BATTLEFIELDS OF THE REPUBLIC
THE STRUGGLE FOR PUBLIC SPACE IN TUNISIA

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Abstract[1]

This paper argues that the Tunisian revolutionary moment of 2011 and its aftermath have opened up spaces that are capable of providing a framework for the agonistic politics associated with democratic possibility. Insurgent public space, an emerging plural public, as well as adversarial contests over the constitution of the republic display features that may help to build 'conflictual consensus' as part of a democratic future. These possibilities are constantly being re-enacted by Tunisians whose disagreements are real enough, but whose struggles are also establishing the boundaries of an emerging political field, loosely thought of as the 'Tunisian Republic'. This is a bold and challenging undertaking, with potentially revolutionary implications, but it is also a precarious enterprise, given the forces that may yet threaten to encroach on public space and on the rights of the citizen.

*'Ever since the republic became the possession of a few… men…
the rest of us, for all that we are energetic and decent…have
become a mob without dignity or power. We are vulnerable to
those who should by right fear us.'*[2]

Introduction

The Tunisian revolution of 2011 can be read in many ways. Visually, an enduring image is that of the hundreds of thousands of Tunisians who gathered in the main avenues and squares of Tunis and of towns across the country, refusing to budge and calling for the overthrow of the regime. These images underline the centrality of public space, not simply to the organisation of power, but also to its imagination. The distinctive topography of the city, shaped by and for the exercise of power, also informs and shapes political contestation, as it did in Tunisia in 2010–11. Doubling back against the authorities that claim to control the city, and thus the state, insurgent forces put the spaces of Tunisia's cities to new uses. It was here that the 'mob without dignity or power' was able to assert both dignity *and* power. In doing so, it did indeed strike fear into those who ruled Tunisia, since it was fighting to reclaim the republic from the hands of the few.

This paper provides an opportunity to reflect upon the connections between the urban environment, the emergence of a self-conscious, plural public through the occupations of spaces in the city, and the efforts to re-establish the Tunisian republic. It argues that the Tunisian revolutionary moment and its aftermath have opened up spaces that can provide a framework for the agonistic politics associated with democratic possibility. It is here that insurgent public space, the emergence of a plural public, fragmented and multi-voiced, as well as adversarial contests over the constitution of the republic, display features that could help to build the 'conflictual consensus' that might yet be the basis of a democratic future.[3] These possibilities are constantly being re-enacted by Tunisians whose antagonisms are real enough but whose struggles are also establishing the boundaries, substantive and formal, of an emerging political field, loosely and variously thought of as the 'Tunisian Republic'.

Key episodes over the past five years have shown that, despite serious ideological differences, there has been sufficient common ground in Tunisia, even amongst political opponents, for joint action beyond the overthrow of the dictator. This has been seen in the setting up of the High Authority (the High Authority for the Achievement of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition) that established the basis for the election of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) in 2011, in the formation of the Quartet in 2013 that paved the way for the near unanimous

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[2] Lucius Sergius Catalina (Catiline), 63 BC, in Gaius Sallustinus Crispus, *The War with Catiline* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), 1931).

[3] Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 6–9.

adoption of the constitution in 2014, and for the elections of that year, which pro-
ceeded as planned, producing a coalition government. As the disagreements among
the various parties to these processes indicated, these were agonistic exchanges, adver-
sarial politics performed within a common framework. The periodic crises over the
years have shown this to be a bold and challenging undertaking with potentially rev-
olutionary implications. It is also at this stage a precarious enterprise. Apart from
anything else, it comes up against antagonisms of varying kinds – from within the state
and security apparatus and from their well-placed social supporters, as well as from
the radical Islamist/Salafi wing of the political spectrum whose ideas appeal to those
who feel alienated from the emerging republican order. They represent very different
constituencies and are driven by opposed imaginings, but they share an intolerance of
dissent and of difference that has marked their strategies of exclusion and sometimes
of violence. In different ways, their behaviour has suggested a ruthless determination
to eliminate the other and to negate the idea of the republic as a shared space or
common project for all citizens.

Power and Resistance in the City

The protest movements in Tunisia that succeeded in overthrowing President Ben Ali
in 2011 were predominantly urban, beginning in the provincial towns of the interior,
but then erupting in the wealthier cities of the coast, until finally moving in on the
capital, Tunis. It was here that they were instrumental in bringing about a collapse of
the morale of the regime, leading to the president's precipitate flight from the country
on 14 January. It is perhaps paradoxical that this should have been the case, since the
cities of Tunisia represented both the symbolic and the material power of the regime.
Yet precisely because these were sites of power, they were also locations of resistance – a
resistance against the very systems of power that had supported the presidential regime.
In this sense, the Tunisian experience bears out the dual nature of cities: they function
both as 'difference machines',[4] but also as 'a factory for the production of the common'.[5]
They are both distillations of class power and class differentials, and crucibles of the rad-
ical thoughts and movements to which such differentials give rise. In public space and
its occupation, antagonism to dominant power is enacted, and the topographical focus
on the location of power can create solidarities, giving rise to a revolutionary moment.
It is then that people seek to re-appropriate the rights of which they have been made
aware, precisely through the interplay of repression and resistance.

[4] Bruce D'Arcus, 'Dissent, Public Space and the Politics of Citizenship: Riots and the "Outside Agita-
tor"', *Space and Polity* 8/3 (2004), p. 358.
[5] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press,
2009), p. 250.

In Tunisia, the regime of President Ben Ali experienced this in a number of ways. Since before the time of the French protectorate (1881-1956), the capital city's relationship with its exploited hinterland had fuelled some of the major upheavals in Tunisian politics. With the migration of thousands of Tunisians to the cities of the coast, especially Tunis, during the decades since independence, some of the exclusions and disappointments to which they had been subject as inhabitants of the interior were experienced by them in the widening impoverished suburbs of the capital. Ironically, President Ben Ali's systems of exclusion/inclusion and the politics of the clan were such that the economically privileged, increasingly concerned about their rights and their property, came to share a common mistrust of the regime with those who had never really enjoyed either.[6] In Tunis itself, the entanglement of property development schemes with the exclusive business interests of Ben Ali and his in-laws made some of the projects of urban displacement and 'renewal' deeply controversial. It gave rise to solidarities of rejection and made clear the acquisitive ruthlessness of the president and his family, exposing the opulent tastes of the incumbents, but also the very structure of ownership in the new districts, such as Lac I and II, significantly removed from the centre of the city. The entwining of Ben Ali's family interests with those of immensely wealthy Arab Gulf investors was mercilessly mocked, for instance, by such spirited and subversive cartoonists as 'Z' in the years before 2011, where Tunisia's national interest was represented by two endangered, articulate and deeply disgruntled flamingoes.[7]

As in many other post-colonial states, the Tunisian Republic of Habib Bourguiba embraced the highly centralised administration of the country, bequeathed by more than seven decades of French rule. Ben Ali, when he displaced Bourguiba in 1987, ensured that everything should remain wholly centred on the political and administrative capital of Tunis. Ironically, or fittingly, in 2010–11 this very system worked in the service of resistance, as insurrectionary activity moved into the capital city from the towns of the interior. Across the country, largely discounted by Ben Ali and the *dirigeants* of the regime, the towns of the interior such as Sidi Bouzid, Menzel Bouziane and Meknassy witnessed large-scale protests from mid-December 2010 onwards. These were soon joined by Sfax, Sousse and Gafsa. However, it was in January 2011, with the return of provincial university students to the capital and the activation of networks living in Tunis, now fired up by the stories of police violence in their towns of origin, that momentum built significantly.[8] The centre of gravity that Tunis had become through decades of centralised administration now worked to attract protest, demonstration and resistance on an unparalleled scale, with dramatic effects on the president's hold on power.

These events are reminders that cities are places of encounter, where new forms and spaces of association are produced. The city can thus become a crucible for revolutionary potential, fuelled not merely by antagonism, but also by a growing awareness

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[6] Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*, tr. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), pp. 193-207, 274-291.

[7] Z, *Révolution! Des Années Mauves à la Fuite de Carthage* (Tunis: Cérès éditions, 2011), pp. 28-47.

[8] Abdelaziz Belkhodja, & Tarak Cheikhrouhou, *14 Janvier: L'enquête* (Tunis: Apollonia editions, 2013), pp. 17-49.

of how to act in common. The power of this process can be realised in a moment of 'irruption', when collective action comes to be seen, even fleetingly, as a way of creating something radically different.[9]

It is in these moments that a new political order can be glimpsed, a republic in the full meaning of the term as a shared project and space for citizens to realise their rights and to defend their liberties against all forms of domination.[10] In this process, the city offers the opportunity for the enactment of republican ideals of joint purpose and activist defence. Even under the repression of Ben Ali, the towns of Tunisia bore witness to the importance of the human fabric of cities: the multiple networks, sometimes working together, sometimes competing, but always creating hubs that took on meaning for those involved.[11] At key moments, as in Redeyef and M'dhila in 2008 in the context of the Gafsa Basin strikes, this produced weeks of public protest, demonstrations, sit-ins and marches. The citizens were sending messages to the regime, but were also reinforcing their solidarity and common purpose, despite increasing repression and the heavy presence of the security forces.[12]

In Tunis itself, ironically, one such site of common purpose and solidarity was the Café-Théâtre Étoile du Nord on Avenue Farhat Hached, only a couple of streets behind the notorious building of the Ministry of the Interior on Avenue Bourguiba. Apart from the plays that were staged there, it became a place for bloggers to gather in order to benefit from the anonymity of the free internet connection. A different approach was taken by the Art Rue group,[13] formed in 2006, which had organised the first of the Dream City events in 2007. This bi-annual activity populated the public spaces of the old Medina of Tunis, and then of Sfax, with new urban networks, intent on using art both to reclaim space and to create the basis for conversations, debate and encounter between otherwise unconnected Tunisians going about their daily lives.[14]

In symbolic terms, Tunis had also played a powerful role in projecting Ben Ali's authority, reminding his subjects that he could oversee their every move. The city's boulevards and squares became sites for the display of his power, with huge portraits of Ben Ali looming over spaces that once were public but could now be seen as the parade grounds of the regime, used for the production of disciplined subjects. However, as Ben Ali discovered, the very prominence of the portraits made them ideal

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[9] Ash Amin, 'Collective culture and urban public space', *City* 12/1 (2008), pp. 7-12; David Harvey, (2012) *Rebel Cities* (London: Verso), pp. 73-80.

[10] Quentin Skinner, 'Freedom as the Absence of Arbitrary Power', pp. 83-101 in Cécile Laborde and John Maynor (eds) *Republicanism and Political Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2008), pp. 86-94.

[11] Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, tr. R. Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 116-9.

[12] Eric Gobe, *The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and a Social Movement: Meaning and Significance of a Protest Movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia*. Working paper, (2010). Available at https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00557826; Hèla Yousfi, 'The Tunisian Revolution: Narratives of the Tunisian General Labour Union', in Larbi Sadiki (ed) *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 322-4.

[13] Association l'Art Rue, *Dream City 2012: L'Artiste Face aux Libertés* (Tunis: Association l'Art Rue, 2012).

[14] Interviews with Sofiane Ouissi and Dhouha Bokri, Tunis, April 2014; Mouffe, *Agonistics*, pp. 85-94.

targets for effective protest. Their destruction had a powerful effect on Tunisian citizens, giving heart to those who witnessed the audacity and apparent immunity of those who defaced the face of power. TV and social media redoubled the effect by spreading these images of destruction so widely.[15]

Equally relevant were the debilitating effects of the demonstrations in the confined spaces of the city on Ben Ali's powers of surveillance. Installed in the presidential palace in the suburb of Carthage, Ben Ali was at the nerve centre of a surveillance operation that had subjected the Tunisian population to intense scrutiny for nearly three decades. However, in order to work, it needed to relay accurate information to the heart of the regime, in real time. The scale of the protests across the city and the mass defiance of police power meant that the surveillance system simply broke down. Indeed, contemporary accounts suggest that the very topography of power prevented Ben Ali from seeing what was going on in the city. Instead, he came to believe, through a sequence of misinterpretations, that he and his family were in imminent danger. It was then that he fled to the military base at Aouina, boarded the presidential plane and left the country, never to return. At this most crucial moment, Ben Ali, far from being the all-seeing president, was effectively blind.[16]

Making Space Public in the City: Against Domination

The Tunisian revolution was not simply this moment of dramatic flight. As with all revolutions, it is an ongoing process of political struggle, ambition and contestation, as different visions for the country take shape. Nevertheless, the re-appropriation of public space in the city meant that the revolution was also, in some senses, about the nature of that space and the rights of the public that it implies. This in itself, whether consciously articulated or not, was a practical restatement of republican ideals. It signaled the coming together of citizens in a joint enterprise and the reclaiming of a republican order from the hands of the small elite who had made it a vehicle for the domination of the majority. Here public space had a crucial role to play, formed by, but also formative of, the citizens' struggles to free themselves of that domination. It is always contestable because the power to set the criteria of admission is always potentially in question, affecting the very notion of the right to participate in decisions that shape the life of the individual and of the community. It therefore links the concrete with the concept of rights, and links the citizen with the larger polity, demanding a definition of the terrain of rights and the relationships that bind them as a site, potentially, of agonistic exchanges.[17]

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[15] Laryssa Chomiak, 'Spectacles of Power: Locating Resistance in Ben Ali's Tunisia', *Portal 9: Stories and Critical Writing about the City*, Issue 2: The Square, (2013). Available at http://portal9journal.org/printarticle.aspx?id=102

[16] Belkhodja and Cheikhrouhou, *14 Janvier: L'enquête*, pp. 51-92.

[17] Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong, 'Introduction: The Conditions of Public Space: Vision, Speech and Theatricality', in Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong (eds) *Public Space and Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 4-11; Helga Tawil-Souri 'It's still about the Power of Place', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5 (2012), pp. 89-91.

In Tunis, the mass demonstrations that precipitated the flight of the president also raised the question of whether the constellation of power matched the new usages of space and the rights that were being asserted. A new topography of the revolution had been created, and, when institutional power was seen to fall short of public aspirations, protest continued, exemplified in the years since 2011. In January and February 2011, massive demonstrations, 'Casbah I' (28 January 2011) and 'Casbah II' (27 February 2011), brought thousands of Tunisians to demonstrate before the seat of power (the government offices on Casbah Square), finally bringing down Ben Ali's Prime Minister, Mohammed Ghannouchi, and forcing the dissolution of the RCD (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique – the ruling party of Ben Ali). Power had become manifest in the city, but it was the power of an insurrectionary public, where significant differences could already be seen, prefiguring emerging national political debates. Some of these differences were articulated by sections of the Tunisian bourgeoisie, alarmed by what they saw as the 'excesses' of the revolution, and representing themselves as the 'silent majority'. They found voice in March 2011 when they held a mass meeting at the Qobba sports complex in El Menzah, calling for a return to work, an end to disruption and the restoration of the order that they had found congenial under the old republic.[18]

By contrast, there was disillusionment at the absence of change in the disadvantaged and poorer suburbs of Tunis, such as Tadammun, Le Kram and Duwar Hichar. These had provided many of the young men who had spearheaded the urban uprising in January 2011. But they were also those that felt most keenly the absence of any significant redistribution of wealth, the continued deficits in the administration of justice and their own exclusion in the face of richer and more powerfully situated quarters. This led some of them to pursue a line of moral renewal, finding in Salafi Islam a powerful language of rectitude, solidarity and political purpose, but shunning the emerging institutional politics of the new republic. The effect was often to perpetuate the exclusion of these same quarters, frequently portrayed in official and private media as somehow beyond the limits of civility.[19] These same dynamics stimulated associations such as the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution. Seen by their critics as little more than 'Islamist thugs' in the service of the more extreme elements of Ennahda, the Leagues nevertheless took up pre-existing associational forms, emerging from particular and often deprived neighbourhoods, advising people on how to negotiate a distant, unreformed and even hostile state administration.[20]

[18] Leyla Dakhli, 'A Betrayed Revolution? On the Tunisian Uprising and the Democratic Transition', Jadaliyya 5 March 2013. Available at http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/10463/a-betrayed-revolution_on-the-tunisian-uprising-and; Sami Zemni, 'The Extraordinary Politics of the Tunisian Revolution: The Process of Constitution Making', *Mediterranean Politics* 20/1 (2015), p. 10.

[19] Mohamed Ali Ben Zina and Olfa Lamloum (eds) *Les Jeunes de Douar Hicher et d'Ettadhamen: Un Enquête Sociologique* (Tunis: Arabesques/International Alert, 2015); Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, 'The Rise of Salafism and the Future of Democratization', in Nouri Gana (ed) *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 252-8; Fabio Merone, 'Enduring Class Struggle in Tunisia: The Fight for Identity beyond Political Islam', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42/1 (2015), pp. 80-87.

[20] Safa Belghith and Ian Patel, 'Leagues for the Protection of the Tunisian Revolution', *OpenDemocracy*, 25 June 2013. Available at http://www.opendemocracy.net/ian-patel-safa-belghith/leagues-for-protection-of-tunisian-revolution

The topography of the city is therefore ambiguous. Or rather, it contains within itself the tensions that have gone into its constitution. It makes visible inequalities in the distribution of wealth, but it also has a masking effect whereby the thick concentration of blank façades surrounding public spaces provides a different kind of environment where exclusionary, potentially violent forms of power move, hidden from public gaze.[21] This concern has led to a polarisation of political debate. There are those who believe that hidden networks of power and violence continue to control the lives of Tunisians, despite the formal institution of openly democratic procedures since 2011. The dominant slogan of the revolution was 'Freedom, Justice, Dignity', and it proved capable of mobilising hundreds of thousands. However, since 2011, there has been a constant struggle to advance and to defend these aspirations. It has brought Tunisians up against the *feloul* (remnants) of Ben Ali's regime, but it has also pitted them against each other as they realise how differently their fellow citizens interpret these widely shared concepts. In April 2012, these fears appeared to be borne out when the Troika coalition government fell back on old, restrictive interpretations of what citizens should be allowed to do in public space, declaring a ban on the demonstrations in Avenue Bourguiba planned for Martyrs' Day. Given the powerful significance of this day and this particular space for the revolution of 2011, it provoked widespread mobilisation and the pre-emptive mass occupation of the avenue once more. This was met by the familiar public order techniques of baton charges and tear gas, but the demonstrators held their ground and the government eventually abandoned their plans.[22]

The post-revolutionary governments have found the repressive capacity of the security forces too convenient to forego and have avoided serious reform. This has encouraged the notion that the 'deep state' in Tunisia has yet to be uprooted. Instances of police mistreatment of citizens, violations of their rights and the use of casual violence and intimidation have been recorded, but hitherto have provided citizens with little possibility of redress.[23] On the contrary, prosecutions have been brought against those who have fallen foul of the police in some way. It was this that sparked the 'I too burned a police station' campaign in 2014 as prosecutions were threatened against those who had burned down police stations in the revolution of 2011, despite pardons by the post-revolutionary government. The campaign, involving demonstrations, performances through the wearing of T-shirts proclaiming the slogan of the group, as well as internet campaigns, created solidarity around those who had been transformed so suddenly from revolutionary heroes to potential criminals. As another slogan of the group proclaims: 'Revolution is not a crime'.[24]

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[21] Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, pp. 118-122.

[22] David Charles, 'Tunisia: Martyrs' Day Violence, why and what's Next?' *OpenDemocracy*, 11 April 2012. Available at https://www.opendemocracy.net/david-charles/tunisia-martyrs-day-violence-why-and-whats-next

[23] Amnesty International, *Tunisia Annual Report 2014/15*, (2015). Available at https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/tunisia/report-tunisia/

[24] *Hata ana haraktu markaz* (I too burned a police station), Facebook page link through Asma Smadhi, 'I too burned a police station, online activists declare' *Tunisialive* 21 April 2014. Available at http://www.tunisia-live.net/2014/04/21/i-too-burned-a-police-station-online-activists-declare/

Despite these concerns for civil liberties voiced by some sections of the public, there are others who see the security forces as the main bulwark against the disorder that threatens the republic from a perceived mixture of class, criminal and radical Islamist resentments, encouraged by Tunisia's regional enemies. For this section of the Tunisian public, the discourse of 'security', used repeatedly by the caretaker government of Mehdi Jumaa in 2014, as well as by the successor Nidaa Tounes dominated administration after the 2014 elections, has been a persuasive one.[25] It has been reinforced by the violent clashes that have taken place between armed Islamist insurgents associated with groups such as Ansar al-Shariʿa, Katibat ʿUqba bin Nafiʿ or Ajnad al-Khilafa and the Tunisian security forces. Events such as the killing of 22 people at the Bardo Museum in Tunis in March 2015 or the shooting of 38 foreign tourists on a hotel beach near Sousse in June 2015 by identified Salafi jihadists have fed into this process. Measures such as the extended state of emergency declared in its wake and the rapid passing of the anti-terror law in July 2015 have raised fears that the re-emergence of the security state would overshadow the freedoms of the new republic. These incidents have drawn attention to the perceived dual nature of the Tunisian urban environment. It is not simply a place where open circulation can feed into the emerging practices of a democratic republic. It is also a place of hidden conspiracies by those prepared to use force to undermine the security and liberty of its citizens, whether acting in the name of the state or explicitly in opposition to it.

In addition to physical space, there is also the question of the republic's institutional spaces. Tunisian activists have tried to ensure that the move from the open public spaces of demonstration to the less visible institutional spaces of decision and power should not infringe the rights of citizens. By tracking the movements, speeches and actions of elected representatives, as well as of state officials, they have revealed to the public gaze – and thus to public judgment – the workings of power in some important spheres. Al-Bawsala, with its dedicated and active off-shoot Marsad Majles, led the way in recording and publicising the workings of the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly from 2012–14 and continues its work in the new parliament elected in October 2014.[26] They have given Tunisians a clear and easily accessible record of the debates, voting patterns, attendance records and behaviour of their elected representatives. Initially mistrusted and resented by many of the representatives, they have helped to change the terms of the debate and, above all, have influenced the ways in which those who have been elected present themselves to the public.

Similarly, the organisation I Watch keeps track of government actions, investigating misuse of public office, the misappropriation of public funds and the ways in which power holders may abuse the power with which they have been entrusted.[27]

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[25] Corinna Mullin and Brahim Rouabah, 'Requiem for Tunisia's Revolution?', *Jadaliyya*, 22 December 2014. Available at http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20334/requiem-for-tunisia%E2%80%99s-revolution

[26] Al Bawsala's website available at http://www.albawsala.com/ar/; Marsad Majles' website available at http://www.marsad.tn/

[27] Facebook page for *I Watch* available at https://www.facebook.com/I.watch.tunisia

The efforts of these and like-minded associations, active in Tunisian public life, are reminders that public space is a political construction that is constantly fought over, with boundaries that are themselves contested, expanding and contracting through the struggles that help to define it. It needs constant maintenance, as well as the active commitment and vigilance of substantial numbers of the public. The same can be said of the republic itself. It is not surprising therefore that classical republican theory puts so much stress on civic virtue and the civic activism that it is meant to encourage. For this very reason the social production of public space and of a meaningful public sphere is an object of intense political struggle in Tunisia, as elsewhere. The city creates a space that is political, and it is this highly charged space that underpins the battle for the republic.

The Production of the Republic: Agonistic Politics in the City

The construction of public space is not simply the making of a physical place, but is also the processes implicated in the manufacture of a public sphere that has meaning for those who participate in it.[28] It raises the question of rights, both in the sense of citizens' rights to participate in the deliberation of their fate, as well as their rights vis-à-vis each other.[29] Highly visible bodily performances and engagement became marked features of the Tunisian revolution, helping to underline the strong link between the theatrical and the visual in the construction of public space and the emerging consciousness of the public. This echoes Arendt's understanding of the public realm, where public appearances feature, as does human artifice. Between them they create an environment that 'relates and separates men at the same time' – a fitting image of the city as political stage and artifact and a site of agonistic exchange.[30] It is here that the understandings of and connections with the reinvention of the republic become central to the process.

The public as actor, collectively aware of citizens' rights, begins to emerge through public manifestation, demonstration and the creation of solidarities in the city. This has wider implications for the understanding of power and rights within the framework of the state. The republic thus comes into being through the performance of a plural public and the discovery of common purpose, even in the acting out of difference. In this sense it corresponds to the republican ideal that the public good can best be realised and preserved by the collective actions of a body of free citizens. For some, this ideal stands against the belief that the body politic must derive its impulse either from religion or from established power located elsewhere. In contemporary Tunisia, these contending views have pitched republicans of rather different casts of mind against one another. There are those who believe that the revolution created the

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[28] Eric Davis, 'The Historical Genesis of the Public Sphere in Iraq, 1900-1963: Implications for Building Democracy in the Post-Baʿthist Era', in Seteney Shami (ed) *Publics, Politics and Participation* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2009), pp. 385-427.

[29] Dan Hind, *The Return of the Public* (London: Verso, 2010), pp. 37-47.

[30] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 52.

opportunity for the assertion, if not necessarily the imposition, of distinctively Islamic norms in public life. Confronting them are those who think that the disciplines and hierarchies of the old republic should be preserved, especially in their secular form. And of course there are others who differ with both, holding out for more egalitarian concepts of republicanism.[31]

Aspects of these divides between different segments of the public have been visible at various moments over the past five years. In June 2012 a challenge was mounted by those who wanted to test the commitment to free use of public space at the Palace of Abdellia, a public gallery owned by the ministry of culture in the town of La Marsa. A number of artists exhibited works that made clear their concerns about trends in Tunisia that they found threatening. They were seeking to provoke public debate, not simply about the limits of artistic expression, but also about the issues raised by many of the works, particularly those relating to the status of women under conservative Islamist rule and Islamic social convention. The provocation succeeded: part of the exhibition was ransacked and burned by outraged Salafis who had been made aware of an exhibition that they would not have visited anyway. This led to a counter demonstration by those who feared the worst in terms of the imposition of Islamic values on public life and the intervention of the police. More ominously for some, it also led to the public prosecutor opening a case against two of the artists who were now charged with 'disturbing public order and undermining public morality', although the case was dropped a few months later, following domestic and international protests.[32]

Similar divisions became apparent in August 2012 in public reactions to the debate in the National Constituent Assembly about the role of Islam in public life, particularly when a constitutional drafting committee dominated by Ennahda suggested that 'equality' between men and women, should be replaced by 'complementarity'. Women and men in their thousands marched on parliament, occupying the spaces around the building and filling the avenues that lead to it. Although there were many in Tunisia, women and men, who support the Ennahda project and who may have supported this amendment, there were also large numbers who were bitterly opposed. They saw it instead as proof of Ennahda's restrictive ideas of participation in public life. The battle lines over citizenship, inclusion and exclusion and thus the nature of the republic itself were being drawn up and resulted in the abandonment of the proposed amendment.[33]

Of even greater power in terms of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation, and in terms of the outcome for the political future of the republic, were the two political assassinations that took place in 2013. The first was that of Shukri Belaid in February, and the second was that of Muhammad Brahmi in July of that year. Both were members of the

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[31] Hamadi Redissi, Asma Nouira and Abdelkader Zghal (eds), *La Transition Démocratique en Tunisie: État des Lieux: Les Acteurs* (Tunis: Diwen Edition, 2012).

[32] Adam Le Nevez, 'Artworks and Property Vandalized during a Night of Tension in Tunis', *Tunisialive* 11 June 2012. Available at http://www.tunisia-live.net/2012/06/11/artworks-and-property-vandalized-during-a-night-of-tension-in-tunis/; interview with Héla Ammar, Sidi Bou Said, April 2013.

[33] S.T. McNeill, 'Wording on Women Sparks Protest in Tunisia', *Al-Jazeera*, 19 August 2012. Available at http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/08/201281981854620325.html

different secular socialist political organisations that adhered to al-Jabhat al-Shaʿbiyyah (the Popular Front) national coalition. In both cases, the main suspects identified by the authorities were adherents of the Salafi jihadist group, named as Ansar al-Shariʿa. Some saw this as proof that a government dominated by an Islamist party had created a permissive environment for such attacks, even if it had not encouraged them. Others speculated that the men responsible for the shootings were in fact front men for other, possibly regional, interests intent on destabilising Tunisia by provoking the kinds of upheavals that would disrupt the emergence of democratic government. For a while it did seem as if this might be one of the outcomes. Hundreds of thousands of Tunisians – some say 1 million – turned out for the funeral of Belaid, protesting by their presence not only the system that had allowed this to happen, but also the introduction of open violence into Tunisian public life. The Ennahda prime minister, Hamdi Jabali, tried to form a neutral, technocratic caretaker government to defuse the situation, but he himself lost his job and was replaced by the Ennahda minister of the interior, Ali Laarayedh.

When Muhammad Brahmi was assassinated, Laarayedh refused to contemplate resignation. This provoked wider protests, weeks of demonstrations and a sit-in by tens of thousands at the Bardo Square, in front of and surrounding the parliament. This was accompanied by similar mass demonstrations, as well as attacks on Ennahda party offices in provincial towns, in addition to the withdrawal from parliament of significant numbers of opposition deputies. As with the demonstrations at the time of Shukri Belaid's funeral, the government responded first with tear gas and baton charges and then with counter-demonstrations by its supporters. However, the overall effect, as the country appeared to be more polarised than ever, was government paralysis.

It only came out of this through the intervention of what became known as the Quartet – the UGTT (Tunisia's trade union federation), UTICA (the employers' federation), the Bar Association and the Tunisian League of Human Rights. This grouping cajoled all the political parties to sign up to a 'Road Map' that would see the republic through the crisis. Maintaining pressure through civic and public action, the process saw the eventual resignation of Laarayedh, the formation of a caretaker, technocrat government headed by Mehdi Jumaa and the passing of the constitution by the NCA in January 2014. These measures and the way in which they had been developed defused the crisis and paved the way for the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2014.[34] The process as a whole was critical to the fate of the republic, since even those who were most bitterly opposed to each other allowed themselves to be brought together to sign up to a common framework of action that meant, in effect, the immediate relinquishing of power by Ennahda. In the circumstances, this can be interpreted as a moment of 'conflictual consensus'. The parties to the 'Road Map' remained adversaries, but within a field defined by agonistic politics that allowed the constitution to be passed, with last minute amendments – the result of compromises – worked out in the cut and thrust of debate. This in turn committed all parties to the competition of the parliamentary and presidential elections that were to follow at the end of 2014.

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[34] Sarah Chayes, 'How a Leftist Labor Union Helped Force Tunisia's Political Settlement', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 27 March 2014. Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/27/how-leftist-labor-union-helped-force-tunisia-s-political-settlement

Conclusions: Challenges in Sustaining the Republic

The Tunisian example in some ways bears out the assertion that cities are sites of citizenship. They provide and shape the environment where the emerging spaces of citizenship – and the struggles associated with them – are played out, and are linked to views about the larger framework of rights represented by the idea of the republic.[35] The struggles and uncertainties experienced by Tunisians as they move towards institutionalised representative life, seeking to protect the rights of citizens against the state and against each other, are reminders of the relevance of republican ideas, and of different concepts of the republic, that inform the Tunisian revolution. The idea of liberty encapsulated in republican thought is a product of public exertion, 'a shared freedom to determine the conditions of our shared life' on which human flourishing depends.[36] Nevertheless, as critical republicanism reminds us, 'civic virtue' is not merely a normative aspiration or an abstract good. It is the outcome of very particular social and economic conditions that ensure that 'all citizens enjoy basic but robust civic standing, in the form of political voice, basic personal autonomy, equal opportunities, material capabilities, and intersubjective mutual recognition as equal citizens'.[37] It therefore implies a more general commitment to ensure that power relations, based on access to economic and knowledge resources as well as on citizen-state relations, encourage participation through inclusion.

In Tunisia this and other contending ideas are visible in the range of very different opinions about what the republic should be, and how, therefore, it should be reconstructed. Each has its committed advocates and derives support from different sectors of Tunisia's plural society, which is organised into parties and associations that give substance to the ideas in the field of political contestation. For instance, there is the enduring idea, strong still within the state administration and among the political elite, as well as within sections of the UGTT, that public interest can best be realised by enlightened administrators endowed with supreme authority (Bourguiba's republic). There also endures the view held by many of the economic entrepreneurs associated with the employers' association UTICA that public interest is best guaranteed by individuals in the market pursuing private ends for mutual benefit (the promise of the republic of Ben Ali, if not exactly its reality). Paralleling this, and enjoying the support of many from these sections of society, as well as from the socialist left, is the idea of the secular republic (*république laique*) as a strongly held ideal, influenced by distinctive traditions of French republicanism. This is countered by the belief held by Ennahda and its many supporters that a particular interpretation of Islamic obligation should dictate the parameters of public life within the framework of a *dawla madaniyya* (civil state) 'with an Islamic reference' (the idea of an Islamic republic).[38]

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[35] James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, 'Cities and Citizenship', *Public Culture* 8 (1996), pp. 187-9.

[36] Hind, *The Return of the Public*, p. 201.

[37] Cécile Laborde, *Critical Republicanism: The Hijab Controversy and Political Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 11.

[38] Rory McCarthy, 'Protecting the Sacred: Tunisia's Islamist Movement Ennahdha and the Challenge of Free Speech', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42/4 (2015), pp. 449-51.

Furthermore, drawing upon critical and radical republicanism, there is the strongly held view by many on the secular left that a true and secure republic must be based on equality of opportunity and social justice for all citizens (the social democratic republic).

These competing views of the republic show that the Tunisian revolution has built on and developed the antagonisms that emerged as the unifying energies of the revolutionary moment dissipated after the fall of Ben Ali. In doing so, however, it opened out the possibility for the development of an agonistic politics, given substance by the emergence of a plural public that re-appropriated, but is also continuing to create, the public spaces that form the site for such a politics. In this respect, a common attachment to the idea of a Tunisian republic, even if differently interpreted, offers the possibility of a framework in which the liberties and the rights of citizens can be protected. It is the republic that forms the crucial institutional order in which these differences can be thrashed out. As the recent political history of Tunisia has demonstrated, even diametrically opposed forces, from across the political spectrum, have realised at moments of crisis that the republic, flawed as it may be, offers a better alternative than the scenarios that Tunisians can see unfolding across their eastern, but also their western, frontiers. Tunisians have shown that the republic can only be preserved by the collective actions of a body of free citizens who may be at odds with each other on many things, but who agree on the need to make the republic through practice as the best guarantee of their common rights and as a framework in which their disagreements can be fought out within the minimal conditions required for a 'conflictual consensus'.

In this respect, a number of areas of concern exist regarding the power of the republic as a mechanism for creating a more equitable, and therefore commonly accepted, system of governance. The first revolves around the question of how a mobilised, if plural, public can move from performance in the public spaces of the city to lodging within the institutions of the state. The divided cityscapes of Tunis have shown that demonstration and occupation of public space have been crucial, but are no substitute for the 'occupation' of public institutions. It is here that opposing views can be debated, and where decisions can be made and followed up based on the conceded authority of an expectant public – but they are also sites that encourage partisanship. In addition, reading the institutional landscape is sometimes made more difficult by the wilful obscurity of many of the existing state institutions. They may be constantly challenged by the activist organisations that scrutinise power, but they also show a tenacious determination to retain their immunities in the name of state continuity.

The general elections of 2011 and 2014 have been the prime mechanisms for ensuring that the people's representatives are placed within a major institution of the state – such as the National Constituent Assembly and the Assembly of the Representatives of the People – that embodies the sovereignty of the people and, in principle, holds the government to account in their name. The elections took place as planned, under intense scrutiny by both Tunisian and international observers, and have been accorded the legitimacy that is their due. This was crucially important for the 2011 elections for the NCA that drew up and passed the new constitution. In another sense, it was equally important that the 2014 elections produced a parliament that provided a shared space for adversarial politics, representing accurately enough the variety of

the Tunisian public. The public is thus no longer symbolic, but made real through representation, and the question remains as to whether its power will remain symbolic or will be enacted through the institutions of state that are formally answerable to the people's representatives.

Nevertheless, direct action by concerned citizens retains its appeal. The right to assembly and peaceful demonstration is guaranteed in the new constitution (Article 37). These are practices that embody rather than challenge a politics of public answerability, even if not all officials, elected or unelected, see this as a proper political channel, preoccupied as they may be with 'order' and 'security'. Thus strategies of disorder in the city that were so effective in opening up public space and in challenging the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali may be used as a pretext to close debate, to narrow down the options and the spaces of the city. It can in turn reinforce the security-heavy view of republican duties – a view that, if unchecked and unchallenged, can strengthen executive power at the expense of public accountability. This is one of the fears concerning the understandable, but nevertheless strengthening, discourse of securitisation that has emerged in response to direct threats posed by violent Islamist groupings. It is a discourse that enjoys public endorsement in many parts of Tunisian society and this makes it all the more worrying for some. As the behaviour of a group of Nidaa Tounes members of parliament demonstrated in August 2015, there is a temptation to use the new anti-terror law to silence critics and opponents. They filed an official complaint under the new law against Sihem Bensedrine (president of the Instance Vérité et Dignité (Truth and Dignity Commission)) and the blogger Azyz Amami for remarks he had made about parliament at a meeting of the Commission the week before.[39]

Finally, there is the enduring question of how to continue to harness public enthusiasm and to maintain public commitment. Citizens need to be constantly exercising their rights *as* citizens, re-enacting the public through mobilisation and by keeping watch on the institutions of the state. This is only achieved in part through elections, even if these do play an important role. The fear is that banality, routine, disappointment and alienation will prevent citizens even from exercising this basic right. The repeated extensions of the period for voter registration in 2014 only persuaded 5.25 million to register out of a potential electorate of 8 million. Although some sixty nine per cent of those who registered did cast their ballots, it was noticeable that the age group of 18-25 year olds was seriously underrepresented, with reports of up to eighty per cent of this cohort staying away from the polling stations.[40] It is in this respect that critical republicanism might bring with it a more substantive and less formalistic programme of public engagement. Rather than focusing only on institutional features, or on citizens' virtues, it suggests that fundamental attention should be paid to the forms of material inequality between classes, generations, regions and city districts, that undermine the possibility of a truly universal citizenship.

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[39] Salsabil Chellali, 'Tunisie: Sihem Bensedrine et Azyz Amami, Premiers à Tomber sous le Coup de la Loi Antiterroriste', *Jeune Afrique*, 24 August 2015. Available at www.jeuneafrique.com/259177/politique/tunisie-sihem-bensedrine-azyz-amami-premiers-a-tomber-coup-de-loi-antiterroriste/

[40] ISIE (Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Elections), *Taqrir al-hai'at al-ʿaliya al-mustaqilah li-l-intikhabat hawl al-intikhabat al-tishriʿiyah wa-l-ri'asiyah 2014*. Available at http://www.isie.tn/actualites/rapport-de-lisie-pour-les-elections-2014/

For many in Tunisia, there is a sense that the political parties do not speak for them and that those who direct the state are always part of an elite that by definition excludes the majority of the population. From this perspective, the revolution may only have allowed those who were privileged by the structures of power and wealth in Tunisia to reassert their privileges and thus 'regain their rights', once again excluding from consideration those who had once joined with them in common cause. If the republic is to survive, not as the instrument of a small coterie of the rich and powerful, but as a shared asset of all its citizens, there should be no sense of permanent exclusion on the basis of income, region, class or age. Youth unemployment, regional under-development and the degradation of public services are all corrosive of the minimal solidarities of a shared political life. It is the visibility of this process in the urban fabric, as well as in the studied invisibility of the provinces, that have continued to fuel demands that the wider questions of property, public education, healthcare and police repression should be addressed. It was for this reason that the group Zwewla changed the slogan that had become so well known in the Arab uprisings – *Al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam* (The people want to bring down the regime) – to read in their graffiti *Al-sha'b yurid haqq al-zwali* (The people want the right of the poor). When they sprayed this up in the streets of Gabès, they found themselves arrested and prosecuted, ironically enough, for 'wilful harm to public property'.[41]

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[41] Interview with Badr Baabou (co-founder of Zwewla), Tunis, April 2014.

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The cover image is a wall painting of Mohamed Hanchi, a 19-year-old from the Hafsia quarter of the Tunis Medina. He was killed in the street clashes between demonstrators and the police in Tunis on 25 February 2011 that precipitated the downfall of Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi (former minister under the deposed President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali).

His image was painted on a wall in the Hafsia quarter of the Medina by the late French-Algerian artist Zoo Project (Bilal Berreni). It was part of his commemorative work 'Martyrs' in which he created life-size portraits of those who had been killed in the Tunisian revolution, placing them throughout public spaces in Tunis because, as their friends had told him, 'they mustn't disappear – to forget them would be to kill them twice over'.