Electoral Democracy and Its Discontents
By Nate Grubman

One of the main paradigms applied to Tunisia since 2011 has been that of a country that has recently and successfully transitioned to democracy. According to conventional wisdom, Tunisia became a democracy in 2011 when political elites agreed to hold competitive elections, removed all doubt in 2014 when elections yielded a change in government, and perhaps ceased to be one with President Kais Saied's recent suspension of the 2014 constitution. But what do we mean when we say that Tunisia is or was a democracy? Why have many Tunisians become disillusioned by institutions of electoral politics? And why was there pushback against the notion that Kais Saied's recent suspension of the popularly elected legislature constitutes a coup against democracy?

To understand these questions, we must grapple with the failure of electoral democracy in Tunisia to achieve accountable and representative government, as well as the conceptions of democracy offered by Tunisian elites as alternatives to a party-based electoral democracy. By focusing on the ways that disagreements even among self-professed democrats regarding the appropriate mechanisms of accountability can spark serious political crises, the case of Tunisia may contribute to our understanding of democratic "careening" elsewhere in the world.[1]

Competitive democracy and its discontents

According to the often used definition of Juan Linz and Al Stepan,[2] Tunisia completed its democratic transition in 2011 when elites agreed to hold competitive elections to produce a government with a reasonable level of authority. Writing in the *Journal of Democracy* in 2012, Stepan argued as much, suggesting that what remained was for that democracy to "consolidate."[3] According to Samuel Huntington's "two-turnover test," the country became a consolidated democracy in late 2014.[4]

Tunisia has featured many of the hallmarks of a competitive electoral democracy. The country has held multiple rounds of presidential and legislative elections, as well as municipal elections. Circumscribed campaign periods and regulation of campaign and party finance have aimed to blunt both the professionalization of politics and the influence of dark money that have challenged other democracies. With relatively low barriers to candidate entry and highly proportional systems of allocation, Tunisian voters have been treated to ballots that seemingly offer a staggering degree of choice. According to domestic and international observers, votes

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[1] Here, I refer to Dan Slater's term. See Dan Slater, "Democratic Careening" *World Politics* 65 (October 2013): 729–63.

[2] Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[3] Alfred Stepan, "Tunisia and the Twin Tolerations," *Journal of Democracy* (April 2012): 89–103.

[4] This concept originally comes from Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1991).

have seemingly been accurately and honestly tallied. Winners have taken office and losers have acknowledged defeat. These are not small accomplishments.

But as the last two months—and the essays in this symposium—illustrate, Tunisia's political system has been so dissatisfying to many Tunisians that many have questioned whether it was a democracy at all. Indeed, pointing to survey evidence from the last decade, a recent Arab Barometer post argues that "What pundits seem to have missed is that relatively few Tunisians believe they currently live in a democracy."[5] Although there was enough consensus to get from one election to the next, at least until 2021, disagreements regarding the proper accountability mechanisms of democracy have repeatedly contributed to political crises throughout the transition, fueling what Dan Slater has dubbed "democratic careening," moments of destabilization fueled by conflicts between those pushing for constraints against mob rule and those bristling against these constraints.[6] Whether democracy should be defined by elections or by something more is an important normative question. Why these processes have failed to deliver the more substantive democratic goods, such as accountability or social justice which many deem critical to democracy, is a profoundly important empirical question.

Part of the answer is that competitive elections have served as a limited instrument of democracy in Tunisia, especially if we think of democracy as something resembling Schattschneider's "party government."[7] In theory, elections allow voters to periodically weigh in on major policy questions by choosing the party that offers the most appealing solution to them. But in Tunisia, political parties have struggled to offer clearly distinct policy choices for addressing the country's problems and policy platforms have played little role in electoral politics. With many political parties unable to retain their members from one election to the next, the legislature has continually opted for broad coalition or nonpartisan governments that muffle the voice of the voters in determining who governs.

Voters and civil society organizations have continually pressured parties to adopt policy promises that can be used to hold politicians accountable. Most of the largest parties have assembled teams of experts to draft electoral platforms, many of them of great length. But these platforms have been difficult to distinguish from each other and have often included wildly optimistic promises. In 2011, Ennahdha promised to create 590,000 jobs, decreasing unemployment to 8.5 percent by 2016. In 2014, Nidaa Tounes pledged to put an end to poverty through a staggering 155 billion dinars of investment over five years. Neither of these came to fruition.

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[5] "Tunisia's Democratic Pulse," Arab Barometer Arab Pulse, 29 July 2021: https://www.arabbarometer.org/2021/07/tunisias-democratic-pulse/

[6] See Dan Slater, "Democratic Careening" *World Politics* 65 (October 2013): 729–63.

[7] This section draws upon Nate Grubman and Aytuğ Şaşmaz, "The Collapse of Tunisia's Party System and the Rise of Kais Saied," *Middle East Report Online* (17 July 2021): https://merip.org/2021/08/the-collapse-of-tunisias-party-system-and-the-rise-of-kais-saied/. On party government, see E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1942). On elections as instruments of democracy, see G. Bingham Powell, Jr. *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.).

National governments have generally struggled to implement the contents of these platforms and after a tumultuous period of a national government featuring Ennahdha and two coalition partners, Tunisian legislators steadily retreated from the notion that governments should reflect the political parties chosen by voters. After winning a plurality in 2011, Ennahdha formed a coalition government primarily comprising members of three political parties that had performed well in the elections. But in March 2013, amidst widespread calls for Ennahdha to step down, the party announced a cabinet shakeup that gave important ministerial portfolios to non-partisan independents.

This would become a model for future governments. In 2014, after Nidaa Tounes won a plurality in the legislature, it not only formed a coalition government that included its principal rival, Ennahdha, but also appointed a non-partisan prime minister, Habib Essid, who pledged little fealty to the party's electoral platform. Since 2015, no government has had much more than half of its ministers associated with political parties and the latest government featured no partisans. The country has not had an interior or justice minister officially associated with a party since March 2013. Policy in some domains, such as fiscal policy and security-sector and judicial reform, seems to be a product less of election results than of negotiations between corporate actors.

It is perhaps not surprising then that many Tunisians express the notion that political parties are odious institutions formed for the purpose of attaining political power. This perception is fueled in part by campaign promises that were later revoked, such as Nidaa Tounes's 2014 promise not to govern with Ennahdha or Ennahdha's 2019 promise not to govern with Qalb Tounes, a party formed by media magnate Nabil Karoui and dubbed by Ennahdha "the party of corruption." It is also a function of the rapid rise and subsequent collapse of many of the country's parties. Elected legislators have frequently changed parties after the elections, leading to a Tunisian neologism "partisan tourism." Although some members of the legislature have performed their duties with dedication, many members of the legislature have eschewed many of their voting or attendance duties, despite the fact that these things are tracked by Tunisian civil society.

In perceiving parties as election-winning machines, Tunisians have been very suspicious of their sources of finance. Campaign finance rules have been difficult to enforce and political actors in Tunisia have traded accusations of foreign financing. At times, former leaders of some of the main parties, such as Ennahdha's Hamadi Jebali and Nidaa Tounes's Lazhar al-Akremi, have conceded that perhaps their parties did not follow the campaign finance rules. These accusations, made by former rather than current party leaders without publicly available evidence, should perhaps be taken with a grain of salt. But Tunisian institutions, such as the Court of Audit, have also raised charges that have gone unresolved but likely affect the way many Tunisians perceive the parties.

In gauging whether Tunisians have lost interest in "democracy," then, it is important to note that Tunisians seem to have become more exasperated with institutions, such as the constitutional balance of power, than with other elements of democracy, such as freedom of

speech. As I wrote in a recent Monkey Cage piece describing a survey experiment designed with Milan Svolik in October 2019, Tunisians were far more concerned with protecting freedom of speech than the constitutional balance of powers. [8]

Careening

Amidst the unsatisfying electoral politics in Tunisia since the transition, elites have offered two main conceptions of democracy that constitute alternatives to party-based electoral democracy. The first is a form of deliberation, either elite or corporate. In 2011, the commission tasked with building consensus surrounding the political transition trumpeted its emphasis of "consensus" as a key ingredient to Tunisia's successful transition.[9] Especially after one year had lapsed since the election of the constituent assembly, many elites continued to push for this sort of consensual model of governing. The national dialogue held in late 2013 was internationally celebrated and Tunisian elites went back to the dialogue well in 2016, when President Beji Caid Essebsi convened a broad set of parties and national non-partisan organizations to fashion a charter for a new government. Although this brand of elite deliberation and consensus politics attracted much international plaudits, a number of recent essays have instead focused on the tendency of elite deliberation to preserve the status quo.[10]

The second competing vision prizes direct democracy. Calls for a more participatory democracy have emanated since the uprising, but Kais Saied has emerged as one of the prominent champions of these calls. Saied's campaign for the presidency was a performance in anti-partisanship. Saied criticized political parties as outmoded institutions and refused to form his own party. Characterizing election platforms as empty promises, Saied emphasized that he offered no platform, except for a vague promise to deliver decentralized participatory democracy. Last December, as it became clear that a newly formed technocratic government had little capacity to address the country's problems, the UGTT pushed Saied to hold another national dialogue. Saied refused, only issuing a vague declaration that he would convene a national dialogue along a very different model from those before it. On July 25, he dispensed with the legislature. Although many Tunisians supported the freezing of the legislature, political elites are now divided regarding the path forward. Many of those who praised Saied for moving against the legislature began to criticize him for refusing to convene elite deliberation.

Tunisia's experience—a new democracy deeply dissatisfying to many of its citizens and a transition pocked by crises between the proponents of different types of democratic constraints—resembles that of many other democratic transitions. Indeed, recent events are somewhat reminiscent of those described in a recent essay by Dan Slater as "careening." Thus

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[8] Nate Grubman, "Do Tunisians still want democracy?" *Washington Post Monkey Cage*

[9] See Yadh Ben Achour, Tunisie, une révolution en pays d'islam (Tunis: Cèrés éditions, 2016); Sabina Henneberg, *Managing Transition: The First Post-Uprising Phase in Tunisia and Libya* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[10] See especially Nadia Marzouki, "Tunisia's Rotten Compromise," Middle East Report Online (10 July 2015) and Amel Boubekeur, "Islamists, Secularists and Old Regime Elites in Tunisia: Bargained Competition," *Mediterranean Politics* 21 (no. 1, 2016): 107–27.

far, it is unclear whether Tunisia is careening, albeit at a slow pace, from one model of democracy to another or whether recent events will presage a transition to a non-democratic political regime. The current regime led by Kais Saied is hardly consolidated and seems unlikely to last in its current form. But it would be naïve to dismiss the possibility that the indefinite assumption of so many powers by one man, albeit a popular one, might open the door to a new dictatorship.