

Islamists' Encounters with the Left in Tunisia (1970s-2020s)

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the complex encounters between the left and the Islamist movements in Tunisia from the 1970s to the 2020s, challenging narratives that reduce their relationship to pure ideological confrontation. The analysis identifies three defining historical moments. First, the university student movement (1977-1991) witnessed intense competition between leftist and Islamist students that, paradoxically, stimulated a crucial learning process for Islamists about political mobilization practices, communication techniques, and social question. Second, the *Collectif du 18 Octobre* (2005-2009) represented an unprecedented attempt at value-based political compromise, producing three joint declarations on women's rights, freedom of conscience, and state-religion relations that articulated shared democratic principles while revealing persistent disagreements on sensitive issues. Third, the first post-revolutionary Troika government (2011-2014), which initially embodied this cross-ideological cooperation but ultimately failed, as leaders prioritized elite consensus over transformative change, abandoned necessary reforms, and contributed to a democratic reversal.

The chapter argues that while shared opposition to authoritarianism created opportunities for dialogue mediated by liberal human rights activists, and while the October 18 experience paved the way for post-revolutionary coalition politics, deep-seated cultural polarization between "secular modernity" and "Arab-Islamic tradition"—reinforced by colonial legacies and Bourguiba's regime discourse on "*tunisianité*"—prevented sustained collaboration. The failure to build upon these encounters, coupled with a "consensus at all costs" approach that froze the democratization process, ultimately facilitated popular disillusionment with democratic politics and the emergence of President Saïd's authoritarian regime in 2021. The study thus illuminates both the transformative potential and structural limitations of cross-ideological political cooperation under and after authoritarianism.

KEYWORDS: Tunisia; Ennahda; Cross-Ideological Alliances; Student Question; Opposition Politics; Democratization.

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Introduction

In Tunisia, as elsewhere in the Middle East, post-independence opposition politics saw a relay race between the left and the Islamists in standing up to the subsequent authoritarian regimes. This relay race evolved through a triangular political relationship among the regime, the opposition, and society, as well as through direct and indirect encounters among the opposition's different currents. This chapter focuses on these encounters and the cross-influences and collaborations they produced despite profound ideological differences and persisting political mistrust and confrontation.

The history of political opposition politics in Tunisia saw two primary cycles in the 1960s-2010s period. In the first 60s-80s cycle – and more precisely between 1957 and 1978 – leftist political formations such as the Tunisian Communist Party (1934-1993, then *al-Tajdīd*: 1993-2012) and, namely, the GEAST (*Group d'Études et d'Action Socialiste en Tunisie*) aka *Perspectives* (1963-1975) movement led the opposition to the Habib Bourguiba regime. In the second cycle of the 1980s-2010s, it was the turn of the Islamist movement (first *al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya*, then MTI from 1981 to 1988, and then Ennahda from 1989) to lead the political opposition to the regimes of Habib Bourguiba and, later, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. During both periods, two sets of opportunities and constraints simultaneously influenced the different Tunisian opposition lineups: one set came from the global historical, political, and cultural contexts in which the oppositions elaborated their *zeitgeist* or, better, their “problem spaces.”² The second set derived from overlapping and entangled regional and domestic/local contexts. As Dot-Pouillard (2018) underlines: “The tensions between the ‘Progressives’ and the Islamists are not specifically Tunisian (...) they are inscribed in the regional arena”.³

Against this backdrop, this chapter addresses the following question: What were the key moments in the encounter between the left and the Islamists in Tunisia since independence? What was the impact, if any, of the encounter with the left on the evolution of Tunisian Islamist ideology and practices throughout the period considered? What was

² “Problem space” is “an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs” (Scott 2004: 4).

³ If not differently acknowledged, all translations in this chapter are by the author.

the legacy of the pre-revolutionary Islamist–leftist encounters on post-revolutionary politics in Tunisia?

The chapter tries to answer these questions by: 1) tracing the history of the three main historical moments of encounter, first in the Tunisian students' movement in the mid-1970s – early 1990s, then in a joint opposition initiative during the last decade of the Ben Ali regime in the 2000s and finally in the Troika coalition government (2011-2014); 2) singling out some of the factors that hindered the feasibility of political collaboration between the left and the Islamists in pre and post-revolutionary Tunisia. The analysis developed in this chapter draws on three primary sources: this author's previous research on Tunisian Islamism; interviews with leftist and Islamist activists conducted in Tunisia in September - October 2024; and an analysis of Islamist publications gathered and archived for the research project from which the present volume originates.⁴

As mentioned, three main historical moments defined the encounter between the left and the Islamist movement in Tunisia and left a legacy in the post-revolutionary political alliances. The first defining moment was in 1977-78, when Islamist university students first competed against their leftist colleagues in Tunisian university elections. In that period, Islamist-leftist competition in the Tunisian student movement produced intense and sometimes violent confrontations with no cross-ideological dialogue, let alone collaboration. Nevertheless, this first encounter stimulated among Tunisian Islamists a learning process about political, cultural, and mobilization practices, as well as internal debates about the left and the social causes it supported.⁵ The second defining moment of encounter took place much later, in 2005, with the establishment of the oppositional *Collectif du 18 Octobre*, where Ennahda personalities, who had survived the regime eradication drive the regime unleashed in 1990-91, cooperated with personalities from the opposition parties and civil society associations not co-opted by the Ben Ali regime. The *Collectif du 18 Octobre* discussed and adopted several joint documents outlining a ground-breaking, shared vision of the fundamental political principles for a democratic Tunisia. The

⁴ Some publications by Tunisian Islamists archived in the ILEMED open-access documentary database created within our research project are accessible at the Zenodo EU documentary repository at: urly.it/31dr0b.

⁵ Carnevale's chapter in this volume analyzes these issues in detail through the prism of cultural activism.

cumulative experience of these two cross-ideological encounters paved the way for the emergence of the first post-revolutionary coalition government, known as the Troika government, which reunited in 20011-2014 Islamist Ennahda party with two secular social-democratic parties – Marzouki’s Congress for the Republic- CPR and Ben Ja‘afar’s Etakattol and represents the third defining moment of Islamists-leftists encounter in Tunisia.

Clashes and Encounters in and around the University

As in most post-colonial Arab countries,⁶ the university played a crucial role in social struggles and political mobilizations before and after Tunisia’s independence in 1956, serving as a privileged site of intellectual formation, ideological socialization, and contentious politics.

Within this common Arab framework, however, the Tunisian university space had peculiarities due to the central place occupied by the “educational question” in the ideology of the neo-independent Tunisian state (Siino 2004; Abbassi 2006: 16). This approach made Tunisia one of the first Arab countries to have a genuinely modern student movement connected to international and regional debates (Dhifallah 2004). The Tunisian university space underwent an evolution similar to that of other Arab countries (Zayed *et al.* 2016) and experienced a transition from leftist students’ domination in the 1960s-1970s to Islamist domination in the 1980s and 1990s, while maintaining until the end of the 1980s what Camau called a role of “substitute political space” (Camau, Geissner 2003: 321).

In fact, student political mobilization in Tunisia dates back at least to 1910, when students from the Zaytouna mosque school and those from the modernist Sadiqi College joined the anticolonial struggle (Chanoufi 1993). However, at independence in 1956, Tunisia had only an embryonic university system (the University of Tunis was established in 1960), and most Tunisian students pursued their studies at French universities. Therefore, the *Union Générale des Étudiants de Tunisie* – UGET— the first and main Tunisian student union – was established in France in 1952.

After independence and following Bourguiba’s victory in the power struggle with the Arab-Islamic-oriented leader Salah Ben Youssef (the

⁶ See Biondi’s chapter in this volume for an analysis of the students’ movement in Morocco.

Neo-Destour party secretary general until 1955), the UGET—with the regime's encouragement—subsumed the Zaytuna students' organization (Dhifalla 2004: 216). This regime-led absorption silenced the voice of the Zeitunian students (*"Ṣawt al-ṭālib al-zaytūnī"* was the name of their publication) and marked a fracture between the modernist youth affiliated with the Neo-Destour party and the educated youth with an Arab-Islamic background. More broadly, the schism Bourguiba encouraged between Western-oriented and Arab-Islamic cultures is one of the roots of the suffocating polarization between the "secular" and the "Islamic" that engulfed Tunisian political development in the following decades.

During the first post-independence years, from 1956 to 1961, Tunisian university students' activism primarily developed in Europe. At this early stage, the ideological differences among Western-educated Tunisian students were somewhat framed and bridged by a form of "students' patriotism", expressed in the UGET union's qualified support for the Bourguiba regime's development policies (Camau, Geissner 2003: 171-172). In effect, the newly independent Republic was short of qualified cadres for its new national institutions, and the first generation of post-independence Tunisian university graduates experienced a strong liaison with the state apparatus, with the vast majority of student leaders from the UGET union becoming leaders of the single party or senior civil service officials (Dhifallah 2004; Siino 2021: 3-4).

Things changed since 1961: while the regime was still intent on including university graduates as "servants" of the State and the Party, university students of the time became more critical and rebellious towards Bourguiba's policies. Protest currents emerged within the UGET itself, and the student union became the arena of a struggle between pro-regime students and protest student groups with Marxist or Arab Nationalist inspirations (Dhifallah 2004; Siino 2021: 5-6). Then, in 1963, Bourguiba hardened his regime and outlawed the Tunisian Communist Party. In the same year, the most radical and influential of the leftist student protest groups was established: the Groupe d'Études et d'Action Socialiste (GEAST), also known as *Perspectives*, after its journal (Jebari 2022).

Following the demise in 1969 of a brief experiment with a socialist economy led by Ahmed Ben Salah, since 1970 the Bourguiba regime adopted a liberalist option, which, among other things, resulted in a more selective access to the University (Melfa 2019: 61). In 1971, at the UGET 18th congress in Korba, the confrontation between pro- and anti-regime student currents led to the paralysis of the union and the

emergence of an openly anti-regime leftist student movement. As a result, the GEAST-Perspective group opposed the absorption of the UGET union by the Neo-Destour party and created alternative UGET “provisional” structures, producing a growingly stark Marxist critique of the Bourguiba regime’s policies (Bouguerra 2019). The regime confronted this radical critique with a wave of repression culminating in March 1968 (El Waer 2018). Further repression led to the 1972 student revolt movement (Ayari 2016: 123-124).

While the leftist anti-regime hegemony of the university students’ movement consolidated during the first half of the 1970s, a different generation of Tunisian students was coming of age. In the late 1960s, a few ‘*ulamā*’ of the Zaytuna school created informal study groups (ar. *ḥalaqāt*: circles) to discuss Islamic issues outside the regime’s control. These groups advocated a return to “pure” Islam to counter Bourguiba’s westernization and the socio-cultural alienation it caused. Rachid Ghannouchi (1941–), Abdel Fattah Morou (1948–), Hamida Enneifer (1942–), and Salah Eddin al-Jourshi (1954–), the founders of what was to become the Tunisian Islamist movement, were among the high school students who participated in these informal study groups. These young men shared a similar background: they came from traditional religious families and were educated in Arabic-language Islamic studies, unlike most post-independence Tunisian elites, who pursued French-language, Western-style education.

In 1970, Ennahda’s young founding members decided to form an underground new Islamist movement, *al-Jamā’a al-Islāmiyya*, which advocated for an Islamic renaissance (in Arabic: *al-nahḍa*) in Tunisia, based on a new reformist approach to the sacred texts and creative socio-cultural reforms to accommodate modern realities, striving for a religious revival at the national level. Working through *ḥalaqāt*, they increasingly established a presence in mosques and high schools, especially in Tunis and in central and southern Tunisia, with the help of younger cadres such as Habib Mokni, Salah Karker, and Fadhel Beldi. Mourou’s affiliation with the Association for the Safeguarding of the Qur’ān, an official institution established in 1967 by Bourguiba’s regime to revamp its Islamic credentials in response to the rise of left-wing ideologies, also facilitated a rapid diffusion of the *al-Jamā’a al-Islāmiyya* study and preaching movement.

Since the mid-1970s, this new generation of Islamist-inspired students began entering Tunisian universities. At the time, the social

recruitment of university students was changing: young people from well-to-do urban families, who had prevailed in the post-independence decade, were now joined by students from the country's interior regions (South, Northwest, and Centre-West) from petty-bourgeois families. This sociological transformation of students' origins directly affected their cultural interests, socialization, and political orientation. A reorientation also facilitated the impact of broader global and regional factors, such as the growing critique of Third Worldism, particularly in French cultural debates (Ayari 2016: 134-37) and the diffusion in Arab world and in Europe of conservative Islamic preaching supported by the newly rich monarchies of the Peninsula. The effects of the regime's repeated waves of harsh repression of leftist activists since 1963, and the change in the social origin of new university students, provoked a rapid decline of leftist hegemony on Tunisian university campuses and the rise of an Islamist hegemony that emerged in the early 1980s and lasted until recently.⁷

In the first half of the 1970s, the small number of Islamist students concentrated in the University's hard sciences faculties and colleges. At the time, they concerned themselves only with purely "religious", moral, and personal matters, such as finding prayer rooms within the university space and providing for affordable meals. As one early Islamist student told this author: "When we started praying at the University, some other students would tell us: 'Why do you do that to us? We came from the countryside to get rid of traditions and find some freedom, and now you want to bring us back'."⁸ This moralizing attitude also shows in the contents of the leading Islamist publication of the time, the monthly journal *al-Ma'rifa*, founded in 1972⁹ which initially focused almost entirely upon the propagation of moral and religious values. The critique of the Tunisian socio-political situation was argued in very general, vague terms, as exemplified by this editorial published in *al-Ma'rifa* in 1972:

Our country suffers from several fundamental problems, without them being thoroughly examined and analyzed, such as the problem of morals, the problem of self-confidence, the problems of sex, individualism

⁷ In March 2023 and November 2024, the Islamist student union UGTE gained the majority of votes in university students' elections.

⁸ Interview with Salah Eddin al-Jourshi, September 28, 2024.

⁹ One issue of *al-Ma'rifa* had already appeared in 1962, but the regime subsequently outlawed the magazine.

and the lack of readiness to offer help and sacrifice for others, cultural imitation, the problem of economic development and its relationship with morality, etc. These problems stem from our historical, political, and educational circumstances, as well as the impact of international circumstances on our situation. We must have our own criteria to judge our circumstances. [By this] I mean a special culture and a special analysis of the universe, the human being, and life. (*al-Ma'rifa*, n. 3/1972: 10)

Later on, however, Islamist university students encountered and quickly learned the communication and mobilization techniques previously developed by their leftist colleagues. They began spreading their message through public meetings, posters, and mural bulletins (Chinese: *Dazibao*; Arabic: *al-jarā'id al-hā'iṭiyya*).¹⁰ Then, in the 1980s, closer encounters occurred within the left-dominated Tunisian counterculture scene, including in alternative or "committed" music.¹¹

In the realm of university politics, as early as the 1972-1973 academic year, a few Islamist students took to the floor at the student assemblies of the Faculty of Letters and Humanities and the Faculty of Political Sciences and Economics, which were traditionally dominated by leftist groups. Then, during the university elections in November 1977 at the Manouba campus in Tunis, an event occurred that some leftist students recall as the first "battle" between them and the Islamists, in which the latter gained the upper hand.¹² The clashes took place in the Manouba campus in Tunis, where the Faculty of Law, a fief of the left, was in front of the National School of the Engineers, a fief of the Islamists. Facilitated by physical proximity, clashes erupted in the square between the two faculties when the news spread that the Islamists were running in the Faculty of Law elections.

The leftist students of the time recall that the spread of the popularity of the Islamists among university students was rapid. As for the reasons for this rapid ascent, the explanations differ: former leftist students attribute it to the purported support the Islamists received from the regime, which would not hinder them or their activities and helped them, for instance, by "printing their publications in the printing

¹⁰ Interview with 'Adel Thabti, Islamist militant and member of the Islamist Student Union UGTE (Tunis, October 31, 2024).

¹¹ Carnevale's contribution to this volume analyzes in detail the encounters between the left and the Islamists in the Tunisian cultural scene of the 1980s.

¹² Interview with Bechir Jomaa, member of the *Perspective* group and its UGET provisional structure (Tunis, October 31, 2024).

house of the regime party".¹³ Islamist students of the time, instead, claim that they acquired popularity because they started not just spreading a well-received call to return to Islam, but also took care of the often-poor students' personal and economic conditions. 1977 was also the year when Islamist university students adopted the name Islamic Tendency in the Students' Movement (ar. *al-Ittijāh al-Islāmiyya fi al-Ḥaraka al-Ṭaliba*), a name later adopted by the entire Tunisian Islamist movement.

The following year, in January 1978, the first nationwide general strike in the country's history paralyzed Tunisia, called by the national trade union, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT). At the time, Rashid Ghannouchi strongly condemned the strike to which the leftist parties and the student movement adhered.¹⁴ Shortly thereafter, however, when the Iranian Revolution galvanized Islamists worldwide in 1978-79, Tunisian Islamists fully realized the scope of the social question and its mobilizing potential. The Iranian experience – in the words of the Ennahda leader Ghannouchi – enabled Tunisian Islamists to "Islamize some leftist social concepts and to accommodate the social conflict within an Islamic context" (Tamimi 2001: 66). In effect, although one of the founders of Ennahda recalls that it had been since 1968 that Tunisian Islamists had begun discussing the class structure of the Tunisian society, the nature and role of its left movements and trade unions,¹⁵ it took a long time for Islamists to move politically beyond broad slogans about social justice. As some Islamist students declared to Wolf: "We quickly realized that our training and ideas were weak in comparison to those of our opponents, that we had to strengthen our ideology" and: "The discourse of the [far left] was strong, we did not have the intellectual means to counter their arguments effectively" (Wolf 2017a: 42). In mosques, student circles (*halaqāt*), and high schools, the first milieus that Tunisian Islamists created or penetrated since the early 1970s, they could use traditional religious means for preaching and proselytism but competing with and confronting their leftists' counterparts on the university campus

¹³ During interviews with this author, this accusation was repeatedly made by former leftist students and repeatedly denied by their Islamist counterparts; either party, however, brought no detailed evidence.

¹⁴ In January 1978, *al-Ma'rifa* (n. 5, year 4) published an editorial eloquently entitled "Before the Iron Curtain comes down" (*Qabla 'an yunzil al-sitār al-ḥadīd*) and an article by Hamida Enneifer entitled "Brink and suicide" (*al-Ḥawf wa al-intihār*).

¹⁵ Online interview with Salah Eddin Jourshi, September 29, 2024.

required a different, less single-minded approach. It also required Islamist students to confront their own ideological discourse with that of their opponents and with its connection to the specific Tunisian social and political situation. In their internal debates, the Islamists had to consider the left's political programs, slogans, and ideology, but, according to some critical Islamists, the analysis of the left's ideological discourse was done "too late and too little".¹⁶ Nevertheless, the weakness of *al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya*'s ideological elaboration on the specificities of Tunisian religious, societal, and cultural realities was one of the main contentious points that in 1978 brought a group led by Hamida Enneifer to leave the Jama'a to establish a new Islamist group called *al-Islamiyyūn al-Taqaḍḍumiyūn* (*Progressive Islamists*), which was much more attentive to Tunisian specificities (al-Jūrshī 2010; Guazzone 2023).

In effect, the political 'coming of age' of Tunisian Islamists was a consequence of the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution, the experience of the 1977 student mobilization in the universities, and the recognition of popular socio-economic malaise, as expressed in the 1978 general strike. A more political turn was evident in the articles in the Islamist journal *al-Ma'rifa* from 1978 to 1979. For instance, the cover of the March 1979 issue of *al-Ma'rifa* featured pictures of Khomeini and protesting Iranian women under the title "Victory of Islam" (*Intiṣār al-Islām*). This confluence of factors pushed Tunisian Islamists to enter politics openly. The vanguard role played by the Islamist students' movement in the broader ideological evolution of the movement¹⁷ became evident in 1981, when the Tunisian Islamist movement adopted as its new name "Movement of the Islamic Tendency" (ar. *Ḥarakat al-Ittijāh al-Islāmī bi-Tūnis*; fr. *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* - MTI), a name inspired by that previously adopted by the Islamist university students. Profiting from a short-lived opening towards multi-partyism initiated under Prime Minister Mzali in April 1981, the Islamist movement adopted the new name and requested recognition as a legal political party.

¹⁶ Interview with Salaheddin al-Jourshi, founding member of the Jama'a Islamiyya and then member of the splinter Islamist group *al-Islamiyyūn al-Taqaḍḍumiyūn* (Tunis, September 29, 2024).

¹⁷ For an analysis of Ennahda's ideological evolution, see, among others, Guazzone 2023.

In its first press conference in June 1981, the MTI presented a political platform which resonated with some of the critiques the leftist student movement had brought against the Bourguiba regime since 1963:

The Islamic world, of which our country is a part, is witnessing the worst forms of pillage and alienation since the Middle Ages. Decadence affects the essence of our nation, prompting it to abandon its mission of enlightenment leadership. On the one hand, [this situation is] *for the benefit of the colonial West, and on the other hand, for control by internal minorities*, disconnected from their origins, which clash with the people's aspirations. [...] Islam has become almost only a symbol of threat [...], mainly because of the abandonment and assault of its values, institutions, and men. [...] In addition to these cultural data that our country shares with the rest of the Islamic world, Tunisia, since the end of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s and 1970s, has experienced [...] special crises, the intensification of social conflict, and the disruption of the mechanisms of *global growth*. This situation arose from the ruling *Destour Party's tendency to maintain a monopoly on power*.¹⁸

Shortly after, the regime rejected the MTI's request for recognition, and a first wave of regime repression hit the leaders of the MTI in the second half of 1981. However, the repression strengthened MTI's public image, and in the following years, the Islamist students' movement began to challenge the hegemony of the university leftist groups openly. In 1982, clashes between Islamist and leftist students intensified as the Islamists began to win the majority of seats in the students' elections. In society at large, at the time of the 1984 nationwide so-called bread riots, the MTI Islamists had finally recognized the depth and mobilizing power of the Tunisian social question. As the MTI was gaining a voice within both the state and civil society at the time, many of its followers actively supported the popular, spontaneous protests that erupted in January 1984 against the IMF-imposed increase in bread prices. Following this experience, Ghannouchi, the MTI president since 1978, began encouraging MTI followers to join the UGTT union, a move so willingly embraced by militants that, in 1989, Islamists represented about 20 per cent of the workers' union (Camau, Gessner 2003: 294). In the Tunisian context, the MTI strategy of UGTT penetration is a

¹⁸ *al-Bayān al-ta'āsīsī li-Ḥarakat al-Ittijāh al-Islāmī bi-Tūnis* (The founding communiqué of the Movement of the Islamic Tendency in Tunisia) as published in ikwanwiki.org, available at: urly.it/3vz71 (Accessed May 20, 2022). Our emphasis.

symptom of cross-pollination from the left, but also an effect of the central social and political role of trade unions, in Maghreb countries in general and in Tunisia in particular. This entryist strategy is, however, a symptom of the evolution of the Tunisian Islamist ideology, namely their recognition of the mobilizing power of the UGTT, as well as their effort to adapt and reconnect their discourse to Tunisian history and realities through the social question.

Also, the Islamist university students recognized the importance of unionism and, in 1984, proposed a new “Students Charter” aimed at refunding the UGET; a “democratic offer” that was rejected by the leftists as a hostile takeover bid.¹⁹ Having thus failed to control a renewed UGET, the Islamist students opted for creating a new student union, the *Union Générale Tunisienne des Étudiants* (UGTE), which was established at the Faculty of Sciences in March 1985. Finally, in 1988, under the new regime of President Ben Ali, what remained of the leftist groups succeeded in reactivating the “original” student union, the UGET. The two student unions – the Islamist UGTE and the leftist UGET – remained active and confronted each other until 1991. However, after 1988, the new UGET quickly became paralyzed again between pro- and anti-regime currents. In turn, the Islamist UGTE continued to gain almost all seats in university elections until it was dissolved in 1991, in the framework of the sweeping and violent repression of the entire Islamist movement that President Ben Ali unleashed after the relative electoral success of the Islamists (now renamed as Ennahda) in the 1989 general elections.²⁰

Our review of the relations between Islamists and leftists in the Tunisian students’ movement from 1972 to 1991 shows no signs of positive exchanges between the two opposition fronts. On the contrary, there was a complete ideological repudiation, confrontations, and violent clashes. As members of both leftist and Islamist students’ unions (UGET and UGTE) affirm, at the time: “There were no political dialogues”.²¹ Nevertheless, this first intense encounter in the student movement produced what we can call cross-influences from the

¹⁹ Author’s interviews with ‘Adel Thabti, member of the Islamist Student Union UGTE (Tunis, October 31, 2024); Abdellatif Mekki, UGET president (1989-1990) (Tunis, November 2, 2024); Habib Masit, member of Perspectives (Tunis, October 28, 2024); Bechir Jomaa, member of *Perspectives* (Tunis, October 31, 2024).

²⁰ For a detailed analysis of the campaign of eradication of Tunisian Islamists under Ben Ali in 1990-91, see, among others: Wolf 2017a: 73-76.

²¹ See notes 9 and 11 above.

leftists to the Islamists, stimulating an Islamist learning process in oppositional politics.

Attempts at a “Historical Compromise”:²² **The *Collectif du 18 Octobre 2005***

Tunisia's modern political history undoubtedly has some important specificities, and the legacy or path dependence of Tunisian political elites' experience with reformism and pacted change is possibly the most relevant to our analysis (Hibou 2009). It is important to note that in modern Tunisian history, there have been several attempts to unite the various cultural and political streams into a common front by bridging existing differences. The most important national experience in this sense was the diffusion of Bourguiba's discourse on the “*tunisianité*” (“being Tunisian”), promoting a unique synthesis between a Mediterranean western modernity, patriotic nationalism and a loose sense of belonging to the Arab and Muslim community (Ben Achour 1987), which was the ideological underpinning of Bourguiba's modernist reformism (Hibou 2009). However, the existence of a “Tunisian exception” within the common historical features of the Arab countries in the modern era, based on broadly, consensual reformism, has been rightly described as “a myth” in the academic literature (Camau 2018). Some Tunisian scholars went as far as to affirm that:

As practiced in Tunisia, the coexistence of two languages (Arabic and French) and two cultures (Eastern and Western) does not have an integrating effect but rather *a major effect of social destruction*. (Krichen 1987: 297)²³

In effect, Tunisian ideological and political struggles have been mirrored -but not bridged- in the cultural sphere, where the combined use of French, modern standard Arabic, and Tunisian dialect sometimes expresses an effort to reunite the different political-cultural Tunisian streams through convergence and compromise. More often,

²² The use here of the expression “historical compromise” points to an analogy with the Italian “*compromesso storico*”, the attempted political cooperation between the Christian Democrats and the Communists that emerged in Italy in the mid-1970s (Cf: Enrico Berlinguer “*Riflessioni sull'Italia dopo i fatti del Cile*”, *Rinascita*, October 12, 1973).

²³ Our emphasis.

however, the choice between languages serves as a mark of distinction and separation (Jerad 2017).

It is against this cultural and political backdrop that one should situate the experiences of political dialogue and compromise between the Tunisian left and the Islamists, and namely the encounter that took place in the 2000s, referred to as the “October 18 (2005) initiative”. As already mentioned, this was the second defining moment of the encounter between the left and Islamists in Tunisia and came to the forefront in 2005, with the establishment of the *Collectif du 18 Octobre* (aka: “October 18 Collective for Rights and Freedoms”),²⁴ where Ennahda personalities just out of prison, such as the future prime minister Ali Larayedh, cooperated with opposition forces not co-opted by the Ben Ali regime, including civil society personalities and human rights activists of the LTDH (*Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l’Homme*), who had helped the *Association Internationale de soutien aux prisonniers politiques*,²⁵ together with political personalities such as Najib Chebbi of the center-left Progressive Democratic Party and Hamma Hammami of the far-left Tunisian Communist Workers’ Party.

As we will see, the activities of the *Collectif* lasted almost until 2010, the eve of the revolution and of Ben Ali’s regime’s fall and produced several joint documents outlining a shared vision for broad political and cultural principles of a democratic Tunisia, which could have provided a starting point for the 2014 constitution. The experience of the October 18 Collective paved the way also for the emergence of the first post-revolutionary coalition government, which was in charge between 2011–2014 (the “Troika” government), formed by Ennahda and two center-left parties: Mustapha Ben Ja’afar’s Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedom (*al-Takatul al-Dimuqrātī min ajl al-‘Amal wa-l-Ḥurriyāt*) and Moncef Marzouki’s Congress for the Republic (*al-Mu’tamar min ajl al-Jumhūriyya*).

The background to the October 18 encounter comprised two distinct but intersecting processes. The first was in the development of a new activism for democracy and human rights in Tunisia since the mid-1970s, which was activated especially by the liberal, splinter wing

²⁴ Aka *Collectif du 18 Octobre* in French. The October 18 Movement was launched in 2005, a month before the UN World Summit on the Information Society held in Tunis. See: Wolf 2017a: 101–103.

²⁵ Established in 2002 and headed by Islamist Mohamed Nouri, the AISPP mainly worked in support of Islamist political prisoners in Tunisia.

of the Neo-Destour ruling party led by Ahmed Mestiri, in connection with leftist Tunisian activists who experienced police repression, unfair trials, and several rounds of prison sentences (Schade-Poulsen 2024). For instance, one of the co-founders of Amnesty International's Tunisian section was Habib Mersit, a member of Perspectives and a former political prisoner.²⁶ This opening to the question of human rights, previously considered as a "bourgeois trap", helped the development of a new indirect political dialogue between the left and the Islamists, when the latter experienced the full weight of regime repression. Liberal political figures mediated this indirect political dialogue in the Tunisian press, especially after the establishment of the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme* (LTDH) in 1976 and the brief regime's flirtation with multipartyism under Prime Minister Mzali in 1981. The liberal weekly *Erraï*, published from 1977 to 1987, was probably the main venue for this indirect dialogue.²⁷ On this subject, Hasib Ben Ammar, one of the co-founders of the LTDH and founder and director of the *Erraï* newspaper,²⁸ declared:

We opened our columns to everyone. Even to Rashid Ghannouchi (an Islamist) and Mohamed Harmel (a Communist), while not supporting their positions. We did this in the name of free expression. I even published an editorial that defended fundamentalists. (Garon 1998: 52)

This attempt at a broadly democratic dialogue between all components of the Tunisian opposition, mediated by liberal figures such as Ben Ammar, was, however, limited and short-lived. In fact, in the early 1990s a broad swath of Tunisia's secular middle class became supportive of Ben Ali's ruthless crackdown on Ennahda, believing it necessary for preserving the country's secular-modern underpinnings, particularly in the face of the violence occurring in next-door Algeria, where in January 1992 a military coup crushed the 1991 electoral victory of Islamist FIS.

²⁶ Author's interview with Habib Mersit, Tunis, September 28, 2024.

²⁷ Interviews with Hechmi Ben Fraj and Hichem Abdessamad, members of Perspectives (Tunis, October 29, 2024) and Lofti Hajj, journalist and member of the October 18 strike and Collective (Tunis, October 30, 2024).

²⁸ Ben Ammar was a former mayor of Tunis and Minister of Defense under Bourguiba, member of the dissident liberal group that left the regime party PSD in 1971 (on this group see Schade-Poulsen 2024: 27-28).

However, even in the early 1990s in Tunisia, there were exceptions to the secular middle class's broad endorsement of Ben Ali's policy of "eradication" of the Islamist movement through police repression, manipulated trials, and harsh imprisonments enacted right after Ennahda's electoral success in mid-1989. One of these rare exceptions was Moncef Marzouki's outspoken stance. A physician turned human rights activist, Marzouki consistently challenged Ben Ali's abuse of the justice system to crush his political opponents and, already in 1994, called for Ennahda's legalization as a party (Perkins 2004: 197). Forced into exile by Ben Ali's repression in 2002, Marzouki, another co-founder of the LTDH, strived to keep the Tunisian opposition alive from France. To this end, he kept open a communication channel with Ennahda leadership in exile in London, aiming at creating a national front of the opposition to the Ben Ali regime, stating:

In Tunisia, the choice is not between Islamists and democrats. The choice is between those who are against the despotic regime and who want to replace it, and the forces that want to compromise with it, whether they are Islamists or democrats. A national front would not aim to compromise on democratic principles, nor to compromise on identity, and would aim to set a national line.²⁹

Marzouki's position was part of a second, broader process of rapprochement among the different souls of Tunisian opposition that, since the 1980s, saw a growing dialogue in France between all shades -Islamists included- of Tunisian opposition parties and associations (Zederman 2020: 95-98). On May 23-25, 2003, Marzouki and others organized a closed meeting at Aix-en-Provence in France, gathering representatives of different parties and movements of the Tunisian opposition for a national dialogue: the Congress for the Republic -CPR led by Marzouki himself; the Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedom - FDTL (aka Ettakatol) led by Mustapha Ben Ja'afar; the Democratic Progressive Party - PDP³⁰ represented by Mohamed Goumani, together

²⁹ Marzouki interview to *al-Quds*, October 2003 (as quoted in Eric Gobe *L'Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord* 2003: 323).

³⁰ First established in 1983 as the Progressive Socialist Rally, the party led by Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, a former pan-Arabist turned Marxist when he joined the group Perspectives, gathered a broad range of currents, from Marxists to liberal pro-democracy activists and progressive Muslims (*al-Islamiyūn al-Taḡaddumiyūn*) such as Goumani himself, who later joined Ennahda political office.

with various representatives of Tunisian civil society organizations (CNLT, AJA, AISPPT, RAID, CPIJ, CNDLE, CIDT and others). The debates developed at the Aix meeting produced the "Declaration of Tunis", which aimed at establishing "a new political and social contract for Tunisia".³¹ As one participant in the meeting declared: "Aix has broken the effect of demonization, the rapprochement between the Islamists and the others was possible" (Zederman 2020: 97). Marzouki, the future first post-revolutionary Tunisian president, declared in retrospect: "In effect, it was in Aix in 2003 that the Troika, which in 2011 created the transition government, was formed" (Marzouki 2013: 80), thus explaining the origin of the political alliance between Ennahda and two center-left movements that governed Tunisia in 2011-2014.

However, in 2003, the PDP and the FDTL did not sign the Tunis Declaration (Abdessamad 2017: 32). In the words of Najib Chebbi, leader of the PDP, his party did not sign the Declaration of Tunis because:

I thought the alliance between the democratic and the Islamist movements was premature. It was not an ideological exclusion. We recognize the right to exist politically to the Islamists, we demand general amnesty, of which they would be the principal beneficiaries [...]. We can go in the same direction, but in a separate row. (Geissner, Gobe 2005: 298)

Thus, in 2003, the first attempt to unite the Islamists and the left in a unified Tunisian opposition front was inconclusive. The most influential leftist groups and parties, including the former Tunisian Communist Party, renamed *Tajdid* (Renewal) since 1993, and the GEAST-*Perspectives* Group, did not even participate directly in the Aix meeting. It is nevertheless interesting to recall that in the early 1980s, the Tunisian Communist Party (PCT) had developed a frontist strategy aimed at including the Islamist movement. To this end, the PCT protested the imprisonment of MTI leader Ghannouchi as early as 1987 (Melfa 2017: 80). More generally, it is worth noting that Marzouki's stance aligned with the supposed preference for reformism through compromise and bargaining that many consider a distinct "path dependence" feature of the political culture and historical experience of Tunisian elites (Hibou 2009). This often-claimed tradition of reformism is typically dated back to Ibn Khaldun and Khair al-Din, but as mentioned, it is also often

³¹ The text of the Declaration of Tunis can be accessed at: urly.it/31dqzt.

described as a myth (Camau 2018). Nevertheless, the Tunisian elites' apparent inclination to compromise and bargain resurfaced repeatedly in the following tumultuous years in Tunisia's political history.

Meanwhile, at the beginning of the 2000s, the Ben Ali authoritarian regime felt confident enough to somewhat relax the treatment of the tamed opposition. After the 2002 constitutional reform that enabled Ben Ali to run for another presidential mandate, most of the remaining long-serving Islamist political prisoners were released. They cautiously began reconnecting with civil society organizations active in defending human rights. In the same years, a few other initiatives created an atmosphere favorable to the inclusion of the Tunisian Islamists in a coordinated opposition to Ben Ali. A background experience was provided by the "Platform of Sant'Egidio", adopted at a unified meeting of the Algerian opposition, including the Islamic Front of Salvation-FIS, held in Rome in January 1995 at the initiative of the Catholic Comunità di Sant'Egidio.³² Other events fostered attempts at a cross-ideological compromise compromise in Tunisia; for instance, the Tunisian lawyers' protest sit-ins and general strike in March-May 2005, during which leftist and Islamist-leaning lawyers protested side by side (Gobe, Ayari 2007).

By 2005, many Tunisian political and civil forces had become convinced that all recognized methods of political action were now impracticable under Ben Ali. Thus, in order to draw international media attention to the issue of liberties in the country, a diversified group of eight opposition personalities, representing various political parties and civil organizations, on October 18 2005, undertook a hunger strike at a private office in Tunis – just one month before the World Summit on Information Society was going to be hosted in the capital city. The eight strikers were: 1) Nejib Chebbi: founder and leader of the center-left Democratic Progressive Party -PDP and one of the most active organizers of the hunger strike; 2) Ayachi Hammami: a democratic lawyer and a former leftist member of the students' movement, who hosted the strike at his bureau at rue Mokhtar Attia in Tunis; 3) Hama Hammami: the spokesperson of the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party -PCOT, who was a longtime opponent of any alliance with the Islamist "obscurantism"; 4) Lofti Hajj: a journalist and activist for human rights, previously close to the

³² See details at Saint Egidio initiative: urly.it/31dqz- .

Progressive Islamists, and founder of the Tunisian Journalists' Union in 2004; 5) Samir Dilou, an Islamist human rights lawyer and former militant of Islamist students' Union UGTE; 6) Rauf Ayadi: member of the CPR (Marzuki's) Party and former member of the leftist Perspective group; 7) Mokhtar Yahiaoui, a dissident judge, without a clear political affiliation; 8) Mohammed Nuri, Islamist president of the International Association of Support to the Political Prisoners - AISPP founded in 2002. The strikers made three fundamental demands: freedom of organization for all, freedom of information and expression, and freedom for political prisoners, along with the adoption of a law on general amnesty.

As hoped, the well-timed hunger strike drew the attention of the international press gathered in Tunis for the International Information Forum. What was surprising, however, was the extent and rapid emergence of broad national support for the strikers, who were visited by many other personalities and saw the creation of a national Committee of Support and local committees of support in various Tunisian cities and in Paris (Abdessamad 2017). The enthusiasm surrounding the successful October 18 hunger strike was such that it seemed to be the prelude to the creation of a long-sought united front of the Tunisian opposition and to the reconciliation of its different political families: the leftists, liberals, and Islamists. The success the hunger strike at the national level and its international impact prompted the strikers to seek ways to maintain momentum. The strike ended with the announcement of the creation of an "October 18 Collective for Rights and Freedoms" (also known as the *Collectif du 18 Octobre*), established in December 2005 by several representatives of Tunisian parties and NGOs (Hajji 2006).

In comparison to those adhering to the National Committee of Support for the hunger strike, the adherents to the Collectif/Collective were fewer in number. Still, they included Ennahda Islamists, the four main opposition political parties (CPR, FDTL, PDP, and PCOT), and several human rights NGOs.³³ The platform of the Collective, as expressed by its Paris Committee, clarified its method and required its

³³ Compare the list of the 124 signatories to the Committee of Support (Abdessamad 2017, 117-118) to the list of the 21 signatories to the Collective, at: urly.it/31dqzw (Accessed October 10, 2024).

members to share three common principles of equality, independence, and non-violence:

The collective is a space of convergence; it remains open to all activists and political and associative organizations that adhere to its founding platform. It prioritizes transparency, collegiality, and consensus-seeking in its operations.³⁴

Starting from this platform, between 2006 and 2009 the Collective activated a forum where the forces it represented discussed and adopted three important joint declarations about the fundamental tenets for a future democratic state in Tunisia: 1) *The Declaration about Women's Rights and Gender Equality* (March 8, 2007); 2) *The Declaration on Freedom of Opinion and Conscience* (October 18, 2007); *The Declaration on the Relationship between State, Religion and Identity* (December 20, 2009).³⁵

On the whole, these three joint declarations went, at least partially, beyond finding a common language to express general principles, and laid down concrete steps to translate principles into legislation and into political, economic, and social life. In the Declaration on Women's Rights and Gender Equality the Collective affirmed its "its support to all the acquired [women's] rights" already enshrined in Tunisian legislation in the realm of personal status -such as the forbiddance of polygamy, equal rights in education, labor and political participation, but also noted in detail how legal equality (when existing) was not fully translated into practice in every of the realms considered. Then it called for: the "explicit mention of gender equality in the Constitution"; the adoption of "legislative provisions and judicial mechanisms to punish authors of discrimination against women"; stated that "the veil issue is (...) a personal choice which cannot be subjected to any interference, to forbid or impose it". The declaration also acknowledged that, on some issues, such as equality in inheritance, the Collective was unable to reach consensus and needed more dialogue.

The Declaration of Freedom of Opinion and Conscience, adopted following a three-month public conference, was less detailed. After

³⁴ *Plate-forme politique pour une action commune*, at: urly.it/31dqzx (Accessed October 10, 2024). Our emphasis.

³⁵ The original text of the declarations is in Arabic; the French translation of the first two declarations can be found in the *Brochure du Collectif* at: urly.it/31dqzx. Lofti Hajji, one of the strikers and a member of Collective, provided this author with the Arabic text of the third -and, possibly, most thorny -declaration.

a prologue that mentioned some of the issues most debated in the conference -from apostasy to the legitimacy of international covenants such as the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights – this declaration spelt out that:

Elements of consensus about...values and standards: freedom of conscience, which relates to individual choice, must be guaranteed to every citizen, man and woman, and includes the right to adopt or not a religion...accomplishing rites, practices, and teaching...Freedom of conscience in our country is not in the least contradiction with the place and importance of Islam...in terms of culture and civilization.

Also, the 2009 Declaration on the Relationship between State, Religion and Identity was the result of a series of seminars and internal discussions that, as the text states:

Highlighted the existence of three challenges facing the Tunisian people in their aspiration to...a sound relationship between religion and state...1) The tyranny of authority: one of the manifestation of which is the subjugation of the Islamic religion to the political will of the existing regime...; 2) The tyranny in the name of religion resulting from a one-sided extremist reading of Islam...; 3) the tyranny in the name of modernity that works to eliminate religion from public life...from within and outside the state apparatus. In the face of these challenges, the Collective affirmed that: 1) the desired democratic state can only be a civil state based on the principles of the Republic and on human rights that derives its legitimacy from the will of the people...5) the desired democratic state must give Islam a special status as the religion of the majority, without any monopoly or exploitation.

From our brief survey of the texts adopted, it emerges that the joint declarations were substantive but became less incisive as they addressed the sore spots in the relationship between the “Democrats and the Islamists”, as the 2009 text referred to the two sides in the dialogue. In effect, shortly after the establishment of the Collective, several leftist feminists and human rights activists expressed their critique about the political method and goals of the Collective in an open letter entitled *À propos d'une derive* (“About a drift”), which stated:

A democratic debate is one thing; an alliance at all costs is another. We are not convinced that the “October 18 Collective for Rights and Freedoms” option (relayed by a counterpart structure in Paris) is opportu-

ne or relevant. If the Ennahda movement says it supports the rule of peaceful alternation and refrains from violence, who would complain about that? However, for this movement to have its place within the democratic family, it would have to give up its Islamic State project, the formidable consequences of which for democracy and human rights are well known. In which case, Ennahda would no longer really be an Islamist party. Moreover, that would be known.³⁶

An important part of the Tunisian leftist political forces thus backtracked from its support to the intra-opposition dialogue activated in the October 18 initiative because of their lack of confidence in the genuine commitment of Ennahda Islamists to the democratic process in general and in particular to the method of consensus (ar. *tawāfuq*) adopted by the Collective. Nejbi Chebbi, leader of the centre-left PDP and one of the Collective's staunchest supporters, responded with another open letter, entitled "Beginning of a debate", in which he discussed and rejected the doubts expressed by leftist critics of the Collective.³⁷ Then, the impact of the October 18 initiative was further diminished because some key opposition figures, including Marzouki himself, were apparently unconvinced by its strategy, arguing that "a dictatorship cannot be reformed". Moreover, friction between the Collective's leaders, Chebbi and Ben Ja'afar, quickly heightened, as both intended to run in the 2009 presidential elections. In effect, the Collective's viability began to crumble at the beginning of 2009, when Chebbi emerged as an alternative candidate to the incumbent president, Ben Ali, in the upcoming presidential election, but did not receive the endorsement of the other parties represented in the Collective. As for Ennahda, which was still banned and had its leadership in exile in London, it decided to form part of a unified front of the Tunisian opposition at its Eighth Congress held in London (Wolf 2017a: 192-193). At the same time, however, the Ennahda leadership was also conducting cautious negotiations with the Ben Ali regime to secure some form of readmission in Tunisia (Geisser, Gobe 2008).

Overall, the October 18 initiative, which included the hunger strike and the Collective Forum, did, in effect, represent a unique attempt at establishing a value-based political compromise between

³⁶ The letter is dated February 2006, and its text is in the Appendix to Abdessamad 2017.

³⁷ The text of Chebbi's rebuke is in the Appendix to Abdessamad 2017.

the “Democrats”, including parts of the left, and the Islamists, as the analysis of the joint declarations confirms. This unprecedented development occurred because it was a prerequisite to establishing a joint front against the Ben Ali regime. In this framework, compromise and consensus were means to a political end. On the whole, the October 18 initiative was a brave departure from the existing taboo of mutual recognition between the left and the Islamists, a departure made possible by the emergence since the mid-1970s of a more liberal left, savvier in human rights and less ideological and, at the same time, by the ideological evolution of Ennahda leadership in exile that enabled its commitment to democracy (Ghannouchi 1993; Tamimi 2001) sourced in the liberal reading to Islamic values elaborated since the late 1970s by the Progressive Islamist current within Tunisian Islamism.

However, as clearly stated in the open letter “About a drift” quoted above, the leftists remained wary of the Islamists’ real political intentions. Conversely, the Islamists remained convinced that a renewed expulsion of Ennahda from the “legitimate” Tunisian political arena remained possible. This shows how overcoming the political exploitation of a purportedly impassable cultural dichotomy between a “Western” progressive modernity and an Arab-Islamic “reactionary tradition” -instigated by French colonialism and reinforced by Bourguiba’s regime narrative about the *tunisianité*- required more mutual trust and practical political experience than opposition politics under an authoritarian regime allowed for.

After the Revolution: The Troika Alliance and the Reemergence of Ideological Polarization

The polarization between secularists and Islamists in Tunisia reemerged in full force after the 2010-2011 popular mobilization that initiated the region-wide Arab Spring and led to the downfall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia (Nachi 2011). As detailed below, the re-emergence of unbridgeable political rifts between the two sides was clearly manifested in 2012 and led to a deep political crisis in 2013.

After the flight of Ben Ali, in March 2011, the Revolutionary Defense Council, the broad front of all mobilized opposition forces, merged in the transitional High Authority for the Realization of the Goals of the Revolution, in charge between March and October 2011 of organizing the “transition from the revolution to the elections” of

the National Constituent Assembly. However, in June 2011, the newly legalized Ennahda party left the High Authority, criticizing the body for establishing itself as a parliament without electoral legitimacy and for failing to respect the principle of consensus. This move clearly signaled the end of the revolutionary convergence and the start a new phase of post-revolutionary political competition.

The results of the first competitive general elections on October, 23 2011 saw a robust victory for Ennahda Islamists, who nevertheless chose to counter fears of an Islamist takeover forming a trilateral coalition government – the so-called “Troika” government – with the second and third winners of the popular vote: social-democratic parties of Marzouki (CPR) and Ben Jaʿafar (Ettakatol); invited to join the coalition government, Chebbi’s PDP declined. The Troika government stayed in power from October 2011 to January 2014. However, Troika did not navigate well the test of government, faced as it was with big structural socio-economic and administrative problems, the people’s high post-revolutionary expectations, as well as with the opposition, since mid-2012, of the leftist parties, of the growing Ansar al-Shariʿa Salafi party, and of the counter-revolutionary ambitions of the nostalgics of the deposed regime (Guazzone 2013). Moreover, the power-sharing agreement among the three members of the Troika remained opaque and was not fully respected, as many of Ennahda’s unilateral moves demonstrated.³⁸ The perceived small political role of CPR and Ettakatol caused half of their elected representatives in the Constituent Assembly to abandon the parties.

Since spring 2012, growing dissatisfaction with the Troika government allowed the former Prime Minister, Caïd Essebsi – a minister under Ben Ali and a member of the Constitutional Democratic Rally regime party – to form Nida’a Tounes (Call for Tunisia), a new party promising to provide a liberal, modern alternative to the Islamists. The establishment of Nida’a Tounes created a bipolarity in the Tunisian political landscape that the leftists sought to break by forming in October 2012 the *Front Populaire*, a front uniting twelve left-wing, nationalist, and green political parties and associations, as well as many independent intellectuals. The pre-revolutionary polarization

³⁸ For instance, Ennahda’s prime minister, Jebali, decided in 2012 to extradite to Libya, Baghdadi Mahmoudi, a Gaddafi acolyte, without the consent of President Marzouki (Cf. Amnesty International “Extradition of Former Libyan Prime Minister from Tunisia”, available at: urly.it/31dqxz (Accessed October 10, 2025)).

of Tunisian political life was thus reconstituted, leading each political pole to struggle for its constituency and to forgive the alliances forged in the opposition to Ben Ali, despite the enduring socio-economic crisis and the persisting popular protests.

Thus, after the first free political election in 2011, Tunisian political actors opposing the Ben Ali regime progressively moved from convergence to competition and reverted to old political patterns (Govantes, de Larramendi 2023). A detailed analysis of this development is beyond the scope of this article; however, it has been observed that the fragmentation of left political actors and the rigidity of their ideological discourse (e.g., the unwillingness to distinguish between Ansar al-Shari'a Salafis and Ennahda Islamists) were possibly just as much to blame as the often-examined shortcomings of the Ennahda Islamists in government (Marks 2018; Guazzone 2013). What is clear is that the renewed post-revolutionary conflict between Islamists and leftists in Tunisia reached a violent climax in 2013 with the assassination of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, two leaders of the Democratic Patriots' Movement (PPDU), a radical communist party within the Popular Front, which accused Ennahda of Belaid's murder. These political killings, whose instigators remain unknown to this day, shocked the country, sparked widespread protests, and toppled the Troika government (Guazzone 2013; Govantes de Larramendi 2023).

In October 2014, the general elections resulted in Nida'a Tounes becoming the leading party with 37.6% of the vote, followed by Ennahda with 27.8%, while the Front Populaire secured only 3.7%. Since then, Ennahda Islamists lost their leadership role in the government and aimed to maintain their legitimacy in the Tunisian political arena primarily through a conciliatory "consensus" approach, namely participating as a minor partner in the national unity government led by Nida'a Tounes, whose leader, Essebsi, also won the presidential election in November 2014.

As analysts have shown (Grewal, Hamid 2020; Blanc 2024), this compromise meant that, for the sake of consensus, there was no effective opposition to the 2015-2019 national unity government. As a consequence, controversial but necessary policies, such as transitional justice and security sector reform, were abandoned, and at the same time, no bold action was taken on the economy or on issues such as establishing the Constitutional Court. In turn, the inability of

the unity government to tackle the real needs of the country and frequent political bickering in Parliament led to intense widespread disillusionment with representative politics parliamentary politics (Yardımcı-Geyikçi, Özlem 2018) that, coupled with the extreme COVID-19 crisis experienced in Tunisia (Guazzone 2024), led to the electoral success of candidates outside the political system in the 2019 general and presidential elections. In the end, the disillusionment of average Tunisians with political parties, institutions, and, more broadly, the very idea of representative democracy enabled the success of the constitutional coup enacted by the “anti-political” President Kaïs Saïed in July 2021 and the consolidation of his new authoritarian regime in Tunisia.

The disregard for the legacy of the dialogue between the leftists and the Islamists, prepared by the student movement in the 1970s and 1980s and realized in the October 18 initiative, is only one of many factors that contributed to the reversal of the democratic transition in Tunisia after the fall of the Ben Ali regime. However, the abandonment of that cross-ideological encounter and of the transformative debates that led to the joint declarations reached in 2007-2009 was a clear symptom of the structural weaknesses of the transition. At the same time, the alternative path taken, that is, “bargained competition” between the political elites that earned Tunisia the Nobel prize in 2015 (Boubeker 2016), did not translate into a progressive change of political culture and practices. On the contrary, it ended up freezing the democratization process and reversing the acquis of the 2011 revolution. As some analysts noted, already in 2017, the new Tunisian government formed in September harbored “more Ben Ali-era figures than any time since 2011” (Wolf 2017b).

Both the leftists and the Islamists paid a high price for not pursuing their encounters. In 2019, the Popular Front broke up, primarily due to strategic disagreements. Some members of this leftist Front favored a possible rapprochement with Nida’a Tounes to counter Ennahda, while others saw both parties as primarily neoliberal and dismissed them both. In addition, in the name of realpolitik and pragmatism, some of the Popular Front leaders wanted to adapt to the economic pressures weighing on the country and accepted the negotiation of the controversial Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (Dcfta) with the European Union finally reached in 2019, while others, including Hamma Hammami, defended loyalty to the social values of the traditional left and opposed the Dcfta head-on.

As for Ennahda, Ghannouchi, the party president, imposed his strategy of compromise with the rebranded elites of the old regime on the party's cadres when, in 2016, he struck, almost in secret, an agreement with Essebsi known as the "pact of the two *shaykh*". By this pact, Essebsi and Ghannouchi provided mutual political protection for each other's survival. Two key aspects of the "pact of the two *shaykhs*" were the increase in the age limit for presidential candidates, which enabled Essebsi to run for president, and an agreement to allow most members and supporters of Ben Ali's former ruling party to participate in politics and business. This effectively blocked efforts at post-revolutionary transitional justice in Tunisia (McCarthy 2019).

In the end, this "at all costs" consensus strategy weakened both parties (Boubekeur 2016). Nida'a Tounes split into multiple factions, rival political groups in Parliament, and was eventually replaced by Qalb Tunis, a new centrist party formed just before the 2019 general elections. As for the Islamists, their renowned internal discipline gradually eroded. As Blanc (2024) notes, the growing internal dissent in Ennahda was not so much about the strategy of compromise pursued by Ghannouchi but rather about the way it was imposed on the party without internal debate. Over time, prioritizing the party's image as legitimate and dependable while marginalizing its ideology and the political expectations of its electorate proved a genuine strategic mistake for Ennahda. This strategy in the end led first to a drastic fall in votes for Ennahda in 2019 and then to a collective resignation letter from the party by one hundred of its higher cadres in September 2021, who were faced with Ghannouchi's unwillingness -and the weakened party's inability- to confront president Said Kais's "constitutional" coup of July 2021 that led to the renewal of authoritarianism in Tunisia.

Conclusions

The political dynamics in Tunisia from the 1960s to the 2010s reveal a complex interplay between the left and Islamist movements. Despite their profound ideological differences and historical confrontations, these two groups experienced moments of interaction and mutual influence, particularly within the university student movements in 1975-1985 and later, in the 2000s, through joint anti-regime actions and collaborative initiatives in the *Collectif du 18 Octobre*.

Between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, encounters between the Left and Islamists in the university space facilitated the political education of Islamist activists despite intense confrontation. In contrast, the shared experience of repression under Ben Ali's authoritarian regime in the 1990s and early 2000s fostered a degree of solidarity and collaboration. Between 2005 and 2009, the activities of the *Collectif du 18 Octobre* represented a significant attempt at political compromise, bringing together diverse opposition forces to articulate a shared vision for Tunisia's future as a democracy. The legacy of these encounters paved the way for the cross-ideological post-revolutionary coalition government of the Troika (2011-2014).

However, the deep-seated mistrust, together with ideological and political divides between the left and Islamists, persisted, ultimately hindering sustained collaboration after the Arab Spring revolution. The shared failure to fully bridge these divides contributed to the political polarization that reemerged during Tunisia's post-revolutionary transition and, more broadly, to the eventual emergence of popular dissatisfaction with democratic politics and, subsequently, to the reestablishment of an authoritarian regime after 2021. In conclusion, the historical interactions between the left and Islamists in Tunisia underscored the potential and limitations of cross-ideological collaboration in the face of authoritarianism. While encounters between the left and the Islamists in Tunisia facilitated important political learning and temporary alliances, enduring ideological rifts, electoral maneuvering, and external pressures ultimately constrained the ability to achieve lasting political transformations and democratic consolidation.

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