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Heurtaux, Jérôme

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Elites and Revolution: Political Relegation and Reintegration of Former Senior Government Officials in Tunisia

*Jérôme Heurtaux**

Abstract: »*Eliten und Revolution: Politische Relegation und Reintegration von ehemaligen hohen Regierungsbeamten in Tunesien*«. What happens to the state elite of an authoritarian regime after its collapse? This article proposes an answer by examining the Tunisian case after the fall of Ben Ali's regime in 2011. Based on a corpus of in-depth interviews with sixty or so ex-politicians or civil servants, the article starts by describing the collapse of the regime in terms of the experience and perceptions of some of those who had served it. This is not presented as a series of institutional and political events linked up in a homogeneous and unidirectional process, but rather as a variety of individual experiences, each unique. The fall of the regime thereby emerges as a concrete experience of political relegation, documented in precise detail by the accounts given of it. Analyzing this experience provides a way of testing several hypotheses regarding the post-revolutionary careers of former senior officials, stressing just how complex and diverse the paths are for reintegrating the political class.

Keywords: Revolution, political elite, democratic transition, political parties, Arab Spring, Tunisia.

1. Introduction

Scholarship on large-scale political change in the wake of major historical events – such as revolution, colonial invasion, or post-war situations – tends to overlook the vanquished. The dominant classes, government officials, and politicians of the former regime, disqualified by “history”, often receive far less attention than revolutionaries, former opposition figures, and leaders of the new regime together with the social groups on whose support they draw. Still, former regime “elites” attract a degree of scholarly interest when dissension between the former state and the ruling classes is viewed as a main cause of revo-

* Jérôme Heurtaux, CEFRES – French Research Center in Humanities and Social Sciences, Na Florenci 1420/3, 110 00 Nové Město, Prague, Czech Republic; jerome.heurtaux@cefres.cz. This article is based on a research that has benefited from a four years position (2013–2017) of its author at Research Institute on Contemporary Maghreb (IRMC) in Tunis.

lution, or when former government officials prompt a “counterrevolution”, or win reappointment in the new regime. An extensive body of scholarship examines the circulation, renewal and/or reproduction of elites in the context of regime change (Gil, Szelenyi and Townsley 1998; Higley, Pakulski and Wesolowski 1998).

The increase in scholarly interest in this topic with regard to Tunisia may be traced to the emergence of the Nidaa Tounes party in 2012, and especially its victory in the parliamentary elections on October 26, 2014, and of its leader, Beji Caid Essebsi, in the presidential elections on December 21, 2014.

The victory of Nidaa Tounes and arrival in power of President Beji Caid Essebsi may have led certain sections of Tunisian society to feel that the former regime was staging a comeback. At times, observers of Tunisian politics latched onto the impromptu comments to this effect flooding social media, emanating from certain political sectors and spokespersons for revolutionary groups speaking with varying degrees of authority. Such comments, based on approximate observation, decried the continuation or renewal of certain practices from the past, such as corruption or collusion between businessmen and politicians, said to be widespread since 2011. Others denounced the persistence of numerous assaults on fundamental rights (human rights and freedom of expression), railing against the arbitrary deployment of police and judicial power and the use of torture, seen as symbolizing a suggestively mysterious “deep state”. It was claimed that the prevalence and aggravation of factors leading to the revolution, such as social and regional inequalities, were clear proof there had been no real regime change. But the most frequent point was that “men from the former regime”, taking advantage of the failure to conduct a purge and the weak transitional and criminal justice mechanisms introduced post-2011, were back in government. Nidaa Tounes, a political party partly founded in 2012 by a group of politicians from the former regime, was identified as the main conduit by which former senior officials returned to power.

Unlike the major social revolutions of the two previous centuries, the break with the former regime did not involve any massive, violent, and bloody purge of government leaders (Skocpol 1979). Equally, unlike the “pacted transitions” after communism collapsed in Eastern Europe, there was no question of “drawing a thick line” under the past (to use the expression of the first post-communist Polish prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, in a speech to the Polish parliament on August 24, 1989). Several former senior officials were put on trial, and in 2013 a transitional justice process was set up. These internal establishment dealings shed light on how the “men of the past” returned. This article seeks to sketch out a reply to two major issues in studies of post-regime changes to the composition of elites. First, how do the political personnel of a fallen regime handle its collapse? What practical experiences and representations accompany this subjective and objective relegation? Second, how do certain former government officials, adapting to the new political context, get

to be reappointed, thereby continuing or resuming their political careers? Is this rebound by former senior officials a factor converting them to democracy?

This article is based on a corpus of in-depth interviews with sixty or so politicians and civil servants from the Ben Ali regime, conducted between summer 2011 and summer 2017.

The sample comprises several senior politicians and civil servants of differing status and career paths (prime ministers, ministers, MPs, chairmen of institutions or state-owned companies, high-ranking RCD officials, regional RCD leaders, ambassadors, etc.). It was initially based on the acquaintanceship networks of certain Tunisian academics who were well-connected to elite social circles, and the pool of interviewees progressively expanded over time. The interviews were carried out face-to-face, normally at the interviewee's home. They were often recorded, sometimes in exchange for guaranteeing anonymity. The identity of the interviewer (a foreign researcher who was neither Tunisian nor a journalist) probably helped establish trust, especially during the first two years of study, when the unfavorable political context did little to encourage former elites to speak openly.

The article starts by describing the collapse of the regime in terms of the experience and perceptions of some of those who had served it. This is not presented as a series of institutional and political events linked up in a homogeneous and unidirectional process, but rather as a variety of individual experiences, each unique. The fall of the regime thereby emerges as a concrete experience, documented in precise detail by the accounts given of it. Analyzing this experience provides a way of testing several hypotheses regarding the post-revolutionary careers of former senior officials, stressing just how complex and diverse the paths are for reintegrating the political class.

2. The Extent, Perceptions, and Multiple Faces of Political Relegation

Though the “Tunisian revolution” did not result in lustration, the collapse of the Ben Ali regime led to several hundred individuals being suddenly expelled from positions of authority, even though in many cases these positions were largely a matter of form given the concentration of power in the hands of a small circle. Key players were evicted from the system of power over the course of the timeframe studied here, from January 14, 2011 (the date when Ben Ali fled) to October 23, 2011 when elections to the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly were held. The presidential palace was placed under new command, while Ben Ali's in-laws were excluded from the heart of power and

their goods confiscated by the state¹. The constitution was suspended, and the upper and lower houses (the chamber of deputies and chamber of advisers) were dissolved, along with the constitutional court, the social and economic council, and other state institutions whose members were appointed on the basis of their ties to power. The president's party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique, or RCD), was disbanded by court ruling, consigning its former leaders to political anonymity. Several ministers who had served under Ben Ali were awarded government posts, and some governors from the former regime were reappointed, but both groups were subsequently dismissed, as were many delegates (officials at the level below that of governor). Ambassadors appointed before January 14 were also recalled. Within a few months, most government officials were forced to relinquish power. All RCD officials were even debarred from standing in the October 23, 2011 elections.²

The apex of power was thus decapitated. But things were different at lower levels of power, where the situation was more complex, varying from one administration or sector to another. In general, high-ranking civil servants either retained their posts, or else were affected to equivalent or lower positions while maintaining the benefits associated with their prior status.³ The ministry of communication was quite simply dissolved, but while certain civil servants at the ministry of the interior were dismissed, there were no general shake-up despite Ben Ali having used it as a prime means of political domination (International Crisis Group 2012). At the ministry of justice, some judges were removed, though not until 2012, but many found the decision unfair for most judges from the former regime retained their positions. New university chancellors and deans were elected over the course of the year. As for economic circles, a fair number of businessmen moved in the same social circles as members of the judiciary, and though many had their passports confiscated, no steps were taken against them as a whole. Most chairmen of state-owned companies held onto their posts, though there were a few cases of dismissal in the wake of staff protests. Further work needs to be done to provide a more detailed assessment of the situation sketched out in the preceding lines. The perspective also needs to be widened to examine the social groups forming the

¹ By decree-law no. 2011-13 of March 14, 2011, signed by the interim president, Fouad Mebazaa, "confiscating assets, movable goods, and real estate", acquired by Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, his wife, and 112 acquaintances.

² By the decree-law no 2011-35 of May 10, 2011 on the election of the National Constituent Assembly. Article 15 stipulates that "whoever took office in the outgoing government of the former president except for those who were not part of the Democratic Constitutional Rally and all those who were entrusted with a position within the Democratic Constitutional Rally in the former president's government" were declared ineligible to stand for election, as were those who before January 14 had implored Ben Ali to run for the presidency in 2014.

³ Interviews with several high-ranking civil servants (2011-2015).

ruling class's loyalist clientele base, reciprocally linked by family ties, business relationships, social bonds, and geographical proximity.

2.1 Political Relegation

The idea of "political relegation" is useful for characterizing the fate of former senior officials from the regime. It is more appropriate than the more widespread one of "political demise", which tends to be applied to an individual rather than a group, and which stresses the irreversible nature of their downwards trajectory. "Political relegation" may affect individuals or groups, without specifying the exact nature of the change. Like social decline, it is relative, and reversible. It may take many different forms depending upon: sociographic parameters (gender, age, education, professional experience), political factors (proximity to Ben Ali or his wife's family, having been minister of a regalian department, acted as a presidential adviser, or held a subaltern post), the context (the upwards or downwards path of the individual's career at the time of the revolution), and so on. For many, political defeat is experienced as a "sudden turning point" in their lives, transpiring in different ways depending upon several individual and contextual parameters. It may take the form of forced resignation of directors of an institution after protests by its personnel (a phenomenon referred to in French as *dégagisme*), dismissal, forced retirement, or else the dissolution of the institution itself by political or joint political and judicial decision (Voetgli 2004).

In a way, the consequences of January 14 held up a magnifying mirror to the elites. It revealed the scale of their political resources, and brought their relationship with the head of state into focus. Equally, the way they apprehended time underwent a transformation. One of the paths to a successful political career in Tunisia used to involve long periods of being sidelined or inactive, alternating with phases of accelerating up through the ranks in a series of abrupt and unexpected promotions. Thus whilst those in the ascending phase in 2011 saw their career paths interrupted, those waiting on the sidelines saw all hope of promotion evaporate, for Ben Ali's fall automatically triggered the collapse of all prospect of promotion.

These experiences of political relegation were not necessarily accompanied by social decline, or at least not to the same extent. This depended on the proportion of political as opposed to non-political resources that individuals could draw on to maintain their social position. It also depended on their capacity to use these resources in new social and political conditions, and on whether or not society sought to impose sanctions for having held a political post in the past. In Tunisia there was not the same form of brutal social decline as that encountered, for example, by the "White Russians" who were forced into exile in the wake of the Bolshevik victory in 1917 (Jevakhoff 2007). Apart from a few figures from the Ben Ali regime who stood trial and served prison sentenc-

es, and whose assets were confiscated, most were able to retain an equivalent social position, albeit diminished now they were shorn of the symbolic benefits flowing from their former responsibilities.

Nevertheless, a fair share of the political class from the previous regime was suddenly deprived of any space for political activity or expression. Several hundred senior officials found they were no longer in the spotlight, a situation which could last varying lengths of time, in certain cases be irreversible, and at times virtually equate to political demise. When Ben Ali fell, so too did a group hitherto in charge of political representation and thus matters of population oversight (elected representatives, national and regional RCD officials, presidential advisers, ministers, governors, ambassadors, etc.).

2.2 Subjective Experiences of Relegation

Relegation is also a matter of perception. Maurice Halbwachs notes that it involves “going from a group you know and where you are held in esteem, to another where you are not known and have no particular reason to care for its appreciation” (Halbwachs 2002). Relegation thus involves aspects that the observer cannot directly detect, such as loss of visibility, and fewer solicitations, phone calls, and requests to intercede. These affect figures used to being continually approached by numerous petitioners, and whose prestige was based on the symbolic commerce they had with titular officials and other people of influence. Political relegation is a social experience that may lead to a feeling of social decline. Public opinion of former leaders, as expressed in public debate, press articles, television programs, and conversations in social spaces (neighborhoods, cafés, etc.), may also lead some to feel they have been marginalized, despite objectively retaining the same position.

In speaking of these episodes in their individual lives, interviewees presented them as inextricably bound up with collective experience, given the strong links between the two. Ben Ali’s “fleeing” Tunisia on January 14, 2011 was viewed retrospectively as the major event of the period, triggering the collapse of the regime and the loss of their political positions. Admittedly, this event was subsequently constructed as the end-goal of the Tunisian revolution and the beginning of the post-revolution period.⁴ But that does not suffice to explain why members of the former regime referred to it as a traumatic event, some circumspectly and others in more violent terms. The fact they remembered it as a “focal point” in a shifting situation is especially striking, for it had more or less immediate effects on the political and symbolic position they held at the time, irrespective of how close their relationship was to the summit of power. In the former regime, the head of state had been the keystone in the institutional political edifice, naming, appointing, promoting, and removing

⁴ Even though this interpretation is not shared by all (Heurtaux 2014).

people from positions of power. It was the head of state who distributed symbolic capital. Careers were made, and undone, through the exchange of favors and a personalized form of political patronage.

Although his departure did not immediately spell institutional collapse, it did automatically devalue all those who owed their position to Ben Ali personally. The first to be affected were those who held positions in institutions overseeing “political representation activities”, starting with the ruling RCD party (Camau and Geisser 2003). The symbolic resources of its secretary-general were abruptly devalued, and his position in the political field altered. He went overnight from being a strongman to a pariah. He had stayed at party headquarters on Avenue Mohamed V, just round the corner from the ministry of the interior where the January 14 demonstration took place, and at 5 PM, when Ben Ali left Tunisia, went home, where he realized his world was collapsing:

I dropped everything, I can tell you. I tried to protect myself physically and personally. It was over for me. I was expecting the worst. I was disgusted.

By the departure of Ben Ali?

By the way it ended, and the worry.⁵

Not all officials underwent immediate political relegation. Certain ministers and members of the RCD central committee managed to hold onto power in the following weeks. But for those whose career was abruptly interrupted, Ben Ali’s departure came as a blow that they described as traumatic:

Well I was shocked. I wasn’t expecting it at all, and today I still can’t explain why he left. A normal person holding that responsibility can’t leave, it isn’t possible, they cannot leave. If I had been president, I would’ve stayed till the bitter end, I would never have left. I might have got my family to leave, but I would never have left. So I experienced it as a terrible shock, also as a betrayal, because if he had stayed, all that wouldn’t have happened. If he had stayed, he would’ve got his family to leave and we would’ve got the country working, um, um, on the bases, on where the country actually stood, and not by wiping things out and say everything was black. I was shocked. I was ill for several months, I mean mentally ill, I reckoned I didn’t deserve that.⁶

Ben Ali’s departure, which subsequently led to a controversy about whether he had left the country of his own accord (had fled) or been forced to do so, was long viewed in the terms that emerged in the minutes after the presidential plane took off. Many described what was, for them, the tragic outcome of the uprising in terms of abandonment and betrayal:

A feeling of cowardice, yes cowardice, a captain doesn’t leave, especially not a military man.⁷ [...] I tried to find, how can I put it, elements to try to under-

⁵ Mohamed Gueriani, RCD secretary-general interview, interview, Tunis, 2013.

⁶ A minister in office during the revolution, interview, Tunis, 2011.

⁷ Ben Ali received military training, and holds a diploma from the French military academy of Saint-Cyr.

stand, positive elements. Was it true that he wished to accompany his family and then return? And even that, even trying in all good faith, I thought: he's not entitled to do that, he's not entitled to think of his son and his family.⁸

Admittedly, such an interpretation is very convenient in that it clears loyal elites of all responsibility, imputed entirely to the head of state. But it was not purely a rhetorical strategy. The memory of a particularly tricky moment runs through the unflattering account about the man who had hitherto embodied supreme power.

It would be wrong to underestimate the psychological effect this departure had on all those for whom the departure of the “king's” body physical necessarily entailed the collapse of his body politic – though it would be out of place to analyze it in a work of sociology such as this. Still, the shock they experienced equated to a loss of political position, and the devaluation of their entire career up to that point. It fed an additional frustration for those whose career had not yet peaked, such as a former senior party official who was convinced that he was being “prepared” by Ben Ali to one day be his interior minister, and for a former minister whose career had once again taken a rapid upwards turn.

3. The Many Forms of Reintegration

Viewed over a larger timescale, the relegation presented here as historical fact might emerge as a mere event, without any major medium-term impact on the principles governing the recruitment of government officials, and thus comparable to the way great Ottoman families continued to form the elites in kemalist Turkey (Bouquet 2011). If we choose to look at the level of lineage, patronymic, or social milieu, then relegation may go undetected. But it comes across more clearly at the scale of individuals, irrespective of whether or not it is only a passing phenomenon.

Any assessment of the reintegration of political life by former senior officials can only be partial at best, given the lack of hindsight needed for a long-term appraisal. Attention also needs to be paid to the diverse nature of post-revolutionary careers, which have not all followed the same direction. Lastly, it is important to avoid a sequential approach, for relegation and re-promotion are not consecutive phenomena, but unfold over partially overlapping timeframes. Whilst this article distinguishes between the two, for reasons of clarity, they in fact need to be thought of together. Lastly, reintegration – or, to coin a metaphor, recycling – should not be thought of solely as an individual or collective strategy arising from the intentions of those concerned. For recycling to occur, there have to be people to be recycled, who are recyclable. Very often there

⁸ A minister in office during the revolution, interview, Tunis, 2011.

also have to be recyclers, and the political and judicial context has to encourage recycling, or at least not impede it. How does an individual become recyclable? Who are the recyclers? The only way to answer these questions is to adopt multiple scales, shifting from the individual to the group and from the group back to the individual.

The argument may be set out succinctly. There is no doubt that a certain number of political and administrative officials from the fallen regime reintegrated political life. But whilst this is clearly visible in qualitative terms, it would appear at the time of writing (2017) to be marginal in quantitative terms, for those former officials who did not retire tended to move into other sectors, such as business, sometimes combined with cultural patronage and consultancy work, for instance.⁹ The “mauves” (a colloquial term designating the official color of the Ben Ali regime) did not monopolize post-revolutionary politics, and most of them were hit by an adjustment in the way multi-party contest worked. In the 2014 elections, ministers who had served under Ben Ali stood (unsuccessfully) for election by a now divided electorate (Heurtaux 2015). In other words, what some described as a “return”, suggesting a massive, unified, and one-directional process, in fact transpired as a series of scattered phenomena of individual and collective remobilizations that were frequently concurrent and overlapping.¹⁰

First, it is worth pointing out that though Ben Ali’s fall from power was spectacular, and the subsequent political relegation widespread, this did not preclude the political survival of a small number of the regime’s servants who – as of January 14 and up until October 23 of the same year, when they were swept aside by elections to the National Constituent Assembly – resumed the reins at the main institutions of state. The provisional executive that stepped into the confusion after Ben Ali fled was headed by two notorious figures from his regime, namely Fouad Mebazaa and Mohamed Ghannouchi. The former, who was president of the chamber of deputies after a long career as an MP and minister, stretching back to the days of independence, was named interim president of the Republic by virtue of article 57 of the 1959 constitution. The latter, who had been prime minister since 1999, continued in this position and was tasked with forming a new government.

However, this phenomenon should not be seen as the first step in a vast return. In a way, these survivors from the former regime acted as a shield against the immediate reinstatement of larger numbers. They were pressured into leav-

⁹ These distinct trajectories show that the actors did not all perceive political time in the same way. Certain embraced historical discontinuity, leaving politics and changing their lives, whilst others opted for individual continuity and accepted to partially realign their political activity.

¹⁰ As in an opinion piece published by a group of academics and association actors published in *Libération* on November 21, 2014 under the title “En Tunisie, le retour de l’ancien régime n’est pas une rumeur”.

ing the RCD (whose central committee they belonged to), and on January 27 they restructured the government, expelling ministers who were RCD members and orchestrating the disbanding of the party. A few weeks later they recognized the need to speed up steps to dismember the regime's institutions. Certain figures from the Ben Ali regime were also put on trial, with the agreement of the new authorities, at times at their behest even. These gestures – carried out in a very uncertain context and under pressure from several actors (the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the bar association, protesters from the Casbah 1 and Casbah 2 movements, and the Committee to Protect the Revolution) – should not be analyzed as evidence of voluntary conversion perceiving the situation as a democratic transition. Instead they stemmed from a pragmatic reading by political actors with limited resources undergoing a process outside their control. Hence their contributions did not last. Mohamed Ghannouchi left politics after resigning on February 27, in the wake of pressure from the Casbah 2 movement, while Fouad Mebazaa stood down after the National Constituent Assembly elected Moncef Marzouki president of Tunisia on December 13. And it was a former minister of Bourguiba, Beji Caid Essebsi, who took over the political reins after Mohamed Ghannouchi. He worked with the High Authority for the Achievement of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition (HIROR), invoking Bourguiba and Destour, and taking care not to recruit figures from Ben Ali's period of the former regime.

Many former government officials denounced in the press (and in my interviews) an attitude they equated to abandonment, betrayal, or denial. They contested certain decisions taken during the first six months of 2011 (the choice of a constituent assembly, the decision not to bring forward presidential elections, etc.), accusing the defectors of being turncoats who paved the way to the Islamists seizing power. The controversy surrounding article 15 of the draft electoral law, which was finally passed by HIROR, debarring a certain number of former government officials from standing, compounded disagreement amongst former regime elites.¹¹

3.1 Building Up the Destourian Political Field

The resultant fracture turned out to be a structural feature in the recomposition of the Destourian political field, that part of the political spectrum which is continually evoking its origins in the national movement and/or former regime. This is the light in which to assess the small political parties that sprang up in this sector as of 2011 (Khémira 2012). Most of these little parties were anchored around figures endowed with sufficient resources (notoriety and an ability to attract private funding) who had been part of the former regime.

¹¹ Cf. footnote 2.

Some, such as the Initiative Party (*Al Moubadara*), led by the former minister of foreign affairs Kamel Morjane, distanced themselves from the Ben Ali regime, whose legacy struck them as too inflammatory. Others competed to capture the support of those disappointed by the transition and nostalgic for the regime. Despite the ban on ex-RCD officials running in the 2011 elections, nine parties did stand, though only the Initiative Party was successful, winning five seats. These refuge parties (such as The Nation (*Al Watan*) led by the former minister Mohamed Jegham) made barely any impact, and most of the many attempts to work together met with failure. There were even more such attempts over the course of 2011, 2012, and 2013, but no party managed to gain sufficient visibility to warrant dreaming of political victory. However, one of these political enterprises, Nidaa Tounes, managed to coalesce around its leader, Beji Caid Essebsi, and to assert itself. It attracted defectors from the left, the trade union movement, the former regime, and the business world. In less than two years it established itself as the main opposition to the Islamist Ennahdha Party. In 2014, it along with other parties took advantage of the lifting of the ban on former RCD officials standing for political office, going on to win the general and presidential elections, garnering the support of most of the electoral clientele targeted by Destourian parties.

3.2 Individual Instances of Recycling

Nidaa Tounes and other parties that may be described as post-RCD – but which tend to present themselves as part of the national Destourian movement – emerged as conduits for recycling former government officials with fewer resources. Several middle-ranking officials from the former RCD stood as candidates on the lists of small post-RCD parties in the 2014 general elections, such as the former deputy secretary-general in charge of women’s affairs, Abir Moussa, and the former mayor of Tunis, Abbas Mohsen, for instance (Heurtaux 2015).

But the sphere of political recycling was far from being limited to Destourian parties. Whenever the context was favorable, the leaders of other parties were also keen recyclers, seeking to “net” officials from the former regime to draw on their experience and networks of influence. During the interviews I conducted between 2011 and 2017, there was not a single former minister who did not boast of having been approached by the leader of a political party, to lend his “advice” to one, and his “support” to another, and above all to share their list of contacts. Before 2014 this “pragmatic rule” of party mobilization was rarely openly practiced (Bailey 1969). The perspective of the upcoming municipal elections in 2018, necessitating small-scale political work in the local constituencies, has revalorized the supposed qualities of former RCD officials more than ever. Certain parties, such as the liberal Afek Tounes Party for example, have made it part of their political strategy.

In the absence of recyclers there is no recycling. But not all candidates for recycling are necessarily recyclable. In Afek Tounes, for example, “corrupt” figures are not officially accepted, whether or not they have been put on trial (reputation and public rumor suffice).¹² Thus certain parties practice a form of vetting, albeit not particularly formalized, in which they check the past of those seeking to be selected as candidate for a given election.

Nevertheless, joining a party rapidly emerged as a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for political success. Former ministers under Ben Ali who ran in the 2014 presidential elections (Kamel Morjane, Mondher Zenaïdi, Abderrahim Zouari, and Mustapha Kamel Nabli) were crushed in the first round, with some even pulling their names from the ballot sheet. Despite extensive media coverage of their individual strategies, they failed to win popular support, even though one of them, Kamel Morjane, was also the leader of his party, and another, Abderrahim Zouari, enjoyed the backing of a Destourian party led by one of Ben Ali’s former prime ministers, Hamed Karoui.

3.3 Defending the Material and Moral Interests of Former Government Officials

When former officials seek to return to political life, whether on an individual initiative or part of a collective one by a group of varying degrees of organization, they need to justify their return in speeches devised to legitimize their participation in public debate and electoral contest. Looking at the speeches by former ministers who ran for the presidency reveals a set of arguments recurring as a leitmotiv: ambiguous references to the Ben Ali past, rhetorical acceptance of the principles of democracy coupled with bitter criticism of the “transition”, and, above all, the incessant vaunting of their presumed fitness to lead the state. In the words of Abderrahim Zouari:

Tunisians today need to restore the authority of the state, [they need] a man who believes in democracy, who has experience of government business and the real world, [who knows] the regions, and can be operational immediately, for the situation in Tunisia is such that solutions cannot be delayed, which is why experience is paramount. I would like to remind you that I started my political path as Mayor of Dahmani, at the age of twenty-five, and that by thirty I was governor, the youngest mayor and governor ever! (*Réalités*, October 2-8, 2014)

Drawing on precise biographical details in this way might appear surprising, were it not backed up by a portrait of the former regime that minimizes any form of ideological adhesion to the fallen regime, and retrospectively distinguishes between their political career, downplayed to vaunt their service to the state. It is thus opportune to highlight one’s former service in the executive

¹² A senior Afek Tounes official, interview, Tunis, June 2017.

apparatus of state, provided one erases the fact that these positions in the former regime required unwavering loyalty to the president, and that one emphasizes strictly sector-specific achievements.

This explains the impressive list of successes Mondher Zenaidi boasted of in “serving the homeland” as minister on several occasions between 1994 and 2011. Far from downplaying his personal experience, he emphasized his “long experience of state, enabling [him] and the experts [he has] called on to assess our social and economic history, to draw the lessons of undoubted successes and certain failures, and to formulate proposals for the future rooted in the values of the reformist current” (*ibid*). The stigma of his long ministerial experience (at the ministries of transport, tourism, trade, and public health between 1994 and 2011) is turned on its head and presented as a strength in his strategy to capitalize on his political experience:

When I was minister for public health, we had an excellent level of operational efficiency while carrying out major structural reforms in the sector. If a machine broke down in any hospital we repaired it within a few days. [...] We managed the H1N1 swine flu crisis in exemplary manner, so much so that the World Health Organization congratulated Tunisia on its efforts and the way this flu was contained without wasting any public money (<*www.businessnews.com*>, October 3, 2014).

It is easy to understand the references to “competence”, for it is part of a widespread social imaginary in Tunisia of state building by the elites. State officials – symbols of “modernity”, bearers of a vision for their country’s development, and champions of its sovereignty – even view themselves as indispensable to its economic success and proper public management, independently, for that matter, of the nature of the political regime and the reality of its economic “successes”. It is in such terms, and always in the name of “noble” causes – such as tackling Islamism, economic emergencies, re-establishing the state’s authority, or the need for national reconciliation – that attorneys, judges, publicists, talk-show hosts, the heads of think tanks, media proprietors, and newspaper editors tend to champion or offer a platform to former government officials, thereby helping them return to public life.

The credit attached to ministerial experience in the former regime needs to be linked to the ambiguous stance many former government officials have towards it. Very few of them condemn the former regime outright, and not all condemn its excesses, or even the exactions carried out prior to 2011. Their return to politics should thus not be thought of as signaling their practical and symbolic conversion to democracy, unlike their counterparts in the parties of Eastern Europe after 1989.

Ben Ali’s former ministers have no doubt contributed indirectly to public recognition of the right of former government officials to stand for election, and to the implicit revalorization of the former regime, through their public pronouncements and by having stood for the most prestigious elections in the

country. The narrative they provide has played a part in defending the moral and material interests of government officials from the former regime. They are not alone in this, and ever more initiatives have taken place as part of the broader process of setting up a transitional justice system. This has triggered the reactivation of networks of former officials, in the form of clubs (of former MPs, governors, or delegates), think tanks, and through pronouncements in conferences and publications. They have sought to influence the content of the law on transitional justice, and regularly spoken out against how it is being implemented. More recently, they have supported the proposed law on economic reconciliation put forward by President Beji Caid Essebsi, seeking to extend favorable treatment to high-ranking civil servants and businessmen implicated in corruption affairs under the former regime.¹³ Although the actions of these groups have not entirely healed the fractures in the former elite, they have resulted in the re-mobilization of a group that had been sorely tested by the events of the revolution, and fragmented by the early phases of political transition.

4. Conclusion

Has the former regime staged a comeback in Tunisia? It is true that not all the characteristics of the fallen regime disappeared with it. Collusion between politicians and certain economic agents has been reconfigured, but without disappearing, and corruption appears to have worsened since 2011. The security forces still operate outside democratic control, even though, in a major difference with the former regime, they now claim to act autonomously of political oversight. Nevertheless the triad at the heart of Ben Ali's power (the presidential palace in Carthage, the security forces, and the business world) has been superseded by a fragmented structure composed of numerous influences, which do not necessarily converge towards stabilizing the situation in ways beneficial to the political authorities. And the government can no longer count on the support of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the powerful central union that is now clearly asserting its independence.

Yet I hope this article has shown that the argument that there is a massive and coordinated comeback by former government officials does not stand up to empirical scrutiny. Instead, analysis shows the individual and collective strategies to adjust to a new political state of play, together with contributions by former officials to depicting the past in what is now a competitive narrative context. In a way, and without presupposing their lasting attachment to democ-

¹³ This proposal triggered resistance and controversy, and it was a watered-down version of the law that was finally passed on September 13, 2017, granting amnesty only to high-ranking civil servants.

racy, former government officials are exploiting a pluralist framework that thereby acts as the precondition for their return to political life. It is quite possible that they will end up rejecting this framework. But it is equally probable that they will flourish in it, and make a lasting return to politics.

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