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Democratisation and Human rights promotion in Tunisia, a 'reformist' discourse of change supporting stability?

Master dissertation

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1. Introduction

When, in December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi desperately set himself on fire to protest against the corrupt government, the outrage rapidly grew into large protests leading the then president of Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to step down on 14 January 2011, after 23 years in power. Three years after Ben Ali's overthrown, a new constitution was enacted and a truce, though shaky, between secular and Islamic parties was agreed on. Today, Tunisia is usually regarded as a democratic state.

The revolts were not limited to Tunisia. Protests erupted in the whole region to oppose their respective corrupts and authoritarian governments. This wave of protests came to be known as the 'Arab Spring'[1]. All countries of the region experienced some forms of protests: revolution in Egypt and Tunisia; civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen; unrest and civil disorder in various extents in other countries. However, the Arab Spring proved colder than firstly anticipated as, ten years later, only Tunisia is arguably on a democratic path.

This dissertation focusses on the democratisation that has been taking place in Tunisia since 2011. Without being a comparative analysis, it intends to understand why Tunisia is the only country of the region that experienced some form of democratisation. To do so, it is first needed to examine what is meant by 'democratisation'. The extensive literature on democratisation is the first necessary step to study the recent Tunisian experience.

The present essay argues that a determining factor in the democratisation process in Tunisia is the persistence of the 'reformist discourse', a certain way of organising and legitimising politics in Tunisia. This discourse was heavily used by the regime of Ben Ali and it is argued that, though the regime changed after the revolution of 2011, the reformist discourse remained. The argument is that the survival of the political ethos of the authoritarian regime is a threat to the achievement of the democratisation process.

After the fall of Ben Ali, the European Union declared itself to be an ally of the new democratising regime. It announced a shift in its policies towards the region in favour of more democracy. It is argued that the European Union promotes democracy as itself rather than

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[1] In this paper, the expression "revolutionary moment", "Arab uprisings" will be used indistinctly. The more common expression "Arab Spring" will later be avoided as it gives the (wrong) impression of a univocal and positive change in the Arab world.

promoting democracy as a regime in which the local citizens organise their political life how they see fit. The two concepts may overlap but not necessarily. The consequence, also caused by its conflict of interests, is that the European Union end up promoting a limited version of democracy in Tunisia. This master thesis argues that democracy as the European Union eventually promotes it corresponds to democracy as understood through the lenses of the Tunisian reformist discourse. The paradox is that the discourse putting into question the democratisation process is actually facilitating EU's promotion of democracy. In fact, this paper defends that the reformist discourse and the European Union's foreign policy are actually facilitating the process of democratisation up to a certain point, but they are making it harder to attain the last step of the process: the democratic consolidation.

This dissertation focusses mainly on the period after the revolution of 2011 though some historical context is needed. The period studied stops in 2020 as the covid-19 pandemic has temporarily modified the conduct of politics. It cannot yet be said what the post-pandemic Tunisian politics will be and the period during the pandemic is too peculiar and different to be included in this paper. Therefore, instead of speculating, the following analysis stops before the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic.

2. General introduction to Democratisation studies

a) *Democracy and democratisation. What definition?*

i.   **Democracy as the ideal goal of democracy promotion**

There is an enormous number of definitions for the word "democracy". Nearly every political theory and ideology ranging from anarchism to fascism has its definition of democracy. These various definitions are often widely different or even opposed. Etymologically, democracy comes from ancient Greek. It has probably been coined by Athenians by combining the words *demos*, people and *kratos*, to rule (Dahl, 2015, p.17). Today, even though we use the word democracy we do not use the concept used by the ancient Athenians; democracy today is usually conceived of as representative and as functioning through elections.

For the purposes of this dissertation the characterisation of democracy by Robert Dahl will be used. He considered that democracy is to be defined by what it provides.

"Democracy provides opportunities for:

1) *Effective participation*. Before a policy is adopted by the association, all the members must have equal and effective opportunities for making their views known to the other members as to what the policy should be.
2) *Equality in voting*. When the moment arrives at which the decision about policy will finally be made, every member must have an equal and effective opportunity to vote, and all votes must be counted as equal.
3) *Gaining enlightened understanding*. Within reasonable limits as to time, each member must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about the relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences.
4) *Exercising final control over the agenda*. The members must have the exclusive opportunity to decide how and, if they choose, what matters are placed on the agenda. Thus, the democratic process required by the three preceding criteria is never closed. The policies of the association are always open to change by the members, if they so choose.
5) *Inclusion of adults*. All, or at any rate most, adult permanent residents should have the full rights of citizens that are implied by the first four criteria. […]" (Dahl, 2015, p.31).

Using this definition in this paper should not conceal the "essential contestability" of the concept of democracy which, as Kurki argued, has too often been forgotten (Kurki, 2010). The choice of this definition over another does not derive from any ideological preference of the author. Rather the choice of this concept of democracy derives from the subject studied: democracy promotion and democratisation. This definition is indeed the definition best suited to start understanding the democratic process taking place in Tunisia since 2011 as well as the promotion of democracy undertaken by the European Union. While this definition might be far from what others have theorised, notably because of its emphasis on voting, it is a definition that could prove useful to this investigation precisely because it is close to what the European official conception of democracy is and to some extent to what has been implemented in Tunisia since 2011. The present work does not intend to provide a comprehensive state of the art on the debate surrounding what a democracy is. The following subsection solely develops Dahl's definition insofar as it helps understanding what democracy the EU claims promoting.

Although the European Union often repeats its commitment to democracy, it rarely provides a comprehensive definition of it. For example, the 2021 "brochure on democracy support" of the European Parliament called "Global democracy support" does not provide any definition of democracy (European Parliament, 2021). Another document with a focus on specific target countries while not defining democracy explains how to enhance it in Tunisia (Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group, 2021). To do so, the group of the European Parliament hopes to "promote a more inclusive and equal society", "supporting the empowerment of women", "facilitate the cooperation of the ARP[2] and government authorities with civil society both in the legislative process and in fulfilling the role of parliamentary scrutiny over the government" and so on. What is striking is that these goals overlap with the definition of Robert Dahl: "an inclusive and equal society" and "empowering women" correspond to the characteristics 2 and 5 of democracy while the "cooperation […] with civil society" and "scrutiny over the government" correspond respectively to the elements 1 and 4.

In its EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, the European Commission also declares that it wants to promote democracy and human rights (European Commission & High Representative, 2020). Its methodology to "enhance democratic, accountable and transparent institutions" shows that its definition of democracy also corresponds to Dahl's definition. Its

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[2] ARP is the acronym of the "*Assemblée des représentants du peuple*", the Tunisian parliament.

methodology to enhance democracy encompass the following objectives: "support parliamentary institutions", "improve the integrity and inclusive participation of electoral processes", "fight against corruption", "foster the role of civil society in oversight and accountability", etc. While the vocabulary may not be exactly the one Robert Dahl uses, the concepts of democracy clearly overlap.

The EU is not a unitary actor and some of its institutions often have diverging visions (Henökl & Stemberger, 2016, p.236). On this topic however, there seems to be a consensus allowing the use of Robert Dahl's definition of democracy to describe EU's concept of democracy. As will be explained later, this conception of democracy which is the one the EU officially has and promotes often differ from the democracy actually promoted by the EU. For now, this first concept needs to be further defined.

Firstly, a regime that only includes competitive elections may be merely a "hybrid regime" having democratic characteristics as well as more authoritarian characteristics (Diamond, 2002). More than elections, even fair, is needed to be a democracy in the expected sense of the term. To be more precise, the question of the quality of democracy may be mentioned[3]. Diamond and Morlino (2004) claim that for a democracy to be of "high-quality", it should respect some criteria allowing it to satisfy citizens' expectations, provide extensive liberty and political equality and allow citizens to judge the performance of their government. A competent and impartial bureaucracy is, to them, the best way to protect the most important of their criteria: the rule of law. And this is precisely what is often missing in newly established democracies[4] (Diamond & Morlino, 2004, p.23). The kind of democracy that they advocate is clearly a liberal democracy. It matters because democracy and liberalism do not necessarily go hand in hand (Rhoden, 2015). Rhoden argues even that democracy promoters – such as the EU – and scholars should be more explicit. They do not only promote democracy; they promote *liberal* democracy; not only democratisation but also liberalisation.

The kind of democracy ostensibly promoted by international actors such as the EU can thus be called a liberal democracy. It entails that elections alone are not sufficient, a set of political freedoms, the accountability of the ruler, a certain responsiveness to citizens' demands and

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[3] Not all agree but Munck (2016), forcibly contends that the concept of the "quality of democracy" should be applied to autocracies as well as democracies.

[4] It can already be noted that European democracy support (in Tunisia for instance) largely includes support for the development of strong governmental institutions.

preferences are required (Diamond & Morlino, 2004). The fact that the liberal in liberal democracy is often not specified only dates from the post-Cold War period when that definition of democracy became generally accepted by the international community (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). The generally accepted definition of democracy is basically the same as the one Dahl previously described[5]. Schmitter and Karl added an important characteristic to liberal democracy, which differentiates it from a socialist or social-democratic approach: a *liberal* democracy "advocates circumscribing the public realm as narrowly as possible" (Schmitter & Karl, 1991, p. 77). This precision needs to be remembered when analysing EU Mediterranean policy and particularly its promotion of democracy in Tunisia.

The liberal aspect in democracy promotion may be an element of contention as it has been found that while a majority of individuals living in Muslim-majority countries support democracy, it seems that they often support a combination of sharia law and democracy instead of a liberal version of democracy (Driessen, 2018). This finding also appears true for Tunisia even if the type of democracy supported is constantly changing according to day-to-day politics. The victory in the elections of 2011 of Ennahda[6] followed by its defeat in 2014 show the unstable support for a more religious democracy. It should be remembered that how to qualify Ennahda – Islamists, conservatives or Muslim democrats – remains an open question; the party includes radical members, but they do not seem to guide the party line.

Another element worth mentioning when talking about a liberal democracy is human rights. In the liberal form of democracy, human rights play an important role. Most concisely, they can be defined as "the rights that one has simply as a human being" (Donnelly, 1999, p.612). They are internationally defined and listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In Europe, we also find the European Convention on Human Rights and, specifically for the EU, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. What Jack Donnelly asserts is that those sets of human rights as well as democracy and development

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[5] Schmitter and Karl propose their own definition of democracy which still goes around the same ideas as that of Dahl: "a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives" (Schmitter & Karl, 1991, p.76).

[6] Officially founded in 1981 (though not legally) as the 'Movement of the Islamic tendency', Ennahda is a Tunisian Islam-oriented party. The name Ennahda is a direct reference to the *Al-Nahda* (rebirth in Arabic), the movement "Arab Renaissance" of the 19th century.

are the "contemporary language of legitimacy" (Donnelly, 1999, p.609). If correctly articulated together, these three elements reinforce each other. Nowadays, they are necessary to be regarded as a legitimate government, both by the inside and from outside. It is clear that the achievement of these three principles is the *declared* objective of the EU's promotion of democracy and human rights policy. Yet, it is unclear whether this is also the current priority of this policy.

However, the path to development and economic prosperity may be a point of disagreement between Europeans and Tunisians. While Tunisians seems to wish a version of democracy that would "include an active role played by the government in the management of the economy" (Bridoux, 2019, p.801), this demand is at odds with the liberal appeal to reducing the "public realm as narrowly as possible". The demand for economic equality, while coinciding with the EU's rhetorical promotion of deep democracy, goes further than the EU's practice which is at times defined as a promotion of 'polyarchy', that is a shallow version of democracy (Sepos, 2018). This gap between EU's rhetoric and practice will be further explored in chapter 6. For now, it should only be highlighted that post-revolution Tunisians may have a more extensive definition of democracy, often clashing with the EU's practice.

ii.   The process of democratisation

The previous subsection aimed at explaining what democracy means (in this approach at least). This was a needed step because what democracy means – for the actors promoting it and those implementing reforms – has significant implications as to what the future regime will look like and on the process to bring it about. Even if tautological, it should be stressed that the goal of the democratisation process undoubtedly influences the process as well as the outcome.

However, this goal of "democracy" is frequently conceived in such a way that it may seem unattainable. It is because, as Dahl (2015, p.25) clarified, democracy refers both to an actuality and to an ideal. It refers to political regimes that claim to be democracies and it refers to democracy as the final goal to attain in the process of democratisation. The two do not necessarily overlap. Often, the democracy attained may not be what political philosophers theorised or protesters hoped and fought for. Hence the possibility of disappointment after a process of democratisation even when this process is fruitful (and even regardless of the contestability of the concept of democracy). In an attempt to resolve this predicament, Robert Dahl coined the word 'polyarchy', 'the rule of/by many', to refer to an actual regime close to

the ideal of democracy. A polyarchy is open, inclusive and competitive, yet falls short of being a full-fledged democracy (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p.1096).

How then is the process of democratisation formulated in the literature? Like democracy, the very concept of democratisation is rather elusive: it consists in "achieving political changes moving in a democratic direction" (Bridoux, 2019, p.801). Obviously whether that direction is considered democratic largely rests on one's definition of democracy.

Democratisation was first theorised in an effort to understand what came to be called the 'third wave' of democratisation. The expression 'third wave of democratisation', first coined by Huntington, refers to the period from the mid 1970s to the first half of the 1990s in which many countries experienced some progress in democracy (Carothers, 2002, p.6). The scholarly debate describing those events were dominated by the 'transition paradigm' or 'transitology'. The central concept of 'transition' was defined as "the interval between one political regime and another" (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986, p.6). In this framework, democratisation was supposed to occur in a certain order of defined steps starting with the collapse of the authoritarian regime and ending with a 'democratic consolidation'. This theoretical model and its essential assumptions were heavily criticised, among other things for their linear and teleological understanding of the evolution of politics[7] (Carothers, 2002). As a result, the 'transition' paradigm is as such mostly absent nowadays from the literature, especially when it comes to the MENA[8], but it does not mean it has been totally abandoned by democracy promoters nor that all the concepts it produces have been discarded.

Transitions to democracy may happen in different ways and involve various actors. In a bottom-up transition, the democratic impulse comes from grassroot movements or even unorganized citizens. Top-Down transitions occurs when it is the leaders of the authoritarian regime that implement reforms. A top-down democratisation will likely pave the way for a smoother transition. Yet not all top-down democratic reforms lead to actual democratic consolidation. The top-down 'democratic reforms' in Morocco following the regional uprisings of 2011 are an example of such reforms that surely never aimed at full democratisation and, at the end, did not fully satisfy the demand of the opposition and civil society (Kchaou, 2020). The 'midway' transition method may also be mentioned. In that model, a part of the formerly ruling elite allies

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[7] Culminating with the *End of History* proclaimed by Francis Fukuyama.

[8] 'MENA' is the acronym of 'Middle East and North Africa.

itself with protesters (not necessarily all of them) to take down the authoritarian regime. Since 'transition to democracy' is very context-dependent, other types are conceivable. The goal here is not to comprehensively describe them. For instance, in Tunisia, the democratic impulse that caused the fall of Ben Ali came from the bottom rather than from the elite. Still, the transition has been rather peaceful and compromised. As explained later, it is arguably caused by the persistence of reformism as the mode of government.

A concept coming from the transition paradigm still relevant today to assess countries undergoing democratic reforms is the concept of 'democratic consolidation'. It is the endpoint of the process, when there are "expectations of regime continuity" (Rhoden, 2015, p.563). A sustainable democracy is one that is not expected to revert to authoritarianism. According to empirical experiences, a consolidated democracy has not only democratised but also liberalised (Rhoden, 2015). Democratisation and liberalisation are usually thought of as being two sides of the same coin, although not always explicitly. As a result, political freedoms are essential. The role of economic freedoms is more controversial as it has been shown that a liberalised economy can at least to some extent accommodate to an authoritarian regime. Ben Ali's regime was indeed considered to be especially efficient in liberalising its economy while no political liberalisation was forecasted (Hanieh, 2013). The enactment of a new democratic constitution is often regarded as a proof of the consolidation of the new democracy. It can be so but not always; democratic consolidation should be defined solely as the moment of "expectation of [democratic] regime continuity". The new constitution may be a sign of this but not necessarily. After all, enacting a new constitution does not automatically mean modifying the political system altogether. As a result, the enactment of the 2014 constitution of Tunisia does not conclude the democratisation process.

In Tunisia, the survival of the bourgeoisie and of the military establishment could be a factor of instability (Hinnebusch, 2015a). The persistence of the economic and military elites[9] after a revolution ushered to some extent by the economic inequality and the violent brutality of the military and police is not necessarily an indication of future stability. For Tunisia, this 'democratic consolidation' seems therefore still far away. Dangers still lurk and the today's regime is to some best understood as a polyarchy (Hinnebusch, 2015a).

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[9] The role of the elites in democratisation is further explored later in this dissertation.

The transition paradigm was also criticised for its "tendency to equate [every] change with democratisation" (Valbjorn, 2015, p.221). To explain change in an authoritarian context, the concept of authoritarian resilience emerged in the early 2000s (Pace & Cavatorta, 2012). It intended to explain why and how an authoritarian regime could sustain itself and prove wrong the teleological transition paradigm. The 'authoritarian resilience' paradigm, following a trend coming from Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, theorised a sort of 'Arab exceptionalism' even though the explanations for this exceptionalism can be highly different (cultural, economic, political, religious, etc.). In any case, the notion of 'Arab exceptionalism' concerning its immunity to democracy has become unsustainable after the Arab uprisings and the relative Tunisian success (Cavatorta, 2010). After the Arab uprisings, this last theoretical model was also criticized along with the dichotomy 'democratisation/authoritarian resilience' in favour of a more complex and nuanced analysis (Valbjorn, 2015; Rivetti, 2015). These two paradigms can still remain useful as long as, as Cavatorta suggested, there are not taken as "as capable of explaining all political developments in any authoritarian or semi-authoritarian countries at all times and in a linear manner" (Cavatorta, 2015a, p.136). Accordingly, these paradigms though full of pitfalls may still help the researcher if used carefully and critically.

For example, opposing the too optimistic democratisation view, Cavatorta argued that, regarding Tunisia, the 'revolution' has only allowed the integration into the political system of a conservative middle-class represented by the party Ennahda (Cavatorta, 2015a, p.137). This while recognising that this party has been rather 'pragmatic' and has played the democratic game. That nuanced view mitigates the effects of the 'revolution', especially when it comes to economic policy, but also recognise the democratic advance it represents. Again, though far from democratic consolidation, (non-linear) progress is made.

b) Actors of political changes

The prior sections have first attempted to present how democracy is generally understood in the framework of 'democracy promotion', namely as 'liberal democracy'. Drawing on the first subsection, the second has gathered relevant theories and concepts on democratisation in order to later start understanding political changes in Tunisia.

In their seminal study on 'contentious politics', Charles Tilly and Charles Tarrow define the politics of protests, demonstrations and claim-making (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). They refer to an *episode* of contention as a moment when some actors "make claims bearing on other actors' interests" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p.7). The Tunisian revolution was such an episode of

contentious politics. They limit this episode from the 17th of December 2010 with the self immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi to 2012 with the exhaustion of the contention (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p.136). Within this episode of contention, only the period from the 17th of December 2010 to 14th of January 2011 is considered to be the 'revolutionary moment'. Others would consider that the contentious episode spans until the enactment of the new constitution in 2014 (Kchaou, 2020). This was a concrete legislative result of the revolutionary moment. The end of the moment of intense contention does not end the contention altogether; contention – particularly peaceful one – is an important aspect of democracy.

This section focusses on the role of the main actors during that episode of contentious politics and during the period of democratisation in general. It does so by drawing insights from democratisation studies and applying them to the Tunisian situation. The actors most decisive in theory and during the Tunisian episode are the political and economic elites, the military, civil society and organised labour and the international actor, governmental or not. Notably, they are differentiated on the basis of whether they can be a 'driver of change' or only a 'facilitator'. Democratisation is commonly not the result of one actor's struggle but is more likely to be the result of a 'democratic coalition' including some but not necessarily all of the actors described in this section.

During the Tunisian revolution, the role of the unorganised citizens brought together thanks to internet and the social medias was very important. However, it is often considered that although their role for overthrowing Ben Ali was decisive, they are not as such actors of long-term democratic change. It is when organised that they favour their flourishing democracy.

Even though they are not the issue at hand in this section, some more structural factors favouring democratisation may be mentioned and remembered such as the level of economic development or the political culture. These elements are not fixed but change at a different pace than the actors' interests, will or clout. They influence the actors and should be kept in mind.

i.   Old and new elites in a democratising context

The economic and political elites of an authoritarian regime have an extensive role in fomenting the overthrown of a regime but also in realizing the subsequent democratisation process (if it occurs). During the French revolution of 1789 for instance, it is generally considered that the split between the economic elite (the bourgeoisie) and the political elite (the aristocracy) was decisive in bringing down the monarchy. In most cases, transition to democracy is more likely

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to be successful if the elites perceive themselves as better off in that scenario, either through economic or political gains, than with other probable courses of events (Hinnebusch, 2006).

The scenario 'elites-led democratisation' requires elite divisions inside the authoritarian regime as well as an alliance between the liberal elites and a democratic opposition made up of civil society organisations and workers' movements, representing the popular front (Hinnebusch, 2006, p.387). Such a democratic coalition should pave the way for a transition to liberal democracy. However, those old elites turned democratic could prove problematic. Indeed, when they were too powerful in the former authoritarian regime, an obvious question arises: to what extent has democratisation really occurred if the same group still rules? For that reason, a certain degree of elite replacement is crucial to attain democratic consolidation. That dimension opened up to doubt after the elections of 2014 in which Tunisia saw the relative victory of the party Nidaa Tounes[10] made up in great parts of old regime elites (Hinnebusch, 2015b). Nonetheless, that victory came through regular elections, a fact that would point to effective democratisation regardless of who is elected. Also, the possibility to prevent former high-ranking officials in Ben Ali's regime from running for political positions in post-revolution Tunisia was discussed but abandoned. The elite replacement in post-revolution Tunisia is only partial.

How the elites are elites also impact their views on political change. In many MENA countries, the elite is a rentier class that therefore strongly need the stability of the regime to keep its oil revenues. Tunisia has relatively little oil and an economic elite whose revenues are more based on capitalism. Political change may well profit them. Yet, a degree of economic liberalisation can occur during the authoritarian regime. The capitalist elites may then be content with that and not necessarily want more uncertainty. Knowing that, an authoritarian ruler such as Ben Ali can strategically liberalise its economy to reduce elites' opposition to his rule and to please some international actors eager for economic liberalisation. In fact, the source of income of elites also helps understanding the elite's attitude on foreign meddling.

Besides, religion also hold sway when examining elites' stance on political change and foreign pressures. Secular elites are more likely to view western interferences or the adoption of a western-influenced political regime neutrally or even positively while more religious elites,

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[10] Nidaa Tounes is a political party founded in 2012 by par Béji Caïd Essebsi.

such as in Iran, can have a negative perception of Western actions and of the adoption of liberal democracy; this based on religious grounds.

Consequently, the possibility of division in the elites that would favour a western-style regime (liberal democracy) is affected by the nature of the elites. In Tunisia, the elites are, since the era of Bourguiba, more secular and liberal than elsewhere in the region (Hinnebusch, 2015a, p.364). Even the mainstream Islamist party, Ennahda, is today regarded as a conservative party and not as an Islamist revolutionary force (Cavatorta & Merone, 2013). In Tunisia, the propensity to compromise between secularists and Islamists is singularly high which helps preventing a split in the post-2011 elites. That cohesion is one of the reasons for the relative success of the democratisation.

The political culture of the elites also influences their democratic conviction. Kchaou has argued that when the elites have built their political ideology around the idea of anti-colonialism, as it was often the case for national elites in MENA states, human rights and democracy was often regarded with these lenses; therefore, criticized for their western character (Kchaou, 2020).

ii. The military

Autocrats need the army for their rule to last. The least liberal and democratic they are, the truer it is. The army is a peculiar actor: often condemned for its violence and non respect of human rights during an authoritarian rule, it can be a kingmaker during an episode of contention. Alternatively, it can thwart any democratic advance. This depends on whether the military has autonomous interests. An army whose interests are interlinked with those of the ruler is very unlikely to defect (Buehler & Ibraheem, 2018). The typical example is the Syrian army that remained loyal to Bashar al-Assad because they share the same sectarian interest, the Allawi faith. Still, it does not mean that all soldiers as well as top-generals share that interest. This mostly refers to the top-generals without who the army will not usually turn against the ruler.

The pre-2011 Tunisian army was widely different to the Syrian one. It was a highly professionalized and did not have extensive ties with Ben Ali who relied more on the intelligence agencies (Buehler & Ibraheem, 2018, p.4). As a result, the army developed autonomous interests from Ben Ali. This is why, during the revolutionary moment of 2011, the military turned its back on Ben Ali; they could do so without fearing for their own interests. Aware of the prominent role of the military for the success of the 2011 revolution, Tunisia's post-revolutionary government raised the military's budget.

In Egypt, the military also had autonomous interests. Yet, the course of events proved to be very different. A military man, Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, grabbed power in 2014 while no such thing occurred in Tunisia. The reason could be, as Hinnebusch suggests, that "the limited repressive capacities and de-politicization of the [Tunisian] military" facilitated democratisation and refrained the military from seizing power for itself (Hinnebusch, 2015a, p.361). Before 2011, the Tunisian military under Ben Ali was underfunded but it was rewarded with a budget increase afterwards (Buehler & Ibraheem, 2018, p.3). Plainly, we see that the military, like the civilian elites, may well switch side and support the protesters but it only happened if it was sure that their interests could be preserved or even enhanced.

iii.   'Civil society', a useful catch-all notion?

Democracy, as defined above, is not merely a system in which elites compete for power through elections. It ought to be more. In order to complete particularly the third and fourth requirement of Dahl's definition, democracy "requires multiple avenues for "the people" to express their interests and preferences, to influence policy, and to scrutinize and check the exercise of state power" (Diamond, 1997, p.3). 'Civil society' should provide such venues. In the literature, the 'civil society' is often given a prominent role in democratisation, both to oppose the dictatorship in order to usher a democratic transition and then to facilitate a democratic consolidation. The EU also attributes this role to civil society, considering that "a flourishing civil society […] plays a fundamental role in holding governments accountable and denouncing human rights abuses" (European Commission, 2001, p.16). Significantly, four Tunisian civil society organisations[11] were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 after launching the 'National Dialogue' in which their role of mediation helped preventing a political crisis in 2013 after the assassination of two left-wing politicians[12].

Civil society is defined rather broadly as the "the arena, outside of the family, the state and the market, where people associate to advance common interests" (Härdig, 2015, p.1133). This definition needs to be nuanced in light of the reality of Tunisian Civil society. 'Tunisian civil society' is not a monolithic actor. For that reason, Härdig proposes to define it not as a

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[11] Later referred to as CSOs. This expression should also include lightly organised actors.

[12] This quartet of CSOs which received the Nobel Peace prize was made up of the labour union UGTT, the human rights advocate LTDH, the Tunisian Bar Association and the employers' organization UTICA. However, whether the UTICA is a CSO is subject to scholarly debate. Some consider that such organized economic interests are distinct from civil society.

community but rather as a space of conflicts and cooperation encompassing actors with divergent objectives (Härdig, 2015). It includes associations focussed on matters as diverse as human rights, religion, economic interests, student representation, culture, education, etc. Even though they all provide an intermediary zone between the state and the private sphere, they do not all play the same role in democratisation. The CSOs with a democratic potential may be called 'civic' while others may be neutral or 'uncivic' when they even pose a threat to democratisation (Diamond, 1997). A typical example of a 'civic' Tunisian CSO is the Tunisian Human Rights League[13] while Salafist movements would be 'uncivic'[14]. The Arabic language provides another distinction within civil society[15]. Civil society as delineated above is separated in Arabic between *al-mujtama 'al-ahli* and *al-mujtama' al-madani* (Härdig, 2015, p.1135). They respectively refer to faith-based associations and civic-oriented organisations.

During Ben Ali's rule, only a handful of independent legal CSOs existed. The most prominent were the labour union UGTT[16], the LTDH, the Tunisian Bar Association. The UGTT is peculiar because it the only relatively independent capable of mobilising a large number of people while being at times aligned with the regime, depending on its national leadership (Weilandt, 2019). After 2011, the number of CSOs exploded (18558 in 2016 compared to 9969 in 2010) (Hudakova, 2019, p.6). In addition to the historically important CSOs, these new CSOs were decisive in scrutinising the government's actions but also in involving citizens in politics. For this reason, 'civil society' is often regarded as having played and playing an essential role towards the goal of democracy consolidation. While the importance of the role of CSOs for democratic consolidation is certain, their role during the revolutionary moment itself is less sure because they acted directly through their members rather than through its organised structure (Hudakova, 2019). To assess the role of CSOs before 2011, a crucial distinction is necessary: that between independent and state sponsored CSOs. Most pre-2011 CSOs were officially supportive of the regime, the independent ones were scarce.

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[13] Later referred to as LTDH, its French acronym which stands for *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'homme*.

[14] Many would not include the Salafist movement in 'civil society' because of their 'uncivic' character; it is because of the broad definition above that they are included.

[15] French, which is also commonly used in Tunisia, only knows the expression "*société civile*", mirroring the English expression 'civil society'.

[16] Which referred to "*Union Générale des travailleurs tunisiens*", the Tunisian Labour Union.

Historically, there regularly existed, at the same time, at least two CSOs for any specific issue, one sponsored by and supporting of the government and at least another, generally smaller, critical to a varying extent towards the regime (Hudakova, 2019; Weilandt, 2019). Those latter CSOs were often not fully independent of the regime which reduced their critical capacity. The most critical CSOs were typically illegal and frequently harassed. Between the legal moderate and illegal more radical CSOs, there were clear linkages and divisions of labour (Weilandt, 2019, p.962). The LTDH and CNLT[17], for example, had mostly similar goals and membership but worked using different means. Before 2011, the existing legal CSOs often had to compromise their criticisms in order to avoid being imprisoned and outlawed. These constant compromises today play to the disadvantage of many pre-2011 activists and CSOs as it delegitimises them in the eyes of younger activists (Weilandt, 2019, p.968). On the other hand, older activists with their experience and historic struggle consider themselves more legitimate. The larger generational cleavage is reproduced within the realm of CSOs.

After the revolution of 2011, CSOs' development was influenced by a significant increase in foreign funding. In its democracy promotion strategy, the EU emphasizes the role of CSOs as is seen with the European Instrument on Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) which heavily focusses on civil society (Hudakova, 2019). This has created further disagreements between activists accepting those funds as a useful help to work efficiently and those criticising the former for being too professionalised and far from the reality on the ground (Weilandt, 2019).

As has been explained in this subsection, the concept of 'civil society' is multifaceted and includes very different actors. This does not hamper the usefulness of the concept for the analysis of democratisation is Tunisia because its role as a counter-power facilitating democratisation remains prominent, even if, as in Tunisia, the role of civil society organisations for the fall of the regime may be rather small. Also, the importance of 'civil society' in the EU's democracy promotion strategy makes it *de facto* a relevant concept to understand it, even if it should be critically examined in this context.

iv.   The role of the external actors

This subsection will present theoretical elements to appreciate the role of foreign actors in democratisation, most importantly for this paper: their policy of democracy promotion. The

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[17] Which stands for "*Conseil national pour les libertés en Tunisie*".

first question to answer is why foreign actors promote democracy in the first place. After, the potential role that the literature ascribe to them will be examined: with a given goal of democratisation how can they act? All foreign actors do not however promote democracy, the case of autocracy promotion in the Arab context will be mentioned at that point.

Before examining why external actors may want to promote democracy, one could ask what results these actors could (most prominently the US and the EU) hope to achieve. It should be stressed that they can "assist or obstruct political change but cannot determine the course of events" (Panebianco, 2012, p.154). The EU cannot be the main protagonist of Tunisian democratisation but can only facilitate or obstruct it. The local actors remain the leading force of local political change, as even the European Commission recognised after the Arab uprisings (Ashton, 2011, p.2). The declared role the EU is therefore to facilitate Arab 'democratic transitions'.

A major rationale in favour of democracy promotion is the so-called 'democratic peace'. This proposition dating back to Kant includes a utilitarian and a normative argument (Wolff & Wurm, 2011). The hypothesis of a 'democratic peace' asserts, shortly, that in a country in which citizens' interests determine policies, including foreign policy, war is less likely for the reason that war is not in the interests of the majority of the citizens. Since war is supposedly less likely among democratic states, promoting democracy is therefore beneficial for the democratic state. This nonetheless does not take into account the fact that democratic governments firstly aim at re-election. Yet the democracy promotion is an uncertain and long-term endeavour while the costs are immediate. The second argument as to why a democratic state should promote democracy outside its borders has to do with its future relations with the newly democratic state. It purports that cooperation and compromise-oriented resolution of conflict as used within the democratic state will later be used between the democratic states. This should favour political and economic interdependence while reducing the risks of war. In the short term however efficiently promoting democracy in a country against the will of the autocrat can only increase the tensions between the two countries. For these reasons, Wolff and Wurm consider that democratic states promote democracy most actively and efficiently in countries where democracy is largely desired but not yet fully realised (Wolff & Wurm, 2011). Accordingly, post-2011 Tunisia seems an ideal candidate.

Among the variety of theories of international relations, only a few can correctly help understanding external democracy promotion, particularly here the one practiced by the

European Union. Following the utilitarian argument of the 'democratic peace', a realist approach may emerge along these lines: a country promotes democracy abroad when, after calculation and taking into account other factors, it considers that this action will be beneficial to itself. This approach may include a constructivist insight pointing to the fact that decision-makers make decisions in a particular context and influenced by socially constructed ideas. The constructivist intuition contributes to the interest-based appeal by pointing to the relativity and context-specificity of interests. This also helps grasping the vagueness of the definition of democracy: each has a definition that suits its interests. Later, one could say in a constructivist way that this definition influences how an actor sees its interests,. Democracy promotion is not merely rhetorical for it is always necessary for democracy promoters to present their other interests as contributing or at least not contradicting this goal. Even when the EU, for example, ostensibly defend economic or security interests, it has to frame them as contributing to democracy. The realist point of view should also take into account the calculations made by the recipient of the democracy promotion, especially the elites in this model (Hinnebusch, 2006). They need to examine whether democratisation will favour them.

Another specifically relevant theory is sociological institutionalism. This approach supports that democracy promotion is to be explained by institutional factors within the democracy promoter regardless of any interest calculation. Norms are not exported for their benefit or intrinsic value but because the domestic context has given them legitimacy (Bicchi, 2006). Civil servants, diplomats and politicians promote what they know and apply already. This explanation is roughly compatible with the normative argument for the 'democratic peace' proposition. According to sociological institutionalism, European decision-makers consider that their model has brought peace and economic and political interdependence in Europe. This gives legitimacy and impetus to the European policy of promoting democracy abroad. In this model, democracy promoters are inwards-looking. This approach suppose that the EU defines democracy according to its domestic polity.

In light of the previous developments, EU's emphasis on civil society can be seen through different lenses. A strong civil society could advance EU's perceived interests in the region. Promoting and empowering civil society in Tunisia may alternatively be seen as a reproduction of the EU's model (or at least of the image that the policymakers have of that model). In addition, promoting civil society can be seen as an intrinsically good thing by policymakers. This last reason, though different, shares a strong affinity with the second reason mentioned here. Even though theoretically different, those bases for European action should be

acknowledged together in order to get a more complex picture of the actions of the EU. Given that it is not a unitary actor, otherwise divergent explanations may be valid to grasp its action. As Tolstrup argued, a synthesis of different theories, instead of seeing them as "black and white" - totally irreconcilable -, may be beneficial to the understanding of external actors' democracy promotion (Tolstrup, 2013).

The tension between these roots of external policy, each to be interpreted differently, may be an explanation for the "inherent 'double standard' of demanding democracy in theory but supporting authoritarian rulers in practice" (Bauer, 2015, p.30). The EU has both an institutional impulse to promote democracy and often an interest-based constraint preventing democracy promotion when competing interests are deemed more valuable. It can be envisaged that the parameters of one paradigm find empirical support for only a limited period of time or only in some instances and then be replaced by the other paradigm.

This analytical frame is roughly also valid when looking at the external policy of actors trying to prevent democratisation. In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is an important regional actor, and it wants to defend its own interests (Freyburg & Richter, 2015). In contrast to democratic countries, its interests are not linked with democratisation. Its political system is not democratic either. Thus, both the realist and the sociological institutionalist interpretation would expect it to promote authoritarian religious (to a certain extent) regimes. Yet, its relations with the EU are not necessarily harmed by their opposite view since the Saudi monarchy remains an important partner (Hassan, 2015). Regarding Tunisia, Saudi Arabia harboured the fallen president Ben Ali and was generally dissatisfied with the regime change. The election of members of the party Ennahda was not cause for celebration in Riyad as it represents a very different branch of Islam to the Wahhabism practiced in and promoted from Saudi Arabia. The Tunisian democratisation had therefore to deal with an antagonist regional power.

External promoters of democracy or autocracy do not always emphasize the same aspects. As Sepos argued, the EU, as an external promoter of democracy, can support democratisation by targeting three dimensions: the elites, the social movements and civil society and the socio-economic conditions (Sepos, 2018, p. 526). Targeting elites in democracy promotion aims at creating a split within the elites so that some may see a democratisation as an opportunity that they would support. In Tunisia, the elites were and are more secular than in other MENA countries which played in the EU's favour. While targeting the elites is also necessary when promoting autocracy, advocating democracy requires supporting social movements and civil

society whose role has already been discussed here. Doing so is peculiar to democracy promotion and fits in the perception that democracy is achieved by citizens and not only elites. Focussing on the socio-economic conditions means reducing the capacity of the autocratic state and then helping the would-be democracy (such as post-2011 Tunisia) to build efficient economic policies to overhaul the pre-revolution economy. In Tunisia, socio-economic issues are usually regarded as being one of the main causes of the uprising (Bridoux, 2019). Resolving them is then necessary for the new Tunisian regime to prove its credibility. Yet, Hinnebusch argues that by blocking Tunisia into 'neo-liberal practices' and thus removing the economy from politics, Western actors' supported political economies were unable to solve the economic injustice (Hinnebusch, 2015b).

By all means, the promotion ought to be different according to each country's specific context (which is not always so). Supporting democracy in Tunisia before or after the revolution of 2011 is a very distinct endeavour. In that regard, one should note that trying to repeat the successes of the third wave of democratisation (in which the EU was instrumental) in the MENA or in Tunisia specifically may end up in failure because of the different context, culture, history and the unavailability of the most powerful EU foreign policy tool: enlargement. In Tunisia, European policy is not the enlargement but the less efficient neighbourhood policy (see chapter 6). Even though it acknowledges that the neighbourhood policy cannot be as efficient in fostering change as the enlargement policy, the European Commission nonetheless considers that "the European Union is well placed to promote democracy and human rights" in the world stage (European Commission, 2001, p.3). It therefore values its own action and considers that it could achieve sizeable results in third countries.

c) Conclusion

In a democratisation process, different potential actors may have different role. Some may be the drivers of the democratic change while other can only facilitate it. The local actors are on the 'driving seat' of the process. CSOs' main role in the democratisation process is to scrutinize government's action, thus controlling whether governmental action is indeed democratically exercised. The elite may support or oppose democratisation based on whether they benefit from it. Creating a split in the elite to weaken the authoritarian regime is a decisive step to topple the authoritarian leader. However, it is not enough to actually democratise the country.

While elites are often crucial in toppling the dictatorship, CSOs are even more important when in comes to consolidating the democracy. In Tunisia, the fall of the regime is often attributed to

the unorganised protesters of the winter 2010-2011. The fact that the elite, especially the military, did not fight to maintain the regime is noteworthy. The role of CSOs to assist the consolidation of the Tunisian democracy has been recognised by the international community and through the award of a Nobel Peace prize.

In brief, democratisation does not simply mean overthrowing an authoritarian regime. It is only the first step on the road to democracy. Democracy is finally consolidated when the 'mode of government', the political ethos of the system has changed to become democratic. Democratic consolidation not only means changing the ruler but rather changing the way politics is conceived and exercised.

3. Research questions and methodology

a) Preliminary remarks

One studying democratisation is one studying a period of deep political changes. During an episode of political contention such as the one that occurred in Tunisia between December 2010 and at least 2012 interests, ideas and political alliances alike are reconstructed on new bases. This situation makes it particularly relevant to consider, in a constructivist fashion, that political issues as socially constructed. Such a stance does not prevent a research on the interests of the actors. However, it defines their interests, not as objective items whose reality is a given regardless of one's beliefs, but as 'what actors consider them to be'. If the EU views security as high on the agenda and migration as part of that concern, it is because it has (re)constructed its concept of security in that manner, not because of an objective external existence of what 'security' is.

Many studies find out how democratisation occurs through comparing countries with each other, often Tunisia with Egypt, to isolate the factors that made the difference (Bogaards, 2019, p.69). This study instead analyses Tunisia's democratisation by emphasizing the role of the so-called reformist discourse before and after 2011 and by discussing the role of the EU as an external democracy promoter. Those two aspects are shown to be important in shaping Tunisia's path. Moreover, they are shown to be related.

Because of its focus, this dissertation can be said to be a 'case-based research', that is a research based on one single case, Tunisia, which it tries to analyse carefully. A difference can be made between case-based researches that firstly aims at proving a theoretical point and those that "seek to enhance our knowledge of a particular case" (Bogaards, 2019, p.63). This study of Tunisian democratisation can be classified in the second category, which emphasizes its empirical component rather than its theoretical one. Indeed, the goal of this dissertation is to bring light on a less-explored aspect of the process of democratisation in Tunisia rather than on the theory of democratisation itself.

b) Research questions

While keeping in mind the chapter on democratisation studies and the Tunisian context, this case study addresses the following questions.

Firstly, what was 'reformism' should be uncover. It is a necessary step before assessing its current relevance in Tunisian politics. Afterwards, the question of the current relevance of the reformist discourse is clarified. What are the consequences of the continued relevance of this discourse?

The issue of security is important because it often is an element of contention with democracy. Security is an important issue in Tunisian politics and in Mediterranean relations; how does this issue impact the democratisation process? And how is this linked to the reformist ethos?

The European Union is the most important international partner of Tunisia. Moreover, it is an actor that claims to base its foreign policy on the values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights (article 21 of the Treaty on the European Union). Therefore, what is its policy towards the democratising state? Are its priorities really democracy and human rights? Furthermore, what 'democracy' does it actually promotes? Is the European action towards Tunisia facilitated or impeded by the persistence of the reformist discourse?

Once again, the question of security is of high importance. Indeed, security has been a growing concern for the EU when dealing with its Southern neighbours. How does this concern for security affect the promotion of democracy and the very definition of democracy in EU's promotion of democracy?

Those research questions can be understood as sub-questions helping to answer to bigger question, which can be formulated as: what are the repercussions on the democratisation process of the persistence of reformism as the Tunisian political ethos and of the implicit European support for it?

That focus has been chosen because of a mismatch between the Tunisian democratisation and EU's promotion of democracy on one hand and the expectations of the revolution on the other hand (Teti *et. al.*, 2020). By combining different streams of scientific literature with empirical findings, this dissertation aims at providing a new perspective of the topic. It intends to back the claim that the European action as well as the reformist discourse have facilitated the beginning of the democratisation of the Tunisian polity but impede the consolidation of democracy in the country.

c) Methodology

In order to answer those questions and thus providing a contribution to the literature on Tunisian democratisation, a specific though not so innovative methodology is used.

After examining the literature on democratisation and on Tunisian politics, official documents published from the European institutions concerning democracy, democratisation and Tunisian political developments were subjected to close scrutiny. To answer to the research questions described above, these documents were necessary as they provide the official published view of the EU on the topic. The analysis of EU's declaratory policy does not seek to examine the differences between the declarations and the implementation (see Bassotti, 2017). Rather it seeks to uncover what are the discursive implications of those European declarations. What does those declarations tell us on the EU's actual priorities and goals? Through the various policy documents, a European discourse on democratisation and democracy promotion is discerned and discussed.

Some Tunisian documents were also consulted as they showcase the persistence of reformism in Tunisia. However, a limit of this dissertation is that many more European documents were consulted than Tunisian ones. It was caused by their unavailability in another language than Arabic – especially for the official speeches – or by the difficulty to find relevant material on internet.

A confirmatory interview could have been useful to receive a more personal opinion on the topic. Still, I believe that the methodology used bore fruits. Indeed, evaluating the democratisation process in light of the persistence of the reformist discourse is an analysis based on written documents more than interviews. The fact that the EU still sees Tunisia as a reformist country and that post-2011 Tunisian governments have indeed taken that role is showcased in written documents, that together shed light on the way Tunisian politics is conceived.

This methodology aims at grasping not mainly the 'objective reality' of democracy promotion but rather how it is seen and implemented by those most concerned. The concept of democracy (and democratisation) being a contested concept, understanding how actors use and promote this concept should also help understanding what the concrete policies are and especially why they have been constructed in such a way.

It is however true that this epistemological stance and methodology provide different results to those obtained with a different methodology. It is evident that how one researches influences the results of that research and it should be especially evident for anyone thinking in a constructivist manner. Accepting this is consistent with the methodological stance of this paper and should not be view as a flaw in itself but rather as linked with how one sees its object of study and its subsequent epistemology.

4. The Tunisian political context

This chapter examines the context in which the process of democratisation in Tunisia has been taking place. The chapter is predominantly descriptive even though it focusses on the categories outlined above.

Before going into more details, it could be fruitful to look at several well-known ratings on Tunisia's democracy. The New York-based democracy-monitoring organization Freedom House[18] rates the level of freedom of countries in the world by focussing on civil liberties and political rights. Its assessment for Tunisia in 2020 was that Tunisia is "free" in the scale "not free - partly free - free" (Freedom House, 2020). This assessment is broadly shared by the EEAS. More precisely, it praises the Tunisian elections of 2019 as a "a milestone in the consolidation of transition", clearly invoking the vocabulary of transitology (EEAS, 2019, p.54). It also states its interest in working closely with the 'civil society' which "plays a key role in the transition" (EEAS, 2019, p.54), further showing the relevance of the literature presented above. The V-Dem Institute reports that in recent years the number of autocracies has been growing worldwide (V-Dem Institute, 2021). Democracy advanced in only a handful of countries, among which Tunisia is considered the "greatest democratiser" in the 10 years span between 2010 and 2020 (V-Dem Institute, 2021, p.18). These reports on democracy in Tunisia all present an overall positive picture of the Tunisian democratisation. The following sections aims at providing more context and details to better understand the changes in Tunisia. It firstly focusses on the authoritarianism and on the economics of the old regime. It also mentions the geographical inequalities which, to some, was critical in producing the revolution. These dimensions are critical to understand Ben Ali's regime.

a) The pre-revolution regime

Before the revolutionary events of 2011, Tunisia was similar to many other countries of the region, a dictatorship where human rights abuses were frequent. It was also characterized by an economic development praised by its international partners. This economic success coupled with a harsh dictatorship was peculiar to Tunisia (Hibou, 2005).

After the reign of the founder of the Republic Habib Bourguiba, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali took power in 1987. His coup was rather peaceful and officially justified by the medical problems

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[18] By all means, this type of rating should be viewed critically. It still provides a useful general overview.

of Bourguiba. Ben Ali's rule was characterized, as many other states in the region, by a one-party system held together thanks to its security apparatus (Sakbani, 2011). Even after Bourguiba, the Tunisian authoritarianism was still considered the "most personalistic found in the region" (Volpi, 2013, p.978).

Limitations of freedoms were also far-reaching. The repression of opposition movements, specifically the Islamists, was also significant. The regime was committed to secularism and to the post-9/11 Western-backed fight against Islamism[19]. The members of the party Ennahda were, for that reason, the most persecuted during the Ben Ali era. Tunisia was even regarded as a "police state" (Andrieu, 2016, p.267). Despite the restless repression, they continuously maintained a weak underground structure in Tunisia and an international network in exile (Cimini, 2020; Kirdis, 2018). This is why, after the revolution, Ennahda emerged as a comparatively well-organised party. It had a longer history than other post-revolution political parties. Also, its history of exile and repression shaped it differently to other Islamist parties: it became, once in power, the Islamic party most open to political pluralism (Kirdis, 2018).

Despite the violations of human rights, the Tunisian economy was well-considered internationally which can be explained at least partially by its implementation of neoliberal programs. Indeed, it was, in 1987, the first country of the region to initiate a privatization program (Hanieh, 2013, p.230). Its implementation of the economic policy promoted by the West was crucial in getting international recognition concerning its economy. The Tunisian growth as well as its per capita incomes was also praised (Sakbani, 2011, p.131). However, the main problem that would soon cause political troubles was youth unemployment. Employment was scare while despair concerning the future was common (Allal, 2012).

Tunisian economy also suffered from a significant trade imbalance. As a result of the trade liberalisation, Tunisia accumulated a trade deficit of US$4 billion in 2010 (Sakbani, 2011, p.132). The trade liberalisation caused Tunisia to export low-value products, mainly to the European Union, while importing high-value manufactured products, still from the European bloc. As Hanieh has shown, Tunisia experienced a considerable trade dependency towards the EU, whereas the EU was undoubtedly not dependent on Tunisia (Hanieh, 2013). A fact that seems to have been known and complained of by the Tunisians (Nouira & Redissi, 2020, p.61).

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[19] Especially after the 2002 terrorist attack on the Djerba synagogue claimed by Al-Qaida.

The widespread corruption was another characteristic of Ben Ali's regime. It became even more evident after his marriage with Leila Trabelsi who is considered, with her family, as the incarnation of corruption during Ben Ali's reign (Alvi, 2014).

The coastal regions of Tunisia were and are the richest in the country. In contrast, the interior regions were plagued even more by unemployment, corruption and poverty. The 2010-2011 revolts mainly started from the "periphery" of Tunisia in order to protest the geographical inequality (Yousfi, 2017b). The geographical inequality is also an economic one. As Cavatorta pointed, the socio-economic question was central to the demands of the protestors in Tunisia but also across the MENA region (Cavatorta, 2015a). More generally, it could be said that, in Tunisia, the poorest regions are systemically the protesting regions (Allal, 2012, p.824).

In brief, the autocratic regime of Ben Ali was characterized by continuous violations of human rights, a one-party rule and an economy plagued by corruption and unemployment, despite its satisfactory level of growth and implementation of neoliberal programs. Those aspects were consistently exacerbated in the peripherical regions of the country.

b) The Tunisian revolution and its political aftermath

At least since the protests of Gafsa in the South-West of the country in 2008[20], Tunisia has experienced an increase in protests linked mainly to socio-economic demands (Allal, 2012). The uprisings leading to the overthrow of Ben Ali surely did not start in 2008 and had their own causes. Yet, it seems possible to consider the "processes of political radicalisations" that eventually led Tunisian to demand and obtain the fall of the regime. Though the movement in 2011 has often been deemed disorganised and unexpected, it should not be regarded as spontaneous and coming from nowhere. Diverse groups and events sometimes far in space or even in time make together the revolutionary process and imaginary. These experiences and resentment accumulated themselves in Tunisians' minds to form a justification for and a thrust toward the end of the regime in 2011.

The proper revolutionary moment started with the immolation of the young street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi in the centre-west city of Sidi Bouzid. This was the spark that lit the Tunisian revolution. The previously existing anger exploded in part because many could relate

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[20] From January to June 2008, a social revolt occurred in the mining basin of Gafsa in the South West of the country.

to the outrage done to Mohammed Bouazizi. That date, the 17th of December 2010, sets the beginning of the Tunisian revolutionary episode. It is also the start of the regional uprisings that came to be called 'Arab Spring'. It might already be noted at this point that the Tunisian democratisation stands out in comparison to others because, unlike many, the transition was not negotiated with the former regime, the goal was to break away from the contested autocracy (Andrieu, 2016, p.273).

After the departure of Ben Ali to Saudi Arabia the 14th of January, Mohamed Ghannouchi, the former prime minister of Ben Ali, reshuffled the government to appease protesters during the period of transition (Murphy, 2013). This was not enough as the two protests on the square "Kasbah" in Tunis have shown. Again, the demonstrations came from the peripherical poor regions of the country. The Kasbah protests showed the characteristic will to break away with the autocratic past. Subsequently, the government was shuffled again and M. Ghannouchi resigned. He was replaced by Béji Caïd Essebsi as prime minister while, the 15th of January 2011, Fouad Mebazaa became the interim President. Following the elections of December 2011, the human rights militant Moncef Marzouki became president of the republic whereas Hamadi Jebali from Ennahda became head of the government. This situation with Moncef Marzouki as president and a member of Ennahda as head of government remained the same until the crisis of 2013-2014.

The murders of the leftist leaders Chokri Belaid on 6 February 2013 and Mohamed Brahmi on 25 July sparked the worst political crisis since 2011. The assassinations having been carried out by Islamists, protesters blamed the government and especially Ennahda for its lenience towards Islamism. To solve the crisis, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet was formed in order to end the crisis. This quartet of CSOs received the Nobel Peace prize in 2015. Eventually, new elections were held in October 2014 that Béji Caïd Essebsi and his party Nidaa Tounes won. Béji Caïd Essebsi then became president of the Republic. This was a considerable setback for Ennahda who lost many seats as a result of its handling of the crisis and, according to many, its responsibility for the surge of Islamism.

The period also saw the term of the work of the Constituent Assembly and the proclamation of the new constitution the 27th of January 2014. The document showcases the Tunisian democratisation as it has enshrined many liberties previously lacking. The role of the Islamists in the process of drafting is however apparent as for instance, Islam is declared the religion of

the state in the first article (Grami, 2014). The constitution instituted a semi-presidential regime with a weak president (Cross & Sorens, 2016).

Notably and still in order to break away from the former regime, a process of transitional justice started as early as January 2011. It was concerned with truth-seeking, reparations, trials and reforms of the institutions (especially concerning security and justice). In Tunisia, from the beginning, transitional justice was highly politicized. Removing the political dimension of the process would, as Andrieu argues, be too "dangerous and impossible" (Andrieu, 2016, p.286). Indeed, it is a process that "puts forward a certain narrative about the past that serves a different (and new) political project" (Andrieu, 2016, p.286) and there is always contention when it comes to defining the political future of a country. As such, the process of transitional justice contributed to the building of a new political narrative for post-revolution Tunisia. It also contributed to the good respect of human rights in transitional Tunisia thanks to the willingness of the post-uprising governments to take the matter into consideration, at least until 2014 and the victory of Nidaa Tounes (Saral, 2019).

It should be noted however that the transitional justice process was criticized in part because it largely benefited the Islamists who were both in the new government and the most numerous victims of Ben Ali's regime. For instance, some saw the reparations as an attempt by Ennahda to reward its supporters or potential supporters (Andrieu, 2016). Those victims were viewed differently as they had gained access to power. Samir Dilou, the first Minister of Human Rights and Transitional Justice, was criticized for precisely these reasons: although he spent some ten years in jail for his political activities, his membership of the leading party Ennahda brought doubts concerning his objectivity. Depoliticizing the process was no longer an option, nor was it attempted.

The Islamists of Ennahda hold however positions widely different to other more radical Islamists. For instance, they promoted consensus in the drafting of the 2014 constitution instead of imposing their agenda (Saral, 2019). It has even been argued that they are the "most progressive on the issue of LGBT rights" in Tunisia (Saral, 2019, p.16). This is why they have been considered as conservative instead of fundamentalists (Cavatorta & Merone, 2013). This particularity of the Tunisian 'Islamists' greatly favoured the process of democratisation.

In short, the Tunisian democratic experience since 2011 shows a clear direction towards democracy but also a clear polarisation between secular movements and Islamists. The literature on democratisation and authoritarian resilience often used the phrase 'Arab

exceptionalism' to refer to the MENA region, because of its imperviousness to democracy. Today, some instead consider Tunisia as a 'democratic exception' (Nouira & Redissi, 2020). Indeed, despite the regional turmoil, it is the only country of the area in which a democratically elected government emerged.

The praised Tunisian democratisation can thus be said to have been triggered by four main factors: the authoritarianism and human rights violations, the high level of – especially youth – unemployment despite a good economic growth, the geographical disparities and the unbearable corruption. The subsequent revolution led to an eventful period prompting the constitution of a more democratic state. Free elections were held but an Islamist challenge remains. Tunisia still seems on the road to democratic consolidation.

5. Reformism and democratisation

This chapter aims at examining the 'mode of government' of Tunisia. It is argued that it is through this discourse that power is regulated and exercised. Reformism had this role under Ben Ali and arguably still has it. The goal of this discussion is to put into question the possibility of a democratic consolidation in a country where politics is still conceived and justified similarly, though more democratically.

The examination of this discourse of changes and reforms starts with the description of what reformism is. Then, it is argued that the whole process of democratisation taking place since 2011 is framed through reformist lenses; that democratisation is viewed as yet another reform to implement. This persistence shows that 'reformism', though advocating for change and reforms, is actually facilitating a certain continuity. Lastly, the conflict between security and democracy is put under scrutiny as it demonstrates the potential mismatch between democracy and reformism. Reformism is indeed a discourse of changes but the issue of security shows that democratic change does not necessarily follow it. In fact, it is a discourse of change that facilitate the continuity of some policies, such as the security policy.

We can already note that, as will be seen later, this is very similar to EU policy towards its southern neighbourhood: after important events, policy shifts are announced but not carried out so that continuity remains the rule in EU policy towards MENA countries and Tunisia.

a) The Tunisian discourse of reformism

Hibou considers that "what is at stake in this revolutionary moment is much more complex than the establishment of a new Constitution, of free elections and the fight against corruption" and that, instead the "mode of government" in Tunisia is at stake (Hibou, 2012, p.299). To define this mode of government in Ben Ali's Tunisia, she uses the notion of 'reformism' first coined in the 19th century Ottoman empire. It means "governing with moderation, being sensitive to openness to the international world, while preserving national achievements and specific characteristics; it meant to enhance reforms as a way of being and behaving." (Hibou, 2012, p.299).

What she calls reformism was/is a powerful discourse helping maintaining Tunisians' obedience. The state was even regarded legitimate by some because it provided an answer to the desires of protection, consumption and modernity (Hibou, 2011, p.6). This appreciation of the Tunisian state was of course not unanimously shared. Many did not receive the benefits of

modernisation and did not have access to the 'society of consumption'. Yet, reformism was unanimously well-regarded: criticisms of Ben Ali's political actions were often based on reformist arguments. This mechanism of power was not an exclusivity of Ben Ali, instead it was deeply inserted in Tunisian political imaginary (Hibou, 2005).

This discussion is essential because Ben Ali's 'reformist authoritarianism' was a crucial aspect of the persistence of its regime. It partly explains the persistence of his regime, which led to theories of "authoritarian persistence" in the MENA. Yet, democratising does not necessarily lead to modifying the "mode of government". The persistence of reformism as the "main political ethos" could cast a shadow on the whole 'revolutionary change' (Hibou, 2012).

Tunisian reformism should not be understood in the way the West usually does, that is in a dichotomy with the idea of revolution. Instead, reformism here refers to the tradition that started in 1839 with the Tanzimat in the Ottoman Empire (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, p.82). This put the emphasis on reforming the state and the religion. There were modernist and fundamentalist reformists. The latter intended to use the reforms to articulate a return to the "original Islam". The modernists on the other hand, were less religious and made direct references to Western thinking (Hibou, 2009). The modernists, though putting less emphasis on religion, did not forget it. Rather, they hoped to preserve it by reforming it in accordance with the conditions of the present world. In today's Tunisia, only the modernist current is referred to as the basis of reformism. Historically, this reformist thought was actually far from Western liberalism and was more a way to conserve the old regime by adapting it than a genuine impulse to transform the basis of society. Only some Western ideas were kept (such as centralism). Ben Ali's discourse of reformism was thus a latter reconstruction of a past intellectual tradition.

Reformism became an intellectual and social movement in the Muslim world from the 18th century on as an Islamic response to European imperialism (Mervin, 2016). It intended to 'reform' Islamic practice and society in order to preserve it and prevent its collapse. In the religious thought, two concepts encompass the possibility of reform: *islâh* and *tajdîd*. Both of them refer simultaneously to renewal and return. *Tajdîd* was more used to sustain religious doctrinal developments while *islâh* was mentioned when the state of society and religious practices needed changes in order, according to the ulemas, to fit more with the word of the Quran (Mervin, 2016, p.187). The initial reformism was thus opposed to European dominance though it used many of its ideas to enhance Islamic thought while remaining true to its doctrine. Changes were regarded positively only insofar as they strove in that direction. This was the

case for the modernist as well as the fundamentalist reformism. Ben Ali's use of "reforms" as a constant political argument was therefore not a characteristic he shared with the original reformists, despite their fragmentation. The openness to the West in the way Ben Ali's meant it was also a new element in the discourse since the original reformism intended to thwart the West's hegemony, not accommodate to it.

Historically, the reformist intellectuals were at the forefront of the criticism of the French protectorate on Tunisia but initially without directly opposing the protectorate, a loose support justified in reformist terms: colonisation was deemed to contribute to technological and administrative improvements (Hibou, 2009). Later, the same promoters of reforms opposed the protectorate because it failed to apply the liberal principles and implement reforms in this direction. With the end of the Ottoman Empire, nationalism replaced pan-Islamist ideas. The struggle for Tunisian independence was led by the liberal constitutional party, which soon was called *Destour* (meaning constitution). It referred to the constitution of 1861 as a source of inspiration. The priority given to texts and to a written constitution aimed at limiting the powers of the Sultan or of the French protectorate and thus preventing absolutism.

Cavatorta and Haugbolle have examined what they called the three mythologies of Ben Ali's Tunisia: the "economic miracle", the "democratic gradualism" and the "myth of *laïcité*"[21] (Cavatorta & Haugbolle, 2012). All three are myths because, though some arguments can be made in their favour, they have been proved false or at least misleading. The "economic miracle" was a very important myth for the regime to gather domestic and international support. This myth was however proved to be the result of statistical and data collection manipulations. It also concealed the economic reality actually made up of unemployment (especially for the youth), consequent tolerance for illegal mode of survival (traffic, black market, etc.), a neoliberal transformation of the conditions of employment, an important regional gap and a significant corruption (Hibou, *et. al.*, 2011). Similarly, the myth of "democratic gradualism" based on the idea that Tunisia was (very) slowly democratising and departing from the tyrannic rule of Bourguiba had to overlook the major human rights violations and authoritarianism of the regime (Cavatorta & Haugbolle, 2012). The third myth identified by Cavatorta and Haugbolle, the "myth of laïcité" correctly presented Ben Ali and its regime as opposed to Islamism. The renewed importance of Ennahda in 2011 plainly proved that this myth concealed

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[21] *Laïcité* is the French word for secularism.

the transformations occurring in the society. This myth imagined society as united and homogeneous while only the urban French-speaking elite fully supported the anti-Islamist policies of the regime (Cavatorta & Haugbolle, 2012, p.190).

For this last myth, the regime of Ben Ali, drawing on the reformist discourse, created a certain Tunisian identity: the tunisianity. Notably, this concept defined being-a-Tunisian in reformist terms: fairly secular, moderate, open to the west, etc. It is why Islamist groups were denounced as un-Tunisian and a threat to the identity of the country (Powel, 2009, p.208). Excluding them from politics was thus not only justified on security and stability grounds as explained later but also based on identity.

These three myths can be interpreted under the umbrella of reformism. They are only myths because they do not have a tangible reality, but they are also more because they discursively influence society and the way politics is conceived and exercised. They can be framed in the larger reformist discourse of Ben Ali's regime. Reformism may be seen as the overarching concept to understand those mythologies. This discourse of changes and reforms concealed in various ways the political and economic reality. It both concealed and interpreted reality to shape it in favour of the regime. Up to the revolutionary moment, it had been analysed that Ben Ali was "upgrading its authoritarianism" so progressively democratising it thanks to mainly these three elements. These dimensions of Ben Ali's regime's legitimisation can be explained as parts of this discourse: they present Tunisia as economically, democratically and religiously close to the West even though these elements present strong empirical inaccuracies. Nonetheless, this discourse shaped politics for more than 20 years and was efficient enough to satisfy international partners and prevent an earlier revolution.

The first post-independence president of Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba, initially from the neo-Destour party, intended to govern guided by the principles of modernism, rationalism, openness and constitutionalism (Hibou, 2009, p.27). The reformist ideas were then at the heart of how he described his exercise of power. However, it is only with Ben Ali that reformism really became the legitimising reference behind every political actions. That Ben Ali was toppled in 2011 does not preclude the possibility of a survival of this political myth, of this way of conceiving how politics should be exercise. Consequently, one should try to assess whether this mode of government has survived the revolution.

As has been highlighted above, socio-economic demands were paramount reasons leading to the revolutionary moment and to the overthrow of Ben Ali. The continuing predominance of

the reformist discourse to legitimise political actions could mean the continuation of the same economic policies. If the political rationale has not changed, it is likely that many policies have not fundamentally changed either. The question to ask to assess the specific Tunisian democratisation is whether the new regime still bases its legitimacy on a reformist discourse associated with an alleged capacity for providing prosperity, security and order. Formulated as such, one may assess Tunisian democratisation and eventually its potential democratic consolidation according to its peculiar experience and discourse.

For a country to reach the point of democratic transition, the changes that occurred need to be significant enough to create an expectation of democratic regime continuity. The sustainable democracy, according to the frame proposed in the second chapter, should not revert to authoritarianism which includes a certain degree of liberalisation (at least political). Reformism being the important legitimisation tool of political actions under Ben Ali and to a certain extent of Ben Ali himself, the persistence of this mode of power after the revolution may disqualify claims that the possibility to revert to authoritarianism of out of sight. Changing the way power is exercised and justified is crucial for a democracy to be consolidated.

b) The process of democratisation as yet another reform

The goal of this section is to come back to the process of democratisation occurring since 2011 and assess it in light of the discursive context in which it has been taking place. Reformism was an important discourse of legitimisation before the fall of Ben Ali, is it still the case? And what consequences could it have on how to make sense of the whole course of events? In short, this section will argue that the reformist discourse has not disappeared; instead the whole process of democratisation has been framed as a set of reforms to implement in order to obtain a democracy.

The process of democratisation that started in 2011 has been so far successfully framed as a new set of reforms allowing the country to be more modern, efficient and open to the world. The democratising reforms are to be understood first and foremost as *reforms*.

The most obvious argument to defend that the reformist discourse did not collapse with Ben Ali's regime is its enshrinement in the preamble of the 2014 Constitution of Tunisia. The following extract is one of the first paragraphs of this preamble.

> "Expressing our people's commitment to the teachings of Islam, to their spirit of openness and
> tolerance, to human values and the highest principles of universal human rights, inspired by the

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> heritage of our civilization, accumulated over the travails of our history, from <u>our enlightened reformist movements</u> that are based on the foundations of our Islamic-Arab identity and on the gains of human civilization, and adhering to the national gains achieved by our people."[22]

In this extract of the first Tunisian democratic constitution, it is stated that the [Tunisian] "enlightened reformist movements" are based on their "Islamic-Arab identity" which is itself defined in a very liberal fashion emphasizing "their spirit of openness and tolerance"[23]. This paragraph takes many ideas dear to the reformist movements and link them together to form, in the constitution, the concept of a Tunisian identity based on openness and tolerance and committed to Islam and human rights. More than directly mentioning and thanking the reformist movements, the preamble is itself an expression of the reformist discourse. It defines the Tunisian identity in reformist terms.

Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, two of the main post-revolution parties, are often considered antagonistic (Zederman, 2016). However, when it comes to the reformist movement, they both stress its historical importance in founding Tunisia and its identity. Nonetheless, they do not emphasize the same elements of reformism: Nidaa Tounes directs its attention to Bourguiba's discourse of modernity, while Ennahda refers to the older 19th century movements and ideas (Zederman, 2016). Ennahda's reformism is decidedly more Islamic and intends to be the foundation of an Arab-Muslim identity. Like its Bourguibist founder, Béji Caïd Essebsi, Nidaa Tounes looks more to the West and have a smaller emphasis on Islam. The French-speaking elite, important because of its long history of political domination, continues to promote a reformist version of "tunisianity". Their version of the national identity is based on the enlightenment heritage, bilingualism, openness to the world and especially Europe (Helal, 2019). For them as for Nidaa Tounes, a Muslim and Arab identity is too narrow and reduce their openness to the West. While being at odds with Ennahda's ideals, it shares similarities with Ben Ali's discourse on tunisianity.

For these reasons, highlighting the "enlightened reformist movements" was an uncontroversial statement that could be supported by the Islamists and the seculars alike. Moreover, as Hibou argued, reformism during Ben Ali's rule was not only mobilised by his regime but also by the

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[22] Preamble of the 2014 Constitution of Tunisia, retrieved on https://www.constituteproject.org/countries/Africa/Tunisia?lang=en (consulted the 22/06/2021).

[23] The French version is clearer on that point: « *Exprimant l'attachement de notre peuple aux enseignements de l'Islam, qui a pour finalité l'ouverture et la tolérance* […] ».

opposition and the population (Hibou, 2011). In addition to being multi-faceted, it is largely recognised as a foundational tradition of Tunisia upon which policies should be based. Yet, reformism should not be taken as being an empty signifier: it does have some recurrent element. The persistence of the reformist discourse in the political life means that it also persists as a legitimiser of policies; policies are still based on reformist principles: progress, openness to the world while retaining its identity and modernity.

Internationally, Tunisia has also presented its democratic story in a reformist fashion. This corresponds to the EU's inclination. The above-mentioned principles characterising reformism fit with European goals for Tunisia. In EU documents, democratisation is systematically referred to as "a process of reforms" aiming towards democracy, good governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights (see for instance: European Union, 2018). While cooperating with international partners, what matters is to build new institutions and reform old ones. this process of reforms is supposed to be the key to democratising Tunisia: it is a process of democratisation focussed on institutions. As a result, legislative reforms (often meaning approximation with the EU) is the privileged way to obtain democracy; or at least a shallow one. Indeed, the revolutionary demands of the people of 2011[24] seems less implemented than the smoother institutional reforms supported by the EU and the new national leadership.

Democratising Tunisia with this reformist mindset implies a smooth transition towards a soft version of democracy. While democratising like that prevents antagonising the remainder of the old regime elite, the risk is to not bring the democratisation process to its very end. The decision to not prevent former high-ranking members of the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (RCD)[25] from running for public offices is both a measure to pacify the post-revolution politics and an opposition to a total break with the authoritarian regime. In fact, like it did not totally break away from France after its independence (in contrast to Algeria), Tunisia seems to not have totally broken away from the political ethos of Ben Ali's regime. The smooth and conflict-averse transition certainly explains its successful democratisation but could also limit the extent of the revolution.

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[24] Speculating on "what the people want" is not the purpose here. It has however regularly been noted in the literature that the neoliberal economic policy was an important point of contention which has remained as it was.

[25] The RCD, founded in 1988 to succeed to the neo-Destour party, was Ben Ali's party during his rule.

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Under Ben Ali, national unity was deemed paramount and a prerequisite for stability and development (Sadiki, 2002). National unity meant cohesion around the ruler and exclusion of those promoting a different identity and a different way of being Tunisians – mainly the Islamists but also the secular human rights advocates. The unity of the nation was part of Ben Ali's discourse. Similarly, the literature often considers that a country will democratise more easily if the polarisations and oppositions within it are minimal (Sadiki, 2002). However, concealing the actual political polarisation would impede the emergence of a pluralist democracy in favour of a shallower version of democracy (Reynaert, 2011). Unity and stability were supposed to go hand in hand. However, democracy should, more than concealing differences, include them and give a voice to all citizens. Among Dahl's criteria of democracy, the inclusion and participation of all citizens in the exercise of power are some of the most important. Yet, they could fail to be fulfilled when unity and stability are viewed with such priority. As it was useful to keep the country from falling into chaos after the revolution, the emphasis on political unity has remained. The 2016 Pact of Carthage, that aimed at creating a government of national union, is a significant example of the continued emphasis on unity and stability as necessary features to govern Tunisia. The chosen solution to the political issues was nation unity. Whether it was indeed the right solution for the issues at stake is not the point here. It should only be stressed that national unity and stability remain a solution when need be. Hecan has also argued that the post-2011 Tunisian politics have been characterized by "moderation and power-sharing" (Hecan, 2016, p.12). As a matter of fact, this experience shows that indeed the ideas of reformism are still relevant.

Since the revolution, three 5-years plans have been enacted. The second one, the 2016-2020 development plan, takes place after the revolutionary enthusiasm mostly faded away but still aims at democratically reforming the country (République Tunisienne, 2016[26]). Some elements may be highlighted to show the continuity with the previous period. The reform of the "Public-Private Partnership" aims at giving more advantages to the private sector whereas Hanieh has argued that this had been precisely the way to privatize infrastructure in the MENA Region, which has led to large economic inequalities (Hanieh, 2013). The revolutionary hope of a change of economic policy seems to have waned. Moreover, most of the projects of

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[26] The 2016-2020 development plan being only available in Arabic, the only document that can be used is an official Powerpoint presentation of the plan in French.

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infrastructure are located in the coastal regions. The geographical inequalities may thus persist if no concrete action is undertaken.

Furthermore, the human rights advocacy NGO Human Rights Watch declared in 2020 that many reforms that could have been undertaken have not taken place (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Though the country has undoubtedly progressed since 2011, human rights reforms also allegedly take more time than they could. These elements explain why even the European Court of Auditors has assessed the pace of reforms in Tunisia as 'too slow' (European Court of Auditors, 2017, p.25). The pace of reforms is slow because stalled; the final goal indeed may be less revolutionary than often thought.

However, it cannot be said that the persistence of the previous way of legitimising power and policies is entirely imputable to the Tunisian leadership. After the uprisings, the Tunisian economy dramatically deteriorated. Tourism and foreign investment decreased substantially. As a result, the Tunisian government struck a deal with the IMF in order to obtain loan of $1.74 billion in 2013 (Hecan, 2016, p.10)[27]. This agreement contained requirements for economic reforms demanded by the IMF. These made sure to maintained Tunisia path of the neoliberal economic policy implemented already under Ben Ali. The persistence of certain policies is then also an demand from the international community which generally had good relations with Ben Ali's regime.

More recently, Tunisia also held negotiations on a trade agreement with the European Union. In December 2018, during the third round of negotiation with the EU in order to conclude a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), the Tunisian negotiators have "stressed the importance of the DCFTA as tool to accelerate the reforms and as a legal instrument for the concretisation of the objectives of the privileged partnership between the Tunisia and the EU." (Commission Européenne & Tunisie, 2019, p.2). This shows that even at the last moment studied in this paper (right before the pandemic), 'reforming Tunisia' was still main objective of the Tunisian leadership. And still, it meant trying to be as close as possible to the EU politically, economically and ideologically.

In conclusion, it appears that reforming Tunisia has remained a decisive goal of political action in Tunisia. During Ben Ali's rule reforms aimed at achieving modernity and economic

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[27] It may also be noted that the posture of political moderation plays in favour of Tunisia when it deals with external actors, such as the EU or the IMF.

prosperity. After the revolution, reforms have been intended to achieve democracy. During both periods, Tunisia wanted good relations with the West. Therefore, political action before and after the revolution draws its inspiration from the reformist discourse.

It should be clear that this section does not intend to say that the persistence of the reformist ethos is necessarily a problem. Some of its components – stability and moderation for instance – have certainly helped the country avoiding another authoritarian regime. Defending modernisation and openness to the West can also push towards democratisation as a way to be closer to the West which usually represents modernity. Reformism may even have been beneficial to avoid an Egypt-like scenario where another dictator emerged. However, as argued, reformism is most likely to enable and facilitate the emergence of an imperfect version of democracy rather than the ideal 'high-quality' democracy hoped by revolutionary protesters.

c) Democratisation or securitisation?

This subsection intends to discuss the competition between democracy and human rights promotion on one hand and security on the other hand. The section also paves the way for the next chapter focussing on EU policy towards the MENA region and particularly towards Tunisia.

First, it should be stressed that security and democracy are not necessarily opposed. Only in some instances is this opposition constructed. It is usually more a question of priority which often stem from the idea that security is a precondition for the democracy to function. The assumption that security is a 'precondition' for democracy has, however, not been empirically proved. The opposite relationship has sometimes also been constructed: democracies are considered more peaceful, therefore promoting democracy means also promoting security in the long-term. This approach sees democracy as a means to another end and not only as an end in itself (Powel, 2009, p.198).

In its review of the ENP in 2015[28], the EU took position on this relationship by stressing that "The EU's own stability is built on democracy […] and the new ENP will take stabilisation as its main political priority in this mandate" (European Commission & High Representative, 2015, p.2). This rhetoric sees democracy as the prerequisite for or at least an element of stability. However, the priority is clearly expressed to be the stabilisation of the region. Knowing the

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[28] More analysis on the European Neighbourhood Policy and its review are provided in the next chapter.

history of conflict between these two goals, it is evident that the possibility that "all good things go together" eventually depends on the context (Grimm & Leininger, 2012). Moreover, it should be stressed that this way of conceiving the relationship should be put in the context of the 2015 post-uprisings review of the ENP: promoting stability first had already proved to be inefficient to obtain democracy. Here, although stability is the overarching goal, democracy is a condition of it and therefore could theoretically be promoted as such, without having to wait for a stable regime. Yet, it did not happen this way. Instead, the review of the ENP was criticized by human rights associations as being a step back rather than forwards for human rights' protection (Euro-Med Rights, 2015).

In MENA countries, democratisation and the opening of the political space has not always been supported by external actors because of security concerns. Indeed, the fear that it would give more power and legitimacy (through elections for instance) to Islamist parties was crucial. Islamist parties were deemed to be both the potential winner of a political opening and the source of insecurity in the region. In Tunisia, the first assumption at least was proved true; the second remain controversial. Ennahda won the first post-Ben Ali elections and governed democratically in a coalition government. However, its links with more extremist movements as well as its possible involvement in the assassinations of leftist politicians could also mean that the second assumption is at least partially true. In the region, the Tunisian case is peculiar since the local Islamist party is uncommonly playing by and supporting the democratic rules. For that reason, the relative success of the opening to Ennahda cannot be used to draw regional conclusions.

During the reign of Ben Ali, Ennahda was regarded as a potentially dangerous Islamist party like the others in the region and was therefore relegated to the fringes of the political space. It was considered dangerous, as stated, for the Tunisian identity and also for security reasons. Ben Ali's regime compared Ennahda with violent Islamist parties in the MENA region to frame it as a danger for security and stability in the country. Moreover, the widespread fear of Islamism in Europe made the complete rejection of the Islamists acceptable although they constituted the largest organised opposition to Ben Ali, as in many other MENA countries (Van Hüllen, 2015, p.148). Defending stability first and foremost meant rejecting Islamists which in turn rendered any meaningful political pluralism impossible.

In this situation, stability and security seem to have been considered even more important European values than democracy. This is because it is deemed that a "good democracy" –

namely a European-style one – requires stability to thrive. Therefore, the target-country of EU policies should be politically stable as a pre-condition of democratisation. An authoritarian regime fighting alleged threats to stability, especially Islamist movements, could then be well-considered as it paradoxically works towards providing the requirement for future democratisation. Playing on this argument, Ben Ali's regime could present itself as acting sufficiently according to EU's desires and consequently receive the much-needed EU funding. This situation was not without ambiguity as the path towards democracy could then comprise the elimination of the potentially largest opposition movement. Democracy and security[29] may then be considered by some as conflicting objectives, one impeding the realisation of the other (Grimm & Leininger, 2012). This question of conflicting objectives is relevant for the external democracy promoters but also for the local actors and decision-makers faced with such dilemmas. In the Tunisian case, a conflict in priorities can be identified – security and stability or democratic progress? – and possibly a conflict of norms regarding what is understood by democracy.

The European Commission itself opposes this conflict and instead considers that "security and respect for fundamental rights are not conflicting aims, but consistent and complementary" (European Commission, 2020a, p.1). It can be argued that the EU is only defending its practice, what it already does, but it does not provide a convincing argument. The history of European democracy promotion does not show consistency nor complementarity between security and respect for human rights.

It should then be stressed that the EU does not in fact promote a local version of democracy[30]. Instead, it promotes its own secular and liberal democracy. It is, according to Powel, reminiscent of the colonial "*mission civilisatrice*"[31] which emphasized the benefits of extending European ideas to the non-European world (Powel, 2009, p.199). The modern-day version of the reformist discourse was an effective instrument in this regard: it was systematically contemporaneous European ideas that it legitimised. Even after the fall of Ben Ali, European priorities still rank high in the Tunisian political agenda. After the 2015 terrorist attacks on

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[29] For a definition of democracy, the reader may refer to the development in the second chapter of this dissertation. Security is here merely considered as the 'protection against violent acts'.

[30] What would be the specificities of the Tunisian version of democracy is uncertain but it seems at least that it would be more religiously-oriented than the Western democracies (see subsection 2) a) i.).

[31] The French expression "*mission civilisatrice*" can be translated into: 'civilising mission'.

Tunisian soil, the government has intensified its fight against terrorism to the point that it may put Tunisia's democratisation at risk (Günay & Sommavilla, 2020). This prioritisation is in line with the Western fight against terrorism and Islamism but may be at odds with human rights and democratic liberties. Moreover, the EU seems to consider that security is best secured through stability which entail "cooperation with the incumbent regimes regardless of their character" (Durac, 2018, p.104). On the other hand, democratisation is a destabilizing factor. This helps understanding what the priority of the EU in the region seems to be. Though support for the current Tunisian regime is certainly not the same of supporting the previous regime, it matters that the EU does not support it in order to help it democratise but more pragmatically to create a more secure neighbourhood for itself. As a matter of fact, this focus could entail a relegitimization of the abhorred security apparatus of the former regime and provide arguments for a halt on the path towards democratic consolidation.

Surveys show that since 2011, the commitment to democracy has decreased among Tunisian citizens (Cammett, Diwan & Vartanova, 2020). This has been caused by the disappointing reality of democracy as it unfolded in the country. The sentiment of insecurity increased in the years after the revolution which contributed to the deterioration of the support for democracy. Together, these elements may clearly facilitate the renewed prioritisation of security over democracy. It should be explicit however that the renewed insecurity is a constructed narrative subject to media and elite framing.

Democratisation on one hand and stability and security on the other hand have a complicated and changing relationship. On some instances, stability was regarded as a goal to attain prior to any attempt to democratise the authoritarian regime. On others, it was democracy which was seen as a component of a stable regime. Whether the goal of a policy is democracy or stability modifies this conceptual relationship. On each instance, one could wonder whether democracy is promoted for itself or, pragmatically, in order to obtain a stable society. In the second case, it is easily understandable that democratisation can be jeopardised if it is proved that it does not provide stability, or not enough. One should pay attention to which of these is the priority and which is conceptually regarded as a precondition of the other.

On the short-term at least, supporting stability first potentially means discarding democracy. Moreover, if stability is deemed to be a pre-requirement for democracy, it provides an argument to support a stable regime that fights instability or perceived instability. European support to Ben Ali's regime could be justified as the support for a stable regime fighting against Islamist's

instability. Though the democratic reforms were practically inexistent, Ben Ali's security and counter-terrorism measures could be seen as putting his regime on a slow democratic path. It was one of the reformist myth sustaining his regime.

6. EU foreign policy towards the MENA: a promotion of democratisation reforms?

It is often considered that "the international dimension matters in determining the development of domestic politics in authoritarian regimes" (Durac & Cavatorta, 2009, p.4). For that reason, the policies of the European Union towards its southern neighbourhood matter when studying MENA politics as a whole or particularly the Tunisian democratisation. In such a process, the international actors may have a role of facilitator as the EU intends to have. Indeed, according to the article 21 of the Treaty on European Union, its foreign policy is supposed to be based on the promotion of democratic values and human rights. Whether this is really the main European concern is discussed in this chapter. In that regard, it will be argued that the EU promotes itself as democracy rather than an abstract version of 'democracy' or even a local version of democracy. Also, democracy itself does not always seem to be the main concern of the democracy promotion policy.

Discussing first the EU's regional policies before going into the details of its relations with Tunisia is also necessary because, as Powel put it "the EU does not have a stand-alone democracy promotion policy in Tunisia. Rather, Tunisia is included in wider multilateral EU policy initiatives" (Powel, 2009, p.195). Understanding EU's wider policy framework is a prerequisite to study its policy towards Tunisia.

a) The Middle East and North Africa in EU policies

i. Overview of EU's regional policies

The aim here is to shortly describe EU region building policies and its main political goals related to its Southern neighbourhood. This will help understanding policies towards Tunisia as well as Tunisian politics in a broader context. After some short considerations on the Mediterranean 'region', this section shall provide an overview of the policies of the EU towards the Southern part of the Mediterranean Sea. It can already be noted that according to many scholars, the EU neighbourhood policy regardless of its changing and conflicting objectives has consistently failed (Henökl & Stemberger, 2016, p.229). The successes in the Eastern neighbourhood of the EU are due to its enlargement policy rather than its neighbourhood policy; notwithstanding the fact that the local actors there were, as always, the drivers of change, not the EU which acted as facilitator.

Although the Mediterranean has been an area of trade and cultural exchange for a very long time, regional political cooperation only started with the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, the North-South fracture in the Mediterranean did not exist as it does today. Most countries in the South or the North alike were allied to the Western side against the soviet bloc (Cavatorta, 2018). The divide between a Southern shore characterized by authoritarianism and economic hardship and a European North characterized by democracy and economic prosperity really emerged with the end of the Cold War. Only then, the EU genuinely manifested its ambition to be a herald of democracy and human rights worldwide. These were not foreign policy priorities during the Cold War. The end of the Cold War created a new impetus for a European foreign policy rhetorically centred on democracy and human rights. Prior to the EMP, the European Community's initiatives, such as the 'Global Mediterranean Policy' were characterized by an emphasis on economic issues (Khalifa Isaac & Esmat Kares, 2017).

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) signed 1995 is generally regarded as the start of the North-South relationship. It was notably championed by Spain and Portugal, newly members of the EU (since 1986). The Barcelona Declaration of the Euro-Mediterranean Conference of 1995 marks the start of this so-called Barcelona process which represented an ambitious and multilateral approach to Euro-Mediterranean relations. The sheer fact that the EU decided to call the initiative a "Mediterranean" one and not an initiative directed to "the broader Middle East" or the 'MENA region' shows that it intended to be an inclusive endeavour encompassing also the European side (Youngs, 2018, p.73). It was to be a regional process, not only a foreign policy. In the EMP, it was made clear for the first time that democracy and human rights were to be achieved in the countries South of the Mediterranean as well. To implement the EMP, the EU signed a series of association agreements with MENA countries. That with Tunisia was signed already in 1995.

The approach of the EMP was decidedly not to create division and controversies. It considered instead that partnerships and dialogues with governments would favour human rights and democracy. In 2001, the Commission made this position clear by stressing that "the most effective way of achieving change is therefore a positive and constructive partnership with governments, based on dialogue, support and encouragement" (European Commission, 2001, p.8). Eventually, avoiding controversies in favour of cooperation did allow for partnerships with MENA countries but did no bring democratisation.

However, the limitations of the EMP were serious. Significantly, the strategy of economic liberalisation and integration of markets did not bring the security, political and modernising effects that it did previously in Europe. Regardless of its good results in providing links for low-politics actors (NGOs, municipalities, journalists, etc.), the EMP is considered disappointing by many analysts and its initial focus was distorted by the securitisation of the North-South relationship (Youngs, 2018, p.74).

As a part of the Barcelona Process, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was launched in 2008 and set up in 2010 as a secretariat focussing on technocratic development projects (UfM website). It intentionally tries to avoid political and controversial issues and merely foster cooperation among local actors in the Mediterranean. This depoliticizing focus may be, as Fontana has argued, contributing to promoting stability as the goal of EU in the region (Fontana, 2014, p.10). After the Arab uprisings, the approach of the UfM was recognised to having been unsatisfactory even by the Commission (European Commission & High Representative, 2011, p.11). It is deemed that its unpolitical character indeed did not help foster peace and prosperity in the region.

After 9/11, the issue of security gained more prominence than ever while democracy and human rights were, at least officially, not forgotten. In reaction to the new environment and to its recent enlargement, the EU devised the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004. The ENP is focussed both on the Eastern neighbourhood and the Southern one. Nevertheless, during the 2000s, the EU paid relatively little attention to its Southern neighbourhood in order to deal with, first, its Eastern enlargement, then with its own institutional and economic crises.

The ENP was developed as an alternative to EU enlargement to create a 'ring of friends' east and south of the EU (Del Sarto & Schumacher, 2011, p.933). It intended to propose to its neighbours 'all but membership'. Given that the prospect of EU membership was EU's best incentive to promote reforms in its eastern neighbourhood, the prospective results were more limited. However, the benefits of cooperation were still sizeable and countries south of the Mediterranean did participate although in a limited manner in some fields such as the field of democracy and human rights (Del Sarto & Schumacher, 2011, p.934).

The period following the Arab uprisings of 2011 is, according to Youngs (2018), the third phase of the relationship. To some extent, the uprisings pushed the EMP to return to its original spirit of idealist cooperation and region-building. Indeed, even the European Commission, through its commissioner for enlargement and neighbourhood, acknowledged that it "fell prey to the

assumption that authoritarian regimes were a guarantee of stability in the region" (Füle, 2011, p.2). The Commission itself accepted that its policy towards its southern neighbourhood was deeply misguided and needed an overhaul. This would come first with the "Partnership for democracy and shared prosperity with the southern Mediterranean" (European Commission & High Representative, 2011). This communication made clear that the approach must be "differentiated" and that all countries have different needs. This new approach is presented as surely distinct from the previous described by some as "our size fits all" approach (Bicchi, 2006). This renewed Partnership intended to reframe the ENP and paved the way for the more comprehensive 2015 review of the ENP. The new differentiation of EU policies towards the MENA countries was supposed to be an answer to the uprisings and an adaptation to the changing situation in each country.

The 2015 review of the ENP continues this trend and presents the new ENP in a more modest way, acknowledging that "not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards" (European Commission & High Representative, 2015, p.2). Differentiation in EU policies is clearer than ever. The political situation of each country also took more and more different paths. For that reason, local ownership of the partnership with each country is to be promoted. For example, the policy towards Tunisia or towards Syria had to be starkly different as one country held democratic elections and enacted a new constitution while the other was stranded in civil war. This differentiation was characterized by the principle "more for more" meaning that economic integration, mobility of people and greater EU financial assistance were dependent on "political reforms and on the respect of shared universal values" (European Commission & High Representative, 2012, p.3). In other words, local reforms, since 2011, are supposed to be the condition for greater European support. This European support can be divided in three heading: money, mobility and market, which are the three kinds of incentives proposed by the EU. Initially, these conditional reforms were mainly concerned with democracy and "shared values", or at least it was announced like that.

The "more for more" approach is actually not so new, the novelty here is that this approach is "backed by a 'less for less' when reforms are not achieved" (Fontana, 2014, p.13). This criticism of Europe's reaction may go even further with Federica Bicchi who argued not only that "there is nothing really new in these communications" but also that the actual response was "less of the same" because the actual policy, besides the discourse, did not change while the environment worsened and the needs of the MENA countries increased (Bicchi, 2014). Still, many analysts do consider that EU's declarations after the uprisings were a watershed in its

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Mediterranean policy, for the best or the worst. Yet, if it was a watershed, it was more in the declarations than in the concrete actions.

Whilst most direct post-uprisings documents (in 2011) emphasized that the EU would work to support the "consolidation of the democratic process", the review of the ENP came back to more pragmatic goals. After realising that the uprisings were not unambiguously leading the Arab states towards the EU, it stressed once again the importance of stability and security, even if doing so while adding that "the causes of instability often lie outside the security domain alone." (European Commission & High Representative, 2015, p.3). To illustrate this focus, one can note that the word "democracy" (10 occurrences) does not occur as often in the text of the revised ENP as words such as "security" (48 occurrences) or stability (12 occurrences; 20 if including "stabilisation"). Theoretically, this renewed focussed on stability could have meant a re-inversion of the relationship between stability and democracy with stability considered once again a condition of democracy. This cannot however be said anymore after the uprisings. Therefore, stabilisation is seen as the "main political priority" and "most urgent challenge". Democracy is pragmatically seen as one of the elements than can be beneficial to stability.

The return of the issue of security also occurred because of security concerns in Europe itself or fears that the Arab instability would have consequences in Europe. The reasons for concern include the so-called migration crisis in Europe, the violent conflict in Syria and Libya, the rise of the Islamic State and the terrorist attacks in Paris. Together, these concerns were crucial in prompting once again the securitisation of the North-South relationship that can be observed in the revised ENP.

When referring later to "EU Mediterranean policy," it is this aforementioned set of different evolving – arguably in three phases – EU policies dealing, under the frameworks of the EMP, UfM, ENP and revised ENP, with the perceived problems of the MENA that is referred to. This way of dealing with the perceived issues of the MENA has been argued to be Eurocentric because of how it 'unreflexively' promotes Europe's solutions and ideas to the rest of the world as if they were universal solutions applicable everywhere (Powel, 2009; Bicchi, 2006).

ii.   The EU-Tunisia relationship

Following the 1995 Barcelona Conference, Tunisia signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 1995. It was ratified by all EU members and by Tunisia (through its national Assembly) in 1998 and still constitutes the legal basis for the EU-Tunisia relationship. For the first time, this agreement was not only about economics. It may be noted that it highlighted the "respect

of democratic principles and of human rights" already in its second article. A political dialogue to contribute to the "prosperity, stability and security of the Mediterranean region" is also established (art.3). One should however not be mistaken; the main objectives of the association agreement are economic. It aims at reinforcing privatisation, developing business-friendly institutions and enhancing the role of the private sector (Cassarino, 1999). In relation to the EU, it also lowers the import barriers which will have the effects of decreasing the fiscal revenue and increasing the vulnerability of the Tunisian economy to European competition (Cassarino, 1999). This association agreement was qualified as a neoliberal one because of the market-centred policies and reconfiguration of the role of the state that it established (Hanieh, 2013).

One of its significant benefit is that it was supposed to "enhance the credibility of the [Tunisian] reforms" and therefore increase the flow of investments to Tunisia (Cassarino, 1999). The importance given to the "credibility of the reform program" should remind one of the prevailing confusions, in Tunisia, between the economic reality and the discourse on the state of the economy (Hibou *et. al.*, 2011). There was under Ben Ali a discourse on the economic miracle of Tunisia, which was not supported by economic facts and results but rather by the consistent implementation of reform programs going in the direction wanted by Western partners. This implementation of reforms as well as a good level of growth could obscure other aspects of the politics and economics of the country. Even more so given that it was believed that economic liberalisation would eventually lead to political liberalisation. These beliefs, in addition to the security dimension discussed later, led the EU to support the Tunisian regime and to postulate that it would eventually democratise.

On the Tunisian side, the 1995 association agreement and the structural reform program it entailed was the cause for a renewal of the reformist discourse. Ben Ali intended to use the program to secure the "alliance between economic growth and social stability" (quoted by Cassarino, 1999, p.66). A country in good economic health is a country where stability should be preserved. The discourse of economic reforms was thus presented as another argument for political and social stability. The economic reforms launched under the auspices of the European Union could show Ben Ali's voluntarism in reforming the country, which under the reformist ethos provided legitimacy to his regime.

As has been mentioned before, the European Union is not a unitary actor. Some of its institutions push for different policy orientations. In this case, the European Parliament did not unconditionally accept that political liberalisation would naturally follow economic

liberalisation, or, at least, that waiting was not sufficient. The Parliament, consistent with its historical focus on human rights, issued a resolution in 2005 to call for the respect of human rights and democracy in Tunisia. In that resolution, the European Parliament was explicit on the fact that liberties and human rights were undoubtedly not respected in Ben Ali's Tunisia even if it "welcomes economic and social progress made in Tunisia" (European Parliament, 2005). Still, according to the Parliament, this was not enough which is why it repeatedly stated, in that 2005 resolution and elsewhere, that the article 2 of the Association Agreement between the EU and Tunisia should be respected and used as a legal basis to pressure the Tunisian regime to respect human rights. However, the powers of the Parliament did not allow it to have actions going further than this resolution; it was still powerless on matters of foreign policy.

Moreover, besides this kind of parliamentary resolution, the total disregard by the Tunisian regime for the "respect of democratic principles and human rights" stated in the second article of the treaty never impacted the relationship in a truly meaningful way. The EU as a whole would have preferred if Tunisia respected these principles, but the Commission did not seem to deem them important enough to jeopardise the relationship which was quite extensive on economic and security issues.

By all means, this should have changed after the uprisings of 2011 and the toppling of Ben Ali. Therefore, the first European declarations after the uprising, as already mentioned, announced changes in the relationship in favour of a bigger focus on democracy and human rights. The first Tunisian post-revolution transition government also suggested changes in its foreign policy. Yet, Zardo argues that the redefinition of Tunisian foreign policy – however shallow it may be considered – did not affect its considerable ties with the EU (Zardo, 2020, p.59). The EU remained an important partner and even increased its aid to Tunisia. The post-revolution Tunisia also received the status of 'privileged partner' of the EU in 2012, a way for the EU to further legitimise the new regime.

Another element that did not change before and after the revolution is the criminalisation of migration and its importance in EU's policy towards its southern neighbourhood (Badalic, 2019). Migration, framed as a security concern by the EU, predates the Arab Uprisings and has been a defining factor of European Mediterranean policy since the 1990s (Wolff & Hadj-Abdou, 2018). In the case of Tunisia, irregular migration was seen as a potential terrorist threat especially after the escalation of the war in Libya (Badalic, 2019, p.88). The importance of migration for the EU and its framing as a security concern on both shores of the Mediterranean

means that the post-revolutionary Tunisian governments maintained the issue of security high on the agenda. This continuity is surprising as the new leadership of Tunisia was, during Ben Ali's rule, critical of his policies and the relationship with the EU. Still, the new political actors did not redefine the priorities in the relationship with the EU and "continued to operate through an existing institutionalised framework within which traditional security cooperation patterns dominated" (Zardo & Cavatorta, 2019, p.685). Security remains the dominant issue and institutionalisation remains the solution proposed. Thus, it is arguable that changes in the relationship have been mainly cosmetical because limited on declarations of good faith.

The trade imbalance between Tunisia and EU has also remained significant through time. While the EU is Tunisia's largest trade partner and accounted, in 2020, for 74.2% of its exports and 49.9% of its imports (Website of the Ministère du commerce)[32], Tunisia is the EU's 35th trade partner and only accounts for 0.5% of its worldwide trade (European Commission website). This is not peculiar to Tunisia; the MENA region has little intraregional trade and mostly trades with the EU or other international partners. This serious trade imbalance maintains the dependence of Tunisia towards the EU; dependence that the EU may use to safeguard its political priorities. This advantage has scarcely if ever been used to push Tunisia towards more democracy.

b) EU's promotion of democracy and human rights in Tunisia

The structure and evolution of EU's promotion of democracy and human rights in Tunisia and more generally in the MENA region follows the same pattern as its overall Mediterranean policy. It has evolved with the EMP, ENP and ENP review. Instead of coming back to what has already been said, this section will focus on the objectives of the EU's promotion of human rights and democracy. These should be observed while keeping in mind the Tunisian reformist discourse which facilitates the achievement of certain objectives over others.

It has already been stated that the literature has repeatedly painted a bleak picture of the EU's Mediterranean policy. The promotion of democracy and human rights being one of the goals of this policy, it does not break away from the aforementioned assessment. After the Arab Spring, the EU reasserted the importance of promoting democracy and human rights in the MENA region. The actual shift – or lack thereof – of importance given to democracy promotion has

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[32] On its website page dedicated to trade with Tunisia, the EU gives slightly different numbers: 70.9% of Tunisia's exports went to the EU in 2020 and 48.3% of Tunisia's imports came from the EU.

already been discussed above, what needs to be stressed in this section is the meaning of democracy promotion.

Explicitly or not, the EU often considered that economic liberalisation would, in the long run, lead to political liberalisation. In addition to considering stability as a precondition of democracy, this other assumption could pave the way for a policy of promoting democracy in which political liberalisation and democracy itself are not the immediate priority of democracy promotion. Still, as has been said in the second chapter, political liberalisation is necessary for actual democratisation to occur. A consolidated democracy must provide to its citizens the opportunities described by Dahl (see chapter 1).

The whole framework of the relations between the EU and its Southern neighbourhood was based on cooperation instead of confrontation (Van Hüllen, 2015, p.147). Cooperation between the Northern and the Southern shores of the Mediterranean included trade, security, energy, movement of people and capital, human rights, democracy and the rule of law, among others. Most of the priorities have not changed after 2011 as is shown by the 2015 ENP EU/Tunisia Action Plan (EEAS, 2015). Unsurprisingly, cooperation with authoritarian regimes designed to push them to democratise and liberalise did not bear fruits. Cooperation to attain top-down changes in favour of democracy and human rights failed. Moreover, the relationships being based on cooperation with authoritarian regimes, the EU ended up entangled with them on the eve of the 2011 uprisings. EU's promotion of democracy before 2011 was not only inefficient by not prioritising immediate democratisation, but it also antagonised the EU in the eyes of the protesters which soon after led governments. It is only after the 2011 revolution that support for democracy became one of the important priority areas. Yet, the most EU funded area before and after the revolution remained the economy (European Court of Auditors, 2017).

For these reasons, the European Union issued its "new response to a changing neighbourhood" (European Commission & High Representative, 2011). With that communication, it hoped to provide a new approach supposed to "provide greater support to partners engaged in building deep democracy". 'Deep and sustainable democracy' is actually another expression for what the literature has called a 'consolidated democracy'. The EU seems to have in mind the transition paradigm in which the democratic consolidation is the destination. This paradigm has already been criticized above as the road towards democratisation often takes many more detours than expected by this approach. So, the declared goal of the EU for MENA countries and Tunisia in particular is democratic consolidation with a definition of democracy taken from

the liberal tradition, thus including an emphasis on elections, freedoms and the rule of law. That policy thus aimed at helping Tunisia to politically liberalise, after the economic liberalisation, itself also supported by the EU, that took place during Ben Ali's regime. The previous economic liberalisation did not help democratisation and the continuous insistence on economic issues – as can be seen in the emphasis on money, market, mobility in the "more for more" approach – makes one wonder whether a shift truly occurred. Putting aside the announcement of a renovated approach and the promotion of 'deep democracy', the EU has been criticized for supporting, in fact, only the model of a 'polyarchy' in the region (Sepos, 2018). The significant continuity in the policy renders the argument compelling.

Besides defining the EU-Tunisia relationship as a 'privileged partnership', the 2013-2017 Action Plan of the EU brings clarity to the kind of democracy promoted by the EU. It seems that the EU defines democracy according to its domestic polity (see also chapter 2 B) iv.). There are three "key elements of the privileged partnership between the European Union and Tunisia" (European Commission & High Representative, 2014, p.6). The first is the usual stress laid on political cooperation. The importance of cooperation for the EU resisted the uprisings because it corresponds to how the EU sees itself: as a peaceful international actor bent on upholding the international rules and compromising instead of confronting. More interestingly, the second key element is the "Greater social and economic integration with the European Union" (European Commission & High Representative, 2014, p.6). This heading emphasises "regulatory harmonisation" through adoption by Tunisia of the European *acquis communautaire*. More than promoting the adoption by Tunisia of its own version of democracy, it demands the adoption of its regulatory practices. Coming back to the hypothesis of 'democratic peace' evoked above, the demand of regulatory approximation can be seen as based on the assumption that similar polities, particularly when oriented towards compromise and peaceful conflict-resolution, are peaceful between themselves and have a high degree of political and economic interdependence. Interdependence is here clearly facilitated by the regulatory approximation as it aims at simplifying economic relations. Regulatory approximation as part of democracy promotion makes it clear that more than defining democracy as itself, the EU literally promotes itself – its model of democracy and its norms – as the goal of a successful democratic transition. More than pushing Tunisia in EU's arms, EU's democracy promotion pushes Tunisia to be like itself.

The third key element of the 'privileged partnership' is a "A closer partnership between peoples". Under this heading are found concerns for direct cooperation with people and

organisations in Tunisia. The enactment of a 'Mobility Partnership' aims at solving issues of "migration, mobility and security". This element should also have helped the EU to resolve one of the old issues of its Mediterranean policy: the actual lack of local ownership of the relationship (Zardo, 2020, p.28). Indeed, after the Arab uprisings, the EU officially attempted to promote and support democracy with a bottom-up strategy instead of the previous top-down one. The cooperation and dialogue between the EU and CSOs in Tunisia on that matter actually seems to not correspond to EU's declared wishes (see also European Commission & High Representative, 2016, p.6). Indeed, some of the most prominent Tunisian CSOs consider instead that, when the EU negotiated the 'Mobility Partnership' with Tunisia, it "did not involve civil society actors" (Euro-Med Rights, 2014). The role of these organisations is often considered to be monitoring and checking the actions of the government. On this issue, the petitioners are worried about the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and do not consider to be listened to. Local ownership of the EU-Tunisia relationship still seems missing. One cannot miss the gap between EU's declarations about its democracy promotion and how local actors actually view their inclusion in the democratic process. It promotes a model of democracy in which civil society is paramount while not actually involving them enough (in their eyes at least). The lack of consideration for local actors may again be explained by the EU's certainty that its model is the best. Powel even considers this arrogance as the remains of a colonialist mindset (Powel, 2009).

In addition to these remarks, the European Court of Auditors assessed that the priorities set in this "Action Plan for 2013-2017" were too numerous even with the increase of funding (European Court of Auditors, 2017). The consequence of this lack of focus has been a "dilution of the potential impact". Thus, even the efficiency of the EU assistance is disputed, not only its motivations and functioning.

As this section has shown, the European promotion of democracy has had different faces which makes it harder to define it. The place given to security or economic relations is noteworthy as it remains important throughout the years. Promoting democracy through cooperation with the regimes is also a recurrent characteristic of that policy. The efficiency of cooperation to promote democracy depends largely on the recipient country. Tunisia before 2011 cooperated with the EU but avoided the elements concerning democracy and human rights. Post-revolutionary Tunisia is obviously more prone to accept democracy and human rights measures. The question of what measures are necessary to democratise according to the EU should be unveiled. It seems indeed that, to European eyes, democratising means not being governed by "the people" but

also being economically and politically close to the EU. Going further, democratisation is supposed to entail resembling more and more to the EU. However, when faced with an actual case of negotiating with Tunisia, the EU may not entirely act according to its stated principles. The tension within the EU's external policy between values and interests is clearly present when it comes to the promotion of democracy.

The EU has recently modified this approach in reaction to the covid-19 pandemic. The "Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. A New Agenda for the Mediterranean" issued in February 2021 states that "Human development, good governance and the rule of law" is its first goal (European Commission & high representative, 2021). This contains a new and significant concern for health. Other concerns such as "digital transition" or "green transition" are new or at least more emphasised than ever before. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that this document was issued in the wake of an important worldwide shock: the covid-19 pandemic. After the Arab uprisings of 2011, the policies were also supposed to be renewed and modified. Previous concern however rapidly came back. Continuity has been the norm and although nothing can be said for certain it is likely that continuity will still characterise EU Mediterranean policies, provided some cosmetic changes. Therefore, one may wonder not if but *when* it will, again, be business as usual after the pandemic.

c) The security aspect in EU's relations to Tunisia and in the promotion of democracy

As previous sections have argued, security and stability are paramount concerns in the Mediterranean relations at large and also more specifically and insidiously in the democracy promotion policy. Although the focus is mainly on the security *discourse*, the previous and following developments should not be taken as minimizing the very real security issues. Indeed, the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution saw a civil war in the neighbouring Libya, new population movements (framed as a security concern) and the resurgence of Salafism in Tunisia. Therefore, the fact that 'insecurity' is a constructed narrative does not mean that the object of the discourse is pure fiction. It means instead that the discourse modifies the way the object is seen. Generally, it simplifies it. For instance, the issue of migration seen only through the prism of security is oversimplified. Securitisation is such a discourse that frames its object.

After the fall of Ben Ali, Tunisia experienced an "atmosphere of absolute freedom" in which a Salafist movement, Ansar al-Sharia, could initially thrive undisturbed (Cavatorta, 2015b,

p.771). In August 2013, the group was eventually recognised as a terrorist organisation which marked the end of a period of unrestricted pluralism and freedom. The possibility to have a radical militant jihadist movement in Tunisia remains substantial. This in addition to the assassination of two left-wing politicians in 2013 and the terrorist attacks of 2015 makes the security issues of Tunisia absolutely genuine. It needs to be remembered that it is not only a question of discourse even if it will be the focus of this section more than the actual security threats.

Historically, European foreign and security policy towards the MENA region was based, though usually not explicitly, on the twofold goal of maintaining security and access to cheap energy resources (Seeberg, 2015, p.41). Some period, such as the start of the EMP and the direct post-2011 uprisings moment saw a bigger emphasis on democracy promotion and region-building. The issue of security initially gained in prominence at the beginning of the 21st century. This is reflected in the European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003, crucial to understand the discourse and practice of the ENP (Fontana, 2016, p.5). The Arab uprisings challenged the importance of security and stability in favour of democracy and human rights. For the reasons stated above but also for reasons specific to Europe, security came back as an essential feature of Mediterranean politics around 2014-2015. The importance of security after 2011 should not downplayed as it is still "strongly implied by the goals and the logic of the policy" (Fontana, 2016, p.6). Therefore, security even when ostensibly put aside retains its significance.

Briefly, it seems that once again the priorities in Mediterranean relations have only been shaken by the events of 2011 but came back in order when the revolutionary excitement cooled down. The remaining of this section is devoted to understanding the approach to security in the relationship between Tunisia and the EU as well as the role of security in the reformist discourse.

As shown by Fontana, the main intended beneficiaries of 'security' in EU discourse are the EU and its citizens (Fontana, 2016, p.7). They benefit from a secure neighbourhood. The security and stability as well as the "democratic transition" in neighbouring countries is seen firstly as a contribution to "EU's own security and prosperity" (European Commission, 2013, p.3). The priority is not the safety of citizens of third countries but preventing a spillover of insecurity and instability into European soil. Such a priority entails that the threats to security are mainly defined, in the Mediterranean framework, according to European standards.

As a result, the two major security concerns are migration and terrorism. The 2003 European Security Strategy saw terrorism as the main threat to EU security and EU livelihoods, while the 2009 report on the ESS saw it as the second most important threat (Council, 2009). Because of the terrorist attacks that occurred in Tunisia and in Europe, radical Islamism is seen by both sides as endangering security. However, the danger is conceived differently on the two shores of the Mediterranean. The party Ennahda, a mainstream Tunisian party since 2011, was considered Islamist and potentially dangerous by Ben Ali's regime and by the EU up to the revolution. After, the radical Islamist group Ansar al-Sharia was tolerated until 2013 while the Islam-oriented conservative party was in power and later remained of importance (Cavatorta, 2015b; Cavatorta & Merone, 2013). It is in particular because of the Islamist and terrorist threats that the Tunisian transition is presented by the European Commission as "vulnerable" (European Commission & High Representative, 2016). When those vulnerabilities materialised with the terrorist attacks of 2015, security came back on the top of the agenda despite the high hopes of democracy of 2014 brought by the adoption of the progressive constitution and the successful organisation of elections.

Migration is seen as the other security issue. But not all agree on that categorisation. In fact, it is the site of intensive discursive struggles whose result will determine whether migration is to be seen as a security issue or as a human right concern. By all means, migration is today a strategic issue in Mediterranean politics (European Union, 2018). This is especially the case for the EU which forcefully attempts to control and regulate migration in the Mediterranean.

To guarantee security, the EU acted as it did with the promotion and support of democracy: by cooperating with the regimes of the target-countries. To better foster security, the stability of the regime is required so that security reforms may be implemented. The disarray following the revolution in addition to the atmosphere of freedom helped the aforementioned security issues to develop. To prevent this from happening again, the EU needs to assist the newly democratic Tunisian state. It assisted Tunisia financially through diverse assistance programs. They also concluded a Mobility Partnership in 2014 in order to tackle migration together. The Privileged Partnership between the EU and Tunisia also includes assistance for security reforms in Tunisia to tackle the issues of (cyber)terrorism, organised crime, human trafficking, etc. By acting this way, the EU intends to guarantee its own security, but it also sees itself as a "security provider" in its neighbourhood (European Commission & High Representative, 2021, p.13). As stated before, providing security elsewhere is firstly aimed at creating a secure neighbourhood for itself. More than a 'ring of friends', the EU wants a secure neighbourhood. Tunisia in particular

is so integrated in the European security networks that Seeberg considers that it "is on its way to becoming an integrated part of the European security community." (Seeberg, 2017, p.107). The cooperation between Tunisia and the EU is particularly extensive on security-related issues at least since the approval of the Nidaa Tounes-led government in February 2015. It is not surprising that this government, less revolutionary than the one before, revived the war against terrorism and destabilisation. This securitisation of Tunisian politics has however "induced the curtailment of democratic liberties and the return of the habits of the national security state of the Ben Ali era" (Günay & Sommavilla, 2020, p.674). Using the reformist emphasis on stability, openness to the West and tunisianity was crucial to justify the securitisation of the process of democratisation. The measures taken to fight the security issues were thus legitimised by using the reformist discourse, the main legitimising tool of the former regime. As expected, the security reforms undertaken after 2011 were supposed to respect and even support human rights and democracy but the fact that their legitimacy comes from the same intellectual tradition as the similar security measures undertaken under Ben Ali makes one wonder whether they will not actually put democratisation in jeopardy.

The securitisation of the relationship thus implies a stress laid especially on the issues of migration and terrorism which the EU hopes to tackle by cooperating with Tunisia. As has been said, the securitisation of the relationship started in the aftermath of 9/11 and, after a break with the Arab uprisings, came back in 2015. In Tunisia, during both those moments, the emphasis on security and stability were sustained by the reformist discourse either under Ben Ali or even after, showing thus an ambiguity in the democratic transition. This securitisation of the Mediterranean political agenda is in line with the reformist discourse but at odds with the global goal of democratisation. This is why, following Panebianco, EU's democracy promotion could be deemed to be merely "an instrumental strategy to pursue regional security" (Panebianco, 2012, p.158). Promoting democracy, in this context, may not even be the central goal of EU's democracy promotion policy. Democracy seems to be promoted only as long as it is considered a necessary step to achieve prosperity, stability and security. Those, instead of the freedoms of the people and representativity of their governments, are arguably the EU's ambitions. Eventually, the difference between the goal(s) and precondition(s) (see chapter 5 b)) appears blurred as well since the declared intention of the EU might actually only be promoted in order to obtain the elements initially proclaimed as its ingredients.

It is necessary to understand the limitations of EU democracy promotion and what it really promotes and intends to see implemented to comprehend EU's actions in Tunisia. Still after

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2011, the country has indeed been the one benefitting the most from the EU reform-rewarding logic (Panebianco, 2012, p.162). It is because it has effectively implemented reforms corresponding to rewards and incentives in the frame EU's promotion of democracy. Those promoted the creation of new institutions, more political and economic freedoms and more ties with the EU[33].

The widespread use of the security narrative during the period of democratisation has impacted the definition of democratisation itself. It created in Tunisia the conception of democracy as a consensual regime opposed to radicals and close to the West. It did so because of the continuous emphasis on stability and security instead of an emphasis on other elements of a democracy. The elements eventually defining democracy in that sense are reformist characteristics. It can be forcibly argued that the democracy the EU promotes – a polyarchy? (see Sepos, 2018) – is in line with the securitisation of the relationship and with the reformist tradition which provides a legitimising argument in favour of a limited version of democracy.

The recent covid-19 pandemic has, like the Arab uprisings before, shaken the policy priorities[34]. The most recent European documents stated repeatedly that human rights and "European values" in general should be respected while ensuring security for European citizens (European commission, 2020a; European commission, 2020b). It is even argued that security "protects fundamental rights and provides the foundation for confidence and dynamism in our economy, our society and our democracy" (European commission, 2020a, p.1). Security is seen as the foundation upon which to build democracy. The goal seems to be democracy and respect for human rights but, as it is the foundation, security might be the priority. A predicament will appear when the respect for human rights will impede, for example, the counter-terrorism policy. A policy will need to be drafted and statements declaring the complementarity of security and human rights will not be enough to appease the antagonism. At that point, if history keeps repeating itself, the choice of security is the most likely.

d) Conclusion: continuity and declaratory shifts in Mediterranean politics

Though the promotion of democratisation reforms is one of the most important declared goals of the EU in the MENA region, it is not always the actual priority of the European policy in the

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[33] For instance, see the 2018 roadmap for priority reforms (Coopération Tunisie-Union européenne, 2018).

[34] The most remarkable change is the apparition of "health" in most documents in 2020 and 2021 as one of the key priorities. It is obviously a consequence of the pandemic.

region. The evolution of Mediterranean politics has seen, at times, a stress laid on democracy in official European declarations, but this has been shown to not having been reflected in the actual policies. The policies instead maintained throughout the years an important focus on the issue of security even when the European declarations announced a shift in the policy. Therefore, the official focus of the policies changed at times while the underlying logic of the Mediterranean politics remained. The evolution of European Mediterranean policy is mostly a story of continuity.

One of the most recent European communication on Mediterranean politics, the 2021 "Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A New Agenda for the Mediterranean" presents a new set of priorities. Security and stability are not the main concerns anymore (security is 3rd) while new issues are emerging in the agenda: the importance given to 'Green Transition' in quite new. With this document implemented, Mediterranean politics could potentially end up very different.

However, one should remember that, after the shock of the Arab uprisings in 2011, the official focus also moved away from security in favour of more idealist democracy and values concerns. Yet, security came back high on the agenda only a few years after with the increased regional instability and the 2015 migration wave. These two elements concealed during the covid crisis may well come back as challenging as ever after the pandemic. Thus, only at that moment, will the European determination to focus on 'human development, good governance and the rule of law' before 'peace and security' be revealed. The focus on health for example seems very linked to the current conjuncture, whether it will last remains to be seen.

Even the very definition of security may have been shaken by the covid-19 crisis. The 2020 EU Security Union Strategy seems to distinct safety as solely the protection from physical harm and security which takes into account safety but also European citizens' prosperity and well-being. Such an approach to security would be a watershed and would surely better take into account human rights. Yet, it should again be stressed that this document is marked by the covid-19 pandemic. Its stress on well-being stems from it. Whether it will be a long-term change or only a momentary declaratory shift is yet to be seen.

7. Conclusion

For the reasons brought forth in this paper, the Tunisian reformist discourse can be said to have persisted beyond Ben Ali, regardless of the 2011 revolution. It has been argued that the persistence of the mode of government of the authoritarian regime has consequences on the democratisation process. More precisely, reformism with its emphasis on progress and modernisation was certainly a force pushing for the overthrow of Ben Ali. However, its emphasis on stability and moderation (among others) is likely to limit the changes brought by the revolution and the democratisation. Reformism remaining a force of *moderate* change, it is likely to hamper the more comprehensive reforms needed to attain a consolidated democracy.

One should indeed keep in mind that, historically, reformism was created in order to adapt the Ottoman Empire as well as Islam in order to preserve them. Absolute change was never the goal, only minimal changes allowing the regime and religion to adapt and survive. The Tunisian elite imbued with reformism could have thought of democratisation in precisely this sense: modifying the regime to adapt it to present-day life but keeping the economic benefits they enjoy. Their political clout was also likely to increase. For this, one could link reformism with the party Nidaa Tounes but reformism is actually a discourse mobilised by the bulk of Tunisian political class. The Islamist Ennahda also supports a form of reformist – different but sharing many important similarities.

Through the analysis of constancies in official declarations, the present master dissertation has also tried to unveil the continuity of a certain discourse and certain priorities in European policy towards its Southern neighbourhood. Eventually, it is argued that the European Mediterranean policy has priorities overlapping with Tunisian reformism. The importance of openness to the West in reformism has also been beneficial to Europe. With regard to the Tunisian democratisation, it is argued that European policy has had similar consequences to reformism. It has facilitated the revolution – though not necessarily purposefully – and the first steps of the democratisation. Yet, it could, like reformism, hamper democratic consolidation. Indeed, European democracy promotion promotes Europe and its model rather than Tunisians' self-determination of their mode of governance. Contrary to its declarations, a form of shallow democracy or polyarchy seems to be promoted more than the official 'deep democracy'.

In Tunisia, the democratisation process is framed in a reformist manner as a set of reforms to implement in order to attain a goal. Importing EU norms can be seen as a way to fulfill this goal as the EU is usually represented as modern, moderate and stable. *Prima facie*, reformism indeed

seem to facilitate European influence in Tunisia. Yet, as the regime of Ben Ali has shown, it is possible to be justify oneself through a reformist discourse but to not implement all measures pushed forth by the model polity. Before 2011, European promotion of democracy was not well received in MENA countries, but European funds were highly wanted. Thus, the MENA regimes and Ben Ali's in particular often only cooperated in areas of their own interest (mainly economy and security). The situation has obviously changed with the democratisation of Tunisia. It now publicly accepts and wants to implement democratic reforms but it still chooses how to do so and does not necessarily wants to simply incorporate all EU norms. The local actors and the local experiences are still more important than external influence[35].

As the consequences of the persistence of reformism should be nuanced, the European promotion of democracy and its efficiency in promoting itself should be as well. Eventually, if Tunisia reaches the stage of democratic consolidation, it will be because of the struggles of local actors more than the European action. Reforming Tunisia appears to have remained a goal of the successive Tunisian governments as well as of the EU, but more may be needed in the long-term to make Tunisia a consolidated democracy.

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[35] This finding is also shared by Weilandt though he does not emphasize the reformist discourse (Weilandt, 2021).

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