heightened contentious moments when masses take to the streets. I will discuss subversive writing in print media, performing arts and jokes, as well as the mundane practices of economic self-help practiced by large segments of populations in authoritarian states. These lived circumstances, whether isolated acts of subversion or widespread economic self-help strategies and political humor, are the contexts from which organized contentious and oppositional politics eventually grow (Scott, 1990). Scholars of Middle Eastern politics have increasingly turned their attention to the ways in which ordinary, typically poor citizens secure access to vital resources as a coping strategy to navigate the deepening of authoritarian state politics. As authoritarian states invest more resources in security and policing services (Marshall, 2009; Bellin, 2004, 2002; Heydeman, 2004) at the cost of social welfare provision, citizen coping mechanisms provide us with information of how state power is navigated and managed, whether in the form of radicalization (Hafez, 2003; Wiktorowicz, 2003; Verkaaik, 2004), self-help through community networks that serve as welfare substitutes (Singerman, 1995; Bayat, 2010), mobilization and resistance (Wikham, 2002), mundane forms of transgression (Scott, 1990; Wedeen, 2008) or social non-movements (Bayat, 2010).

I am not trying to reproduce a new sequential logic to protest and large-scale mobilization along the lines of ‘mundane politics cause mobilization, which causes revolt.’ Rather, I want to show that contentious political moments exist prior to large-scale political revolt, and presumably after, which has two explanatory utilities: (1) less surprise when the type of street-based protests we most recently witnessed across the Middle East occurs and (2) ability to identify actors, ideas, geographies and grievances that constitute the eventual mass-based protest.

As Asef Bayat defines a social nonmovement as a “collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared practices of large number of ordinary people whose
To exemplify the overlap and sequences of mundane politics, lived circumstances and implicit contention prior to revolutionary moments, I will trace some of the contentious moments in authoritarian Ukraine prior to the 2004 Orange Revolution (1994-2004) and in pre-Jasmine Revolution Tunisia to construct a more vibrant account of contentious political life under authoritarian conditions. I will also discuss instances of explicit contestation in the Ukrainian case, including non-violent yet illegal protest training camps that were deeply rooted in prior contentious moments and lived circumstances. The forms of explicit contestation that existed in Tunisia prior to the Jasmine Revolution will be discussed in the following chapter.

**Locating Implicit Contestation**

Scholars of social movements who work on uncovering possibilities and moments of mobilization have stressed that simple ‘talk’ under authoritarian conditions should not be underestimated (Johnston, 2001), but rather carefully studied and analyzed. Political scientists have likewise recognized that words, gestures, utterances, voices, and so forth, take on complex meaning and carry different weight in political and social contexts where public expression is carefully controlled or entirely restricted (Scott, 1990; Wedeen, 1999). Before turning to a discussion of freedom of expression and possibilities for journalistic subversion, I will introduce a fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations.” He refers to this phenomenon as the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary,” which is the “mobilization of millions of subaltern, chiefly urban poor…[and the way] in which the poor struggle to survive and to better their lives by quietly impinging on the propertied and powerful, and on society at large.” Examples include tapping into municipal electricity taps or, as in Singerman’s study of Cairo’s informal economic networks. The survival strategy of the urban disenfranchised and poor, Bayat argues, resembles a nonmovement rather than expression in political Islam (2010: 14-16).
historical instance of subtle transgression in theater from Soviet Ukraine and a contemporary parallel in Tunisia. In the second part of this chapter, I will critically examine pre-Orange Revolution contention, before transitioning into an in-depth debate about explicit forms of contestation in Tunisia under Ben Ali leading up to the January 2011 Jasmine Revolution.

Historically, transgressing authoritarian political orders through concealed or hidden tactics is not unusual or unique. Studies, essays and novels about the social conditions within the Soviet Union, both by writers living under communism and those who emigrated (Havel, 1978; Kundera 1967, 1975, 1984; Michnik, 1986, 1998; Lukyanenko, 2009) are rife with themes about the limitations of expression, the control of thought, and domination of language by state authorities. The inability to express in public, or even private, any criticism or doubt vis-à-vis the omnipresent state apparatus and its pervasive ideology, has forced writers, philosophers and thinkers to find other avenues and venues for expression, whether in sarcasm, subversion, secret love affairs, fictitious stories about the human condition, clandestine publications, or the performing arts. It comes with little surprise that artistic production was so vehemently controlled by Soviet authorities as exemplified by the popular German film *The Lives of Others* (2006) directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. Plays, films, novels, painting and short stories were all spaces within which power, politics and policies could be critiqued, subversively, disseminated among larger publics that could identify with the artists’ messages ultimately presenting a threat to the power of the state. Even today, Ukrainian
authorities tightly control archives that house theater plays and essays of the Soviet era despite recent commitments to make archives more accessible.

In Soviet Ukraine during the 1950s and 1960s, a group of Ukrainian theater students wrote dissertations on plays that subversively mocked Soviet ideology and state rhetoric. These works include discussions of the 1956 play “First Day of Freedom” by Leon Kruchkowsi, the 1965 comedy “A Simple Person” by Branislav Nušić, and the 1958 play “In the Name of Revolution” by Anton Hryhorovich. It remains unclear whether these dissertations were directed by the same mentors or committees, however, each study explicitly discusses the meaning of a “new” freedom granted to all Soviet citizens, the individual and his civic responsibilities, and the ambiguous control of all human thought and actions.

In the play “First Day of Freedom,” for instance, five Polish solders, former concentration camp prisoners, enter a room that represents their new home. They are stunned by the cleanliness and order of the room and as they look out the window they see a beautiful fresh spring day, signifying their first moment of freedom. After

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81 I visited the city archives of Kyiv in the fall of 2009 to conduct research on the types of documents filed within the Ministry of Culture and Arts in the Soviet era. Similar to other cases, access to archives in Ukraine remains extremely limited, especially archives pertaining to the immediate post-Soviet era. I was not granted permission to photocopy the theater dissertations I read, however, the head archivist granted me reading-and note-taking rights. I was particularly surprised that the dissertations were written in Ukrainian and not Russian. The translations of archives are all my own.

82 Branislav Nušić was a Serbian novelist, playwright, satirist, essayist and founder of modern rhetoric in Serbia. He was eventually jailed for this writings.

83 The spring metaphor is a common theme in the literature and art of dictatorships, usually marking a moment of change (for instance a coup d’etat or regime transformation) and symbolizing the newly-found freedom for citizens. In Tunisia, cartoons and schoolbooks oftentimes make reference to the spring of progress and liberty after Ben Ali’s coup in November of 1987. In Ben Ali’s rhetoric, spring is
years in prison, these soldiers are now privileged with clean beds, food, furniture and other staple luxuries. Yet, the student writes, will these soldiers be able to handle their newly found freedom? Their first reaction after marveling at the spring day is a state of confusion and feeling of loss. They feel overwhelmed by all that is given to them – beds, furniture, and food. These freedoms, the student writes, are all symbolized by minimal life necessities: sleeping, eating and living. Are the soldiers aware that freedom itself comes at a price? At this point, the student directs his analysis from a somewhat sarcastic and repetitive discussion of freedom to the political cost individuals living within the Soviet system have to pay, namely obedience. The challenges, he writes, is understanding the life of this new person (the new Soviet citizen), and if the challenge is not understood, the consequence will be “the price of blood.” Of course the student would have not been able to overtly voice his critique equating freedom with obedience or risking death, in a journalistic analysis, book, or public critique. Instead, he selected to analyze a regime-sanctioned play and develop his critique of political obedience under the Soviet system and its underlying paradoxical and repressive principles.

Theater, whether in writing or performance, has constituted a compelling venue for subversion or hidden critique, both historically and contemporary (Garton Ash, 1990).84 During the spring of 2009 in Tunisia, for instance, the play Duo Pour

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un Mur (‘‘Two for a Wall’’) opened in Carthage. The five actors portrayed young and educated Tunisians entangled in a plot of feeling trapped, unable to see beyond the wall. The wall, of course, represented a barrier to information, travel, life opportunities, and other social ills plaguing Tunisia’s young and educated population, or as the review explained, “the wall in this play represented multiple obstacles.” For this reason, the play addressed a wider audience than just those interested in the performing arts. Through their dialogue, the plot deviates from a narrative of entrapment to a debate about possibilities for liberation. The main character, for instance, is portrayed in his simple existence, owning few material goods (a suitcase, a radio, and two safety boxes), yet curious and thoughtful in his worldview. The erection of the wall in his life world, however, disrupts his simple existence, generating fear and anguish. Slowly his life is overshadowed by the metaphorical shadow of the wall, yet he refuses to give in. On the other side of the wall, the silhouette of a beautiful woman appears, her music captivating his attention and giving him hope and a reason to live on. Another character suggests that the inability to see beyond a wall can be mitigated by recognizing that the wall itself might not be real. The dialogue, at this moment twists, linking the uncertainty of a wall to the ambiguity of political legitimacy, or at least those individuals and institutions responsible for erecting social and political barriers. Overcoming this barrier means recognizing that a wall is not only a physical barrier but also exists within our minds. To acknowledge the duality of the wall, its physical and mental manifestation, is the beginning of regaining hope. The performance ends with a bizarre acknowledgement

that walls can turn, distinctively referencing the German *Wende* or fall of the Berlin Wall.

Another two plays, “Yahia yaïche: by Fadhel Jaïbi and Jalila Baccar as well as Taufik Jebali’s “Le audelà tiens,” more directly critiqued the state of freedom of expression and press, with the assistance of some Tunisian journalists who shared their experiences and frustrations. The plays opened precisely at a time as a dialogue about freedom of expression with Ben Ali’s regime was intensifying (see below) in April and May of 2010, in fact during the same week that the weekly *L’Observateur* published a series of testimonies by Tunisians journalists about their opinion vis-à-vis freedom of expression. The plays, however, take their critique further and Zyed Krichen, editor-in-chief of the established *Réalités*, discusses their political message in great detail. “Artists and intellectuals,” he writes, “have decided to take the bull by its horns, and address fundamental questions that agitate all of society: society’s connection to political power and the response to political power to society.”

While performing arts are not generally treated as spaces for political contestation, they nonetheless exemplify how individuals are able to puncture dominant authoritarian narratives, chronicling the everyday experiences of citizens living under and coping

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86 Zyed Krichen, the editor in chief of *Réalités*, a regime-sanctioned weekly, is not only fluent in navigating media censorship but also closely connected to Tunisian academic circles who have always been critical and dismissive of the Ben Ali regime. Krichen strategically used the space of his publication to transmit a critical and important political message, while acknowledging the venue of arts as areas of subversive political expression.
with authoritarian politics. Similar ruptures within authoritarian narratives can be discerned in contemporary print media.

Today, the lack of freedom of expression as defined by international democracy-promotion programs and organizations such as Freedom House refers to the inability of expressing specific thoughts and ideas that challenge if not resist authoritarian politics in the direction of political liberalization. For the past two decades or more, Tunisia has received a score of ‘not free’ similar again to Ukraine’s score under President Kuchma (1994-2004). In both cases, oppositional political commentators, bloggers and cartoonists faced on-going harassment, imprisonment or death. Despite these dramatic incidents, which most certainly gripped the attention of international human rights organizations, the Freedom House narrative of ‘not free’ nonetheless overshadows subversive activities by savvy journalists, artists and writers that reflect broader political realities and sentiments, especially of those individuals who eventually helped mobilize masses and themselves took to the streets in Kyiv, Tunis, Cairo, Algiers, Bengazi, Rabat, among scores of other cities.

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87 For an insightful discussion of the role of literature under dictatorship, see a round-table discussion on Al-Jazeera’s talk show Riz Khan aired on February 23, 2011 titled “The political power of literature,” with Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman, Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif and Libyan writer Hisham Matar.

88 The Press Freedom Index ranked Tunisia as 164 out of 178 countries rated in 2010. Reporters Without Borders included Tunisia in its list “Enemies of the Internet” along with North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Turkmenistan.

89 A famous incident refers to Tunisian journalist and blogger Taoufik Ben Brik, who is a well-known critic of Ben Ali, the Tunisian regime, and the state of censorship. Ben Brik has published a series of scathing articles and books abroad, causing a series of arrests and detainments in Tunisia, as well as harassments against him and his family. In October 2009 he was imprisoned on trumped-up charges of having assaulted a citizen in a traffic incident. While his sentence of nine years was upheld by the Court, he was released in January 2010 after serving six months.
To exemplify further, on a visit to Tunis in 2009, a National Democratic Institute (NDI) representative stationed in Morocco confirmed the Freedom House narrative and firmly stated that there is no freedom of expression or freedom of press in Tunisia. The inability to express alternative political ideas to those sanctioned by the ex-ruling RCD party has likewise been a re-occurring concern in the annual State Department Report on Human Rights in Tunisia, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, the EU Neighborhood Policy, among other organizations working on political and economic transformations as well as civil society development in the Middle East and North Africa. Such reports generally conclude that Tunisian citizens do not have a venue to express their alternative political ideas and beliefs, that they can not engage in oppositional activity vis-à-vis the authoritarian system of former President Ben Ali, and that political mobilization if only in independent civil society organizations, is therefore unlikely. This condition has been all the more aggravated by Ben Ali’s control of internet activity, mobile phone conversations, radio broadcasts (the 2009 shutting down of Radio Kalama) as well as the blocking of youtube.com, dailymotion.com or any international news sites publishing critical pieces about the Ben Ali regime, and, finally, the expulsion of the French-language

91 The Tunisian government briefly shut down facebook.com in the summer of 2008. As Facebook usage is growing rapidly in Tunis and has developed into the premier public discussion board as well as internet venue to promote various social events, some diaspora Tunisians began Facebook groups against the governmental ban. The Facebook ban was lifted shortly thereafter. On January 13, 2011, Ben Ali removed internet censors as a concession to growing protests. Protesters, however, were already preparing for the January 14 events that eventually toppled Ben Ali, and sent a clear message that hundreds of deaths warrant a lot more than the unblocking of youtube.com.
publications *Currier Internationale*, and *Le Monde* prior to the October 2009 Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

Similar to the Syrian case, some Tunisian media have been privatized, mainly daily and weekly print publications under the publishing house *Al-Sabah* and the radio stations *Radio Zaitouna* and *Radio Mosaique*, yet vigorous censorship nonetheless dictates what can and cannot be published or broadcasted. A recent set of articles discussing the privatization of publications and internet activities in Syria (Kawakibi, 2010 (a); Kawakibi, 2010 (b)) contends that the privatization and relaxing of internet control has not been able to provide an unrestrained forum for the publication and dissemination of oppositional voices and critiques. In Ukraine under ex-President Leonid Kuchma, Ukrainian citizens were equally restricted in accessing information and locating venues for alternative political expression, as a number of oligarchic networks either within or close to the regime increasingly controlled the media. The most infamous state response to critical expression was the 2000 Gongadze affair, in which the Georgian-born opposition journalist Hrehory Gongadze was found beheaded on a highway leaving Kyiv, and the subsequent discovery of President Kuchma ordering the killings on leaked tapes. The embarrassing event was coined the “Kuchma-gate” affair and constituted one of the events that led to increased mobilization among young and disenfranchised citizens questioning the authoritarian state of affairs.

Events such as Kuchmagate and the privatization of media in both Ukraine and Tunisia by private sector entrepreneurs close to and within the regime further tightened freedom of expression in both countries. Nonetheless, there are two
distinctive ambiguities in statements such as the one expressed by the NDI representative in Tunis. First, a lack of venues (newspapers, conference, magazines, independent civil society) for expression of alternative, oppositional, and resistant ideas and activities should not mean that such voices do not exist and are not widespread among citizens living under authoritarian political conditions. This has become especially evident in post-Jasmine Revolution Tunisia, as analysts are reluctantly accepting the efficacy of Facebook and Twitter in spreading important political messages and mobilizing previously unimaginable numbers of protesters.\textsuperscript{92} Business scholars have termed the savvy usage of internet sites as “smart mobs,” referring to technologically capable groups who tactfully exploit internet tools to further their causes (Rheingold, 2002). The difficulty for social scientists lies in linking a virtual mobilization space, for instance a “Down with Ben Ali” group on Facebook,” to individual decisions to take to the streets.\textsuperscript{93} So far, social networking sites have not been considered to the same extent as more traditional outlets for expression, including newspapers, radio, television, especially in evaluating freedom of expression and press. Unlike traditional media outlets, social networking sites in cases like Tunisia do constitute important spaces where alternative and radical opinions have been circulated for at least half a decade. Ex-President Ben Ali and his


\textsuperscript{93} In \textit{Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements} (2001), the editors Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jaspers, and Francesca Poletta argue that collective emotions are linked to the pleasure of protest. Individuals are not only motivated by participating in political activities with loved ones, but can also be captivated by collective motions, chants and songs practiced by scores of strangers. Facebook groups in particular provide a venue for collective sentiment among strangers and friends alike.
notoriously corrupt son-in-law Sakhr El-Materi even had their own Facebook pages where ordinary Tunisians performed allegiances via wall postings. Unlike cell phones and satellite networks such as Al-Jazeera (Lynch, 2006), Facebook allows for the formation of virtual communities where individuals can observe who participates in groups, discussion forum or supports oppositional politics. Virtual communities help mobilize individuals, spread videos and images stirring emotions (Goodwin, Jasper and Poletta, 2001), and build trust among supporters over time, which contributes to their willingness to take to the streets. Finally, social networking sites invite much broader participation than street-based protests, as those who are unwilling or unable to partake in street-based contention can nonetheless participate. Tunisia, in this regard, is not the only example. In Egypt too, young oppositional movements were comprised of various Facebook groups, including the “We are all Khalid Said” site, the “April 6th Youth Movement,” (influenced by Serbia’s Otpor!), Kefayya!, and so on.

In a similar vein, the link between limited freedom of expression and political apathy defined the analytical lens of scholarship and policy reporting in pre-Orange Revolution Ukraine. During Kuchma’s reign (1994-2004), for instance, scholarly and journalistic writings about political conditions in Ukraine concluded that the combination of creeping Kuchma-style authoritarianism and post-Soviet legacies

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94 In the days before the January 14, 2011 Jasmine Revolution, Ben Ali’s personal Facebook account as well as the official Presidential site carthage.tn were infiltrated and closed by hackers part of the growing oppositional movement. News of the shutting down of carthage.tn and the online portal to the Tunisian stock market by hackers spread rapidly via Facebook and twitter, increasing confidence in the impending protests.

rendered an apolitical and undemocratic Ukrainian populace. Yet by 2005, a year following the Orange Revolution, articles, reports and analyses reverted to discussing the triumph of civil society, the young generation’s commitment to democracy, as well as the ability to subvert state-controlled media (Diuk, 2006, Aslund, 2006). How is a leap from political apathy to democratic, “more free,” political culture possible in the span of a few months? Similar to assumptions about anti-Ben Ali voices in Tunisia, did Ukrainian anti-Kuchma voices truly lack a platform or venue to disseminate their ideas, beliefs, and political anticipation? How are such large-scale mobilizations as the events of the 2004 Orange Revolution or the 2011 Jasmine Revolution possible with a politically apathetic citizenry?

Pre-Orange Revolution mobilization efforts spearheaded by the youth group Pora! (It’s time) and trained by Serbia’s Otpor (which also worked with Egypt’s April 6 movement), were more organized and sophisticated than Tunisia’s Jasmine movement, yet parallels are nonetheless clear. Pora! made savvy use of the internet, including sites such as UkrayinskaPravda.com (UkrainianTruth.com), capitalized on moments such as Kuchmagate, led nation-wide protest training camps a year before the 2004 Presidential election, and motivated previous sit-ins and strikes collaborating with groups such as “Ukraine Without Kuchma” and “Anti-Kuchmism.” These on-going contentious and oppositional activities attracted the attention of disenfranchised youth and students on campuses as well as a citizenry that was rapidly growing disgruntled with Kuchma’s creeping authoritarianism.

However, very few of these activities captured the attention of outside observers, especially those studying civil society through a democratization lens.

The increase in recent citizen-inspired, non-violent, urban, civic uprisings especially in the Middle East and North Africa (or in Eastern Europe beginning with the revolutions of 1989) is testimony to the notion that deepening authoritarianism produces resistance along with compliance. A lack of freedom of expression and press, as decreed by international organizations, renders an image of a population that does not engage with opposing ideologies, ideas and critiques and as such complies with the governing system. International development initiatives and donor agencies therefore press for freedom of expression in their programs, with the underlying assumption that granting a venue for expression will indeed produce such expression. Virtually no attention is paid to the venues where such expression does exist – either in pre-Orange revolution Ukraine, or in recent contemporary context such as Ben Ali’s Tunisia’s. As exemplified above, such spaces are manifold, reaching beyond intentional mobilization efforts to mundane venues, including working class beer bars in downtown Tunis primarily ventured by men, the hundreds of coffee shops where the poor and unemployed kill hours of time discussing, rumoring, imagining, and critiquing, (Collins, 2009), large-scale soccer matches where fans mock the police in song and chant, subversive publications in both Kyiv and Tunis, complementing the large-scale mobilization efforts on university campuses in Kyiv and across Ukraine and informal often illegal student movements on campuses in Tunisia, clandestine protest training camps across Ukraine, and widespread political jokes about the
disenchantment of leadership, often comparing leadership styles to neighboring countries (Ben Ali-Bouteflika; Kuchma-Putin).

The second ambiguity concerns the assumption that a state-controlled press, such as the one under Ben Ali’s Tunisia, is completely restrictive. While the Tunisian mainstream French and Arabic-language media in print (La Presse, Al-Sabah, Le Temps, Le Renouveau, Réalités, Chourouq, El Bayan, Essarih, Al Akhbar, El Horriya, Eshafa, Kol-Ennass, El Moussawatm, Akhbar Al-Joumhouriyya, Echaba), television (Hannibal TV, Tunis 7) and radio (Radio Mosaique, Radio Zaytouna, National, Jeunes) did not allow for a regular and fully open forum of critical debates about government policy and activities, including elections, new economic policy, and the hundreds of state-sponsored conferences and dialogues that occurred in Tunisia annually, the ability to express was not entirely restricted. For years, there has been a variety of weekly newspapers published by the opposition (Al-Maukif, Al-Tariq Al-Jedid and Al-Mouatin) that fervently criticize government policy and a careful reading of articles in the civil society column of L’Expression, a former semi-independent bi-monthly, showed regular yet subtle subversive discussions on

97 One of the most insightful columns published in Al-Mouatin is entitled “Citoyens pas Subjets” (Citizens not subjects) which routinely discusses the governments attempts to curb rights and restrict access to information.
98 L’Expression was shut down in March of 2009 yet the explanation for the shutting-down vary. A few months before, the President’s son-in-law purchased the publishing house Al-Sabah which printed the weekly L’Expression. Some of the dialogues in L’Expression were funded by MEPI, other critical civil society columns were published by Nejib Sassi, a relatively critical journalist. In February of 2009, Sassi published a scathing article about freedom of expression in the Arab World, without mentioning Tunisia but clearly implying the Tunisian condition. L’Expression was shut down a week after. The oppositional publication Al-Maukif published an article claiming that it was shut down because of Sassi’s article. Yet the official line was that L’Expression was an expensive publication that was not bringing in sufficient revenue to justify its continuity.
questions of censorship as well as freedom of press and expression. As all publications are subject to approval by the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior, it remains surprising why such discussions are indeed allowed and sanctioned by the state. Critics of Tunisian politics have argued that even the oppositional press is an apparatus of the state and that critical articles are a token of the state, especially as the parties who publish them are government-approved opposition parties. Yet, as an editor of one of the most widely read weeklies stated in an interview, “Tunisia is not Syria; we can publish anything we want except personal criticisms of the President or his family.”

From a series of interviews conducted with students, young lawyers and other professionals, the availability of oppositional publications does indeed have an effect on their understanding of politics and what an alternative political system might look like. The Tunisian state thus allowed a certain level of expression, albeit a limited one, yet certainly not one that mirrors the accounts produced by associations such as Freedom House, NID, among others. Those familiar with the range of press in Ben Ali’s Tunisia would hardly agree that the official state publication La Press or other party sponsored publications such as Le Renouveau mirror magazines such as L’Expression or oppositional papers such as Al-Maukif or Al-Mouatin.

Of course, the Tunisian press under Ben Ali was neither free nor was expression of alternative political ideas easy, welcomed, or encouraged. Yet the narrative produced by Freedom House of complete state domination over all forms of expression is overstated. In discovering spaces where oppositional ideas were

99 Interview with Ziad Krishan, editor in chief of Realities, Tunis, November 17, 2009.
articulated however careful, we can begin hypothesizing about state responses and better understand the dialogue of contestation-domination that unfolds between state and social actors. If, for instance, an oppositional or non-party publication runs articles on the state of civil society or freedom of expression, a party-sponsored newspaper will respond with its version of the story. When students protest the reduction of scholarships and stipends and high-unemployment among Tunisia’s youth, *La Press* oftentimes responds with a series elevating the state-sponsored *Pact Jeunesse* (Youth Pact, see chapter 2). Rather than concluding that state dominance has become ubiquitous (King, 2010) we can discern the linkages between oppositions/critique and state response to ultimately better understand the fluid yet complex state-society relations in authoritarian political systems.

To illustrate, on February 27, 2009, the semi-independent *L'Expression* published a series of daring articles discussing censorship and auto-censorship in the Arab world as well as the state of freedom of expression. Nejib Sassi, the magazine’s regular civil society correspondent interviewed Larbi Chouikha, a well-known regime critic, professor of Journalism, contributing writer to the opposition paper *Attariq Al-Jedid*, and militant member of the Tunisian Human Rights League. The interview consistently referred to a lack of freedom of expression in the Arab world in spite of making references to specific conditions in Tunisia, particularly economic development, widespread literacy, and the absence of an independent opposition. The intrepid interview and accompanying articles were pushing the limits of the permissible, examining questions such as the limitations of socio-economic development necessary for democracy (in effect, the Tunisian paradox) or
recognizing signs of ‘liberal openings’ within political processes, such as elections and party politics. With respect to censorship practiced by the state and even auto-censorship practiced by ordinary citizens, Sassi wrote of the possibility of an “Arab Exception,” criticizing the negative effects of any form of censorship on intellectual thought, societal trust, and political development. “Auto-censorship is more complex with adverse effects,” wrote Sessi, “…the role of censorship and those who engage in censoring disappears if there is democracy and a state of law.”

While Sassi never mentioned Tunisia specifically, he nonetheless skillfully integrated information about the blatant ridicule and buffoonery of laws stipulating press freedom and publication of intellectual thought, mirroring conditions specific to Tunisia.


L’*Expression* was shut down immediately following the publication of Sassi’s article. Yet, the context within which the articles on censorship appeared is likewise

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insightful in understanding the complexity of subtle contention in Tunisia.

*L’Expression* is a sister publication of two major Tunisian daily French and Arabic newspapers, *Le Temps* and *Al-Sabah*, and has been in circulation for just over a year. Initially, *L’Expression* was pulled off the newsstands for its investigative analysis although it was reinstated within just a few weeks. After the publishing of some critical articles in the fall of 2008 questioning the absence of freedom of the press and expression, a controversial debate between the student union UGET (*Union Générale des Etudiants Tunisiens*) and the government and political pluralism more generally, the editor was dismissed and replaced by a more suitable candidate a few weeks before Tunisia’s celebration of Ben Ali’s November 7th, 1987 coup d’état. The publication took on a new tone, covering mundane Tunisian matters, profiling the legalized opposition parties, as well as regional North African and global affairs. However, during the same week that the capital was preparing for its first 2009 soccer derby in which Tunis’ archrival teams battle for the nation’s championship, *L’Expression* published the series of articles on censorship by Sassi. The timing was important in that the entire nation was being consumed by soccer fever at the expense of any other national or international event. While this parallel clash in coverage—the juxtaposition of the country’s most vocal form or expression in soccer stadiums versus the virtual absence of expression lamented in the articles on censorship—might be coincidental, it can also constitute a moment when contestation finds its voice in popular discourse.  

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101 *L’Expression* was shut down after the issue covering autocensorship (March 2009). Explanations vary: some say that the President’s son who had recently acquired the publishing house *Al-Sabah* decided to shut down the magazine because
Since the final shutting down of *L’Expression* in March of 2009, the state-controlled press published countless articles on freedom of expression, including individual journalists’ testimonies about their impression of the state of freedom of expression in Tunisia.\(^\text{102}\) The articles and testimonies commissioned by the state treated Sessi’s subversion as a critique of Tunisia’s state of freedom of press and expression, rather than a criticism of the Arab region more generally. In May 2009, the opposition paper *Al-Tariq Al-Jadid* responded with an interview with Nejib Sassi discussing the reasons for the disappearance of *L’Expression* immediately following publication of his articles.\(^\text{103}\)

![Figure 4.4. Attariq Al-Jadid, 2009](image1)

![Figure 4.5. Attariq Al-Jadid, 2009](image2)

A political cartoon depicting an attractive female police officer asking a man reading a newspaper accompanied the interview: “Has your paper already been read by the...”

\(^{102}\) Quelle liberté pour quelle presse?” *L’Observateur*, no.96, April 30-Mai 6, 2010, pp.2-21.

\(^{103}\) “Liberté d’expression: L’exception arabe?” by Larbi Chouikha in *Attariq Al-Jadid*, may 2-8, 2009, p.2.
In the spring and summer of 2010, the ruling RCD party sponsored a series of events about freedom of press and expression in Tunisia and in October of 2010, ex-President Ben Ali publicly announced his intention to increase circulation of the opposition press and allow for new independent publications to be formed.

This exchange within the papers signifies a dialogue of contestation or claim-making and dominance between those challenging the state’s policy towards freedom of expression and the state responding itself through the vehicle of state-controlled publications, conferences organized by the ruling RCD party or commitments by the ex-President himself. The reaction of the state as part of the dialogue also shifted from shutting down a publication completely, to co-opting the ‘freedom of expression dialogue,’ to allowing even more intrepid articles in the opposition press, and finally committing to increasing the dissemination of opposition ideas. This is only one example through which we can understand the type underlying dialogue that can exist under authoritarian political conditions, beyond our typical assumption of complete domination and repression. We can also see why Tunisia’s press might have not been ‘not free’ as classified by Freedom House.

*Implicit Contestation*

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104 Political cartoons have been analyzed as voices of dissent in contexts where any form of critique is generally restricted (Douglas and Malti-Douglas, 1994; Wedeen, 1999; Corstange, 2007).

105 The commitment to an increased dissemination and availability of oppositional ideas via print press occurred just two months before the December 2010 protests. Following the fleeing of Ben Ali to Saud Arabia on January 14, 2011, the state of freedom of press and expression changed radically in Tunisia. See, for instance, “Tunisia’s Sudden Press Freedom,” *Spiegel Online International*, January 21, 2011 by Ulrike Putz.
In the second part of this chapter, I will move beyond incidents of subversion and turn to political contention that does not necessarily begin at collective and public ‘claim-making’ (Tilly, 2004) or the articulation of rights-based demands (O’Brien and Li, 2006) vis-à-vis the state, but rather at the gradual and risky puncturing of dominant political narratives produced by the state. That is, the moments ordinary citizens decide to privately or publicly transgress and challenge authoritarian political policies, whether material (economics, systems of taxation), spatial (living quarters, urban spaces) or ideological (dominant political ideology). Until recently, social movement models whether structural (resource-mobilization) or cultural (framing), have not systematically considered the forms of contestation that exist before movements form and begin articulating demands (Olson, 1965; Fireman and Gamson, 1979; Snow & Benford, 1992; Jasper, 1997). Thus, ordinary and widespread practices or social non-movements as articulated by Bayat (2010), such as tax evasion, common jokes and tapping illegally into municipal resources, or isolated acts of contention including hunger strikes, journalistic transgression or sporadic protests are usually not considered to be associated with organized, activist activities carrying defined political agendas. An exception has been the turn led by the Dynamics of Contention scholars (McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2000) to identify contentious micro-processes across cases and time in an effort to improve theories of macro-political outcomes, whether democracy, nationalism, revolution or protest (Tilly, 2004, 2007).

The years preceding the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine constitute a compelling example. As discussed previously, scholarly and public policy accounts about Ukraine’s civil society, civic life, and regime change possibility were all but
pessimistic (Way, 2005; Kuzio, 1998; Riabchuk, 1998). The message was clear:
President Leonid Kuchma used authoritarian political tactics to curb independent
interest articulation, freedom of expression and speech, and sought to manipulate the
democratic political process, particularly the 2004 Presidential elections that
eventually presented a political opportunity for the PORA! (“Its Time!”) movement
to spearhead the revolution. Yet, the political conditions described in policy reports
and academia in the 1990s and early 2000 – namely wide-spread political apathy –
became clearly unfounded when in November of 2004, hundreds of thousand of
ordinary Ukrainians from the capital and other parts of Ukraine took to the streets in
Kyiv for days in the bitter winter cold. Scholars were quick to produce chapters and
articles on Ukraine’s ‘triumph or break-through of civil society’ (Diuk, 2006; Aslund,
2006). Yet, the question remains, which civil society? And how did it burgeon so
quickly from one day to the next?

In my interview research with leaders and activists of the PORA! civic
movement, the responses were unanimous: conceptions of civil society, or the ways
in which we traditionally study the abstruse space between state and society (Putnam,
1993; Diamond, 1999; Shils, 1997; Seligman, 1992; Cohen and Arato, 1992), have

106 The protests began after it became clear that the election results were rigged to favor Kuchma’s favored candidate, Viktor Yanukovich. After a second round of elections in January of 2005 closely supervised by international organizations and scores of international election monitors, Viktor Yanukovich, the political face of the Orange Revolution was declared winner. In an interesting turn of events, Viktor Yanukovich ran again in the January 2010 Presidential elections and won the Presidency over Orange Revolution leader and former Prime Minister Yulia Tymochenko. Explanations are primarily rooted in the inability of the Orange Revolution leadership to deliver on its promises, on failing its electorate, political infighting, inability to curb corruption, deteriorating relations with Russia, among many others.
little explanatory power when trying to understand the events of the 2004 Orange Revolution. Compared to the Eastern European revolutions of 1989 where civil society in the form of dissident-backed, oppositional civic movements did indeed break through (Tismaneanu, 1998; Glenn, 2003), Ukraine’s experience is comparable to that of many other countries classified as late developers. Historically, Ukraine’s civil society roots are not radically different from other cases in the post-Soviet world. Many Ukrainian dissidents who partook in the Helsinki Charter 77 movement, helped lead the country to independence in 1991, formed a nationalist political party Rukh (Movement) that helped in Ukraine’s transition from a former Soviet Socialist Republic to an independent state, and occupied high-level positions in the early post-independence government. Yet Ukraine did not consolidate democracy in the early post-Soviet years, as did Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and the dissident-inspired civil society that helped consolidate democracy in those cases was effectively pushed aside in the Ukrainian case. It has, for this reason, been difficult to establish a solid connection between weakened, nationalist parties such as Rukh who have also been pushing an anti-Kuchma agenda, and the young large-scale movement PORA! that was able to mobilize a nation.

One of the PORA! leaders – Serhij Taran – probably articulated it most clearly: “The Orange Revolution has little to do with civil society, it is rather a civic moment that brought together diverse political, linguistic, cultural, economic and ethnic groups. What united the hundreds of thousand of protestors and supporters

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107 One example is the support of Ukraine’s Crimean Tatars, a Muslim minority of about 2 million residing on the Crimean Peninsula, for the Orange Bloc movement, even though the Crimean Tatar leadership was unsure whether or not the
during the days of the revolution was a common desire for regime change and to rid Ukraine of Kuchma-style politicking.”¹⁰⁸ As political apathy yet again became a ‘reality’ within a few months following the election of President Viktor Yuchenko of the Orange Bloc and political leader of the Orange Revolution, and PORA! splintered into four separate interest groups including a small and weak political party, it has become all the more clear that the Orange Revolution might have been the end of waves of moments of contestation and ordinary grievances, and not the beginning of a contentious process, even democracy, as academics and analysts claim (Aslund, 2006; Wilson, 2006). This conceptual deviation is particularly important in understanding the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, which I contend is likewise the culmination of multiple prior contentious moments, driven by an unforeseen future. In other words, the civic moment cited by Taran and other Orange Revolution activists, was a culmination of various political grievance-based movements and sporadic anti-regime and revolutionary activities supported by a previously quiet and ordinary populace that was increasingly surviving on economic self-help activities, with an unsure and unknown political future for the country. The political apathy defining Ukraine’s political landscape prior to the 2010 elections, five years after the Orange Revolution, provides one indicator for the argument that civil society and a democratic political culture did not necessarily flourish, temporally, after the

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¹⁰⁸ Interview with Serhiy Taran, Kyiv, Ukraine, November 2007. These sentiments can be clearly applied to the movements we witnessed most recently in Tunis and Cairo, especially an apparent lack of a unified opposition or even dominant oppositional ideology, beyond a common desire to oust authoritarian leaders.
revolutionary events that replaced a pro-Moscow government with a nationalist, pro-
EU leaning government.

We are therefore left two explanations: (1) academic research on Ukraine in the 1990s was correct in arguing that civil society was weak and political apathy widespread but not right in its assessment of a ‘civil society break-through’ to explain the Orange Revolution or (2) scholarly assessments were wrong in linking a weak civil society to political apathy and overlooked a number of intentional extra-institutional political practices (community self-help networks, bartering, tax evasion, informal student movements, activist training camps over a decade across the nation) that built upon widespread political apathy to mobilize a population at various political opportunities, including the Kuchma-gate affair and anticipated fraudulent elections. My argument is built upon the second explanation, and presents a critique to studies of civil society and classic social movement models, which tend to overlook crucial political practices that can bring about incremental change with respect to government policy or elicit unexpected responses from state institutions.109

To summarize thus far, if we begin treating moments of political contestation as fluid categories that are either the end-point of diverse and overlapping modes of contestation or the beginning of new processes of contestation, we can begin uncovering the various practices, including ordinary, every-day activities, that provoke culmination, or lead up to unexpected moments such as revolutions, protests, and other contentious political activities. I do not mean to suggest that large-scale

109 Neo-Tocquevillian studies of civil society do not provide scholarship with the tools to identify political activity beyond the associational and formal institutional realm that can have serious effects on the rules of the political game, ignite regime change, as well as provide insights about the post-transition consolidation phase.
political events such as revolutions or regimes transformation involving every-day citizens are necessarily unexpected or random – they may be carefully crafted by activists, sympathizers, and other oppositional political actors – but rather that the events leading up to such moments and the unfolding of new political orders thereafter are results of both planned and unexpected events. The democratization literature of the 1990s stressed the bargaining and negotiation among incumbent elites, the splitting of soft-liners from hard-liners within transitioning regimes, the structural variables propelling regime change such as economic crisis, institutional strength, among others. Within these explanatory models, little attention was paid to the ways in which activities by ordinary citizens combined with larger structural and decision-making models to achieve change. In the case of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, many of the splits among regime elites followed the traditional elite-bargaining model: the opposition aligned with soft-liners (Orange Bloc lead by Victor Yuchenko and Yulia Tymochenko\textsuperscript{110}), split from the hard-liners and searched for a political opportunity (election fraud) to mobilize the masses. Yet did hundreds of thousand ordinary Ukrainians taking to the streets know that elite bargaining would

\textsuperscript{110} Yulia Tymochenko was the charismatic and populist co-opposition leader with Viktor Yushchenko who together led the Orange Revolution movement. Following the second round of elections in early 2005, Yushchenko took the Presidency and Tymochenko the Prime Ministership. Between 2005-2010, Yushchenko and Tymochenko had numerous falling-outs over domestic policy (mainly financial restructuring and problems of corruption) and international relations (primarily regarding the gas dispute with Russia as well as Ukrainian-Russian relations). Tymochenko left the Orange bloc coalition after she was dismissed as Prime Minister in 2005 (though she joined government later and was the Prime Minister again from 2006-2010) and formed her own political party called “Bloc Yulia.” In January 2010 she ran for Presidency, but lost against former Presidential contender and culprit of election fraud (2004) Viktor Yanukovich.
not result in violence repression by the regime? Or, did the masses anticipate the splintering of the security apparatus when security forces joined the protesters against the regime in front of the parliament? C.J. Chivers reported in the New York Times that Kuchma ordered 10,000 Interior Ministry troops to meet protesters with force on November 28, 2004 and to put down the protests on Maidan. At that time, however, political elites who already broke with the regime, quietly warned protesters in the streets and frantically called on the Ministry of Interior to withdraw its troops.

Even though we eventually learned of the fissures in Kuchma’s regime, the elite-level explanation still does not provide us with compelling explanations for why hundreds of thousand Ukrainians took to the streets. Answers to such questions are nearly impossible to attain as we would need extensive survey data conducted before, during, and after protests, and then would face the methodological fallacies of opinion surveys: how do we know that the respondents answer truthfully and how can we capture fluctuations and changes in opinions as individuals might feel and respond differently during and after a protest.

The point here, however, is different. We can safely assume that individuals took to the streets for different reasons. In interviews with student activists in 2006 and 2007, many claimed that they simply protested to get out of the house and ‘join

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the party. Small-business owners and employees, on the other hand, joined the protests because they felt genuinely disgruntled with Kuchma’s policies governing their business operations and the regime’s ways of conducting politics more generally. As a result, those who felt frustrated with Kuchma’s style of governance, that is increasingly authoritarian and dictatorial tendencies, began avoiding politics altogether and identifying politically elsewhere: community self-help networks to negotiate small business deals and avoid taxes, neighborhood associations that started to lobby local officials for improvement of surrounding public spaces (parks, playgrounds, streets, plumbing, water, heat), as well as youth and student groups that started waves of anti-Kuchma activities on and off campuses. Pora! Was thus preceded by waves of other civic moments and movements, including Znayu! (I know!), Ukraine without Kuchma who coined the term “Kuchmism”, Chysta Ukrayina (Transparent/Clean Ukraine), Za Pravdu (For Truth!), as well a dozens of hunger strikes. As more citizens become involved in such networks or identified with politics beyond the official realm of governance, their political life became defined by smaller unofficial political spaces oftentimes involving economic self-help activities or other schemes that had direct impact on their daily lives. The gradual distancing of citizens from an authoritarian state, then, creates an illusion of political apathy.

In studies of authoritarianism these trends are viewed from the perspective of state dominance over civic and public life, yet at the same time an important state-

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112 Young Ukrainians (students and young professionals) customarily live with their families in oftentimes small, Soviet-era apartments until marriage. For this reason they generally take up any opportunity to leave the house and go out.
113 Author’s interview with Olha Ajvazovs’ka,, October 13, 2009, Kyiv, Ukraine.
society dialogue unfolds through the lens of contestation. Avoiding taxes through creative schemes or forming informal political movements is as threatening if not more than oppositional party politics especially in cases such as Tunisia where the opposition is viewed as an arm of the state. As Asef Bayat argues, if the majority of a population seeks political practices, i.e. self-help networks, elsewhere, the snowball effect that can ensue threatens the authoritarian leadership’s desired ubiquitous power. Avoiding taxes, political jokes, illegal publications and gatherings, all become contentious political acts on a large scale that might dare the government to respond. That government response, then, is generally analyzed as the strategies authoritarian leaders employ to secure power and political survival. Yet, the relationship between state and society is significantly more complex than a simple domination and repression paradigm. The relationship is fluid and ambiguous once we examine more closely how authoritarian elites respond to trends within society: whether they choose to clamp down on freedom of press or respond to critiques through their own media, or whether they chose to jail even assassinate journalists and writers, co-opt them, or allow them to continue writing.

The case of Tunisia is particularly understudied in this regard, compared to Chile under Pinochet, post-revolutionary Iran, Egypt under Mubarak (Singerman, 1995, Bayat 2010), the Hyderabad region in Pakistan (Verkaiik, 2004), the former German socialist republic, just to name a few. As I have discussed in previous chapters, political scholarship on Tunisia has predominantly focused on the trajectory

114 Even beyond mundane practices that have political consequence, scholarship on the Egyptian political opposition, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, exceeds work on Tunisia (El-Ghobasy, 2006; Brownlee, 2007; Stacher, 2007).
of authoritarianism in the post-colony, arguing that the authoritarian state has increasingly become more robust, co-opted the entirety of civil society including unions and the political opposition parties, and tightly controlled all areas of expression and interest articulation. While this authoritarian continuity analyzed as a conscious and linear process was certainly necessary to understand the strategies authoritarian regimes employ in an age of global democracy, most studies overlooked instances and spaces of extra-institutional political activity. In reality, as Fariba Abdelkhah writes in his book on modernity in Iran, “change springs from disparate and local practices, at various points in a society in the midst of thoroughgoing change” (2000:13). A common explanation for this lacunae in empirical work on Tunisia is that extra-institutional activity, often referring to illegal political parties and movements, cannot affect the fierce Tunisian state, especially since the coming to power of ex-President Ben Ali in 1987. Another explanation is that such activity simply does not exist, hence the well-known Tunisian paradox: a country with comparatively high socio-economic development and a large middle class, unable to press for political liberalization.

115 An exception is Melani Cammet’s book *Globalization and Business Politics in Arab North Africa: A Comparative Perspective* (2007), where she looks at the contentious interactions between new industrialists and the state.

116 Studies in Middle Eastern politics on local and mundane practices under authoritarian political conditions are growing: Jillian Schwedler, Lisa Wedeen, Fariba Abdelkah, Diane Singerman, Asef Bayat.

117 I adopt “fierce state” from Ayubi who compellingly separates between a ‘strong state,’ a political system enjoying the consensus of civil society and a ‘fierce state,’ in which the state uses coercion and violence to subjugate rather than compliment society. According to Ayubi, the ‘fierce state’ defines the political systems of the modern Arab world (1996).
In the third chapter I discuss the technical and ideological strategies of the state, including the construction of an omnipresent political cult of personality. Like Lisa Weedeen’s study of the Hafez Al-Assad cult of personality in Syria, I argue that the Ben Ali cult of personality has invited transgressions by ordinary citizens. Jokes about the public display of power circulate in abundance among ordinary Tunisians, even those who are considered to be fairly close to political power. For instance, following the October 2009 Presidential and Parliamentary elections in which Ben Ali won 86.9% of the popular vote and the ruling RCD party took the majority of seats in parliament, many of the posters and displays lining streets, parks, and adorning buildings across the country were updated to new images, with new messages to the public. One observer jokingly mentioned, “look, there is my new president,” mocking the constitutional amendment that effectually established Presidency for life, the electoral process itself, as well as the public display of power in the form of a political cult of personality. While most Tunisians did not partake in the elections (though many are forced to be members of the ruling RCD party), nor believed in the legitimacy of the electoral process, they nonetheless mocked the process. The mocking, then, becomes a wide-spread public transgression provoked by a phony political process – in this case elections – that Tunisian citizens know is meaningful elsewhere but not within their own governing system. In other words, Tunisian citizens knew that an electoral process could be legitimate but was fraudulent in their own system, and in the absence of independent opposition parties that could pose a threat to incumbent power, one of the few means by which to voice opposition to the electoral process was by avoiding or mocking it.
The Ben Ali government, as any other authoritarian regime, is aware of public opinion, and responds by fashioning obedience and forcing ordinary citizens to become party members, attend party-sponsored events and celebration, and meanwhile venerating itself with a visual increase in its political cult of personality. The jokes that circulate among Tunisian citizens are not far from what James Scott conceptualizes as hidden transcripts gone public, meaning the deep-seated personal and communal feelings and emotions about a system of dominance, which are voiced in public among the dominated classes. The “breaking of a taboo imposed by the dominant,” or the “public refusal to reproduce hegemonic appearances,” he argues, constitute public declarations that rules of subordination are neither legitimate nor decisive (1990: 215-217). The photographic display of the ex-President as part of the visual cult of authority itself invited widespread ridicule by Tunisians. Images showcasing the former President in his younger and healthier years, alternated between poses of Virgin Mary-like open palms (“for my country”) to clasped hands (“my country united”) to his right hand covering his heart (“from my heart” or “in my heart”). The portrayal of Ben Ali covering his heart was commonly dismissed as “in my (suit) pocket” (dans ma poche) even “genuinely, from my heart, screwing the country.” Both statements referred to the widespread popular sentiment that the regime has not only become a neo-liberal state involved in large-scale privatization, but also that the ex-President and his wife’s family, the Trabelsis, are running the country as a mafia-state. The sentiments were
confirmed after the release of *TunisLeaks* in December of 2010, officially revealing the widespread corruption and lavish lifestyle of the Presidential family, and more so exposed following the Jasmine Revolution. Yet even under Ben Ali’s rule, everyday conversations with Tunisians were marked by disgruntlement with the neo-liberal character of the state even more than the absence of political liberalization, even though the two are generally seen to be connected. Jokes about Ben Ali and his corrupt economic practices became widespread modes of resistance or a public response to a political system that citizens do not deem legitimate, much in the same ways as Wedeen argues about jokes against Asad in Syria.

What is particularly incisive about identifying such widespread micro-practices is that they are generally not captured by large initiatives such as surveys or public opinion polls. Here it needs to be specified that both surveys and public opinion polls conducted by foreign individuals and organizations were generally not approved by the Ben Ali regime. Yet, nonetheless, when opinion polls do survey the attitudes and feelings of ordinary citizens towards their governing systems (as well as towards the governments of other countries), they are not always able to capture this dimension of prevalent public opinion, especially under repressive
political conditions. And, when individual respondents do not comment on their representative governments, analysts are quick to point to political apathy, rather than fear or engagement with other ways of political expression.\textsuperscript{118} It is at these cross-sections that we cannot adequately answer why political apathy turns to revolution in Ukraine, or why political apathy persisted in Tunisia for more than two decades.

Instances of extra-institutional contentious politics under Ben Ali’s Tunisia were abundant and ranged from easily identifiable illegal movements and organizations (primarily the Marxist PCOT and the Islamist \textit{an-Nahda} movement), to loose networks and groups protesting government policies oftentimes formed on campuses (POCT Jeunesse, \textit{Tunisia in White.}) increasingly via Facebook and Twitter\textsuperscript{119}, subversion in journalism, political identification with soccer or urbanism, underground music (rock, punk, 

\textsuperscript{118} This issue is especially pertinent to international organizations and bi-lateral government programs (such as the U.S.-led Middle East Partnership Initiative or the EU Neighborhood Policy, among many others) as well as opinion and attitudinal surveys (i.e. Arab Barometer) involved in democracy-promotion and dissemination of ‘civic norms’ in non-democratic countries. Such initiatives are rooted in a scholarly tradition pioneered by Almond and Verba in \textit{The Civic Culture} (1960). For an edifying critique of such programs and categories of political agents (i.e. a civic or citizen-agents of democratization), see Timothy Mitchell, Keynote Address, “Foucault and Middle East Studies – The Virtues of Recalcitrance: Democracy from Foucault to Latour,” UCLA, April 29, 2009.

\textsuperscript{119} For an excellent analysis of recent internet-based political activism in Tunisia and Egypt see Johanne Kuebler, “The Role of the Internet as an Alternative Public Space in Authoritarian Countries at the Example of Egypt and Tunisia,” paper presented at the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES), Barcelona, Spain, July 19, 2010.
heavy metal, hip-hop),\textsuperscript{120} imaginary spaces (Collins, 2009), and finally widespread self-help activities\textsuperscript{121} (creative tax schemes, bartering, illegal private construction, tapping into municipal water and electricity sources). Similar to the Iranian case discussed by Abdelkhah in which he analyzes the “Iranians’ proverbial lack of enthusiasm for their tax obligations,” because of the distance they perceive between the state (collector of taxes) and nation (the imaginary category citizens learn to love), Tunisians do not flaunt their obedience to the Ben Ali regime by obeying tax responsibilities. Besides partaking in informal market and income generation activities (Ferchiou, 1998; Lobban, 1998; Berry-Chikhaoui, 1998; Michalak, 1983), Tunisians avoid paying mandatory taxes in creative ways. For instance, in lower class neighborhoods (cartiers populairs), families oftentimes extend their houses by adding floors for rentals or for growing families after a son or daughter is married. Once a house is extended in size, the owners have a responsibility to report it with their municipality for a new tax rate to be determined. Yet, an extension needs to be reported only if it is fully constructed. Using this loophole, most families avoid painting the outside walls or fail to install all windows, for instance, leaving the house in an incomplete condition for an indefinite period. And, similar to the practices of tapping into municipal water and electricity sources in Iran and Egypt discussed by Bayat, Tunisians likewise tap into official sources as well as into the homes of the

\textsuperscript{120} For a comparative analysis of metal music and resistance in the Muslim world, see Marc Levine, \textit{Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam}. Three Rivers Press, 2008.

\textsuperscript{121} An interesting conceptualization of contentious and wide-spread self-help is Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li’s study \textit{Rightful Resistance in Rural China} (Cambridge, 2006):”Otherwise powerless people use rhetoric and commitments of the central government to try to fight misconduct by local officials, open up clogged channels of participation, and push back the frontiers of the permissible.”
wealthy or foreigners where available. Among the wealthy classes, lawyers and doctors are especially keen to keep their reported income down to avoid higher tax brackets. Lawyers oftentimes declare a minimal fee for services rendered whereas in reality they collected a sum exponentially higher. Doctors similarly claim that they only see a handful of patents daily while in reality they treat many more. Among masons, tailors, artisans, electricians and so on, services are oftentimes exchanged for services rather than payment.

The question remains, then, why do governments not police these practices especially in resource-poor countries where tax revenue should constitute a significant part of the domestic budget? Both Singerman and Bayat argue that economic self-help practices are tolerated by governments because they fulfill a welfare role that the government cannot meet. Governments might also overlook tax evasion because they find other regulated and unregulated sources of income, including kickbacks for launching new businesses, bureaucratic inefficiency, informal pressure to donate funding to political parties or political events.\textsuperscript{122} This type of income extraction forces citizens to engage in widespread self-help activities, which in turn produces a backlash in the form of support for oppositional voices, and more direct contentious activities.

\textit{Conclusion}

\textsuperscript{122} This practice is particularly prevalent in Tunisia. All types of businesses are urged to purchase space and pages in state-run newspapers congratulating and thanking the President, donate to the ruling party on a regular basis (usually annually), and purchase expensive tickets (averaging $150) for party-sponsored events. In an interview with a manager of a real-estate firm, he referred to this practice as his “annual membership to citizenship.”
Political contestation has evolved into a rich and complex field of study within the social sciences. In the last two decades, scholars have critiqued linear theories of political transition, including the classic democratization paradigm, theories of civil society impacting democratic governance, the relationship between economic development and political liberalization, and the ubiquity of authoritarianism. This chapter engaged a number of these schools of thought, contributing to a growing literature on the fluidity and complexity of authoritarianism. From an institutional, state-centric perspective authoritarian regimes appear to be dominating all forms of political, economic, cultural, artistic, and social activity. Their strategies seem rational, repressive, dominating, with the sole purpose of securing power. As Mubarak’s reluctant departure from office and Gaddafi’s violent grip on power exemplifies, authoritarian leaders remain unwilling to surrender power, giving way to institutionalized political contestation in the form of free and fair elections. Previous waves of political transformation, whether in Western Europe and Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, or the Eastern European revolutions of 1989-1991, exemplify how authoritarian leadership cannot be omnipresent. Coinciding with the revolutions of 1989, Jeffrey Herbst warned of treating the state as a “forbidden monolith,” arguing that certain political institutions are particularly amenable to the political pressure arising from weak, oftentimes unorganized groups (1989). Institutional transformation (economic crisis, elections) and decision-making (bargaining among incumbent and oppositional regime actors) is fundamental in initiating political change, but so are bottom-up, societal forces in instigating and sustaining systemic transformation. In Morocco, for instance, women’s groups were able to effectively
pressure the monarchy to amend laws governing family relations, the so-called *Moudawanna* reforms. For this reason, the logic of international democracy promotion programs has shifted to designing initiatives that foster democratic citizenship in the form of “Agents of Democracy” alongside democratic institutions. Authoritarianism also manifests itself differently today: leaders seeking to maintain power employ democratic rhetoric and are willing to construct political institutions that resemble open political systems but in reality function to deepen authoritarian rule.

As a response to state-centric studies of authoritarianism that left analysis at an impasse, political scientists have started looking to other disciplines including anthropology, sociology, geography and history, to locate contentious activity that can elicit regime response. In this chapter I examined everyday practice by ordinary citizens that occur outside of the institutional realm of authoritarian states. Ordinary practices and oppositional activities carried out by activists in Ukraine sparked various moments of contention culminating in the unexpected events defining the 2004 Orange Revolution. An in-depth understanding of the complex circumstances that led to large-scale organized contention allows analysts to search for and identify similar spaces and practices of contention in other authoritarian conditions, like that of Ben Ali’s Tunisia. Rather than studying the traditional actors that bring about contention in post-colonial orders (unions, parties), I turned to illegal and informal initiatives and movements, widespread practices to subvert governance and engage in necessary self-help activities that place a drain on taxation, and creative schemes to challenge the political order in soccer chants, jokes and journalism. The expansion of
widespread critical sentiments to public spaces (publication, internet, public discourse) elicits uneven government responses beyond repression, as generally assumed. The Tunisian state under Ben Ali tolerated some critique and did not jail every journalist who critiqued its policies. Through this lens, a more dynamic relationship between state and society unfolds. As in the case of “Tunisia in White” which will be discussed in the next chapter or the soccer chants discussed in chapter 3, the government cannot respond with absolute repression because of the unexpected backlash that can ensue. Instead, the Ben Ali government oftentimes tried to reframe particular stories and change the narrative (for instance the youth question) within state-sponsored publications, through conferences or radio and TV broadcasts.

Inevitably, citizens living under authoritarianism engage in activities that consciously or unconsciously remake relationships of power and carve out new spaces of political meaning. How these new spaces of meaning affect dominant authoritarian political systems is examined in the next chapter on resistance and relies on evidence from pre- and post-Ben Ali Tunisia.
Chapter 5: Moments and Narratives of Resistance

Liberty is either creative or non-existent\(^{123}\)

-------- Mohammed Kerrou, Tunisian Scholar, May 2010

How well we know all this! How often have we witnessed it in our part of the world! The machine that worked for years to apparent perfection, faultlessly, without a hitch, falls apart overnight. The system that seemed likely to reign unchanged, world without end, since nothing could call its power in question amid all those unanimous votes and elections, it shattered without warning. And, to our amazement, we find that everything was quite otherwise than we had thought\(^{124}\).

-------- Vaclav Havel, 1975

The point of any political struggle, Foucault wrote, is to alter the power relations in which we find ourselves. One of the most visible manifestations of political struggles attempting to fundamentally alter power relations is in the form of popular protests, of citizens taking to the streets and demanding power readjustments though leadership transformation, political or economic redistribution, or adherence to promised rights and liberties. As protests continue daily across cities and towns in the Middle East and North Africa at the time of writing, journalistic accounts, blogs, Facebook and Twitter updates are saturated with competing narratives of resistance, political actors, and visions of the Middle East’s political future. One prevalent analytical trend has been fixed on identifying the moments and instances that

\(^{123}\) Dr. Kerrou publicly posted this statement in May 2009 on the wall of the “Tunisia in White” Facebook group. The Facebook initiative was organizing non-violent street based protests as well as discussions regarding political liberties on Facebook. It was the last large-scale initiative before the Jasmine Revolution.

presumably sparked the most recent wave of protests in the region. In this chapter, I will discuss the perceived consensus of what provoked the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and show how analysts are attempting to trace a trajectory from the Mohamed Bouazizi incident to large scale protests in the city of Tunis that surprised observers on January 14, 2011. A rather simplistic linking of events such as Bouazizi’s self-immolation to large-scale contentious political activity that fundamentally restructured the rules of the political game is not limited to the Tunisian case. In Egypt too, the January-February 2011 protests that ousted Hosni Mubarak were linked to the grotesque and fatal police violence against Khaled Said in 2010. In Ukraine, the 2004 Orange Revolution was typically attributed to the dioxin poisoning and subsequent disfiguration of ex-President Victor Yushchenko’s face as well as the be-heading of opposition journalist Hrehory Gongadze. Anna Walentynowicz, a local activist at the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk, Poland who was terminated on July 1, 1980, is regularly portrayed as the spark of the strikes that eventually led to solidification of the Solidarnosc movement.

I will frame my critique of the increasingly dominant narrative in Tunisia by engaging the social science literature on resistance and presenting examples of explicit forms of contestation that existing under Ben Ali’s Tunisia before the Bouazizi incident. I argue that the waves of protests that broke out following Bouazizi’s self-immolation cannot be divorced from previous waves of contention, but rather constitute a heightened moment of overlapping grievance-based movements and informal political practices that developed over time. Rather than treating the December 2010-January 2011 protests as unexpected events marking the
beginning of contentious activity, I link them to previous contentious moments to exemplify how a culmination of contention, or stretching of analytical boundaries, can be productive in understanding resistance.

My argument builds upon previous chapters in revealing forms of contestation that have existed in Tunisia prior to the 2011 Jasmine Revolution. However, unlike the previous two chapters that discussed the formation and location of alternative identities as well as implicit forms of contestation such as subversion in media and jokes, this chapter engages political activities that explicitly targeted the Tunisian state under Ben Ali. In other words, activities that clearly constitute a political struggle in which individual citizens sought to alter the existing power relations between themselves and authoritarian political institutions. I will begin with a discussion of on-going protests in the Southern mining town of Gafsa (Allal, 2009; Seddon, 1989) and will then discuss in more detail the last Facebook and Twitter-based mobilization campaign before the Jasmine Revolution, commonly known as the May 2010 *Tunisie en Blanc* (“Tunisia in White”) event.125 *Tunisie en Blanc* was organized by the same individuals who helped propel the Facebook and Twitter-based Jasmine revolution in Tunis the week of January 14th, 2011, thus by activists who most recently navigated censorship and police harassment, and who were fluent in e-mobilization campaigns.126 My intent is to demonstrate that explicit forms of

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125 Claims against the state have regularly been articulated by the Tunisian Student Union (UGET) and the Tunisian Worker’s Union (UGTT). See also, Human Rights Watch, “The Price of Independence: Silencing Labor and Student Unions in Tunisia.” October, 2010.

126 One of the *Tunisie en Blanc* organizers was Slim Amamou, known among Jasmine Revolution protesters as “Slim 404,” who was arrested on January 6, 2011 for dissident blogging, but later appointed Minister of Sports and Youth on January 13th.
contestation against some Tunisian state institutions, including the Ministry of Communication and Technology, the Ministry of the Interior, and individual ruling elites, have consistently existed even before the seemingly surprising protests beginning in December of 2010.

The short history of Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution as recounted by journalists and some analysts has become commonly accepted. A young Tunisian produce seller by the name of Mohamed Bouazizi, in the South-central town of Sidi Bouazid, just north of the more contentious mining city of Gafsa, set himself on fire after an agent at the municipality refused to renew his work permit without, by implication, paying a bribe. The female agent slapped Bouazizi across his face and spit at him, prompting him to burn himself in front of the municipality. Earlier that morning, the locale police confronted Bouazizi and confiscated his license to sell fruit from a cart on the side of the road. Others claim that Mohamed Bouazizi did not have the means to bribe the police, who have reportedly been harassing him regularly. In his frustration, Mohamed Bouazizi committed a painfully theatrical act that ultimately led to his death. His plight, many argue, represented the frustration of thousands of Tunisians, the educated but jobless young population as well as the millions of Tunisians impacted by rapidly rising food prices. Prices of food have exponentially risen since 2008 due to high grain prices in the global market and a drought that has forced the country to double its grain imports in 2009-2010, compared to previous years.127

Following Bouazizi’s hospitalization in the coastal city of Sfax and later Ben Arous where Ben Ali visited him and his family, protests started breaking out across the rural South beginning in Sidi Bouazid, prompting Ben Ali to order police forces to violently quell the rapidly spreading contention that loosely became known as the Mohammed Bouazizi movement. Within days, reports and videos about police violence were disseminated via internet and social networking sites, including Vimeo, Facebook and Twitter, while Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya spear-headed a regular and in-depth coverage of the contentious activity captivating media attention to Tunisia’s South. Across the country, Tunisians increasingly became aware of police forces using live ammunition against innocent protesters fueling their anger and frustration with the regime. When a controversial song by Tunisian rapper El General (Hamada Ben Amor) from Sfax was released on his personal Facebook page (see translations below), causing his immediate arrest and detention, savvy Facebook users in Tunis, Sfax and other large cities across the country immediately formed Facebook groups calling for solidarity against Ben Ali. Then General Rachid Ammar broke with the regime, disobeying orders by Ben Ali to shoot at protesters as the army was rapidly moving into cities and towns across the nation. Ben Ali’s swift loss of power occurred in line with his dichotomous attempt to calm the population, first by conducting a honorary visit to Mohammed Bouazizi’s hospital room just before his death, and a series of three public addresses in which he first called the protesters

128 The swift deployment of the military was covered on most vividly on facebook as observers across the nation were updating their status within minutes of seeing tanks move into their towns and cities. The updates listed the name of the city and Confirmé! For instance, Gafsa Confirmé! Carthage Confirmé! Kef Confirmé!, and so on.
terrorists, but after public uproar pledged not to run in the 2015 elections and promised to lift censorship immediately unblocking Youtube and Dailymotion on January 12, 2011. By that time, however, hackers forming the project “Operation Tunisia” had already taken control of and shut down Ben Ali’s public Presidential website, his facebook site, the Tunisian stock market site as well as other government portals.\textsuperscript{129} Within hours, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) called for a strike, and two million Tunisian Facebook users changed their profile photos to “Ben Ali Dega!” When Ben Ali unblocked a number of previously censored websites in a last attempt to satisfy protesters, more outrage spread among Tunisians who furiously stated that over one hundred protesters did not need to lose their lives for youtube to be unblocked. A day later, on January 14, 2011, thousands took to the street in Centre Ville, downtown Tunis, occupying the broad Avenue Habib Bourguiba and directing their chants, slogans and cries against Ben Ali toward the notorious Ministry of the Interior which anchors the Avenue at Place 7 Novembre (November 7th place), opposite the towering and glitzy RCD party building. Within hours, Ben Ali escaped to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, after Malta and France denied him landing rights and political asylum.

The Tunisian Revolution is thus framed within a narrative of socio-economic ills causing an act of self-immolation resulting in public

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frustration, protest, repression by the state, more protest and finally an ouster. This narrative, however, is of little analytical utility in understanding the breadth of contention as well as the activists engaged everyday citizen support for contentious activity (the quiet encroachment of

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<td>Figure 5.2. Dominant Facebook profile photo 2-3 days before January 14, 2011</td>
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the ordinary, in other words), as it carves a particularly logical story out of existing work on Tunisia’s authoritarianism that pitched a repressive state against a quiescent population. As I will discuss below via a number of examples, the mobilization that occurred immediately before the Jasmine Revolution is closely linked to regular contentious political activity that has occurred in Tunisia especially to moments where ordinary citizens explicitly challenged Ben Ali and the state. The discussion and research findings upon which my argument is based were inspired by evidence from pre-Orange Revolution Ukraine yet also build upon the implicit forms of contention and avoidance that I discussed in chapters three and four, rounding up the dissertation’s overall analytical quest.

*The Culmination of Contention*

Political contention in the form of open and loud resistance explicitly challenging if not overthrowing dominant political orders has been the object of
several seminal studies within the social sciences (Tilly, 1978; Skocpol, 1979; Burke, 1987; Goldstone, 1993, O’Brian and Li, 2006;). Jack Goldstone famously stated that “the same dictatorships that appeared so strong can quickly become the site of modern revolutions” (1993). Whether intentional or not, Goldstone’s mention that sites of modern revolutions can form quickly buttresses the dominant analytical angle that somehow revolutions and mass-mobilization are unexpected and surprising. While the timing of a revolution is startling partly because of the unpredictability in an incumbent’s decision to step down, the conditions leading up to it need not be. Classical social science research has examined the structural shifts propelled by socio-economic changes leading to mass-based revolutions (Moore, 1966; Skocpol, 1979), and remains of analytical utility in approaching recent revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as the wave of colored revolutions from 2004-2005. Another set of literature has gauged the more obscured acts of political contention and subversion that do not necessarily constitute overt forms of confrontations with ruling elites (Scott, 1985, 1990; Wedeen, 1999, Bayat, 2010). In the following pages, I will link explicit and open confrontation with state authorities to the implicit, subversive and banal acts discussed in previous chapters, arguing that large-scale contention is rooted in diverse lived circumstances, rendering moments of resistance less surprising. I am not attempting to use the historical method of analysis, or process-tracing, to reveal a causal convergence resulting in contentious political moments. Rather, I unpack

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A compelling study analyzing causal convergences resulting in revolution is Daniel Brook’s comparative study of the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and China (2005).
attempts at contentious bottom-up politics as episodes\textsuperscript{131} and situate them in the larger context of more vibrant political life under authoritarianism. In other words, I believe that episodes of contention under Ben Ali’s Tunisia or any other authoritarian context cannot be divorced from their lived circumstances or mundane context, or previous moments of explicit political contention. Such contentious repertoires\textsuperscript{132} including protests and Facebook mobilization form a lesser known back story to Tunisia’s January revolution. These political repertoires need to be located within their lived circumstances, in order to identify them in the first place, and later to better comprehend them within a broader political framework. On Friday, January 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2011, Tunisian protesters took breaks from cries calling for Ben Ali to step down, and instead transformed tunes and rhythms of popular soccer songs into revolutionary chants. Not only did the random episodes of soccer allegiances form solidarity through widely loved songs and chants, but they also exemplified how the hatred for Ben Ali was embedded within everyday practices. In Cairo, chants for Mubarak’s ouster were also livened by women who modified wedding songs into songs of protest, while men shouted political messages to the tunes of popular soccer chants.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{131} In \textit{Dynamics of Contention}, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly specify “the contentious politics that concern us are episodic rather than contention…and occur in public” (2001: 5). The book itself is a departure from previous models of social movement theory (structure, political opportunity and framing) to identify and compare micro-processes of contention across time and space, although upholding a causal logic. See also Charles Tilly. 2008. \textit{Contentious Performances} (Cambridge University Press).

\textsuperscript{132} Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow define contentious performances as the “relatively familiar and standardized ways in which one set of political actors makes collective claims on some other set of political actors.” These familiar ways include protests, strikes, mass demonstrations, and so on. Contentious repertoires are defined as “arrays of contentious performances that are currently known and available within some set of political actors.” (2007:11).

\textsuperscript{133} “People’s Triumph in Egypt,” by Anand Gopal, \textit{The Nation}, February 12, 2011.
Rod Aya aptly captures the dynamic, stating that modern revolution is merely the continuation of politics by other means (1990).

At this time of writing, two months after the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, five weeks after the Papyrus/Lotus Revolution in Egypt and four months before the Tunisian elections of June 2011, it remains impossible to evaluate whether events in Egypt or Tunisia constitute revolutions, or a complete political-systemic overhaul. In Tunisia, at least, there was a discernible move from contention and protest to a moment of resistance. The difference between protest and resistance, Martinot writes, is that protest “assumes that a dialogue with power is still possible,” whereas resistance implies the movement from a “space of silencing, structural disrespect, and abuse [in]to a space in which one is heard, and one’s humanity given value” (2001: 9-10). Resistance, then, is understood as the crossing of a boundary or breaking of a spatial barrier, bringing to the forefront new identities, communities and languages, all of which could have previously existed in the form of alternative yet suppressed political spaces, identities and cultures. In James Scott’s words, the crossing of a boundary within oppressive conditions signifies the moment at which hidden transcripts become public, or when oppressed populations openly voice their dissent and become aware of their collective status. Yet, the processes that denote a movement from a silenced to a pluralist space nonetheless occur within the boundaries of Foucault’s famous predicament: ‘where there is power, there is
resistance, and yet, or consequently, this resistance is never in exteriority in relation to power” (1978: 95).

My aim in this final chapter is modest in that I do not take on the arduous task of exploring whether resistance can or cannot be separated from technologies of power, or eventually culminate into a Gramscian counter culture restructuring the hegemonic political order. Rather, I continue to develop my empirically-based argument about existing forms of contestation under authoritarianism, in this instance explicit contestation, allowing me to question the simplistic narrative of Mohammed Bouazizi as the provoker of the Tunisian revolution. In uncovering complex political processes that constitute compelling back stories to profound events such as the 2011 revolutions in the Arab world, I primarily seek to generate broad questions about what counts as contestation in the study of politics.

Prior to December 2010 protests and the Jasmine Revolution, explicit forms of contestation in Tunisia were severely limited because of state repression, although some did exist. Deepening repression on part of the Tunisian state, from arbitrary economic barriers to jailing, disappearances and torture, achieved widespread political inertia, just short of absolute abeyance. Nonetheless, frustrated yet courageous Tunisians engaged in pockets of episodic contention, most notably in the South-Western phosphate mining town of Gafsa and the surrounding area nearby the Algerian border (just South of Sidi Bouzid, where the December 2010 protests began). 2008 was an especially contentious year in Gafsa and the nearby town of Redeyef, as street-based protests began in January and February against unfair hiring and labor conditions exercised by the state-run Compagnie Phosphate de Gafsa.
(Gafsa Phosphate Company or CPG). In an area where unemployment hovers around the forty percent mark, inhabitants searching for work believed that the CPG had struck an unfair agreement with the local branch of the General Tunisian Worker’s Union (UGTT), hiring based on nepotism and not merit. Yet, the street-based protests, which began as anti-CPG protests, attracted unforeseen levels of support (a social non-movement phenomenon), swiftly culminating into a loosely organized social movement across the Gafsa region, rebelling against unemployment, social injustice, repression and neglect on part of the Ben Ali regimes.

The re-occurring weekly protests in Redeyef were never covered in the state-controlled Tunisian press, though the oppositional papers Al-Maukif, Al-Mouatin and Al-Tariq Al-Jedid, reported on them regularly. The waves of protests also caught the eyes of young sympathizers on university campuses in Tunis, Sfax, Sousse, even among Tunisian Diaspora communities in France and Montreal. Many of the supporters were either adherents of the illegal PCOT, the Tunisian Worker’s Communist Party (Parti communiste des ouvriers tunisiens), or its student wing on campuses, and committed to supporting the plight of Tunisians in the impoverished rural South. Within days, local schoolteachers, women and wives of miners, neglected youth, even local union branches joined the expanding movements. The snowball effect of a targeted protest against unfair hiring practices on part of a local phosphate monopoly into a broad movement attracting other adherents locally, nationally and internationally, led to the expansion from small localized contention,

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to a broad social non-movement, to a political movement with set goals. Protesters took to the streets every week to explicitly engage in a dialogue with the Ben Ali government, negotiating more jobs and improved social welfare and justice.

Ben Ali, however, ordered security forces to violently stifle the protests, arresting hundreds of protesters, even underage children who took to the streets, and torturing jailed suspects. As Tunisians across the nation became aware of snippets of contentious encounters in the country’s South, the government quickly moved to label the non-violent and peaceful wave of protests as an organized coup attempt, justifying its increased repression. In April 2008, wives of imprisoned workers and union members and widows of deceased mining workers took to the streets in Redeyef, while activists organized a day of solidarity in Tunis on April 4, 2008. As clashes continued sporadically over the spring of 2008, the military moved into Gafsa and Redeyef, fatally shooting two protesters in June of 2008. Internet savvy activists in Tunis, Gafsa, Sfax began spreading the Redeyef/Gafsa story on Facebook reacting to the virtual non-reporting in the Tunisian press and blocking of all international news sites that covered the events. On August 18, 2008, Ben Ali ordered for Facebook to be shut down citing national security violations by terrorists, only to unblock it by September 3, 2008 following an international pressure campaign on Facebook (“1,000,000 strong against Facebook blocking in Tunisia”).

135 The concocted narrative on part of the Ben Ali regime that Facebook in Tunisia is a tool used primarily by Islamic terrorists resonated among less critical observers in Tunisia for years, especially following the April 11, 2002 bombing of a synagogue on the island of Djerba by Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghrib. See for instance, “Tunisie: Terreur Intégriste sur Facebook,” par Saloua Charfi, Realites, no. 1269, April 22-28, 2010, pp. 26-29.
The 2008 events in the Gafsa region clarify the difference between protest and resistance, in that protesters initially sought to engage in dialogue and negotiation with the Ben Ali regime. The lens of a contestation-domination dialogue is particularly instructive as it sharpens the angle of an on-going negotiation that occurs between protesters and the state, complicating an easy story of repression or domination. While the Ben Ali regime eventually responded with force in Gafsa killing at least two civilians, a tactic that was mirrored in December 2011 following renewed eruption of protests, a closer reading of the events preceding repression shows a dynamic attempt at engaging the state. The analytical advantage lies in teasing out varying state responses to contentious activity in closed authoritarian systems, like Tunisia. In the courageous “Tunisia in White” event discussed below, the Ben Ali regime did not respond with force, but rather with soft repression, blocking organizers’ Facebook accounts and briefly jailing two of the main organizers. Regime responses to bottom-up contention thus vary within their own strategies, and not just from one type of authoritarian state to another (Davenport, 1995; Lust-Okar, 2005; Geddes, 1999) The Gafsa example provides an important analytical anchor for the argument of existing contention under authoritarian conditions and on-going, varied dialogue between state and society. First, the Gafsa events were supported by the same activists and groups who organized “Redeyef Support Groups” across the country in the spring of 2008, pressured Ben Ali to unblock Facebook in August of 2008, organized Tunisie en Blanc, and helped mobilize the 2011 Jasmine Revolution in Tunis. In all of these events, the Ben Ali government or affiliates of the state, such as the Ministry if Technology of
Communication, the Interior Ministry, or the Gafsa Phosphate Company were explicitly targeted by disgruntled Tunisians. Second, Sidi Bouzid is located a mere one hundred kilometers, or sixty-two miles, north-east of Gafsa, and ordinary Tunisians of Sidi Bouazid suffer from the same socio-economic ills as those in Redeyef/Gafsa. Tunisia’s South has always held a contentious relationship with the Northern political elite, which has been compellingly documented by historians of the country’s modern history (Perkins, 2008). Third, while the contentious episodes discussed in this chapter vary in their political goals (socio-economic ills, freedom of expression and thought, regime overthrow), they are nonetheless cultivated by some of the same groups and activists who articulate their grievances against the regime and its pervasive repressive tactics in all aspects of ordinary life. I categorize these moments as episodes of contention, yet trace an important continuity across time and space that can culminate in the heightened political events we are currently witnessing across the Middle East.

**2010-2011, Explicit Contestation Expands: Tunisie en Blanc (Tunisia in White), May 22, 2010**

One of the last contentious events preceding the Jasmine Revolution was a loosely organized protest organized by six young activists via Facebook and Twitter called *Tunisie en Blanc* (“Tunisia in White”; in Arabic: *nhar a’la a’mar*, Day against Aamar\(^{136}\)) on May 22, 2010. The event advertised widely on Facebook was titled *Ce Samedi, je m’habille en blanc et je vais prendre un café sur l’Avenue* (“This Saturday, I will dress in white and have a coffee on the avenue”), a peaceful demonstration

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\(^{136}\) Ammar is an imaginary character that Tunisian activists created as a metaphor for the invisible censor blocking various websites and controlling all web-based communications.
against internet censorship in Tunisia. The plan for demonstration consisted of two
events: a protest in front of the Ministry of Technology in downtown Tunis as well as
wide-spread citizen engagement calling for supporters to dress in white and have a
coffee in one of the many cafés on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the main boulevard in
downtown Tunis connecting the Medina to the French colonial city. Laws and
bureaucratic procedures governing protests and demonstrations in Tunisia were quite
stringent and did not allow for any sort of organized activity criticizing the Ben Ali
government.\textsuperscript{137} Even when organizers applied for protest or demonstration permits
where the intent was not to explicitly criticize the regime but rather express grievance
for, say, working conditions in clothing factories or call centers among female
employees, the authorities routinely denied permission to assemble in public. Part of
the explanation is the snowball-effect any large-scale public gathering or protest can
cause by becoming a venue for voicing grievances beyond the intended protest, as the
Gafsa/Redeyef incident exemplified. The other part of the explanation is the regime’s
sensitivity to any criticism as working conditions, wages, food prices, etc. are, of
course, regulated and stipulated by the regime. At the same time, the Ben Ali regime
was also known for courting oppositional actors at some moments and then banning
them completely, as has been widely documented with the country’s Islamists in the
late 1980s, the leftist opposition, including a green movement affiliated with
European green parties that was most recently co-opted into a new political party

\textsuperscript{137} Since the Jasmine Revolution in January 2011, protests have become the primary
mode of collective political expression, calling for the ouster of numerous ministers
affiliated with Ben Ali’s ruling RCD party, the stepping-down if Primer Minister
Ghannouchi on February 27, 2011, and a number if strikes. The daily contentious
activity in downtown Tunis marks a stark difference to the orderly and quite streets
defining the bulk of the country’s post-colonial history.
called Parti Vert (2008). The few demonstrations that were allowed to take place in Ben Ali’s Tunisia were usually government-sponsored marches in support of the Palestinian cause and most recently against Israeli and U.S. policies towards Gaza. In short, besides a number of on-going worker’s strikes and protests in the Southern cities of Gafsa and Gabés (Allal, 2009), organized and authorized protest against the government especially in the capital city of Tunis was severely limited prior to January 2011.

*Tunisie en Blanc* was thus a bold attempt by a number of young activists to mobilize for an issue that affects the daily life of hundreds of thousands of Tunisians: not having access to popular websites such as youtube.com, dailymotion.com, accessing critical articles about the Tunisian regime published abroad, among many others. The particularly striking fact in this case however, is the way in which young activists were able to mobilize thousands of Tunisians within Tunisia as well as in Paris, Montreal, New York, Accra and other cities across the world. Relying primarily on Facebook, a site that was shut down for a few months in 2008 only to be opened amidst an international internet-pressure campaign to lift the censorship blockage, the activists used a medium and space that was already Facebook shielded from the government’s ability to block it completely. And, to further ensure the dissemination of the “Tunisia in White” campaign, the activists launched the event just days before the planned activities on May 22, 2010. On May 17, 2010, the

138 In 1963 the Shah of Iran launched a series of modernization reforms aimed at the peasant and working classes called the ‘White Revolution.” The Shah’s white program was likewise an effort to legitimize the Pahlavi dynasty, by gaining the support of the peasantry and counter the growing power of the urban middle class. While the two movements are not necessarily comparable, the color white is utilized in both political programs to signify elements of non-violence and sophistication.
Facebook group “Nhar Ala Aamar” (“day against Aamar”) appeared, and approximately 50,000 Tunisian supporters ‘liked’ the group. The group which was dedicated to the event described the movement as a peaceful and citizen-oriented community organization for a free internet in Tunisia. Similar to the messages spread by Orange Revolution activists in Ukraine prior to 2004 or the many non-violent civil movements appearing worldwide (Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008; Karatnycky and Ackerman, 2005; Lawson, 2005; Robert and Garton Ash, 2010; Garton Ash, 2009; Bunce, McFaul and Stoner-Weiss, 2009; Glenn, 1999) the Tunisian activists stressed a peaceful and non-violent approach to garnering support: 

> Venez nombreux pour revendiquer paisiblement votre droit a l’accès libre à l’information et à la connaissance, votre droit à un internet affranchi des ciseaux de Ammar! (“Come in large numbers to peacefully demand your right to free access to information and knowledge, your right to Internet access save from the scissors of Ammar!”). As Tunisians were generally guarded when referring to political activism under Ben Ali, the organizers stressed:

> “Do not hesitate to invite your friends, there is nothing illegal about dressing in white and having a coffee on the avenue. There is nothing illegal about demanding Internet access free of censorship. The demonstration will be held in front of the Ministry of Technology and Communication.....but if you do not want to or cannot attend, meet at a café dressed in white and simply have a coffee.”

A number of consequential dynamics unfolded in the days prior to the planned protest, pointing to a politically dynamic yet varied reaction to the event. To start, from the approximately 9000 invited guests on Facebook, 1300 indicated that they would not be attending, 780 assured that they will be present and an additional 440
chose to ‘maybe attend,’ while 7000 did not yet respond. In a country where citizens practiced obedience most of the time and certainly in public venues and spaces, it was all the more startling to see nearly ten percent of invited protesters RSVP to a public event that touches on one of the main grievances by international democracy promoters and rights activists. It was equally interesting to witness the thirteen percent or so publically showing their opposition to the event, for reasons of not supporting the protests or simply to protect themselves from any association with the activists and potential harassment by the police. The on-line discussion that ensued following the event’s announcement likewise became testimony to the political zest that existed among young Tunisians and those who were jaded by the omnipresent system of control and its paradoxical rhetoric evoking increased liberties in an expanding police state.\textsuperscript{139}

In the first few hours after the event was posted, the organizers were quick to assure safety for potential supporters who chose to partake in activists.\textsuperscript{140}

\textit{Malek: The best way to participate is to stay close to Slim, Yassine\textsuperscript{141}, and the others in front of the Ministry, but for those who cannot be there, and}

\textsuperscript{139} Another political opportunity moment was the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in November 2005 in Tunis. While the holding of the Summit meeting in a dictatorial police state was met with criticism by local and international activists, the Tunisian regime strategically used the event to solidify its international image as a liberal and progressive Arab state, a blatantly transparent effort to mask its authoritarian expansion.

\textsuperscript{140} The transcript was originally available on the Facebook page \textit{“Ce Samedi, Je m’habille en blanc...”}, but the event site was shut down a few days after the planned protest activities.

\textsuperscript{141} Slim (who is now the Minister of Sport and Youth) and Yassine are two of six main organizers and also the creators of a video entitled \textit{Sayeb Saleh: Citizen action for a FREE Internet}, that was disseminated on-line (initially on \url{www.vimeo.com}, later \url{http://dekhnstan.wordpress.com/2010/05/24/ammar404-scared/}) after authorities blocked the protests. In the video Slim and Yassine show the process by which their
excellent alternative is to simply dress in white and have a coffee at any café on Avenue Habib Bourguiba.

Wael: Malek, don’t mention the names of our organizers, just say: join those who are gathering in front of the Ministry. No reason to cite any names.

Riadh: I completely agree with Malek, we should all agree on one place to meet, the Ministry of Telecommunication; it is important that we all meet in one place for our voice to be the strongest possible.

Khayri: This is truly a heroic act! I am with you! Believe me, I will be in white!

Myriam (one of the organizers): I’m still waiting to hear what is happening with the authorizations, and so on...if we don’t hear anything, who wants to join me for a stroll on the avenue?

Naceur: All united against censorship!

Khemais: Bravissimo!

A few minutes later respondents began questioning the purpose of using a proxy, the figure Ammar, and then debating and questioning the legality of the mobilization:

Ismail: Using a proxy is exactly the same attitude that we had when we were little and waited for our parents to sleep before we watched a film or did something that our parents would not allow us to do....this is the same as implicitly accepting the BIG BROTHERING of Aammar.

Amena: I pity this cute baby whom you are bottle-feeding with non-citizenship. How can you hide yourself behind him [Aammar]? He will be forever more courageous than you guys because he has the advantage to piss where he wants and on whom he wants!

M. Sifi: Using a proxy is illegal!! A demonstration is only legal in a clearly defined setting. So, do you choose to benefit from your rights or do something illegal?

Amina: We'll be there, choreographed sort of like a flash mob...since we will be all in white!

Aziz: The flash mob, there we are, a great idea! I totally concur with it, but we should organize it for early June so that we don’t loose momentum.

Malek: We have to support our friends in Tunis who are willing to take these risks and at the very least be at their sides on May 22 in front of the Ministry of Technology and Communication. All other actions should be supportive of this historic moment.

Jeff: This does not interest me!

permit to protest from the Ministry of the Interior was denied, discuss harassment by the police, and mock the Tunisian’s government endless efforts to curb access to information on the internet. The activists pledge to continue their fight despite increased censorship and harassment: Ammar is scared. Tunisia’s history is happening now. Share this video. United we stand, divided we fall. Freedom of Information. Freedom of Thought. Freedom of Speech. Yassine assures at the end of the video, I swear on my mother. We’ll be back 😊
Aziz (in English): Who said that you had to be interested anyway? If your own dignity as a Tunisian citizen is none of your business then you should stay whatever you are and enjoy your pleniness [sic].

Within a few hours of posting the event on Facebook and Twitter, a number of sympathizers initiated a debate on the logistics, legality and symbolism of the planned event. The organizers, in response, became alarmed about the potential split among supporters (i.e. choosing a proxy; protesting versus flash mob, etc.), that the conversation was carefully mediated back to the civil, non-violent and voluntary character or the initiative.

Meriem: if you can come up with something less aggressive or heads-on, I will be there. We need to encourage all those who have supported the virtual movement...if we all show up, the sheer numbers will alleviate any fears of participating.
Zied: An entire Avenue in White is a lot stronger than a head-on protest, which can be interrupted by the security forces much easier.
Malek: But Zied, there is nothing aggressive about our protest. It’s a pacifist and civilized event! If it will not be approved (by a clear refusal from the Ministry of the Interior, which has not yet been the case) then it will be legal!! Right now, the white t-shirt is a great alternative for those who want to partake but do not necessarily want to protest in front of the Ministry.

As the build-up to the protest attracted an increasing number of supporters who debated minute-by-minute the meaning, symbolism, organization and participation of the protest, a number of Tunisians from abroad showed their support.

Haythem: I am abroad but I would love to participate, so I will dress in white over here.
Leila: I love the idea of white, we are going to see a much more elegant Tunis. I’m in!
Houeida (organizer): To all of those who live in other cities throughout Tunisia: You can participate! Just dress in white and gather on your main avenues in your cities! Tunisians of Sfax, Béja, Médenine, Jerba, Kasserine, Bizerte, Nabeul, Hammamet, Kerkennah, Kairouan, Gafsa, Tozeur, Gabes, Mahdia, Sousse, Douz, etc. Make sure to post all photos on Facebook thereafter!
Sami: But wait, we might have problems in these regions because we will not have authorization from the regional authorities!
Aziz: Its enough to dress in white and go with friends to have a coffee. There are no restrictions to dressing in white and having a coffee in Sousse, the promenade in Hammamet or in Sfax!!
Mehdi: In white at the Porte de France. See you Saturday!
Yassin: Direction Café Paris!
Asma: I work on Saturday! Damn it!
Zaid: Me too!!
Rayhane: Then dress in white and go to work!!!
Mohammed (famous Tunisian anthropologist): Liberty is either creative or non-existent!
Walid: I’m in!
Karima: Let’s do it!
Maher: Ok! Ready!
Ena: Let’s go!
Daddou: What about Nabeul? Hammamet? Is there nothing going on here?
Malek: 404! There is no protest in Lyon [France]. I will follow the internet voices dressed in white at the café at the corner!
Hani: You should notify the French press -- that will definitely have an effect!
Good luck! We will be in front of the embassy in Paris, insha’Allah!
Hedi: Okay! See you in Paris!
Amira: We are waiting for you in Paris! It is really important for as many as possible to show up!
Hedi: Flash mob in Paris! All in white!!
Amira: Yes, we will all be in white in Paris!
Malek: Tomorrow, Tunisia the Green will turn into Tunisia the White! In Tunis and elsewhere, we will dress in white and honor Slim and Yassine (the two main organizers of the event).
Brahim (in English): Good Luck everybody! The battle will be won in the end even if it has to take a million years.
Fatma: Since I cannot join you on Saturday in Tunis, I will dress in white and my friends and I will have a coffee at the 4 coins café in Monastir.
Hichem: Is there a protest in Sousse too?
Rami: But I don’t have white clothing?
Abderahman: Bla, bla, bla! That is not an excuse! Stick some of your clothes in a bucket of bleach!

While supporters were discussing the event’s logistics on Facebook, Houeida, one of the organizers began posting more alarming messages on Twitter. Yassine and Slim did not succeed in receiving ministerial approval for the protest, a short-video clip that they posted on the internet was blocked and after 5pm on May 21st, they apparently disappeared. By the afternoon, the authorities also disabled Houeida’s Facebook account, and she resorted to Twitter to continue mobilizing individuals:

Houeida (via Twitter, May 21 in chronological order):

\[142\] Many supporters call the movement Error 404 or Ammar 404. When an attempt is made to access a blocked website or illegal content, an error page with the number 404 appears on the screen. One of the organizers, Slim Amamou, was referred to as “Slim 404” by supporters.
-- Saturday, whether the demonstration is allowed or not, let’s all dress in white to protest, this can never be illegal!
-- I have a good feeling for tomorrow
-- My facebook was disabled. How do I re-activate it?
-- Can they read my Twitter posts?

Responses (via Twitter):
-- You are getting paranoid!
-- No, you can’t re-activate it!
-- I was very scared all day today! Tomorrow they will wait for us and arrest everyone dressed in white!
-- There is no easy way around this!

Houeida (via Twitter)
-- Slim and Yassine’s video is censored on vimeo.com!!
-- Slim and Yassine have disappeared since 5pm and were probably detained for interrogation! There is no permit, the protest is therefore illegal!
-- Don’t exhibit your white t-shirt until 3pm (hide it under other clothes).
-- Slim and Yassine are back home! No protest tomorrow! They need to rest!

More details to follow...
-- 3pm tomorrow, everyone in White!

It is not clear whether all supporters who planned to attend “Tunisia in White” were also reading the tweets, but by the morning of May 22, 2010, the day of the planned events, supporters certainly were getting ready to head downtown dressed in white. Yet it soon became clear that the police was asking all those dressed in white, drinking coffee or walking on Avenue Bourguiba to leave immediately.

Sahbi [8:42 am]: I’m ready. I am wearing my white t-shirt and am on the train. See you in Tunis at 2:40pm. Good Luck!
Sahbi [9:42 am]: But no one is here!
Sahbi [10:03am]: Where is everyone? Mah, where are you?
Mah [10:07am]: I’m on the Avenue but there is nothing! Maybe later, at 7pm?
Sahbi [10:11am]: I’m at the café by the Elissa, by the Tunisair sign and the Africa hotel!

Houeida (via Twitter): The cops are here to break us up!!!

The following day on May 23rd, supporters continued to comment to the Facebook event page, despite the harassment by the police, the detention of two organizers, the blocking of personal Facebook accounts and banning of a video.

Mohammed: Yesterday I came dressed in white and sat calmly in a café on the Avenue when the police came and told me to leave and not come back to the Avenue!

Fabore O: The results were not good yesterday! At around 3:40pm, I found about 15 people in white at the Africa café. I joined them and after 10 minutes the police showed up and ordered us to leave immediately.
Kathy Razouane: Too bad, I didn’t see anyone dressed in white. I only saw individuals dressed in dark colors, black, blue, and very little white. I was there from 12:30 until 6pm. I know that a lot of people in this Facebook group marked that they will attend, and I was excited to see everyone. I was sure that one thousand people would show up, maybe even more as more people were invited to this event and new groups were forming on Facebook related to this event. This was an “apolitical and pacifist” action, to dress in white and go with a group of 3 or 4 people to have a coffee in Avenue Habib Bourguiba. Check Mate 😐

I discuss the events leading up to “Tunisia in White” in detail to exemplify the motivation and willingness to engage politically among Tunisian citizens even under extremely repressive conditions. The heart of the so-called Tunisian paradox that occupied analysis until the fall of Ben Ali, that is the absence of a middle class society transforming itself into an active civil society, is complicated when examining the ordinary and contentious practices of Tunisian citizens. The debate prior to the anticipated White March in May 2010 and later the pre-Jasmine Revolution discussion exposed the kind of dialogue that existed among Tunisian citizens despite the condition of a weak, co-opted or non-existing civil society under Ben Ali’s rule. Similar to the Qat chews analyzed by Lisa Weeden in the case of Yemen where ordinary citizens meet regularly to discuss issues of communal and national consequence in the absence of strong and representative state institutions, or the Salons in the Arab Gulf, Tunisian citizens likewise carve out spaces to debate grievances, policies, authority, the meaning and responsibility of citizenship, political transition and political identities. Thus, while the Tunisian state apparatus, including its institutions and symbolic public display in the form of a political cult appeared ubiqutities in its ability to generate political obedience, the debate and interaction among ordinary Tunisian citizens portrayed the gradual remaking of relationships of
power and the carving out of local spaces of meaning. Political power, then, extends beyond its assumed location within the state in two important ways: the political cult invites transgression by non-obedient citizens (Wedeen, 1999) and, at the same time, the state has to respond to unexpected transgressions usually with repressive tactics, including detention, jailing, threats, interrogations, and blocking of communication channels (internet, cell phone use, travel, and so on). When repression against ordinary citizens becomes increasingly unpopular, as in the years leading up the Orange Revolution in Ukraine or the months before the revolution in Tunisia, the state finds itself in an antagonistic situation: it breeds the contestation, opposition and resistance that it has to police, thus increasing its unpopularity despite sweeping efforts to be loved by its citizens. “Tunisia in White” differs from the wave of street-based riots in the Southern mining town of Gafsa spatially, but also strategically as activists took advantage of the state’s ambiguous strategy and motivation. As mentioned above, the Tunisian authorities decided to block Facebook for a short period in the summer of 2008. The resistance in and outside of Tunisia to the shutting down of the most popular webpage forced the government to lift the blockages and allow its citizens unfettered access. The organizers of Tunisia in White therefore strategically used Facebook and later Twitter to mobilize a significant group, knowing that the authorities would be limited in their ability to fully block the site. Thus, only some of the organizers were blocked from accessing Facebook while the event page continued as a venue for supporters to communicate, debate and mobilize before, during and a few days after the planned events.
January 2011: Contestation goes creative!
El-General: Rais El-Bled (“President of the Country” or “President your people are dying”), arrested January 6, 2011

“Tunisia in White” was the last large-scale contentious event organized prior to the Jasmine Revolution in January 2011, yet little attention was paid to the initiative, primarily because it was somewhat successfully quashed by the state’s security forces. After the release of both Slim404 and Yassine, two of the main organizers who were detained and interrogated at the Ministry of the Interior in Tunis, the activists posted an electrifying video on vimeo.com, speaking in detail about their detention. Slim and Yassine were particularly keen to document the lawful process by which they sought to obtain protest permits and the Ministry’s absurd denial and subsequent detention. Both activists vowed that they will be back, that Ammar (the state) is scared, and that they will continue to organize the masses knowing that “united we stand, divided we fall.”

The language of mobilization and debate on Facebook for “Tunisia in White” was notably different from the language preceding the Jasmine Revolution (see discussion below), a moment, I argue, that denoted a switch from willingness to protest to broader sentiments of resistance. The organizers for “Tunisia in White” were quite particular about following and documenting guidelines to engage in a legal and institutionalized dialogue with the government (in the form of approved protest). When Ben Ali, however, ordered the police to use live ammunition against protesters in the South following the Mohamed Bouazizi incident, many Tunisians increasingly became unwilling to negotiate with the government, a sentiment that became increasingly clear in the last days of Ben Ali’s reign. A final attempt at negotiation,
was made by an extraordinarily courageous musician, El General, from the city of Sfax in his petition for Ben Ali’s attention. When El General posted his extremely popular song *Rais El-Bled* on his Facebook page, he was immediately arrested by thirty plain clothes police agents (normally referred to as the political police) who broke into his family’s apartment, the same day that Slim and Azyz disappeared from Tunis. When El General asked why he was being arrested, the police agents answered: “You know what you have done, and you know what price you will have to pay.”

*Rais El-Bled* is a captivating rap song in Tunisian Arabic with an interlude of a few French words, and yet El General’s frustration can be clearly discerned even if the words are not understood. The lyrics constitute a detailed and scathing critique of Tunisia’s socio-economic conditions, the illegitimate security state, and political liberalization. El-General also takes on Ben Ali’s in-laws, the Trabelsis, and other families close to the regime who have disproportionately benefited from corrupt economic practices. Fueled by the release of *TunisLeaks* Tunisian citizens confirmed their bitter jokes and outrage against crony capitalism, developed at kitchen tables, coffee shops, men’s beer bars, and among close friends.¹⁴³ In the music video itself, the song is preceded by Ben Ali entering a classroom and walking towards a young school boy who is crying. Ben Ali leans over the young boy and asks him, “What’s

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¹⁴³ Lawrence Goodwyn writes that in Poland, hatred towards the bourgeoisie was also manifested in knowledge of elaborate vacation homes, spas, privileged hospitals and homes, luxurious shops, elite education for children and their access to state budgets, all resulting in arrogance and clearly-marked social separation. These shared feelings vis-à-vis the privileged class is one of the explanations for the development of a force that pre-dated the 1980 Gdansk incident. See, Lawrence Goodwyn. (1991). *Breaking the Barrier: The Rise of Solidarity in Poland*. (Oxford University Press).
wrong, my child?” In the political rhetoric and cult of Ben Ali, the Tunisian people were commonly portrayed as Ben Ali’s children, particularly in mandatory text books and on posters displaying a towering Ben Ali reaching over his “nation of children.”

_Rais El-Bled_ by El General

_Mr. President, today I speak with you_
_And my name is that of all the people_
_Who live in suffering_
_In 2011, people are still dying of hunger_
_They want to work to survive_
_But their voices are not heard_
_Go down to the street and look around you_
_The people are treated like monsters_
_Look at the police_
_Beating everyone with their batons_
_Not caring about anyone_
_Because there is no one to say ‘no’_
_You don’t respect the law or the constitution_
_You can put the Constitution into water and drink it_

_Every single day I hear about a new police case_
_Completely fabricated cases_
_But the police know that the citizens are honest_
_I see cops beating veiled women_
_Would you accept this if it were your daughter?_

144 See, for instance, _Tunis: Al-Rahla Al-Raia_ (Tunis: A Magical Voyage) in which Ben Ali takes two children on a voyage through Tunisia’s history beginning with the era of change in 1987 when he took power, guided by a female mythical figure called Tunisia wearing a long purple robe (the official color of the Ben Ali regime). Throughout the text books he refers to Tunisia’s population as his children who he has gifted with socio-economic and technological development.

145 The song is sometimes translated as “Mr. President, your people are dying,” (_Rais El Bled Sha’abek met_)!

146 This is from a Tunisian proverb: _Nafkhou wa sheb ma’a_ “to put something into water and drink it” means not caring.

147 This question is particularly contentious as it not only references a protective relationship between a father and his daughter, but also specifically Ben Ali’s daughter who married Sakhr El-Materi and has been at the forefront of re-introducing a state-led Islamic narrative, by abstaining from drinking alcohol, practicing Ramadan
I know that the words I say will cause you tears
Because you are a father
And you wouldn’t want any harm to come to your children.
So tell yourself that this message is from your children:
We are suffering like dogs
Half of the people are living in shame
And have tasted misery

Mr. President
Your people are dead
People are eating out of garbage cans
Look at what is happening in the country
Worries are everywhere
People have nowhere to sleep
Today I am speaking for all the people
Crushed by the weight of injustice

You tell us to speak without fear
Here, I have now spoken
But I know what’s waiting for me
It’s only the beginning
I see a lot of injustice
That’s why I chose to speak
Although many warned me not to.
How long must Tunisians live in their dreams?
Where is freedom of expression?
I’ve only seen the name
You call it “Green Tunisia”
But Mr, President look,
It has become a desert
Cut in two parts
They steal in plain sight
No need to name them
You know very well who they are

A lot of money should have gone to projects and development,
To schools, to hospitals, to housing
But the sons of dogs

publically, and leading the religious-financial initiatives briefly discussed in chapter 2.

148 Here Al-General explicitly references the Ben Ali narrative of all Tunisians being his children, and he the father of a nation.
149 This is a reference to Ben Ali’s in-laws, the Trabelsi family, and the other few families who control the country’s economic resources. *Weld el Kalb* literally means “sons of dogs” but is used derogatively as “sons of bitches.”
With the people’s money
Are stuffing their stomachs
They steal, they pillage
They serve themselves
Even a chair does not escape them
The people have so much to say
But their voice does not carry
If this injustice would not exist
I would not have to speak.

Rais El-Bled circulated on the internet at a time when Tunisians were increasingly relying on social networking sites and Al-Jazeera to follow the events in the country’s South. The mood and language had already drastically changed and the two million registered Tunisian Facebook users (the country’s population is ten million) engaged in thousands of stimulating political debates that have never existed in public under Ben Ali’s rule.

Jasmine Blooms on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, January 14, 2011

Political commentators and academics continue to scrutinize the role of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter in catalyzing political contention and protests. Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow recognized the internet as a means by which protests and demonstration can be achieved, however, they specifically suggest that the internet so far has only been successful in assembling individuals for demonstrations or to coordinate protests at different sites (2007:13). The analytical or causal limitation for scholars is the difficulty of linking Facebook usage, for instance, to physical participation in protests, or taking politics from the computer screen to the street, especially in authoritarian political contexts. I do not wish to romanticize social networking sites as roots of revolutions, yet I also believe that the Jasmine Revolution would not have been possible without Facebook or Twitter as
crucial mobilization vehicles and tools for rapid solidarity-building. This short exchange on December 30, 2010, for instance, provides an example of how Tunisians themselves understood the internet as a powerful political tool:

*On Hannibal TV*[^150], they are explaining to all Tunisians that the internet is dangerous, that facebook is dangerous...

Sure, but dangerous for whom precisely!

I always say that the only danger is Hannibal TV, the internet rescues us! I bet that the suicide[^151] will transform itself into a murder.[^152]

*Moez Souabni just justified 404[^153] on Hannibal TV: for the protection of our children; for fear of our security*

The art of taking people for idiots!

*The internet is not solely a business revolution. It is likewise a political revolution. Internet pushes the boundaries of power, and disrupts dominant relations. Internet is profoundly destabilizing.*

Political resistance, revolutions, protests, contention, even ordinary forms of political participation are extraordinarily complex phenomena that have been probed in various academic disciplines with competing arguments of what fuels them. The internet already played a decisive role in the 2004-2005 Colored Revolutions (Kyj, 2006; Diuk, 2006), even before Facebook’s ubiquity. Traditional explanations for political mobilization, resistance, and revolution remain nonetheless compelling: economic crisis, splits among ruling elites, bargaining between oppositional actors and soft-liners, and negotiating the rules for a reformed political game. Facebook, then, provides an additional lens into the murky waters of mobilization and

[^150]: Hannibal TV was a private TV station established by a family member of Ben Ali.
[^151]: The reference is Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation.
[^152]: The reference is to the Tunisian state manipulating stories and news items.
[^153]: 404 is the common symbol for internet censorship, as in Slim404.
contestation, the messy categories that are oftentimes left out of scholarly analysis for more attention to shifting structural factors and elite politics. Even though I critiqued public opinion surveys in the previous chapter for not necessarily capturing widespread yet hidden political opinions and sentiments vis-à-vis ruling elites, the imperative project of polling has nonetheless provided the sole linkage between structural changes (for instance domestic economic changes or regional political trends) and power politics.

Over the last half decade, Facebook in Tunisia developed into one of the very few public spaces where dynamic community-based debate and dialogue occurred regularly.\(^{154}\) Ben Ali himself was an avid Facebook user and his personal site provided yet another platform for ordinary Tunisians to express their adulation. Criticisms of the President and his family was of course closely controlled and censored, and initiatives such as *Tunisie en Blanc* carefully crafted their political language, to escape immediate censorship and blocking. In the previous chapters I wrote of the intense forms of censorship of speech, press, thought and expression that have defined the Ben Ali years, leaving Tunisians with few choices to communicate publicly or engage in meaningful political activity, whether in the form of political parties, unions, or civil society organizations. Facebook, even more so than Twitter, provided possibly the only venue where strangers could debate the meaning of important political developments, share their hopes and fears, and form solidarities in times of crisis and upheaval. In the following example, supporters debate the meaning of political concepts as they refer to their experience under Ben Ali’s rule. These

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\(^{154}\) Author’s interview with Mohamed Kerrou, La Marsa, December 9, 2008. Author’s interview with Abdelkadr Zghal, Tunis, January 2009.
early pre-Jasmine Revolution debates mirrored the tone of Facebook conversations at the time of “Tunisia in White.”

*Manipulation, in an abstract sense, is the influence exercised by one person over many others with the goal of controlling their actions and sentiments.*

*Manipulators are generally intelligent, but here.*

*Mental manipulation is the attempt to take control of the mind and behavior of an individual or group, via the usage of persuasion techniques that allow for the numbing of a critical mind, meaning his/her capacity to judge or refute information.*

*On January 1, 2011 an activist wrote:*

*I understand each day why some people chose to inflict their own death...because there are worse things than death....one can loose one's dignity!*

Facebook became an important venue in which friends and strangers could debate taboo political concepts and conditions, such as the brief excerpt on manipulation above exemplifies. Before becoming a prime mobilizational tool, Facebook was gradually transformed by users into a crucial news depot. As police violence against protesters was intensifying across Tunisia’s South, active Facebook users would call on individuals across the country to share footage and photos of police violence against innocent and peaceful protesters, presenting a blatant juxtaposition to Ben Ali’s increasing absurd narrative of the protests. According to close observation of Facebook debates and developments in late December 2010 until January 14, 2011, the dominant instigation for nation-wide public outrage against the regime was not rooted in the isolated Mohammed Bouazizi incident, but rather in Ben Ali’s order for police forces to use live ammunition against innocent citizens, whom Ben Ali referred to as terrorists. When stories began circulating of Tunisian authorities attempting to block Facebook and Twitter (an attempt also made by
Egyptian authorities, which Egyptian activists circulated as *Misr Offline*), activists across Tunisia continued to re-post tweets as Facebook updates while accessing blocked articles by the international press covering the protests and external support for Tunisia’s movement though HotspotShield.

On December 31, 2010, an activist posted a censored *Attariq Al-Jedid* article covering protests in the South titled, “Youth revolt in Sidi Bouazid and surroundings” by Taoufik Karkar. The following day, protests began erupting across the country’s North, particularly El-Kef and Ben Arous. The re-posting of censored news articles and posting of protest footages was intended to ensure solidarity and trust.

*These are our friends! Let’s publish! Let’s write! Let’s practice our rights! Post videos of protest in Kef*[^155]

*Excellent! Excellent! See, there are hundreds if not thousands of protesters!*

*Ben Arous with a civic sense! Thank you to the police and informants for allowing protesters to engage in this liberal experiment! Youth, rise-up!!!*

*“When they came to look for the communists, I did not say anything, I was not a communist. When they came to look for the unionists, I did not say anything, I was not a unionist. When they came to look for the Jews, I did not say anything. I told myself that I was not Jewish. Then they came to look for me and not a single person was left.*

*I’m censured on Twitter…Facebook next?*

The volume of footage posted on Facebook about police violence against innocent protesters was immense and overwhelming, rendering Ben Ali’s grotesque story of security forces fighting terrorists increasingly illegitimate, if not insulting. Within a week, activists in Tunis began debating and mobilizing protests in the capital city, while news of the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) and other

[^155]: Le Kef is a city close to the Algerian border in northwest Tunisia.
associational arms of the state supporting the protest movement, further fueled the willingness to take to the streets. The following excerpts are from a Facebook debate on January 8th, 2011.

*Check it out! The website of Tunis7 (TV station) has been hacked!* 

*I just went to the demonstration (place Med Ali). Very few protesters, tons of cops but ALL very respectful. The army presence in downtown is very necessary, otherwise its impossible to get to the place!*

*Those who do not care about Tunisia are not Tunisians and have nothing to do with our matters, these are our problems and we will resolve them!*

*Please (name of organizer)! If there is another protest this week, please, please let me know! Thank you!!*

Friends of an activist were quickly growing worried about his/her participation in the early protests.

*If you need a body guard, I am here!*
*Let me know if you are ok!*

*Any more news? Is it ok?*
*I’m ok, Mouna!*

*Please don’t disappear for too long! Kiss!*

*Thank you to all who have worried about me! I am really touched, but honestly, do not fear for me, we do not have to fear those free people even when they are locked up…but once they are released…*

*In the majority of countries, citizens have the right to speak. But in a democracy, they still enjoy their liberties after speaking [Andre Guillois]*

The same day, news of violent clashes between police forces and protesters in Gafsa and Kasserine were circulated on Facebook and Twitter.

*On Twitter: To protesters in Kasserine: “do not burn the Tunisian flag,” shouted by protesters in Kasserine. Our people are magnificent!*
On Facebook, videos and eye-witness accounts of police-violence were rapidly shared, just before the state-run daily *LaPress* published another article that the protesters were terrorists.

*For those who still do not believe, a video of an innocent mother shot!*
*From Twitter: 21 dead in Meknassy during the day and night*

*And here we go, the official line in La Press that we, Tunisians, are terrorists January 8, 2011 – the slaughter of Kasserine*

*From twitter: the funeral turned to a clash after the police opened fire on the crowd*

*From Twitter: Urgent! Violent protests at this moment in Ben Guerdene, Gafsa, Mdnine, Seliana, Makter (total chaos)*

*And, if you still don’t believe it, there is the version of our beloved national channel: Tunisie7 (in response to video claiming that protesters are terrorists)*

*Bravo! Hats off, my friend! Please, please keep posting!*

*“The advantage of a red national flag is that murderers can use it to wipe their bloody hands without soiling it.” (Jean Cau)*
*Keep sharing the videos of the massacres! Share them so the world can see! So that the world is aware! A slaughter, a slaughter! Murderers! Terrorists!*

*We have to break away from our TVs and computers and get out on the street! “Violence at the hands of people is not violence, but justice!” (Eva Peron)*
*More than 50 dead in Thala (16), Kasserine (22), Meknassi (2), Feriana (1), Reguab (8)*

Towards the evening, Facebook activists were calling on individuals to join in protests, stressing non-violence to juxtapose the fabricated Ben Ali message.

*A call for protest tomorrow! PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE do not break anything, do not burn anything, without insults, without violence. Indignation comes with silence! Do not let them make the world believe that we are terrorists! Tunisians are magnificent by their martyrs! But Tunisians are also magnificent because they will take to the streets tomorrow!*

*I will spread the message and add: Do not be deceived! To be heard we have to be many! There is no secret: to be many everyone must take to the streets!”*
Where?

I will let you know, right now I am trying to get details about the new carnage in Kef!

Please give us more news about Kef!

Tomorrow at 1pm in Tunis! Protest!

The government just declared that it has understood our message and is open to hold a dialogue. Given that the government has an eye on my facebook profile and wall, I hand you the opportunity! Express yourself!

Despite the sadness, despite the indignity, look to my facebook wall with your analyses, comments, information, arguments, proofs, confirmations, and I feel mellow! Look at us! We are not imbeciles, we are not ignorant, we are ready! See you tomorrow! Monday, January10 in Tunis!

The following day, Ben Ali addressed the nation for the first time on television after protests in downtown Tunis called for “Jobs! Liberty! Dignity!” He insisted that the protests were being spearheaded by terrorists, that the nation was under severe threat calling on citizens to help protect the nation against the “culprits.” Ben Ali also vowed to use legitimate force against the protesters. In the same speech, he promised to create 300,000 jobs in two years immediately absorbing all university graduates into the workforce and informed Tunisians that he had already planned a national conference for employment scheduled for February 2011. Yet, the very same day, Ben Ali ordered the shutting down of all schools and universities until further notice in light of continuous government crack-downs. Debates on Facebook were rapidly growing furious in response to the blatant dichotomy of rhetoric and action on part of the regime.

Legitimate defense? Legitimate defense? Who are the terrorists?

Gather one million Tunisians against the usage of weapons against civilians!
Monday, January 10th at 4:30pm in Tunis
Urgent! Do not sign out of facebook! If you sign off your internet connection will be automatically shut off!! Share this message!

Tunisian journalists are calling for protest for Tuesday, January 11, 2011.

The following day on January 11, 2011, General Ammar refused to shoot at protesters, defying Ben Ali’s orders.

The national army! The national army! You are beautiful! You are magnificent! We love you!

We love you! But dear God, ACT!

Homage to the national army!

Touching! Its already a beginning! Something is changing!! Its happening!

Ben Ali addresses the nation again! He is advising not to listen to protesters and not to read facebook!

Do not fear! All will go well! The Tunisian people are united! Tunisian people are magnificent! We Tunisians are not terrorists! We Tunisians are dignified! We do not fear!

Within hours, Ben Ali called in the army, confirmed step by step on Facebook (with videos):

La Marsa, in front of French residence, Tunis, Carthage, Sidi Bousaid, Gammarth

The facebook page of Zine El Abedine Ben Ali has disappeared.... Ben Ali sacks interior minister and appoints Ahmed Friaa

Protests in Sfax

The Military encircles the offices of Hannibal TV, The Prime Ministry (Kasbah), Central Electricity station in Menzah7

Hamma Hammami, leader of the POCT\textsuperscript{156} was arrested by the “political police” today. They broke into his apartment to take him away in front of his

\textsuperscript{156} POCT is an outlawed Tunisian Communist Workers’ party.
family and militant supporters. The situation is bad, his life is in risk. Stay in solidarity and pass the information along.

Military deployed in Bizerte, Carthage, Kram El Ghazala, in front of Zitouna FM, Hammamet, Nabeul, Gafsa, Mensah7, Ezzahra, Hammam Lif, tear gas bombs in downtown, Gabes, Douz, Ben Arous, Jendouba, Sfax

Large scale protests break out in Sfax, Nabeul, boutiques close in Berges du Lac

On the eve of the Jasmine Revolution, Facebook activists were providing last-minute advice for those taking to the streets, for the largest of all demonstrations that forced Ben Ali’s out of power.

Please share widely: For tear gas, soak a scarf in vinegar and place over mouth and nose, because this deters the tear gas. And do not rub your face, the effects of tear gas do not last longer than a minute. Try to breathe fresh air.

More on tear gas: do not wear make-up, wash your face with soap before stepping outside, take out your contact lenses, wear a scarf soaked in vinegar or lemon juice over your mouth and nose, in case of exposure do not sit on the floor but rather step on something elevated (a chair or table) because the gas is much stronger if you are down.

Whether the activists and supporters participating in this heightened contentious debate leading up to the January 14th, 2011 knew that their courageous and daring efforts would result in Ben Ali’s departure that same day is less important than their rapidly growing willingness to engage politically in public. Through Facebook and Twitter, Tunisians of all ages disseminated messages and opinions, shared censored news items, and debated questions of political freedom, dignity, and oppression, a type of debate that had never existed in such a vibrant and feverish manner under Ben Ali’s rule from 1987-2011. The elation defining Tunisia’s political

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157 As the military was moving into cities and towns, Tunisians were confirming based on eye witness accounts on Facebook and Twitter.
breakthrough has continued until this day, as Tunisian citizens unremittingly engage in protests, voicing their demands, debating politics beyond internet-based social networking sites, in the newly free press, on TV and radio talk shows, while forming new political parties and associations. Tunisians have actively marked their unfettered involvement in the domination-contestation dialogue, skillfully demanding the departure of political elites of the Ben Ali era, while engaging in a reform process that will set a new political tone replacing the authoritarian narrative of the ex-police state.

**Narrating Resistance and Public Solidarities**

In an interview with T., a former Marxist-Leninist, now extreme Leftist in the spring of 2009, her disillusionment with direct political activism against the Ben Ali regime was conspicuous. “We need solidarity,” she insisted, “otherwise our actions are nothing but a striptease performance to ourselves.” James Scott recognized the restricted spaces within which hidden transcripts exist and wrote of the importance in recognizing related hidden discourses to avoid “filling essentially empty heads with novel ideas” (1990:223). The moments of resistance chronicled in this chapter detail the connectedness of explicit forms of contention as well as the larger veiled political debates from which they burgeoned. In tracing the development of solidarity not only within Tunisia, but later between Algerians, Egyptians, Moroccans, Libyans, Bahrainis, Yemenis, Jordanians, even Saudis and Syrians, an omnipresent and overarching hatred for authoritarian politics defining the region beyond the successful cases of Egypt and Tunisia has rapidly revealed itself in public.

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158 Author’s interview. Tunis. April 2009.
A useful comparison, again, is the making of Solidarność in August of 1980, marking a collective experience of groups that have experienced similar subjugation, and, therefore, have produced similar hidden transcripts. “Behind 1980,” Scott writes, “lay a long prehistory, one comprising songs, popular poetry, street wisdom, political satire, not to mention a popular memory of the heroes, martyrs, and villains of earlier popular protest” (1990:212). While the incident at the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk is oftentimes introduced through the lens of Anna Walentynowicz’s dismissal, the sudden solidarity and rapid formation of a nationwide labor movement headed by Lech Walesa was rooted in shared feelings of oppression, subjugation and humiliation that formed and strengthened over time. The solidarities were not formed through formal political institutions or channels, but rather in daily conversations at home, in beer canteens and restaurants or articulated in the form of jokes and satires. As exemplified in the selected excerpts of Facebook debates in Tunisia above, individuals were carefully crafting solidarity over common feelings of oppression and political exclusion, often mocking even insulting the concocted narrative of the state. In reference to the Gdansk incident Scott writes that “the bond described here is not some mystical link of human solidarity, [but rather] the shared discourse of the hidden transcript created and ripened in the nooks and crannies of the social order, where subordinate groups can speak more freely” (1990:223).

Analytically, exposing hidden transcripts located primarily within mundane practices but also culminating into momentous contentious activity and solidarity

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159 Walentynowicz was released from her post on charges of theft after she collected candles from a nearby graveyard to commemorate the ten year anniversary of strikers who were killed in 1970 by the regime.
building, renders heightened moments of resistance less surprising, while explaining the electrifying if not carnevalesque mood once the hidden transcript is exposed.

When a widespread hidden discourse or sentiment indeed crosses the boundaries of the permissible into a newly carved out space of open resistance, a highly charged political occasion ensues. The energy fueling such heightened political moments, from protests and strikes to revolutions, however, stems from long-standing subjugation and common feelings of solidarity forged and solidified over time.

When considering incidents such as Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation as last straws in on-going contention, rather than the easily-identifiable sparks that might or might not give rise to resistance movements, a whole new space of political contention can be discerned and studied. Not every dramatic dissident act will result in large-scale protests, shared solidarities, and resistance as witnessed in Tunisia. But every such act nonetheless marks a puncturing of repressive conditions, a public performance of defiance to a prescribed political order, a brave event that represents the widespread sentiments of many. Thus, Scott writes,

[t]he reversal of a public humiliation, to be fully savored, needs to be public as well. This leads to a consideration of how charismatic acts gain their social force by virtue of their roots in the hidden transcript of a subordinate group. It is the prehistory that makes such charismatic acts possible and helps us understand how a political breakthrough can escalate so rapidly that even revolutionary elites find themselves overtaken and left in its wake (1990:203).

When Tunisians collectively shouted “Game Over!” on January 14th, 2011, an outburst marking the end of Ben Ali’s rule and their subjugation to his phony politics and mafia-like economic practices, they clearly indicated that the seemingly powerless won their first political struggle in a dramatic, captivating and electrifying game of power.
Conclusion

Tunisia’s nascent post-Ben Ali era has swayed from instances of political anarchy to moments of strong and effective citizen solidarity. The political landscape so far likens a theater of elite rotations in response to continuous protests and strikes. Tunisians are certainly voicing their political concerns, albeit primarily on the street. As part of the immediate post-revolutionary reform process, the interim government headed by president Fouad Mebaaza and prime minister Beji Caid Sebsi,\(^{160}\) has realized a number of pivotal changes. These included the legalization of the Islamist An-Nahda party, dismantling of the former ruling RCD party, the establishment of a committee for constitutional reform\(^{161}\), the dissolving of the secret services within the Ministry of the Interior, and calling for elections on July 14, 2011.

For students of political development even beyond area specialists of the Middle East and North Africa, the spring and summer 2011 period leading up to elections in Tunisia and later in Egypt will be of unprecedented interest. Since Ben Ali’s departure from power, the apparently quiescent police state has turned into a loud, vibrant and contentious political field. New voices are entering politics in the form of political parties and organizations, while activists eagerly maneuver a free internet to mobilize, inform, debate and share information. A contemporary political scene has emerged in the Middle East, one stirred by a savvy and young population that will make every attempt to have a say in its political future.

\(^{160}\) The 84-year old Beji Caid Sebsi served as a Minister under Bourguiba and replaced former prime minister Mohammed Ghannouchi on February 28, 2011.\(^{161}\) On March 20, 2011, Egyptians voters firmly approved a referendum with over 70 percent of their vote. The constitutional amendment will usher in rapid elections.
My account of Tunisian politics in particular and authoritarian systems broadly was initially pitted against grim accounts produced by scholars of authoritarianism. Research showed that the authoritarian state was growing increasingly more robust as political elites would co-opt political institutions, actors, and enforce phony political participation. My research objective was therefore to identify and study those individuals and groups who were willing to contest authoritarian politics. I was especially interested in locating meaningful political spaces where individuals either form alternative political identities or contest the authoritarian state, both implicitly and explicitly. My motivation to explore the understudied case of Tunisia was rooted in comparative research in Ukraine following the Orange Revolution, when observers and analysts were surprised by the sudden popular and large-scale mobilization against rigged elections. Where did this sudden burst of political participation and willingness to take to the streets come from? Similar to Tunisia under the rule of President Ben Ali, Ukraine was framed as a case constrained by political apathy, no independent civil society and intensifying authoritarianism.

This dissertation provides one explanation, or back-story, to contestation under authoritarian rule. I argue that forms of contestation and resistance do exist under closed political systems such as Ben Ali’s Tunisia, but that they need to be located beyond formal political institutions such as elections and civil society organizations. As elections have increasingly been co-opted in the Middle East and North Africa and civil society is not fully independent, oppositional voices and their popular support consequentially grow elsewhere. Based on two years of qualitative
research conducted in Tunisia with comparative insights from fieldwork in Ukraine, I traced alternative political identities, forms of micro-contestation and attempts at direct resistance against the state. The authoritarian state, I show, does not necessarily rely on overt repression but rather engages in a subtle domination-contestation dialogue. For instance, Ben Ali used force against unauthorized protests in some cases but then relaxed control in areas of freedom of expression and even some political mobilization. Instead of treating the authoritarian state as pervasive, this approach helps uncover the spaces where contestation grows as well as the actors involved in carving out alternative and oppositional politics.

The first part of this dissertation provided a glimpse into the construction of the capital city of Tunis as well as citizen involvement in contesting the spatial reorganization of the city. I then wrote about soccer games in Tunis, comparing the quiet and constructed spectacle celebrating Ben Ali’s ascension to power and the loud, vibrant spectacle of soccer. Soccer is an important political space beyond Tunisia, however, in a country that generally exhibited political obedience in public, the loud brawl of the stadium became an important arena for my analysis. Fans would engage in identity contests, claim sections of the city, and declare love and allegiance for their team rather than the nation or Ben Ali. During soccer games, fans even chanted against the police, an institution that was regarded as synonymous with the regime, or Ben Ali’s police state.

I continued my exploration of politics in Tunisia with an analysis of implicit forms of contestation, especially subversion in media. Here I exemplified the domination-contestation dialogue through the lens of freedom of expression. I show
how journalists subvert the phony Ben Ali message through implicit analysis in state-controlled publications and more explicitly in the oppositional press. In expanding contestation beyond official institutions to areas such as journalistic subversion and performing arts, I contribute to structural accounts of contestation. Political and economic shifts as well as resource-mobilization theories are compelling explanatory tools once political movements break through and successfully rupture the fabric of authoritarian politics. The back-story of how these movements and groups form, however, remains under-examined in cases where political advancement in the direction of liberalization has not yet occurred. In other words, structural theories of mobilization and contestation do not explain much about the “first act of public defiance” (Scott, 1990: 219). An analysis of what occurs behind the scenes of official politics, then, can tell us something about the moments and actors that can bring about political change. Or, as Jim Scott writes, these moments constitute an essential force in political breakthroughs, one that most structural accounts of contention and resistance “cannot remotely hope to capture” (219).

I conclude the story of political contestation in Tunisia with moments of explicit attempts at resistance against the regime of Ben Ali between 2008 and 2010, linking these instances to the Jasmine Revolution of January 14, 2011. The Tunisian Revolution, similar to the Egyptian, Ukrainian and other revolutions, I contend, was a culmination of on-going contentious activity rather than an isolated contentious act. Revolutionary moments thus do not mark the onset of contention, but rather the continuation of contentious political practices that have existed even under some of the most closed political conditions. In Tunisia, I show, protests in the Southern
mining town in Gafsa not far from Sidi Bouazid where the December 2010 protests began, were not isolated events especially as Ben Ali ordered the police to use force against protesters in 2008. Nation-wide supporters of the Gafsa protests later engaged in a 2010 Facebook initiative known as “Tunisia in White,” and, of course, in the Facebook and Twitter mobilization resulting in the Jasmine Revolution.

Why are back-stories of political contention important despite on-going protests and clashes in the Middle East and the March 19, 2011 French-led campaign against Qaddafi in coalition with Britain and the United States? Probing political contention within this type of framework does not substitute for existing scholarship on the politics of authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa but rather contributes explanations to a larger puzzle. Similar to research on authoritarianism, an exploration of hidden political discourses, subversion and attempts at resistance does not seek to explain state-society interactions in each case, space, and instance. Instead, rooting political contention in the lived circumstances of millions of citizens provides an important alternative view of authoritarianism, one that challenges the ubiquity, strength and reach of the authoritarian state. In its simplest terms, political contestation exists even and especially under the most robust authoritarian conditions. Citizens living under authoritarianism are neither de-politicized nor unwilling to participate in the political game. Following the experiences of both Tunisia and Egypt, this argument seems innate, however, until December of 2010 very few analysts believed that ordinary citizens could force Ben Ali and Mubarak out of power.
An understanding of lived circumstances under systems of domination is likewise telling of post-transitions periods, especially as elite politics change rapidly in the immediate aftermath while lived circumstances do not. In Tunisia the relationship between state and society has shifted from a subtle and hidden domination-contestation dialogue to a loud, public and overt debate over the rules of the political game. Whether and how this debate will transform itself into institutionalized politics will most certainly fill the research agendas of scholars and analysts in the years to come.

To exemplify how this analytical angle compliments existing approaches, I will summarize a number of themes that contributed to the overthrow of Ben Ali’s regime. First, the classic relationship between economic crisis and popular mobilization provides a compelling preliminary explanation for the initial protests that spread in December of 2010. In-depth analysis of state-controlled media as well as discursive analysis of rumors and stories circulating among Tunisians from 2008 when the global financial break-down began until the January 14, 2011, the day of the collapse of the Ben Ali regime, shows a stark dichotomy of Tunisia’s economic reality and the narrative constructed by the regime. State-controlled newspapers such as La Press, Le Renouveau, Eco-Journal, El-Bayan, Essarih, El Horriya, the state run television stations TV 7, and radio stations were producing an ever-growing story of Tunisia’s protection from the economic crisis. These accounts claimed that Tunisia remained a fruitful arena for foreign direct investment, and that European tourism, a significant portion of the country’s revenue, continued to thrive as holidays in Tunisian all-inclusive hotels are always less-expensive than daily life in Europe.
While foreign investors began pulling out of Tunisia in 2008, housing projects funded by the Arab Gulf and Saudi Arabia across the capital of Tunis were abandoned, textile factories shut down in the country’s North, hotel occupancy dropped to an immediate post-9/11 low, and unemployment rose, the Ben Ali regime vamped up its effort to strengthen its narrative that Tunisia is indeed protected from the crisis. The gradual reproduction of the Ben Ali narrative by ordinary Tunisian citizens, then, was either a public display of loyalty (Wedeen, 1999), a self-help coping strategy (Bayat, 2010), or true belief in the miraculous protectionist forecast. The economic crisis in Tunisia, however, has been real since 2008 as reported by the IMF in 2010. Ben Ali’s phony narrative of economic protection rapidly circulated among Tunisia’s population, angering citizens across the country and eventually culminating in waves of protest following Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation.

Second, for popular mobilization to be sparked in Tunisia, a sensational act of frustration was necessary. In the absence of traditional catalysts for oppositional mobilization, such as fraudulent elections under systems of competitive authoritarianism, popular oppositional voices such as the experience of the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) in Algeria in 1990-1992, Mohamed Bouazizi’s public display of frustration and helplessness symbolized a nation-wide tipping point. While Bouazizi’s frustrations were shared by millions of Tunisians, his public suicide coupled with a deepening economic crisis and public resentment over information released and confirmed in TunisLeaks, helped catalyze thousands to take to the streets despite violent clampdown by the police. By January of 2011, scores of Tunisians on Facebook changed their profile pictures to a Tunisian flag covered in blood,
publicly showing their solidarity for those killed in protests. Within days, profile pictures were switched to poignant statements, including *A bas Ben Ali!* (“Down with Ben Ali”) or *Ben Ali, Degage!* (“Ben Ali Get Out!”) or *Ben Ali Assassin!,* and post-revolution, to a symbol of unity and solidarity covering the Tunisian flag to curb post-transition violence and looting. Explicit statements voicing hatred for Ben Ali and the sheer volume of public discontent were unimaginable weeks before January 2011.

The first profile picture depicting blood over a Tunisian flag circulated rapidly as individuals learned of police violence against protesters in the South, primarily through Twitter and Facebook updates. The snowball effect encouraged hundreds of thousands to quickly change their message to a clear “down with Ben Ali,” with the government loosing its ability to censor every individual Facebook and Twitter users (approximately 20% of Tunisia’s population), especially as security and police forces were consumed by nation-wide protests.

The third condition, then, was a population willing to engage in resistant and oppositional political activities if given the opportunity to do so. In stretching the analytical contours of what counts as meaningful contestation, beyond oppositional party politics and illegal movements, I was able to reveal the various spaces from which alternative politics could and eventually did grow. These lived circumstances formed an important back-story to regime transformation in the context of both a deepening economic crisis and a devastating public display of frustration. Neither the economic crisis alone nor the self-immolation in Sidi Bouazds constitute sufficient explanations for the large-scale revolt that ensued. Tunisia has previously quelled bread-riots in the 1980s and other individuals have set themselves on fire without
resulting in large-scale protests. The behind-scenes-story of contemporary Tunisia, therefore, provides a telling account that compliments mainstream explanations of political contention and regime change.

In conclusion, a number of engaging research areas have most recently emerged for students of the Middle East and North Africa and those interested in political development more broadly. Upcoming elections in both Egypt and Tunisia will provide for interesting analysis of electoral dynamics. Popular support for Islamists, both an-Nahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, will most certainly pre-occupy scholars and dominate scholarly discourse. Whether elections will be free and fair is not yet certain, neither is the inclusion of all oppositional voices guaranteed. The revolutions across the region, similar to the colored revolutions between 2000 and 2005, have also brought new political actors to the forefront, representing a youth segment that has previously been excluded from the political game.

A vibrant area of research will most certainly consider the political void left behind by dictators. In Tunisia, Ben Ali’s ruling RCD party not only consumed all formal politics but its tentacles also reached into the daily lives of individuals. Tunisians faced the politics of Ben Ali daily, in his omnipresent cult of personality as well as the reproduction of his cult in business practice and products, for instance Café November 7, 7 Air, even 7 Gel. Ben Ali’s politics were also inscribed in other mundane practices, from receiving various licenses at municipalities, traveling, purchasing land and homes, to enforced participation in elections and party-sponsored events. The complete removal of the RCD party from the political landscape and
destruction of the Ben Ali cult thus opens a new political space, both for practice, participation and timely analysis.

At this time, it remains unclear whether the Jasmine Revolution opened possibilities for political liberalization beyond a rotation of political elites. New actors have only entered politics on the margins, and some have already resigned from political office. At the very least, however, the revolution in Tunisia ushered in an exuberant political image, captivating even the most cynical critics.
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