

**Local (r)evolutions in times of democratic transition:**

**Reconstructing political authority in Tunisian municipalities (2011-2014)**

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**Introduction: contextualizing the Tunisian transition**

In recent scholarship on democratization in the Arab world, there have been repeated criticisms of the dominance of top-down institutionalist analyses in the period prior to the Arab uprisings.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that bottom-up approaches were not present, as there were indeed very relevant studies produced at the time, even in such unpropitious research settings as Tunisia. Researchers looking at the protests in the mining region of Gafsa in 2008 already highlighted some of the dynamics between local unrest and state authoritarianism that would later impact the Tunisian revolution.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, studies had investigated the dynamics of the (crony) neo-liberal reforms of the Tunisian regime at the local level and outlined the many unintended consequences of macro-reforms in the face of local resistance and adaptations.<sup>3</sup> Yet in all these cases,

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Ben Néfissa, “Révolution Arabes: les Angles Morts de l’Analyse Politique des Sociétés de la Région,” *Confluences Méditerranée*, Vol. 2, No. 77 (Spring 2011), pp. 75–90; Michelle Pace and Francesco Cavatorta, “The Arab Uprisings in Theoretical Perspective: An Introduction,” *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (July 2012), pp. 125–38; and Frédéric Volpi, “Explaining (and re-explaining) Political Change in the Middle East during the Arab Spring: Trajectories of Democratization and of Authoritarianism in the Maghreb,” *Democratization*, Vol. 20, No. 6 (April 2013), pp. 969–90.

<sup>2</sup> Amin Allal, “Réformes Néolibérales, Clientélismes et Protestations en Situation Autoritaire,” *Politique Africaine*, Vol. 1, No. 117 (2010), pp. 107–25; and Amin Allal and Karine Bennafla, “Les Mouvements Protestataires de Gafsa (Tunisie) et Sidi Ifni (Maroc) de 2005 à 2009,” *Revue Tiers Monde*, Vol. 5 (HS) (2011), pp. 27–45.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen J. King, *Liberalization against Democracy: The Local Politics of Economic Reform in Tunisia*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); and Béatrice Hibou, transl. by Anrew Brown, *The Force of Obedience. The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia* (London: Polity Press, 2011).

because bottom-up challenges to the existing institutional order were not sustained and powerful enough, these micro-dynamics were generally de-prioritized in explanation of political stability in the country (and the region). Instead the dominant consensus that emerged was that since authoritarian institutions and policies appear to be producing over time a reasonably stable and predictable national environment, explanations of political causality in these countries ought to be grounded mainly on these known institutional actors and processes.

Today, in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, institutionalist approaches are once again becoming common, especially in relation the rebuilding of the state legitimacy and institutions.<sup>4</sup> Whilst such focus on the state retains its relevance, particularly in situations of consolidation of routine political governance, it is crucial not to ‘over-state’ once more the Arab state. Certainly, the literature considering the struggle between ‘new’ and ‘old’ elites seeking to maximize and/or consolidate their power at the top of the institutional system remain particularly appropriate in the post-uprisings contexts.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly too, the practical and ideological struggle between Islamist and non-Islamist actors for the control of state institutions is important; even though it is not necessarily the most relevant indicator of social and political change.<sup>6</sup> Equally, the role of ‘security forces’ in these polities can be decisive, as we can see from their impact in the recent political reconfigurations of Libya and Egypt.<sup>7</sup> Yet, with the benefit of hindsight, today even more

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<sup>4</sup> Alaya Allani, “The Post-Revolution Tunisian Constituent Assembly: Controversy over Powers and Prerogatives,” *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2013), pp. 131–40; Emma C. Murphy, “The Tunisian elections of October 2011: a Democratic Consensus,” *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2013), pp. 231–47; and Andrea G. Brody-Barre, “The Impact of Political Parties and Coalition Building on Tunisia’s Democratic Future,” *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2013), pp. 211–30.

<sup>5</sup> Volker Perthes, ed., *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004); and Isabelle Werenfels, *Managing Instability in Algeria: Elites and Political Change since 1995* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Alfred C. Stepan, “Tunisia Transition and the Twin Tolerations,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (April 2012), pp. 89–103; Francesco Cavatorta, Fabio Merone, “Moderation Through Exclusion? The Journey of the Tunisian Ennahdha from Fundamentalist to Conservative Party,” *Democratization*, Vol. 20, No. 5 (2013), pp. 857–875; Malika Zeghal, “Competing Ways of Life: Islamism, Secularism, and Public Order in the Tunisian Transition,” *Constellations*, Vol. 20, No 2 (2013), pp. 254–74; and Frederic Volpi and Ewan Stein, “Islamism and the State after the Arab uprisings: Between People Power and State Power,” *Democratization* (forthcoming 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Eva Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (January 2012), pp. 127–49; and Holger Albrecht,

so than before the Arab uprisings, it remain crucial to make room for the bottom-up political processes that work beneath (and sometime upset) these top-down institutional dynamics. In the following, we seek to contribute to a better understanding of the grassroots and local dynamics of democratic transition by analyzing trends in the successes and failures of local democracy in Tunisia.

The Tunisian democratic transition that started when President Ben Ali left power on 14 January 2011 was characterized by a reasonably smooth establishment of an electoral democracy symbolized by the elections to the constituent assembly (parliament) of 23 October 2011. At the end of 2011, the formation of a government of coalition (the Troika) led by the Islamist party Ennahda marked the beginning of two years of political and institutional consolidation. Political polarization in the country became more intense in the first half of 2013 with the assassinations of two leftwing parliamentarians (Chokri Belaïd on 6 February 2013 and Mohamed Brahmi on 25 July 2013) by armed Islamists thought to be linked to the Salafist organization Ansar al-Sharia (which was classified as a terrorist organization and banned shortly after the second assassination). Tensions between Islamist and secularized politicians, led by the Nida Tounes party, led to parliamentary boycotts and extra-parliamentary protests that hindered the passing of a new constitution and the scheduling of new parliamentary elections. However, in January 2014, the Ennahda-led government formally handed over executive power to a technocratic government that was to govern until the holding new elections, scheduled for the end of that year. This agreement facilitated a return to parliamentary routine, and the passing of a new constitution by the constituent assembly. This political pragmatism enabled the country to move relatively unhindered towards new parliamentary (26 October 2014) and presidential elections (23 November 2014 and 21 December 2014 (second round)).

For Tunisia as for most of the region, while there is some degree of scholarly consensus regarding the most relevant state actors and processes that shape contemporary political changes, no such agreement is readily available regarding the most pertinent

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“Does Coup-Proofing Work? Political-Military Relations in Authoritarian Regimes Amid the Arab Uprisings,” *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.20, No.1, 2015.

grassroots dynamics.<sup>8</sup> Although many analysts have focused in recent months on the struggles in Tunisian high politics (new constitution, nomination of a technocratic government, parliamentary elections, formation of a new ruling coalition), much of the bottom-up dynamics that fed into these processes remained largely overlooked.<sup>9</sup> Hence, in our analysis we investigate the political dynamics that could gain momentum at the local level when an authoritarian system like that of Ben Ali's Tunisia is overthrown and replaced by a new and more democratic system. Locally, what were the implications of the fears voiced by the Tunisian opposition that the Islamists would attempt to play a new hegemonic role and exclude them for power? Conversely, how far were the supporters of Ennahda correct to blame many of their difficulties of governance on the continuing presence of a 'deep state' that purposely created hindrances for the new regime? The analysis developed in the following highlights the role of the local strategies and of their unintended consequences in shaping a municipal political landscape that both facilitate and hinders the democratic transition implemented by national institutions.

In the following, we examine the reconstruction of local politics and institutions in a few Tunisian municipalities with diverse social and political constituencies. We analyze how a new set of processes and actors take roots locally and interact with the democratic transformation of the political institutions and state administration. We detail how the initial re-empowerment of local politics as a form of 'direct democracy' – i.e. the bottom-up 'revolutionary' process of replacement of personnel and rules from the old regime by local ones – evolved into an ambiguous form of representative democracy. During the time of the study, this ambiguity derives from the fact that during the first four years (at the time of writing) of Tunisian transition, representative democracy was not

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<sup>8</sup> Lisa Anderson, "Demystifying the Arab Spring: Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (May/June 2011), pp. 2–7; Michele Penner Angrist, "Understanding the Success of Mass Civic Protest in Tunisia," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Autumn 2013), pp. 247–64; Nouri Gana, ed., *The Making of Tunisian Revolution: Context, Architects, Prospects* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change in the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Laura Guazzone and Daniela Pioppi, eds., *The Arab State and Neo-Liberal Globalization. The Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2009); and Sylvia I. Bergh, "Introduction: Researching the Effects of Neoliberal Reforms on Local Governance in the Southern Mediterranean," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (November 2012), pp. 303–21; Laryssa Chomiak and John P. Entelis "Contesting Order in Tunisia: Crafting Political Identity," in *Civil Society Activism Under Authoritarian Rule: A Comparative Perspective*, ed., Francesco Cavatorta (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp.73-93,

directly applicable to local politics as no local elections were held. In this context, we investigate how the political interactions between the center and the periphery shaped and were shaped by local actors and processes that had different types of claims to democratic legitimacy. A better understanding of these different forms of legitimacy constitutes an important element of explanation of the contemporary Tunisian democratic transition.

To highlight how local politics were shaped by local actors, we focus our analysis on municipalities located in a single governorate. Although we have found similar local dynamics to the ones examined here in other governorates<sup>10</sup>, we chose to reduce the variability introduced by gubernatorial and parliamentary actors by ensuring that one governor dealt with all the municipalities investigated and, after the 2011 parliamentary elections, only one set of parliamentarians was involved (as parliamentary circumscriptions correspond to governorates). We chose the governorate of Ariana as it contains in close proximity municipalities with visibly different levels of socio-economic development. There, we focused primarily on the municipalities of Ariana and of Ettadhamen, with additional insights provided by the municipalities of Raoued and of Soukra. The Ariana municipality is a relatively well-off neighborhood of the capital with a long tradition of social and political activism. The Ettadhamen municipality is a poorer area primarily developed in the 1970s through improving shantytowns and building new social housing. Illustrative of these differences, in the 2000s, the unemployment rate in the Ariana municipality was about half that of Ettadhamen, and the number of inhabitants with formal education three times higher.<sup>11</sup>

In the first section below, we detail how in the municipalities, the Ben Ali period is characterized by a functioning state administration which is top down and instrumentalized by the regime for political ends. In the second section, we illustrate how the early revolutionary period constituted an experiment with democracy in which citizens and previously excluded social and political social actors learnt about political governance and tried to institutionalize the choices made during the revolution. In the

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<sup>10</sup> See also, Hellal Mohamed, “Les réactions des acteurs locaux à Monastir dans le contexte de l’après-révolution tunisienne,” *Confluences Méditerranée*, Vol. 2, No. 85 (2013), pp. 61–73

<sup>11</sup> Institut National de la Statistique, *Tunisie, Censur 2004* (Tunis, 2005). We are well aware of the unreliability of official estimates by the Ben Ali regime but regardless of what the exact number were, the contrast between different neighborhoods remains quite revealing.

third section we show how the absence of an electoral process at the local level was a substantive cause of friction between the bottom-up revolutionary process of popular empowerment and the top-down formal process of political democratization. Finally in the fourth section, we indicate how the erosion of state authority in the municipalities is tied to the erosion of local political legitimacy, as tensions between politicians, civil servants and citizens weaken the ability of the state to act effectively and consensually.

### **The old regime and its local legacies**

In this section, we introduce the structure and rationale of the local political and administrative order under Ben Ali prior to the 2011 uprisings. We note the linkages between the administrative aspects of governance and the political logics of regime survival. We also indicate the limitations of Ben Ali's reforms of the 2000s and the tensions that began to become more visible at the local level in the polity. The relevance of the 'local' in forming public opinion is grounded on people's everyday experiences with the local interfaces of national institutions. Regarding state authority, it is also directly connected to the way in which state power is devolved and organized locally.

Local opposition activist, Khaled Amami, suggests that for ordinary Tunisians, Ben Ali's governance system appeared to be built from the bottom-up with the '*omda*', the district chief, being positioned at the lowest level.<sup>12</sup> The *omda* is the starting point of a long, hierarchical, administrative structure that ends at the top of the Interior Ministry. He (for he is usually a man) is the representative of the state administration at the district (i.e. neighborhood) level. In the Ben Ali system, beside his administrative function, the *omda* played a political role and was the face of the regime for most ordinary Tunisians. The power of the *omda* was largely the product of a patronage network in which he had a strategic role in evaluating the socio-economic needs of the locals and in directing the flow of state benefits towards 'deserving' individuals and families. Discretionary financial support was most relevant for the poorest, and although this system did not directly address the issue of poverty, it gave the state administration an additional tool of

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<sup>12</sup> Khaled Amami, personal interview, Tunis, December 2012.

social control.<sup>13</sup> As scholars from King to Hibou show, despite having a low status in the administrative machinery, the *omda* had significant influence over the life of ordinary citizens.<sup>14</sup>

On the upper levels of the administrative and political ladder are the functionaries from the province (*délégation*) and the governorate (*wilaya*). The regional governor (*wali*) is at the nexus between the central administration and the local/regional administrative and political structure. These key civil servants regulating the interactions between the center and the periphery are appointed by the Interior Minister and, before the revolution governors' nominations were overseen by Ben Ali himself. The other relevant institutional nexus at the local/provincial level are the decentralized structures of the different ministries. Under Ben Ali, beyond purely local matters, the principal way in which ordinary citizen would engage with the central state bureaucracy was via the ministries' regional or provincial headquarters. As explained by an *omda* in Ettadhamen, this system was structured by the patronage network of Ben Ali's party, the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (RCD), and citizens in need of a 'service' from the administration usually needed the help of a local facilitator.<sup>15</sup> This task was usually performed by a delegate (*mouattamed*), the representative of an administration at the level of the province (*délégation*). Whilst the delegates were technically in charge of coordinating actions between the different local sections of national administrations, for the majority of Tunisians they were simply the people to approach to obtain various authorization from the central bureaucracy.<sup>16</sup>

In parallel with this administrative structure, the country set up in the 1990s a new system of local councils (municipalities), principally in response to external pressure for political democratization and administrative decentralization.<sup>17</sup> The 264 Tunisian municipalities deal with matters such as building and maintaining primary schools, sports

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<sup>13</sup> Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, *Tunisie: Etat, Economie et Société: Ressources Politiques, Légitimation et Régulations Sociales* (Paris: Publisud éditions, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> King, *Liberalization against Democracy*; Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*.

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous, *omda* (district chief), personal interview, Ettadhamen, 18 December 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Cherni Mohammed Khemissi, Head of the Ennahda party committee on local authorities, personal interview, 12 December 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Béatrice Hibou, "Le Réformisme, Grand Récit Politique de la Tunisie Contemporaine," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, Vol. 5, No. 56-4bis (2009), pp. 14–39.

halls, cemeteries, public gardens, as well as roads improvements, rubbish collection, and some aspects of building regulations. They have an elected local council and are headed by a mayor who is one of the local councilors selected by and among his peers. In the 1990s, municipalities were given additional prerogatives and in particular they were given a degree of financial autonomy via the collection of local taxes, as well as through the establishment of a compensation fund for the poorest municipalities that could not entirely rely on taxation. In our case studies, while the Ariana municipality was largely financially autonomous, that of Ettadhamen was mostly subsidized by the central administration (via the *Fond Commun* (FCCL) and the *Caisse de Prêt et de Soutient*(CPSCL) of the local collectivities, which are overseen by the *Direction Générale des Collectivités Publiques Locales* (DGCPL), in the Interior Ministry) (see figure 1). It is evidently highly questionable whether this process of decentralization worked in the sense of creating a local democracy or even greater public accountability of the local institutions. In the 2000s, analyses of the role of such state reforms promoting ‘good governance’ and ‘local development’ in the country commonly present this process as part of a general upgrading of authoritarianism.<sup>18</sup> These developments did nonetheless provide a new formal structure of participation for local actors and ordinary citizens that would become relevant after the 2011 revolution.

**[Figure 1 here]**

The limited significance of these reforms was visible in the final years of the Ben Ali regime through the occasional episodes of contestation that took place in several localities. The most important and best known of these episodes of local unrest are the 2008 Gafsa protests. Centering on the nepotistic distribution of jobs in the mining region of Gafsa by the state-owned Gafsa Phosphate Company, the protest by unemployed

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<sup>18</sup> Houda Laroussi, *Micro-Crédit et Lien Social en Tunisie. La Solidarité Instituée* (Tunis-Paris: IRMC-Karthala, 2009); and Amin Allal and Florian Kohstall, “Opposition within the State: Governance in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia,” in *Contentious Politics in Middle East: Political Opposition under Authoritarianism*, ed., Holger Albrecht (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), pp. 181–204.

workers showed some of the limitations of the patronage system and repressive tactics of the regime. Due to the central significance of the mining industry in the region, the protest snowballed to include most of the local population. Eventually, the carrot and stick approach of the regime – dismissal of the governor, of the company director, and a new round of hiring on the one hand, as well as an increased number of arrests and imprisonments of protestors on the other hand – ensured a return to normality.<sup>19</sup> Similar difficulties in translating national policies into the local context led to several days of rioting in the border town of Ben Guardane in August 2010. In this case, it was the attempt by the Tunisian regime to clamp down on the smuggling of cheap products transiting through Libya that led to the closure of the border crossing. This situation dramatically affected a local economy primarily based on legal and illegal commercial exchanges with Libya, and generated violent protests by the town population. Finally, that same year near Sidi Bouzid already, in the small town of Regueb a few months before the start of the Tunisian revolution, small landowners (including members of Bouazizi's extended family) had organized a protest against the National Agricultural Bank to oppose the efforts of the bank to repossess more swiftly the land when the landowners were late reimbursing their loans.<sup>20</sup>

At the local level, many of the tensions that had been expressed in the final years of the Ben Ali regime quickly resurfaced after the fall of the regime during a period of intense social unrest.<sup>21</sup> In the public administration, this period was often an opportunity to settle accounts with multiple 'petty dictators', usually members of Ben Ali's party the RCD or their associates, who had been in charge until then. Equally, during this hectic period, it was no great surprise that most of the RCD-dominated local councils suddenly stopped meeting up, and their most prominent members disappeared from view (of their

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<sup>19</sup> Eric Gobe, 'The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and a Social Movement: meaning and significance of a protest movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia', Working paper, HAL (2010). <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00557826>.

<sup>20</sup> Michaël Béchir Ayari, Vincent Geisser and Abir Krefa, 'Chronique d'une révolution [presque] annoncée', *L'Année du Maghreb*, VII (2011), pp. 359-387; Mathilde Fautras, 'Mohamed Bouazizi, l'ouvrier agricole: Relire la « révolution » depuis les campagnes tunisiennes', *Jadaliyya*, 21 July 2014. [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18630/mohamed-bouazizi-louvrier-agricole\\_-relire-la-%C2%AB-r%C3%A9](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18630/mohamed-bouazizi-louvrier-agricole_-relire-la-%C2%AB-r%C3%A9).

<sup>21</sup> Habib Ayeb, "Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution," *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 38, No. 129 (September 2011), pp. 467–479.

own accord or because they were driven out by protesters). This situation generated in its turn new dilemmas particularly in relation to the management of the municipalities: who was meant to do what, on what grounds, and in whose name? In the early stages of the Tunisian transition, the roadmap proposed by the new provisional government of Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi focused on introducing new electoral laws and bodies to supervise national elections in order to meet both domestic and international expectations. Yet, this roadmap to the election of a national constituent assembly ignored or, at best treated very superficially, the issue of local democracy in Tunisia's municipalities. National leaders appeared to deprioritize the issue of the legitimacy of the new local councils and of their relevance in ensuring good local governance the post-Ben Ali era.<sup>22</sup> In the following, therefore, we consider how new local actors in some of these municipalities managed the institutional and administrative infrastructure left behind by the old regime, and to what effect.

### **The battle for the local reconstruction of political authority**

In the following we highlight the plurality of actors who came to the forefront during the uprisings and how they dealt with the existing political and administrative order in order to rebuild local forms of authority. We examine the evolution of these ad-hoc arrangements centering on the local councils between the time of the revolution and the parliamentary elections of October 2011 to illustrate how different social and political actors interacted in order to produce local compromises that reflected the varying strengths of their movements at the local level. In particular, we highlight two different stages in the transitional process. First, the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Ben Ali regime was characterized by the emergence on the public scene of a multiplicity of social and political forces, including 'old' civil society actors (unions, human right associations, leftist organizations, established opposition politicians) and new civil society actors (Ennahda activists (in the sense that they could return on the ground after the uprising),

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<sup>22</sup> As Tarek Chaabouni, a former leader of the Communist Party (Ettajdid) and subsequently a member of Nida Tounes remarked, just like under Ben Ali, the issue of the local administration of the country hardly ever appeared on the national political agenda. Tarek Chaabouni, personal interview, Tunis, 9 December 2013.

salafis, ‘revolutionary leagues’). Second, after a few weeks or months of unrest, there is the beginning of a process of re-institutionalization of political authority during which some of these emergent actors are able to stabilize and consolidate their positions in local politics. In this context, we note how successful actors tended to be characterized by a greater professionalization of their role, an effective mobilization of the local resources, and an effective dialogue with the state administration.

While the disruption to the routine mechanisms of authoritarian governance generated by the 2011 uprisings was sufficiently important to induce a change of elites at the top, the ramifications of this crisis throughout the institutional system were less clear-cut, even as the new elites set out to democratize the system of governance.<sup>23</sup> Typically, in situations of multiple sovereignties characteristic of revolutionary episodes, the disorganization of the security apparatus of the old regime constituted one important factor of change. Shortly after Ben Ali fled the country, Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi obtained the support of key opposition actors such the powerful workers union *Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (UGTT) to head the provisional government after fully embracing the discourse of democratic transition. Soon afterwards, Ministers from the provisional government started saying in televised interviews that citizens were right to come out in the streets in order to protect their neighborhoods against counter-revolutionary forces (allegedly the presidential guard, the RCD activists, and various other ‘agitators’). This situation reinforced a dynamics of local mobilization for defensive purposes rather than against the regime. This shift in emphasis, which implied trying to insulate the local community from (harmful) external influences, would have long-lasting consequences for local politics.

As locally groups of people organized themselves in order to protect and manage their neighborhood, various committees and leagues for the protection of the revolution began to take shape. It is worth noting that while many of these bodies would continue to function well after the election of the constituent assembly, their internal organization and sociological makeup, as well as their ideological orientation and their practices

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<sup>23</sup> Pickard, Duncan, ‘Prospects for Implementing Democracy in Tunisia’, *Mediterranean Politics* Vol.19, No.2 (2014), pp.259-264; Sami Zemni, “The Extraordinary Politics of the Tunisian Revolution: The Process of Constitution Making,” *Mediterranean Politics* Vol.20, No.1 (2015).

would significantly evolve over time. In the weeks that followed the fall of the regime, the local actors that took over power from the police forces, the administration and the RCD networks in the neighborhoods were commonly established opposition political or social actors who had previously been tolerated to some degree by the regime.<sup>24</sup> The most institutionalized actors included the cadres of the official trade union (UGTT), as well as civil liberties activists linked to the Tunisian League of Human Rights, the Bar Association, the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates, etc.<sup>25</sup> Others activists, such as those of the communist party had been forced to live semi-clandestinely, whilst most of the Islamist had been put in jail, were under house arrest or under strict police surveillance. While these ‘official’ local actors structured formal and informal institutional relations during the transitional process, they were not necessarily the ones leading the anti-regime protests up to that point. They too had been surprised by the sudden mobilization of a crowd of previously ‘depoliticized’ youths against the regime – a motley crew of young revolutionaries who would soon be blaming these institutionalized actors and the politicians for stealing ‘their revolution’.<sup>26</sup>

The local dynamics of the post-revolutionary period thus varied enormously from place to place depending on the composition of established civil society actors in each locality, and on the relation between ‘old’ and ‘new’ activists. In our case study these variations were clearly visible between the different municipalities of the Ariana governorate. In particular, in the relatively well-off Ariana municipality, politics and associative life is dominated by a traditional ‘bourgeoisie’ structured along secular and liberal tendencies (from the left and from the right).<sup>27</sup> As actors from an established middle-class and often secularized civil society were well implanted before the revolution, they ‘naturally’ led the process of transition locally after the revolution since they had experience in dealing with the central administration. In the more impoverished

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<sup>24</sup> Head of the League for the Protection of the Revolution in Kabariyya, personal interview, Tunis, 8 January 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Delphine Cavallo, “The Trade Unions in Tunisia,” in *Political Participation in Middle East*, eds., Ellen Lust-Okar and Saloua Zerhouni. Boulder: Lynne Rienner (2008), pp. 239–55.

<sup>26</sup> Lamjed, student union activist (Union Générale des Etudiants Tunisiens), personal interview, February 2011.

<sup>27</sup> The overall success of Ennahda in the November 2011 parliamentary elections in the Ariana governorate hides the voting disparities among municipalities, which did not all vote primarily for the Islamists, as illustrated in the debates about changing the local councils composition that we analyze in the next section.

Ettadhamen municipality, by contrast, such established local actors were less prevalent and lower-middle class and working class people tended to endorse mainly the representatives of the Ennahda movement and of the ‘League of Protection of the Revolution’ as leaders of the local community.

In the Ariana municipality, the role played by Tarek Chaabouni, a former opposition parliamentary in the previous Ben Ali legislature exemplifies the dynamics between established civil society actors in the post-revolutionary period. When he saw that the city council was no longer convening, he wrote to the governor at the end of February 2011 to ask him to nominate a new council.<sup>28</sup> In his turn, the *wali* began to contact several established opposition activists in the governorate in order to organize a meeting between himself, as a representative of the new state authorities (even though he was a member of Ben Ali’s administration), and the representatives of the local community. Soon afterwards, a new council was nominated that was led by the general secretary of the local branch of the UGTT and the local representatives of the official opposition parties under Ben Ali (Ettajdid, PDP, Ettakattol).<sup>29</sup> Other city councils were subsequently appointed throughout the governorate at rate that reflected the ease with which the governor could find a coalition of local activists able and willing to endorse this governing role. As time passed by and the enthusiasm for revolutionary politics (or for politics altogether) diminished, professional politicians associated with political parties and social actors with organizational support (unions, businesses) became more prominent in the organization of local governance.

In several municipalities of the governorate, such as Ettadhamen, Raoued, or Soukra, although city councils were appointed in a similar fashion, the outcomes of this process of re-establishment of local governance were not so straightforward.<sup>30</sup> In these localities, the local ‘representatives’ identified by the governor among established civil society actors and nominated to govern the municipalities were far less prominent on the

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<sup>28</sup> Tarek Chaabouni, personal interview, Tunis, 9 December 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Rafik Khamfir, Ariana municipality councilor, personal interview, Ariana, 12 December 2013. The council nomination was by decree of Ministry of Interior on 12 April 2011. *Journal officiel de la République Tunisienne*, No. 27, 19 April 2011, pp. 495-498.

<sup>30</sup> In Ettadhamen the initial nominations made in the decree of 12 April 2011 would be invalidated and a new council nominated by the decree of 23 August 2011. *Journal officiel de la République Tunisienne*, No. 64, 26 August 2011, pp. 1624-1625.

local scene. The legitimacy and authority of these nominated councilors, especially those from the secularized, liberal or leftist organizations, were quickly challenged by other local activists, especially Islamists, who had a stronger local following than these ‘official’ civil society actors.<sup>31</sup> Soon enough, this competition at the local level was interpreted by activists according to the political battle lines drawn at the national level. In Ettadhamen, a leftist activist articulated a common perception found on the left that the League of Protection of the Revolution was ‘used by Ennahda’ to impose their preferred candidates in local politics.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, a local Ennahda councilor explained such tensions by arguing that there were links between these secularized civil society actors and the old regime, and that they were used by the remnants of the old regime to resist change.<sup>33</sup> In these contested municipalities therefore, the re-establishment of political authority and administrative governance was directly influenced by these local power struggles. In Raoued, after 8 months of sit-ins by the local League of Protection of the Revolution in front of the city council, an agreement was finally reached when 9 local members of the Ennahda party were nominated to the council (of 24 councilors).<sup>34</sup> In Ettadhamen, where Islamist activists were more prominent, the city council was ‘conquered’ in August 2011 after several large demonstrations and sit-ins, and the mayor who had been appointed in March was forced to resign. Eventually this seizing of power was accepted as a *fait accompli* by the new governor of the region after the parliamentary elections and the nomination of the Ennahda-led government.<sup>35</sup> In all these cases, Ennahda sought to position themselves as the professional politicians best able to represent all Islamic-minded social actors and citizens, from the salafists to the ‘Islamic bourgeoisie’.

These local dynamics commonly followed the evolution of the state-level process of democratic transition. Many leftist and liberal activists in the municipalities studied recall that at the beginning of the transition process, before the elections to the constituent assembly, Ennahda activists were very discrete. This initial situation reflected of a lack of

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<sup>31</sup> Tarek Chaabouni, personal interview, Tunis, 9 December 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Lotfi Saiki, Ettadhamen leftwing activist, personal interview, Ettadhamen, 18 December 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous, Ettadhamen Ennahda councillor, personal interview, Ettadhamen, 18 December 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Fathy Ayari, Raoued municipality councillor, personal interview, Raoued, 11 December 2013.

<sup>35</sup> According to an anonymous Ettadhamen Ennahda councillor, this change of mayor was justified because he was a former RCD member. Personal interview, Ettadhamen, 18 December 2013

local implantation after years of intense state repression against the Islamists. Local councilor Fathy Ayari noted that at that time most of Ennahda's cadres were 'coming back from abroad, looking for houses to live in, or trying to find a place for the party's local headquarters'.<sup>36</sup> In that context, many of the political and civil society associations that were active throughout the 2000s, albeit under strict state supervision, could more easily provide local leadership than Ennahda members. However, returning or new Ennahda activists, just like the new salafists of Ansar al-Sharia and the revolutionaries committees, were able to make up for lost ground in those poorer neighborhoods, small provincial towns and rural areas without a dense network of established associations.<sup>37</sup>

### **Managing the relations between local powers and the new regime**

In this section we highlight the different political and administrative dynamics that came into place after the parliamentary elections of October 2011 and the formation of the Ennahda-led government in order to manage the exceptional situation created by non-elected local councils. In particular, we illustrate how the overall administrative structure and decision-making channels of post-revolutionary Tunisia remained the same as before but were backed by a new form of political legitimacy and reflected a new political orientation in national (and local) politics. In this context, we examine the new local power struggles between pro- and anti-Islamist actors and their outcomes in different municipalities when state actors with formal democratic legitimacy reinvested the local scene. In particular, we highlight how, after the elections, the new Tunisian regime sought to rebalance the political forces that controlled local councils through a combination of political and administrative pressures.

Authoritarian regimes are generally criticized on functionalist and normative grounds for the arbitrariness of their rule and the omnipresence of the exception in their models of governance. Nonetheless, as Agamben stresses, situations of exceptions can also be institutionalized in democratic systems to ensure the persistence of areas in which

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<sup>36</sup> Fathy Ayari, personal interview, Raoued, 11 December 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Personal observation.

the usual rules and regulation do not apply.<sup>38</sup> The situation in Tunisia after the fall on the Ben Ali regime was characterized, as most revolutionary situations are, by exceptional politics.<sup>39</sup> The process of democratic transition was meant to be a return to routine governance and to a situation in which if exceptions persisted, they would be more akin to the dilemmas highlighted by Agamben in established democracies than to the arbitrariness of the old regime.

After the revolution, the issue of the municipalities was raised formally for the first time by the provisional government in March 2011.<sup>40</sup> Following the massive protests in Tunis' Casbah that led to the resignation of Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi, the new provisional government led by Essebsi quickly elaborated a road map to take the country to the elections for the constituent assembly. In the meanwhile, the government decided to resolve the power vacuum left in the local political and administrative system by using the existing organic law of the municipalities. The law stipulated that in extraordinary circumstances, local councils could be replaced by 'special delegations' (*délégations spéciales*) appointed by decree of the Interior Minister.<sup>41</sup> Under Ben Ali, this proviso had been invoked mainly to bypass councils which showed too much independent-mindedness or were reluctant to implement directives from the central administration. In the post-revolutionary context, this law was used to enshrine the authority of the newly nominated councils which, as 'special delegations', could substitute themselves to the (Ben Ali era) elected councils for a duration of one year. Whilst it was previously a process that was meant to impose the choices of the center over the periphery – and the Interior Ministry, via the governor, always had the last word in discussions with local actors –, this relationship became far more balanced in the aftermath of the revolution.

One of the main arguments advanced here is the that a main substantive cause of friction between the bottom-up revolutionary process of popular empowerment and the

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<sup>38</sup> Giorgio Agamben, trans. by Kevin Attel, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> See Zemni, "The Extraordinary Politics".

<sup>40</sup> Cherni Mohammed Khemissi, personal interview, Tunis, 12 December 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Article 12 of the organic law of municipalities No. 75-33 of 14 May 1975, modified by organic law No. 95-68 of 24 July 1995.

top-down formal process of political democratization was the absence of an electoral process at the local level. The issue of whether to start the process of political transition by organizing local elections before parliamentary ones briefly surfaced after the nomination of the Essebsi government but it did not gather momentum.<sup>42</sup> The question of the organization of local elections came back after the elections to the national constituent assembly in October 2011. However, the parliament decided that a new electoral law needed to be in place before the organization of the next local and parliamentary elections. As this was unlikely to happen before the expiration of the one-year statutory period for the special delegations, new procedures were introduced as part of the '*petite constitution*' to remove this time limitation. Article 21 of constitutional law 6/2011 of 16 December 2011, also gave power to the prime minister to dissolve and to appoint new municipal councils after a consultation with the president of the republic, the president of the constitutive assembly, the deputies from the relevant constituencies and the local actors from the municipality.

These choices reflected a new political situation in which the parliament (constitutive assembly) was the only democratically elected institution in post-Ben Ali Tunisia. By implication, it signified to the local councilors that they had to heed this new distribution of democratic legitimacy, evidenced by the number of parliamentarians from different parties in each electoral constituency. Yet, without local elections, political competition as well as agreements between national political elites could not be directly duplicated at the local level. Local politics were about balancing the competing interests and agendas of the activists who first took charge the municipalities in the aftermath of the revolution because of their more structured presence on the ground, and those who acquired legitimacy after the parliamentary elections. Thus, while nationally the main battleground of the Tunisian democratic transition throughout 2013 were the ideological struggles between Islamists and secularists over the devising a new constitutional order, an important if unspectacular war of attrition was also been fought in local politics to infuse the local administrative and political systems with a particular set of ideas and practices of governance. In particular, opposition actors began to fear the way Ennahda

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<sup>42</sup> Tarek Chaabouni participated directly to the discussion. Personal interview, Tunis, 9 December 2013.

and their allies were increasingly controlling the local political and administrative system so as to shape everyday opportunities and expectations of citizens in ways that resembled what the previous authoritarian regime had been doing for years.

In the months that had followed the fall of the Ben Ali regime, the establishment of special delegations in the municipalities more often than not merely validated a de facto situation of control by various groups of local activists. While the initial impulse for the reorganization of political and administrative authority in the municipalities was from the bottom up, later on, as the newly elected Tunisian parliament reasserted the decision-making powers of the national institutions, it is the institutional apparatus inherited from the authoritarian era that regained its ability to shape local politics (not least because governors retained most of their prerogatives towards the municipalities). This situation acquired a new political significance after the formation of the Ennahda-led government at the end of 2011, as opposition actors on all sides judged that the Islamists were nominating governors who were sympathetic to their cause in order to control the political and administrative system.<sup>43</sup> In the Ariana governorate, after the parliamentary elections, the governor and the newly elected Ennahda parliamentarians from the circumscription put pressure on the local councils that did not have a strong Ennahda presence to change their composition to reflect the electoral success of the Islamists. In the Ariana municipality, they faced strong opposition from the other social and political actors who were still well mobilized and organized. As Rafik Khanfir, a local councilor at the time noted, ‘Ennahda tried to renegotiate its political influence and the political balance within the city council due to the electoral results in the circumscriptions. However they did not succeed in gaining more influence in the Ariana council’.<sup>44</sup> By contrast in the neighboring Raoued municipality, where opposition actors were less effectively mobilized, Fathi Ayari, the town vice-mayor, indicated that ‘the governor started negotiations in order to renew our city council, and so 9 councilors of 24 came from Ennahdha, as an inevitable consequence of what happened in the national elections’.<sup>45</sup> Finally, in the Ettadamen municipality, as Ennahda and their allies were

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<sup>43</sup> Lotfi Saiki, personal interview, Ettadhamen, 18 December 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Rafik Khanfir, personal interview, Ariana, 12 December 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Fathi Ayari, personal interview, Raoued, 11 December 2013

already controlling the council no changes were introduced. In all these cases, the reassertion of the power of the central authorities thus maintained a tension (albeit a manageable one) between elected national politicians and local actors in the local councils.

### **Electoral legitimacy, (bad) governance, and (sites of) resistance**

In the following we outline how the erosion of political authority at the local level is linked to the absence of formal (electoral) legitimacy underpinning the actions of the city councils. We indicate how in this extra-ordinary situation, local political actors cannot easily command the obedience of civil servants or the compliance of the population. We illustrate how the conflicting demands placed on local actors can generate paralysis and by extension undermine the overall authority and capabilities of the state. In addition, in a context of political transition, the tensions between central government, local political authorities and the administration are commonly instrumentalized to make political gains.

The main practical difficulties that local political actors faced when took control of the municipalities were a very limited logistics and a scarcity of financial resources. Probably the most visible post-revolutionary local predicament in the months that followed the revolution was the mountains of trash that accumulated on the streets of Tunisia. For many Tunisians it was a testimony to the many problems of post-revolutionary governance in the country. As many municipalities had their garbage collection trucks destroyed during the uprising, rubbish collection could often no longer be organized.<sup>46</sup> After the revolution, it also became far more difficult for the councils to finance the activities of the municipalities through tax collection as many citizens decided they would not pay inefficient and/or illegitimate local authorities. In the post-revolutionary situation, local governance was also hampered because the local police could not always be relied on to follow the directives from the council. As Fathi Ayari, the vice-mayor of the Raoued municipality remarked, ‘we always had some difficulties in

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<sup>46</sup> Rafik Khamfir, personal interview, Ariana, 12 December 2013.

collecting taxes, but after 2011 the situation got even worse [...]. The municipal police began to refuse to obey us, and the municipality could not rely on their support anymore and could not collect taxes as much as before'.<sup>47</sup> In this difficult context, local police officers like many other local civil servants weighted the requirements to support local authorities with limited legitimacy against the risk of popular resentment (or even violence) against them.<sup>48</sup>

Visible breakdowns of state authority were thus particularly notable in relation to the growth of black market activities and the boom in illegal constructions. With limited means at their disposal to reestablish their authority, the local councils often had to cave in to high social demands for change in this post-revolutionary period. Cherni Mohammed Khemissi, the Head of the Ennahda party committee on local authorities, stressed that many local councils chose to turn a blind eye to this phenomenon as resentment against the Ben Ali system was particularly acute in those areas – for example only good patronage connections could deliver a building permit previously. As Khemissi laments, however, overall 'this way of acting give the impression that the country is in a state of anarchy'.<sup>49</sup> During the transitional period in the municipalities, local needs were thus addressed primarily through to the weakness of the local institutions and political elites rather than due to their work. Unsurprisingly, by 2013, this continuing lack of (good) governance at local level was beginning to reflect badly on the ruling coalition led by Ennahda.

At that time, in the municipalities, far more than ideological divergences it was poor management and failure to meet expectations that damaged the authority of local and national political actors. This poor management was in no small degree linked to the lack of electoral legitimacy of the councils. Routinely, their decisions were opposed internally by civil servants unwilling to follow instructions which could land them into trouble, and opposed externally by local activists and citizens with different views or claims. As a result, as Lotfi Dachraoui, director of the environment department of the Ariana municipality, remarks, 'the mayor and important members of many councils

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<sup>47</sup> Fathi Ayari, personal interview, Raoued, 11 December 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Anonymous police officers, personal interview, Raoued, December 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Cherni Mohammed Khemissi, personal interview, Tunis, 12 December 2013.

(including Ariana) who still fear ordinary citizens and the ‘*dégage, dégage*’ (get out, get out) attitude, prefer not to take clear-cut, significant political decisions’.<sup>50</sup> Although local actors commonly recognized that most of these problems are local, opposition activists and even civil servants are quick to point out that this also illustrates more generally a lack of competence of the Ennahda-led government.<sup>51</sup> In this context, the local representatives of the Ennahda had increasing difficulties convincing the population that they were managing their affairs efficiently at a time when in national politics the party faced strong parliamentary opposition and street protests.

In practice, the Essebsi transitional government (2011), the Ennahda-led government (2012-13) and the Jomaa technocratic government (2014) all have a part of responsibility in the continuing erosion of political authority at the local level. By deprioritizing local elections, national politicians ensured that the contested legitimacy of the councils – be they ad-hoc local constructs, nominated special delegations, or a mixture of both – continued to reduce the efficiency of the local actors as transmission belt for national politics. In addition, new nominations in the local and provincial administrations (governors, delegates, *omda*) to replace the most visible agents of the Ben Ali system may have been expedient to entrench the authority of the new regime but it also gave the impression in the local constituencies that the new elites were instrumentalizing the political and administrative system to set up their own patronage networks. Local activist Khaled Amami indicated that many ordinary Tunisians felt that the Ennahda offices or those of the Leagues of Protection of the Revolution were then the places to visit to obtain a favor from the state administration.<sup>52</sup>

The dysfunctional nature of the post-revolutionary Tunisian state in this local context can thus generally be explained by the combination of three sets of factors. First, failure to meet expectations in the post-revolutionary period had much to do with the behavior of the citizens themselves who kept challenging the rules and taking the law into their own hands. Second, the limited legitimacy of the councils combined to their limited

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<sup>50</sup> Lotfi Dachraoui, personal interview, Ariana, May 2014

<sup>51</sup> For example, although Dachraoui assessed that the municipalities’ inability to deal with the rubbish crisis had been caused by damage done by local people to the councils’ equipment, the issue was deemed to be a national predicament and so the government was deemed responsible of the failure to resolve this crisis.

<sup>52</sup> Khaled Amami, personal interview, Tunis, December 2012.

resources and support from the state administration ensured that local political actors were often unable and/or unwilling to act decisively in the face of conflicting social demands. Third, national politicians sought to reorganize local political and administrative hierarchies according to what they thought was right after the revolution; and in doing so created new frictions that undermined the inefficiency of the new system. Citizens who had expected a rapid change in their material condition were disappointed by what they saw generically as ‘bad’ governance; and by 2014 this perception was one of the main reasons underpinning the growing success of the anti-Ennahda opposition.

## **Conclusion**

As the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections have ushered Tunisia towards a period of democratic consolidation, what lessons can be learned from local processes of political reconstruction during the transitional period? In analyzing the interactions between citizens, local actors and administrative structures, we give a glimpse of the political dynamics that commonly remain ‘under the radar’ during periods of dramatic institutional reconfiguration. We illustrate how the changing articulations of power between the different local actors influence and are influenced by the successes and failures of formal, institutionalized political democratization. Tensions, competition and confrontations in national debates have direct consequences on the process of transition at the local level – e.g. nomination of special delegations, of governors, (non-)organization of local elections). In their turn, the intended and unintended consequences of these strategies fuel the competition (and at times collaboration) between local actors who already have goals and strategies of their own in relation to the local population. The political and ideological tensions prevailing in national politics are thus reinterpreted locally in relation to concrete dilemmas and opportunities; thereby mobilizing local constituencies for or against national elites.

In Tunisia, while the formal process of institutionalization of the democratic transition seemed relatively straightforward (even taking into account the frictions between Islamists and secularists), the local mechanisms of political and institutional

transformation remained far more ad-hoc (and even anarchic) in the years that followed the revolution. Locally, more than an ideological struggle between Islamists and secularists, the opposition between different social and political actors centered on a practical contest to control local institutions in a situation where elections were not available to support one's legitimacy claims to. Equally, the apparent resilience of some authoritarian practices (use of special delegations, pressures to change the composition of local councils) was often less an attempt by Ennahda to control the system than a pragmatic choice made in an unstable environment. The different outcomes of the state pressures to change the composition of the councils in different municipalities after the 2011 elections illustrate the continuing practice of political compromise in situations where the local legitimacy of all the actors involved remained uncertain. However, as long as local democracy is not formalized through electoral processes, authoritarian practices lookalike and the resistance that they generate persist and even deepen.

In this context, center-periphery tensions which initially centered on socio-economic development were increasingly reinterpreted in more political terms, and local politics fed into national processes of contestation as opposition actors blamed the Islamist-led government for everything that could go wrong locally. Beyond the political rhetoric, however, it is clear that the initial revolutionary experiments with democratic power in Tunisian municipalities during the transitional period were not put to the best use by citizens and local actors. The limited coordinated effort at good governance that resulted, among local actors and between the center and the periphery, is linked to the lack of practice of many of the new actors (and even some of the old civil society activists) who gain prominence during the revolution. This situation created a vicious circle of inefficiency in which each participant (citizens, councils, civil servants, government) willingly or unwillingly contributed to make the action of the others even less effective, thereby producing a general situation (and perception) of decline of political authority. Although the Tunisian process of democratic consolidation is undoubtedly still moving ahead, the experiments with local democracy which could have facilitated the transition have been turned into a series of hindrances and resistances. It will now require more political vision and skills from all the social and political actors concerned to turn local governance into an asset for democracy in the country.