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الشبكة الأوروبية - المتوسطية لحقوق الإنسان

TUNISIA AFTER 14 JANUARY AND ITS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

THE ISSUES AT STAKE IN A RECONFIGURATION OF EUROPEAN POLICY



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LA TUNISIE D'APRÈS LE 14 JANVIER ET SON ÉCONOMIE POLITIQUE ET SOCIALE
LES ENJEUX D'UNE RECONFIGURATION DE LA POLITIQUE EUROPÉENNE





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report aims to present the economic and social challenges facing Tunisians since January 14, 2011, and to discuss the nature of the contribution of the international community, in particular the European Union, to this issue.

To do this, it is essential to gain a better awareness of the real state of the political economy of Tunisia. This requires firstly a deconstruction of the Tunisian 'economic miracle' and the country's 'stability' and, secondly, an analysis of the reconfigurations of power and the socio-economic issues of the period following 14 January.

THE FICTION OF THE BEN ALI REGIME AS A 'MODEL STUDENT'

For years, the discourse of Tunisia's financial partners, primarily the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, but also the European Union, helped spread the image of an economic 'miracle' performed by the Tunisian government.

The discourse on the economic 'miracle' highlighted the following elements: on the one hand, the extent of growth, economic diversification and the ability to create jobs, the increase in exports, the way the country could attract foreign investment and finance, and an improvement in the living standards and well-being of the population; on the other, the ability to reform and stabilise the country in macro-economic terms, to undertake liberalisation, as well as a variety of sector-based restructurings; and finally, the decision to envisage liberalism from the point of view of managing the social question. The centrality of 'stability' in the discourse on the economic 'miracle' was a major element that the Ben Ali regime skilfully used in its relationships with other countries, especially the Europeans.

The report identifies key processes in developing the fiction of the Ben Ali regime as a 'model student'.

A first procedure consisted of being cunning in one's choice of juxtapositions, drawing comparisons that were temporally and geographically incoherent. Although the Tunisian authorities regarded their country as an emerging economy, statistical surveys chose flattering benchmarks so as to highlight the prowess of the only 'Mediterranean dragon', by referring primarily to other countries of the African continent.

A second procedure involved various shifts: surreptitious modifications in the construction of the indicator, in the modes of measurement or in the assessment of a phenomenon must ensure that one could always point to improvements. For example, in order to show that émigrés were investing in the country and that a real dynamic momentum had been set up, investments that had actually been made and projects that had simply been approved were mixed up. Similarly,

companies licensed by the investment promotion agency (IPA) were recorded as fully existing enterprises.

The systematic forgetting of past performances constituted a third procedure whereby the economic discourse was developed. It is striking to note the amnesia of power, especially when it comes to the period before 1987.

The appropriation of social phenomena constituted a fourth procedure whereby a flattering portrait of the economic and social conditions of Tunisia was constructed. Dynamics specific to the society were re-appropriated directly by government officials through a discourse linking the positive developments to the government's economic policies.

A fifth technique consisted in selecting information in such a way as to conceal any which did not send out the 'right' message. The Tunisian authorities were forever emphasising the primacy of social over economic considerations, while, at the same time, a whole arsenal of economic policies that ran counter to the much-vaunted social objectives was minimised or even concealed.

A sixth technique was to present figures that were either shown or hidden, depending on their relevance to official discourse.

A final method was to make shifts in the meaning of words. This was the case with the term 'stability', whose meaning shifted imperceptibly from political stability to institutional stability and ended up covering economic stability. Thanks to these shifts in meaning, a set of causal relations was created between the political system and the economic situation, which was in turn deemed to promote political stability or even democratization.

Tunisia was able to take advantage of 'the diplomatico-strategic instrumentalisation of aid for development', whose main objective was now less to 'develop' than to 'stabilise'.

In all countries that receive aid and wish to attract external financing, official discourses aim at concealing a much more complex and problematic social reality. There is nothing specific about Tunisia in this regard, apart from the fact that the banning of all debate, including on economics, has prevented there from being any development of critiques of official rhetoric, any expression of discontent, and any alternative discourse.



AN ALARMING SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

The social unrest of 2010 and 2011 brought into the open the economic and social difficulties, the inequalities, and the cracks in the Tunisian economic model. The most significant of these focused on unemployment and exclusion (especially among young people), on the gap between regions, on the loss of job security, on corruption and the growing interventionism of those in power in the economy.

Two decades of 'miracle' have certainly resulted in compliance with these balances and in good 'fundamentals', but at the cost of exponential unemployment and growing inequalities, particularly as regards access to employment and public services.

At present, it is still impossible to form any real estimate of unemployment and under-employment in Tunisia. However, more alarming figures were published after 14 January: the unemployment rate among young people from 18 to 29 almost rose to 30% in 2009, and soared to 45% in the case of higher education graduates, while the figures made public at the time claimed a figure of 22.5% for unemployed graduates.

Each year about 140,000 people enter the labour market as against just 60,000 to 65,000 jobs being created, mainly localised in Greater Tunis and on the coastal regions.

The poverty rate - previously estimated at 3.8% - has now been reassessed at 10% at the national level. If the same rate applies to the gap between regions, it is likely that the Centre-West is experiencing a poverty level close to 30%.

Entire regions are without hospitals worthy of the name, because of under-equipment. People are thus forced to travel and spend resources that, for the most part, they do not possess. This is particularly true of the Centre West, the region of Kasserine and Thala, but also of Gafsa. Secondly, healthcare is no longer free, and the poorest simply no longer have the money to afford it.

The distribution of the business fabric between regions is very uneven and the discourse on the miracle has concealed the structural incapacity of the economy to create jobs in a context of spreading education among the masses and demographic pressure, and consequently the production of 'supernumeraries'.

The Tunisian model of development does in fact condemn those entering the jobs market to long periods of waiting and actually forces them into an economy of making do, the only opportunity for them to come up with the material resources for subsistence, or else encourages them to turn to emigration.

Finally, the discourse on the miracle has avoided the issue of corruption and predatory practices among the clans and their surreptitious practices of protectionism, going quite against their declared liberalism.

THE LACK OF DEBATE ON THE BROAD LINES OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICIES IN TUNISIA

The departure of Ben Ali and the broken silence might imaginably have enabled a debate on the 'economic miracle' to begin. However, the first interpretations of the situation and the first measures taken at Tunisian government level reveal inertia and conservatism in the economic and social spheres.

The transitional government seems to want to remain in the path previously followed, a path that has the advantage, firstly, of respecting the major macroeconomic balances and the norms defined by the major funding partners and, secondly, of not upsetting the balance of power within the political economy of Tunisia. For the different political parties as for the government, economic and social considerations are set out hazily, with general statements but without any analysis of the origin of this situation, systematic critiques of past options, or concrete proposals to address socio-economic demands in depth.

The issue of economic and social rights (especially in terms of the right to work, to 'fair' and 'favourable' working conditions, and the right to social security) appears to be secondary in the strategy documents of the Tunisian authorities.

Thus the economic and social dimension of the movement that produced the revolution is marginalized.

Faced with widespread unemployment, the government has taken a number of measures, starting with the recruitment of 20,000 people into the civil service and the integration of 200,000 young people in moves presented as mechanisms for an active employment policy. However, on closer inspection, nothing really new has actually been implemented.

The 'active employment policy' is close to previous policies that did not consist in really creating employment but in challenging the guaranteed employment enjoyed by some. Such policies erode workers' rights to the extent that priority is being given to improving competitiveness by more flexible employment and a lowering of the comparative cost of labour.

Aid to needy families and job seekers is still pathetic and does not in the slightest alter the situation of these populations; it remains mainly defined by the old paradigm of conditioning, control and waiting, unable to play a part in any recovery. The same is true of aid to firms deemed to favour hiring.

The Tunisian authorities have promised vague 'budget allocations' to 'locally activate the mechanisms of employment and social welfare' and have given themselves two extra months to proceed to a 'significant reallocation of spending on priority zones and regions in the light of the demands expressed by the regions'.



In public debate, the analysis of corruption is limited to clan participation in projects and domestic and foreign investment and to the products of these predatory activities, to the funds transferred abroad and committed to financial or property investments. This focus on clan predation prevents anyone from raising and discussing the problems of the Tunisian economy, the patronage system developed around the RCD (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique – Constitutional Democratic Rally) and the UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail - General Union of Tunisian Workers), and the state of justice.

In fact, there is no questioning of the political economy of Tunisia, or of the arrangements that lay behind the formation of a `credit bourgeoisie`, the extent of tax evasion, the illicit enrichment and the abuse or even repression in the world of work and wages.

The question of justice is also rarely discussed, even though the political instrumentalization of the world of judges, lawyers and more generally of all professions involved in the legal world has been fundamental in the exercise of domination.

Finally, the fact that emigration is a central element in managing the supernumerary population and the blockages in the Tunisian economic model is still ignored.

A LACK OF SELF-CRITICISM AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL IN THE MATTER OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICIES

Contrary to the economic and social realities of the country, which the social unrest has laid bare, the very positive and optimistic diagnosis drawn up over many years has been generally shared by experts and officials of the European Union. Thus, in the National Indicative Program 2011-2013, we read that `the economic and social policies of the Tunisian State have achieved positive results in the social sphere,` and the same applies to the economic assessment of the country. Other documents also highlight the gradual reduction in the unemployment rate, based on official Tunisian figures.

Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy reflect a very liberal ideology: this is evidenced by the centrality, in the institutional set-up, of the free trade zones between each partner in the South and the European Union, the adoption of structural adjustment programs and more generally the support for the processes of economic liberalization, and the primacy of economic and commercial logics over social logics and development logics. This is also clear from the distribution of European funds that primarily go into these economic programs: industrial upgrading and more generally support for development and competitiveness, improving the employability of workers, and economic reforms aimed at harmonization with European standards.

The strategy of intervening primarily in the form of budgetary support, following the reforms set out by the states in collaboration with the Bretton Woods institutions and controlling this aid by relatively loose indicators, means leaving a lot of room for manoeuvre to the Tunisian authorities and thereby guiding European aid according to the political logics of the regimes in power.

By giving primacy to management, community institutions have given support, de facto, to authoritarian regimes. Tunisia has been the classic example, given its status as an economic model student: since the government can negotiate, projects go ahead properly in terms of deadlines and administrative management, and macroeconomic results are better than in other countries in the region, payments have followed at the pace of this positive feedback, without any real account being taken of the political dimension, however theoretically present it may be in the Partnership.

Independent of any economic and social performance, Tunisia has, in fact, been an excellent risk, since it always pays back (on time, too), has never defaulted on a payment, manages its debt sensibly, and has an efficient bureaucracy when it comes to the administration of international relations. Furthermore, the geopolitical factor has played in its favour, since the country is 'squashed' between 'violent Algeria' and 'unpredictable Libya', straddling the zone of 'Africa' and the zone of 'the Maghreb-Middle-East' or the 'developing' and 'emergent countries'.

After January 14, the situation on the European side started to look more uncertain. The desire for change, demonstrated by overt support for the process of democratic transition, has been stated by all European authorities and reflects a determination to turn the page of unconditional support for authoritarian regimes.

On 14 April, Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the European Union, announced a financial commitment on the part of Europe to providing Tunisia with 258 million euros between now and 2013, with 17 million being released 'immediately' and the growing involvement of the EIB, with the result that the rate of aid to Tunisia is increasing significantly. On 31 March, Stefan Füle, the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, promised to double the financial aid provided by the European Commission, with the particular aim of reinforcing civil society, promoting the development of underprivileged regions, and developing micro-credit. The status of advanced partner should be granted 'once the country has established the rule of law and a democratic system that respects human rights', which should make it possible to lure in European investors, modernise the Tunisian administration and thereby increase the competitiveness and the economic advantages of Tunisia. Negotiations on free trade agreements should also be speeded up.

This haste to make promises and define priorities, even though no assessment has been made of the strategies pursued hitherto, demonstrates a certain confusion among European institutions when confronted with the new situation. More worryingly, it seems that there is a drift to a mere continuation of the policies already being pursued, with a few day-by-day adjustments to cope with future eventualities; and that many of the announcements presented as support for the 'new Tunisia' are in actual fact the (new) presentation of previous commitments already ratified.

90% of funds available to the European Commission pass through bilateral cooperation, through projects and support for public policy enshrined in the National Indicative Programs (NIPs). These programs take an extremely long time to set up, requiring at least a year or a year and a



half between conceptualization and the first pay-out. In the present context, the NIP will not be questioned and there is no possibility for the Europeans of starting from scratch.

In a vision that separates economic and social rights from civil and political rights, there is no in-depth critique of the overall direction of public policies supported in Tunisia, no self-criticism, particularly at the operational level.

On the European side, politics and economics continue to be dealt separately reckoning that *'fine work has been done in the economic sphere'* but that *'problems lay mainly in governance, human rights and justice.'* The business climate, improving conditions of employability, improving the regulatory framework, and deepening liberalization are still on the agenda, as is emphasized by the European experts directly involved in the conceptualization of cooperation: *'the major structural reforms that enable the framework for development to be built are still the same'*.





INTRODUCTION

MADE BY EURO-MEDITERRANEAN HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK

This report aims at contributing to highlight the importance of economic and social rights promotion and protection in Tunisia; it does so by discussing what future Tunisian economic and social policies should look like, and by questioning what European policies should be in this regard.

The report comes at a time when discussions in Tunisia about the country's future political configuration are flourishing after decades of oppression of fundamental freedoms and political dissent.

The report is built on the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights Declaration that human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. It welcomes that political and constitutional reform is being discussed in Tunisia but insists that it would be a fundamental flaw to neglect looking into the need of reforming Tunisian economic and social policies as well as, hence also EU -Tunisian cooperation in this field

The overthrow of Ben Ali was the result of a popular uprising, led by youth, in a quest for respect of its inherent dignity and worth, for social, political and economic and political justice.



It is therefore disturbing to see that economic and social policies conducted by the former Tunisian regime remain largely unquestioned as described in this report.

It is also disturbing to note that the EU seems to think that past social and economic support programs remain valid today and need little or no revision - even in the light of the arrival of thousands of Tunisians in 2011 to the European shores (through Lampedusa) illustrating in a dramatic way that there is a radical need to redress the economic and social situation and structural inequalities in the country.

The report forms part of the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network's (EMHRN) efforts since 2001 to high light the importance of addressing economic and social rights issues in EU and South Mediterranean relations⁴.

⁴ The Human Rights Implications of the MEDA Programmes, EMHRN 2002; Economic and Social Rights in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, special issue of Mediterranean Politics (eds. Iván Martín and Iain Byrne), 2004; Employment and Labour Law in the Arab Mediterranean Countries and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Euro-Mediterranean trade union Forum, "Comisiones Obreras", "Fundación Paz y Solidaridad", Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN), 2008



More specifically the report is an outcome of the EMHRN's establishment in 2009 of a Solidarity Group⁵ for Tunisia composed of Tunisian and European EMHRN members as well as resource persons from Tunisian and European civil society⁶. The solidarity group had as its core activity to promote solidarity initiatives with the Tunisian human rights defenders and civil society, to strengthen cooperation between Tunisian activists and to contribute to reinforcing their networks inside and outside Tunisia. It chose as a core activity to look into human rights relations between Tunisia and the EU seeking to use this instrument as a lever for human rights work.

The Solidarity Group organized encounters between human rights groups inside Tunisia; it conducted advocacy activities in Spain and Italy (which led to the Ben Ali's regimes amendment of the Penal Code 61bis, criminalizing 'anyone who establishes, directly or indirectly, contacts with agents of a foreign state, or foreign institution'). The group also produced a report on EU Tunisian relations with a focus on civil and political rights that sharply criticised the Tunisian regime and the EU's performance vis-à-vis the regime⁷.

In April 2010 the EMHRN and the Solidarity group decided to look closer into the Tunisian regime's economic and social policies including the EU's response to these, as one of the strongest and most recurrent arguments met among EU and EU members state officials for supporting Ben Ali's regime, and even for deciding to give Tunisia advanced status⁸, was the country's economic and social performance.

It was decided to look closer into the 'Tunisian economic and social miracle' in order to provide Tunisian human rights defenders with arguments and lines of actions that could be used in their work.

The concrete launch of the project took place in November 2010 in Rome during an encounter between the Solidarity group and one of the researchers of this report, Béatrice Hibou, who is well-known for her in-depth knowledge of the country⁹.

A month later the Tunisian revolution was set off when Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 set himself on fire in a desperate and emblematic act of protest against his life conditions and the daily humiliations faced by him and his co-citizens.

5 With the generous support of the EU Commission, the Spanish International Development Agency, the Swedish International Development Agency and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

6 Acsur – Las Segovias (Espagne); Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates – ATFD; Comité pour le Respect des Libertés et des droits de l'Homme en Tunisie – CRLDHT; Conseil National pour les Libertés en Tunisie – CNLT; Fédération Tunisienne pour une Citoyenneté des Deux Rives – FTCT; Ligue des droits de l'Homme – LDH (France); Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des droits de l'Homme – LTDH; Solicitors International Human Rights Group – SIHRG (Royaume Uni) ; Khémaïs Chammari (Tunisie) et Anna Bozzo (Italie), membres honoraires du REMDH

7 Cf Inconsistent European Policies Fail to Address Human Rights Abuses in Tunisia, EMHRN, 2010

8 i.e. upgrading Tunisia's relation to the EU within framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy

9 Notably through her book 'La Force de l'obéissance. Economie politique de la répression en Tunisie, Paris, La Découverte, 2006.

The start of the revolution confirmed the pertinence of choosing economic and social as the theme of this report. However, the focus of the report had to change in order to adapt to new circumstances and the fact that Tunisia moved from being ruled by a frozen oppressive regime to becoming the site for a process of broad political change, of power struggles and debates about what the country's future should look like.

Hence rather than opting solely for a deconstruction of a the former Tunisian regime's promotion of its economic and social achievements – and the financial and program support provided by the EU - it was chosen to present a report that would high light the importance of discussing economic and social rights issues at the current stage in Tunisia.

Hence, the present report is not a human rights document in the 'traditional genre' of its kind. It is a 'discussion document' targeting Tunisian civil society and its supporters in the Europe and the Arab world, Tunisian and European decision makers.

This is why recommendations are not part of the report itself. Given the process Tunisia engaged in the EMHRN has chosen to feed it into the debates in Tunisia, and organise meetings with Tunisian human rights activist, economists, developments associations, etc. and from these meetings draft recommendations to be presented to the Tunisian public and the political parties, to the interim government and to the EU.

The recommendations will be published in separate leaflets for further advocacy efforts.

The report itself is based on extensive research by the expert team, Béatrice Hibou, Hamza Meddeb and Mohamed Hamdi, on Tunisia before the revolution. It was updated with field research in Tunisia and Brussels starting in January 2011 and ending in late in March 2011.



I. THE RHETORIC OF 'STABILITY' AND THE ECONOMIC 'MIRACLE'

The strategies adopted by the European Union, as of other donors to Tunisia (the World Bank and the IMF, as well as bilateral forms of cooperation) have rested on a largely exaggerated, even erroneous analysis of the situation in Tunisia, in its different dimensions: political, economic and social. On reading the strategy documents published (especially the country strategy papers or CSPs, and the National Indicative Programs or NIPs), one is so struck by the gap between the reality and the way it is described by experts that one is tempted to see a kind of voluntary blindness at work.

For years, the discourse of financial partners, starting with the World Bank and the IMF, but largely repeated by the European Union, has contributed to spreading, and gaining credence for, the image of an economic 'miracle' that the Tunisian authorities have fostered. Apart from the undeserved legitimacy this has given the Tunisian regime, this rhetoric has constituted the underpinnings of the strategies pursued, as well as being a guarantee to donors. If we are to clear the path for a more adequate fit between the representation of the Tunisian economy and its reality, we inevitably have to deconstruct the discourse on Tunisia's 'economic miracle'.

A cursory overview will show that it rests on several well-known elements, and is relatively simple: on the one hand, the extent of growth, economic diversification and its ability to create jobs, the increase in exports, the way the country can attract foreign investment and finance, and, last but not least, an improvement in the living standards and well-being of the population; on



the other, the ability to reform and stabilise the country in macro-economic terms (controlling deficits and inflation), to undertake liberalisation, especially with regard to foreign countries, as well as a variety of sector-based restructurings; and finally, the decision to take over the social question and to envisage liberalism only insofar as it can be combined with attention to social issues. The centrality of 'stability' in the discourse on the economic 'miracle' was a trump card that the Ben Ali regime skilfully used in its relationships with its international partners, especially with the most important of these, the Europeans. In any case, the latter never ceased to support the way priority was given to a 'stability' whose outlines still remained conceived in vague and woolly terms. Europe's susceptibility to this discourse often lay behind its conciliatory attitude when faced with the economic failings that were noted (for instance, the need to restructure the banking sector, to clean up public finance or even to fight corruption and the predatory practices that had intensified at the end of Ben Ali's reign) and especially with the flipside of this discourse, comprising systematic violations of human rights, political freedoms and fundamental rights – violations that were carried out with complete impunity, in the name of the war on extremist movements, seen as vectors of instability.



I. 1. THE MODES OF CONSTRUCTION OF OFFICIAL DISCOURSE

Even though it is apparently 'scientific', based on apparently tangible realities, on figures and quantified data in which assessment and control make controversies apparently less subjective than in political discourse, the economic discourse which Tunisian authorities developed since the 1990s, right up until the departure of Ben Ali, is the result of a construction which determines the direction of its political meaning. It is easy to point to procedures or mechanisms that have made it possible to construct the discourse on the Tunisian 'economic miracle'. The following analysis puts forward a systematic and rationalized analysis of these techniques (which have not always been thought of as such and which can also be the result of bureaucratic happenstance), based on certain emblematic examples. In the space available, there is obviously no room for us to propose a critical analysis of all the data on the whole period of the 'Ben Ali' regime: we aim, rather, to bring out the main mechanisms by which the fiction of the 'model student' has been created.

● ● ● ● ● I.1.A. The cunning choice of comparisons

A first procedure consists of being cunning in one's choice of juxtapositions, drawing comparisons that are temporally and geographically incoherent. Although the Tunisian authorities consider their country to be an emerging economy, the only 'Mediterranean dragon' comparable with the new Asian tigers, rates of growth, debt, or electrification, percentages of investment or access to property, literacy figures, and the competitiveness of the economy are all seen through rather rosy-tinted spectacles – they are set against figures for the Maghreb or the Middle East, but in particular for the continent of Africa. However, donors do not voice any objection to these wobbly comparisons, since they themselves often do the same thing for other reasons, linked to the geographical apportionments of their management administrations, geopolitical preoccupations, and ideological considerations.¹⁰ Performances in improving literacy rates, for instance, are presented in a flattering light by comparing Tunisia to the Maghreb or Africa; but the detailed statistics of the UNDP, especially the indicators of human development, enable it to be shown that the country is in fact somewhat below the average of countries in its category.¹¹

10 See B. Hibou, 'Economie politique du discours de la Banque mondiale en Afrique sub-saharienne, du catéchisme économique au fait (et méfait) missionnaire', *Les Etudes du CERI*, no. 39, March 1998, for the World Bank – but this is also true for the UNCCD, the ADB and national guarantor agencies such as Coface and its publication, *Le MOCI*.

11 According to the UNDP, the literacy rate in Tunisia was 71% in 2000, as opposed to 52.8% for the least advanced countries, but 73.7% for developing countries overall. M. Camua and V. Geisser, *Le Syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003). If we pursue the comparison with Iran, the gap is even more to the disadvantage of Tunisia, since 89.6% of Iranian women are literate in urban milieus and 79.3% in rural milieus (source: national statistics provided by Marie Ladier-Fouladi).

Another variant of this procedure consists of not quoting indicators which would invalidate the demonstration. On the basis of over-general analyses provided, for example, by the organization for promoting exports, the authorities highlight the dynamism of the Tunisian textiles industry and its powers of resistance with regard to its competitors in terms of exports to Europe. However, sector-based statistics are unambiguous when it comes to the fragility of the sector and the weakness of investments, including in relation to its Mediterranean competitors.¹² In the flattering texts, one can observe a subtle mixture of previous performances, present situation, decisions taken, developments to come, anticipations, and projections, with the result that we do indeed gain the impression of the constant progress and indisputable success of the Tunisian 'model'. The announcements are systematically integrated into the economic analysis of the present: Tunisia is making progress because 'direct foreign investment will be consolidated and increased 2.5 times over in sectors apart from energy', restructuring is taking place because 'the new banking law will impose order on the system', and privatisation is speeding up since '41 enterprises will be put up for sale'.¹³ In the final analysis, this way of presenting quantified projections and measured objectives, combined with the accumulation of data and the two-way traffic between past and present, creates an impression of reality and effectiveness. The centrality of the Plan in discourse and in economic practices is a basic element in the construction of economic truth.¹⁴ The Plan does indeed provide figures – figures on which it is impossible to cast any doubt, and which cannot easily be contradicted by the facts.

● ● ● ● ● I.1.B. Shifts in techniques of accountancy and classification

A second procedure involves various shifts: surreptitious modifications in the construction of the indicator, in the modes of measurement or in the assessment of a phenomenon must ensure that one can always point to improvements.

In order to show that émigrés are investing in the country and that a real dynamic momentum has been set up, investments that have actually been made and projects that have simply been approved are mixed up. In the same way, in order to convince everyone that the economic situation has brightened to provide a context favourable to enterprise, companies that have obtained a licence from the Investment Promotion Agency are counted as fully established enterprises.¹⁵ In order to suggest that the private sector has energetically embarked on its own

12 According to the document compiled by the French Department of Foreign Economic Affairs, *Le Textile habillement dans les pays méditerranéens et d'Europe occidentale: l'enjeu de la compétitivité* (Paris: Ministère de l'économie, des Finances et de l'Industrie, December 2002), the percentage of investments in comparison with production in the sector is the lowest in Tunisia – apparently, for the period 1999-2001, 4% for Tunisia, 7.1% for Morocco, 8% for the whole of the Mediterranean and 9.2% for Turkey (and much higher for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe). See also the sector-based data for Tunisia provided by the Fédération du textile-habillement, and drawing on the very alarmist Gherzi report (CETTEX-GHERZI, *Mise à jour de l'étude stratégique du secteur textile-habillement*, overall report, May 2004) or the UGTT report, *Le secteur textile-habillement en Tunisie et le défi de la réinsertion professionnelle des salariés licenciés*, Department of studies and documentation with the support of the ILO, final report drawn up by S. Ben Sédrine, S. Aoadi, A. Nciri, M. Amami, April 2005.

13 Quotations taken from interviews, and internal documents of the national administration (the Plan) and international administration (French cooperation), December 2001.

14 On the centrality of the Plan in a period of liberalisation, see for example E. Murphy, *Economic and Political Change in Tunisia. From Bourguiba to Ben Ali* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999).

15 This is shown in J.P. Cassarino, *Tunisian New Entrepreneurs and their Past Experiences of Migration in Europe: Resource Mobilisation, Networks, and Hidden Disaffection* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), especially p. 122 where the author emphasises the importance of the differential between the former and the latter.



modernisation and is now the engine of growth, private investments include the proportion of investments (a particularly significant figure) that come from the public enterprises of the productive sector, without this fact ever being spelled out, to the regret of the IMF.¹⁶ The fact that there are, properly speaking, no official statistics on the contribution of the private sector to national added value reinforces the idea that the vague and confused nature of economic data is not always an accident.¹⁷

● ● ● ● ● I.1.C. The forgetting of past performances

The systematic forgetting of past performances constitutes a third procedure whereby the economic discourse is developed. It is striking to note the amnesia of power, especially when it comes to the period before 1987. Even though there are striking continuities between the two periods, everything was designed to highlight the 'Change'.¹⁸ The model of growth and stability so vaunted by the sycophantic supporters of 'Ben Ali's Tunisia' was, however, conceived at the turn of the 1960s, under Bourguiba. The sustained growth of the 1970s and the start of the 1980s and the transformations of the economic fabric resulted from the numerous incentives drawn up in that period and financed from petrol and gas income – and thus before the

'Change' and the current economic reforms.¹⁹ Likewise, the current 'upgrading' program in industry has issued directly from the policies of modernisation and industrialisation of the years of prosperity and income.

● ● ● ● ● I.1.D. The appropriation of social phenomena

The appropriation of social phenomena constitutes a fourth procedure whereby a flattering portrait of the economic and social conditions of Tunisia is constructed. In accordance with this logic, the benefits of the practices and achievements brought about largely by the population acting autonomously, outside political injunctions or public policies, are pre-empted or harnessed by the administrative and political authorities. Dynamic movements proper to society are directly re-appropriated by government officials or seized on by official rhetoric, and the discourse then attributes responsibility for positive developments to the economic policies and measures taken by the governing class. A good example of this tapping into social dynamics can be found in the rate of growth. This rate is generally attributed to the fairness of economic and monetary policies, with the omission of two fundamental factors: on the one

16 Interviews with donors. See also S. Nsouli and J. Decressin, 'Peace, Investment and Growth in the Middle East', *Finances et Développement au Maghreb*, n°18, March 1996, pp. 17-31, and J.P. Cassarino, *Tunisian New Entrepreneurs*, p.120 note 75.

17 R. Zghal, 'Le développement participatoire, participation et monde du travail en Tunisie' (pp. 205-229) in D. Guerraoui et X. Richet (eds), *Stratégies de privatisation. Comparaison Maghreb-Europe* (Paris and Casablanca: L'Harmattan and Les Editions Toubkal, 1995).

18 On this topic, see for example M. Kilani, 'Sur-pouvoir personnel et évanescence du politique', dossier on *La Tunisie sous Ben Ali*, December 2000 on the website www.ceri-sciences-po.org/kiosque/archives/déc2000; M. Camau and V. Geisser, *Le Syndrome autoritaire*; and, for the economic dimension, E. Bellin, *Stalled Democracy. Capital, Labour and the Paradox of State-Sponsored Development* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002).

19 P. Signoles, 'Industrialisation, urbanisation et mutations de l'espace tunisien' (pp. 277-306) in R. Baduel (ed.) *Etats, territoires et terroirs au Maghreb* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1985); A. Bédoui, 'Spécificités et limites du modèle de développement tunisien', loc.cit.; S. Khiari and O. Lamloum, 'Le Zaïm et l'Artisan: de Bourguiba à Ben Ali', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, vol. XXXVII, 1998, pp. 377-396; E. Murphy, *Economic and Political Change in Tunisia*.

hand, the importance of the international situation and climatic conditions, and on the other, the dynamism of entrepreneurs ('Sfaxians', according to another myth which could do with further investigation) as well as the social structuring of the industrial and, above all, commercial networks.²⁰

More often than not, however, this re-appropriation operates more subtly, by creating, a posteriori, public policies to which every improvement is subsequently attributed. François Siino has provided us with a superb formula for this process: 'belated institutionalisation, or: foreseeing what has already happened'²¹ On this topic, the most striking example is undeniably that of council housing policies. Everyone can remember the fabulous figure of 80% representing the percentage of Tunisian households that owned their own homes. In separate but convergent studies, Mustapha Ben Letaïeff and Sana Ben Achour have shown the importance of dwellings built on land acquired informally.²² Only 50% of title deeds to land, it appears, are registered in urban territories and, of the celebrated 80% of families whom the Tunisian authorities boast of having turned into homeowners, many of these have done so independently of any state action. Unpublished ministerial reports underline the dangers of the proliferation of districts where people set up improvised homes, the decline of property assets and the relative size of dilapidated and insalubrious accommodation.²³ In Greater Tunis, 30% of housing is 'anarchic' and this figure increases to over 50% in the Ariana governorate. These are DIY buildings and self-financed dwellings, put up without the permission of official authorities, so their owners cannot benefit from the financial support mechanisms for house building (building sites, interest relief, installation of water, gas and electricity, and land registration). It is now established that housing aid programs – though the same applies to most social programs – are essentially aimed at the solvent population.²⁴

20 M. Bouchrara, 'L'économie du réel', *La Presse*, 13 March 1985; 'Diminuer les entraves avant de multiplier les subventions', *La Presse*, 20 and 27 March 1985 and '7 millions d'entrepreneurs', loc.cit.; P.N. Denieul, *Les entrepreneurs du développement. L'ethno-industrialisation en Tunisie. La dynamique de Sfax* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992).

21 He develops this argument in connection with the organisation of research in the hard sciences: F. Siino, *Science et pouvoir dans la Tunisie contemporaine* (Paris: Karthala-IREMAM, 2004), p. 211.

22 S. Ben Achour, 'Permis de bâtir et régulation urbaine' (pp. 173-192) in *Mélanges en l'honneur de Habib Ayadi* (Tunis: Centre de Publication Universitaire, 2000), especially pp. 179-183. She states that an 'overwhelming majority of households own their own homes' in districts dominated by informal dwelling-places and that these are never squatters (p. 181). M. Ben Letaïef, 'Institutions, modes de gestion et devenir: la politique tunisienne de la ville', *Revue Tunisienne de Droit*, 2000 (Tunis: Centre de Publication Universitaire), pp. 159-193. See also P. Signoles, 'Acteurs publics et acteurs privés dans le développement des villes du monde arabe' (pp. 19-53) in P. Signoles, G. El Kadi et R. Sidi Boumedine (eds), *L'Urbain dans le monde arabe. Politiques, instruments et acteurs* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1999).

23 Reports of the Ministry of Equipment, Housing and Physical Planning quoted by M. Ben Letaïef, 'Institutions, modes de gestion et devenir', loc.cit.

24 D. Chakerli, 'Lutte contre la pauvreté et solidarité nationale', dossier *La Tunisie sous Ben Ali*, December 2000 on the website www.ceri-sciences-po.org/kiosque/archives/déc2000.



● ● ● ● ● I.1.E. The concealment of divergent information

A fifth technique consists in selecting information in such a way as to conceal any which does not send out the 'right' message. The Tunisian authorities are thus forever emphasising the primacy of social over economic considerations, underlining the policies favourable to employment and the efficiency of such policies, by enumerating programs and incentives. To this end, arguments are skilfully deployed: the slow and cautious way in which privatisations are carried out, laws that favour job creation (such as the law on bankruptcies and various measures on the right to work which make it difficult for anyone to be sacked), measures of solidarity and the translation of social preoccupations into budgetary provisions. But at the same time, a whole arsenal of economic policies that run counter to the much-vaunted social objectives is minimised or even concealed. This has made it possible to show that, in spite of the aid programs for underprivileged and peripheral zones, the peasantry was still in the 1980s and 1990s the poor relation of public policies,²⁵ while in the 1990s, the priority given to liberal reforms as against social policies has been made clear.²⁶ The same could be demonstrated in other areas. So nothing is said, of course, on the decline of currency entering the country when the figures on the number of overnight stays may suggest, when they are presented by themselves, that tourism is flourishing or unemployment decreasing when the overall figure for growth is meant in itself to encapsulate the 'miracle'.

● ● ● ● ● I.1.F. A skilful presentation of the figures

A sixth technique consists of presenting figures through a whole system of arrangements.

● I.1.F.a. Negotiated and massaged figures

● The figures are, first of all, negotiated between donors and the Tunisian authorities (but
● this is obviously not restricted to Tunisia alone). For example, figures for inflation, the
● budgetary deficit, and the big macro-economic aggregates in general are the object of
● re-assessments depending on international relations of force, the economic situation, and
● political and ideological circumstances, thereby lessening the weight of conditionalities
● and giving more room for manoeuvre to the government of countries receiving aid to
● confront their internal constraints.²⁷

25 H. Sethom, *Pouvoir urbain et paysannerie* (Tunis: Cérès Editions, 1994).

20 D. Chamekh, *Etat et pauvreté en Tunisie : assistance et/ou insertion*, DEA thesis in political science, Université de Tunis III, Tunis, academic year 1998-1999 ; E. Murphy, *Economic and Political Change in Tunisia*.

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27 The notorious Articles IV of the IMF (which imposes on all its member states the obligation to communicate to the IMF, once a year, the situation of their economy and their public finances), and the reports of the UNDP or the World Bank are 'negotiated'. For Africa, see O. Vallée, *Le Prix de l'argent CFA: heurs et malheurs de la zone franc* (Paris: Karthala, 1989) and *Pouvoirs et politique en Afrique* (Brussels: Desclée de Brouwer, 1999) and B. Hibou, 'La politique économique de la France en zone franc', *Politique africaine*, n°58, June 1995, pp. 25-40 and 'L'Afrique est-elle protectionniste? On Tunisia', see B. Hibou, 'Les marges de manoeuvre d'un "bon élève" économique', *La Tunisie de Ben Ali*, Les Etudes du CERI, no. 60, 1999.

Figures are then presented or concealed depending on how relevant they are to the official discourse. While in the case of the overall balance of payments figures it is difficult to provide erroneous data, their breakdown can more easily lend itself to manipulation. For instance, figures on the influx of currency cannot be falsified, unlike sector-based data on tourism, in particular the number of overnight stays, the number of tourists, and the origins of the latter. So the Tunisian public powers have tried to conceal the problems in the tourist sector by broadcasting the figure of a 4% increase in unitary receipts per tourist between 2000 and 2007. Now, if one takes a closer look, this figure was largely constructed by carrying out the assessment in local currency, and the failure to take into account the continuing depreciation of the Tunisian dinar (32% between 2000 and 2007) swelled the sector's real performances. According to the Fitch rating agency, receipts per tourist have thus dropped over the last few years.²⁸ This way of presenting the figures enables the crisis in the tourist sector to be swept under the carpet: losing 5.3% of its regional market share between 2000 and 2006 and seeing, in comparative terms, the slowest average growth in revenues in the sector, Tunisia finds that its place as a preferred tourist destination is falling, so that it comes behind its direct competitors in the southern Mediterranean, Egypt and Morocco, as well as Turkey.²⁹

Sometimes, the divergence between data is, so to speak, openly admitted, and the authorities seek less to harmonise them than to use them in the most advantageous way, depending on the arguments deployed. Thus, just staying for the moment in the tourist sector, the data of the Fitch rating agency will be used to play down the effects of the crisis since, according to this institution, this sector represents a mere 6.5% of GDP and employs 380,000 people.³⁰ On the other hand, the official data repeated by European authorities are used when it is a matter of negotiating aid and additional financing, insofar as these figures quote a figure of some 15% of GDP for the participation of the tourist sector, representing 800,000 direct and indirect jobs, i.e. around 40% of the active population.³¹ These divergences may result from different ways of defining the object to be quantified, different methods used, different bases for calculation, the absence of updating, and so on. In this case, these divergences (or rather these enormous differences) are tied in with a different way of drawing up accounts in the area of tourism. The first data take into account only tourism in the strict sense, while the second also consider the impact of tourism on arts and crafts (4% of GDP) and on services (3% GDP).

28 See the latest report of the Fitch rating agency on Tunisian tourism, 'L'industrie touristique tunisienne: un modèle à rénover', December 2007. The Tunisian magazine *l'Expression* had also devoted a dossier to the situation of tourism in Tunisia, 'Gros nuages sur le tourisme tunisien', n° 39, 11 to 17 July 2008. [footnote 22 is missing in the original, I have renumbered all subsequent footnotes accordingly – AB, Tr.]

29 Over the same period, Turkey, one of Tunisia's main competitors, managed for example to increase its share in the market by 9.9%. www.webmanagercenter.com: 'Tunisie: Les quatre vérités d'un secteur au bord de la sinistrose', 12.12.2007.

30 See the latest report of the Fitch rating agency on Tunisian tourism, 'L'industrie touristique tunisienne: un modèle à rénover', December 2007.

31 Official Tunisian data for the years 2009 and 2010 noted in the draft report drawn up by the European parliamentary delegation whose chair, Hélène Flautre, went to Tunisia on 3-6 February 2011. See also 'Les défis économiques de l'après Ben Ali', *L'Expansion*, 19.01.2011. http://lexpansion.lexpress.fr/economie/les-defis-economiques-de-l-apres-ben-ali_247221.html.



I.1.F.b. Data that are concealed and not published

On other occasions, however, data are not published if they do not completely tally with official discourse, and especially when they do not show any improvement. Another form of this technique is when only fragmentary data are shown, so as to create the image of Tunisia as a model student. This is true of the communiqués provided by ministries or by the Central Bank, which conceal the results – even though these are provided by the National Institute of Statistics – for the months when the data show a regression, so as to be able to announce an improvement in figures for currency coming into the country. This was the case in October 2003.³² Likewise, the figures for privatisations were available solely in aggregate form, by year. For a long time they were not published by operation and the name of the acquirer(s) remained inaccessible.³³

When it comes to the way figures are presented, there are in fact countless different techniques. One would be, yet again, the pure and simple non-publication of categories of data likely to reveal imbalances or inequalities. Thus, in the 2000s, the division of national wealth by deciles, which had long been made public, was no longer published, and neither was the localisation and extent of 'pockets of poverty'; this is also true of information on access to public services, which is unavailable by region. We could also mention the technique whereby the data are rewritten. So state expenditure does not include the expenditure of governorates and municipalities (this is itself is not very serious, since decentralisation is not very far advanced in Tunisia), but neither does it include expenditure in the public and parapublic sectors (and this is much more serious, given the size of this sector). Finally, data are everywhere provided with a certain profusion and published in raw form, to show the 'transparency' of the Tunisian authorities, but this profusion of unorganized data does not make it possible for anyone to know what the situation really is, or how things are developing. This applies, for instance, to fiscal data. When it comes to economic aid, the tax inspectors appointed by foreign partners to help with rationalisation and to improve the management of tax collection in Tunisia came up against an opposition that took the form of a proliferation of quantitative data.³⁴ No coherent picture, no percentage of return by type of taxation, not even a readable diagram of the fiscal administration was provided. Instead, the aid workers were given a surplus of incoherent and redundant figures, data that were so detailed as to preclude anything from being deduced from this information in terms of the general economy of tax collection and management techniques.

This is not necessarily the result of a technique of disguising or putting a spin on the data, but of the inadequacy of the information gathered, the low numbers of poorly-trained staff, and the absence of any real grasp of the information. Another procedure used is the way data are not brought up to date. This is glaringly obvious when it comes to rates of unemployment (stable at around 15%), untouched by any crisis, growth, or external shocks... Information is not easy to obtain in Tunisia, and nothing is done to further the

³² M. Ben Romdhane, 'De la morosité et... de son occultation', *Etarik Ejjadid*, December 2003.

³³

³⁴ Interviews in Paris, May 1998; Brussels, May 1997, and Tunis, April-May 1997 and April 1998.

task of analysis, especially if it is trying to be critical. For example, it is impossible to find any document synthesizing the government's social action and the sums allocated for this.³⁵

● ● ● ● ● I.1.G. A fundamental semantic shift in the notion of stability

On the one hand, the Tunisian appropriation of the language of the international community has been an essential mode of its strategy of extraversion and an important bargaining counter in consolidating not only financial income but also the symbolic income represented by the figure of the economic 'model student'. This tendency is historic and has long been an expression of the ability of the Tunisian authorities to adapt to changes in international paradigms and ideologies in vogue in the international community. In the 1960s, 'the socialist path' of development was set up as a model. The 1970s corresponded to the decision to open up the economy and resort to private initiative, following almost immediately the ideological about-face that occurred on the international level. From the 1990s, Tunisian discourse talked up 'good governance', durable development, the war on poverty, and 'stability' as a guarantee of the pursuit of reforms deemed capable of setting in motion the process of emergence.³⁶ Tunisian technocrats have shown a constant desire to keep their room for manoeuvre while bringing in reforms, in the name of 'stability' and the specific features of national development. This posture, associated with the capacity for production of modern, technical discourse, has often had the effect of reinforcing the perception, among international officials, that the Tunisian authorities had 'mastered their brief', even if this involved certain confrontations, insofar as the acceptance, refusal, and negotiation of reforms used a 'legitimate' language, that of the international community. Using the same words does not, after all, mean sharing the same vision, pursuing the same objective, or even speaking about the same thing. The ambiguity of the word 'stability' enabled the Tunisian government to utter its public policies in a vocabulary ratified by its donors while at the same time subjecting these very policies to an internal logic proper to political power.³⁷

● I.1.G.a. A mastery of the vocabulary and international grammar

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³⁵ D. Chamekh, *État et pauvreté en Tunisie*.

³⁶ Hamza Meddeb, 'La Tunisie, un pays émergent?', *Sociétés Politiques Comparées*, n° 29, November 2010 (available online: www.fasopo.org).

³⁷ Samy Elbaz, 'Quand le régime du "changement" prône la "stabilité". Mots et trajectoire de développement en Tunisie', *Revue Tiers Monde*, no 200, 2009/4, pp. 821-835.



of reforms deemed capable of setting in motion the process of emergence.³⁸ Tunisian technocrats have shown a constant desire to keep their room for manoeuvre while bringing in reforms, in the name of 'stability' and the specific features of national development. This posture, associated with the capacity for production of modern, technical discourse, has often had the effect of reinforcing the perception, among international officials, that the Tunisian authorities had 'mastered their brief', even if this involved certain confrontations, insofar as the acceptance, refusal, and negotiation of reforms used a 'legitimate' language, that of the international community. Using the same words does not, after all, mean sharing the same vision, pursuing the same objective, or even speaking about the same thing. The ambiguity of the word 'stability' enabled the Tunisian government to utter its public policies in a vocabulary ratified by its donors while at the same time subjecting these very policies to an internal logic proper to political power.³⁹

I.1.G.b. A desire to master the agenda proper to the regime

On the other hand, without being reduced to a mere rhetoric, the discourse on 'stability' reflected a mode of thinking about and conceiving public action. As a result, the shifts that were brought about from the economic to the political register were neither anodyne, nor effects of language. What they expressed, in actual fact, was an exercise of power desirous to maintain its mastery of the levers of economic action. At the interface of the political, the economic and the social spheres, 'stability' was set up as an indispensable condition of national unity to counter any vague urges towards political protest, the rise of social unrest and an economic dependency that would spell out the loss of sovereignty. Such a discursive construction, moreover, made it possible for the authorities to find an accommodation with the conditionalities imposed by their partners, albeit this was a subtle accommodation, whereby they found a way round the conditionalities in the name of national imperatives, concessions as much as ruses, negotiated adaptations and pretences aimed mainly at mastering economic and social developments.⁴⁰ Tunisia was also able to take advantage of 'the diplomatico-strategic instrumentalisation of aid for development'⁴¹, whose main objective is now less to 'develop' than to 'stabilise'. Tunisia also signed the free trade agreement with the European Union in 1995. It has reaffirmed its commitment to combating the flow of migrants by signing agreements with a certain number of its neighbours on the northern shores of the Mediterranean. So Tunisia has signed with France an agreement on readmission, called the agreement on the 'joint management of the flow of migrants and co-development' on the occasion of President Sarkozy's visit to Tunisia on 28 April 2008. This agreement, aimed at implementing a new strategy developed by France to 'control the flow of migrants' concerns mainly the readmission of Tunisian nationals without proper papers, and links this imperative closely

38 Hamza Meddeb, 'La Tunisie, un pays émergent?', *Sociétés Politiques Comparées*, n° 29, November 2010 (available online: www.fasopo.org).

39 Samy Elbaz, 'Quand le régime du "changement" prône la "stabilité". Mots et trajectoire de développement en Tunisie', *Revue Tiers Monde*, no 200, 2009/4, pp. 821-835.

40 Béatrice Hibou, 'Les marges de manoeuvre d'un "bon élève" économique'.

41 J. M. Séverino, 'Refonder l'aide au développement au XXIe siècle', *Critique Internationale*, n° 10/1, 2001, p. 82. On the changes in aid for development, see J. M. Séverino and O. Charnoz, 'Les "mutations impromptus". État des lieux de l'aide publique au développement', *Afrique contemporaine*, n° 213/1, 2005, pp. 13-131.

to aid in development policies. It came into force on 1 July 2009. There is not, properly speaking, any agreement on readmission with Italy even if, during the visit of the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Franco Frattini, and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to Tunisia, there was some discussion about signing an agreement. In actual fact, this agreement cannot be signed and ratified, since the Tunisian Parliament is currently not sitting, while it awaits elections. However, for several years, police cooperation between Tunisia and Italy has taken various forms: exchanges of information on networks of people smugglers, the creation of an alarm system to warn of clandestine emigration, the training of border control officers, and the provision of equipment and surveillance material for the coastal regions.⁴² Finally, Tunisia has renewed its commitment to the war on terrorism by carrying out successive waves of arrest of young people charged with belonging to the Salafist movement.⁴³

● ● ● ● ● I.1.H. The policy of donors and in particular the European Union at the heart of the miracle

Foreign partners and donors have played an important role in constructing the 'miracle', since the international recognition of the 'Tunisian model' is at the heart of the exercise of power:⁴⁴ positive reports from abroad provide a solid basis for international respectability, foster the inflow of external funds and, above all, give support to a certain legitimacy at home, one that is all the more effective insofar as they largely repeat Tunisian rhetoric. The 'Tunisian model' lies at the heart of the strategy of attracting external finance and the efforts of the Tunisian authorities have always been aimed at maintaining excellent relations with donors. The arguments and logics that justify giving this label are relatively simple: the development of the great economic conglomerates, a proper use of aid, and the attraction of political voluntarism and pragmatism.

Tunisia's partners are not taken in – far from it – by the 'cobbled-together measures' and the staged presentations that are always meant to show off the best face of the Tunisian model; they are even completely au fait with the practices that often run completely counter to the discourse. But the excellence of relations between Tunisian authorities and the different donors can be explained by convergent interests: the implementation, however partial, of reforms; a certain mutual respect; a technocratic understanding of economic policies. However, it is for another reason that the 'positive reports' translate into the granting of significant loans or gifts: overall, the behaviour of the Tunisian authorities seems to conform to the highly individual demands and constraints imposed by donors. Independent of any economic and social performance, Tunisia is, in fact, an excellent risk, since it always pays back (on time, too), has never defaulted on a payment, manages its debt sensibly, and has an efficient bureaucracy when it comes to the administration of international relations. Furthermore, the geopolitical factor is playing in its favour, since the country is 'squashed' between 'violent Algeria' and 'unpredictable Libya', straddling the zone of 'Africa' and the zone of 'the Maghreb-Middle-East'

42 Monia Ben Jémia, 'La Tunisie, cerbère des frontières européennes', *Plein Droit*, n° 73, July 2007, pp. 35-38. See also Hassen Boubakri, Sylvie Mazella, 'La Tunisie entre transit et immigration: politiques migratoires et conditions d'accueil des migrants africains à Tunis', *Autrepart*, n° 36, 2005, pp. 149-165.

43 Samy Elbaz, 'Quand le régime du "changement" prône la "stabilité"'.

44 For detailed examples and further discussion of all these questions, see B.Hibou, 'Les marges de manœuvre d'un "bon élève" économique'.



or the 'developing' and 'emergent countries'.⁴⁵ In addition, the country has the advantage, for donors desperate for withdrawals, of being characterised by its 'good' use of aid. It is indeed one of the countries whose rate of absorption of external finance is one of the highest in the region.⁴⁶ For donors, as for the Tunisian authorities, this ability to manage aid constitutes a real windfall, at a time when revelations of embezzlement are rife, as are deviations linked to the management of aid and, as a consequence, to donor 'fatigue'. Donors need 'models', 'success', and 'model students'; and since nobody is perfect, they are ready to make a few concessions, to overlook and forget a few things.

In this way, a virtuous circle can be set in motion. This is the case with relations between Tunisia and the European Union. Insofar as the latter insists on their being at least 'an example', relations are de facto good, in spite of the changing moods of the different parties, little quarrel, dirty tricks and warnings. Aid is indeed dispensed without any attention being paid to concrete situations, or to the environment in which it is deployed. Donors are external actors who necessarily respect national sovereignties: for this reason, but also for purely functional reasons, most of them tend to take only a cursory look at effective implementation and thus at the reality of reforms. The rate of withdrawal can thus be interpreted as a discursive technique which is permitted by the very ambiguity of the payment: the ability to mobilise external funds shows a good mastery of the international grammar, with its procedures for requesting withdrawal, the sending of a report on the use of preceding tranches, the preparation of provisional accounts, and so on. Generally speaking, withdrawal is the result of a skilful interplay between recipient and donor: the former has to show that it cannot use the loan because the procedures employed by donors are dubious and bureaucratically complex; the latter that it cannot pay the sums committed because of disorganisation, lack of preparation, and incompetence in administration and in the financial organisations of the recipient country. Tunisia's performances in this area thus suggest an excellent mastery of this game, with its presentation of arguments acceptable to donors and an administrative and organisational stance compatible with that of great international organisations.

The object of this deconstruction is not to take part in the debates (which in our view are sterile and, above all, political) on the existence or otherwise of the economic 'miracle', or to contribute to a normative assessment of the Tunisian economy. We are aiming, rather, to understand the bureaucratic, political and social dynamisms at work in this 'elaboration' (in the Freudian sense of 'elaboration of a fantasy') in order to gain a better grasp of what is being said between the lines, what needs to be seen but also what is hidden, disguised. All these discursive techniques are commonplace and part of the desire of any government to show its

45 For example, Antoine Sfeir, one of the international spokespersons for the Change, writes: 'In Algeria, they're always killing each other; in Morocco, the new king is trying to strike a balance between his plans for the future and a timid old guard; in Libya, uncertainty hovers over western intentions towards a Gaddafi who has been 'demonised' by the American and European press; as for Mauretania, the latest country in the Maghreb, it is already one of the least advanced countries. Tunisia is top dog in this region with over 2,500 dollars of revenue per head. The inflation rate is lower than 3% and the growth rate has been maintained, throughout the last few years, at above 5%', in 'Pourquoi la Tunisie?', les Cahiers de l'Orient, n°66, 2ème trimestre 2002, p. 3.

46 On the last European protocol, the average rates of absorption in Mediterranean third countries stood at 93% for commitments but only 25% for outgoings. And the latter rate rose, respectively, 10% for Egypt – and 45% for Tunisia, surpassed only by Jordan, with a rate of 48% (financial services of the DGIB of the European Commission; interviews at the European Commission in Brussels, March 1997).

actions in a good light and to present itself under the best auspices, especially in the eyes of its international financial partners. What distinguishes the Tunisian discourse from all others is the way it is made part of a political economy and a situation of public liberties which paralysed all counter-discourse, all alternative voices, all conflicting debates.

Now, this discourse – which rests on ‘massaged’ data and information presented in an artificially positive way – has not simply guided the way people might assess the country. It has also and above all tended to guide the way it is read, to offer a smooth and homogeneous image of the country, to conceal cracks, fault lines and inequalities, as well as to disguise the authoritarian modes of government that are associated with it.

I. 2. A DISCOURSE WHICH CONCEALS A SOCIAL REALITY MARKED BY THE DEEPENING OF INEQUALITIES AND BY AUTHORITARIAN MODES OF GOVERNMENT

As in all countries that receive aid and wish to attract external financing, official discourses aim at concealing a much more complex and problematic social reality. There is nothing specific about Tunisia in this regard, apart from the fact that the banning of all debate, including on economics, has prevented there from being any development of critiques of official rhetoric, and open and systematic expression of discontent, and any alternative discourse. Even while research had for some time underlined the constructed, strategic and political character of the discourse on the miracle, it was the uprising of 2010 and the departure of Ben Ali in January 2011 that made critique of his regime widespread and commonplace, bringing out the economic and social difficulties, the inequalities, and the cracks in the Tunisian economic model. The most significant of these, at least the ones that are most often expressed during protests and which are still the object of current social demands, focus on unemployment and exclusion (especially among young people), on the gap between regions, on the loss of job security, on corruption and the growing interventionism of those in power in the economy. Here too, these ‘ills’ are not specific to Tunisia, and have lain behind other uprisings in Egypt and Morocco for example. But, unlike in the latter country, where these questions have been up for debate for years, the land of ‘eternal joy’ prevented them from emerging into the public space.

● ● ● ● ● I.2.A. Unemployment and the extreme difficulty young people face in gaining access to the labour market

At present, it is still impossible to form any real estimate of unemployment and under-employment in Tunisia. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Ben Ali, the government daily paper *La Presse* ‘revealed’ the real figures of young people without jobs as provided by the director general of the Observatoire national de la jeunesse, Brahim Oueslati. According to this newspaper, the results of an inquiry carried out by this institution had been ‘strangled in their cradle’, so as to ‘preserve the favourable brand image of Tunisia abroad’.⁴⁷ We thus learn from them that the

⁴⁷ *La Presse*, 6 February 2011, <http://www.lapresse.tn/06022011/21973/ces-chiffres-qu-on-ne-nous-a-jamais-reveles.html>



unemployment rate among young people from 18 to 29 almost rose to 30% in 2009, and soared to 45% in the case of higher education graduates, while the figures made public at the time claimed a figure of 22.5% for unemployed graduates. These figures seem credible insofar as they are close to those provided by a study published at the end of 2005 by the World Bank, in which the rate of unemployment among senior technicians and those with masters degrees was close to 50%.⁴⁸ According to the 2004 data provided by the Bretton Woods institution, the unemployment figures reached 37% for ages 15-17, 32% for ages 17-19, 29% for ages 20-24 and 22% for ages 20-29, while these rates soared to 40% for graduates aged 20-24.⁴⁹ Given the decline in the situation since the middle of the 2000s, especially after 2008, the figures published in the press in the wake of the revolution seem credible.

Every year, the number of those entering the labour market is estimated at around 140,000, as against just 80,000 to 85,000 jobs being created, mainly localised in Greater Tunis and on the coastal regions. However, the 11th plan (2007-2011) predicted an annual creation of 83,000 jobs on the basis of a predicted 6% growth over this period. Now, evidently, growth was lower than these predictions suggested – an average of 4%, limiting the number of jobs created to between 60,000 and 65,000 positions.⁵⁰ Among these 140,000 new job seekers, 70,000 are graduates, 40,000 have come from professional training, and 30,000 have no training. These data suggest the importance of the problem of jobs for young people possessing a minimum training when we take into account the fact that the jobs on offer are not very highly qualified. The situation is not likely to improve when we see the effects of social unrest and above all of the civil war in Libya on the Tunisian economy. In Tunis, among donors, the business community and the Tunisian authorities, there are rumours of a loss of 150,000-200,000 jobs in 2011: 10,000 jobs have been lost, it is claimed, due to economic paralysis, especially in the public works sector and in certain industries that were already vulnerable before the uprising, 80,000 are under threat mainly because of the drop in tourism, while 30-35,000 Tunisians are said to have returned from Libya and are attempting to gain access to the labour market, and the drop in remittances from migrants and the halting of trafficking and smuggling concerns thousands of people.⁵¹ Even if, here too, the figures may be debatable, there is no doubt that unemployment, which was the main flaw which discourse on the 'miracle' was attempting to conceal, remains the main question to be dealt with.

48 Comparison and figures quoted in Slim Dali, 'Feu identique, conséquences différentes: un aperçu des inégalités régionales en Tunisie', El Mouwaten, 1 March 2011, available on: <http://www.elmouwaten.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=61>

49 World Bank, *Stratégie de coopération. République tunisienne-Banque mondiale, 2005-2004*, Washington D.C., 2005.

50 National consultation on employment, *Compétitivité et croissance. Le défi de l'emploi aux multiples dimensions. Rapport intermédiaire. Version 2. Septembre 2008*, World Bank/Tunisian authorities, Tunis, 2008.

51 Interviews, Tunis, March 2011.

● ● ● ● ● I.2.B. The regional gap between the interior of the country and the coast

The problem of the existence and the reliability of data and statistics by region adversely affects the quality of the analyses. The existence of reliable data on the economic and social situation region by region, especially the regions in the interior of the country, often encourages analysts to use employment figures as the sole criterion for assessment of the socio-economic realities of the regions. While it represents a characteristic that is common to all the country's regions, unemployment is none the less divided unequally between the regions on the coast and those in the interior: according to official data, it varies between 6 to 10% in the former and reaches its highest levels in the regions of the Centre, the South, and the West (between 16% and 21%).⁵² Insofar as we do not know how the official figures were 'cobbled together' so as to minimise unemployment and keep it around 14-15% at the national level (a figure considered as acceptable by the population), it is difficult to assess the reality of unemployment by region. It is, however, likely that these regional differences are at least equivalent, or even more significant than those presented by official sources. As far as levels of poverty by region are concerned, we need to fall back on the last five-year survey into consumption and standards of living among households as carried out by the Institut National de la Statistique (INS), dating from 2005. According to this survey, for a national average of 3.8%, the rate of poverty is close to 13% in the Centre-West (as against 7.1% in 2000) and 5.5% in the South-West. Insofar as the poverty rate has now been re-assessed at 10% (and not 3.8%) at the national level,⁵³ it is here again probable (with the same necessary precautions, given the absence of information on the construction of official data) that the Centre-West is experiencing a poverty level close to 30%.

But regional inequality also concerns public services. For over two decades of discourse on 'underdeveloped zones', an assessment of the needs and deficits of development in these regions has been made in accordance with a reductive criterion, namely access to water and electricity, as well as the opening up of an area by means of extending the road network. Campaigns promoting the National Solidarity Fund created initially to finance the development of poor regions have been focused on these elements, while neglecting questions of employment, as has been said, but also those of access to health and education. The spectacular progress in medical tourism (targeting the European middle classes and above all the Libyans) in reality conceal a situation that is very uneven and problematic for certain regions. In fact, the number of foreign patients who have combined medical treatment and periods of convalescence in Tunisian hotels rose from around 50,000 in 2004 to 150,000 in 2007.⁵⁴ In 2008, over 120,000 patients, largely from bordering countries (mainly Libya and Algeria, certain countries in sub-Saharan Africa) but also from Europe have been treated in Tunisia. 70% of the clientele is composed of Libyans and Algerians and 12% are patients from Africa.⁵⁵ Libyan patients constitute the main clients in Tunisian private clinics, especially in the south of the country: in Djerba and Sfax,

⁵² National consultation on employment, *Compétitivité et croissance*.

⁵³ According to the new Minister for Social Affairs who, in a press declaration, claimed that there were in Tunisia 185,000 'needy families', which means that the poverty rate is close to 10% of the population. See 'Tunisie: 185 mille familles nécessiteuses bénéficiaires d'allocations mensuelles dès le 18 avril', www.africanmanager.com (14.4.2011).

⁵⁴ According to the National Chamber of Private Clinics, a chamber that belongs to the UTICA (the Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'artisanat). See also 'La Tunisie, nouvelle destination du tourisme médical', *Le Journal de la finance africaine*, 17 July 2008.

⁵⁵ 'Tunisie, le tourisme médical à la croisée des chemins', www.africanmanager.com, 18.8.2009.



as well as in Tunis. In addition, Tunisia has achieved the status of first destination for European patients (18% of all patients) who wish to take advantage of cosmetic surgery operations that are less expensive than in Europe. In this regard, several agencies have specialised in this type of medical tourism, turning Tunisia into a 'paradise for the scalpel'.⁵⁶ Faced with the development of this sector, the Tunisian authorities took over responsibility for it in 2008, and actually decided to support this activity so as to turn Tunisia into a country that exports medical services by 2016.

These hospital centres are situated in Greater Tunis and on the coast. Hospitals in the interior of the country lack human and material resources, and simply pick up second-hand equipment used by hospitals in the coastal zones. But even the sectors targeted by government programs have remained characterised by imbalances to the detriment of regions in the west, the centre and part of the south: the road network remains based on Tunis and the coast; the merchandizing of public services (clean water, health, education) aggravates the disparities.⁵⁷

The division of entrepreneurial activities between the regions is also highly unequal, and the relative proportions leave no doubt as to the inequalities in the number of jobs available. Whereas there is one enterprise for every twenty members of the working population in the East of the country, this figure comes down to just one enterprise for every 170 workers in the West. These data reveal something that is obvious for anyone who knows Tunisia: a concentration of enterprises in the regions of Greater Tunisia and the coastal regions. They also explain the rural exodus of active populations from the interior of the country to its only dynamic region. The crisis in the agricultural sector provides us with another explanation for the extent of inequalities between regions. The rural world has historically borne a considerable burden in the transformations of the Tunisian economy, firstly in the modernising of the economy, then in the preservation of an economic and social balance through the fixing of agricultural prices without the sector benefiting from the aid and subsidies that might have kick-started its own modernisation. If we are to believe the official data, this sector, representing 13% of the GDP, and employing 16% of the active population in 2007, has been declining for at least two decades.⁵⁸ For the period 1989-2003, the average increase in agricultural added value was lower than for the rest of the economy: 3.7% for agriculture as opposed to 4.7% for the economy as a whole. In addition, liberalisation and the withdrawal of the state over the last two decades have largely contributed to increasing the difficulties experienced in the rural world. The rural exodus of young men led to the agricultural population becoming more older and more feminine (the average age was 53 in 1995); this trend has continued, and the inequality between the majority of small- and medium-scale farmers using a family labour force on the one hand, and big farmers on the other, has widened. This displacement of the population – masculine for the most part – to the big industrial zones of Greater Tunis or the Sahel is part of the formation of a reservoir labour force on which industrial entrepreneurs draw. This reinforces the latter in their

⁵⁶ 'Au paradis du bistouri', www.doctissimo.fr, accessed on 7.5.2011.

⁵⁷ Bruno Romagny and Christophe Cudennec, 'Gestion de l'eau en milieu aride: considérations physiques et sociales pour l'identification des territoires pertinents dans le Sud-Est tunisien', *Développement durable et territoires* (online), Dossier 6: 'Les territoires de l'eau', uploaded on 10 February 2006 (accessed on 16 April 2011). URL : <http://developpementdurable.revues.org/1805>.

⁵⁸ The agricultural sector provided 46% of jobs in 1960 but just 23% in 1995-2000 and 16% currently. See Jean-François Richard, 'Le devenir de l'agriculture tunisienne face à la libéralisation des échanges', *Afrique contemporaine*, n° 219, 2006/3, pp. 29-42.

strategy of controlling wages and lowering the conditions of job security. Competition between the urban workforce and the workforce that has come from the rural world drags wages down..

● ● ● ● ● I.2.C. A transformation in the organisation of work

What the discourse on the miracle also concealed was a transformation of the organization of work and a general decline in conditions of employment for middle- and working-class categories. The policy adopted by the public powers to consolidate the performance of the Tunisian economy as it grew was in fact based on a wage freeze, the flexibility of the workforce, and even a loss of job security. The last social negotiations which took place in 2008 were a good illustration of this. It had been agreed to increase wages in the public sector by 4.7% per year over the next three years. But this increase was less than the rate of inflation in those years, which went well over 5%, thereby auguring a deterioration in the buying power of the most modest social categories.⁵⁹ This wage freeze, in the interests of competitiveness, could be achieved only at the cost of disciplined and politically muzzled wage earners.

Contract-based jobs (Al-mounawala) best symbolise this policy aimed at reducing the security of working relations. It constitutes a hybrid form between temporary work and the externalisation of certain services – activities such as cleaning and caretaking. Apparently, Tunisia has fewer than 150,000 wage-earners employed under this system of work, and, in the context of the Ben Ali regime, they were vulnerable to all sorts of abuses:⁶⁰ the privatisation of permanent contracts, the absence of Social Security cover, pressures on wages and poor working conditions that even extended to their being deprived of days off and vacations, as the law provided for. This system of employment was set up in 1996, and was practised in particular in the public sector, and affected no fewer than 100,000 employees.⁶¹ The situation is the same in tourism as it is in industry: hotel proprietors are obliged to sell off overnight stays cheap under the pressure of tour operators on whom they are totally independent. This drags wages down and reduces the job security of their staff. This spiral embodies the jamming of the tourist sector and the bad management choices that have been made: the lack of their own capital and the huge debts incurred by these establishments push hotel owners into a frantic quest for profitability, even if this means bringing prices really low, and ignoring the quality of the services they offer. This creates a vicious circle.⁶² The lowering of quality, explained by the lowering of the price of an overnight stay so as to attract the maximum number of customers, provides tour operators with opportunities to exert even more pressure on Tunisian hotel owners who, eager to seize any activity because of their debts and pressure from bankers, accept increasingly drastic

59 'Négociations salariales: le dégel après l'impasse?', Webmanagercenter.com (accessed on 19.11.2008) and 'Tunisie, l'inflation continue d'augmenter. A quand les négociations salariales?', Africanmanagercenter.com (accessed on 11.05.2008).

60 B. Hibou, 'Work discipline, discipline in Tunisia: complex and ambiguous relations', *African Identities*, 6, August 2009, pp. 327-352, and H. Meddeb, 'Tunisie, pays émergent?' Information updated by interviews in Tunis, March 2011. The abolition of this employment system constitutes one of the main demands of trade union militants: see 'Le syndicat des métiers des services condamne le laxisme dans l'abolition du régime d'al-mounawala dans le secteur public', www.kalima-tunisie.info (accessed on 16 April 2010; the article is in Arabic, the translation is ours).

61 'Vers l'abolition d'al-mounawala dans le secteur public', www.tunisia-today.net (accessed on 19.2.2011, article in Arabic, our translation).

62 B. Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, tr. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), ch. 5, and 'Work discipline, discipline in Tunisia: complex and ambiguous relations'.



conditions. In order to operate, this kind of management is essentially based on significant pressure on wages, job insecurity among the workforce, and political conniving that plays a role in preserving an economically inefficient political order.

● ● ● ● ● I.2.D. Corruption and exploitation: full modes of government

The discourse on the miracle avoided the question of corruption. It did however emphasised 'good governance' as recognized by several international partners and reinforced by the publication of reports such as Doing Business or by international classifications, such as that made by Transparency International. In fact, according to the assessments made by these several international organizations, the rate of corruption in Tunisia was at merely a moderate level, one considered quite acceptable for a developing country. Here is not the place to discuss such a confused notion as that of corruption, nor the methods used to quantify it. We must however note that the question of corruption did not wait until 14 January to worry the Europeans, who, in their agreements, spoke of it in the euphemistic form of a need to create an 'improvement in the business climate' aimed at fostering private investment. The question of 'cleaning up the business climate' was brought up by the World Bank in 2007, with its experts referring to the bribes and other forms of corruption prevalent in the allocation of public markets. Their Tunisian counterparts rejected these critiques, stating that they would take no lessons from an institution weakened by the Wolfowitz affair.⁶³ The Europeans stuck to their guns, less openly but just as systematically, emphasising the need to clean up the business climate and improve conditions for investment.⁶⁴ At present, the question is mainly seen as a matter of exploitation by the predatory 'clans', in other words the families linked to President Ben Ali. However, the situation is somewhat more complex. It is important to analyse corruption in all its complexity since it has issued directly from, and is revelatory of, modes of government which the discourse on the 'miracle' concealed.

As opposed to the dominant discourse, in the field of business, corruption cannot be restricted to the predatory activities of the 'clans' which had mainly consisted of tapping into existing economic activities. The members of these 'clans' (essentially brothers, children, nephews and sons-in-law of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and his wife Leïla Trabelsi) had for the most part never been businessmen and had never been viewed as such. They were simply taking advantage of their positions in power to build up for themselves a position from which they could accumulate wealth, by monopolising the function of intermediary financiers in privatisations, in import-export operations, in access to public markets, and in access to information. They also proceeded by intimidation, seizing on a share of capital from flourishing businesses, and increasing the number of 'matrimonial' strategies in order to widen their field of intervention. At the time, this corruption concerned only the most important businessmen who were Tunisian or who operated in Tunisia. In any case, the latter had not all behaved the same way, and several of them were in an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the President's circle; they often suffered from their predatory activities, but it was not unusual for them to have sought their help, at least initially, in the hope of

⁶³ See 'Tunisie: corruption et gouvernance, objet d'une jouter verbale avec la BM!', www.africanmanager.com, 29.10.2007.

⁶⁴ On this issue, see Samy Elbaz, 'Quand le régime du "changement" prône la "stabilité". Mots et trajectoire de développement en Tunisie', *Revue Tiers Monde*, n° 200, Oct.-Dec. 2009, pp. 821-836.

seeing their own businesses prosper.⁶⁵ The departure of the 'clans' will definitely have a positive impact in terms of image, and also in terms of attractiveness for major investors both national and international.

However, the practices of the 'great' do not in themselves account for the 'bad business climate', and cannot by themselves explain the low level of private investments. On the one hand, most economic actors (we need to recall that over 90% of the industrial network is composed of enterprises with fewer than ten wage-earners) have not had to suffer these predatory activities. On the other, the most significant of the entrepreneurs were indeed subjected to these public interventions, but they benefited from them to the extent that they could also use them to sort out problems with the unions, to negotiate a deal, to 'kill off' a rival, and to pave the way for certain initiatives. So small entrepreneurs and traders, as well as big business figures, were part of the economy of negotiations, arrangements and compromises that comprised the golden age of the Tunisian 'miracle' and the country's security pact.⁶⁶ It is within this context that we need to understand corruption, which takes the form of multiple interventions rather than that of predatory activities: an appeal to an acquaintance to guide a decision, the activation of a network of friends, or regional or professional colleagues, to get round a rule, the mobilisation of the party to get away without paying back a debt or paying taxes, or using family links to obtain a favour. Intervention can also take a financial form: you have to pay in order to have a job or obtain a bursary, get the right papers at the right time, open a shop, sell in the streets, take part in smuggling networks, and so on.

Furthermore, the population as a whole has never been, for its part, directly and materially concerned by these predatory activities, even if the impudence of the 'family' and the immorality of its behaviour were experienced by everyone as a lack of respect, a conception unworthy of the state, and even if the behaviour of the 'clans' eventually came to symbolise the contempt and humiliation (*hogra*) felt by the population. On the other hand, the question of corruption in day-to-day affairs constitutes a real challenge for the population. This corruption fuelled its sense of injustice. Corruption protects, includes, enables active people to get involved in business, to succeed or simply to live and survive; but at the same time it disciplines and controls, it normalises things in the guise of participation in a system of exchange, privilege, special favours – a system which does not embrace merely the 'great' but the whole of the population; it wounds people and feeds into their frustration, their disenchantment, and their humiliation. None of this changed with the flight of Ben Ali and his Mafioso acolytes, even if denunciation and critique can now gain a hearing for themselves more easily, and protest is largely continuing in this area, with the rejection of the new governors appointed, as we have seen, but also the publication of lists of the privileged and the corrupt, the traffickers and the Mafiosi.

⁶⁵ B. Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, and "'Nous ne prendrons jamais le maquis'". *Entrepreneurs et politique en Tunisie*, *Politix*, volume 21, no. 84, 2008, pp. 115-141.

⁶⁶ B. Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, and "'Nous ne prendrons jamais le maquis'".



● ● ● ● ● I.2.E. Managing supernumeraries by tolerance of illegality

The discourse on the miracle was also aimed at hiding the structural incapacity of the economy to create jobs in a context of spreading education among the masses and demographic pressure, and consequently the production of 'supernumeraries'. The Tunisian model of development does in fact condemn those entering the jobs market to long periods of waiting and actually forces them into an economy of making do, the only opportunity for them to provide the material resources for subsistence. This configuration reflects one of the main characteristics of unemployment in Tunisia, namely the fact that it is an unemployment that affects finding, rather than losing, a job. Indeed, even if we adopt the official rhetoric that minimised the extent of unemployment, the authorities admitted that 'nearly 80% of the unemployed registered in 2004 are aged under 35 and the unemployment rate in this category is continuing to rise in spite of the decline in general unemployment.'⁶⁷ As a result, the younger generation are the outcasts of an economic system which long operated by excluding them from the labour market and, if they did indeed manage to enter it, by taking away any job security. However, the great majority of them are pushed into living on the margins of legality. The development, among ordinary working people, of practices enabling them to get by and survive from day to day reflected a massive decline in the contractual aspect of the economy as a response to blockages in the economic system.

This informal economy was estimated in 2002 at 38% of the GDP and as employing almost 40% of the working population: it provided work for entire regions, in particular the regions of the south-west and the centre west, and it has continued to grow.⁶⁸ The town of Ben Guerdane is linked to the Libyan towns of Zaltan, Zuwara and Tripoli by a cross-border commercial route nicknamed el khat. Ben Guerdane has gradually been transformed into a cross-border trading post providing the whole of the Tunisian economy with consumer products and equipment of Asian manufacture.⁶⁹ These products, adapted to the purchasing power of Tunisian consumers, these products, re-exported fraudulently from neighbouring Libya by young Tunisians who carry out the return trip several times a day on either side of the border, are a considerable source of revenue in an arid region deprived of productive investments either public or private.⁷⁰ On the other side, at the Algerian frontier, the populations of these poor regions have largely lived, since the start of the 2000s, by indulging in all sorts of trafficking such as fuel, cattle and even narcotics.

When they cannot exploit tax differentials across the border, young people from within the country often take the path of rural exodus to work in countless souks of counterfeit products, the best known being the souk of Sidi Boumendil in the medina of Tunis. Coming mainly from the

67 Consultation nationale sur l'emploi, Compétitivité et croissance. Le défi de l'emploi aux multiples dimensions. Rapport intermédiaire. Version 2. Septembre 2008, p. 12.

68 Report of the World Bank, Friedrich Schneider, 'Size and measurement of the informal economy in 110 countries around the world', July 2002; accessible online: http://rru.worldbank.org/Documents/PapersLinks/informal_economy.pdf

69 H. Meddeb, Contrebande et réseaux marchands informels en Tunisie, Paris, FASOPO, multigr., January 2009; and the same author's 'La Tunisie, pays émergent?'; H. Boubakri, 2000, 'Echanges transfrontaliers et commerce parallèle aux frontières tuniso-libyennes', Monde arabe, Maghreb Machrek, La documentation française, n°170, pp. 39-51.

70 On the geography of the region, see Hassouna Mzabi, La Tunisie du Sud-est: géographie d'une région fragile, marginale et dépendante. Tunis, Publication de l'université de Tunis, 1993.

governorate of Sidi Bouzid, these street vendors, who occupy the main arteries of the centre of the capital, sell goods bought from wholesalers who have found an exploitable sales force, one ready to endure the bullying of the municipal police in order to survive.⁷¹

The desire to leave, and the mass emigration of young people, also deserve to be considered in terms both of this sluggish economy and of the tolerance of the public powers of these migratory movements, which they have historically seen as a solution to the problem of a surplus workforce.⁷² Indeed, throughout its modern history, independent Tunisia has never considered emigration as a problem that governments had a duty to avoid or even stop. On the contrary, migration has always been seen as a development opportunity and a lever to modernize the Tunisian economy. It is for this reason that this country was one of the first countries to sign a labour agreement with France in 1963.⁷³ This tendency to view migration as an investment strategy and a way of managing the supernumerary workforce emerged during the 1970s, following the failure of the collectivist experiment in 1969⁷⁴ before taking illegal forms as a result of restrictions imposed by European countries.⁷⁵ If, during those decades, the profile of migrants has changed, the approach of the government seems unchanging, if we are to believe the strategy advocated by the current Prime Minister: increase the number of labour agreements to find jobs for graduates wishing to leave, but sign the fewest re-admission agreements possible. The remarks made by Béji Caïd Essebsi prove as much: after Silvio Berlusconi's visit on April 4, 2011, he had publicly stated: 'The lucky ones who managed to leave did the right thing!'⁷⁶ The purpose of this visit was to sign a readmission agreement, which the Essebsi government refused to do. The (unwritten) agreement was intended to enhance police cooperation and establish a technical commission headed by the Interior Ministry, responsible for finalizing as soon as possible a bilateral agreement on repatriation of Tunisians. Italy has pledged some 300 million euros to help Tunisia to better control its borders and curb illegal emigration.

● ● ● ● ● I.2.F. Liberalization without liberalism, a political economy of ceaseless interventions

The discourse on the miracle was, ultimately, responsible for disembodiment and depoliticizing the economic sphere by presenting Tunisian performance as the result of self-assured technocratic decisions and technical arrangements. On the one hand, the statements and declared aims of the reforms were taken as actual achievements. On the other, the power relations behind these performances were thereby hidden and ignored.

71 Hamza Meddeb, 'L'ambivalence de la 'course à el khobza'. Obéir et se révolter en Tunisie', *Politique Africaine*, n° 121, 2011, pp. 35-52.

72 According to a United Nations survey, 44% of young Tunisians dream of emigrating, as opposed to 37% in Morocco or 32% in Algeria. 'En Tunisie, 44% des jeunes rêvent d'émigrer', www.kapitalis.com, accessed on 27.11.2010.

73 See Gildas Simon, *L'espace des travailleurs tunisiens en France. Structures et fonctionnement d'un champ migratoire international* (Poitiers, 1979).

74 From independence until 1969, the different governments presided over by Bourguiba adopted the socialist economic option, under the influence of Ahmed Ben Salah: nationalisations, planning, development of public enterprises, and massive public investments in infrastructure, but also in tourism and industry, collectivisation of land and the development of cooperatives.

75 Hamza Meddeb, *Ambivalence de la politique migratoire en Tunisie* (Paris: Fasopo, 2008).

76 Speech by the Prime Minister, Béji Caïd Essebsi, to the Conseil supérieur on updating the objectives of the revolution, political reform and democratic transition, on 5.4.2011. See 'Tunisie-Italie. Le coup de maître de Béji Caïd Essebsi', www.espacemanager.com (accessed on 6.4.2011).



● I.2.F.a. The confusion between discourse and reality

● Behind all the talk of the reforming 'model student', actual practices are far more heterodox. This is what has been called 'liberalization without liberalism'.⁷⁷ The case of the liberalization of foreign trade is emblematic. Tunisia is often considered the first country in the region to have liberalized its foreign trade. But this process is actually largely negotiated not only with donors and international organizations themselves, but also with the various economic actors in Tunisia. The decision to appear as the 'model student' of the WTO and especially the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership cannot go against the interests of entrepreneurs or, more precisely, cannot happen in a way too opposed to their interests. Now these interests can very easily be taken into account thanks to the decree of August 29, 1994, which allows all sorts of restrictions, thanks to temporary safeguard measures included in the agreement on association and Article 28 of the latter, which allows for exceptions to the principle of free trade for 'reasons of public morality, public order, public safety, and the protection of the health and life of people and animals'.⁷⁸ These legal provisions enable the legalisation of 'snags' obstructing openness, which in this way do not appear as a violation of free trade agreements. The techniques are many and varied: health checks and technical checks, the over-fussy checking of specifications, heavy-handed bureaucracy, the invention of taxes to offset the elimination of tariffs, and so on. In the case of the balance of the current account slipping, or shortage of currency, the Central Bank issues oral instructions to banks and government agencies to restrict imports. An increased number of customs formalities, limitations on providing importers with currency, and barriers to obtaining documentary credits, delaying the arrival of products by encouraging port authorities to slow clearance procedures and access to the necessary documents, ad hoc and unofficial rises in customs duties, negative feedback on the product for faults in production, lack of adequate information, or quite simply because it is defective, etc. These modes of intervention are countless.⁷⁹

● I.2.F.b. Hidden power relations

● CThis smooth discourse confuses discourse and reality and also has the effect of erasing power relations at work in all reforms and all business practices. If we stay with the example of hidden practices of protectionism, it is easy to see how they can also be vectors of favouritism and socioeconomic inequality. When importing a product depends on subjective judgments, more or less unofficial administrative procedures, or the quality of personal relationships, protection becomes an obvious instrument in the service of the central power and its need to control.

But the same applies to all public policies. Thus, upgrading programs initiated by Europe to help Tunisian enterprises to adapt to international competition, have been transformed into real mechanisms for controlling the business world.⁸⁰ This policy, conceived as an industrial policy designed to help businesses compete globally, has indeed been

77 Béatrice Hibou, 'Le libéralisme réformiste, ou comment perpétuer l'étatisme tunisien', *L'Economie politique*, n°32, October 2006, pp. 9-27.

78 For a detailed analysis of these measures, see N. Baccouche, 'Les implications de l'accord d'association sur le droit fiscal et douanier'.

79 Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, ch. 8.

80 See B. Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, ch. 9 for a critical analysis of upgrading in these terms.

integrated into the political economy of Tunisia, thereby giving it another meaning. The upgrading program is primarily an almost farcical expression of the voluntarism of the Tunisian state, a point that has often emphasized by those it has left disappointed, its detractors, its sponsors and supporters, as well as by outside, independent analysts.⁸¹ The pernicky interventionism of the Tunisian authorities is simultaneously a more or less forced mobilization, a more or less real support, a more or less effective surveillance. When donors praise Tunisian voluntarism and contribute to the funding, even partial, of such policies, they simultaneously give a blank check to techniques of control and ways of exercising power that are not necessarily consistent with the rules they in other respects intend to promote, for example those of the rule of law and good governance. Whether they are aware of it or not hardly matters in the end, to the extent that their support is tantamount to an external legitimization that is conscientiously exploited by the Tunisian authorities. However, it is obvious that, for entrepreneurs, upgrading is primarily a 'state affair',⁸² as dictated by the logic of a liberal and authoritarian interventionism. Moreover, even if upgrading is rationally designed and implemented, with targets for sectors and regions, with a real desire to modernize and adapt to international competition, with a desire, also, to answer the concerns of the economic world, the program is naturally incorporated into the diffuse ethos of authoritarian reformism. Entrepreneurs understand the program in terms of power relations, of administrative and political control over the business world, in line with previous policies whose foundations were precisely the opposite of current policies. As a result, upgrading is not interpreted as an apprenticeship for free trade, but as a protective subsidy and at the same time as a friendly and yet inquisitorial supervision. Unlike liberalism itself, 'upgrading' is an additional opportunity to obtain aid - the continuation, under new forms, of a public policy, economically interventionist and politically vote-catching. Subsidy emerges from its economic framework to become an honorary gratuity, an intrusive gaze, a protection that is simultaneously reassuring and dangerous. The lack of economic credibility when it comes to upgrading also results from this alliance of a liberal discourse and interventionist practices, of a discourse of openness and protectionist and political interpretations thereof.

Similarly, privatization has been a unique area for the predatory activities of 'clans', but also for the distribution of benefits and income for the traditional bourgeoisie which was 'rewarded' in turn by being able to move into the acquisition of the companies sold off.⁸³ National preference was not only a decision taken 'from above', by the government, to promote or conversely hamper any particular entrepreneur, to impose one strategy rather than another, or to block any view from outside. It is intimately experienced, by the members of Tunisian society, as an exercise of national sovereignty, and as the defence of Tunisian identity and of a certain mode of existence able to safeguard certain types of social relationships. Of course, these interventions, which are at the same time training techniques, help to control individuals in society. These social relationships facilitate the monitoring of actors and economic and financial interests; they normalize

81 The most exhaustive analysis is that by J.P. Cassarino, *Tunisian New Entrepreneurs and their Past Experiences of Migration in Europe and 'The EU-Tunisian association agreement'*.

82 These are the words of M. Camau (in 'D'une République à l'autre').

83 B. Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, ch. 9.



their behaviour. Disciplinary power is thereby legitimized. Privatization can thus enable a process of classification, observation, and individualization of entrepreneurs; it guides their behaviour so that the process meant to symbolize the emancipation of the private sphere is transformed into a vigorously led planning, a freedom kept under surveillance, and a continuous monitoring. Privatisation should be analyzed less in terms of the modernization of the productive apparatus and entrepreneurial governance (as is believed by the technical programs set up by donors, beginning with the European Union) than in terms of modes of government, control, and surveillance.

● ● ● ● ● I.2.G European policies in Tunisia

These last examples bring out the full ambiguity of European cooperation policies, in Tunisia as in all Mediterranean third countries. The purpose of this report is not to make an assessment of the Euro-Mediterranean policy, since this has often been done already.⁸⁴ Instead, if we are to better understand the challenges posed by the period after 14 January to European cooperation, it will be useful to summarize its main features.

First, it is indisputable that partnership and the Neighbourhood Policy reflect a very liberal ideology: this is evidenced by the centrality, in the institutional set-up, of the free trade zones between each partner in the South and the European Union, the adoption of structural adjustment programs and more generally the support for the processes of economic liberalization, the primacy of economic and commercial logics over social logics and development logics. This is clear from the distribution of European funds that primarily go into these economic programs: industrial upgrading and more generally support for development and competitiveness, improving the employability of workers, and economic reforms aimed towards harmonization with European standards. That said, regulatory and interventionist activism also characterizes the Euro-Mediterranean policy, with an authoritarian approach and security of borders (closure or system of quotas, visas), the bureaucratic management of funds that are by nature interventionist, and a constant effort to spread European norms and standards.

Secondly, there is a conviction (at least in northern partners) that economic liberalization leads to political liberalization. But the signing of association agreements has not only resulted in a significant increase in investment, renewed growth and therefore development; despite decent growth rates (and for Tunisia in particular, a respect for really balanced budgets), the region is experiencing genuine economic and social difficulties, which the services of the European Commission also recognized before the 'Arab spring', and which the events of recent months have served to highlight. And, as is masterfully illustrated by the case of Tunisia, presented by Europe until early January 2011 as the model student of the Partnership, the economic reforms have not resulted in the implementation of political reforms or of democratization: far from it.

⁸⁴ For an overview in terms of political economy, see the special number 'Les faces cachées du partenariat euro-méditerranéen', *Critique internationale*, 18, April 2003.

This approach, simultaneously bureaucratic, managerial and liberal, is not without its political effects: it leads to a perversion of the logics operating at the heart of the Partnership. A perversion of the economic-political logic, first and foremost. This applies to the rise of budget support in support of the reforms, for purely managerial reasons: by falling in line with the initiatives of the World Bank and the IMF, and working together with them, Europe undermines its new strategy of association that presented itself, it must be remembered, as a break with traditional policies of cooperation and aid; in particular, it has rendered meaningless the word 'partnership', as structural adjustments and liberalization processes are treated in the South, wrongly or rightly, as western strategies of domination. In addition, this strategy of intervening initially in the form of budgetary support, following the reforms set out by the states in collaboration with the Bretton Woods institutions and controlling this aid by relatively loose indicators, means leaving a lot of room for manoeuvre to the Tunisian authorities and thereby guiding European aid according to the political logics of the regimes in power. The aforementioned examples of upgrading and privatization suggest that, by coming to the support of policies implemented in very specific political contexts in which power relations are also often deployed primarily in the economic field, European bodies are contributing in spite of themselves to keeping these regimes firmly in power. This illustrates the second and even more serious risk of perversion: the perversion of the democratic logic of the Barcelona Process and more generally of the Neighbourhood Policy. By giving primacy to management, community institutions support, de facto, authoritarian regimes. Tunisia is the greatest and now classic example, given its status as an economic model student: since the government can negotiate, projects go ahead properly in terms of deadlines and administrative management, macroeconomic results are better than in other countries in the region, so outgoings follow at the pace of this positive feedback, without any real account being taken of the political dimension, however theoretically present it may be in the Partnership.

It is thus also important to deconstruct the Tunisian 'miracle' for another reason: it is this distorted image which identifies the priorities for action on the part of the Tunisian authorities as well as Tunisia's partners, starting with the Europeans. In fact, contrary to the economic and social realities of the country, which unrest has laid bare, the diagnosis drawn up over many years has been generally very positive and optimistic. This view is shared by experts and officials of the European Union. Thus, in the National Indicative Program 2011-2013 for example, we read that 'the economic and social policies of the Tunisian State have achieved positive results in the social sphere,' and the same applies to the economic assessment of the country. Other documents also highlight the gradual reduction in the unemployment rate, based on official Tunisian figures.



II. THE RECONFIGURATION OF POWER, THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES OF THE REVOLUTION, AND EUROPEAN POLICY

The departure of Ben Ali and the broken silence might have enabled a debate on the 'economic miracle' to begin. For the time being, this has not really taken place in Tunisia itself. Coupled with a preference for stability and continuity in the political and economic elites of the country, this lack of questioning of the discourse encourages the pursuit of modes of government symbolized by the permanence of the political personnel in charge of economic and social issues. In the current state of political forces, the government is not up to addressing these issues. Not only, as is often stated, because of the transitional nature of the government and its supposed lack of legitimacy; but because the senior leaders share a common vision and are from the same mould.⁸⁵ The major economic leaders of the transitional government are from what is now called the 'ancien regime'. Thus Abdelhamed Triki, who was former Secretary of State to the Minister of Development and International Cooperation, is now the Minister of Planning and International Cooperation; something which appears as a pledge, a good thing for donors (starting with Europeans), can actually be ambiguous with regard to the political economy of the revolutionary moment. The same applies to the new Minister of Industry and Technology, Abdelaziz Rassaa, who since 2007 held the post of Secretary of State for Renewable Energy and Food Industries, or Slim Chaker, Secretary of State for Tourism, who was formerly the

⁸⁵ On this set of assumptions shared by the whole political elite, including members of the opposition, see B. Hibou, 'Tunisie: d'un réformisme à l'autre', in J.-F. Bayart, R. Bertrand, T. Gordadze, B. Hibou and F. Mengin, *Legs colonial et gouvernance contemporaine*, volume 1, Paris, FASOPO, December 2005, pp. 209-263 et 'Le réformisme, grand récit politique de la Tunisie contemporaine', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, n° 56-4 bis, 2009 supplement, pp. 14-53.



director of the highly strategic FAMEX (access funds to foreign markets). Even former opponents who are now members of the Provisional Government not belonging to any party to some degree support this rhetoric of economic success, while 'independent' technocrats are often former advisors of the regime, such as Mohammed Nouri Jouini , a one-time Minister of Development and International Cooperation in the governments of Ghannouchi. Others had already held important positions in the senior civil service, such as Mohammed Ennaceur, who had repeatedly served as Minister of Social Affairs, a post which he holds again today. While not all of them had held formal responsibilities under Ben Ali, they still share a mainstream neoliberal and macroeconomic mainstream vision that is completely in line with past policies. They have often been lobbyists for the 'miracle' abroad, such as Mustapha Kamel Nabli, previously at the World Bank previously, now Governor of the Central Bank.

On the European side, the situation seems unclear on this subject, for many reasons that overlap and already suggest how difficult it will be to change behaviour.⁸⁶ The desire to bring about change by giving clear support to the process of democratic transition is affirmed by all European authorities and undoubtedly reflects a determination to turn the page of unconditional support for authoritarian regimes. But beyond the statements, the practical and effective implementation of this new direction seems random and difficult, primarily because

⁸⁶ All this and the following information on the European Union comes from a mission to Brussels, 29 March – 1 April 2011.



of the cumbersome bureaucratic machinery. For change to be translated into action, the instruments available to European institutions should be immediately mobilized and redirected. Although there is a mechanism designed to work in emergency conditions - the instrument of stability - but it represents merely symbolic amounts that cannot fundamentally influence European policy. This is how the 17 million euros pledged by Mrs Ashton were presented, during her visit to Tunisia on 13-14 February 2011, prompting the irony of the Tunisian authorities and more generally the country's population, a classic strategy when it comes to obtaining additional funds.⁸⁷ But 90% of funds available to the European Commission pass through bilateral cooperation, through projects and support for public policy enshrined in the National Indicative Programs (NIPs).⁸⁸ But these programs take an extremely long time to set up, requiring at least a year or a year and a half between conceptualization and the first pay-out. In the present context, the NIP will not be questioned and there is no possibility of Europeans starting from scratch, both because of bureaucratic delays but also, fundamentally, because that there is no questioning of past economic policies.⁸⁹ In a vision that separates economics from politics, while regret is expressed at the low level of pressure for human rights, there is no in-depth critique of the overall direction of public policies supported by Tunisia, no self-criticism, particularly at the operational level. Moreover, the logic of European action remains the same, directly emerging from the philosophy of the Partnership and the Neighbourhood Policy, based on dialogue:⁹⁰ it involves acting primarily by providing budget support, following the public policies and actions defined by the Tunisian authorities; intervening only after an official application and the definition of clear reforms. In the context of the withdrawal, extreme caution and even paralysis that characterizes the transitional government headed by Béji Caïd Essebsi, it is unlikely that the conditions for a clear reorientation of public policy will all be met. The EIB loans, however, seem less constrained and could more easily support the desired change in European policy because of their focus on individual projects. Teams working in Luxembourg on the reactivation of previously studied but dormant projects; support for the development of the Tunisian Chemical Group, modernisation of the road network, and financing of hospital equipment. This shows that, here again, is continuity which governs European intervention in a technocratic vision of expertise and aid for development, especially since these projects will be defined in agreement with the Tunisian authorities who, in this area, primarily intend to follow the line of former logics, as suggested by the first steps taken (see below) and the speeches of Tunisian ministers sent to Europe to try to attract investment and convince partner governments to help the country in the current delicate situation.⁹¹

87 On his visit to Tunis on 29-30 March, Commissioner Füle announced a doubling of financial aid from the European Commission to Tunisia for the year 2012-2013. This aid is meant to reinforce civil society and promote the social and economic development of poorer regions in the centre and south of Tunisia.

88 The NIP set out the aims of EU cooperation, the means implemented to do this, and the aims and conditions to be respected in taking advantage of this aid.

89 Interviews, Brussels, 29 March – 1 April 2011.

90 On this philosophy, see the Barcelona Declaration. For a critique, see B. Hibou et L. Martinez, 'Le partenariat euro-maghrébin, un mariage blanc?', *Les Etudes du CERI*, n°47, November 1998 and B. Hibou, 'Le Partenariat en réanimation bureaucratique', *Critique internationale*, n°18, January 2003, pp. 117-128.

91 See the statements made by the Tunisian ministers visiting Paris on 27 April 2011.

It is important at this juncture to clear up a misunderstanding. The transitional government led by Béji Caïd Essebsi often mentions its lack of legitimacy to explain its inaction, the preference for stability and continuity, and, at all events, the absence of clear guidelines and concrete proposals – something about which foreign partners, beginning with the European Union, complain bitterly. Given their option to intervene, which makes them dependent on demands expressly made by Tunisia and on the definition of clearly expressed strategies, intervention on their part is often blocked. If we can understand that a major tax reform is not to be implemented before the elections, this argument still seems to correspond more closely to a bureaucratic and political excuse than to a real lack of legitimacy. Who could be against measures that take into account some of the demands of the population that rose in revolt? Who could protest against policies promoting major public works or works of public utility, especially in the regions? And why would thinking about how to reorient the economy so as to integrate more people and give them better conditions be less acceptable than the decision, taken in haste and without consultation, to create positions in the civil service or increase civil service salaries by 15%? On the contrary, a transitional government could have a greater capacity for reflection on, and implementation of, innovative policies: consisting of ‘interim’ officials (since the rule for participating in the Caïd Essebsi government was that its members would not stand in the forthcoming elections), the latter are not bound by campaign promises, by the need to please at all costs and generate consensus. The government might thus have been able to implement a whole series of measures symbolizing a break with past practices, starting with the introduction of checks and balances on power and procedures that promote compliance with competition rules and transparency, and the independence of intermediary bodies and controlling institutions (starting with justice).

It seems that the wait-and-see behaviour of the transitional government must be analyzed through another interpretative grid: not a lack of legitimacy, but an implicit political orientation that fundamentally wants to remain in the path previously followed, a path that does indeed have the disadvantage of generating a growing number of supernumeraries, but that also has the advantage, firstly, of respecting the major macroeconomic balances and the norms defined by the major funding partners (and thus ensure a good rating and preferential financing) and, secondly, of not upsetting the balance of power within the political economy of Tunisia. In other words, this withdrawal may also be interpreted as a refusal to take specific account of the socio-economic springs of the revolutionary movement, which sought at once to better integrate all Tunisian actors into the societal dynamics, including those actors who were previously partially excluded, and to defend the principles of dignity, respect and transparency. It can also be understood as a legacy: ways of thinking do not change immediately, and it is clear that the pre-eminence of planning, a bureaucratic operation that is hierarchical, disempowering and fussy, and centralized decision-making are all a brake on the renewal of economic strategies and modes of government. Similarly, operating by consensus (a consensus partly constructed, it goes without saying), as was characteristic of the reformist ethos in action over the last fifty years and more particularly in the Ben Ali period, has not been questioned: the quest for a unanimity that is clearly unobtainable the minute the constraint of fear and the choice of silence have disappeared, prevents any decision from being made.



II. 1. THE UNCERTAINTY AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION: A BIAS TOWARDS CONTINUITY IN ECONOMIC OPTIONS

It is obviously too risky to engage in an analysis of the developments now occurring in Tunisia, as the changes are recent, the situation evolving and uncertain, and the relations of force on the ground changing and influencing day-to-day decisions, interpretations and behaviours. This uncertainty concerns the Tunisians primarily, but it also affects Europeans insofar as, in the absence of a clear vision of what the authorities of the country want, it is difficult for them to propose changes in their approach and take into account a reality that often eludes them. These uncertainties have increased, at European level, since bureaucratic actors are so numerous, disagreements and differences of interpretation are no less so, the period in which modes of intervention can be reshaped is still in progress, political intentions sometimes find it difficult to materialize in the form of concrete actions and programs, so cumbersome is the functioning of these institutions, and so standardized their procedures. For all these reasons, the following analysis should therefore be read with caution. It seems, nonetheless, that the pervasive wait-and-see attitude, like the first interpretations of the situation and the first steps taken, do point to one emerging trend: that of inertia and continuity as regards economic and social areas, in glaring contradiction to the political dynamic that was set in motion in January 2011.

● ● ● ● ● II.1.A. The priority given to security and stability in a short-term vision

Security and stability are the two watchwords of the government but also of most political actors. A detour through recent history is needed to take into account the political significance and deeper meaning of these terms. Upon taking power, on 7 November 1987, President Ben Ali set himself the mission to 'restore the prestige of the state and end chaos and laxity' that had in his view plunged the country into a spiral of debt and deficits so as to risk undermining its independence and sovereignty. Initiating the 'change' thus involved prudent debt management, consolidation of public finances and macroeconomic stabilization undertaken within the context of the structural adjustment program, but also a strict control of the population through monitoring by police and party. Originally conceived in technical and economic terms, 'stability' was not, however, any less politically charged from the outset, which, moreover, was a hidden but very real legacy of Bourguiba. The centrality of 'stability' actually reflected a strategy of maintaining economic and social balance, and was part of a broader mode of 'short-term' regulation of violence and conflict, playing simultaneously on fear, threats, and rewards (real or promised).

Hand in hand with this undeniably repressive dimension, the legitimacy of the Ben Ali regime was based in part on this vaunted (and supposed) capacity for providing stability, security and order. The neo-Bourguibism embodied by the present Prime Minister seems to be reproducing this vision by perpetuating a strategic and political use of restoration, adopting the same symbolic slogan focused on the quest, for the state, of a prestige allegedly lost by the mere fact of predatory behaviour unworthy of Ben Ali and his 'clan'. We can better understand the

functionality of a discourse that is currently focused on corruption, which calls into question neither the economic model, nor the modes of government. Restoration can be achieved only by macroeconomic stabilization, by getting Tunisians back to work, and by gaining access to the external financing needed in the management of social conflict and the regaining of political control. Thus, the social and economic program launched in early April 2011 is introduced by the imperative of 'security' (considered as the first step, both economic and social) while this document concludes with a 'solemn appeal to the Tunisian people to work hard' and a vigorous critique of 'exaggerated promises'.⁹² By perpetuating and strengthening this tradition that stigmatizes conflict and glorifies consensus, the current Tunisian authorities are reproducing forms of government that have a strong elective affinity with a disciplinary and normalizing conception of power.

It is a good idea to recall how this preference for stability is shared by Europeans, from the Barcelona Declaration to the specific instruments of intervention in crisis situations (specifically called 'stability instrument'). It is a good idea from the political point of view: in the aftermath of 14 January, Europeans have largely supported Mohamed Ghannouchi in the name of stability and the desire to find a safe and recognized conversation partner at the earliest opportunity. It is also a good idea from an economic point of view: in general, donors - including the European Union - base their argument for stability on economic factors; it is a matter of attracting foreign investment, enabling further growth thanks to confidence in the markets, participating in international stability, and so on. However, it is unnecessary to dwell on the obvious: the evocation of stability, security, and 'public order' is instrumental and allows any kind of intrusion into social life, beginning with political repression of which it is an invariant factor.

● ● ● ● ● II.1.B. Political life: the primacy of short-term strategic considerations

In a revolutionary situation, the political comes first. The opposite would, by definition, be dangerous, meaning that it had been pre-empted by some elements while others were excluded. However, the economic and the political cannot be separated (we will return to this at length below), and the political finds expression in various topics. Now what is striking about the current situation is that the economic and social dimension of the movement that carried out the revolution (a political movement, in other words) is, so to speak, marginalized. For the different political parties as for the government, these economic and social considerations are set out hazily, with general statements regarding the consideration of economic and social problems, but without any analysis of the origin of this situation, systematic critiques of past options, or concrete proposals to address socio-economic demands in depth. In terms of proposals and even strategic ideas, these considerations remain secondary in the face of the resurgence of the debate on secularism and the place of religion in society, aroused simultaneously by the political elite of what is now called the 'ancien régime' and by the old secular opposition representing so-called civil society. They also and above all remain marginal in comparison with the quest for a better position on the political chessboard, tactics of alliance and opposition, considerations on strategies for winning influence on the political scene,

⁹² All these quotations come from the Prime Minister's speech presenting the social and economic program on 8 April 2011.



opposing or supporting the transitional government, putting forward the demands of those in the streets or conversely making them disappear. Europe is in tune with this stance, and it adapts very well, so to speak, to this priority given to a narrow view of the political. Its instrument of stability, the only instrument that can be mobilized quickly, essentially finances support for the electoral process, constitutional expertise, and a few of the associations of civil society that were formerly repressed (LTDH, the Tunisian League for Human Rights; ATFD, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, AFTURD, the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development), while aid to the regions struggles to be defined.

Obviously, these economic and social questions have not disappeared from the scene. They were at the base of the unrest that began to express itself in January 2008 (events in Gafsa) and peaked in December 2010 and January 2011, and they remain visible in public space through strikes, sit-ins, occupations, the establishment of self-management committees, the almost daily demonstrations, and so on. But it is striking that the political parties do not seize these concrete expressions to think through economic and social change. Insofar as the unrest has had no leader in the political world, and was not really organized, starting authentically 'from the bottom up', often even against more highly-structured forces, it is to be expected that current events will take the political parties as it were by surprise. Hitherto repressed and prevented from carrying out their activities, they struggle to find their position and define concrete guidelines in terms of governmental options. Nevertheless, in this respect, the current guidelines are somewhat surprising, when you see the debates focusing on issues that are of course important, such as the electoral code and political realignments, secularism and women's place in political, institutional and social life, but that did not lie behind the unrest and are even completely out of step with the basic aspirations of those who led the protests. For the Tunisian revolutionary moment has reinforced Tunisian identity more than it has heightened its internal tensions, religion being reserved for the personal and social space, not the political space. The protest movement was built around issues of employment, development, justice, transparency and freedom, not on identity issues and questions of secularism.

● ● ● ● ● II.1.C. The issue of unemployment, employment and assistance

The government has, however, set some priorities for public action in favour of employment, the great slogan of the unrest. But the guidelines remain, to date, extremely vague, including on short-term measures, and defined in line with past policies, without challenging the very functioning of an economy that generates unemployment.

- II.1.C.a. Pursuing a strategy of minimizing the quantification of unemployment
- Faced with widespread unemployment, the government has taken a number of
- measures, starting with the recruitment of 20,000 people into the civil service and the
- integration of 200,000 young people in moves presented as mechanisms for an active
- employment policy. However, on closer inspection, nothing really new has actually been
- implemented.

On the one hand, it is amazing that after giving the press the 'real' unemployment figures, the government re-uses the official data drawn up prior to the revolution. Thus, despite the disputes around unemployment statistics, the provisional government sticks as in the past to official data - less worrying but already alarming - supplied before January 14. Similarly, public discourse tones down the difficulties faced by the post-revolutionary Tunisian economy, with immediate effect in terms of job losses from the collapse of tourism and the civil war in Libya. In continuity with the past, this is simultaneously a desire not to present too gloomy a picture of the Tunisian economy and a difficulty in facing reality in its social and political consequences.

On the other hand, and more importantly, the 'active employment policy' is surprisingly close to previous policies characterized more by their ability to camouflage the real statistics than by their impact in terms of integration into the Tunisian economy. Before 14 January, this policy was based primarily on delaying tactics designed mainly to reduce the recognition of job seekers. Thus, after completing their studies, young people were less motivated to find a job than to go to a job centre. Formed in the early 2000s as one-stop centres, these provided them with advice and support.⁹³ They thus gained access to internships, to the financing - by the Tunisian Solidarity Bank - of various projects due to cheap credit extending over 10 or 15 years, to aid in the creation of small companies, and to professional training programs. In 2000, the National Employment Fund was created to help young people to train, reintegrate and re-qualify for the labour market. The courses on 'Introduction to working life' had been developed for those with a master's degree (SIVP1) or the baccalaureate (SIVP2), so they could be temporarily recruited at very low wages - less than the minimum wage - by public or private companies, publicly funded. We can also here mention the introduction of employment-training contracts and funds for integration and vocational adaptation. Employment workshops offered young people occupation in return for financial compensation, about 60 TD for 15 days' workshop, i.e. 4 TD per day. Increasingly used in rural areas, they offered a supplement to family income and were an attempt to limit the rural exodus.⁹⁴ De facto, all these measures failed to bring these young people into working life as is suggested by the unemployment figures revealed in the aftermath of 14 January or the World Bank reports mentioned above; they were primarily intended to reduce the rate of unemployment and guarantee a living wage for young people.

The measures proposed today are strikingly similar to the previous ones. The system for allocating allowances to unemployed graduates remains ambiguous. The AMEL (Hope) program, announced by the provisional government on 22 February 2011, is meant to enable unemployed graduates of higher education to benefit from training courses and internships in specialties defined by the labour market, in return for 200 dinars per month for one year. The conditions for obtaining them are very restrictive, and they actually exclude graduates who have already made contributions to social security for over

93 For all these measures, see A. Bédoui, 'Spécificités et limites du modèle de développement tunisien', communication to the colloquium on Démocratie, développement, dialogue social, organised by the UGTT in Tunis, November 2004, and the official press and websites.

94 The number of jobs on the shop floor rose from 500,000 to 1.2 million in 5 years. Source: MEF.



a year, including all those who, while working in the informal economy or surviving on subsistence practices, had contributed by themselves to the NSSF. Furthermore, no new mechanisms of inclusion and integration into the labour market have been established. It is true that, in addition to a full overhaul of the missions of employment offices, this would require the model of economic development to be rethought, as well as all the incentive schemes, so that it is not unqualified jobs (those funded by the SVIP or the workshops) that are supported. There is thus still a system of waiting without any conclusive results, with an apparent minimizing of the problem of unemployment, especially among graduates: the young are herded into temporary schemes aimed at hiding underemployment.

● II.1.C.b. The extension of an employment model that has generated frustration and anger

● Despite the overall diagnosis of improving employment conditions and following work carried out by the World Bank in this regard, the issue of youth unemployment, especially among young graduates, had captured the attention of European experts before the expansion of the unrest in 2010. The increasingly difficult conditions of access to employment were well-known. But, in the logic of the image of the Tunisian 'miracle' and the dogma of neoliberal economics, the issue was and is addressed in terms of 'improving employability', of 'labour market reform,' of the development of 'social protection' and especially of the improved flexibility of employment. In the National Indicative Program 2011-2013, which, we should emphasise, is still in force, the strategy promoted by the EU in agreement with the Tunisian authorities, is defined thus: 'Specific objectives will be formulated on developing an integrated strategy of employment based on job demand in businesses and the operation of the labour market, the strengthening and modernization of employment services and finally the development of a coherent arrangement for professional mobility, the protection of workers who lose their jobs, and private initiative.' In other words, the priority as defined does not consist in rethinking the economic model so that it can provide more jobs, but in adapting job-seekers to the existing economic model and to business needs, including the development of increased flexibility and labour mobility. The strategy of the fight against unemployment as thus promoted is therefore not really to create employment but to challenge the protected employment enjoyed by some sectors so as to distribute employment and unemployment throughout the workforce and, for those who will be condemned to unemployment, to organize safety nets and to offer self-employment as a solution.

After the fall of the regime, these employees demonstrated en masse, demanding an end to this scheme and their integration, either into the civil service or into large companies (public or private). These mobilizations have actually put on the agenda an issue that is currently the focus of negotiations between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Directorate of the UGTT (Union générale tunisienne du travail). In sectors where the union was strong, some employees have already been integrated. However, these measures do not undermine the very philosophy of the labour reform proposed by the government authorities in accord with their international partners. Indeed, neither the Tunisian government nor the European services intend to challenge the reforms

conceived by the previous teams and formalized in the NIP. The fundamental choice of flexibility is followed even if it faces a few cyclical hitches, regarded as inevitable but also as transient and marginal. Ultimately, this statement, these proposals and the few measures taken do not raise the fundamental question, asked earlier about the economic 'miracle' of Tunisia: the question of the overall shape of the Tunisian economy. The problem is not that of the increased flexibility of work - already very great in practice, even though the laws and the formal rules may seem to leave a certain 'rigidity' in place - but the problem, rather, of the economic model, the structure and functioning of the productive apparatus, the political economy of Tunisia (see below, II.2.A).

● II.1.C.c. A hazy strategy of short-term recovery

● In the short term, there is no doubt that only the Keynesian policy for recovery can cope with the increasing difficulties and demands of those who have sustained the unrest. Apart from recruitment policies in the civil service and the improvement in social protection mentioned above, this Keynesian policy finds classic form in a policy of larger or smaller public works and rapid, small investments in public services. The Essebsi government seems, however, to have trouble defining such a strategy. Aid to needy families and job seekers is still pathetic and does not in the slightest alter the situation of these populations; it remains mainly defined, as we have seen, by the old paradigm of conditioning, control and waiting (and not integration into the labour market), unable to play a part in any recovery. The same is true of aid to firms deemed to favour hiring. It seems unrealistic that a delay in reporting business profits or taking over part of the employers' contribution for new recruits should succeed in boosting the economy. As for regional development and investment incentives, these remain empty slogans. The Tunisian authorities have promised vague 'budget allocations' to 'locally activate the mechanisms of employment and social welfare' and given themselves two extra months to proceed to a 'significant reallocation of spending on priority zones and regions in the light of the demands expressed by the regions'.⁹⁵ They encourage the 'implementation of major projects', especially in the field of new technologies...

European emergency aid is partly dedicated to this type of short-term stimulus because 10 of the 17 million euros of the instrument of stability must be dedicated to plans for micro-credit that will profit projects in the interior regions. But this amount, deemed 'ridiculous' in Tunisia,⁹⁶ is indeed derisory in comparison with the needs and challenges of the recovery. In contrast, the EIB Bank is certainly in this area the most active of the European authorities, less dependent on bureaucratic logics and the definition of reforms defined by the Tunisian authorities, committing far more significant sums. In fact, the EIB has announced a budget of 1.87 billion euros to fund economic programs focused on growth and employment, and its board of directors has already approved two major projects, already set up but as yet unrealized, namely the construction of the new Mdhilla

95 Prime Minister's speech presenting the social and economic program on 8 April 2011.

96 Statement by the Minister for Industry, Afif Chelbi, on 17 February 2011. We heard these remarks throughout our mission in Tunisia.



factory for the Tunisian Chemical Group, a modern plant built to the highest environmental standards (140 million euros) and the implementation of an extensive road modernization program across the country (163 million euros).⁹⁷ However, this announced increase in European commitment is again partly illusory and operates more as an incentive: the 1.87 billion actually include funds already available and projects already signed in 2010 which have been ratified only this year. So the commitments of the EIB in 2011 should eventually reach the same level as in previous years (about 450 million euros per year over 2007-2009, and 500 million in 2010). The green light for other projects planned or set up⁹⁸ remains conditional on changes in the socio-political situation of Tunisia, including a more explicit commitment from directors of public companies or clearer definitions of economic guidelines at government level, while a certain number of measures for short-term recovery depend more on the logic of subsidy (aid for job creation, the financing of local communities in trouble).

The definition of a real short-term stimulus package thus seems constrained by a combination of factors: a government that favours budget support and claims it cannot currently define a new strategy; European partners who cannot commit to new projects in the absence of any definition of clear directions from the Tunisian government; aid procedures with budgetary support, which take at least a year and half or even more; emergency assistance that comes in derisory amounts; and loans that cannot be committed to except for long-term projects.

● ● ● ● ● II.1.D. **Focusing on corruption, which prevents a rethinking of the political economy of intervention**

As we have said, in public debate, the analysis of corruption is limited to clan participation in projects and domestic and foreign investment and to the products of this predation, to the funds transferred abroad and committed to financial or property investments (in France, Switzerland and the Gulf countries and even elsewhere in Latin America and Asia). This explains that the main measures taken in the fight against corruption have hitherto related to the sealing of movable and immovable property and the freezing of assets in Tunisia and abroad belonging to the different 'clans'. This also helps explain why the Commission on the fight against corruption and embezzlement primarily handles requests coming from the country's economic elite which relate to the land in the well-off suburbs around Tunis and participation or abuses in large enterprises. This corruption endemic to the 'clans' is often presented as the source of the evils in the Tunisian economy, reducing Tunisian dynamism by several points of GDP. International partners, first and foremost the Europeans, adopt this discourse without questioning it, as in the report that says that 'we must know that without the family's grip on the economy, the annual growth rate of Tunisia would have been 7% instead of 4% at present, a loss of 36,000 jobs per year. In addition, funds invested abroad would amount to 60% of the state budget.'⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Interviews, Luxembourg, April and May 2011.

⁹⁸ Public projects, for example, especially in the sector of cleaning, energy and road infrastructures; credit lines for the support fund for local communities; the financing of new STEG projects, etc.

⁹⁹ Report of the European Parliament delegation, p. 15. The authors of the report do not give any source for these assessments.

One can understand this situation, which recreates unanimity among Tunisians and among Europeans and Tunisians. Some of the reasons that lie behind this interpretation are certainly not very honourable, such as those which drive the Administrative Commission of the UGTT (which does not want anyone talking about its own participation in the widespread system of corruption and clientelism), the political elite previously in power (for obvious political reasons, starting with the operation of the single party) or part of the business community (which does not want anyone to look into its professional practices, often overlapping with political compromises and even shady financial dealings with the Ben Ali regime). But other reasons may be honest, naive or strategic, as in the case of a majority of the population who truly believe that the family's predatory activities have led the country into bankruptcy, people who agree with the analyses of the relation between development, corruption and democracy, or politicians (whether Tunisian members of the former opposition or Europeans) who think that the debate on the family's corruption is definitely a way to disqualify once and for all the use of personal power, to mobilize European countries in the freezing of assets in their own country, and to release new funds to help a friendly country in difficulty.

Be this as it may, this focus on clan predation produces a fundamental perverse effect: it prevents anyone from raising and discussing the problems of the Tunisian economy, the patronage system developed around the RCD and the UGTT, and the state of justice. Low investment in the Tunisian economy is not only due to the clans draining off resources: it is also directly linked to the incessant interventions mentioned above, and the nature of economic incentives shaped more by political pressure and by financial reasons than by considerations of economic competitiveness and the trajectory of Tunisian entrepreneurs. The discourse of the new government elites calls for 'good governance' and an end to the endemic corruption that characterized the government under the former regime to gain a few percentage points of growth and address the structural problems of the Tunisian economy. In fact, there is no questioning of the political economy of Tunisia, or of the arrangements that lay behind the formation of a 'credit bourgeoisie', the extent of tax evasion, the illicit enrichment and repression or even abuse of the world of work and wages. The fault lines of inequality and injustice may be drawn in part by the places and modes of predation of the clans... but they are far more decisively drawn by the model of economic development, by decisions on tax and incentives, by the conception of public service and the public good, by this political economy of arrangements and clientelism that created the regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. None of this has been challenged by the departure of Ben Ali and the clans, and is not discussed. It involves a reorganization and investment in all areas of interventionism, in all fields: financial, legislative, fiscal, customs, legal, IT, social... and, last but not least, legal. The question of justice is indeed fundamental, and in the final analysis not much discussed, whereas the political instrumentalization of the world of judges, lawyers and more generally of all professions involved in the legal world has been fundamental in the exercise of domination. The focus on the fight against corruption through the establishment of an ad hoc Commission prevents any proper clean-up from taking place, any professionalization and specialization from developing (such as specialized departments in financial, fiscal, and customs matters), and makes it possible for people to avoid dealing openly and above all concretely with the record of judicial independence, as is emphasized by the judges' trade union and many lawyers. The



Justice Program of the European Union, previously shelved by Brussels, should be revitalized. But its actual implementation is again dependent on Tunisian government proposals, which are struggling to express themselves given the magnitude of the political issues surrounding this issue (the future of the RCD and its members, the fight against illegal practices, financial crime, widespread corruption throughout the police and security forces but also within the administrative, economic and cultural services of the state), and conflicts over the purging of the judiciary.

The disappearance of 'clans' and their predation changes nothing in the discriminatory practices that do affect the vast majority of the population, or at all events a significant part of the population which was active in the unrest. These are practices that have sharpened feelings of arbitrariness, unfairness and disrespect. These people experienced and still experience injustice in everyday life, through the conduct of police officers and more broadly the agents of authority, through the real conditions of access to employment and the labour market, through the lowering of their purchasing power and real impoverishment. However, these issues are addressed today neither in public debate, nor in the work of governing bodies. It is true that thinking about ways to alter the logics of inequality and unfair practices is extremely demanding, and perspective, distance and critical thinking rarely characterize revolutionary periods. However, to cope with these nagging questions that lie at the heart of revolutionary logic, it is imperative to reconsider the Tunisian economic success story: the reforms, economic and social policies of at least the last two decades must be re-assessed specifically because they were based in part on a distorted picture of the daily reality of Tunisians. The unrest has highlighted what critics had long complained of in vain, namely the fact that the discourse on the Tunisian 'miracle' actually hid gaps, fault lines and numerous regional and generational inequalities in terms of standards and styles of living, and access to employment and public services.

● ● ● ● ● II.1.E. The decision to pursue the neoliberal option

Government strategy, which is undoubtedly also European strategy, certainly continues its previous line in major economic decisions.

● II.1.E.a. The diktat of the great balances

● While previous policy continuities are often implicit, when it comes to macroeconomics, ● the government has explicitly demonstrated and broadcast the fact that it was keeping ● to the same course. Thus, the last IMF mission which took place March 31, 2011 found ● a relatively good macroeconomic situation, and in any case decided that it was not ● necessary to intervene immediately in support of Tunisia, as the 'fundamentals' were still strong enough to leave Tunisia outside the emergency mechanisms that would justify the loosening of these constraints.¹⁰⁰ But the revolutionary situation, and especially the sources of the malaise and social protest should make one think about the relevance of the major macroeconomic policies. Should the 'macro' variables and the plaudits given by donors to the 'great balances' have to remain the yardstick by which to assess

¹⁰⁰ Interviews, Brussels, 1 April 2011 and Paris, April 2011.

the country's economic success? Two decades of 'miracle' have certainly resulted in compliance with these balances and in excellent 'fundamentals', but at the cost of exponential unemployment and growing inequalities, particularly as regards access to employment and public services. Thinking through the democratic transition, emerging from the Ben Ali political economy, require that these questions be openly asked and replace abstract, formal slogans on the need to 'meet the objectives of the revolution'. Now while the government has clearly opted for fiscal restraint and a balancing of current operations, Europeans are not applying any pressure for a reconsideration of public policies, since the conceptual frameworks shaping strategies and National Indicative Programs remain unquestioned, and only marginal and symbolic improvements are planned within these broad guidelines. Never mentioned is any possibility of a loosening of constraints that are, however, now widely debated in the European context.

● II.1.E.b. Assuming a full place in globalization: competitiveness ● through lower labour costs

● The issue of economic and social rights (including rights to work, 'fair' and 'favourable' working conditions, and the right to social security) appears to be secondary in the strategy documents of the Tunisian authorities (various programs, planning) as in those of the European Union (mainly the NIP) whereas, as recent events have shown, poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and lack of rights are widespread in Tunisia and are the main drivers of unease and protest. On the contrary, indeed, we can say that in the current priorities, it is the trend - already underway - to erode workers' rights that must be strengthened to the extent that priority is being given to improving competitiveness by more flexible employment and a lowering of the comparative cost of labour. In this area, the revolution has changed nothing, either on the government side or on that of the Europeans. Neither group mentions the possibility, and even the advantage, of revising these guidelines which instead, or so it is said, need to be strengthened. The issue of unemployment, particularly among graduates, and inequity in access to the labour market continue to be addressed through a quest for improved 'employability', i.e. a better adaptation to conditions set by employers. The question of entitlement to social security is considered in terms of employment and the reform of health insurance, in a formal and abstract vision that does not include the majority of workers. As for such issues as workers' poverty, insecurity and lack of rights in many sectors and situations, they are not even considered.

However, in this respect, the situation is already made significantly more fragile since, by applying recipes in fashion since the late 1970s, Tunisia has taken the view that the best solution for improving the country's competitiveness and attracting industrial investments for export was the increased flexibility and insecurity of employment. Article 23 of Law 92-81 on the establishment of free zones had already imposed and generalized a form of employment contract: the fixed duration contract. The only working relationship allowed offshore was thus one that undermines the worker's status and subjects him to the arbitrary will of his employer. And even if the latter wishes to make this relationship a long-term one, and give the work a 'decent' character, this is impossible for him. In



such zones, it is not only the nature of the employment contract which is the source of insecurity, it is the difficulty employees face in setting up trade unions and defending their most basic rights. Since the amendments of the Labour Code of 1994 and 1996 and the introduction of fixed term contracts (contrats à durée déterminée - CDD), the proportion of temporary jobs has climbed rapidly: of the unemployed who lost their jobs, 41 percent were in this situation because their contract had run its course. In free zones, the only possible contract is the CDD.

Similarly, lower labour costs in Tunisia have already been in force for years, and the guidelines required by integration in neoliberal globalization (and transmitted by European demands) do not take this situation into account. The income of a father on the guaranteed minimum wage has deteriorated significantly. Composed of the latter's wages, but also of family allowances, the single wage allowance (when his wife is not working, which is usually the case) and other allowances, this set of revenues experienced a significant decline, mainly because of lower benefit levels. It follows that, on average, between 1983 and 2006, the loss of purchasing power of a father of three children on the minimum wage has amounts to over 86 dinars per month.

The magnitude of the pressure on wages has been implicitly recognized through the increases awarded by entrepreneurs in the aftermath of 14 January. But while these adjustments certainly improve the lives of the wage-earners affected, they are not general. They mainly concern the offshore sector, in which reactions have been varied, depending mainly on the economic situation of the companies involved. Many of them have given in to demands and some had even anticipated them by announcing salary increases immediately after January 14, precisely in the hope of avoiding creating permanent jobs.¹⁰¹ They had calculated the cost in euros of these salary increases, and had considered them to be insignificant compared to the benefits provided by the proximity of Tunisia to Europe, as was openly stated by the acting President of the UTICA: 'Wage demands are negligible when converted into euros.'¹⁰² Other companies, certainly those which were already in a bad position and close to leaving, have 'taken advantage' of claims to close down and announce their relocation: in this way, Tunisia has lost between 10,000 and 15,000 jobs.¹⁰³

In the onshore sector, it is mainly officials who have demanded wage increases, starting with the police who got a hike of up to 150 TD per month, or employees of public enterprises such as Tunis Air or urban transport companies. While some permanent jobholders obtained wage increases, some of the less secure demanded that their jobs be made permanent: 100,000 caretakers and cleaners are negotiating their integration into the civil service. The standoff in the private sector just after the fall of Ben Ali has stalled and employees have preferred to save their situation, some employees protecting 'their' factories with clubs, after 14 January amid the security chaos, and most accepting a de

101 Interviews in Tunis and the industrial zone of Grombalia, March 2011.

102 Marie Christine Corbier, 'Tunisie, le temps des colères sociales', www.lesechos.fr, accessed on 7.3.2011.

103 Ibid., and interviews in Tunis, March 2011.

facto (facit) moratorium on wages to keep their jobs.¹⁰⁴ Despite the strength of the unrest and the continuing conflicts in many sectors and regions, the confrontation between Tunisian workers and bosses generally seems to have been concluded in favour of the latter: faced with demands for permanent jobs, the bosses were able to respond with blackmail, threatening the closure of the company. While Tunisian employees demand permanent jobs first and foremost and an end to the CDD and job insecurity, Tunisian entrepreneurs are often willing to make wage concessions, but definitely not to review employment terms.

We find the same inequality in the 'race for el khobza' which was simultaneously the source of obedience (for years) and rebellion (for a few months): while employees chase el khobza in an attempt to make it more secure, employers base their profits on their ability to render el khobza uncertain.¹⁰⁵ These adjustments do not undermine the development model chosen, based on a competitiveness involving pressure on wages and specialization on just-in-time production based on flexibility of work.¹⁰⁶ Instead, one might even say that the end (perhaps temporary) of conflict has resulted in an even stronger reaffirmation of this 'historical necessity' of insecurity.

¹⁰⁴ Interviews in Tunis, March 2011.

¹⁰⁵ The expression 'the race for el khobza' (literally 'the race for bread') is an attempt to express the situation in which, in order to find a means of living (or surviving), one has to accept a day-to-day existence made of labour and privation, to have to domesticate uncertainty, insecurity, violence and risk in order to have any chance of gaining access to material resources. See Hamza Medded, 'L'ambivalence de la "course à el khobza"'.
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¹⁰⁶ The 'just-in-time' principle involves organizing production so as to minimize stocks and 'in-hand' manufacture, and reducing to the minimum each stage of production time from raw materials to end product.



II. 2. THE STAKES FOR A RADICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TUNISIA

However, the extent of economic and social problems should eventually bring the Tunisian authorities and their international and European partners to rethink the development model and the modes of government associated with it. While it is understandable that this rethinking has not yielded definite results in this period of transition and adaptation to the new political situation, it is certain that only a reflection on these issues will be able to respond to popular demands and take into account the economic and social rights (especially in terms of the right to work, to fair and favourable working conditions, the right to social security, but also to an adequate standard of living or the right to education and health) of all categories of the population.

II.2.A. Reviewing the development model

As has often been said throughout this report, the key question that is not asked is that of the reconsideration of the Tunisian development model, a model which not only has generated an ever-growing number of people excluded from work but has also often flourished in the shadow of disciplinary forms of government that go against respect for economic and social rights insofar as corruption, cronyism and nepotism dominated access to the labour market and the principle of allegiance and socio-political conformism regulated access to social programs.¹⁰⁷

II.2.A.a. Dependence on Europe

The Tunisian economy is highly dependent on the European Union. The latter absorbs 78% of exports, provides 65% of imports, generates 83% of revenue in the tourist sector, provides 73% of foreign direct investment (FDI) and provides 90% of income transfers to Tunisia.¹⁰⁸ In sum, the equivalent of two-thirds of Tunisian GDP depends directly on Europe. So far, in Tunisia, a number of political parties mention this specific feature as a matter of regret, but have offered nothing very concrete to reorient the Tunisian economy, such as the Ennahda which certainly raises this issue openly, without defining any clear strategies for diversification.¹⁰⁹ It must be said that in the moderate and pragmatic approach it has adopted, the Islamist party can do no more than take note of a fact of life while attempting to take into account the nationalism shared by a significant portion of the population. Europe, obviously will not discuss this dimension as the only aim of the projects proposed (the Barcelona Process, the Union for the Mediterranean, the Neighbourhood Policy, advanced status, and so on) is that of strengthening those ties. And this remains problematic for Tunisia given the sluggish economy of Europe. Vague speeches about the necessity of strengthening ties with countries in the region do not strictly speaking constitute an alternative. This dependency on Europe is a direct outcome of the mode in which the country has been integrated on the international level by outsourcing at low

¹⁰⁷ See in particular Sadri Khiari, *Tunisie, le délitement de la cité* (Paris : Karthala, 2003), Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, and Hamza Meddeb, 'Tunisie, pays émergent?', and his current thesis.

¹⁰⁸ Source: Banque centrale de Tunisie, 2006.

¹⁰⁹ Interviews, Tunis, March 2011. See also, on Ennahda's position, 'It could be normal. Tunisia is getting back on track', *The Economist*, 31 March 2011.

cost, and ultimately of the country's relative lack of openness to the world, contrary to the myth of Tunisia as a 'bridge between East and West.'

- II.2.A.b. The limits of the dualistic model and specialization in downmarket outsourcing
- In fact, long-term thinking on the development model should focus on possible ways to increase job creation by raising the level of specialization and by questioning a dualistic model that maintains inequality, by diversifying the economy, by improving the educational system and more generally the infrastructure needed to increase competitiveness, and by a better fit between training and jobs offered, etc.

Faced with intensifying global competition, improving the productivity of factors of production, including labour, has become a necessity for the Tunisian government. The integration of Tunisia into the economy of international outsourcing has largely hinged, as we have seen, around wage pressures and more insecure working conditions leading to de facto segmentation of the workplace between a protected population mainly employed in the public and certain private sectors and a population living on the margins of legal rules and the welfare system, non-unionised and very vulnerable, whose number has continued to grow since the establishment of the program of structural adjustment in the mid-1980s. It should be noted here that the informal sector in 2002 accounted for 40% of jobs in the active labour force,¹¹⁰ and the years of crisis have only increased this proportion. In the context of a liberalization that has led to a destabilization of a class of wage earners established in the 1970s, the welfare system aims less to include vulnerable categories in ever-increasing numbers than to try to compensate for the impoverishment of workers.¹¹¹ Specialization of the private offshore sector in low-cost outsourcing and the weakness of the onshore sector considerably hamper their abilities to create skilled jobs. In this regard, despite liberalization and accelerated privatization, the public sector remains, with 52% of jobs created, the engine of job creation in the country.¹¹²

The offshore sector accounts for 34% of total exports from Tunisia and 70% of manufacturing exports, and contributes 17% to job creation, covering 80% of the current deficit. Although it appears to meet most of the conditions required to appear among the preferred destinations for foreign investors, the Tunisian economy seems to suffer from a growing inability to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). This is what some have suggested calling the 'paradox of Tunisia'.¹¹³ Heightened international competition, bringing labour costs down, has stemmed the influx of FDI to Tunisia. Since 1998, performance in terms of FDI can be explained largely by investment in the hydrocarbons sector and by accelerating the privatization process:¹¹⁴ the government had accelerated the privatization process

110 Report by the World Bank on the significance of the 'informal' economy in several countries, edited by Friedrich Schneider, 'Size and measurement of the informal economy in 110 countries around the world', July 2002 (available online: http://rru.worldbank.org/Documents/PapersLinks/informal_economy.pdf).

111 On welfare in Tunisia, see Blandine Destremau and Myriam Catusse, op. cit.

112 World Bank and Tunisian Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment, 'Dynamique de l'emploi et adéquation de la formation parmi les diplômés universitaires. Rapport sur l'insertion des diplômés de 2004'. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org>. 2008

113 F. Abbate, 'L'intégration de la Tunisie dans l'économie mondiale: opportunités et défis', Conférences des Nations Unies pour le commerce et de développement, Geneva 2002, www.globalprogramme.org/tunisie.

114 Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, ch. 9.



from 2000 and had opened the bidding to foreign companies so as to compensate for the weakness of FDIs.

This situation undoubtedly reflects a weakening of the offshore sector and, more generally, a blocking of the dual development model. The development in recent years of call centres (involving as they do remote and outsourced relations between a company and its customers) in Tunisia is definitely to be included in an attempt to reproduce the dualistic economic structure by extending offshore activities to the service economy. However, this redeployment was essentially carried out on 'low' segments of the international range of specialization, segments which are not strong in technology and knowledge transfer and requiring 'cheap' graduate labour. This segment led to the creation of 10,000 to 15,000 jobs, and embodies the phenomenon of proletarianization of graduates and the reproduction of 'downmarket' international specialization.¹¹⁵

Faced with this situation, the position of European institutions seems to be extremely ambiguous. Experts implicitly emphasize the limits of the model, noting the qualification requirements, the need for more adequate training and employment, the indispensable improvement of the education system, the need for improved infrastructure, the transformation of the incentive scheme to make it less favourable to unskilled work, and so on. The need to go upmarket and increase the added value created is recognized. But, firstly, European economic cooperation depends on the reforms set out by the Tunisian authorities that, as we have seen, favour stability and continuity, being more concerned with elections and their positioning on the political chessboard than by the need to respond to the requests of those who brought about the revolution and are express their demand for integration. These reforms, technical though they appear, are highly political and can only be defined by the Tunisians. In this context, Europe can have only marginal influence on the overall direction of the economic model. Secondly, European businesses and consumers are the primary beneficiaries of this specialization in international subcontracting, in industry or services, based on flexibility and low pay. It is hard to see the European Union going against this international division of labour, of which it is one of the initiators and one of the beneficiaries, and which is also a direct result of the liberalism it promotes.

¹¹⁵ Hamza Meddeb, 'Tunisie, pays émergent?'

● II.2.A.c. The agricultural economy

● A reconsideration of the model of development also means taking greater account of
 ● its agricultural dimension. The share of agricultural trade in total trade has fallen steadily,
 ● from 23.4% during the period 1984-1988 to 13.6% for the years 1999-2003, reaching less
 ● than 13% today. It confirms the status of Tunisia as a net importer of agricultural products.¹¹⁶
 ● This decline is accompanied by a very high inequality in the structure of farming.¹¹⁷ The
 ● fragmentation of farms, often family businesses, thus forces young men, mainly younger
 ● brothers, to migrate in order to preserve the homestead by financially assisting their
 ● parents who remain in rural areas to live on their land. Indeed, the yields from the land
 ● prove most often insufficient to meet the needs of their kin. This situation largely explains
 ● the aging farm population: faced with poor harvests and pay deemed to be derisory,
 ● young men prefer to try the path of rural exodus to find jobs in other sectors of the
 ● economy, or else international migration - particularly the more affluent among them.
 ● This situation, indeed, has not failed to create a shortage of male labour in rural areas,
 ● a shortage felt especially at harvest time. It is often women who work the family farm
 ● land or sell their labour at extremely low wages (4 TD per day, equivalent to 2.5 euros in
 ● 2005/2006). This situation has persisted up to the present. If construction workers receive 8
 ● TD, women who work in agriculture receive much less (maximum 6 TD but often less), and
 ● this is one of the explanations for the rural exodus and the feminization of the agricultural
 ● labour force. It is more financially advantageous for men to go and work on construction
 ● sites, on the coast or in Tunis. Agricultural employment is the main source of job creation
 ● for women in Tunisia.

While the agricultural workforce increased by 20% between 1993 and 2002, productivity has not so far followed this increase. Furthermore, over the same period, performance in the agricultural sector was obtained at the price of costs borne by the rest of society: firstly, subsidies for compensation amounted to 180 million TD, and secondly, price distortion contributes to an increase of 4% of the cost of living for consumers and 0.8% of GDP in growth lost due to price distortion.¹¹⁸ Rethinking the development model requires that the policy of subsidy, redistribution and transfer of income be radically revised, as indeed suggested by the aforementioned World Bank report which emphasized that the existing transfers and incentives were highly inequitable, benefiting primarily the wealthy.

116 Jean-François Richard, 'Le devenir de l'agriculture tunisienne face à la libéralisation des échanges', *Afrique contemporaine*, n° 219, 2006/3, pp. 29-42.

117 Ibid: 'The structures of farming contrast greatly with one another: in 1995, 53% of farmers had less than 5 hectares (with an average of 2 hectares) and occupied 9% of agricultural land, and 1% of farmers had over 100 hectares (with an average of 300 hectares) and occupied a quarter of agricultural land. The average surface area of the 50,000 farmsteads is around 10 hectares, and this average figure has been dropping for 40 years, as land continues to be broken up', p. 35.

118 These calculations were made by the World Bank in its abovementioned Report on agriculture, p. 2006.



● II.2.A.d. The system of incentives and tax policy

● This set of problems is not specific to agriculture. Reflection on the development model should also lead to a rethinking of the system of incentives and the fiscal relationship which in recent years, following the neoliberal order, have turned out to be much more favourable to capital and the owners and holders of capital than to labour and the middle and working classes.

It is common knowledge that many companies evade some or all of the taxes they are supposed to pay:¹¹⁹ inaccurate statements, minimization of receipts, and various frauds are common practices, as are the many tax deductions and exceptional measures aimed at encouraging investment. Highlighting the limitations of the data provided by official statistics, and the shortcomings of the methodology used by the experts in the tax administration, a report of the UGTT in 2006 nevertheless managed to highlight certain lines of force of the distribution of tax burdens.¹²⁰ It underlines in particular the way that employees bear the greatest share of direct taxes (about 45% of direct taxes during the 2000s), noting also that 'the share of natural persons was 60% on average over the period 2001-2005, as against 40% for corporations'. Among natural persons, the report notes that employees 'bear on average 73% of direct taxes paid' over the period 1986-2005. More generally, 'in proportion to GDP, tax revenue has grown faster than taxes on corporations since its share rose from 1.9% in 1990 to 4.1% in 2005 while that of taxes on corporations has gone from 1.9 to 3.7%. Unquestionably, the tax increase impacted first and foremost on employees. Over the last twenty years, taxes on non-wage income have thus gone up 5.9 times, while taxes on waged income increased by a factor of 6.9. At the same time, rights of consumption, weighing on the poor and middling social strata, have seen their share of tax revenues rise from 6.3% to 15.3%. Tax policy is clearly far from egalitarian, and biased against the less wealthy.

This division of the tax burden is due in part to exceptional measures enacted, including in the code of investment incentives (tax exemptions, tax holidays, accelerated depreciation, interest subsidies, state assumption of national employer contributions to social security, etc.) that could be justified by the benefits of new investments. Now we see on the contrary that, firstly, many companies that benefit from tax holidays when set up cease operations once the holiday period comes to an end and, secondly, that the share of private investment in total investment has increased only very little.¹²¹ Moreover, the structure of tax benefits highlights one of the major weaknesses of the Tunisian economic policies that recent events have forcefully brought out: in the 2000s,

119 Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, ch. 5.

120 UGTT, *La fiscalité en Tunisie et la question de la cohésion sociale*, November 2006, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/tunesien/04796.pdf>.

121 On taxation, for the 1970s, see H. Ayadi, 'Les tendances générales de la politique fiscale de la Tunisie depuis l'indépendance', *Revue Tunisienne de Droit*, Tunis, CPU, 1980, pp.17-75; for the 1980s, see L. Chikhaoui, *Pour une stratégie de la réforme fiscale*, and for the 1990s, see N. Baccouche, 'Les implications de l'accord d'association sur le droit fiscal et douanier' (pp.5-27) in *Mélanges en l'honneur de Habib Ayadi* (Tunis: Centre de Publication Universitaire, 2000). On the low level of investment, see P.A. Casero et A. Varoudakis, *Growth, Private Investment, and the Cost of Doing Business in Tunisia*; World Bank Operation Assessment Department, *Republic of Tunisia. Country Assistance Assessment*, Advance Copy, and the 2005 FEMISE Report, 'Profil pays Tunisie', Institut de la Méditerranée, December 2005. For an overview and critical analysis, B. Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, ch. 5.

72% of tax reductions were granted to exporting firms as against only 12% to regional and agricultural development (the remaining 8% concerns common incentives).¹²² One of the major challenges in redefining the development model lies thus in the transformation of the tax incentive, so it will be less favourable to unskilled employment and that, contrary to what is happening today, it will be of more benefit to companies employing qualified workers. The measures taken in emergency conditions in March and April 2011 do not follow this path at all: they continue to favour traditional recipes based on multiple exemptions to encourage a rapid recruitment (they are expected to employ 20,000 people!) as well as flexible funding arrangements.¹²³ To increase the added value created, and change the ratio between capital and labour in promoting skilled labour, it is necessary to amend radically the package of incentives, including tax breaks, so that such is less an attempt to dump young people in temporary youth schemes to hide underemployment (as do the SIVP and AMEL programs mentioned above) than to really help companies rise higher in their level of production. Again, European technocrats are aware of the challenges, but they remain stuck in their strategy of 'follow-my-leader', that is to say by their principle of action that consists not in proposing specific reforms of their own but in supporting (or not) the reforms set out by the Tunisians.¹²⁴

● II.2.A.e. Rethinking public service policies

● The strategy of reshaping the model of development has yet to reformulate policies on public services. This last point is crucial given the importance of the inequality of citizens in this area, expressed in two different ways that the example of access to care exemplifies perfectly: firstly, entire regions are without hospitals worthy of the name, under-equipped and unable to assume responsibility for surgery and serious illnesses, and with minimal social infrastructure. People are thus forced to travel and spend resources that, for the most part, they do not possess. This is particularly true of the Centre West, the region of Kasserine and Thala, but also of Gafsa. Secondly, healthcare is no longer free, and the poorest simply no longer have the money to afford it.

The revolt was also fuelled by this unequal treatment, the practical impossibility of having access to so-called public services. The issue of hospitals and access to quality health care was central in people's demands and in the discourse of demonstrators pointing to the regional divide. In the region of the coalfields, for example, where the rate of cancer diseases is increasing because of pollution from the processing and purification of phosphate, the construction of a hospital at Sousse, with resources as good as those of the hospitals of Sfax or Sahloul, was one of the main demands of the population after the fall of Ben Ali. The same applies to Kasserine, a major focus of the protest, where one of the key demands is the establishment of a Centre Hospitalier Universitaire. This investment would provide better public health care to people, would save transport costs and travel expenses, and provide jobs for people in these regions.¹²⁵

122 Data taken from the report 'Tunisie. Examen de la politique agricole', 20 July 2006, report 35239-TN of the World Bank, available online: http://www.dev-export.com/images_articles/agricole.pdf.

123 See the Prime Minister's speech on the social and economic program, 8 April 2011.

124 Interviews, Brussels, 29 March – 1 April 2011.

125 Interviews, Tunisia, March 2011.



Europeans are tackling this issue, but from a technocratic point of view, based on a largely faulty diagnosis (since they underline, for example, the existence of significant progress in education and health, particularly in the NIP 2011-2013), one which is not necessarily questioned today. Regarding health, the results of the Program of support for the reform of health insurance, launched in 2000 by the European Union with a donation of 40 million euros in the form of support for the budget of the Tunisian state and technical assistance, have been overestimated. Completed in 2007, the program aimed, says a statement from the EU Delegation to Tunisia 'at supporting the Tunisian government in its reform set out in the tenth development plan (2002-2006), and confirmed in the eleventh plan (2007-2011), which provides for improving and streamlining the coverage of health risk for people affiliated to the health insurance system. It aims also to consolidate the principle of equal access to health care and covering of health risk'. In 2008, the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) was set up and the same statement welcomed the program funded by the EU as 'a remarkable achievement able to set an example for other countries'. Now, if there is one obvious flaw in this plan, it is that, far from being egalitarian, it concerns only part of the Tunisian population likely to be affiliated to the national health insurance system, the Caisse nationale d'assurance maladie (CNAM), since it excludes the poor, agricultural workers, the self-employed and of course workers in the informal sector. It also leads to many perverse results such as the diversion of patients to private medicine and, in general, the introduction of a two-speed medical system. The 'progress' identified by the EU does not really relate to the access and quality of care but simply their gradual privatization, which is seen by the EU as an improvement, without considering that, on the contrary, privatization is accompanied by a gradual abandonment of free care and a deterioration of public health for the greatest number, as evidenced by the stagnation of state spending in the hospital infrastructure.

These contradictions and perverse effects need to be emphasized to the extent that this program of cooperation is often presented as exemplary, and as beneficial not to the regime but to the whole population.¹²⁶ An overhaul of European cooperation programs therefore also requires a reassessment of earlier programs, a reassessment that goes into the details of the implementation of the reform on the ground, takes into account problems of distribution and (in)equality, and is 'de-ideologized' with regard to the privatization process.

What has been described in the case of health applies equally to other utilities like water, electricity and the road infrastructure, even though these were the main objectives of Ben Ali's regime. The opening up of regions and their integration with the rest of the territory and the dynamic economic zones on the coast and Greater Tunis still needs to be carried out, as shown in the list of major works projects, and the extension of roads and motorways. The commodification of clean water observed in several regions of the country not only raises the issue of access to this vital resource but also that of public health. Indeed, given the poor quality of water distributed by the National Society of Water Distribution (Société nationale d'exploitation et de distribution d'eau: SONEDE),

a large proportion of people buy from private providers or arrange to collect and purify rain water, without being assured of the quality of water thus obtained.¹²⁷

● II.2.A.f. The migration issue

● A distorted presentation of the economic and social image of the country, finally, has a fundamental impact on the relationship between Europe and Tunisia through the most sensitive issue at present: that of migration. To the extent that it did not produce enough jobs, the 'economic miracle' only worked by producing emigrants. Emigration is a central element in managing the surplus population and the blockages in the Tunisian economic model: this has always been ignored, on both sides of the Mediterranean. However, it is a fundamental issue, both in terms of the management of supernumeraries of the 'miracle', and in terms of the input of currency and the contribution to an equilibrium in the balance of payments. This question involves the well-known problem of the Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean, the Neighbourhood Policy and other free trade agreements, including agreement on advanced status, namely the coexistence of the free movement of goods, services, and flows of money and information on the one hand and, on the other, an ever greater fragmentation of labour markets and the increasing obstacles to the movement of individuals.¹²⁸

This situation is not sustainable for the very reason that the economic model underlying all these partnerships and agreements is based, firstly, on the high value placed on capital (relative to labour) and on the intensification of capitalist means of production (at the expense of the employment of labour) and, secondly, on increased insecurity of working conditions. These two features simply fuel the phenomenon of migration which, in European legal and political conditions, characterized by a repressive management of these flows, can only occur illegally.

The regime was well regarded in this sense, through the enactment of repressive laws and the signing of readmission agreements. Organic Law 2004-6 of 3 February 2004 amending the Law 75-40 of 14 March 1975 on passports and travel documents aimed to stem illegal emigration and illegal crossing of borders, and it did indeed limit the number of people leaving Tunisia.¹²⁹ But for one thing, this law had a significant repressive effect even in Tunisia: it was enacted shortly after the adoption of the law against terrorism in late 2003. This coincidence allowed repression to be hardened even more inside the country through the radicalization of the legal arsenal by exploiting the 'windfall' that followed the events of September 11, 2001, which paved the way for the worldwide adoption of draconian laws. And for another, this law has not stopped migration. Illegal emigration

127 Bruno Romagny and Christophe Cudennec, 'Gestion de l'eau en milieu aride: considérations physiques et sociales pour l'identification des territoires pertinents dans le Sud-Est tunisien', Développement durable et territoires (online), Dossier 6: 'Les territoires de l'eau', uploaded on 10 February 2006, accessed on 16 April 2011. URL : <http://developpementdurable.revues.org/1805>. Interviews and participant observation, March 2011.

128 See for example B. Hibou, 'Le Partenariat en réanimation bureaucratique', and more generally the special number 'Les faces cachées du Partenariat euroméditerranéen', Critique internationale, n° 18, April 2003; J.-F. Bayart, Global Subjects. A Political Critique of Globalization, tr. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge : Polity Press, 2007).

129 H. Meddeb, Ambivalence de la politique migratoire en Tunisie (Paris : FASOPO, mimeo, 2008).



has not stopped. Tunisians still managed to leave the territory, organizing crossings of the Mediterranean by taking longer trips, especially via Libya, slipping into the holds of ships and into the containers of goods for export. The huge influx of Tunisians since February 2011, taking advantage of the relaxation of Tunisian border police control, suggests the potential of this momentum, that only a radical transformation of the economic model can slow down.

The purely repressive policy in European countries is doomed to failure. From one point of view it leads to violations of the elementary principles of human rights. From an economic and financial standpoint, it only fuels tension in a model already running out of steam. From a practical standpoint, it is neither tenable nor realistic. This is the lesson of past practices that have actually resulted in a hardening of measures in the legal arsenal to meet the 'requirements' of its partners while taking into account its own specific issues. Lawmaking has allowed the government to vaunt, in front of its partners and donors, its commitment to fight illegal emigration effectively and to 'manage migration'. The government's commitment was assessed by its European partners primarily in terms of its legislation, and thus benefited from the high marks given by foreign partners to the Tunisia Ben Ali. Indeed, European partners and donors in general look, above all, at the formal proceedings, the legislative or administrative structures, when assessing their partners in the south; they do not check the practical and concrete implementation of the commitments made.¹³⁰ The same applies in migration policy as in economic policy: even if they may argue about the quality and presentation of economic data, donors look first at the apparent results (respect for fundamental balances, for example). They appreciate Tunisia's unhesitating commitment to 'reforms' whose reality is gauged in terms of overall aggregates: the number of non-tariff barriers removed, the number of lowered customs tariffs, the quantitative reduction of the share of SOEs in the economy, the number of prices and margins which are no longer controlled, progress in the convertibility of the dinar and foreign exchange management, the number of laws adopted... that are observed. They do not look at the set of practices that are actually implemented around these measures and that may completely change their meaning. Lawmaking has also helped increase the extent of the repressive legal framework on whose basis the Tunisian authorities could monitor any sensitive activity. In so doing they created more crime since they broadened the scope of illegality, helping to render entire sectors of the population, including young people, vulnerable.

Given these contradictions, the economic aid proposed by Europe will not change things much in the short term, unless the economic model is fundamentally rethought. Again, the experience of recent years suggests as much. The government headed by Ben Ali and directed by Mohamed Ghannouchi had mobilized a discourse on the need for economic development so as to engage European partners in the North and convince them that Tunisia could not police their southern borders alone without their economic support.

¹³⁰ Béatrice Hibou, 'Economie politique du discours de la Banque mondiale en Afrique: du catéchisme économique au fait (et méfait) missionnaire', Les Etudes du CERI, n°39, March 1998 and 'Les marges de manœuvre d'un "bon élève" économique'.

This Tunisian discourse on the indispensable financial support of European countries in the fight against migration was incorporated into a subtle management of extraversion aimed at ensuring access to financing that would be of interest to the authorities and promote their involvement in a struggle that was not at the top of their agenda. It was a kind of blackmail. This situation has not changed in the least with the departure of Ben Ali, as Béji Caïd Essebsi's aforementioned comments remind us. The Tunisian authorities will always be able to turn this aid to their advantage by refraining from engaging in a migration policy that they cannot control and that can only aggravate their problems in managing supernumeraries.

The mass exodus that has taken place since fall of Ben Ali reflects not only the extent of economic and social difficulties but also the centrality of the migration issue, which may be subject to instrumentalisation and power play in bilateral relations and on the regional level with the conflagration in neighbouring Libya. Reactions to the migrants landing on the island of Lampedusa in the aftermath of the Revolution (in total, according to the Italian Interior Minister, Roberto Maroni, 25,800 migrants landed in Italy from the beginning of the year to the end of March 2011) are significant of the limits in the Euro-Mediterranean policy based on the repression of emigration at all costs. In exchange for granting temporary residence permits (six months) to some 20,000 migrants from Tunisia, the Italian authorities have obtained Tunisia's commitment to taking back all migrants who arrived after the signing of the agreement and especially to increase surveillance of its coasts, for which purpose Italy will deliver 10 patrol ships and a hundred jeeps.¹³¹ Apart from the announcement of increased financial assistance, Europe has failed to find a collective solution to the problem. The European Commission has, for the first time, spoken of the circulation of migrants, and has envisaged its mobility partnership.¹³² However, this proposal ignores the reality of the nature of the candidates for emigration, and the local dynamics of the production of emigration, and continues to reflect by socio-professional categories, even though in negotiations with the Tunisian authorities, the question of the geographical origin of migrants has been raised, favouring applicants from the poorest regions.¹³³ Secondly and more importantly, it collides with the national logics specific to each Member State.¹³⁴ The meeting of Ministers of the Interior and Justice Ministers of the EU (held on 11 April in Luxembourg) led to no concrete action, with the various states preferring to leave Italy to carry this 'burden'. The French Minister of the Interior has for his part announced the strengthening of police controls at the border between France and Italy, which was confirmed by the closure of the border at Ventimiglia on April 18, with the support of the European Commission. It has thus apparently been decided to expand to European level the decision last week by Rome and Paris to hold joint air and naval patrols very close to Tunisian waters to block the departure of illegal immigrants; they will even use Frontex, the European Agency for border surveillance.

131 'Exilés tunisiens: les gardes à vue tombent une à une', *Libération*, 3 May 2011.

132 Statements made by Commissioners Füle et Malmström on their visit to Tunisia, 31 March and 1 April 2011.

133 Interview with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, M. Ounaies, 5 February 2011, quoted in the draft report of the parliamentary delegation of Hélène Flautre.

134 Interviews, Brussels, 29 March – 1 April.



The ambiguities are obvious and any misunderstandings may not have much impact. The government of Caïd Essebsi is clear in its guidelines: part of the solution to the economic crisis will come from emigration. Hence its many initiatives to try to reach agreements that place the Tunisian workforce in Western countries or to renegotiate the labour agreements already existing. But Europe is just as clear in its determination to stand firm.

● ● ● ● ● II.2.B. Modes of government

The issue is huge and we cannot here mention more than the main aspects, but it is fundamental since feelings of injustice and inequality have also been fuelled by these practices. So our report cannot go over all the ways in which power has been exercised in Tunisia over the last decades. We will, however, note the main ways, those which incur conflict and lie at the heart of the relations of force that have emerged from the new political situation.

● II.2.B.a. Clientelism

● First and foremost, party patronage has structured all relations between the authorities and the population, in political life but also, in an area of interest to us here, in economic and social life. The disappearance of the RCD does not affect the sociability and the modes of operation by networks that helped to anchor the state, the government and the party in society, but which simultaneously drew the lines of exclusion and inequality. The revolutionary moment aims to question this pre-eminence, but nothing is definite as such structured networks are advantaged relative to diffuse demands that are relatively widespread but poorly organized. Conflicts between politicians assume classic shapes, such the resistance in government or the sabotage of initiatives by the instrumentalisation of certain categories of the patronage network. Such is the case, for example, in Grombalia where the RCD town authorities resists the committee for the protection of the revolution by giving trading licenses to 'big shots' or encouraging the refuse collectors to strike.¹³⁵ These moves reflect the destabilization strategies introduced by the local elites of the RCD to intimidate those most involved in the citizens' movement to protect the revolution. This scare tactic is coupled with clientelist solicitude expressed by the creation of associations financed by the entrepreneurs of that region in order to consolidate the networks of activists or at least prevent the capture of their electoral base.¹³⁶ The dissolution of the RCD, following a court decision, has not however led to the disappearance of its social roots and its capacity to manipulate networks at the local level, as evidenced by their hasty reaction in sheltering party assets liable to seizure. The situation here is confused and plural, depending on local power relations. In some situations, the committees to protect the revolution have been able to recover RCD premises, whilst in others they have been illegally occupied by families close to the former ruling party, with this appropriation of premises then being presented as spontaneous.¹³⁷ In doing so, local elites are gradually reinvesting the public space, despite the corruption scandals that they are accused of. Local political manoeuvring is marked by a kind of

¹³⁵ Interviews and participant observation, Grombalia, March 2011.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Fieldwork, Tunisia, March 2011 and press follow-up with data on social networks.

restraint in the exchange of 'blows', including those aimed by former opponents, despite the 'public secret' comprised by these cases and the illicit enrichment involved – and indication that the links of acquaintanceship, kinship, neighbourhood and even friendship lying behind clientelism can transcend political divisions in this 'revolutionary moment'.

But these conflicts can assume newer and more dangerous forms as illustrated by the increasingly common involvement of regional and tribal conflicts. This is the case in cities where jobs are created (as in Sfax) and where leaders, in a populist strategy, intend to give priority to the natives to the detriment of outsiders often from the poorest regions of Tunisia, where the protest began.¹³⁸ It is also the case in large public companies which are trying to define strategies to meet social demands (both job creation and the end of non-transparent recruitment practices) that are being sabotaged by some of the forces present. In the mining basin, for example, the Gafsa Phosphates Company (CPG) intended in February 2011 to create 3,000 jobs and help launch small productive activities. This strategy has not yet been implemented due to the instrumentalisation of social conflict based on tribal lines and the pursuit of clientelist practices that were, however, criticized and helped spark the revolts of 2008 and 2010.¹³⁹ The curfew established in early May in the Gafsa region is directly connected to the explosion of violence between tribes.

Unequal access to public service highlights another requirement: that social policies, the actions involved in the 'fight against poverty', be no longer reduced to private charity (as we saw earlier through the clientelism and personalisation of the privatization of social policies in favour of President Ben Ali, or, in a quite different way, as we see now, in an extraordinary show of solidarity, through citizen initiatives) and the establishment of social safety nets, but that real public policies be designed and implemented, placing these questions of equality at the heart of their conception. The policy of assistance to the unemployed and the poor was indeed, until 14 January 2011, partly based on clientelism. Conducted without the participation of interested parties, and not subject to any control, the selection of the recipients of public aid obeyed the clientelist considerations of local and party authorities.¹⁴⁰ The establishment of lists (those of 'needy families', beneficiaries of subsidized low-income housing, recipients of extra tutoring and other forms of assistance) was under the control of the RCD. Today, in the wake of the previous logic and without modifying its terms of action, monthly allowances of 70 dinars have been pledged to these needy families with an extra 10 TD for each child attending school (limited to 3 children).¹⁴¹

138 Interviews, Tunis and Sfax, March 2011.

139 Interviews, Tunisia, March 2011. On the instrumentalisation of tribal conflicts, see 'Tunisie: deux morts et 20 blessés dans les troubles à Metlaoui (centre-ouest)', Agence de presse, 11.3.2011. Also in Kssar Hlel in the Sahel, 'Ksar Hellal, Bataille rangée entre habitants', La Presse, 4 March 2011.

140 D. Chamekh, op. cit.; Chakerli, art. cit.

141 'Les 185 milles familles nécessiteuses'.



● II.2.B.b. How the bureaucracy works: between party allegiance, distancing and centralization

● The Tunisian administration since independence has been highly politicized, following the model of a perfect correspondence between administrative structure and party structure: to have a responsible position and rise in rank, one had to swear allegiance to the party, in other words be a member or bow to the demands of the political sphere and the party hierarchy. To the extent that the law, still in force, stipulates that one must have attained a particular rank in the administration to gain access to a particular position of responsibility, and above all insofar as the decision has been made to emphasise stability, bureaucratic continuity, 'moderation' and the avoidance of conflict, any renewal of senior management cannot be achieved. Specifically, key positions and leadership positions are still in the hands of people linked to the RCD or who, in any case, have been 'formatted' by the old system. Under these conditions, one can sometimes see real resistance being organized, as shown by the drawing up of lists of new governors, sub-prefects or delegates; one most often finds the reproduction of prickly behaviours, sensitive to orders from above, including those in breach of the legal stipulations.¹⁴² Locally, different situations are widely divergent: some municipalities have been dismantled, while others have remained completely in the hands of RCD members. But whatever the configuration, the power of these authorities is now virtually nonexistent in terms of administrative work and economic and social life, since political conflicts are so powerful and widespread. As for governors, coming from the previous administrative and party hierarchy, they are often paralyzed by the tensions and even hostility towards them, and share a bureaucratic ethos that lessens their desire to show any initiative in this period of uncertainty. This situation is problematic insofar as local authorities are not playing their role as a link with the population, especially in the poorest areas where expectations are huge. Under these conditions, the state still appears just as distant from the population, remote, hierarchical and unattainable. In this respect, the successive transitional governments, including the third government under Caïd Essebsi, are entirely in line with previous governments. It is striking that neither the Prime Minister nor any other minister have gone out to marginalized areas or have visited the families of martyrs. Even at the local level, these families or the families of people injured in cities like Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, the places most heavily affected by the violence of repression, have still not been received by the Governor. No structure for listening to, analysing and gathering people's demands has been established, while the situations are often dramatic. Distancing oneself from authoritarian modes of government requires a whole apprenticeship and a series of changes in political and administrative behaviour that will necessarily take time.

¹⁴² Interviews, Tunis, March 2011. This was also openly revealed by the former Interior Minister, Farhat Rajhi, who also disclosed that he had himself been caught out by his administration, which had drawn up the list of officials to be appointed and promoted.

Another constraint on the democratisation of forms of government lies in the extreme centralization of the administration and more broadly of the modes of government. The break with the dualist administration of the territory is a highly political issue that goes beyond the economic sphere to the foundations of citizenship. As suggested by Habib Dlala in his column in *La Presse*, 'the land issue should not be reduced to the mode of regulation of an economic development open to the world economy. It should be a strategic choice responding to the legitimate aspirations of populations of all regions. The design and implementation of programs and projects should reflect the shift from a hierarchical mode of government to a participatory mode of governance for the production of social effects and the guaranteeing of equal opportunities among citizens and between territorial entities.'¹⁴³ The necessary transformation cannot come about merely through the dissolution of the RCD. It goes without saying that the situation is a result of the combination of far more complex factors and that this argument fails because the coastal and northern regions have also been governed the same way. The absence of any consideration of the specific features of regions in the elaboration of development policy is also explained by the fact that the latter obey the requirements of sectors and techniques defined at the central level. There are actually no indicators constructed from any consideration of the realities of each region in building a policy for development¹⁴⁴. Similarly, development choices are not based on any strategic study, nor on any pattern of development that would take into account the needs of each region. In reality, the party's mechanisms of surveillance and the political logics of control and of the population have certainly stifled the problems of development in inner regions. However, the focus on the hegemony of the RCD obscures the real issues around the development of these regions: the centralized and politicized administration of the economy and the political mainsprings of a differential management of the territory that has resulted over the years in a real regional divide. While the 'useful' regions were the target of investments and helpful interventions, poverty-stricken areas were left to the logic of *laissez-faire* and tolerance of illegality.¹⁴⁵ It is striking to note that the 2011 draft budget of the last Ben Ali government had set aside 18% of the budget to the inland areas, as against 82% to coastal regions.¹⁴⁶

143 Habib Dlala, 'L'urgence d'une réflexion collective sur le développement et l'aménagement du territoire tunisien', *La Presse*, 11.4.2011.

144 As mentioned by Minister Abderrazek Zouari quoted in 'Tunisie : Abderrazek Zouari face aux maux du développement régional', *webmanagercenter*, 12 avril 2011

145 Hamza Meddeb, 'La Tunisie, un pays émergent?', and Béatrice Hibou, *Anatomie politique de la domination* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), ch. 8.

146 According to Minister Zouari's declarations in 'Tunisie: Abderrazek Zouari face aux maux du développement régional', *webmanagercenter*, 12 April 2011.



● II.2.B.c. Taking into account the balance of power in the economic sphere

● Any reconsideration of the modes of government specific to the Tunisian model also requires that the political dynamics at work in the reforms and in the implementation of economic and social policies be taken into consideration and, thereby, that the shifting balance of power can be altered so that the conditions of subaltern populations, of those who have expressed their frustration and despair, will actually be improved. After all, general statements in terms of the consideration of 'economic and social rights' that should be included in the new Constitution do not, of course, guarantee anything, and reflect a very great degree of naivety... or a choice of continuity rather than a clean break.

In fact, current power relationships have the paradoxical result of increasing inequality rather than reducing them even where there seems to be apparent progress. It goes without saying that demands over wages and working conditions are completely legitimate: the decline of living standards because of stagnant wages and the rising cost of living over the past fifteen years, and the development of insecure conditions of employment and labour flexibility have contributed to the intensification of social tensions and economic hardships among the working classes in Tunisia. However, the way these demands have been taken into account is problematic. Indeed, employees have received wage increases in sectors where the UGTT was strongest, and not (or very little) in the manufacturing sectors and small structures where working conditions are actually the most problematic but where UGTT is weak or even absent.

This situation may seem paradoxical, but it makes sense insofar as the single union mainly defends its own members and has always been historically positioned as a political actor.¹⁴⁷ In the current struggle, the UGTT has been more anxious to show its strength, to respond to its base and win influence in the political arena so as to count for something and affect the balance of power, than it has behaved as a social actor representative of a general interest attentive to the popular demands of the demonstrators. Its management has also sought to 'whitewash' its huge participation in the way the regime controlled work, in the policies of job insecurity and pressure on wages, by trying to force wages higher.¹⁴⁸ This immediate pressure on certain sectors rather than others has thus increased inequality in the productive sector itself but also and especially among those with jobs (who have seen their situation improve) and those who do not. Moreover, wage increases in the civil service and public corporations and parastatals necessarily come at the expense of other ways of spending the budget, such as investments in disadvantaged regions. Here again, the effect of inequality is increased. This does not mean that the demands of workers

147 On the UGTT, see R. Zghal, 'Hiérarchie et processus du pouvoir dans les organisation' (pp.237-250) in *Elites et pouvoir dans le monde arabe pendant la période moderne et contemporaine* (Tunis: Les Cahiers du CERES, Série Histoire n°5, 1992) and 'Nouvelles orientations du syndicalisme tunisien', *Monde arabe, Maghreb-Machrek*, n°162, October-December 1998, pp.6-17; S. Zeghidi, 'L'UGTT, pôle central de la contestation sociale et politique' (pp.13-61) in M. Ben Romdhane, *Tunisie : mouvements sociaux et modernité*; S.Hamzaoui, 'Champ politique et syndicalisme', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, vol. XXXVII, 1999, pp. 369-380; S. Khiari, *Tunisie, le délitement de la cité*, and 'Reclassement et recompositions au sein de la bureaucratie syndicale depuis l'Indépendance. La place de l'UGTT dans le système politique tunisien', dossier *La Tunisie sous Ben Ali* on the CERI website, www.ceri-sciences-po.org/kiosque/archives/déc.2000.

148 Interviews, Tunis, March 2011.

and employees were not legitimate and were not, also, a response to expectations expressed in the revolt. But the interplay of political factors and the absence of formal social intermediaries for the socially most disadvantaged social categories dictated the order of priorities, and favoured the demands of those who were more organized, that is to say, by definition better integrated socially, economically and politically. The most important issue, that of jobs for those who have nothing, or that of conditions of access to the labour market, has thus been relegated to the background, and remains so. This is also suggested by the continuing waves of emigration, the reflection of an opportunity opened by the temporary and strategic withdrawal of a hated police force, but also and above all by a deteriorating economic situation, with falling growth (expected to hover around 1% this year instead of the usual 4-5% rate, which already produced unemployment, and the 9-10% necessary to absorb entrants to the labour market) and the disastrous consequences of the war in Libya.

● II.2.B.d. Emerging from consensus and instrumental rationality

● The dual paradigm of consensus and the decision to favour economic efficiency applied
 ● by apolitical technocrats continues to characterize the modes of government. In this
 ● sense, one could even say that there has been no regime change at all.

This is how we must also understand the immobility of the transitional government: refusing to face up to opposition and conflict, including in the economic sphere, the government restricts itself in its action. No economic debate is held on the guidelines to choose in order to meet social demands, and the current economic difficulties are themselves partly obscured. The government will not take any decision that might create tension and conflict, it will not take up a position, opting instead for the management of current affairs and continued adherence to previous guidelines. It goes without saying that this claim that it is apolitical, and this technocratic posture, are in fact highly political: the very fact of not openly discussing the very political issues of injustice, inequality, conditions of access to employment, the choice between recovery in the Keynesian tradition and commitment to major macroeconomic balances reflects choices that are implicit but definite, and a rejection of the demands of the unrest.

The very concept of consensus must be questioned. Under Ben Ali, it was an ideology that hid devices and practices of domination, even violent coercion, behind a language of negotiation. This was also true of the social dialogue which in fact was the imposing from above, and by the Party-State, of decisions then presented as the result of social dialogue.¹⁴⁹ This question is not even touched on by European experts: this, too, is the result of remaining true to the discourse on the 'miracle' which emphasized the tradition of listening on the part of Tunisian officials, and highlighted the consensus around liberalism with a dash of attention to the social sphere.¹⁵⁰ However, the situation is quite different. At the national level, as at the business level, social dialogue is reduced to an ever-

149 Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, ch. 6 and 7.

150 Interviews, Brussels, February 2003 and March 2011. See also 'Le Partenariat en réanimation bureaucratique', and 'Les marges de manoeuvre d'un "bon élève" économique'.



diminishing trickle. At the national level, social negotiations now take place only once every three years, on government initiative, and they focus almost exclusively on wages. Outside these meetings, there is no institution for negotiation. Furthermore, we know the ambiguous role played by the UGTT. At the business level, dialogue has been greatly impoverished. The Business Committee, which enjoyed financial and technical autonomy from the employer, the Health and Safety Committee and the Joint Commission (in elections to which the union took an active role) were abolished and replaced by a single substantially weakened organisation (the Joint Business Committee).¹⁵¹ It has no autonomy from the entrepreneur and the union is not involved or even consulted in his election. In terms of work organization, recruitment, compression, and closure, it is the bosses' unilateral power to decide which prevails. In free zones, finally, where labour relations are based solely on fixed-term contracts, structures of dialogue are difficult to create. So if we are move from a situation of inertia in which decisions are imposed from above to a real dialogue, we must simultaneously rethink the role and functioning of the administration and the place of unions in the economic, political, and social landscape of Tunisia. For now, the UTICA, which had been fully aligned with the party and had sworn allegiance, through its chair, to Ben Ali, is in total disarray and indeed non-existent. The UGTT, for its part, is torn between a base and some of its structures that are urging social protest, a de-legitimized management, the culture of compromise of the bureaucracy, and government pressure. The temptation to get involved in politics (an ephemeral presence in government and in the higher courts) is counterbalanced by the fear of being trapped by politics. The essential thing, however, is being ignored: internal power relations, the potential and scope of social mobilization (the element that is driven by trade unionists, and the 'wild' element), the capacity of the UTICA to exert pressure when it is itself in crisis, and that, of course, of the government. Reorganization will take place rapidly, and obviously, no one knows the outcome. But the existence of a genuine social dialogue requires above all that power relations, modes of negotiation, the passing on of demands, their means of transmission and the operation of intermediary bodies be redrawn.

● II.2.B.e. For an analysis of the political economy

● Finally, it seems to us crucial to reflect on one thing if there is to be any real consideration of economic and social rights, and more broadly of the requirements of democratisation: ● we need, that is, to reflect on the political economy itself, in other words on the impossibility ● of separating out distinct spheres, those of the economic and the political spheres.

What is striking, after all, in the analysis of the 'miracle' and in the interventions of donors, is the generalising of dualistic analyses that deal separately with politics and economics. At European level, this position is farcically exaggerated, in spite of the assertion (unique in international forums) of the indivisibility of rights. On the one hand, political questions are asked, in this case with a strong commitment to supporting the democratic process, human rights, civil liberties... and, on the other hand, economic and social affairs

151 This transformation and the creation of the Joint Business Committee were brought about by the amendment of the 1994 Labour Code: law 94-29 of 21 February 1994.

are handled by technicians in an apolitical vision of development expertise which considers the economy as an object to be manipulated and directed. This position is not new; it goes hand-in-hand with European interventions (and more generally with the interventions of donors). Previously, we had on the one side a more or less complacent and chaotic political dialogue (with the signing of conventions, agreements on association, 'dialogue' within sub-committees and other bodies) and on the other the resolute and constructive pursuit of economic cooperation. In the current context of the redefinition of European politics, this dualism is perpetuated and the European authorities continue to treat these two 'sides' in a differentiated way. This results in communiqués promising change that seem at odds with the cumbersome technocratic machinery. The formula of Mrs Ashton that redefines the European policy vis-à-vis Tunisia by the '3 Ms' (Money, Market, Mobility)¹⁵² is, to be sure, primarily a slogan for the media and the expression of an attempt to distinguish itself from its bureaucratic competitors. It clearly reveals, however, this inability to think through the political sphere in Europe and especially to consider the linkages between politics and economics. Similarly, reflections heard in the operational services on the previous period confirm this dualistic inertia that still persists: 'either we go for "human rights", or we go for cooperation', we 'could not do otherwise, the European instruments are instruments of dialogue and cooperation' so that it would have been 'inappropriate' to use these instruments of economic cooperation to put pressure on the political.¹⁵³

On the one side, then, there is support for the political transition, which results in expertise and electoral observation, through support to identified actors in civil society, the media, etc. And on the other, an attempt is made to boost economic cooperation, but according to previous patterns in that these economic programs are assessed only in economic terms and are modified only marginally at best. Indeed, there is no fundamental questioning of economic cooperation programs. European technicians believe that 'fine work has been done in the economic sphere' but that 'freezes were mainly in governance, human rights and justice.' The business climate, improving conditions of employability, improving the regulatory framework, and deepening liberalization are still in the news, as is emphasized by in the European experts directly involved in the conceptualization of cooperation, 'the major structural reforms that enable the framework for development to be built are still the same'.¹⁵⁴ The philosophy of partnership between Europe and its south has not altered in the least, with the emphasis always on free trade, the benefits of the market and the harmonization of standards (with those of Europe, of course) without taking into account the political dimension of these economic developments. Bilateral economic programs seek to carefully consider the consequences of their actions on gender or the environment, but these impact studies are superficial and mechanistic and analyse these effects only a posteriori, in a vision totally dissociated from economic instruments and social consequences; moreover, they do not fundamentally reflect, in the very

152 Press communiqué of the European Union, 11 March 2011 (A 102/11). Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on arrival at the Extraordinary European Council. See also 'Ashton's fluctuation scale for EU aid with the Arab World, www.newsportal.european-left.org, 15 March 2011.

153 Extracts from interviews, Brussels, 29 March – 1 April 2011.

154 Extracts from interviews, Brussels, 29 March – 1 April 2011



construction of these arrangements, on the question of inequality - the political question par excellence. Sometimes there is open discussion of the need to promote sustainable development and reduce inequalities; but this preoccupation remains purely verbal discursive insofar as almost all of the cooperation is realized through budget support and support for reforms set out by the Tunisian government. This dualism is now intensified by the Treaty of Lisbon that has separated the external services (which defines the general policy towards third countries) from the bureaucratic machine of the Commission (which implements economic programs). This construction of the economy as an object of expertise prevents one from taking into account what we have been analysing in the preceding pages, namely the fact that the economy is a place for the exercise of power, that the economy is a space in which are deployed social relations, human relations - and thus, also, political relations.



CONCLUSION

The current situation is thus characterized by a tendency to focus on 'political' issues and marginalize 'economic and social' questions in the name of the transition and the urgent need to set up rules for living in a democracy. As the foregoing discussion has tried to show, this preference is problematic insofar as these economic and social issues are highly political issues which alone can meet the expectations, demands, and claims of those who carried out the revolution. Identifying the paradoxes of the current situation, the continuities with the previous period, the worrying developments, and the lack of reflection does not, however, mean concluding that the revolution has failed and that an authoritarian restoration is inevitable; it means, rather, trying to emphasize as best we can the stumbling blocks, the conflicts, the places of tension and confrontation in which power relations and struggles between opposing forces are played out. To some extent, nothing will ever be the same again as fear has partly vanished, the silence has been broken and people's tongues have been loosened. The debate can now take place even if it has not yet taken root in the public sphere as the conditions for its realization are difficult to obtain. But it is also important to recall the conditions necessary for a real breakthrough and a real democratization: they reside largely in the political economy of the country. Until now, the elites attempting to pre-empt the revolution have failed because of the strength of the unrest and the supervision brought into play by certain political groups that are certainly in a minority but well-structured. However, the pressures and demands and the decisions that have resulted have, so far, not impacted on economic and social issues, making these gains even more partial and fragile.





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