Making sense of Tunisia's interregnum: The obsession with liberal democracy and missed social contract delivery

By Giulia Cimini

President Kais Saied's power grab with the support of a large part of Tunisia's public opinion must stimulate reflections and self-reflection in the broader academic community. Cheering crowds flooding the streets of many cities across the country with anti-government and anti-Ennahda slogans even surrounding military units, must make us seriously question the reason for such mass celebrations at the president's announcement on July 25. While there is still debate in Tunisia about whether or not there was a coup (*inqilāb* in Arabic), polls showed clear support for Saied's decision. The question is whether and for how long this support will last. After all, many consider his decisions to be legitimate precisely because other political actors are no longer legitimate in their eyes. Even Saied, however, risks getting caught in the pay-off between expectations and meeting those expectations. The widespread dissatisfaction with the establishment (as represented by political parties and Ennahda in particular, parliament and government) which 'captured the revolution' has not been a mystery for some time now.

Most of the scholarship on post-2011 Tunisia – not unlike that on the Arab uprisings and their aftermath more broadly – has remained imbued with Western-centrism, liberal normativity, and anxieties about the dark side of Islamists.[1] Much of the debate, therefore, has focused on democratization and its 'compatible' actors, and resorted to classic binary paradigms like democratic transition *vs* authoritarian resilience.

There are several problematic aspects to these approaches. First, there is the temptation of Tunisia's 'exceptionality' which reproduces – more or less intentionally – a set of culturalist and reductionist tropes. Second, there is the selectivity in scrutinizing which actors may or may not be democratic and accountable and how much, specifically the question only arose for Ennahda party, but for no other political or social actor (not even the police, and more recently the army). Third, there is the biased conceptualization of democracy, not only in procedural terms bound to elections and institutions but in line with the specific liberal model of democracy.

The greatest omission is the depoliticization of the economy, with its relevance overshadowed by attention to purely procedural understandings of democracy. This is despite the fact that the claims for dignity, social justice, more efficient and better service delivery, the fight against corruption and regional imbalances were as much at the root of the 2010-11 uprisings as civil and political rights. Those protests have never ceased over the last decade. Politics and policy-making have never fundamentally challenged the economic fabric of the country. Academia, for its part, has devoted too little attention to the nexus between the missed implementation of social and economic rights and citizens' political behavior and preferences, and their continuing contentious action. The 'delivery problem' in the construction of Tunisia's democratic governance nurtures the populist currents embodied by President Saied and others in different forms.[2] It is also, and crucially, linked to the new, promised social contract based on greater inclusiveness, social justice, and redistribution.

If the uprisings that subverted the Ben Ali regime marked the definitive breakdown of the previous populist authoritarian bargain, they also came with the imaginary of new relations between the state and society, calling for a more participatory, inclusive and performant governance. Concomitantly, they raised people's expectations for those in power to significantly improve general living conditions and 'with an added sense of urgency.'[3] These promises and expectations of greater inclusion and wealth redistribution were the cornerstones around which the new social contract would be forged after the uprisings. At stake therefore was the input and output legitimacy of the system in its supposed new form, and of the new ruling class above all.

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[1] Paola Rivetti, and Francesco Cavatorta, "Revolution and counter-revolution in the Middle East and North Africa. Global politics, protesting and knowledge production in the region and beyond," *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 511-529, 10.1285/i20356609v14i2p511

[2] Hamadi Redissi, Hafedh Chekir, Mahdi Elleuch, Mohamed S Khalfaoui, *La tentation populiste: les élections de 2019 en Tunisie* (Tunis: Cérès éditions, 2020).

At risk of oversimplifying, the social contract, either implicit or explicit or both, was intended as the renegotiation of the rules of the game, and their reconfiguration. In this sense, even before being a final agreement, it was a contested and contestable process which involved a plurality of dimensions and actors, to the exclusion of others. While the new 2014 constitution explicitly incorporates principles like social justice around which a larger mobilization was easier to coalesce, it does not exhaust the premises and promises of the social contract. It acts, if anything, as a reminder of the inconsistency between rhetoric and action inasmuch as the ruling class failed to fully implement its principles (social justice, or the right to a good job among many others) and prescriptions (the still missing Constitutional Court being the most glaring example).

In the eyes of citizens, the rulers' avoidance of liability on their side of this contract has progressively strengthened the loss of legitimacy and credibility of the political system after Ben Ali's fall. At the same time, an alternative order that is sufficiently coherent and shared to be viable – not necessarily one that everyone agrees on – is struggling to emerge and consolidate. As Gramsci would have said, this is precisely what the *crisis* is about. While Gramscian interpretations to Arab politics are certainly not new, some have returned to reflect more recently on their potential and limits as theoretical lens to frame revolutionary dynamics.[4] Notions such as the 'crisis of authority,' 'interregnum,' and the centrality of 'processuality' – and I would add in close connection with the question of the social contract – can help us make more sense of current events in Tunisia.

More properly, the 'crisis of authority' refers to the loss of consensus of the ruling class, that is thereby no longer 'leading' but only 'dominant' in Gramscian readings. In Tunisia, ruling elites cannot be said to have exercised control through coercive force, despite the resurgence of repressive and securitarian policing methods typical of the old regime. At this early point, it would be utterly hazardous to speculate on Saied's possible authoritarian drift premised on the military and police to date. In any case, the question of leadership legitimacy remains a central node for understanding the elements on which it rests.

Thinking in terms of *interregnum* helps us to consider this 'pending' moment in its own right, and not as a mere transition between two endpoints, whatever they may be. This allows for reflection on the transformative dynamics and forces at work regardless of their presumed orientation. In this sense, the discourse on backward and forward steps, especially on a democratic backsliding and a return to authoritarianism, makes less sense as framing what is far from a linear process, with continuities alongside the changes. Evidence for this can be seen in the presence of the representatives of Tunisia's pre-revolutionary regime in the now collapsed Nidaa Tounes party – and through alliances with new actors like Ennahda – and in the rising Abir Moussi's Free Destourian Party (not to mention the administration and security sector). Likewise, the persistence of some core issues on the economic and social front and, to a lesser extent, civil and political rights. Simplistic narratives of change, nearly always normative in orientation, had the counterproductive effect of fueling frustration since they were met with a good deal of inconsistency. In other words, the state's 'organized hypocrisy' manifests itself in the enduring mismatch between promises and their delivery, and the increasing discrepancy between societal expectations and reality.[5]

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[3] Youssef Mahmoud, and Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, "Improvising Peace: Towards New Social Contracts in Tunisia," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 14, no. 1 (2020): 101-118, 10.1080/17502977.2019.1629377

[4] See, for example, John Chalcraft and Alessandra Marchi's Special Issue "Gramsci in the Arab World," *Middle East Critique* 30, no. 1 (2021) and the Special Section edited by Gennaro Gervasio and Patrizia Manduchi, "Introduction: reading the revolutionary process in North Africa with Gramsci," *The Journal of North African Studies* (online first), 10.1080/13629387.2020.1801264

Related to continuities, which continue to shape the reality on the ground, is the dimension of *processuality*. It means, firstly, that crises are not reducible to single exogenous shocks breaking into an existing order insofar as 'they originate in contradictions or tensions of the old, dying social order.'[6] In this context, it is evident that Saied's actions capitalized on enduring discontent, as it is often the case. What is missing is the absence of a new 'hegemonic' model, a viable social, economic and political project that is truly capable of imposing itself by generating (enough) widespread consensus. This is equally true for the political class, perhaps even more remarkably for the intellectuals who should have, instead, a crucial role of 'avant-garde' if we want to remain in a Gramscian reading, and society at large.

On a concluding note, a cumbersome juxtaposition, often implicit in many analyses and perhaps unintentional, is the misleading and above all unnecessarily simplistic dichotomy between (bad) political actors and (good) civil society actors with a clear normative bias. By endorsing this perspective, one risks obscuring the complexity of both, not least the plurality of agents of which each is composed, and the permeability between the 'two sides.' The emphasis on the 'streets of Tunisia' as if they had a single voice renders analysis less useful to the extent that it overlooks class-based, geographic and other differences, while underestimating how disconnected segments of society can be from each other in a sort of freezing, homogenizing effect.

In light of this, concepts like 'electoral legitimacy' and 'street legitimacy' should not be dismissed tout-court as they mirror a difference very much felt in Tunisia these times.[7] Yet, the allegedly sharp division between the symbolic spaces where politics is done, official institutions on the one side and the streets on the other side, is at best ambiguous, if not analytically irrelevant. Remarkably, in fact, not only the ranks of demonstrators also include left-wing political parties, mostly excluded from the governance of the country, but dominant political parties themselves, take to the streets to show off the strength of their base, not to mention the social actors, trade unions *in primis*, who sit in institutional settings. These interactions deserve more attention, as well as the reasons why some actors more than others, think of leftist forces or youth movements, fail to assert themselves politically. Looking at how the social contract dictating the way forward is forged in its being a dynamic agreement, its internal (in)coherence and conflict issues, its 'winners' and 'losers,' tells us much more about what is going on.

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[5] On the elaboration of Krasner's notion, see Ruth Hanau Santini, *Limited Statehood in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia Citizenship, Economy and Security* (Palgrave, 2018).

[6] Milan Babic, "Let's talk about the interregnum: Gramsci and the crisis of the liberal world order," *International Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2020): 767–786, 10.1093/ia/iiz254.

[7] Such a juxtaposition was the *leit-motiv* of the 2013 anti-government and anti-parliament protests and promptly repeats itself.