The Struggle for Meanings and Power in Tunisia after the Revolution

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In light of the chaotic and current situation in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen, international observers consider the Tunisian experience to be the reference model of political change in the region. In spite of assassinations, tensions and conflicts that emerged within and outside of its Parliament, Tunisia managed to free public speech, to create a pluralist political arena and to obtain a democratic constitution adopted by the National Constituent Assembly. This second transitional phase resulted in the upholding of parliamentary and presidential elections. Glowing reports of the international community and local self-triumph put aside, the Tunisian trajectory should be scrutinized in order to go beyond simplistic interpretations of the dynamics at work.

The 2011 uprisings have initiated a continuing process of redefinition of political forces and alliances. Key elements of this process include the institutionalization of political Islam through the Ennahda party, the assertion of the Salafi movement in the public sphere, the shift from one type a collation of former opponents to the Ben Ali regime in the years 2011–2014 (the “troika” of CPR-Ettakatol and Ennahda) to an alliance between Islamists and the anti-Islamist party of Nida Tounes. However, competition for power does not by itself explain the dynamics that have unfolded within the Tunisian political sphere. Since 2011, the observable political struggle tightly correlates with disputes over the introduction of new narratives and new interpretations about the revolution. The widespread celebration of consensus, for example, does not merely reflect an objective balance of power among political forces. It also contributes to naturalizing an interpretation of Tunisian politics, in which dissent is a threat to national unity rather than an ingredient of democracy.
To the regime’s fall is hence tied a struggle for meaning, one that is inseparable from the struggle for power. It has divided the country along multiple lines that oppose business elites to the “people”; Islamists vs. secularists; the upper class and urban elites to the rural “inland” regions; the North to the South; Political Islam to Tunisianity; the national to the diaspora, etc. This special issue seeks to examine this very relationship between the battle for power and the competition over truths and narratives.

Social scientists and experts have not remained insulated from these disputes around the interpretation of the transition. While scholars of Tunisia have suddenly multiplied after 2011, they have been confronted with fundamental ethical and epistemological questions. In addition to the difficult task of trying to ascribe some stable meaning to a process in the making, the high emotional charge involved in the study of a revolution and a transition has been a major challenge. Until 2011, the social scientific literature on post-independence Tunisia, and more specifically on the Ben Ali authoritarian regime has been scarce.1 The difficult condition of doing fieldwork in the repressive context of a highly policed state is the main explanation for this seeming lack of interest. After 2011, given the relative scarcity of the corpus of political and sociological analysis of post-independence Tunisia, several experts have elaborated analyses of the post-revolution dynamics that were based on external models (drawn from Eastern Europe, Asia or Latin America), rather than on the consideration of Tunisia’s own history.2

The sudden outburst of academic enthusiasm for Tunisia has undoubtedly contributed to a better understanding of the complexity of the current transformations. Tunisia, however, regularly appears in these works as a case of study, the function of which is to allow scholars to test and verify theories that have been elaborated for very different contexts. Moreover, a gap
