BEN ALI'S TUNISIA

INTERNECINE STRUGGLES AND THE RISE OF CONTENTION IN A PARTY-STATE, 1987–2011



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ABSTRACT

The 2010–11 Arab Spring caught scholars and regional experts, who had long been invested in explaining the apparent stability of regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, completely off guard. To account for the speed and suddenness with which several authoritarian regimes collapsed, many such scholars have since focused their research on the popular revolts and on people's calls for dignity, freedom, and democratic politics. Yet the fall of dictatorships, some of which were considered amongst the world's most stable, may stem at least as much from factors internal to these regimes themselves. My doctoral thesis indeed suggests that internal grievances, power struggles, and the rise of dissent and contention within regime ranks were key reasons behind the collapse of these dictatorships. It argues that the political and economic marginalisation of the dictators' own constituencies – often a decades-long process – is a critical factor behind their downfall. My dissertation focuses on the regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, from 1987 when he took power until he was ousted in 2011. It analyses the role of the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party in his quest for dominance. I show that during Ben Ali's initial consolidation of power he widened the structures of the RCD to enlarge his support base, later ruling through a narrower core to embark upon increasingly personalised politics. In the 2000s Ben Ali's succession became a critical topic and some of his relatives integrated into the RCD in hope of preparing for a successor from within the family, a trend which marginalised many longtime activists and led them increasingly to defy the ruling clique. When mass protests erupted in December 2010 these sidelined sections within the RCD decided to display their discontent in the open. Those I call 'party losers' became dissenters,

and their political contention took various forms: the rank and file typically joined the protest movement, whereas midlevel officials and some senior leaders engaged in passive acts of resistance. Their political contention divided the party – the President's most important support base – and drove even loyal activists underground, thus depriving the party of its capacity to stage counter-mobilisations and displaying publicly the fragmentation of the regime. This provided a political opening for sections within the elite to move against Ben Ali. Indeed, contrary to the commonly accepted narrative that Ben Ali 'fled' Tunisia because of the mass protests, I show that he was ousted following a secret coup d'état from within his own regime, which occurred amidst the demonstrations.

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

For colloquial Tunisian Arabic, I have opted for French-based transliterations, which are most commonly used by Tunisians themselves, in order to reflect the local variations in language. For example, the Arabic letter ش is transliterated as 'ch' rather than 'sh'. The names of well-known groups, movements, names, and places mirror general use so that they are more easily recognisable. For sources derived from Modern Standard Arabic, I use a simplified version of the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. In quotations I have kept the transliterations used in the original documents.

ABBREVIATIONS

ATCE	Tunisian Agency for External Communication
BTS	Tunisian Bank of Solidarity
CPR	Congress of the Republic
CREDIF	Centre for Research, Studies, Documentation, and Information on the Woman
ENA	National School of Administration
EUR	Euro (currency)
FF	French franc
FNE	National Employment Fund
FNS	National Solidarity Fund
GPC	General People's Congress (Yemen)
LTDH	Tunisian Human Rights League
MDS	Socialist Democratic Movement
MTI	Islamic Tendency Movement
NDP	National Democratic Party (Egypt)
PDP	Progressive Democratic Party
PSD	Socialist Destourian Party
RCD	Constitutional Democratic Rally
RTF	Rally of the Tunisians in France
TND	Tunisian dinar
UDU	Unionist Democratic Union
UGET	General Union of Tunisian Students
UGTE	General Tunisian Union of Students
UGTT	Tunisian General Labour Union
UNFT	National Union of Tunisian Women
USD	United States dollar
UTICA	Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade, and Handicraft

‘WHO’S WHO?’ IN BEN ALI’S REGIME

Abdallah, Abdelwahab: longtime Ben Ali adviser and Palace associate; a previous Foreign Affairs Minister and Information Minister; from Monastir.

Abidi, Samir: appointed Communications Minister in December 2010; previously Minister for Youth and Sports. From Gafsa.

Ammar, Habib: military colonel and co-conspirator in the 7 November 1987 coup against Bourguiba, who headed the National Guard; longtime friend of Ben Ali from Sousse, but was marginalised shortly after his takeover of power.

Baccouche, Hedi: co-conspirator in Ben Ali’s 7 November 1987 coup; Prime Minister from November 1987 to September 1989; Secretary General of the PSD/RCD from November 1987 to September 1989; Director of the PSD from March 1984 to April 1987; from Hammam Sousse.

Ben Ali, Cyrine: Ben Ali’s youngest daughter from his first marriage. Married Marouane Mabrouk.

Ben Ali, Dorsaf: Ben Ali’s middle daughter from his first marriage. Married Slim Chiboub.

Ben Ali, Ghazoua: Ben Ali’s eldest daughter from his first marriage. Married Slim Zarrouk.

Ben Ali, Leila: formerly Leila Trabelsi. Ben Ali’s second wife; married in 1992. From Tunis.

Ben Ali, Mohamed: Ben Ali’s only son; from his second marriage, to Leila. Born in 2005.

Ben Ali, Nesrine: Ben Ali’s eldest daughter with Leila. Born out of wedlock. Married Sakher el-Materi.

Ben Dhia, Abdelaziz: longtime Ben Ali adviser; RCD Secretary General between June 1996 and November 1999 and Director of the PSD between April 1987 and September 1987; held various ministerial posts. From Moknine, Mahdia governorate.

Ben Miled, Mounir: prominent businessman and longtime RCD Central Committee member.

Chaabane, Sadok: Ben Ali adviser; in February 1991 appointed Secretary of State to the Prime Minister and in June 1991 nominated as first presidential adviser on human rights. From Sfax.

Chaouch, Ali: RCD Secretary General from December 2000 to August 2005; headed various ministries, including the Interior Ministry between October 1997 and November 1999; from Bou Arada, Siliana governorate.

Cheikhrouhou, Mahmoud: Ben Ali's personal pilot; flew him to Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011.

Chettaoui, Nabil: head of Tunisair at the time of the uprisings; responsible for Ben Ali's presidential plane.

Chiboub, Afif: Brother-in-law of Dorsaf, Ben Ali's daughter from his first marriage.

Chiboub, Slim: Ben Ali's son-in-law, married to Dorsaf, Ben Ali's daughter from his first marriage.

Djilani, Hedi: longtime head of the UTICA employers' union. Related to Ben Ali through his daughter's marriage to Belhassen Trabelsi.

Dkhil, Rafaa: Trabelsi associate and business partner from Bizerte. RCD Central Committee member.

Eltaief, Kamel: businessman and longtime Ben Ali associate; in February 2002 sentenced to prison after a fallout with the presidential family. From Hammam Sousse.

Essebsi, Beji Caid: longtime RCD Central Committee member, head of parliament in the 1990s; Foreign Affairs Minister under Bourguiba. Elected President of Tunisia in 2014. From Tunis.

Ghannouchi, Mohamed: Prime Minister between November 1999 and February 2011, and a former Finance Minister. From Sousse.

Ghariani, Mohamed: RCD Secretary General between September 2008 and March 2011; previously ambassador to the United Kingdom; headed the RCD student branch. From Kairouan.

Grira, Ridha: Defence Minister at the time of the uprisings. A former State Property and Land Affairs Minister. From Sousse.

Gueddich, Mohamed: longtime Ben Ali Palace associate and his personal doctor. From Hammamet.

Jegham, Mohamed: head of the Presidential Cabinet from January 1997 until November 1999; occupied various ministries, including the Defence and Interior ministries. From Hammam Sousse.

Kallel, Abdellah: close Ben Ali adviser who occupied the Interior Ministry, the Defence Ministry, and the Justice Ministry, among other posts. From Sfax.

Karoui, Hamed: Director of the PSD/RCD from October 1987 to August 1988, then Prime Minister from September 1989 to November 1999. From Sousse.

Kefi, Naima: first wife of Ben Ali; divorced in 1988.

Mabrouk, Marouane: Ben Ali's son-in-law; married to Cyrine, Ben Ali's daughter from his first marriage.

Materi, Sakher, el-: Ben Ali's son-in-law; married to Nesrine, Ben Ali's daughter with Leila.

Mdhafer, Zouhair: created and later headed the RCD Centre for Studies and Training. A former State Property and Land Affairs Minister.

Mebazza, Fouad: leading RCD figure and head of parliament from October 1997 until 15 January 2011, when he became interim President of Tunisia. Occupied various ministerial posts. Born in Tunis.

Mhenni, Hedi: RCD Secretary General between August 2005 and September 2008; appointed Interior Minister in April 2002 and Defence Minister in November 2004. From Sayada, Monastir governorate.

Mohsen, Abbes: RCD Central Committee member between 2008 and 2011; mayor of Tunis from 2000 to 2010; in 1988 nominated Director of Protocol of the President; subsequently worked in the Interior Ministry. From Tunis.

Morjane, Kamel: Foreign Affairs Minister from January 2010 to January 2011; Defence Minister from August 2005 to January 2010; previously worked at the United Nations; a distant relative of Ben Ali from Hammam Sousse.

Moussi, Abir: lawyer and Vice-President of the RCD Coordination Committee at the time of the uprisings; charged with legally defending the party and challenged its dissolution.

Neffati, Chedli: RCD Secretary General between February 1991 and June 1996; headed various ministries, including the Interior Ministry, with a previous career as governor. From Gabes.

Nasfi, Hassouna: Secretary General of the RCD student wing between 2000 and 2003. From Gabes.

Rouissi, Moncer: adviser to Ben Ali when he first took power; Director of his 1989 presidential campaign. Occupied various ministerial posts and was ambassador to France between September 2003 and May 2005. From Degache, Tozeur governorate.

Saada, Ryadh: Director of the RCD Centre for Studies and Training between 1995 and 2008.

Seriati, Ali: Ben Ali's key security chief and head of the presidential guard at the time of the uprisings. On 14 January 2011 convinced Ben Ali to board the plane for Saudi Arabia.

Tarhouni, Samir: commander of the Antiterrorism Brigade at the time of the uprisings. On 14 January 2011 left for the airport to arrest the Trabelsis.

Trabelsi, Belhassen: Leila Ben Ali's favourite brother. Became an economic heavyweight. Headed Karthago Airlines. From Tunis.

Trabelsi, Imed: Leila Ben Ali's favourite nephew. Elected mayor of La Goulette in 2010.

Zarrouk, Naziha: a previous RCD Vice-Secretary General, ambassador to Lebanon (2003–2005), and Minister for Women and Family Affairs. From Jemmal, Monastir governorate.

Zarrouk, Slim: Ben Ali's son-in-law. Married to Ghazoua, Ben Ali's daughter from his first marriage.

Zenaidi, Mondher: member of the RCD Central Committee and Political Bureau. Occupied various ministerial posts, including Transport, Commerce, Tourism, and Public Health; associate of Belhassen Trabelsi from Tunis.

Zouari, Abderrahim: RCD Secretary General between August 1988 and February 1991 and between November 1999 and December 2000; held several ministerial posts, including Foreign Affairs. Prior career as a governor. From Dahmani, Kef governorate.


TUNISIA
Mediterranean Sea
Menzel Bourguiba
Bizerte
Strait of Sicily
Gulf of Tunis
Tabarka
L'Ariana
Beja
TUNIS
Ben Arous
Jendouba
Nabeul
Zaghouan
Golfe de Hammamet
Le Kef
Siliana
Sousse
Monastir
Kairouan
Thala
Mahdia
El Djem
Kasserine
Mediterranean Sea
Sidi Bou Zid
ALGERIA
Sfax
ILES KERKENNAH
Gafsa
Gulf of Gabes
Nefta
Tozeur
El Hamma
Gabes
Kebili
Matmata
Medenine
Tataouine
Remada
El Borma
LIBYA
International Boundary
Governorate Boundary
National Capital
Governorate Capital
Other Cities

1. INTRODUCTION

> [On 13 January 2011] a spontaneous demonstration erupted here [in Gafsa]. Adil Akmi, a fellow activist of the [Constitutional Democratic Rally party], walked in it holding a placard with the slogan 'Tunisia is free, free Tunisia' and 'the Rally needs to leave'. When I saw him I started crying.[1]
>
> Monji Salem, former head of RCD public sector cells in Gafsa

On 13 January 2011 massive protests swept throughout Tunisia. Demonstrators chanting 'free Tunisia' demanded the downfall of the regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the longtime dictator who had ruled the country since 1987. The unrest had been sparked a month earlier, on 17 December 2010, when a street vendor from the impoverished southern region of Sidi Bouzid, Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire after the police harassed him and confiscated his wares. Subsequently protests erupted in the south; demonstrations gradually spread to other regions until they came to engulf the entire country and even triggered similar protest movements in other Middle East and North African states, in what would become known commonly as the 'Arab Spring'. Amidst the turmoil, on 14 January 2011, Ben Ali left Tunisia for Saudi Arabia and an interim government led by a political veteran, Beji Caid Essebsi, took over power. Essebsi disbanded Ben Ali's ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD or 'Rally'), and organised the country's first free and fair elections, which paved the way for a nascent democracy.

[1] Interview with Monji Salem, Gafsa, 22 June 2016.

A puzzling phenomenon during the 2010–11 uprisings was the RCD's seeming lack of reaction to the mass protests. In 2010, the party had over a million members; that is, about 10% of Tunisia's 10.6 million-strong population. However, not only were there almost no attempts by RCD followers to organise counter-demonstrations in favour of Ben Ali; some of its activists even joined the crowds against the President, who was also the head of the ruling party. The account of the above-quoted Monji Salem, an RCD follower in his 70s, is illustrative in this respect. Salem had been a member of the ruling party since his childhood and, at the time of the uprisings, headed the cells of RCD activists who worked in the public sector in the southern governorate of Gafsa. But despite his own personal commitment to the ruling party, Salem said he did not engage in any pro-regime activism at the time of the protests. What is more, he recounted that he had witnessed several RCD activists participate in the demonstrations against Ben Ali. They included Adil Akmi, a well-known party follower and journalist of the newspaper *Al-Chourouk*, who had hitherto played an important role in spreading pro-Ben Ali news in Gafsa. During the uprisings Akmi joined the protest movement, even holding a placard demanding the fall of Ben Ali and the end of the ruling party – of which he himself was a leading member!

Akmi was no exception: party activists throughout Tunisia were seen in the protests, though to varying degrees, sometimes chanting with the crowd 'dégage RCD!' ['RCD get out!'] – one of the main slogans of the uprisings.[2] Their participation was deeply unsettling for other party activists, such as Salem, who supported the regime until the end and feared for the future of the ruling party; but despite their indignation, these figures seemed to have done little to stop RCD followers from joining the protest movement or to counter their activism in other ways, such as by organising rallies in favour of Ben Ali and the ruling party. It is in this light that this thesis seeks to answer the following questions: why did the RCD fail to

[2] Chapter 5 elaborates on the RCD in the 2010–11 protest movement in greater detail.

counter-mobilise in the face of the mass protests? Why did some party activists take to the street, in seeming contradiction to their self-interest, and what was their weight in the demonstrations? What were their sources of indignation, both short- and long-term? What role, if any, did the RCD play in the downfall of the Ben Ali regime? And, more generally speaking, how can we conceive of and explain internal contention within ruling parties, during times both of stability and of change?

Institutional change and contention

This thesis draws upon recent studies of political institutions and of contentious politics to answer these questions. On the face of it these two bodies of literature may appear incompatible, and they have often been dealt with separately. However, when brought together, they are uniquely suited to develop new insights into the mechanisms and agents of change and contention within ruling parties in authoritarian regimes – during stable times but also during periods of vast political transformations. Theda Skocpol's pioneering work on revolutions has highlighted the role of elite divisions in facilitating the fall of long-standing regimes.[3] While building on many of her insights, this thesis argues that the fluid and sometimes counterintuitive and contradictory internal dynamics of authoritarianism can lead to the rise of internecine dissent, contention, and regime breakdown. The subsequent sections will draw up a tentative theoretical frame that will guide this thesis.

Traditionally, scholars of institutions, such as parties, have been invested mainly in explaining their creation and apparent longevity and stability, as well as the roles of key actors, the environment, and state therein.[4] Much of their work has been based on the

[3] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
[4] Key works include Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996; Angelo Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

premise that 'Things that are institutionalized tend to be relatively inert, that is, they resist efforts at change'.[5] By contrast, social movement theory and studies of contentious politics have taken the lead in laying out the mechanisms through which established institutions can be disrupted or even broken down. Indeed, social movements have been framed mainly as phenomena directed *against* the state and other established institutions.[6] This is despite scholars recognising the close interlinkages between institutions, social movements, and contention. For example, protest movements can result in the reinforcement of key institutions, such as the state and military, as powerbrokers seek to shield themselves from contenders.[7] Moreover, ruling parties in authoritarian states often emerge out of nationalist movements that engaged in contentious politics against colonial powers, and, according to Samuel Huntington, this fierce struggle at the time of their inception accounts for much of their later stability.[8] In the case of Tunisia, the RCD has its roots in the Neo Destour, a mass movement created by Habib Bourguiba in 1934 to fight the French Protectorate that was established over the country. The Neo Destour emerged out of a split from the more elitist Destour ['Constitution'] Party, which was launched in 1920 by Abdelaziz Thaalbi – the name 'Destour' alluding to Tunisia's short-lived Constitution of 1861. Under the leadership of Bourguiba the Neo Destour paved the way for independence in 1957.

While scholars have focused on the seeming stability and continuity of institutions, such as Tunisia's Destour – typically understood as encompassing its successive political

[5] Walter W. Powell, 'Expanding the Scope of Institutional Analysis', in Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio (eds.), *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 145.
[6] For example, Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982; Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly, *How Social Movements Matter*, Minneapolis, MN: The Regents of the University of Minnesota, 1999.
[7] Compare Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
[8] Samuel Huntington, 'Social and Institutional Dynamics of One-Party Systems', in Samuel Huntington and Clement H. Moore (eds.), *Authoritarian Politics and Modern Society*, London: Basic Books, 1970, pp. 12–13.

manifestations – they have naturally also tackled the question of institutional change. Historical institutionalists frequently account for their transformations through the concept of the critical juncture – that is, a period of high uncertainty and contingency that bestows agency upon key actors, whose leverage is otherwise constrained by the institutional structure.[9] For example, building on Alexis de Tocqueville's ground-breaking work on the internal factors underlying the French Revolution,[10] Ivan Ermakoff analysed the impact of choices made by several individuals on the French Parliament's 4 August 1789 decision to abolish feudalism in France. Ermakoff convincingly established that deputies' move that day to terminate feudalism was not predetermined or inevitable, but highly contingent upon a series of decisions made by key actors.[11] Works such as Ermakoff's have been paramount in shedding light on episodes of vast institutional change or even breakdown, and can provide useful comparative insights for scrutinising key moments in the life of the RCD, such as its inception in 1987, when Ben Ali took over power, or its breakdown and dissolution in 2010–11.

However, critical junctures are most useful to explain rare or exceptional events, such as institutional inception or collapse – though scholars have pointed out that critical junctures do not necessarily lead to transformation but can also reinstall the old order.[12] They are typically framed as emerging out of exogenous changes to the environment, which empower certain institutional actors. They form part of 'a discontinuous model of change [within historic institutionalism] in which enduring pathways are periodically punctured by

[9] Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, 'The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism', *World Politics*, 2007, 59, pp. 341–369.
[10] Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1857.
[11] Ivan Ermakoff, 'The Structure of Contingency', *American Journal of Sociology*, 121, 1, 2015, pp. 64–125.
[12] Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, 'The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism', *World Politics*, 59, 2007, pp. 341–369.

moments of agency and choice'.[13] Once institutions have taken a certain path 'they tend to stick to it rather than jump to another one'[14]. Yet this approach fails to account for sources of change endogenous to institutions – be they of evolutionary or revolutionary nature – and how they may relate to and interact with exogenous transformative processes.

To address these shortcomings, some scholars have sought to combine insights from the study of institutions with that of social movements and contentious politics. They include institutionalists James Mahoney, Kathleen Thelen, and John Campbell, as well as leading theorists of social movements and contentious politics Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, and Neil Fligstein. This thesis builds on many of their discussions and deliberations, but also develops some of them further to account for the focus on the RCD. All of these scholars agree that even during times of stability, a lot is going on within institutions. Indeed, institutions may undergo vast internal change only to keep their overall stability. As Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam put it: 'even under generally stable conditions, actors are engaged in a constant set of adjustments that introduce incremental change into constructed social worlds… . To a degree, change is always going on'.[15] More inconspicuous internecine transformations, for their part, may lay the groundwork for more abrupt and revolutionary change in later periods.

Much of this body of literature has focused on understanding the mechanisms and actors behind institutional change. Scholars generally distinguish between transformative processes during settled times on the one hand and, on the other, periods of high uncertainty and

[13] James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, 'A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change', in James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (eds.), *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 7.
[14] John L. Campbell, *Institutional Change and Globalization*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 13.
[15] Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 7.

contingency that can give way to vaster institutional alterations or even breakdown.[16] Their research is based on a power-distributional approach, which presupposes that 'institutions are fraught with tensions because they inevitably raise resource considerations…formal institutions are specifically intended to distribute resources to particular kinds of actors and not to others'.[17] Indeed, institutions are home to incumbents, who hold vast distributional powers, and challengers or 'institutional losers',[18] who occupy less privileged positions.[19] When trying to understand institutional change the losers take central stage, because they have an interest in altering the power structures to their advantage. At the same time, transformative processes can only be understood against incumbents' continuous efforts to maintain stability, protect their interests, and accumulate even greater wealth. This dialectic relationship between incumbents and challengers is at the centre of this thesis as it seeks to shed light on internecine contentions within the RCD. How Ben Ali and his ruling clique tried to enforce control within the RCD to dominate politics and the ways in which their endeavours might have been challenged from inside the ruling party are topics requiring critical investigation.

During periods of stability shifts in the balance of power within an institution are key sources of change and contention. They often manifest themselves through alterations in the makeup and weight of institutional factions or coalitions, for example, owing to incumbents' promotion of one group over another or the marginalisation of previously powerful actors. They can also be driven through changing relations to other institutions – in the case of ruling parties, amongst others, through shifting ties to the state administration, powerful

[16] For example, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 9.
[17] James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, 'A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change', in James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (eds.), *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 8.
[18] Ibid., p. 22.
[19] Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 13.

unions, associations, or the Presidential Palace. In the case of Tunisia, for example, the Neo Destour harboured close relations to the country's main and influential labour union, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), and other national organisations at the time of its struggle against French Protectorate officials; however, once independence was established and Bourguiba became President, relations grew more conflictual as he cracked down on influential union activists. Labour unionists even became powerful political opponents: amongst other activities, they were involved in organising countrywide protests against price spikes for basic commodities in 1978 and again in 1984 during the so-called 'Bread Riots', which were brutally suppressed by the regime. In part to stem rising opposition activism, Bourguiba reinforced the party's ties to the state administration and public-sector companies. While Ben Ali largely continued this approach, he also sought to coopt the UGTT and integrated its activists into the party. The Destour's increasingly close links to the state and national unions unsettled many historic party activists who feared that they might lose relevance (Chapters 2–3). Changes in a party's ties to other groups and institutions affect internal power relations and can be an important source of contention.

Even during generally settled times both incumbents and challengers always hope to outflank opponents, marginally improve their position and jockey for advantage. Their leverage to do so is constrained by an institution's many formal and informal rules and customs, which guide the allocation of promotions and other resources – sometimes patronage and rents – but also shape more symbolic practices, such as ideology. Indeed, the creation of an identity and culture within an institution such as the RCD can be a key instrument for domination as powerbrokers typically promote ideas that best suit their interests. Under Bourguiba, the Neo Destour – which was renamed the Socialist Destourian Party (PSD) in 1964 to reflect a turn towards state-led economic planning at the time – internalised a paternalistic vision of power that bolstered his claim for leadership; it depicted

Bourguiba as the 'father' of the nation, who was in advance of society and best equipped to decide upon Tunisia's political and economic future.[20] These were ideological tools that were later appropriated by Ben Ali to bolster his dominance (Chapter 2).[21] Moreover, ideology is an important unifying and mobilising force, especially for parties that emerged out of nationalist movements against colonial powers, which draw upon deep bonds of comradeship forged during battle. It is, in part, through understanding the identity and the many formal and informal rules and customs of an institution that actors try to bend them to their advantage, to further their own interests. Adam Sheingate has shown that institutional rules, such as party statutes, are not only a constraint but often are ambiguous and subject to interpretation, which provides opportunities for agency.[22] Moreover, some institutional actors have the power to introduce new rules and ideas or to alter existing ones, though such leverage is typically limited to the incumbents.[23] Change can also emerge 'out of the neglect of an institution…the failure to adapt and update an institution so as to maintain its traditional impact in a changed environment', a process that is generally associated with institutional drift or decay.[24]

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[20] Compare Clement H. Moore, 'The Single Party as Source of Legitimacy', in Samuel Huntington and Clement H. Moore (eds.), *Authoritarian Politics and Modern Society*, London: Basic Books, 1970, p. 49; Clement H. Moore*, Tunisia Since Independence: The Dynamics of One-Party Government*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965.

[21] Compare Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, Cambridge: Polity, 2011.

[22] Adam Sheingate, 'Rethinking Rules: Creativity and Constraint in the U.S. House of Representatives', in James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (eds.), *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 168–203; see also Marc Schneiberg and Michael Lounsbury, 'Social Movements and Institutional Analysis', in Royston Greenwood, Christine Olivier, Kerstin Sahlin, and Roy Suddaby (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, London: Sage Publications, 2008, p. 656.

[23] James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, 'A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change', in James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (eds.), *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 15–16; John L. Campbell, *Institutional Change and Globalization*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 69.

[24] James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, 'A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change', in James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (eds.), *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 19.

Yet actors within an institution do not necessarily comply with the established rules and practices when they seek to instigate change, not even during settled times. In an authoritarian context most ways of overtly contesting incumbents are risky, including through strikes and protests, which can result in costly penalties, torture, and jail. Contention therefore typically takes more inconspicuous and secretive forms, such as actors writing anonymous dissident statements, clandestinely manoeuvring against the powerbrokers, criticising parts of the dominant ideology, at least in private or symbolically[25], or withdrawing from aspects of the institution's activism or work. In isolated cases, contention can manifest itself through more active forms of revolt, such as when actors refuse to follow a superior's orders or openly criticise the incumbents; these are rare, however, given the costs associated with them, especially during settled times.

Internecine contention does not necessarily trigger change. Indeed, it can even result in institutional reinforcement, repression, and control, especially in the short term, as incumbents seek to immunise themselves from their challengers. However, it can pave the way for wider transformations during periods of high uncertainty that are associated with 'contentious politics', which can broadly be defined as episodic, 'collective political struggle'.[26] When investigating the role of established institutions in contentious politics, most academics discuss them solely as the targets of movements seeking to engender change.[27] This is true even for those scholars who recognise that institutions can engage upon political struggles themselves. For example, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly state they seek to 'challenge the boundary between institutionalized and

[25] For a discussion of symbolic forms of protest and resistance, see Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 256–319; Charles Tripp, 'The Art of Resistance in the Middle East', *Asian Affairs*, 2012, 43, 3, pp. 393–409.
[26] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 5.
[27] In addition to the literature cited earlier, see Neil Ketchley, *Egypt in a Time of Revolution: Contentious Politics and the Arab Spring*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

noninstitutionalized politics'.[28] They point to the role of the United States House of Representatives in the impeachment process against former President Richard Nixon to illustrate that contentious politics can also occur 'within legally prescribed, officially recognized processes'.[29] However, the overwhelming amount of their work is devoted to social movements. The role of institutions such as ruling parties in contentious politics has been understudied, both theoretically and empirically.

Yet state institutions were a driving force behind some of the most transformative political events in recent history: beyond the earlier example of the impact of key parliamentary decisions on the French Revolution, internecine factors played an important role in the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Valerie Bunce has argued that 'the very institutions that had defined [socialist] systems and that were, presumably, to defend them as well, ended up functioning over time to subvert both the regime and the state'.[30] Most of her research has looked at the long-term flaws in the socialist institutional setup and how they contributed to the crumbling of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, which culminated in its formal dissolution in 1991. Moreover, focusing on the dynamics of nationalist mobilisation at that time, Mark Beissinger found that 'the tide [of protests] created enormous divisions within Soviet institutions…and the lines of battle frequently crossed the state-society divide'.[31] Communist activists sometimes took a role in the protest movement. For example, during a major demonstration on 25 February 1990 in Moscow against the political dominance of the Communist Party, 22% of those who took to the streets themselves hailed from the

[28] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 6.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 2.
[31] Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 97.

Communist Party.[32] In Azerbaijan, the First Secretary of the Communist Party further affirmed that some officials in his country 'turned out themselves to be organizers of disorders'.[33] By contrast, in Latvia, one observer said that the Communist Party there went mostly 'underground' rather than taking any role in the demonstrations.[34] In East Germany, the party 'began to unravel and disintegrate',[35] and frictions between rival factions burst out in the open. Some grassroots activists charged that their leaders were 'dogmatic, conservative, and incapable of change', while senior officials insisted that 'a growing number of party members…must be excluded from the party because they stood against the general line of the party, negated the success of the socialist state, and [damaged] the party'.[36] Mary Elise Sarotte, moreover, found that the opening of the Berlin Wall was not simply an inevitable response to the protest movement, but an 'accident' triggered by a series of decisions of disgruntled Stasi officers and party activists; however, once taken, this step could not be reversed.[37]

From party losers to dissenters

Scholars typically evoke the prism of 'defection' when trying to explain why ruling party activists in authoritarian regimes might turn against their own powerbrokers in moments of incertitude and crises.[38] It suggests that party followers leave their party activism behind,

[32] Ibid., p. 98.
[33] Quoted in Ibid., p. 97.
[34] Quoted in Ibid., p. 98.
[35] Rasma Karklins and Roger Petersen, 'Decision Calculus of Protesters and Regimes: Eastern Europe 1989', *The Journal of Politics,* 1993, 55, 3, p. 607.
[36] Steven Pfaff, *Exit-Voice Dynamics and the Collapse of East Germany: The Crisis of Leninism and the Revolution of 1989*, London: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 57.
[37] Mary Elise Sarotte, *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall*, New York: Basic Books, 2014.
[38] For example, Rasma Karklins and Roger Petersen, 'Decision Calculus of Protesters and Regimes: Eastern Europe 1989', *The Journal of Politics*, 2013, 55, 3, p. 589; see also Steven Pfaff's discussion about the 'defection' of midlevel officials in East Germany's Socialist Unity Party (Steven Pfaff, *Exit-Voice Dynamics and the Collapse of East Germany: The Crisis of Leninism and the Revolution of 1989*, London: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 180), and Mark R. Beissinger's study of communist leaders' 'defection' in Ukraine as they came to advocate for sovereignty and independence (Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 97).

change their allegiance and join the political opposition to challenge the incumbents in state and party. However, this perspective fails to take into account that party followers may have multiple identities; indeed, 'any particular person often plays parts within more than one political actor, sometimes participating as a worker, sometimes as member of a religious congregation, and so on'.[39] Party activists do not necessarily leave their identity – let's say, as Destourians or communists – behind when they challenge their leaders. What is more, it is feasible that they actually turn against them in the name of their party identity, such as when they believe that their chiefs no longer represent the masses or the interests of their specific party faction. In this thesis I argue that party losers, that is, those activists who occupy less privileged positions and are marginalised, become dissenters in moments of crisis and change. Their position as party losers owes to their sidelining. As such, party losers are distinct from those many card-carrying members who have little influence but never cared to invest in the RCD in the first place. They are also at odds with dedicated loyalists, who, no matter their rank, blindly follow the orders of key post incumbents, even during moments of crisis. The internecine rebellion in which party losers are engaged can be understood only through a careful analysis of the roots of their marginalisation, alongside their repertoires of contention, during times both of stability and of change, and a consideration of how these might differ from those of non-institutional challengers.

Every institution has losers, though to varying degrees, and their position as such in parties can owe to a range of reasons, such as socioeconomic status, regional, ethnic, or family clan affiliations, alterations in a party's ties to other institutions and groups, or a shift in its leadership. A party's structural set-up can also create losers, such as when specific posts do not entail any opportunities for upward advancement. In addition, the mode of political

[39] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 12.

domination shapes a party's marginalisation structures: when powerbrokers depend on party cooperation, such as was the case with Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party, they tend to pour more resources into the party to please its followers; when compliance is enforced through party subordination – a practice common amongst leaders who personalise power and rule through a narrower base – the reverse is true. Even though institutional losers always seek to marginally improve their positions, their potential for contention and dissent can easily be overlooked. This is because most of the time they simply follow the institutional rules and customs, even when they try to instigate change. During times of stability, party losers can even appear as fervent supporters of the system and openly praise it, simply because they believe that such public approbation might best serve their interests. This is why authoritarian institutions tend to appear stable from the outside, even when they are inherently fragile. Periods of party instability or breakdown can only be understood through a careful analysis of the many seeds of internecine grievances and dissent, which may have been planted years or even decades earlier.

While earlier sections have discussed the ways in which party losers might try to instigate change during generally stable times, their repertoire of contention differs during episodes of intense political upheaval and change, such as during the disintegration of the Soviet Union or the Arab Spring protest movement. During such periods of turmoil, the political opportunity structure changes; the threat of punishment for opposition activism decreases as the protest movement grows in size, so open dissent becomes less costly: institutional losers become dissenters. Charles Tilly has developed a detailed repertoire of contention for movements that are directed against established institutions, such as authoritarian regimes,[40] but internecine challengers' mechanisms for dissent differ significantly. Internecine

[40] Charles Tilly defines repertoires of contention as the 'whole set of means (a group) has for making claims of different types on different individuals'. See, for details, Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 2.

challengers typically err on the conservative side of the protest movement and display their discontent in less conspicuous ways. Therefore this thesis tentatively proposes what may be called a 'repertoire of internecine contention': (1) institutional losers can engage in symbolic protest, passive resistance, and other forms of 'silent protest'; (2) they can secretly support the opposition and form coalitions with them – practices most visible amongst marginalised officials; (3) they can join the protest movement alongside other opposition forces, a tendency most common among the rank and file; (4) party followers may also choose to take the opportunity of political upheaval to try to enact change from within – however, this option is available only to figures with at least some institutional leverage; (5) lastly, some activists may decide to defect from the party. This move is common amongst card-carrying members who were never much invested in the party, but it can also result when activists and officials experience traumatic events during the upheaval, such as the death of a loved one.

Naturally party dissenters may switch from one strategy to another when they seek to contest against their leaders. It is important to note that their contentious intentions do not necessarily reflect the actual outcome of the upheaval.[41] For example, in the context of the disintegration of the Soviet Union or the Arab Spring, some party activists may have taken to the streets because they were dissatisfied with their leadership, and because they hoped to instigate political renewal and elevate their own positions within the regime. Many sought outcomes other than the collapse of the regime, and did not necessarily prefer democracy to authoritarian politics. Party followers commonly wish to retain key institutions of the state and party. However, regime breakdown 'is a process full of highly contingent and subjective

[41] Charles Tilly has highlighted the importance of distinguishing revolutionary intentions from outcomes. See, for details, Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1978, pp. 189–222.

factors, wherein beliefs cause events and events change beliefs',[42] and, as such, it cannot be predicted. Regime breakdown – though often not the desired outcome of party dissenters – is actually much more likely when internecine challengers emerge who can form alliances with the political opposition.

Party dissenters have the potential to undermine dominant power structures. They can cripple the confidence of loyal regime activists and their capacity to organise counter-protests. They can drive the ruling party underground, leaving it divided and inactive. While mounting protests serve to reassure dissenters and incite them to take to the streets, they equally 'de-assure' regime supporters.[43] Rasma Karklins and Roger Peterson suggest that as the regime comes increasingly under threat even loyal supporters begin to '[look] for signals when to defect'.[44] Their rising incertitude and the overall unpredictability of the situation elevates the agency of political challengers, who can try to steer events to their advantage. Regime collapse – be it through a coup, a revolution or a combination of both – is a fluid process driven by a series of decisions by key actors, often from within the regime. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted on the French February 1848 revolution: the 'victors were as astonished at their success as the losers at their defeat'[45] – an observation which certainly applies to many other processes of regime transformation and breakdown. They can be understood only through a careful analysis of internecine dynamics of contention, how they relate to external sources of dissent, and how both interact, possibly reinforce each other, and jointly gain momentum.

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[42] Stathis N. Kalyvas, 'The Decay and Breakdown of Communist One-Party Systems', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1999, 2, p. 335. See also Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009; Timur Kuran, 'Ethnic Norms and Their Transformation Through Reputational Cascades', *Journal of Legal Studies*, 1998, 27, pp. 623–659.
[43] Rasma Karklins and Roger Petersen, 'Decision Calculus of Protesters and Regimes: Eastern Europe 1989', *The Journal of Politics*, 1993, 55, 3, p. 589.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848*, edited by J. P. Taylor and A. P. Kerr, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1987, p. 62.

Wider contributions

Alongside its contribution to the study of internal change and contention within ruling parties in authoritarian regimes, this thesis seeks to add to several other bodies of literature within political science, authoritarian politics, and Middle East and North African studies. They include studies on the function of ruling institutions in dictatorships; succession politics in the Arab republics and authoritarian regimes more generally; the 2010–11 Tunisian uprisings and the Arab Spring.

1. Over the past two decades an increasing number of scholars of authoritarian regimes have scrutinised the institutions dictators use to rule and their effects on regime stability and longevity. They all agree that institutions – such as parties, legislatures, or the military – matter, and that they are distinctly correlated to a dictator's prospects for staying in power.[46] Most of their research is based on large quantitative studies that code regimes according to ideal types, such as dominant party, military, personalist, or a hybrid of them. Though their methodologies vary, all scholars agree that regimes with a single or dominant party tend to be amongst the most stable.[47] This has given rise to a series of studies seeking to explain why ruling parties are seemingly so useful in bolstering the power base of dictators. They point to a range of factors, such as the role of parties in fostering information flow between the grassroots and the elite, which can help dictators to become aware of popular grievances and address them before they lead to wider unrest. Large ruling parties also serve to

[46] For example, Barbara Geddes, 'What do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1999, 2, pp. 115–144; Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
[47] Ibid.

mobilise the masses,[48] which can be central in staging widespread support for the regime. In addition, some have a security branch to spy and report on the political opposition, though such activities are most often attributed to the police or the military.[49] Many scholars also believe that the prime function of ruling parties is to foster elite cohesion through the distribution of benefits and patronage. Jennifer Gandhi and Beatriz Magaloni say that ruling parties serve to coopt opposition activists as they are better off working with the regime than against it, which creates a more coherent ruling class.[50] This view is challenged by Milan Svolik, however, who stipulates that the main role of ruling parties is to reduce monitoring and commitment problems.[51]

By contrast to such deliberations about the 'primary function'[52] of ruling parties, this thesis suggests that the way in which ruling parties serve the interest of a dictator is continuously evolving and contested. It is closely related to the mode of domination leaders employ to stay in power and whether it is based on a wider ruling coalition or a narrower base and repressive politics; that is, whether the dictator depends on the party to stay in power or has firmly established his rule in his own right. The main function of a party can at times indeed be to coopt the opposition, especially during processes of authoritarian consolidation when dictators rely on a broader consensus to remain in power. However, this role can entirely disappear during other periods, such as when a dictator comes to defend his power base

[48] Beatriz Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli, 'Political Order and One-Party Rule', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2010, 13, pp. 123–143. Compare also Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols of Domination in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
[49] Barbara Geddes, 'Minimum-Winning Coalitions and Personalization in Authoritarian Regimes', Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 2–5 September 2004; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 25; Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 182.
[50] Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
[51] Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 88.
[52] Ibid.

primarily through coercion and repression. In addition, the source of authoritarian stability may not be at all the ruling party and its many functions, but actually owe instead to the dictator's weakening of the party,[53] such as by shifting the source of power to the presidency and personalising politics, reinforcing state structures over the party's, promoting 'technocrats' instead of party cadres, or opening up membership to almost everybody, hence compromising the resources that can be distributed amongst activists. For example, Vladimir Tismaneanu found that Nicolae Ceausescu marginalised the Romanian Communist Party as he embarked upon increasingly personalist rule.[54] In his article 'The Decline of the Party in Single-Party African States' Immanuel Wallerstein described a similar phenomenon, documenting cases where leaders developed strong personality cults.[55]

Bourguiba's PSD, too, progressively lost vigour. In the first decade after independence, the ruling party led an ambitious reform programme that promoted women's rights – enshrined in the 1956 Code of Personal Status – as well as a modern school curriculum and universal basic education.[56] Once key reforms were implemented, however, activists came to struggle to redefine the PSD's political priorities and raison d'être. This was particularly the case once it became apparent that the PSD's socialist experiment had only worsened the country's economic woes, which led to its discontinuation in 1969. The economic downturn, alongside Bourguiba's increasingly authoritarian politics – in 1975 he became constitutionally recognised as President for life – also invigorated the political opposition:

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[53] For a discussion of strong and weak ruling parties, see Samuel Huntington, 'Social and Institutional Dynamics of One-Party Systems', in Samuel Huntington and Clement H. Moore (eds.), *Authoritarian Politics and Modern Society*, London: Basic Books, 1970, p. 6.
[54] Vladimir Tismaneanu, 'Personal Power and Political Crisis in Romania', *Government and Opposition*, 1989, 24, 2, pp. 177–198.
[55] Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The Decline of the Party in Single-Party African States', in Joseph La Palombara and Myron Weiner (eds.), *Political Parties and Political Development*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966, pp. 201–214.
[56] Clement Henry Moore, *Tunisia Since Independence: The Dynamics of One-Party Government*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965; see also Lars Rudebeck, *Party and People: A Study of Political Change in Tunisia*, London: Hurst Publishers, 1967.

main challengers included the far left, often with links to the French Perspectivist movement, which was particularly active in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), which became a key player in the late 1970s and 1980s. Both leftists and Islamists drew wide support amongst young people, particularly at universities. In addition, in 1978 Ahmed Mestiri, a former Interior Minister, and certain other well-known PSD leaders defected from the ruling party to create the Socialist Democratic Movement (MDS). They were indignant over Bourguiba's increasingly autocratic and neopatrimonial style of rule,[57] which even led his wife, Wassila, to become an independent political broker. However, the PSD's fracturing – alongside an increasingly vocal opposition – did little to unsettle Bourguiba's power base. Under Ben Ali too the RCD and its functions constantly evolved, as did the sources of internal and external contestation, and it did not always constitute the main base of Ben Ali's power, though it was always an important source (Chapters 2-4). The longevity of single or dominant party regimes may owe to a combination of institutional and non-institutional factors, including a dictator's personalisation of power, and ruling parties may not always play the decisive role in ensuring regime stability.

2. A range of scholars have highlighted that the politics of succession pose a key threat to the stability of authoritarian regimes.[58] In contrast to the Arab monarchies, where executive

[57] The concept of neopatrimonial rule derives from Max Weber's study of different types of domination; he differentiates between, on the one hand, personalist or patrimonial rule and, on the other, sultanistic domination, which he calls an 'extreme case' of patrimonialism (Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, vol. 1, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, p. 231). Since then scholars have developed his concepts, using the notions of neopatrimonial or sultanistic rule to refer to a range of personalist dictatorships which rely on a combination of loyalty, coercion, and threats.

[58] Louis Cantori, 'Political Succession in the Middle East', *Middle East Policy,* 2002, 9, 3, pp. 105–123; Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist (eds.), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012; Anthony Billingsley, *Political Succession in the Arab World: Constitutions, Family Loyalties and Islam*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010.

succession is hereditary, in most republics constitutions formally stipulate how executive power can be gained or transferred. In the 2000s, succession became a pressing issue in almost all Arab republics, including Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father Hafiz as President after the latter passed away in 2000. Other leaders of Arab republics soon began to prepare family members as successors: in Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak began to groom his son, Gamal, for the presidency, and leaders in Libya and Yemen also lined up sons for highest office.[59] Roger Owen rightly observed that 'the choice of a family member, usually a son, [was] designed to produce a sense of security and predictability for important sections of the elite', but 'if mishandled or if it was simply allowed to go on too long, [it promoted] exactly the opposite: an atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty'.[60]

This thesis highlights the importance of ruling parties in succession politics. In countries with a single or dominant party, they have an important legitimation function, even if purely cosmetic, and they can help to pave the way for a smooth succession – provided party activists endorse the dictator's proposed candidate. If they prefer another candidate, or different party factions support different candidates, the ruling party can become a major source of political instability and contestation. For example, towards the end of Bourguiba's rule, various PSD factions came to compete over the succession; one favoured Bourguiba's son, Habib Bourguiba Junior; another supported Mohamed Mzali – Prime Minister and PSD Secretary General between 1980 and 1986; still another favoured Mohamed Sayah, a longtime party leader and adviser to the President; other party factions had again different

[59] Compare Virginie Collombier, 'Gamal Moubarak et le Parti National Démocratique ou la Stratégie du Désastre: Comment Ceux qui Prétendaient Préparer la Succession Présidentielle ont Précipité la Chute du Régime', *Outre-Terre*, 2011, 3, 9, pp. 335–336; Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 140–149.
[60] Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 139. See also Jason Brownlee, 'Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies', *World Politics*, 2007, 59, 4, pp. 595–628.

candidates in mind. Internal party divisions over the succession gave rise to a general sense of political insecurity and crisis, which further heightened in response to the President's mounting health issues: Bourguiba developed dementia, which led to an increasingly erratic ruling style, whereby he sometimes dismissed several ministers a day. A succession crisis also manifested itself towards the end of Ben Ali's rule as rival clans began to compete for the presidency and rumours about his health began to mount (Chapter 4).

This thesis spells out some of the principal ways in which dictators use ruling parties to prepare for a successor. The grooming typically entails a carefully orchestrated process of elite engineering as party activists who support the dictator's candidate are promoted to leading posts. Only in a second step does the candidate himself become a leading figure within the party – he typically comes to occupy posts that are central to the succession line. In Egypt, for example, Gamal Mubarak held the position of Vice-Secretary General of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) at the time of the uprisings. Over the years Gamal's supporters had come to swamp NDP structures – to the disgruntlement of many historic activists, who were progressively sidelined.[61] It is important to note that the marginalisation of followers who oppose the dictator's successor candidate creates many new – and potentially influential – party losers, who can challenge the leadership in moments of crisis and turmoil.

In Tunisia succession preparations were much more advanced than has been commonly understood. Indeed, many scholars assumed that the fact that Ben Ali's only son was still too young to be groomed for highest office was an indication that no candidate was prepared to

[61] Virginie Collombier, 'Gamal Moubarak et le Parti National Démocratique ou la Stratégie du Désastre: Comment Ceux qui Prétendaient Préparer la Succession Présidentielle ont Précipité la Chute du Régime', *Outre-Terre*, 2011, 3, 9, pp. 335–336.

succeed him.[62] However, by the early 2000s, several Ben Ali family clans had begun to compete for the succession line. Several frontrunners soon emerged, and they took important roles within the RCD. Though scholars typically assume that the family's interest is 'mutual',[63] this thesis suggests that the dictator's relatives do not necessarily perceive them as such. Internal family rivalries over the succession can exacerbate political instability, especially when they are played out within the key institutions of the state and party (Chapter 4).

3. Authoritarian decay – be it driven by the weakening of regime institutions, struggles over the succession, or other processes – can contribute to the fall of authoritarian regimes. However, decay does not in itself explain or cause the breakdown of regimes, though some scholars mistakenly evoke long-term dynamics of authoritarian decline to argue that a dictator's ousting was 'inevitable'.[64] Those who treat regime decay and breakdown as distinct though interrelated processes have tended to focus on protest dynamics, often in the framework of cascade models, to explain the apparent speed and unpredictability of some of the most important political transformations in recent history, such as the French Revolution, the fall of the Soviet Union, the 1998–2005 'colour revolutions', or the Arab Spring. Even scholars who are critical of these models, as they fail to account for internal

[62] Compare Steffen Erdle, 'Tunisia: Economic Transformation and Political Restoration', in Volker Perthes (ed.), *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004, pp. 207–236; Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 150.
[63] Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 44.
[64] For critical discussions on this see Stathis N. Kalyvas, 'The Decay and Breakdown of Communist One-Party Systems', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1999, 2, pp. 332–333; Morten Valbjorn, 'Reflections on Self-Reflections: On Framing the Analytical Implications of the Arab Uprisings for the Study of Arab Politics', *Democratization*, 2015, 22, 2, pp. 218–238; Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi, 'Beyond Structure and Contingency: Toward an Interactionist and Sequential Approach to the 2011 Uprisings', *Middle East Critique*, 2017, 26, 4, p. 374.

factors behind these vast moments of change, still tend to affirm that 'The 2011 Arab uprisings are…potentially the best and purest case of a regime change cascade'.[65]

This thesis challenges this narrative by highlighting the importance of the internal regime dynamics behind the fall of the Ben Ali regime. In his pioneering article 'Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring', Gregory Gause suggests that for decades 'many academics focused on explaining what they saw as the most interesting and anomalous aspect of Arab politics: the persistence of undemocratic rulers'.[66] This led to an enormous amount of research being produced on the features of Arab states and regimes that account for their supposed stability, such as the military, ruling parties, and, increasingly, nominally democratic institutions, such as elections.[67] Gause's main argument is that scholars neglected the people and social dynamics of change that drove the 2010–11 uprisings and that this is why they missed the Arab Spring.[68] There is certainly much truth in this, as regime breakdown could never have happened without the mass protests.[69] However, this thesis argues that many scholars have misunderstood the Arab Spring for the very reason

[65] Henry E. Hale, 'Regime Change Cascades: What We Have Learned From the 1848 Revolutions to the 2011 Arab Uprisings', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2013, 16, p. 344. Also note that Ivan Ermakoff, whose work on regime change is generally attentive to internecine factors, focuses in the case of Tunisia solely on the mass mobilisation; he evaluates that the self-immolation of Bouazizi 'elicited other acts of protests… . After three weeks of intense and violent demonstrations, Ben Ali fled the country' (Ivan Ermakoff, 2015, 'The Structure of Contingency', *American Journal of Sociology*, 121, 1, p. 80).

[66] Gregory Gause, 'Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011, 90, 4, p. 81.

[67] In addition to the literature cited earlier, see, for example, Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger, '"Waiting for Godot": Regime Change Without Democratization in the Middle East', *International Political Science Review*, 2004, 25, 4, pp. 371–392; Ellen Lust-Okar, 'Elections Under Authoritarianism: Preliminary Lessons From Jordan', *Democratization*, 2006, 13, 3, pp. 456–471; Steven Heydemann, 'Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World', *Brookings Institution Saban Center Analysis Paper* No. 13, 2007; Oliver Schlumberger, *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

[68] Compare also Morten Valbjorn, 'Reflections on Self-Reflections: On Framing the Analytical Implications of the Arab Uprisings for the Study of Arab Politics', *Democratization*, 2015, 22, 2, pp. 222–223.

[69] Key works on the 2010–11 protests and civil resistance in the Arab world include Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; Adam Roberts, Michael J. Willis, Rory McCarthy, and Timothy Garton Ash (eds.), *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring: Triumphs and Disasters*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

they 'missed' it in the first place: most still devote their attention to the apparently 'anomalous' and 'unexpected' – the protest movement – and have thus failed to account for internal factors in the fall of regimes. While there has been much talk about 'over-stating the Arab State',[70] I would argue that, as far as the Arab Spring is concerned, the state and regime have been under-stated.

Those scholars who have tried to account for internal regime factors, at least to some extent, typically focus on the military, suggesting, for example, that in Tunisia the armed forces refused Ben Ali's order to use force and sided with the protesters.[71] However, this narrative has been uncovered as a myth: Tunisia's military has historically been marginalised, as both Bourguiba and Ben Ali feared the armed forces might stage a coup against them; when protests erupted in 2010, Ben Ali never asked the military to take a leading role, let alone to shoot unarmed protesters, and certainly the army could not have refused an order it never received in the first place.[72]

In this thesis I argue that mass protests alone did not lead to the fall of the Ben Ali regime (Chapter 5). Inner regime contention and, in particular, internecine struggles within the RCD

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[70] For example, Nazih Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2001.

[71] A range of scholars have wrongly asserted that the Tunisian military played a key role in the uprisings. They include Gregory Gause, 'Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011, 90, 4, p. 84; Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 199; Amin Allal, '"Revolutionary" Trajectories in Tunisia: Processes of Political Radicalisation, 2007–2011', *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 2012, 62, 5, p. 57; Risa Brooks, 'Abandoned at the Palace: Why the Tunisian Military Defected From the Ben Ali Regime in January 2011', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2012, 36, 2, pp. 205–220; Henry E. Hale, 'Regime Change Cascades: What We Have Learned From the 1848 Revolutions to the 2011 Arab Uprisings', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2013, 16, p. 346; Jason Brownlee, Tarek E. Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds*, The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 38; Sean Burns, *Revolts and the Military in the Arab Spring: Popular Uprisings and the Politics of Repression*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2018.

[72] See, for details, Noureddine Jebnoun, 'In the Shadow of Power: Civil-Military Relations and the Tunisian Popular Uprisings'*, Journal of North African Studies*, 2014, 19, 3, pp. 296–316. Note that General Rachid Ammar, the chief of the army at the time of the uprisings, has formally corroborated this account. See, for example, General Ammar quoted in Imed Bahri, 'Tunisie-Politique: Qui a Peur du Retour du General Ammar?', *Kapitalis*, 16 January 2014, http://www.kapitalis.com/politique/20156-tunisie-politique-qui-a-peur-du-retour-du-general-rachid-ammar.html, last accessed 20 August 2018.

are central to understanding the outcome of the upheaval. The protest movement provided an opportunity for marginalised sections within the party to manifest their discontent with the regime: many RCD losers formed alliances with political opponents or displayed their dissatisfaction in more inconspicuous ways, such as by retreating from party activism. This fragmented Ben Ali's support base and deprived officials of their capacity to stage counter-protests. Their failure to organise pro-Ben Ali rallies publicly revealed the fragility of the regime and unsettled even loyal followers. It is in this context that figures within the elite decided to move against the President and staged a coup within the uprisings. Indeed, contrary to the widespread account that Ben Ali 'fled' Tunisia because of the mass protests,[73] I show that on 14 January he left for Saudi Arabia solely with the intention to drop his family in Riyadh; he wanted subsequently to return to Tunis. However, in his absence important challengers within the state and party took over power and declared the advent of a 'Tunisian Revolution'.

Methods

Scrutinising internal change and contention within the Ben Ali regime and, particularly, the RCD, can appear challenging. In recent years a range of scholars have written on Tunisian politics. While their work provided invaluable secondary material for this thesis,[74] gaining

[73] For example, Angelique Chrisafis and Ian Black, 'Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali Forced to Flee Tunisia as Protesters Claim Victory', *The Guardian*, 15 January 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/14/tunisian-president-flees-country-protests, last accessed 14 August 2018; 'Tunisia's Ben Ali Flees Amid Unrest', *Al Jazeera*, 15 January 2011, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/01/20111153616298850.html, last accessed 14 August 2018; Nouri Gana (ed.), *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

[74] Key works include: Michael Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco From Independence to the Arab Spring*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014; Jean-Pierre Tuquoi and Nicolas Beau, *Notre Ami Ben Ali: l'Envers du 'Miracle Tunisien'*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999; Kenneth J. Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Maghreb*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010; Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, Cambridge: Polity, 2011; Gregory White, *A Comparative Political Economy of Tunisia and Morocco: On the Outside of Europe Looking In*, Albany: State University of New York, 2001.

access to Ben Ali and RCD circles to uncover the particular dynamics of domination and contention at play was almost impossible in the authoritarian context before 2011. The Arab Spring and the advent of a nascent democracy in Tunisia changed this. Though immediately after the fall of the Ben Ali regime many high-ranking RCD officials feared a political reprisal and retreated from public life, many made a comeback in the 2014 general elections, often in the framework of the Nidaa Tounes ('Call for Tunisia') party, which was created in June 2012.[75] Their renewed relevance bolstered the confidence of former RCD officials and, for the first time, some of them were willing to speak about their experience under Ben Ali on record, sometimes even offering to share private archives. This material provided the backbone for this thesis.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with in total 216 individuals were carried out in Tunisia and, to a lesser extent, in France and the United Kingdom; in a limited number of cases they took place via Skype and Viber. They were conducted between 2014 and 2018 – a period during which I spent in total a year and a half in Tunisia – with eight groups of people:

1. 112 RCD officials and activists of various ranks and positions, including six out of its eight[76] former Secretary Generals and all of its three Vice-Presidents, many of whom were interviewed several times;
2. 18 high-level diplomats and ministers who were not formally a member of the ruling party;

[75] Anne Wolf, 'Whose "Call for Tunisia?"', *Middle East Institute*, 18 November 2013, http://www.mei.edu/content/whose-"call-tunisia", last accessed 15 August 2018; Anne Wolf, 'Can Secular Parties Lead the New Tunisia?', Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2014.
[76] Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, RCD Secretary General between 1996 and 1999, passed away in 2015; Hedi Mhenni, Secretary General between 2005 and 2008, was unavailable for an interview due to health issues.

3. six close relatives of Ben Ali, including his daughter, Nesrine, who lives with him in Saudi Arabia;
4. seven key actors during the 2010–11 uprisings, including then-Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi and Ben Ali's personal pilot, who flew him to Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011;
5. 13 representatives of groups and associations that were closely linked to the RCD, such as the employers' federation and the public administration;
6. 35 opposition activists in politics and civil society, including bloggers, labour union activists, and representatives of the key opposition parties
7. 19 demonstrators in the 2010–11 uprisings who were otherwise not politically active and
8. six journalists, experts, and scholars of Tunisian politics.

Moreover, for my book *Political Islam in Tunisia* I previously conducted around 400 interviews and informal conversations with representatives of the Islamist movement – the main opposition under Ben Ali – and other dissidents, as well as state representatives, and this material provided useful background information.[77] About one-third of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. However, in more informal settings it sometimes proved more expedient to take notes by hand. The large number of interviews was particularly useful to compare and corroborate data.

Interviews were partially arranged by the strategy of snowball sampling, that is, relying on the social network of respondents for further contacts, which is particularly useful when trying to reach groups that are not easily accessible.[78] In addition, I approached key

[77] Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
[78] Rowland Atkinson and John Flint, 'Accessing Hidden and Hard-to-Reach Populations: Snowball Research Strategies', *Social Research Update*, 2001, 33, p. 1.

informants with in-depth knowledge of important political events and decisions; they were identified mainly through secondary material, expert interviews, and archival sources. I also pursued more official channels to counteract the risk of self-selection, for example, by asking national and local communications offices of Nidaa Tounes and other relevant parties and organisations for contacts. Furthermore, I conducted a series of interviews with people I approached in cafés and on the streets in individual neighbourhoods that were internally diverse to reach out to the RCD grassroots. To minimise the risk of geographical bias, I conducted interviews not only in the capital of Tunis and the city of Sousse, including Hammam-Sousse, Ben Ali's hometown on the eastern coast, which was a stronghold of the RCD, but also in other parts of the country. They included Bizerte in the north, Jendouba in the north-west, Gafsa and Sidi Bouzid in the south-central region, Monastir – Bourguiba's hometown and central support base – along with Sfax on the east coast. In addition, interviews were conducted in various suburbs of Tunis and nearby towns, including those popular amongst the elite, such as La Marsa, Carthage, and Gammarth, all east of the capital, and Menzeh to the north, alongside middle class and poorer areas, such as downtown Bab Souika, El Kram in the north-east, and Hammam-Lif, south-east of Tunis.

Archives

This thesis also draws upon archival sources gathered in the National Archives in Tunis and the private households of individuals who agreed to share their material with me. They include official RCD pamphlets, internal party statutes, and electoral campaign material, alongside books and conference material published by the party's ideological education wing. In addition, I accessed regime mouthpieces, most importantly, the official RCD daily *Le Renouveau* and the local daily *La Presse*, which authorities also controlled; I further consulted a range of weekly political magazines, including *Réalités* and *Jeune Afrique*. These sources were particularly useful to reconstruct the evolution of the official regime

discourse and to develop a deeper understanding of key political players, events, and decisions at the time. Moreover, *Le Renouveau* reported in much depth on formal RCD events, party congresses, and the general elections, and this coverage was revealing for tracing aspects of the more evolutionary kind of change within the party, such as the ways in which alliances were constantly redrawn and formalised, new leaders and rules emerged.

Partially to balance the official propaganda dispersed by the regime, I also accessed dissident magazines and sources derived from 'expanded archives', a notion that has in recent years become increasingly popular amongst historians and refers to the vast amount of data housed in cyberspace.[79] Social media outlets, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, were particularly important channels through which opponents expressed their discontent under Ben Ali. Human rights reports on Tunisia were also obtained on the Internet, as were cables from the US Embassy in Tunis that were published by WikiLeaks. In addition, *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* online archives were invaluable to gain a better understanding of Tunisia's international relations and of western discourse towards the Ben Ali regime. Some Ben Ali family members who have been exiled after 2011 also published statements online, which provided valuable material.

It is important to note that throughout the thesis I apply a nonformal, narrative-guided approach that attributes particular importance to the internal validity of specific events and processes. This means that respect for historic detail and accuracy is paramount, even if this may 'sacrifice parsimony or elegance',[80] at least to some extent, and at times does not seem to narrowly follow the theoretical frame at hand. In addition, I share Karl Polanyi's

[79] Compare, for example, Antoinette M. Burton, 'Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories', in Antoinette M. Burton (ed.), *Archive Stories: Facts, Fiction, and the Writings of History*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 1–24.
[80] Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, 'The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism', *World Politics*, 2007, 59, p. 359.

observation that at certain points in history 'time expands' and so should our own analysis.[81] Therefore, this thesis pays particular attention to key moments in the life of the RCD, such as its inception when Ben Ali first took power, as well as the 2010–11 uprisings which resulted in the party's dissolution.

Outline of chapters

Chapter 2 details Ben Ali's rise to power and the role of the ruling party therein. Though Ben Ali had a background in the military and was no Destourian activist, he quickly gained control of the party and, two years into his presidency, would become its unchallenged leader. This chapter demonstrates that the RCD emerged out of the PSD at a critical juncture during which the creation of another ruling party was a real possibility. It shows that Ben Ali opened up the political scene and instigated innovations into the party with the sole aim of consolidating his power base. Ben Ali integrated key opposition forces into the RCD, such as leftists, and, to a lesser extent, religious activists, which Bourguiba had fiercely repressed. While this is commonly referenced as an indication of his early democratic credentials, I argue that the opening up of the party's membership base was a purely strategic move to broaden Ben Ali's support, especially given that opposition activists were initially wary of his takeover of power: they bitterly recalled Ben Ali's role in brutally breaking up the 1978 protest movement in his then function as Director-General of National Security, as well as his tough reputation as Interior Minister between 1986 and 1987. However, Ben Ali promised wide-ranging reforms of the state and party, amongst other institutional innovations – rhetorical tools that came to appeal to many Destourians and political opponents alike, especially given the political stagnation during Bourguiba's last decade of rule.

[81] Quoted in Ibid., p. 357.

Chapter 3 illustrates that once Ben Ali had consolidated his power he discontinued the political opening and deliberately weakened the RCD to embark upon increasingly autocratic rule. This was done by reinforcing the state and, particularly, bolstering the leverage of the Presidential Palace in Carthage, which came to decide upon all key political matters. This chapter shows that party officials progressively lost their capacity to propose their own representatives and to affect fundamental politics, especially once presidential associates created a shadow cabinet in Carthage. Some activists sought to challenge the RCD's progressive subordination by creating a political academy, tasked with preparing activists for high office; however, they largely failed in this respect, given the President's deliberate attempt to subdue the party. Instead, officials in Carthage decided to enlarge the RCD's security functions, and party followers came to take a central role in monitoring and reporting on political opponents – much more so than was commonly understood. In the 1990s the RCD's spying activities worked relatively well: they entailed important economic benefits and opportunities for upward advancement, and came within an ideological credo that increasingly focused on prosperity and stability rather than democratic politics.

All of this changed, however, once Ben Ali's succession became a pressing issue. Chapter 4 shows that in the 2000s Ben Ali further personalised his rule to shield himself from any challengers and to prepare a successor from within his family. This was attended by deep structural and leadership changes inside the RCD. Contrary to Bourguiba, who had permitted regional party figureheads to emerge, Ben Ali nominated all such figures personally, which allowed him to place family associates in key regional leadership posts. He gradually extended the practice of nominations to all central party roles. Naturally this created many RCD losers, often Bourguiba-era figures who were discarded, but also local notables and regular party activists who saw their opportunities for upward mobility strongly reduced. It also reinforced the economic marginalisation of many sectors of society, as

goods and privileges were increasingly distributed within the family. In 2008, major protests erupted in Gafsa against preferential hiring practices at the city's phosphate company, which was run by presidential associates. While such forms of popular dissent have been well documented, this chapter shows that some RCD followers also began to defy their incumbents in the state and party, though typically in more inconspicuous ways. Their dismay with the Ben Ali family only increased once presidential kin were integrated into leading organs of the RCD and began to compete for the succession from within the ruling party.

The eruption of mass protests in December 2010 provided an opportunity for marginalised sections within the RCD to manifest in the open their discontent with the powerbrokers. Though the uprisings are commonly framed in opposition to the ruling party, the RCD's role in the demonstrations was actually deeply heterogeneous. This chapter shows that some former party activists view themselves as revolutionary actors who fought against Ben Ali, whereas others advance discourses of victimisation to suggest that they were wrongfully targeted by the demonstrators. The RCD rank and file commonly participated in the protest movement, while marginalised officials typically retreated from any activism to passively protest their discontent with the regime, especially in economically deprived governorates. RCD officials also sided with the protest movement in regions with a particularly high number of casualties, sometimes knowing the victims personally; by contrast, in relatively stable governorates, party representatives still tend to deny the very fact that the security forces shot unarmed protesters. The large amount of RCD dissenters left the ruling party fractured and drove even loyal followers underground, increasingly de-assured. Mounting uncertainty and the overall contingency of the situation provided a political opening for sections within the elite to move against Ben Ali.

2. THE BIRTH OF THE RCD

Ben Ali was a military strongman…but politically he was weak… . He wasn't good at delivering speeches…he had never been an activist of the Party. This was his weak spot.

Hassouna Nasfi, Bardo, 24 May 2016

On 7 November 1987 Ben Ali deposed Bourguiba in a bloodless coup d'état, announcing a 'new era' through the establishment of a 'responsible democracy fully respecting the sovereignty of the people'.[82] The first years of Ben Ali's rule were marked by a tentative political opening[83] and observers typically denote that period as a brief 'Tunisian Spring'.[84] In his writings Tunisian scholar Elbaki El-Hermassi recalled widespread talk at the time about the advent of a 'Second Republic'. He himself viewed developments as part of a 'new political order' in the sense of Ibn Khaldoun's 'new *dawla'*,[85] that is, the birth of a state following the fading of an old system. El-Hermassi proclaimed that 'it was no longer possible to speak about Tunisia in the same way as before because…almost everything had changed: the political direction and…the regime's relations to the opposition and the intelligentsia'.[86] Acclaim for Ben Ali reached its height in January 1989 when he was awarded the French Louise-Michel Prize for Democracy and Human Rights. Alain Poher –

[82] Ben Ali's speech, delivered on 7 November 1987. An English translation is available at 'Tunisia: The Overthrow of Bourguiba', *al-Bab*, n.d. https://al-bab.com/albab-orig/albab/arab/docs/tunisia/declaration_07111987.htm, last accessed 19 August 2017.
[83] See, for example, Michel Camau, 'Tunisie: Vingt Ans Après: De Quoi Ben Ali est-il le Nom?', *L'Année du Maghreb*, 2008, 4, Paris: CNRS, pp. 507–527.
[84] For example, interview with Moncer Rouissi, Tunis, 21 July 2017. See also, Steffen Erdle, *Ben Ali's 'New Tunisia' (1987–2009): A Case Study of Authoritarian Modernization in the Arab World*, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2010, p. 97.
[85] Elbaki El-Hermassi quoted in Rafaa Ben Achour, 'L'État de Droit en Tunisie', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1995, 34, Paris: CNRS, p. 21.
[86] Ibid.

the honorary President of the French Centre for the Study of Politics and Society, who presented the award – declared that Ben Ali was 'a man of dialogue and tolerance' and that Tunisia now belonged to a 'privileged space of liberties' reserved for the few true democracies in the world.[87]

In contrast to such statements, this chapter argues that Ben Ali's decision to open up the political scene was a strategy designed solely to amass more support and strengthen his power base; he never intended to install a liberal democracy. As the above quote from Hassouna Nasfi, a former RCD leader, highlights, Ben Ali was a military strongman with no background in the PSD or its predecessor, the Neo Destour, a position that left him politically vulnerable. Ruling the country required gaining a grip over the politics, a process this chapter seeks to elucidate in detail. It shows that the RCD emerged during a critical juncture out of a negotiated compromise between Ben Ali and Bourguiba-era officials. The new President and his associates used the cover of national reconciliation and appeasement to introduce wide-reaching changes within the party. In particular, they purged the party and state of symbols and tenets associated with Bourguiba, officially to demarcate the end of personalised expressions of power – yet these were soon replaced by references to 7 November, the day that Ben Ali assumed power. They also coopted leftists and university professors by promoting some of their figureheads to high political posts, further reinvigorating party structures on campuses – which had been a bastion of the opposition under Bourguiba – by providing lucrative benefits for RCD students. Most importantly perhaps, Ben Ali changed the internal party statute to introduce the practice of designating appointments, as opposed to holding internal elections, within all key RCD institutions.[88]

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[87] 'Tunisie: Le Président Ben Ali Lauréat du Prix Louise-Michel', *Le Monde*, 27 January 1989, http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1989/01/27/tunisie-le-president-ben-ali-laureat-du-prix-louise-michel_4116472_1819218.html#Qczlhkw1iA59EISh.99, last accessed 19 August.

[88] 'Al-Nizam al-Dakhili li-l-Tajammuʿ al-Dusturi al-Dimuqrati' (*Statute of the Constitutional Democratic Rally*). Copy received from private archives in Tunis.

This enabled him to place his own people in top positions and marginalise Bourguiba-era figures.

While these changes occurred gradually and sometimes almost unnoticed, they eventually shifted most party activists' allegiance from Bourguiba to Ben Ali. It is in this context that the first RCD congress took place in the summer of 1988. The congress allowed Ben Ali to gain a grip over the party structures and, hence, to pursue increasingly personalised rule. During general elections a year later Ben Ali was the only presidential candidate and the RCD took all parliamentary seats. In the space of less than two years, indeed, Ben Ali engineered a 'transition from contested to established autocracy', to borrow use a phrasing from Milan Svolik's account of authoritarian regime change.[89]

The coup

Scholars have highlighted that Ben Ali relied mainly on the security apparatus to depose Bourguiba, with National Guard troops surrounding the Presidential Palace during the night of 7 November.[90] They have also pointed out that everything was done to ensure the ousting was perceived as conforming to the Constitution, and a team of medical doctors testified to Bourguiba's unfitness according to constitutional article 57.[91] Implicitly or explicitly, such scholars have suggested that this 'medical coup'[92] was neither driven nor executed by the

[89] Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 7.
[90] For example, Larbi Chouikha and Éric Gobe, *Histoire de la Tunisie Depuis l'Indépendance*, Paris: La Découverte, 2015, pp. 44–45; Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, p. 49.
[91] For example, Emma C. Murphy, *Economic and Political Change in Tunisia: From Bourguiba to Ben Ali*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999, p. 165; Amor Boubakri, 'Interpreting the Tunisian Revolution: Beyond Bou'azizi', in Larbi Sadiki (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, pp. 70–71.
[92] A number of scholars and interviewees have used this term to describe the events of 7 November. For example, Noureddine Jebnoun, 'Ben Ali's Tunisia: The Authoritarian Path of a Dystopian State', in Noureddine Jebnoun, Mehrdad Kia, and Mimi Kirk (eds.), *Modern Middle East Authoritarianism: Roots, Ramifications, and Crisis*, New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 103; interview with Mohamed Jegham, Tunis, 19 July 2017.

PSD; thus the party's role in the removal of Bourguiba, as well as its responses to Ben Ali's takeover, have received little scholarly attention. This is despite the fact that Hedi Baccouche, PSD Director from March 1984 until April 1987, was one of the key architects behind Bourguiba's ousting and even wrote Ben Ali's 7 November statement in which he declared that he had taken over power.[93] Together with Hamed Karoui, who succeeded him as PSD Director, he also mobilised party structures in the immediate aftermath of the coup. Both old friends of Ben Ali from Sousse, Baccouche and Karoui had pushed for his promotion to Prime Minister in October 1987, a position critical for the succession.[94] Moreover, I uncovered that earlier that year, Baccouche had reached out to opposition figures and university professors, organising clandestine meetings between them and Ben Ali,[95] presumably in order to prepare for a smooth transfer of power.

Narratives differ as to when Ben Ali and his team decided to move against Bourguiba. While Baccouche's actions suggest preparations were commenced many months, if not years, earlier, other 7 November co-conspirators have asserted that the timeframe was much shorter. In particular, Habib Ammar – another old friend of Ben Ali from Sousse, who went to the same military school and headed the National Guard which surrounded the Palace on 7 November – stated that the decision was taken only following the August 1987 hotel bombings in Sousse and Monastir, which were carried out by militant Islamists and wounded thirteen people.[96] However, this is improbable: planning is likely to have taken much longer. Presumably Ammar sought to suggest that Bourguiba's ousting was legitimate

[93] Interview with Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 28 September 2015 and 22 July 2017.
[94] Article 57 of the Constitution stipulated that the Prime Minister was to take over power should the President pass away or be unfit to govern.
[95] Interview with Moncer Rouissi, Tunis, 21 July 2017.
[96] Interview with Habib Ammar, Gammarth, 27 July 2017; see also Habib Ammar, *Parcours d'un Soldat: Entre le Devoir et l'Espoir*, Tunis: Simpact, 2016, pp. 88–90.

as it prevented the country from plunging into chaos and possibly even civil war, but that taking power had never been an end in itself.[97]

It is noteworthy that both Hedi Baccouche and Habib Ammar affirmed that Bourguiba's favourite niece, Saïda Sassi – a PSD activist who lived in the Palace and gave political counsel to Bourguiba– played an important part in Ben Ali's takeover. They said that Sassi became close to Ben Ali and – convinced that Bourguiba's illness made him unfit to govern – facilitated his coup by providing insider information from the Palace. In particular, having heard that Bourguiba was planning to dismiss his new Prime Minister, she shared this information with Ben Ali, who consequently accelerated the preparations for the coup. The fact that Sassi supported Ben Ali's takeover illustrates the extent to which Bourguiba's personalised rule through kinship connections not only symbolised the regime's weakness in its final decade but also played a key role in its demise – a dynamic that would also mark Ben Ali's last years in power, as will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

Aside from Hedi Baccouche, no other PSD figures were directly involved in the logistics of the coup. As explained in the introductory chapter, a range of party officials, including Mohamed Sayah, were hoping to succeed Bourguiba. Opposing party clans had different successors in mind – few of them favouring Ben Ali, a military man – so the architects of 7 November sought to keep those in the party out of the loop as far as possible. To remove Bourguiba they relied mainly on personal relations, forged since childhood, thus shifting the centre of power to Sousse – from where they all hailed – and giving rise to the so-called 'Sousse clan'; Bourguiba had promoted a disproportionate number of activists from his hometown, Monastir. In consequence, most party followers were taken aback when they

[97] Ibid. Note that the deposal of Bourguiba was originally envisaged for 8 November, but that the date was changed to forestall a coup planned by the MTI.

heard about Ben Ali's assumption of power. Mohamed Ben Khallifa, a regional leader from Bizerte, recalled:

> At 6.30am [on 7 November] a friend called…asking me if I had listened to the radio…I switched it on and heard [Ben Ali] delivering his speech. I called the *délégué* [the head of one of Tunisia's 264 regional delegations] and he didn't even know about it yet. People were completely taken aback, they didn't know what to do![98]

PSD activists were particularly unsettled because in his first speech to the people Ben Ali did not clarify which role, if any, the party would play under his presidency. Some worried that he might even decide to dissolve the party, given that he did not have a background in PSD activism. However, the matter was settled a few hours later – temporarily, at least – when Ben Ali's team delivered a statement calling upon the PSD to participate in the declared political 'Change'.[99] Subsequently, Hedi Baccouche and Hamed Karoui were tasked with mobilising activists in support of Ben Ali. Karoui explained that he had contacted the PSD's regional representatives and requested they 'organise…rallies' in favour of the new President, later asserting that mobilisation occurred 'spontaneously' in an attempt to convey that Ben Ali enjoyed widespread support.[100] The fact that Baccouche and Karoui managed to organise pro-Ben Ali rallies, even though the new President was not a party figure, illustrates that the PSD maintained a high degree of internal discipline, even at this time of political upheaval. Mobilisation was facilitated by widespread awareness of Bourguiba's deteriorating health; many people were relieved that Bourguiba's removal had occurred without bloodshed and believed in the constitutionality of Ben Ali's takeover, even

[98] Interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, Bizerte governorate, 9 February 2017.
[99] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 20 July 2017. Note that the notion of 'Change' became one of the key credos of the Ben Ali regime. See, for example, 'La Presse Internationale Salue le Changement Intervenu en Tunisie', *L'Action*, 10 November 1987, p. 12; 'Attachement à Préserver les Acquis et à Concrétiser les Objectifs du Changement', *Le Renouveau*, 1 August 1998, p. 3.
[100] Interview with Hamed Karoui, Tunis, 1 February 2017. *L'Action* subsequently also announced 'spontaneous rallies' for Ben Ali. See, for example, 'Une Manifestation Spontanée de Soutien au Président Zine El Abidine Ben Ali', *L'Action*, 8 November 1987, p. 7. Note that many interviewees sought to propagate the narrative of 'spontaneous' pro-Ben Ali protests (for example, interview with Sahbi Karoui, Sousse, 27 July 2017).

if they had favoured another successor. This narrative was reinforced by the media in the subsequent days.

The day after Ben Ali's ascent to power, the official PSD publication *L'Action* featured a series of articles detailing the provisions of Article 57 that had been invoked to remove Bourguiba, and stressing that his dismissal had occurred out of a respect for the 'national interest' and 'the republican legality'[101] – in reference to the republican ideal in which the rights of citizens take centre stage and can be '[defended]…against all forms of domination'.[102] *L'Action* also announced a new PSD leadership in accordance with the party charter: as the President of the Republic, Ben Ali would also be the President of the PSD; Hedi Baccouche – who was appointed Prime Minister – would become its Secretary General; Hamed Karoui would remain its Director.[103] Everything was done to convey an image of law and order.

Ben Ali and his team also sought to bolster his Destourian legitimacy by affirming that the new President had played an important role in the fight for independence. Ben Ali's official biography – advertised in all major newspapers following his takeover – proclaimed that 'at the age of sixteen, he had been active among the ranks of the Destourian youth and served as a liaison officer between the regional party structures and the armed struggle led by the resistance fighters';[104] yet it is unlikely that he had at that young age, and with his limited military training, held any significant post. The biography also underlined that Ben Ali had become a member of the PSD Political Bureau in June 1986 and had later risen to become its Vice-Secretary General – positions given to him automatically by virtue of his

[101] For example, 'Dans le Respect de la Légalité et de la Constitution', *L'Action*, 8 November 1987, p. 1; 'Changement Dans la Légalité Constitutionnelle', *L'Action*, 8 November 1987, p. 5; 'Le Premier Alinéa de l'Article de la Constitution de la République Tunisienne', *L'Action,* 7 November 1987, p. 3.
[102] Compare Charles Tripp, 'Battlefields of the Republic: The Struggle for Public Space in Tunisia', *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series*, 2015, 13, p. 9.
[103] 'Communiqué de la Direction du Parti Socialiste Destourien', *L'Action*, 8 November 1987, p. 3.
[104] 'Biographie du Président Zine El Abidine Ben Ali', *L'Action*, 7 November 1987, p. 2 and p. 8.

appointment as Interior Minister and then Prime Minister, but which he had not used to become active within the party.[105]

Ben Ali and his supporters next reassured PSD activists that they would play a key role in the new political era. This was first of all done by announcing that they were the ones entrusted with realising the political 'Change', a rhetorical tool highlighting the beginning of a new era with wide-ranging reforms, which was only launched, but not concluded, on 7 November. They even denominated the party itself as 'author' of the change, a move intended to suggest that Ben Ali's takeover had occurred within a Destourian framework – even though the wider party structures had not been involved in the coup.[106] In addition, the new political leadership repeatedly stressed that the road towards political pluralism would not reduce the role of the PSD, but actually strengthen it. On 10 November Hedi Baccouche declared in front of party followers that:

> we need to get prepared for the new stage by adopting PSD programmes and policies that respond to the demand for pluralism, in order for the [PSD] to remain the party of national liberation, the party which gathers the majority of citizens, and in order for it to acquire the means of exercising democracy so that it will preserve the privileged place it enjoys in Tunisian society more generally and in politics in particular.[107]

Baccouche's statement illustrates that the new authorities were careful to highlight that the goal was for the PSD to remain the 'majority'[108] party: they would recognise other political voices, but assured followers that this plurality would ultimately only benefit the PSD. This

[105] Interview with Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 22 July 2017.
[106] This rhetoric was reiterated in later months and years. See, for example, 'Ben Ali Trace: Nous Voulons Réaliser le Changement Dans le Pays et Nous Voulons que le R.C.D. en Soit l'Auteur', *Le Renouveau*, 30 July 1988, p. 8.
[107] 'M. Hédi Baccouche Tient Une Réunion Avec les Secrétaires Généraux des Comités de Coordination du Parti', *L'Action*, 10 November 1987, p. 10.
[108] Ibid. See also declaration by the Central Committee following its February 1988 meeting, quoted in 'Tunisie: Changement d'Appellation; Le Parti Socialiste Destourien Devient le Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique', *Le Monde*, 1 March 1988, http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1988/03/01/tunisie-changement-d-appellation-le-parti-socialiste-destourien-devient-le-rassemblement-constitutionnel-democratique_4071577_1819218.html#UuG2cUPoACXm46zj.99, last accessed 27 August 2017.

strategy was attractive both to PSD hardliners – who wanted to reinforce their political predominance by all means – and to followers who believed that a certain degree of plurality was needed for the party to remain strong. Following encounters with Baccouche and Karoui, the Secretaries General of the Coordination Committee, the party's highest regional organ, published a communiqué in which they announced their 'total backing of the measures [Ben Ali] has taken' and their 'wholehearted adhesion to the content of his [7 November] declaration'.[109] Similar statements were echoed by other party institutions.[110]

It is notable that the idea of truly competitive politics was never seriously discussed within the PSD organs, though it was touted to opposition forces and western allies, presumably to gather more support for the new regime.[111] Hedi Baccouche, the key ideologue behind the 'Change', told me that a 'savage' or uncontrolled opening was never on the table, elaborating that this was what Tunisia came to witness after 2011, 'with [the emergence of] over 216 political parties'.[112] A range of statements and practices confirm the early authoritarian tendencies of the new officials – though since the 2010–11 uprisings many of them pretend that Ben Ali was initially sincere about democracy, probably to justify their own political activities at the time.[113] Amongst other manifestations, this can be seen in how in the days following the coup newspaper articles repeatedly proclaimed the 'unanimous

[109] 'Les Secrétaires Généraux des Comités de Coordination Expriment Leur Appui au Président Ben Ali', *L'Action*, 10 November 1987, p. 4.
[110] For example, 'La Cellule Destourienne de l'Agence TAP: l'Ère Nouvelle Sera une Ère de Labeur, de Réalisation, de Sérénité et de Renforcement des Acquis Républicains', *L'Action*, 8 November 1987, p. 7.
[111] Interviews with various opposition leaders, for example, Abdelfattah Mourou, co-founder of Ennahda, La Marsa, July 2013.
[112] Interview with Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 22 July 2017.
[113] For example, the Association of Former Tunisian Parliamentarians assessed that during the early period of Ben Ali 'many initiatives were taken that guaranteed the openness of the regime'. See, for details, 'Istintajat al-Qiraʾa al-Naqdiyya li-Masarat al-Hukm min Sanat 1955 ila Sanat 2010' (*Inductions from the Critical Reading of the Trajectories of Governance from 1955 until 2010*). Association of Former Tunisian Parliamentarians, July 2017, private archives in Tunis.

support' Ben Ali and his team enjoyed,[114] thus denying their opponents and critics any voice.

The Bourguibists protest

The pretence of unanimous support stood in stark contrast to the fact that Ben Ali's key rivals for the succession, such as Mohamed Sayah, were placed under house arrest on 7 November out of fear that they might stage a counter-coup; they were released only once the new President believed they were no longer able to challenge his rule.[115] Naturally competing PSD factions, especially faithful Bourguibists who knew Bourguiba personally or had fought under his leadership against the French, disapproved of Ben Ali's presidency. However, they held little leverage to contest it on constitutional grounds or through force. Moreover, even the most loyal Bourguibists knew that their figurehead had developed Alzheimer's and believed a change in power was necessary, so eventually most decided, however unwillingly, to accept Ben Ali's rule. They were, however, deeply concerned about the way in which the new President treated Bourguiba, particularly that he cut him off from public life and provided no news about him in the days following the coup. Many PSD followers from Bourguiba's hometown, Monastir, were particularly anxious. One of them, Fathi Baoueb – who had favoured Mohamed Sayah or Habib Bourguiba Junior for the succession – explained:

> We were waiting for news about Bourguiba and what would happen to him. At a certain point some people thought they [Ben Ali's team] might kill him… . The first and second days [after the coup] were calm here in Monastir. Then we started asking for news about [Bourguiba]. We were not opposed to his removal, he was old… . But we wanted reassurances about his wellbeing.[116]

[114] For example, 'M Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Président de la République: Soutien Unanime du Peuple', *L'Action*, 8 November 1987, p. 7 and p. 10.
[115] *L'Action* briefly confirmed the house arrests, calling them 'precautionary measures'. See, for details, 'Arrestation à Titre Préventif de Quelques Personnalités', *L'Action*, 7 November 1987, p. 3.
[116] Interview with Fathi Baoueb, Monastir, 27 July 2017.

Baoueb recalled that on 10 and 11 November 1987 rallies were staged in Monastir and some other localities to demand information about Bourguiba's whereabouts and condition. A particularly loyal group of Bourguibists even demonstrated – armed – in front of the PSD headquarters in El Kasbah, Tunis.[117] Though Baoueb despised that Ben Ali, a military man, had taken power, he repeatedly stressed that these rallies were 'not against Ben Ali, but for Bourguiba'.[118] This illustrates that even many fierce critics of Ben Ali did not voice opposition against him and believed in the constitutionality of his takeover. It is noteworthy that even after the ousting of Ben Ali many of his former associates still deny the very fact that Bourguibist demonstrations took place.[119] Protests also received no media coverage at the time. To the new powerbrokers, any criticism of the way in which they treated Bourguiba signalled disloyalty and threatened their claim to unanimous support.

To forestall demonstrations spreading to more localities, PSD figureheads tried hard to avoid alienating the Bourguibist protesters. Amongst other concessions, they offered the El Kasbah group 'guarantees' that Bourguiba was unharmed.[120] A few days later, Bourguiba was transferred to a house in Mornag and later to Monastir, where he spent the rest of his life. To this day, Ben Ali associates suggest that the new President was very generous to allow Bourguiba to 'settle' in Monastir. They point out that Bourguiba even enjoyed around-the-clock medical care and household assistance.[121] However, he was confined to his residency and could receive only a very limited number of visitors, a situation many of his supporters found difficult to accept. Amira Marzouk – the daughter of a PSD activist who knew Bourguiba personally – affirmed that in Monastir, her hometown, people 'couldn't

[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] For example, interviews with Ameur Bnouni, Monastir, 25 July 2017; Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 22 July 2017.
[120] Interview with Fathi Baoueb, Monastir, 27 July 2017.
[121] Interview with Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 22 July 2017.

bear that Bourguiba, who led the struggle for independence, found himself locked away'.[122] Some decided to manifest their disapproval in symbolic ways. In particular, interviewees highlighted how the most loyal Bourguiba followers continued displaying pictures of him in their homes or workplaces, even after authorities instructed to take them down: a quiet form of protest conveying their persistent allegiance to Tunisia's first President.[123]

A small group of Bourguibists in Monastir decided to demonstrate openly their discontentment with the new powerbrokers. In the village of Ksar Hellal – a bastion of Bourguiba followers and location of the Neo Destour founding congress on 2 March 1934 – the entire PSD local bureau resigned out of loyalty to Bourguiba, provoking early municipal by-elections. These were held in January 1988 alongside legislative by-elections, triggered by the dismissal of two deputies representing the district of Monastir who were considered particularly close to Bourguiba.[124] It is noteworthy that when asked about the reasons for the parliamentary by-elections, Hedi Baccouche pretended that they were held because the PSD lawmakers had passed away. This illustrates the extent to which some Ben Ali officials are still willing to misrepresent information to hide the early authoritarian tendencies of the regime.[125] They also refuse to acknowledge that the by-elections became an important site of resistance against Ben Ali. Scholar Asma Larif-Beatrix established that during the ballots some protesters shouted 'long live Bourguiba' – a slogan Ben Ali supporters quickly dismissed by ascribing it to a handful of 'PSD barons' who were 'too jealous' to share their power.[126] A group of loyal Bourguibists even sought to challenge Ben Ali upfront through

[122] Interview with Amira Marzouk, Tunis, 29 September 2015.
[123] Note that this practice was common amongst Bourguiba loyalists well beyond Monastir. Interviews with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, Bizerte governorate, 9 February 2017; Fathi Baoueb, Monastir, 27 July 2017.
[124] One of them was Mansour Skhiri, a former governor of Monastir and head of Bourguiba's Presidential Cabinet.
[125] Interview with Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 22 July 2017.
[126] Asma Larif-Beatrix, 'Chronique Tunisienne (1988)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1990, 27, Paris: CNRS, p. 745.

rival electoral lists. Fathi Baoueb, who ran on a competitor list for the parliamentary by-elections, recalled:

> We were sure that [Ben Ali] would win…because we did not have the money to campaign and we knew he might falsify the results. Our participation [in the by-elections] was an act of refusal, it was an act of opposition against Ben Ali. We wanted to show him that he would have to deal with us, that we had a voice in Monastir.[127]

Baoueb further explained that on the day of the legislative by-elections, all independent observers were expelled from the ballot booth. Ben Ali's list was awarded all seats. The same happened during the municipal by-elections. Arguably Ben Ali and his team considered it particularly important to claim victory in Monastir and its historically significant Ksar Hellal village to convey the impression that even Bourguiba's stronghold had come to embrace the new President, reinforcing his Destourian legitimacy. They were free to propagate this narrative as most journalists and academics did not discuss the Bourguibist opposition and likely manipulation of the election results at all – perhaps some were not even aware of them. Initially most of their work focused on processes of political liberalisation – even though these ultimately served only to reinforce the power of the new President and were never internalised amongst the ranks of the PSD, as will be demonstrated in the following sections.

Conflicting visions for the party

Changing the image of the PSD, which had become increasingly a symbol of domination and personalised rule under Bourguiba, was key to Ben Ali's strategy to convey the beginning of a new era of political openness and democratisation. Abderrahim Zouari – a close adviser of Ben Ali who in December 1987 was nominated Secretary General of the PSD Political Bureau, the party's executive committee, appointed by the President –

[127] Interview with Fathi Baoueb, Monastir, 27 July 2017.

explained that Ben Ali had charged him and four other officials with instigating 'innovations' into the institutions and ideological outlook of the party; he elaborated that his task was one of 'restructuring'.[128] One of the first outcomes of this was the opening up of the PSD grassroots by creating 7 November clubs and federations in parallel to the party cells. PSD leaders stressed that everybody was welcome to join the new 7 November institutions or the wider party structures. In one interview Hedi Baccouche stated:

> The [party's] Central Committee decided that all those who believe in the 7th of November and have the predispositions to work for the good of Tunisia and its new, modern orientations are welcome. It is sufficient that their intentions are sincere.[129]

The creation of 7 November institutions was highly strategic: it encouraged people who had never been involved in the PSD to become politically active, thus serving as a key recruitment structure of the new regime. Many of these 7 November activists would eventually join the PSD. Hedi Baccouche remarked on the 'massive influx of…patriots of all [political] tendencies' at the time;[130] while this is an overstatement, as the party never absorbed the entire ideological spectrum,[131] a range of interviewees testified that its membership grew significantly in the months following Ben Ali's takeover.[132] By July 1988, the official number of adherents reached 1.5 million[133] – though one interviewee alleged that authorities inflated the number by also counting people who had retreated from political life, including some loyal Bourguibists.[134] The party membership fee was only a couple of dinars per year, making membership readily accessible to any willing person.

[128] Interview with Abderrahim Zouari, Tunis, 9 February 2017.
[129] 'Interview de M Hedi Baccouche', *Le Renouveau*, 29 July 1988, p. 6.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Many activists of the far left and the MTI maintained some distance from Ben Ali and his associates, voicing suspicions about their 'true' intentions.
[132] For example, interviews with Sahbi Karoui, Sousse, 27 July 2017; Mounir Ben Miled, Tunis, 24 May 2016.
[133] 'Le R.C.D par les Chiffres', *Le Renouveau*, 29 July 1988, p. 6.
[134] Interview with Mounir Ben Miled, Tunis, 24 May 2016.

Despite their important recruitment function, the 7 November structures stoked fear amongst the PSD's traditional support base. Many worried that the new President might still decide to establish his own party, even though he had said that the PSD would remain important and would even lead his 'Change'. Increasing talk about a '7 November movement'[135] and the '7 Novemberists' – that is, the people who participated in the ousting of Bourguiba – only reinforced such suspicion. The PSD loyalists' anxieties were increased when some of Ben Ali's close advisers openly suggested he create his own political movement. Most interviewees affirmed that only officials with no background in the PSD provided such counsel, believing this would boost their own career prospects,[136] but some historic party figures also advocated for the creation of a new political movement – including Abderrazak Kefi, Information Minister under Bourguiba – in order to convey an image of 'total reform'.[137]

Uncertainty about the future of the ruling party reached a height in February 1988 on the occasion of the first meeting of the PSD Central Committee under Ben Ali. This occasion constituted a critical juncture for Tunisia's ruling party. The Central Committee comprised the top leaders of the party, who held prime responsibility for executing its programmes and resolutions, decided during five-yearly party congresses. The February 1988 Central Committee meeting revealed that PSD activists had reason to believe that the new President wanted to create his own party. During his inauguration speech, Ben Ali called upon the PSD to 'become an example of the "Popular Democratic Rally"'[138] – a somewhat blurry statement which attendees interpreted as either an allusion to a proposed new party that would absorb the PSD, or a suggested new name for the latter.[139] Both options were

[135] See, for example, 'Reconnaissance aux Martyrs et aux Résistants', *Le Temps*, 21 March 1989, p. 2.
[136] For example, interviews with Hamed Karoui, Tunis, 1 February 2017; Mounir Ben Miled, Tunis, 24 May 2016.
[137] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 20 July 2017.
[138] 'Ben Ali Devant le Comité Central, 26 et 27 Février 1988', *Le Renouveau*, 29 July 1988, p. 5.
[139] Interviews with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 20 July 2017; Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 28 September 2015.

discussed during the meeting. Naturally Central Committee members, dominated by the PSD old guard, were fiercely opposed to creating a new party, as was Hedi Baccouche, who chaired the meeting. He recalled:

> Contrary to Ben Ali, I was attached to the party. Some people told him 'you are a great man, you can establish a new party', but in practical terms it was not a good idea. We had a party with its traditions, a reasonable man wouldn't abandon it. …So we disputed.[140]

Though Central Committee members vehemently rejected the idea of a new party, they were willing to adjust the name of the PSD to signal a political change. However, they disapproved of Ben Ali's suggested 'Popular Democratic Rally' as it did not include the term 'Destour'. To the old guard, this proposition not only conveyed a dismissal of the legacy of Bourguiba but also of the wider independence movement. 'At the end we made a compromise that included the word "Destour"', Habib Baccouche explained, setting out the reasons behind settling on Constitutional Democratic Rally (*Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique*; *al-Tajammuʿ al-Dusturi al-Dimuqrati*).[141] However, the name is commonly abbreviated using the French initials 'RCD' and its 'Destour' stipulation is translated in other languages, which further distinguishes it from its predecessors. The fact that Hedi Baccouche and the Central Committee members managed to persuade Ben Ali not to create a new party and that they significantly influenced the renaming of the PSD illustrates that they possessed significant agency. Ben Ali's power base remained somewhat fragile in the months after his takeover: he did not have full leverage over the party and was willing to make important concessions so as not to alienate its followers. This is not to say that the creation of the RCD was inevitable, however. Ben Ali could still have decided to launch his own party. Though this would have left him politically more isolated, at least temporarily,

[140] Interview with Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 28 September 2015.
[141] Ibid.

he could have shifted the centre of power to the military or the security establishment, as he would do in later years.

While the choice of the name 'RCD' suggested some element of historical continuity through its reference to the Destour movement, it also reflected the party's formal adoption of the wider political and economic principles laid out by the new President. Amongst other factors, the elimination of the 'Socialist' reference highlighted the RCD's commitment to economic liberalism, a strategy the PSD had already come to embrace in recent years, after its socialist experiment had failed. More importantly, the 'Democratic Rally' stipulation signalled the party's absorption of the democratic principles of the 7 November declaration – at least formally. *Le Monde* wrote that the Central Committee meeting 'further developed the general orientations of Ben Ali', elaborating that 'the focus was set on…introducing democratic practices at all levels [of the party]'.[142] In a similar vein Abderrahim Zouari affirmed that the meeting launched the party's 'phase of democracy'.[143] To symbolise this change, the Central Committee members agreed to rename the party newspapers *l'Action* (The Action) and *El Amal* (The Hope) to *Le Renouveau* (The Renewal) and *El Horra* (The Free). However, in stark contrast to the rhetoric of democratisation, I found that Ben Ali and his team actually used the Central Committee meeting to reaffirm their belief in a majority party. Mohamed Ghariani stated:

> The idea of democracy was discussed. We were in a way obliged to play the game. But Ben Ali gave guarantees…that this democracy would not be at the expense of the party. So the elites knew that their party would remain…in power.[144]

[142] 'Tunisie: Changement d'Appellation; Le Parti Socialiste Destourien Devient le Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique', *Le Monde*, 1 March 1988, http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1988/03/01/tunisie-changement-d-appellation-le-parti-socialiste-destourien-devient-le-rassemblement-constitutionnel-democratique_4071577_1819218.html#UuG2cUPoACXm46zj.99, last accessed 27 August 2017.
[143] Interview with Abderrahim Zouari, Tunis, 9 February 2017.
[144] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 20 July 2017.

Ghariani explained that the 'only real polemic' at the meeting concerned the naming of the party; a competitive democracy was something neither the new political leadership nor the Central Committee members desired.[145] To some extent, the 'Rally' component of the new name conveyed this perspective. Indeed, the main concern for Ben Ali and his team was that the RCD should remain a mass party capable of 'rallying' people around the new President. To bolster Ben Ali's support base, the Central Committee members formally agreed to 'consolidate and enlarge the structures of the Rally [RCD]'[146] by recruiting people from a range of ideological backgrounds. While in authoritarian states officials sometimes decide to restrict the membership of ruling parties, as this makes it easier to distribute privileges and enforce internal discipline and control,[147] Ben Ali sought to attract as many people as possible to the RCD. For the new President a large RCD membership base was a way to claim legitimacy, which was especially important as he lacked any obvious political credentials.

The Central Committee also engaged in a 'self-critique'[148] to better understand why the party had become weak towards the end of Bourguiba's rule and to devise strategies to strengthen it. Ben Ali explained that through this process they 'reexamined the organisation of the [party] structures and their internal working to evaluate the situation [the party] had experienced'.[149] A range of interviewees affirmed that the principal conclusion was that the PSD had lost vigour because internal democratic practices had ceased to exist, including at

[145] Ibid.
[146] 'Tunisie: Changement d'Appellation; Le Parti Socialiste Destourien Devient le Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique', *Le Monde*, 1 March 1988, http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1988/03/01/tunisie-changement-d-appellation-le-parti-socialiste-destourien-devient-le-rassemblement-constitutionnel-democratique_4071577_1819218.html#UuG2cUPoACXm46zj.99, last accessed 27 August 2017.
[147] For example, membership in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was deliberately restricted to about 10% of the population. See, for details, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003, pp. 53–54.
[148] Interview with Abderrahim Zouari, Tunis, 9 February 2017.
[149] 'Ben Ali Trace: Nous Voulons Réaliser le Changement Dans le Pays et Nous Voulons que le R.C.D. en Soit l'Auteur', *Le Renouveau*, 30 July 1988, p. 8.

the local level; some also criticised the merger of state and party structures, particularly during the socialist experiment.[150] They said that this had enabled activists with insufficient qualifications to take control over the party grassroots.[151]

One of the main challenges towards the end of the Bourguiba era was that historic PSD leaders were growing old and some had passed away. Their successors typically hailed from the same family and – though they did not possess the same extent of political legitimacy – made it very difficult for other activists to climb up the party echelons. While party followers typically opposed democracy as a mode of governance, they considered a certain degree of internal competition necessary for the PSD to regain its strength as it opened up the party to new faces and fostered upward mobility. Therefore the Central Committee members agreed on a road map to 'renew' the RCD local chapters on the basis of democratic practices, in preparation for an extraordinary party congress. This was scheduled for the summer of 1988 and intended to overhaul the wider party structures, including its relation to the state.[152] However, as the following sections demonstrate, Ben Ali officials certainly did not intend to induce democratic practices at the local level, but rather used the occasion to discard longtime leaders, facilitating the emergence of a new generation of regional figureheads loyal to the new President.

'Renewing' the grassroots

Ben Ali's team began the RCD's wide-ranging process of local restructuring by appointing new Secretaries General to the Coordination Committees,[153] arguing that the previous

[150] For example, interviews with Abderrahim Zouari, Tunis, 9 February 2017; Ali Chaouch, Tunis, 11 February 2017.
[151] Ibid.
[152] 'Ben Ali Trace: Nous Voulons Réaliser le Changement Dans le Pays et Nous Voulons que le R.C.D. en Soit l'Auteur', *Le Renouveau*, 30 July 1988, p. 8.
[153] Ibid.

regional leadership 'was not at all qualified to lead the necessary change'[154]. These intermediaries between the party officials in Tunis and its rank and file were tasked with organising extraordinary congresses of the local party cells to install a new grassroots leadership throughout the country – however, not on the basis of elections, but through designations. Indeed, despite their stated commitment to internal democratic practices, the new political leaders claimed that appointments were initially necessary to ensure political 'renewal'. Chedli Neffati, a close collaborator of Ben Ali who would head the RCD in later years, explained:

> The cell leaders were dignitaries, activists from important families… . Some people respected them [and] some didn't because they had been in power for too long. No matter what we had decided, we would have created a controversy and some people would have been disappointed. We agreed to nominate a new local leadership even though this was undemocratic… . Some people told us: 'how is it possible that on the one hand you talk about democracy, but on the other you nominate local leaders?!'. We said that this time – only once – we will nominate the leaders and dismiss those who have been [in power] for too long in order to give a chance to new people, to the youth.[155]

Interviews suggested that, upon hearing the arguments brought forward by officials such as Chedli Neffati, most party followers became persuaded that appointing a new grassroots leadership was initially necessary to inject fresh blood into the party. They trusted their figureheads that this would be an exceptional measure and that elections would be the norm during subsequent cell congresses.[156]

When asked about the characteristics of the local leaders that were appointed, interviewees advanced two main points. The first was that Ben Ali and his team were particularly keen to promote wealthy local entrepreneurs to posts as cell leaders.[157] They sought to bolster the RCD's influence on the ground by linking it to local capital. The prominent families that had

[154] Interview with Naziha Zarrouk, Tunis, 30 January 2017.
[155] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[156] For example, interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, Bizerte governorate, 9 February 2017.
[157] For example, interview with Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 22 July 2017.

dominated the local party leadership under Bourguiba were not necessarily wealthy but typically were known for their political leverage, gained by virtue of their roles in the fight for independence. Replacing some of their leaders with highly accomplished entrepreneurs – sometimes from rival family clans – was presented as a way to overcome the crisis of socialism by rewarding professional success. In particular, Ben Ali was keen to integrate Tunisia's new business and commercial class, which emerged in the 1970s in the wake of Bourguiba's tentative economic opening and typically focused on private investments in quickly growing urban areas.[158] Ultimately, however, this started a tradition of tying upward mobility within the RCD to financial means rather than activism – a tendency that would weaken the party in later years, as will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters.

The second characteristic of the new local officials was that they were markedly younger than their predecessors, some of whom had held their posts for decades. Though Ben Ali and his team suggested that the promotion of younger activists manifested their commitment to 'renewal', they directly profited from the emergence of a new generation of party officials who could rise with Ben Ali – aged 51 at the time of the coup – and whose careers depended entirely on his leadership.

Coopting students

The new officials were particularly keen to attract youthful people to the RCD as they had the potential to substantially increase the overall party size – in 1987 73,7% of the population was aged 34 or younger[159]. In addition, they provided an opportunity to prop up the number of followers whose loyalty had never been with the previous regime. Aside from

[158] For details about economic developments at the time, see Gregory White, *A Comparative Political Economy of Tunisia and Morocco: On the Outside of Europe Looking In*, Albany: State University of New York, 2001.
[159] See, for details, 'Pyramide des Âges, Perspective Monde: Tunisie', Université de Sherbrooke, n.d., http://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BMPagePyramide?codePays=TUN&annee=1987, last accessed 13 June 2018; author's own calculations.

promoting younger activists to local party posts, reinforcing the RCD's sway in schools and, especially, universities became a priority. During the last decade under Bourguiba, the PSD had been almost non-existent on campuses, where leftists and MTI followers dominated student activism. The fragility of Bourguiba's rule became visible first at universities, where anti-regime protests were staged – reaching a height in the summer of 1987 – and security forces clashed repeatedly with demonstrators. If Ben Ali sought to remain in power, he would have to gain a grip over campuses, not only by strengthening the RCD's position there, but also by gaining the sympathy of the opposition.

Shortly after taking power, Ben Ali officials announced that campuses were once again a space where student activism could take place freely, as long as it was peaceful and not against the law. Consequently, the General Union of Tunisian Students (UGET) – dominated by leftists – announced that it would finally convene its 18th Congress in spring 1988: the Congress had originally been scheduled for and cancelled in 1971, after the PSD sought to impose a union leadership. Also, the rival General Tunisian Union of Students (UGTE) – which had been outlawed under Bourguiba, and consisted mainly of activists close to the Islamist movement – enjoyed unprecedented freedom of action. However, most of its members remained sceptical of the new regime as it had not yet released the MTI leadership from prison. Samir Abidi, a UGET follower at the time, told me that activists from both unions had reservations about the new authorities, despite the newly gained liberties on campuses. He said:

> They [the student activists] were not with Ben Ali; it is important to highlight this. [They were] in the opposition, but the unions worked in a much freer environment. The general spirit of students at the time was to work in the opposition.[160]

[160] Interview with Samir Abidi, Tunis, 30 June 2016.

To gain a grip over the powerful UGET, Ben Ali officials approached some of their key representatives. They tried to win them over by saying that Ben Ali was supporting their activities and popular liberties more generally, suggesting that the free space on campuses evinced the sincerity of his intentions. The new powerbrokers were particularly keen to attract UGET students who had family members in the PSD or the RCD, believing that their attitude made them more open to compromise. One of them was the above quoted Samir Abidi, who had relatives in the PSD.[161] During the 18th UGET Congress, held between 30 April and 2 May, Samir Abidi was elected head of the union and later would become one of the key collaborators of the Ben Ali regime, an indication of the extent to which the new authorities succeeded early on in coopting some influential student leaders.

In parallel, Ben Ali officials sought to reinforce the RCD's own leverage on campuses, though this proved initially somewhat more challenging given the sway of leftists and MTI activists. However, while many young people had reservations about the new authorities, they were attracted by the wider tenets of the 7 November declaration. The RCD leadership knew how to capitalise on this. Mohamed Ghariani, the first Secretary General of the RCD student movement, explained:

> We found a general sympathy for the 7 November principles. We took advantage of this sympathy to reorganise the party, particularly…at the university, amongst students, and at the level of university professors. In a way we…exploited this state of glory, [their] hope for democracy and human rights. The 7 November, it was easy for people to like. …We seduced the youth.[162]

Mohamed Ghariani stated that just after Ben Ali took power, the student wing counted only around 100 active members, affirming that this number rose to as many as 20,000 a couple of years later.[163] While some young people certainly joined the RCD because the 7

[161] Ibid.
[162] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016.
[163] Ibid.

November principles 'seduced' them – to use Ghariani's term – many others signed up for more pragmatic reasons. In particular, the RCD leadership attracted young people through a scheme of lucrative benefits reserved for the party's youth and student wings, which did not exist under Bourguiba. Advantages ranged from free printing services and rare student accommodation guarantees to free vacation trips.[164] It is noteworthy that interviewees frequently disagreed on the type of benefits that existed and how they were distributed, which suggests that channels were mostly informal and depended on individual patronage.

Aside from bolstering the RCD's youth and student branches, Mohamed Ghariani's above quote suggests that the new authorities also sought to attract university professors. Ghariani elaborated that for the PSD it 'had been very difficult to work in elitist circles, at the university, with lawyers, and intellectuals more generally'.[165] This had weakened the party in several ways. First of all, it created an influential opposition, often with strong ties to France, where many professors and public intellectuals had studied. Secondly, it stoked criticism that the big thinkers of Tunisia were not part of the regime, which selected people on the basis of their background in the independence movement rather than their professional qualifications. Critics of Bourguiba charged that this not only accounted for the economic crisis under his rule, but also inhibited the regime from proposing new political ideas.

The Destourian 'leftists'

Addressing such shortcomings, the new authorities made it a key prerogative to integrate public intellectuals and academics into the RCD. This enabled Ben Ali officials to widen

[164] Some of these benefits were formalised, while others, such as free vacation trips, were on paper available to all students though in practice party activists were almost exclusively selected. Interviews with Aymen, a former RCD student activist, Bardo, 6 October 2015; Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017; Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 22 July 2017; Naoufel Aziz, Tunis, 24 July 2017.
[165] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016.

their support base and bestowed greater substance on their claim to open up the political scene. In addition, it allowed them to frame the emergence of a new generation of political leaders in terms of a technocratisation process which prioritised professional qualifications. Ben Ali affirmed that 'the RCD must gain its strength through the capacity of its activists and their competence'.[166] Laurent Guiter explained:

> [The] process of 'technocratisation' of party cadres [under Ben Ali] must be seen through the evolution of the sociology of the new ministers and state secretaries who are increasingly selected on the basis of academic merit and less according to their political past.[167]

Laurent Guiter correctly described a gradual shift towards political leaders with a more technocratic profile. He also critically reflected that this would eventually replace the imperative of the 'historic allegiance with the leader of the nation [Bourguiba]' with that of a 'technocratic allegiance with the person of the President [Ben Ali]' rather than with democratic politics.[168] However, the intellectuals and academics who joined the Ben Ali regime were not merely simple expressions of this 'technocratic allegiance', which was forged through deeply personalised relations. Many also provided the very substance of its ideological justification, a tendency scholars such as Laurent Guiter have failed to investigate.

The RCD's academic recruitment focused on lawyers and, to a lesser extent, on sociologists – though many of them became highly influential. They were carefully chosen by a handful of close advisers to Ben Ali. Besides Hedi Baccouche, they included Abderrahim Zouari, a lawyer and the head of the RCD Political Bureau responsible for the party's restructuring, as well as Abdelaziz Ben Dhia – then Dean of the Law Faculty in Tunis and a longstanding ally

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[166] 'Ben Ali Trace: Nous Voulons Réaliser le Changement Dans le Pays et Nous Voulons que le R.C.D. en Soit l'Auteur', *Le Renouveau*, 30 July 1988, p. 13.
[167] Laurent Guiter, 'Tunisie: Chronique Intérieure (1997)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1999, 36, Paris: CNRS, p. 296.
[168] Ibid.

of Ben Ali who would become highly influential in subsequent years. Zouari and Ben Dhia recruited mainly trusted students and colleagues. These 'Destourian leftists' – who typically had a background as leaders in the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), the UGET, UGTT, or Perspectivist movement, and were markedly anti-Islamist – took key positions in the sociocultural and educational arenas, and some rose to become the central ideologues of the new regime. Most famously, Mohamed Charfi – a lawyer and leader of the LTDH, who under Bourguiba had spent 15 months in a penitentiary for his activities in the Perspectivist movement – became Education Minister in 1989, a position in which he was tasked with modernising the education curriculum. Abdelbaki Hermassi, a sociologist who had studied at Berkeley, became Culture and Foreign Affairs Minister. These Destourian leftists primarily served to bestow a liberal face on the regime and to underpin its legality; however, they were also critical in shaping its ideological outlook.

The trajectory of Moncer Rouissi – a sociologist with a doctorate from France, who came to join Ben Ali's cabinet as an adviser – is particularly instructive to understand the ways in which authorities recruited some well-known public intellectuals and the central role they took in the regime, especially during its early years. Under Bourguiba Rouissi had been active in the UGTT and the Perspectivist movement. Rouissi told me that he used to have 'a very bad image of Ben Ali' given his brutal repression of the 1978 protest movement in his then function as Director-General of National Security.[169] Yet Rouissi was more compromising towards the authorities than many of his compatriots, as he had family members who held senior PSD posts; his uncle had been an important figure in the struggle for independence.

In the summer of 1987, when anti-regime protests erupted on campuses, Rouissi was teaching at the 9 April University, Tunis, and the Manouba University – bastions of the

[169] Interview with Moncer Rouissi, Tunis, 21 July 2017.

opposition. 'There were protests on a daily basis', Roussi recalled. 'The police intervened. …I remember saying to some friends that Bourguiba won't finish this year [in power]'.[170] While witnessing day-to-day the fragility of the Bourguiba regime, as well as the brutality with which it suppressed its contenders, Rouissi was approached by a member of the Ben Ali clan. He said:

> In July or August 1987, Ben Ali contacted me through an intermediary…who told me that he would like to see me. I had a very bad image of Ben Ali, but [the intermediary] insisted we meet. He said: 'What do you have to lose? What are you afraid of? He wants to see you to talk with you!'[171]

Despite his initial reservations, Rouissi was visibly flattered that he had been asked to speak with – and possibly even provide counsel to – Ben Ali, Interior Minister at the time. He knew Ben Ali only as a strongman, but found him unexpectedly charming and warm during the meeting they eventually convened. He said:

> We spent around two hours together. I was surprised to find a very pleasant, likeable person in front of me. He was very disturbed [by] the general situation in the country. …He talked a lot, which is untypical for a military person… . He talked a lot to someone he did not know – though he knew me of course from his police files.[172]

Rouissi's acknowledgement that Ben Ali must have read his police files – compiled on all known opposition figures – suggests that he was well aware that the Interior Minister probably contacted him as his ties to both the leftist movement and the PSD served him well. He was in an ideal position not only to provide Ben Ali with valuable information about his competitors, but also to act as an intermediary between the regime and its leftist opposition. However, this rationale was overshadowed by the captivating experience of meeting and speaking with Ben Ali in person. Just like some other interviewees, Rouissi

[170] Ibid.
[171] Ibid. Note that Rouissi did not want to reveal the identity of the intermediary.
[172] Ibid.

described Ben Ali as highly charismatic and compelling during private meetings[173] – an image he did not convey in public. He also said that Ben Ali managed to convince him that he sincerely sought to open up the political system. Once Ben Ali was nominated Prime Minister, he called Rouissi directly to convene another meeting. Rouissi recalled:

> [Ben Ali] phoned me. He said: 'We did not finish our discussion!'. I met him again…and we talked about the [political] situation…we discussed it for a long time. I had the impression that he was sincerely committed to opening up the system. The [Bourguiba] system could not have lasted the way it was![174]

Naturally 'opening up' the political arena did not equate to installing a competitive democracy. It is even doubtful that this was something Rouissi himself desired. Indeed, until today he has fierce anti-Islamist views and seems to favour 'managed' freedoms over truly competitive politics that risk being dominated by religious voices – a stance most other leftists who teamed up with Ben Ali shared and came to defend from within the regime.[175] Once Ben Ali took over power, he asked Rouissi to assume a more active political role and join his Presidential Cabinet. Rouissi stated:

> I saw the President a couple of times when I taught at the university… . He asked me to join his cabinet. I refused at the beginning, but he insisted a lot. He said it was for my own protection. He held: 'you know…the police do not like you [academics]. If you are at the Palace…this will protect you, but if you aren't…'.[176]

Rouissi affirmed that he could not 'reject' Ben Ali's point that by joining the Presidential Cabinet he could help to 'protect' the universities. It is noteworthy that Rouissi did not perceive Ben Ali's reference to the police as a threat in case he decided against it. Rather he advanced Ben Ali's argument to justify his decision to enter the cabinet and it is even doubtful that he ever 'refused' in the first place. He and other 'intellectuals were fascinated

[173] Interviews with Mohamed Jegham, Tunis, 19 July 2017; Kamel Morjane, Tunis, 26 May 2016; Moncer Rouissi, Tunis, 21 July 2017.
[174] Interview with Moncer Rouissi, Tunis, 21 July 2017.
[175] For example, interview with Sadok Chaabane, Tunis, 20 July 2017.
[176] Interview with Moncer Rouissi, Tunis, 21 July 2017.

so see the state adopting their discourse'[177] – at least parts of it. Rouissi was particular pleased that Ben Ali did not ask him to give up his teaching position – though this was of course highly strategic because it allowed the President to establish a direct link between the Palace and campuses.

Managed 'reconciliation'

Rouissi and other Destourian leftists integrated into key organs of the RCD, a process Ben Ali framed as part of a wider political 'reconciliation' – a notion first introduced in the 7 November declaration which became a key ideological tenet of the ruling party. Sadok Chaabane – another leftist lawyer recruited by Zouari, who became one of Ben Ali's chief propagandists, heading the RCD's ideological training programme – said they served to 'liberalise' and 'innovate' the party. Chaabane, who at the occasion of the 1988 RCD Congress integrated into its Political Bureau and Central Committee, suggested that the 'recruitment of new faces, new personalities' strengthened the party, as it enlarged its support base and became more representative of the ideological landscape in Tunisia.[178]

However, leftist newcomers such as Chaabane had many adversaries within the RCD – typically longtime followers who feared they would be sidelined. Many of them considered the notion 'Destourian leftists' a contradiction in terms, charging that the newcomers embraced a foreign ideology, imported from France or the Soviet Union, and hence threatened their nationalist cause. They also thought that the integration of leftists devalued the role of the party in society, particularly its historically important role in fostering upward mobility and socioeconomic advancement. Mohamed Ghariani explained:

> Under Bourguiba…the party managed everything, it was the party…with its members that governed and appointed [people]. Under Ben Ali…the party played a role, but it

[177] Asma Larif-Beatrix, 'Chronique Tunisienne (1988)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1990, 27, Paris: CNRS, p. 745.
[178] Interview with Sadok Chaabane, Tunis, 20 July 2017.

> wasn't the same because he diversified the sources of recruitment. Ben Ali…recruited from the administration, intellectual circles, the university. So the party just became one source of recruitment. Under Bourguiba, it was the only source![179]

Clearly, Ghariani idealised the PSD as the economic crisis under Bourguiba had limited its role as a social elevator. Further, its structures overlapped to a large extent with those of the state and its administration, making it often difficult to determine which were paramount in matters such as promotions and recruitment. Though Ghariani acknowledged that Ben Ali's new recruits were formally 'injected'[180] into the RCD, he did not view them as an integral part of the party. Rather, Ghariani argued that their integration into the RCD reflected the emergence of rival sources of political influence and upward mobility, such as universities, suggesting that this weakened the party.

Ghariani's position illustrates the extent to which the opening up of the RCD remained contested amongst the old guard. The party networks became more vast and extended to institutions previously dominated by regime opponents – including not only universities but also the important UGTT, as will be discussed below. Most RCD adherents defended a narrow view of the 'Destourian' and rejected these newcomers. They never came to embrace Ben Ali's declared political 'reconciliation' and denied the newcomers a Destourian identity, denouncing them as 'leftists' and 'unionists', amongst other epithets[181] – outsiders who were imposed on the party.

Ben Ali's promise of political reconciliation entailed not only the RCD's opening up to new voices, but also the legalisation of some opposition parties. Ben Ali sought to display the sincerity of his intentions by taking some of the opposition's key concerns into account, abolishing the Constitution's presidency-for-life provision and gradually releasing all

[179] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 20 July 2017.
[180] Ibid.
[181] For example, interviews with Sofien Kadri, Regueb, governorate of Sidi Bouzid, 27 June 2016; Abbes Mohsen, Tunis, 21 July 2017.

political prisoners Bourguiba had incarcerated. Ben Ali also met with their key representatives, including those from the MTI. Well aware of the sway of religious forces, he revived some Islamic institutions and practices.[182] While most religious activists remained wary of the new authorities – especially MTI followers, who had been severely repressed under Bourguiba – some decided to integrate into the regime. However, this 'Islamo-Destourian' trend constituted only a small fraction of RCD newcomers, a group which remained on the whole dominated by leftists. Amongst others, Cheikh Abderrahman Kheli – the Imam of the Great Mosque of Kairouan, who had fallen out with Bourguiba – publicly sided with the new authorities and reminded people that 'the Destour was founded by a Sheikh, the Sheikh Abdelaziz Thaalbi'.[183] He encouraged his followers to join the 'Change' and during the first parliamentary elections under Ben Ali in 1989 headed the RCD's electoral list in Kairouan.[184]

While trying to seduce the more religious portions of society, the authorities sought also to gain a grip over the UGTT. The union had been substantially weakened following the 1984 Bread Riots, in which its members participated *en masse*. Some of its activists even wished to reconcile with the new powerbrokers to guarantee a minimum of union activities. The RCD's leftists led the discussions between the union and the regime. A key figure was Moncer Rouissi, who himself had a background in the UGTT. He recalled:

> [We] sought to…normalise relations with the union. We met with Habib Achour, who was a very strong historical figure in the UGTT. …I persuaded him to withdraw from the UGTT leadership, to retire. …I said, a new page is turning in Tunisia. …I also convinced Abdelaziz Boraoui, another union leader, to step down [and]…to establish a [UGTT] Committee of Syndicalist Reconciliation.[185]

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[182] Amongst other actions, Ben Ali restored the status of Tunisia's historic Zaytouna University – which Bourguiba had reduced to a simple faculty of Islamic law and Theology – as a university and established a Ministry of Religious Affairs and a Supreme Islamic Council. See, for details, Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 68–69.
[183] 'Entretien Avec le Cheikh Abderrahman Khelif, Tête de Liste R.C.D. Pour la Circonscription de Kairouan, "La Vérité est Multiple"', *Réalités*, 189, March/April 1989, p. 36.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Interview with Moncer Rouissi, Tunis, 21 July 2017.

It is improbable that negotiations between the union and the RCD were as smooth as Rouissi describes, and longtime figureheads such as Habib Achour and Abdelaziz Boraoui are unlikely to have given up their posts voluntarily. However, they had little choice given how vulnerable the union had become after years of repression and in the face of a massive popular influx into the RCD, including from some leftists with a background in the UGTT. The fact that the new authorities even managed to establish a Committee of Syndicalist Reconciliation within the UGTT – tasked with smoothing the union's ties to the regime as well as reconciling members with distinct ideologies – illustrates the extent to which they managed to coopt the union leadership early on. During the 1989 legislative elections, three figureheads of the left-wing UGTT were elected lawmakers for the RCD[186] – quite ironically, given that the party ran on an economically liberal programme and in subsequent years worked hard to reduce the influence of the union.

The authorities' most prominent attempt at 'reconciliation' was the so-called National Pact, signed on 7 November 1988 – the anniversary of Ben Ali's takeover – by sixteen parties and associations, including the UGTT, the employers' federation – the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicraft (UTICA) – and the MTI[187]. It enshrined their support for popular freedoms, human rights, and the Code of Personal Status, but specified that this was subject to 'the context of the law' – a qualification most observers did not pay much attention to at the time.[188] The key role political pacts had played in democratic transformations in Europe and South America led many to uncritically infer a similar trend

[186] They were Amara Abassi, Mohsen Dridi, and Mohamed Sghaier Saidane, representing the governorates of Gafsa, Bizerte, and Kairouan respectively.
[187] Note that the MTI had not been legalised, so its members supported the pact through a representative who signed the final agreement.
[188] For example, US Embassy in Tunis, 'Tunisia Celebrates 7 November; Elections Next April; National Pact Signed', *Wikileaks*, 8 November 1988, 88TUNIS11598_a, confidential; Lisa Anderson, 'Political Pacts, Liberalism, and Democracy: The Tunisian National Pact of 1988', *Government and Opposition*, 1991, 26, pp. 244–260. Note that Anderson writes that the National Pact '[devotes attention]…to the political rights and responsibilities associated with classical liberalism' (p. 247).

in Tunisia.[189] It is noteworthy that the text of Tunisia's National Pact was discussed and signed at the Presidential Palace, rather than in the framework of an elected body, such as the parliament. The initiators of the pact – most importantly, Hedi Baccouche – justified this choice by stating that the parliamentary deputies hailed from the Bourguiba era and were therefore not apt to lead the 'Change'.[190] However, they could have waited until the first elections under Ben Ali, which took place only five months later. Clearly the priority was to boost the legitimacy of the new regime rather than that of its governing organs. Tunisian lawyer and scholar Lazhar Bououni argued that the National Pact

> paved the way for the establishment of a consensual democracy [that] privileges the path of dialogue with different partners…[over] an institutional framework. …The signature of the text in the Palace, under the patronage of President Ben Ali, has symbolic value: that of a desire for reconciliation…with all components of the Tunisian society and the renunciation of a tutelary vision of power. …The recognition of the right of difference…implies, for the initiators of the National Pact, the organisation of this difference.[191]

Bououni's analysis of the pact is interesting not only because he is another example of a Tunisian public intellectual with close ties to French academic circles who integrated into the Ben Ali regime as a 'Destourian leftist' and quickly rose to its leading ranks: at the time of the 2010–11 uprisings he was Minister for Justice and Human Rights and was later convicted for abusing power and possessing illegal funds. Bououni's analysis is especially insightful as it lays bare the contradictions between the authorities' official rhetoric and their ruling strategies and goals. While Bououni affirmed that the pact signified the 'renunciation' of presidential tutelage and the 'right of difference', he simultaneously specified that it was concluded 'under the patronage of President Ben Ali' and entitled the new powerbrokers to

[189] Ibid.
[190] Interview with Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 22 July 2017.
[191] Lazhar Bouony, 'Relations de Pouvoir et Démocratie Consensuelle en Tunisie: Propos sur le Pacte National', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1997, 36, Paris: CNRS, p. 342.

manage political plurality. Political voices that did not endorse the pact, such as the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party, were outside this 'consensual democracy' and remained illegal.

In her singular research, Béatrice Hibou established the close association of 'procedures of negotiated compromise with political domination' in Tunisia[192] – of which the National Pact is a prime example. She warned that officials positioned themselves as part of a 'rational, cultivated [and] open…elite', led 'by the man of providence [Ben Ali]'.[193] They claimed to be the only ones apt to reform the political system, as 'the state was in advance of society, the only body in a position to give concrete form to the implementation of modern, rational ideas thanks to the impetus given by the strong man'.[194] What officials sold as an avant-garde pact owing to the foresight of their new leadership was, first and foremost, an attempt to coopt the opposition and control the nature of the demands emanating from it; it also served to convey 'a degree of stability and predictability' – a common strategy to '[reassure] threatened traditional elites' during periods of political transformations.[195]

Naturally the instrumentalisation of the idea of the 'enlightened leader' was nothing new to Tunisia. Bourguiba himself had claimed to be the founder and guarantor of 'modern Tunisia'[196] – a stipulation he commonly evoked to justify his authoritarian politics. Both Bourguiba and Ben Ali advanced a teleological legitimation of their regimes which also became the central ideological tenet of their ruling party: it saw the state and party as guarantors to achieve the overarching goals of 'progress', 'modernisation' and 'stability', which they placed at the centre of politics but never elaborated in much detail. To

[192] Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, Cambridge: Polity, 2011, p. 211.
[193] Ibid., p. 214.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Terry Karl, 'Petroleum and Political Pacts: The Transition to Democracy in Venezuela', in Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead (eds.), *Transitions From Authoritarian Rule: Latin America*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986, p. 198.
[196] Many commentators have internalised this narrative; see, for example, 'Habib Bourguiba (1903–2000): Fondateur de la Tunisie Moderne', *Manière de Voir*, 2006, 86, 4, https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/mav/86/A/52521, last accessed 3 September 2018.

differentiate himself from Bourguiba, Ben Ali sought to reinterpret Tunisia's recent history, suggesting that modernisation initiatives preceded Tunisia's first President. He revived the image of several nineteenth-century figures who had instigated pioneering reforms, 'mythological heroes' of a type commonly evoked by authoritarian leaders as the supposed 'founders of the political community'.[197] They included Kheireddine Pasha al-Tunisi, a former Prime Minister who in 1875 founded Sadiki College, which taught modern sciences and was popular in elite circles; Ben Ali even had his picture printed on 20 Tunisian dinars (hereafter TND) notes, which had previously displayed Bourguiba.[198] Ben Ali also rehabilitated important Destourian figureheads who had fallen out with Bourguiba, such as Abdelaziz Thaalbi and Salah Ben Youssef – the founder of the Destour and Bourguiba's rival for the Neo Destour leadership – whom he awarded the Grand Cordon of Independence.[199]

The new authorities redefined the boundaries of the modern and nationalist – all while retaining key ruling strategies and ideological frames from the previous regime. Indeed, just like the Bourguiba authorities, Ben Ali officials demanded exclusive claim to Tunisia's identity and equated it with the ideological project of the party. One coursebook published and used by the RCD Centre for Studies and Training – the party's ideological education wing, which in 1989 was launched on a budget of 250,000 TND[200] – detailed:

> The year 1987 marked the great transition, not only in the state, but also in the party. The ideology changed and the course of action changed. Today our political battles are internal. …The previous battles…were led against the other [France]. Today's battles…compete, within a wide-scale national reconciliation framework. …It is true that some movements are connected until today to the other. They did not break their external

[197] Compare Andrew F. March, 'From Leninism to Karimovism: Hegemony, Ideology, and Authoritarian Legitimation', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2003, 19, 4, p. 318.
[198] Note that Bourguiba's daughter, Hajer, fiercely denounced Ben Ali's revival of Kheireddine. She even alleged that Kheireddine had stolen money from the state to suggest that he was not able to hold a candle to her father (interview with Hajer Bourguiba, Sidi Bou Said, 28 July 2017).
[199] 'Le Chef de l'État Décore des Martyrs et des Résistants', *Le Temps*, 21 March 1989, p. 2.
[200] Interview with Zouhair Mdhafer, Tunis, 10 February 2017.

> ties and did not nationalise their affairs… . Such movements…are not inside our democratic system.[201]

While proclaiming 'the great transition', RCD officials affirmed that some parties still embraced external agendas – though the foreign enemy, France, had been defeated. They applied the same reasoning Bourguiba used to justify the PSD's political dominance to legitimise their management of political 'plurality'. They simply redefined which parties were outside the nationalist and ideological frames. The new authorities enlarged the number of legal opposition parties, but were careful to license only those who had come to accept Ben Ali's leadership unconditionally, and criminalised all others – creeping authoritarian practices that were overshadowed by the seductive rhetoric of 'national reconciliation'.

Controlling the party structures

Persistent talk about reconciliation and an undeniable – if tactical – political opening clouded another trend that would bestow Ben Ali with vast powers in the years to come. Having appointed a new local RCD leadership through nationwide cell congresses, Ben Ali and his team next took it upon themselves to change the party's representatives on the national level and the ways in which its institutions there were constituted. The occasion for this was the first RCD Congress, convened from 29–31 July 1988 under the banner of 'salvation', a topic chosen in an attempt to 'prolong' the supposed 'countrywide enthusiasm…[for] 7 November'.[202] The conference logo – a hand rescuing someone from

[201] Sadok Chaabane, 'Tahawwul al-Sabiʿ min November wa-l-Tajdid al-Fikri li-l-Tajammuʿ al-Dusturi al-Dimuqrati' (*The 7 November Transition and the Intellectual Renewal of the Constitutional Democratic Rally*), in *Markaz al-Dirasat wa-l-Takwin, Muntadayat al-Fikr al-Siyasi 2008–2009* (*RCD Centre for Studies and Training, Political Thought Forums 2008–2009*), p. 47, Tunis: RCD Publications, 2009.
[202] 'TUNISIE: le "Congrès du Salut"; Le Parti Gouvernemental est Invité à se Rénover en Vue des Futures Échéances Électorales', *Le Monde*, 30 July 1988, http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1988/07/30/tunisie-le-congres-du-salut-le-parti-gouvernemental-est-invite-a-se-renover-en-vue-des-futures-echeances-electorales_4086493_1819218.html#fQxOjKcTSpwbrGLw.99, last accessed 25 October 2017.

drowning – served to remind participants that Ben Ali had managed to 'stop the damage' of the Bourguiba regime, and this without any bloodshed.[203]

The conference brought together both the PSD old guard and RCD newcomers, including its leftist recruits, youth activists, and the regional leaders that had been designated earlier in the year. The day of the conference opening, *Le Renouveau* announced that disputes were likely to erupt between these opposing party wings. It remarked:

> At first glance, the democratic current…seems to outweigh by far the reactionaries and conservatives. …The two RCD trends risk… [turning into] a struggle for influence between the supporters of renewal and the PSD old guard, protected through their historic legitimacy, which…is no longer suited to influence the course of events or to infuse the Rally with the energy it needs to meet challenges and change mentalities. Congress participants should therefore expect major conflicts between conservatives and reformers.[204]

It is noteworthy that within less than a year the confidence of the Ben Ali team had grown to the extent it now dared to openly denounce the PSD old guard as 'reactionaries' and 'conservatives' and contrast them with the RCD's supposedly new 'democratic trend' and 'reformers'; at the Central Committee meeting just five months earlier Ben Ali officials had still advanced a much more accommodating discourse. This illustrates how quickly the new powerbrokers had managed to strengthen their leverage within the party and that they had no intention to pursue reconciliatory politics towards Bourguiba-era figures once they believed they had gained the upper hand. However, they were still keen to project an overall compromising stance on the outside. At the end of the congress *Le Renouveau* declared that the expected 'fight between the old guard and the modernists had not taken place' as

[203] Ibid.
[204] Salem Cheikh, 'Parti du Bon Pied', *Le Renouveau*, 29 July 1998, p. 12.

'everybody agreed on the 7 November principles'[205] – even though major disputes did erupt between opposing party wings.

The main point of disagreement between the PSD old guard and the RCD newcomers was the composition of the Central Committee and how its seats were allocated. Under Bourguiba, the Central Committee consisted of 90 members who were officially elected – though a list of names was typically prepared in advance and voting was more of a formality. Ben Ali enlarged the Central Committee to 200 seats, of which 122 were appointed by the President. The authorities claimed that designations were necessary to open up the party structures to new political faces – the same reasoning they had already advanced during the RCD cell congress a few months earlier, when they decided to appoint all local and regional party figureheads. Abderrahim Zouari, who was responsible for the RCD's restructuring, explained:

> Two-thirds of the Central Committee was nominated and one-third was elected, to allow the youth, women and academics to become members. They did not have a social base to become elected and we wanted to give them a chance.[206]

Zouari suggested that the appointments served solely to integrate RCD newcomers into the Central Committee. Alongside leftists, academics, and youth activists, they also included some wealthy entrepreneurs who had come to side with the new powerbrokers.[207] The Central Committee nominations pushed the old guard to the margins and allowed Ben Ali officials to gain a majority, that is, to control the RCD's largest institution. In parallel, the new authorities also gained a grip on the Coordination Committee. Under Bourguiba, Coordination Committee members were elected, so influential regional figureheads emerged by virtue of their activism and social base in their localities. At the Congress of Salvation,

[205] 'Dans le Vif du Salut', *Le Renouveau*, 31 July 1998, p. 1.
[206] Interview with Abderrahim Zouari, Tunis, 9 February 2017.
[207] Interview with Sofien Kadri, Regueb, governorate of Sidi Bouzid, 27 June 2016. Note that contrary to Zouari's statement, almost no women joined the Central Committee at the time.

Ben Ali altered the RCD's procedural rules: all Coordination Committee members were henceforth to be appointed, not elected. This enabled him to promote his own people to regional representative posts, a practice that further sidelined many Bourguiba-era figureheads and created many party losers amongst Tunisia's traditional political elite. It also detached the RCD's local structures from its regional and national institutions, marginalising many grassroots leaders. One local leader from the coastal town of Hammam-Lif elaborated that

> the PSD had been a social elevator. First you were an activist of a cell, then of a federation, then of the Coordination Committee, then you had the chance to become a high public servant. Ben Ali disconnected [the party structures], so this was no longer the case.[208]

Under Ben Ali, only the RCD cell leaders were elected. This limited their ability to climb up the party ranks as it effectively 'disconnected' local representatives from higher-ranking posts. It also triggered a deep rift between elected and appointed figureheads, who came to mistrust one another – with far-reaching consequences that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

While gaining a grip over the most important RCD institutions, Ben Ali also strengthened his prerogatives as President of the party. Prior to the congress, some opposition figures had suggested Ben Ali relinquish his position as RCD President to break once and for all with the personality cult of his predecessor and to separate party structures more clearly from those of the state – a necessity if other political voices were to compete with the RCD. Ben Ali rejected this proposition and at the congress had himself elected RCD President by acclamation – his first official mandate as head of the party – all while affirming that 'although he was the President of a party, he was no less the President of all Tunisians'[209]. In

[208] Interview with Naoufel Aziz, Tunis, 24 July 2017.
[209] Asma Larif-Beatrix, 'Chronique Tunisienne (1988)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1990, 27, Paris: CNRS, p. 745. Note that in later years prominent RCD officials suggested that opposition figures who asked

parallel, he abolished the position of RCD Director – until then occupied by Hamed Karoui; he retained only the post of Secretary General, to which he appointed Abderrahim Zouari, a longtime Ben Ali loyalist. Mohamed Ghariani elaborated that 'the Director was the one who commanded, who led, …[but] the Secretary General was a position…mainly related to the internal management of the RCD'.[210] The Secretary General was limited to administrative duties and the execution of presidential directives.[211]

Ben Ali said he abrogated the position of RCD Director in order to respond to the opposition's demand that party structures be separated from the state, given that the Director was also a minister in government.[212] However, he could alternatively have changed the RCD's internal statute and limited the Director's duties to those pertaining to the party. Moreover, the Prime Minister remained simultaneously RCD Vice-President – a largely symbolic post, but an illustration that Ben Ali did not care much about disentangling party institutions from the state. Rather he abolished the position of RCD Director because he did not wish to deal with a strong party figure who could pursue his own agendas and priorities which might possibly contradict his own interests as President.

It is noteworthy that Ben Ali officials took other steps that made the party appear more detached from the state, but which ultimately turned out to be meaningless in that respect and served mainly to bolster the support base of the new regime. On the regional level they stipulated that the position of governor – who under Bourguiba had headed the PSD's

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for 'separating the party's presidency from the state's presidency' had 'either ill intentions or hostile attitudes'. See, for details, Ahmed Iyadh Ouederni, 'Al-ʿAlaqa bayna al-Tajammuʿ wa-l-Dawla fi Zil al-Taʿaddudiyyat al-Siyasiyya' (*The Relationship Between the Rally and the State in Light of Political Pluralism*), in *Markaz al-Dirasat wa-l-Takwin, Muntadayat al-Fikr al-Siyasi 2008–2009* (*RCD Centre for Studies and Training, Political Thought Forums 2008–2009*), p. 4, Tunis: RCD Publications, 2009.

[210] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 20 July 2017.

[211] The RCD's rules of procedure vaguely stated that the Secretary General was 'to help [the President] perform his duties, manage the Rally's bodies, activate its structures [and] enhance its choices'. See, for details, Al-Nizam al-Dakhili li-l-Tajammuʿ al-Dusturi al-Dimuqrati, al-Fasl 4, al-Madda 25 (*Statute of the Constitutional Democratic Rally, Chapter 4, Article 25*). Copy received from private archives in Tunis.

[212] 'Conférence de Presse du Dr Karoui: Le Président Ben Ali Restera le Président du R.C.D', *Le Renouveau*, 30 July 1988, p. 4.

regional chapters – was independent from the RCD. Henceforth regional RCD Secretaries General directed the party in their localities.[213] A neutral governor was not only in the opposition's interests but also served many RCD activists who believed that public servants had taken over too many party prerogatives. On the national level, Ben Ali officials promised to give the RCD 'a say in deciding on their government representatives', who had previously been handpicked by Bourguiba.[214] Sadok Chaabane evaluated that 'the most important thing for a party is its capacity to choose, to nominate…to present its candidates in parliament, during municipal elections'.[215] He affirmed that many party activists sincerely believed that Ben Ali wanted to strengthen the role of the RCD given the range of innovations he brought to its structure and ideological outlook.

Many congress participants stated that they were attracted by the very notion of political reform – after decades of stagnation under Bourguiba – and only realised in subsequent years that many changes primarily served the interest of Ben Ali, rather than the party. Amongst other points, interviewees typically said that they initially supported the practice of designations within the Central Committee and the Coordination Committee because it injected new blood into the party, but that they came to regret it in later years. Many interviewees were RCD newcomers, who directly profited from the appointments, but even some members of the old guard – though a minority – were taken by the wave of new party adherents and initially supported designating some of these to leading posts.[216]

So, within less than a year Ben Ali, who had no background in the PSD, found himself at the forefront of Destourian party politics. He became the RCD's consensus figurehead – the only person that seemed apt to unite its different currents, to instigate innovation into the

[213] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 20 July 2017.
[214] Interview with Sadok Chaabane, Tunis, 20 July 2017.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Interviews with Naziha Zarrouk, Tunis, 30 January 2017; Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 22 July 2017.

Destour without a complete rupture with its history. Ben Ali became the very personification of what new Destourian politics was all about – and with the reforms at the Congress he controlled not only the RCD's ideological tenets, but also its institutions to an extent Bourguiba never did. The party of Bourguiba had become the party of Ben Ali.

Dominating politics

To make sure nobody could challenge his leadership from within the regime's ruling circles, Ben Ali next dismissed his coup comrades and long-time friends Habib Amar and Hedi Baccouche. The marginalisation of coup co-conspirators is a frequent practice amongst authoritarian leaders seeking to consolidate their power in the early years of their rule.[217] Following Ben Ali's takeover Amar had been assigned the influential position of Interior Minister. News soon began circulating that he had played an important role in the deposal of Bourguiba. Indeed, it was Amar's troops that surrounded the Presidential Palace on the night of 7 November, whereas Ben Ali was mainly in charge of the logistics of the coup.[218] Amar explained that frictions erupted between himself and the President, who wanted people to believe that he alone had removed Bourguiba. He said:

> When I was Interior Minister I was very popular… . Ben Ali's advisors told him to dismiss me. They said I would do with him exactly what he did with Bourguiba… . One day a newspaper published an article saying that Ben Ali and I did 7 November together…that it wasn't Ben Ali who did everything by himself… . I was dismissed immediately afterwards as Interior Minister.[219]

In July 1988 Amar was demoted to Minister of State for the Interior, which he described as a position without any real responsibilities.[220] Three months later he was placed under house

[217] See, for example, Barbara Geddes, 'Minimum-Winning Coalitions and Personalization in Authoritarian Regimes', Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 2–5, 2004.
[218] Interview with Habib Ammar, Gammarth, 27 July 2017.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid.

arrest and then assigned an ambassadorial post in Austria. While Amar suggested he was 'very popular' at the time, it is notable that his falling-out with the President received very little media coverage – even though it had wide-ranging consequences: with Amar outside the country, Ben Ali not only controlled the RCD's countrywide networks, but also the defence and security apparatus – structures he would progressively merge in subsequent years, as will be detailed in the next chapter.

Ben Ali would wait a few more months to conclude the dismissal of Baccouche, the Prime Minister and RCD Vice-President. In contrast to Amar, Baccouche was a prominent political figurehead who had participated in the Neo Destour's struggle against the French. Ben Ali relied on his historic legacy during the April 1989 general elections, when Baccouche was central in mobilising the RCD grassroots, including its PSD old guard. However, even before the elections, frictions emerged between Ben Ali and Baccouche, who wanted the President to acknowledge his contributions to 7 November. These frictions burst out into the open in March 1989 when the weekly *Jeune Afrique* published an interview with Baccouche, quoting him in the title saying 'The Change – I did it!'.[221] Through the course of the interview Baccouche largely qualified this statement, elaborating that: 'on 7 November, I was there and in a strong position' and 'I realise the Change with the President day-to-day'.[222] However, the title was enough for Ben Ali to seethe with anger and he allegedly did not even read the rest of the article.[223] Abbes Mohsen, one of Ben Ali's close collaborators at the time, recalled:

> With this unfortunate title…it was over [for Baccouche]. Ben Ali was furious, he was full of rage! He sent Mohamed Jeri, the Director of his Presidential Cabinet, to see Mister Baccouche and ask him to deny the article.[224]

[221] 'Hedi Baccouche: "Le Changement, Je l'ai Fait!"', *Jeune Afrique*, 1472, March 1989, p. 28.
[222] Ibid., p. 30.
[223] Interview with Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 22 July 2017.
[224] Interview with Abbes Mohsen, Tunis, 22 July 2017.

However, Baccouche refused to refute the article, affirming 'there was a lot of good information in it'.[225] Shortly afterwards Ben Ali launched a propaganda campaign against his Prime Minister. He charged that Baccouche was trying to boycott his political 'Change', a discourse many commentators uncritically assumed. When in September 1989 Baccouche was finally dismissed as Prime Minister, *Le Monde* wrote that this was because he 'blocked [Ben Ali's] politics of modernisation'. The article assessed that Ben Ali had 'no other choice' than to dismiss Baccouche if he wanted to pursue his reform project.[226] Blinded by the regime's seductive discourse on modernisation, most commentators failed to see that Baccouche's replacement, Hamed Karoui – another longtime Ben Ali loyalist from Sousse – was certainly not more reform-minded, but less of a political heavyweight and therefore easier to control.

The discrepancy between the regime's outwardly innovative image and its actual ruling strategies and goals became most apparent during the April 1989 general elections. Propagated as the first occasion for 'the popular will…to express itself'[227] in Tunisia, the elections strikingly exposed the authoritarian underpinnings of the new regime – both within the RCD as well as towards opposition forces. Prior to the elections, Ben Ali officials had created a parliamentary commission to reform the electoral code, but it retained the winner-takes-all majority list system, which had been used under Bourguiba. It also stipulated that every candidate needed to obtain the support of 75 eligible voters prior to the elections, then register them with the municipal authorities, who often belonged to the RCD and could use their administrative discretion to create additional procedural hurdles. This made it very

[225] Interview with Hedi Baccouche, Tunis, 22 July 2017.
[226] 'TUNISIE: La Destitution du Premier Ministre, M. Baccouche; Le Président Ben Ali Charge M. Karoui de Relancer les Réformes', *Le Monde*, 29 September 1989, http://www.lemonde.fr/recherche/#Mjssf4S664mqt0Ro.99, last accessed 1 November 2017.
[227] 'Un Entretien Avec le Président Tunisien Ben Ali; La Volonté Populaire Pourra s'Exprimer le 7 Novembre 1989 à l'Occasion d'Élections Présidentielle et Législatives Anticipées', *Le Monde*, 10 September 1988, http://www.lemonde.fr/recherche/#s5PPgcj7AGg5WMAm.99, last accessed 3 November 2017.

difficult for opposition voices – especially small parties with a limited support base – to present electoral lists.

To divert attention from the code's blatant shortcomings, Ben Ali suggested that opposition parties who signed the National Pact establish common lists with the RCD. This was deeply contentious within the RCD's own ranks, as many activists believed they were the only truly nationalist force, some going as far as to label other political trends as 'treasonous'.[228] However, the RCD leadership was quick to convey to its activists that they would keep the upper hand and could determine the composition of the common lists.[229] It is notable that all major opposition forces initially accepted the proposition, believing this was the only way for them to gain any parliamentary seats; yet the MDS soon backtracked and other parties followed, so the entire initiative collapsed. Subsequently Ahmed Mestiri, the MDS Secretary General, published a statement demanding 'free competitive elections' and denouncing an 'increase in harassment of opposition activists'.[230]

The opposition's refusal to present common lists was a clever opportunity for the authorities to hold them responsible for the RCD's subsequent political dominance. Indeed, it is even possible that Ben Ali officials proposed the initiative with exactly this goal in mind and that they never expected the opposition to come on board. In a 2017 statement, the Tunisian Association of Former Parliamentarians – which was created in 2013 and consists of many formerly high-ranking RCD officials – charged that it wasn't the electoral code, but the opposition's rejection of the common lists that reflected an 'abortion of the foundations of

[228] Note that Zakya Daoud affirmed that Belhadj Amor, the Secretary General of the Popular Unity Party, first proposed to establish common lists (Zakya Daoud, 'Chronique Tunisienne (1989)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1991, 28, Paris: CNRS, p. 681). However, interviewees denied this account (interviews with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017; Moncer Rouissi, Tunis, 21 July 2017).
[229] Interview with Moncer Rouissi, Tunis, 21 July 2017.
[230] Zakya Daoud, 'Chronique Tunisienne (1989)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1991, 28, Paris: CNRS, p. 680.

the national democratic path'.[231] Moreover, in an interview days before the elections, the Prime Minister insinuated that Ben Ali's proposal to create common lists evinced that 'there has been a real internal revolution [within the RCD]', which, he stressed, 'is not true for other political voices'.[232] In what sounded like an attempt to prepare the public for the RCD's imminent victory, he declared:

> We are willing to fight and why not to win. Will we have the totality or the majority of seats? 80% or 60% of the votes? We will see this [on election day] and nobody in a democracy is allowed to prejudice the results… . President Ben Ali unblocked the [ruling party], which has been entirely renewed. This gives us a lot of credit…and leads us to believe that our position on the eve of the elections is strong.[233]

The results of the 2 April 1989 elections did not offer any surprises: the RCD claimed 80.6% of the votes and were allocated all 141 parliamentary seats; Ben Ali, the only presidential candidate, was elected with 99.27% of the votes. Clearly, it was never about whether the RCD would gain a 'totality' or a 'majority' of parliamentary posts – though either would have allowed it to dominate the legislature. Opposition forces – even those who performed comparatively well – stood no chance of gaining even a limited number of seats. Representatives of the Islamist movement – renamed Harakat Ennahda ('Renaissance Movement') in 1988 – participated on independent lists and scored up to 20% in several electoral districts. Former RCD activists said they were baffled by the dedication and enthusiasm with which Ennahda followers participated in the elections, which contrasted with the behaviour many members of the ruling party evinced. Mohamed Ben Khallifa, then a cell leader in Bizerte's town of Ras Jebel, recounted that on election day

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[231] 'Istintajat al-Qiraʾa al-Naqdiyya li-Masarat al-Hukm min Sanat 1955 ila Sanat 2010' (*Inductions from the Critical Reading of the Trajectories of Governance from 1955 until 2010*). Association of Former Tunisian Parliamentarians, July 2017, private archives in Tunis. Note that the only 'criticism' the association's members voiced about the electoral code is that it should 'perhaps' have granted a 'certain degree' of representation to the opposition, possibly via a quota, in order to 'lend more credibility to the democratic process' – an implicit rejection of free competitive elections.
[232] 'Hedi Baccouche: "Le Changement, Je l'ai Fait!"', *Jeune Afrique*, 1472, March 1989, p. 29.
[233] Ibid.

> RCD observers came to my office complaining that they did not receive free coffee [as promised]. …They were upset and [left] the polling station. …I found myself in tears. I said an [RCD] adherent who believes in the party…stays in the polling station all day long – fasting [if necessary]! …That's when I realised [the RCD] was in decline… . The Islamists…arrived [at the polling station] at 7am in the morning, before everybody else. They stayed the entire day… . We tried to make them leave for a bit, to falsify [the results]…but they never left![234]

Despite the vigilance of Ennahda followers, many polling station officials still ended up manipulating the results by reporting that the Islamists received fewer votes than they did, which triggered an outcry amongst their support base. Ben Khallifa explained that ballot station directors feared they would be sanctioned if the RCD did not do well enough in their districts, so they tended to inflate the number of people who had voted for the party;[235] naturally the election results were also rigged at higher levels. The fact that officials sought to falsify the election results even though they produced a landslide victory for the RCD reveals that they never intended to even tolerate a limited political opposition.

The discipline of Ennahda activists who stayed at the polling booth all day long stands in stark contrast to the RCD members who were upset and left because nobody brought them free coffee. Ben Khallifa's coffee anecdote is particularly revealing as it lays bare the lack of enthusiasm the party's rank and file displayed on election day. Ben Khallifa elaborated that the activists in his town of Ras Jebel had been disillusioned by the way in which the RCD's electoral list there had been constituted. Months before the elections, party cell leaders had been asked to consult their base and together propose a series of names for the list, but ultimately every single candidate was imposed from above.[236] This left many activists – some of whom had spent weeks trying to find suitable front-runners – alienated from the

[234] Interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, Bizerte governorate, 9 February 2017.
[235] Ibid.
[236] Ibid.

party incumbents, who had failed to live up to their promise to pursue democratic practices within the RCD.

In protest, some activists did not even vote for the RCD. Ben Khallifa recalled that several party members were startled when the polling station staff requested to see their completed ballot papers in order to determine where they had put their cross. They had not expected that voting in the first elections under Ben Ali would be just as coercive as it had been under Bourguiba. Some were humiliated in front of other voters when it became apparent they had not cast a ballot for the RCD. Ben Khallifa confided that he himself had not supported the RCD in the elections. He stated:

> When I entered the polling station I only took the paper with the red list [from the RCD]. But I crossed out the name of the head of the list from Ras Jebel, so my vote could not be counted. That's what I did and you are the first person I told about it![237]

Ben Khallifa's account is probably truthful given that – despite all of his criticism – he still takes a lot of pride in his previous RCD activism. Ben Khallifa explained he cast an invalid vote because he fiercely opposed the candidacy of the RCD's head of list in Ras Jebel, whose name, he said, did not even feature amongst the recommendations his cell had submitted to the leadership.[238] The fact that Ben Khallifa, a cell leader, did not even vote for the RCD exposes how quickly its support base was crumbling. Many party followers had trusted that their new officials would enact important reforms within the RCD – in particular, that they would open it up to internal competition – and felt betrayed when they realised that these had been empty promises.

Now that Ben Ali officials had established the RCD's political dominance, they no longer needed to uphold the pretence of political reconciliation – either amongst the RCD's

[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid.

different wings or towards other parties. Shortly after the elections, authorities began a crackdown on Ennahda, their biggest political opponent. Between 1989 and 1992, they imprisoned up to 8,000 of its followers.[239] They also took tough actions against RCD members, typically from the PSD old guard, who were considered too critical of the regime, though this trend has been overlooked so far. Fathi Baoueb, the self-described Destourian activist from Monastir, recounted that when in 1990 he publicly disapproved of aspects of Ben Ali's foreign policy, he found himself in prison.[240] Alongside dozens of other Destourian activists at odds with the new powerbrokers, Baoueb was charged for pursuing a 'plot against the head of state'. He was tortured, and released only after several months in jail.[241]

Conclusions

This chapter has shown that as soon as Ben Ali had gained a grip on both the state and the party, he discontinued the tactical political liberalisation he had launched in November 1987. Up to the April 1989 elections Ben Ali had relied on a broad support base and negotiated compromises to remain in power and become elected President: he extended the party networks to universities and leftist corners, which were traditionally opposed to the regime; this restructuring was underpinned by the regime's ideological tenets, focusing on reconciliation, compromise, and unity. Ben Ali even dropped his plans to launch a new party. Indeed, the RCD emerged out of the PSD during a critical juncture – a brief period during which the creation of an alternative ruling party was a real possibility – which has not been investigated so far. Like other political leaders, Ben Ali pursued a strategy aimed at

[239] 'Tunisia: Prolonged Incommunicado Detention and Torture', *Amnesty International*, 4 March 1992, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde30/004/1992/en/, last accessed 5 November 2017.
[240] Interview with Fathi Baoueb, Monastir, 27 July 2017. Note that his account was corroborated through other interviews.
[241] Ibid.

maximising his influence without incurring 'unacceptably high costs'.[242] Scholars of critical junctures have stressed the importance of decisions by influential actors who seek to bolster their own positions during periods of fluidity. Power relationships are important, and Ben Ali's very understanding of his own strategic interest changed during the negotiations about the ruling party; it was contingent upon other actors, such as Hedi Baccouche, who retained a lot of influence and fervently defended the PSD. Ben Ali decided to enter into a compromise with Bourguiba-era figures rather than to create his own party. Though this could have been perceived as weakness, he must have concluded that enjoying the support of the old guard would produce higher payoffs on his way to consolidate power.

As soon as Ben Ali established control over the state and party such compromises posed a threat to his quest for political dominance, so he backtracked. The regime '[became] more centralized and hierarchical', a common trend once dictators have consolidated their power.[243] The President tolerated no criticism, least of all from followers of his own party, from whom he demanded absolute loyalty and blind obedience. Ben Ali began to rule with fear and terror – to an extent that Bourguiba never had – and the RCD structures and security forces became key to this pursuit, as will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

[242] Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 26.
[243] Compare Barbara Geddes, 'Minimum-Winning Coalitions and Personalization in Authoritarian Regimes', Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 2–5, 2004, p. 11.

3. ALL THE PARTY'S OFFICERS

[Ben Ali] was the head of the police who became the head of state all while remaining the head of the police.

Tarek Chaabouni, Tunis, 1 October 2015

When Ben Ali visited France in 1997, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin lauded the 'economic performance' and 'security' established during his first ten years of rule. Jospin further elaborated that 'politically, the choice of economic liberalisation will foster a wider opening towards…democracy and pluralism'.[244] Jospin's statement reflected a growing narrative in the West according to which Tunisian authorities had managed to cultivate prosperity and stability. In the mid 1990s European partners even began talking about a 'Tunisian miracle'[245] and expressed hope that economic liberalisation would elevate Tunisia to the status of a 'Mediterranean Singapore'.[246] They uncritically assumed the official Tunisian discourse, which increasingly came to suggest that economic growth precedes and enables political freedoms.[247] Jospin's proclamation of a gradual political opening seems particularly misplaced in light of the 1989 general elections – in which the RCD took all parliamentary seats and Ben Ali was the only presidential candidate – and the large-scale human rights violations, particularly against Islamist contenders, that were discussed in the previous

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[244] 'M. Jospin Confiant Dans les Progrès de la Tunisie Vers la Démocratie', *Le Monde*, 23 October 1997, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1997/10/23/m-jospin-confiant-dans-les-progres-de-la-tunisie-vers-la-democratie_3776732_1819218.html?xtmc=tunisie_democratie&xtcr=5, last accessed 18 June 2018.
[245] Lénaïg Bredoux and Mathieu Magnaudeix, *Tunis Connection: Enquête sur les Réseaux Franco-Tunisiens Sous Ben Ali*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012, p. 45.
[246] The notion of a 'Mediterranean Singapore' was widely propagated by Tunisian officials. See, for details, Zakya Daoued, 'Tunisie: Chronique Intérieure (1994)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1996, 33, Paris: CNRS, p. 722.
[247] See also Emma Murphy, *Economic and Political Change in Tunisia: From Bourguiba to Ben Ali*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, p. 7.

chapter and well documented in the 1990s. The fact that many Western partners turned a blind eye to the regime's repression gave Ben Ali considerable leeway not only to continue perpetuating such practices, but also to alter his modes of domination, making coercion and policing central features of his rule.

It was in this context that the above-quoted Tarek Chaabouni, a leader of the legal opposition, suggested that when Ben Ali became President he remained 'the head of the police', in reference to his prior career in the military and security establishment. Many analysts have similarly asserted that Ben Ali created a 'police state'.[248] This chapter details the ways in which Ben Ali inaugurated a vast system of surveillance and control, and how it worked from the inside. In contrast to the widespread perception that Ben Ali came to rely mainly on the police to defend his power base, recent data reveals that the size of his security forces has been widely overestimated. Indeed, I show that, instead of the police, the regime drew heavily upon the RCD and its extended networks in the state administration, to associations, and to unions to enforce control – much more so than has previously been assumed.

Alongside the promise of prosperity and stability, Ben Ali evoked the 'threat' of Islamism and warned that it might result in bloodshed of the type seen in neighbouring Algeria as it slid into civil war to justify building what would become essentially a security state. The Presidential Palace in Carthage became the central location at which Ben Ali and his advisers decided upon key political and security matters. Naturally this power shift to Carthage weakened the political leverage of the RCD. This chapter shows that the party's

[248] See, for example, Safwan M. Masri, *Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly*, New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2017; Amira Aleya-Sghaier, 'The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity', in Ricardo Larémont (ed.), *Revolution, Revolt and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2014, p. 30; David A. McMurray and Amanda Ufheil-Somers (eds.), *The Arab Revolts: Dispatches on Militant Democracy in the Middle East*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, p. 14.

structures progressively blurred with those of the state and that it became increasingly an executor of the Palace's decisions, though important initiatives were taken within the ruling party to counter this trend and it did not lose all agency. Ben Ali and his advisers used the RCD's vast networks – which encompassed the entire country, all layers of society, and the professions – for functions ranging from policing, information exchange, spying, and coercion to the use of force against regime opponents. Ben Ali was in the 1990s at the height of his power, and once he had purged his Islamist opponents he began to crack down on leftist contenders and critical voices within the regime's own ranks.

The making of Carthage

As soon as Ben Ali became President he expanded the prerogatives of the Presidential Palace in Carthage. During the last decade under Bourguiba, the Palace had become an increasingly empty space, frequented only by the President – who dominated political affairs – along with a few relatives who advised him, and the head of his cabinet. Afraid of possible challengers to his rule, Bourguiba had come to rely on a small circle of trusted allies. However, Carthage, though the most important centre of power, had never been the only place of high politics. Mohamed Ghariani – who was a student during Bourguiba's last years in power and would later join the RCD's leading ranks – explained that 'Bourguiba had a cabinet director who worked in the Palace but otherwise…[he] relied very much on the government and important ministers' – though of course only so long as they did not question his leadership.[249] Moreover, as the preceding chapter demonstrated, Bourguiba allowed influential regional figureheads to emerge via election to the Coordination Committee, a practice Ben Ali discontinued upon taking power.

[249] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 22 July 2017.

From the early days of his Presidency Ben Ali counted very much on advisers in Carthage such as Moncer Rouissi, mainly because, unlike Bourguiba, he commanded less than ample political capital. Ben Ali was also wary of delegating too many tasks to others, much more so than Bourguiba had been, and especially cautious of ceding tasks to officials working outside the Palace, such as RCD chiefs, parliamentary deputies, or ministers: he feared that doing so would create influential political leaders who could eventually challenge his rule. Ben Ali sought to centralise all major decisions in the Palace. Carthage's expanding political influence can be illustrated clearly by the growing budget allocated to the presidency: while in 1986 under Bourguiba the presidency had received a relatively modest sum of 1 million TND, the amount was augmented to 7 million in 1990 and 29 million in 1998; this multiplication continued throughout Ben Ali's reign and the sum reached as much as 311 million in 2010.[250]

It is notable that when Ben Ali took power the Palace premises in Carthage were initially too small, and with too few offices, to serve as the epicentre of politics. The Palace did not even provide enough space to accommodate Ben Ali's cabinet, advisers, and supporting staff. Therefore Ben Ali swiftly decided to expand the physical structure of the Palace. Abbes Mohsen – a graduate of the prominent National School of Administration (ENA), who in 1988 joined the Palace as Director of Protocol to the President – recalled that

> Ben Ali built a gigantic annexe to the Palace, an outbuilding of quality…[with] around 80 offices. …He must have started [constructing it] in 1988 or 1989 and it took him around two years…you know such things are very quick with military men [like Ben Ali]! He instructed all of his close collaborators to work from there.[251]

[250] Derek Lutterbeck, 'Tool of Rule: The Tunisian Police Under Ben Ali', *Journal of North African Studies*, 2015, 20, 5, p. 816.
[251] Interview with Abbes Mohsen, Tunis, 22 July 2017.

The enlargement of the Carthage Palace allowed Ben Ali to monitor carefully the work of key associates. Aside from expanding the size and resources of the Palace, Ben Ali altered its internal organisation to reinforce oversight and control. Interviewees suggested that Ben Ali modelled the Carthage Palace's structure on that of an *état-major*, a leading military unit, with its various priority areas and units.[252] Mohsen said that

> since 1987 Ben Ali had been thinking about [creating] an *état-major.* ...Do you know how an *état-major* is organised? …You have four main offices: logistics, intelligence, operations, and psychological activities. …Ben Ali was a brilliant officer and highly organised. He organised the Palace like an *état-major*.[253]

Carthage's new annexe – whose construction was completed in the early 1990s – furnished the necessary physical space for the complex military-like reorganisation of the Palace. Mohsen's assessment that Carthage was structured around the four broad poles of logistics, intelligence, operations, and 'psychological activities' – likely referring to strategies to intimidate and terrorise dissidents – is plausible, given that his position as Director of Protocol to the President gave him unique access to internal Palace affairs. Others have provided even more details about Ben Ali's *état-major,* including information about its repressive components. In April 1990 an anonymous group of Ben Ali opponents, calling themselves the Tunisian National Salvation Front, published a statement in which they claimed that the Palace included a 'unit of disinformation' tasked with disseminating news favourable to Ben Ali and silencing critical journalists in Tunisia, as well as a 'unit of external communication', which extended this regime propaganda to foreign countries and diplomatic circles. The statement further stipulated that Ben Ali personally headed an intelligence division in the Palace, which was made up of former Interior Ministry officials.

[252] Interviews with Abbes Mohsen, Tunis, 22 July 2017; Fouad Mebazaa, Tunis, 30 May 2016; Adel Kaaniche, Tunis, 26 July 2017; Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 22 July 2017.
[253] Interview with Abbes Mohsen, Tunis, 22 July 2017.

It was linked to a 'unit of ghost brigades', which was charged with intimidating dissidents, including through violence.[254]

It is unclear how the members of the Tunisian National Salvation Front received their information about the Palace's internal organisation. Their descriptions are very detailed and include, amongst others, the units' budget and respective leaders, a fact which suggests they are not entirely based upon rumours and could have been provided by Palace insiders, at least partially. It is possible that they were subunits of the four poles Mohsen evoked. Mohsen himself avoided giving details of Carthage's security structures; likely he wanted to protect his own image by suggesting that he knew no more about them. Other Palace insiders have acknowledged the existence of some of the units, though they typically affirm that they became aware of them only after they had left Carthage. Asked about the Palace's role in manipulating domestic and, to some extent, international media outlets, Mohamed Jegham – between 1997 and 1999 the Director of the Presidential Cabinet – said:

> I was shocked when I discovered how the media was treated. …There was a structure [at the Palace] tasked with dealing with foreign media. …[Ben Ali officials] bought off the media…especially domestic media. For example, if [journalists] printed the picture of the President [they] received money.[255]

Given that the authorities' clampdown on the media following the 1989 elections was well-documented,[256] it is nearly impossible that officials such as Jegham became aware of it only in later years. In 1990 authorities even created the Tunisian Agency for External Communication (ATCE), a public institution with a budget comparable to that of a ministry, whose official task was promoting Tunisia's image abroad, especially through positive

[254] Statement published in Zakya Daoud, 'Chronique Tunisienne (1990) – Annexes Documentaires', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1992, 29, Paris: CNRS, pp. 804–809.
[255] Interview with Mohamed Jegham, Tunis, 19 July 2017.
[256] For example, 'Silence, On Réprime', *Reporters Sans Frontières*, 1 June 1999, https://rsf.org/fr/rapports/silence-reprime, last accessed 1 February 2018.

foreign media coverage.[257] However, while figures such as Jegham must have been aware that the Palace had a hand in manipulating the media, they may not have been party to much further detail. Indeed, interviewees suggested that the President was the only one with access to Carthage's full organisational structure, as well as the prerogatives and strategies of its various units and sub-units, including its repressive divisions. Information about the Palace's inner working was provided on a 'need to know' basis and Ben Ali typically left officials in the dark about their colleagues' activities, in an attempt to enforce top-down control.[258]

Ben Ali was even more careful to limit information exchange within key institutions outside the Palace, such as the government. Fouad Mebazaa – a minister and parliamentary head under Ben Ali – said that 'we were not supposed to know what other ministers were working on, there was no flow of information'.[259] Kamel Morjane – a distant relative of the President, who has occupied various ministries, including key portfolios such as Foreign Affairs – further explained that

> if you were Foreign Affairs Minister, Ben Ali [did] not discuss with you any other issues [than] foreign affairs. …It was very rare that he [discussed topics] out of your field of responsibility. It was very rare that there were general issues that [were] put on the table and which everybody could discuss. [Ben Ali] was very specific. This [offered] most control.[260]

To effectively implement government strategies and to avoid duplicated effort, ministers typically need to know about each others' work and prerogatives, but Ben Ali minimised contact between them. Key ministers – such as those responsible for defence, the interior, and foreign affairs – rarely met without the presence of Ben Ali, to minimise the risk that

[257] Vincent Geisser, 'Le Président Ben Ali en Campagne Contre les "Médias Sataniques"', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 2002, 38, Paris: CNRS, p. 381.
[258] For example, interviews with Mohamed Jegham, Tunis, 19 July 2017; Abbes Mohsen, Tunis, 22 July 2017.
[259] Interview with Fouad Mebazaa, Tunis, 30 May 2016.
[260] Interview with Kamel Morjane, Tunis, 26 May 2016.

they might conspire against the President. Moreover, the Defence Minister, responsible for supervising the armed forces, was expected to refrain from entertaining overly close relations with the army and instead to coordinate with the President, who was paranoid about a possible military coup.[261]

Ben Ali further undermined the work of the government by duplicating key ministries in Carthage; this effectively created a shadow cabinet in the Palace – a common way through which authoritarian leaders seek to enforce control.[262] By the mid 1990s almost every minister in government had a counterpart in the Palace – an adviser of Ben Ali who had a specific area of expertise and presided over a large supporting staff. Some of these shadow ministers were well known, such as Mohamed Ghenima – head of the Tunisian Central Bank under Bourguiba – who was charged with economic and financial affairs, or Mohamed Gueddiche – Ben Ali's personal doctor – who was responsible for health and environmental policies. Day to day the government ministers were in touch with their counterparts in Carthage. Naturally this starkly reduced the prerogatives of the actual cabinet and its Prime Minister. Hamed Karoui, Prime Minister between 1989 and 1999, recalled that

> the advisers [in Carthage] became more important than the ministers…they became so important that the ministers were always in touch with them and not with [me], their Prime Minister, for example, when they had to decide about a specific law. …It became totally abnormal![263]

[261] Ibid. Note that Kamel Morjane was also a Defence Minister under Ben Ali.
[262] For example, in Morocco, ministers have long been controlled by royal counsellors who effectively constitute a shadow cabinet in the Palace. See, for details, Michael Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco From Independence to the Arab Spring*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 143; Miguel Hernando de Larramendi and Irene Fernández Molina, 'The Evolving Foreign Policies of North African States (2011–2014): New Trends in Constraints, Political Processes and Behavior', in Yahia Zoubir and Gregory White (eds.), *North African Politics: Change and Continuity*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, p. 258.
[263] Interview with Hamed Karoui, Tunis, 1 February 2017.

Though Karoui seeks to portray himself as critical of the Ben Ali regime, he of course participated in it at the highest levels – even once the government had become little more than the executor of decisions taken in Carthage. Some key ministers, such as the Foreign Affairs chief, of course continued to enjoy a certain degree of independent leverage, and even secondary ministries retained technical influence, but they answered to Carthage on all key matters. To further reinforce their control of the government, Palace officials closely monitored the daily activities of ministers. Adel Kaaniche – a close collaborator of Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, one of Ben Ali's most important advisers – affirmed that the shadow ministers in Carthage spied and reported on their opposite numbers in the government. He stated:

> In a way [Carthage was] a…spying institution. …[Ben Ali's] adviser of health policies, who did he spy on? He spied on the Health Minister… . The governmental ministers feared their counterparts in the Palace. …The advisers and their staff knew everything about the ministers: who they met, which relations they entertained, …and about their private lives.[264]

The advisers in Carthage briefed Ben Ali about the activities of the ministers, so when the President met with them he appeared to be 'aware of everything'.[265] In addition, Ben Ali personally monitored the whereabouts and movements of key associates, which suggests that he did not even fully trust the reporting of his advisers. French analysts Jean-Pierre Tuquoi and Nicolas Beau cynically noted that Ben Ali had 'a real passion for information technology' because 'computers can't lie'.[266] They found that the President gathered confidential information about all of his close collaborators on his laptop and personally monitored the travel movements of ministers onscreen.[267]

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[264] Interview with Adel Kaaniche, Tunis, 26 July 2017.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Jean-Pierre Tuquoi and Nicolas Beau, *Notre Ami Ben Ali: l'Envers du 'Miracle Tunisien'*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999, p. 103.
[267] Ibid.

By the mid 1990s the government had lost so much relevance that a minister could not even nominate a member of his own staff without the prior approval of the Palace. One regime insider explained that ministers typically sent three proposals to Carthage when they wanted to appoint a new staff member, but sometimes Palace officials did not approve of any of them and imposed someone else. Ministers were allegedly not even free to appoint their own chiefs of staff without consulting the Palace.[268] It is noteworthy that though many interviewees seemed to deplore Carthage's control over the government, they typically also stressed that the Palace 'worked well' and that Ben Ali and his advisers were very efficient and highly organised – especially in the first decade of his rule.[269] This suggests that many officials were not opposed *per se* to the establishment of a shadow government – as long as they believed it got things done. They assumed the regime's teleological ideological underpinnings, in that they legitimised its authoritarian practices, at least to some extent, for the sake of a 'higher' objective and the 'greater good'. There were even academics who embraced this discourse. In his study of the Ben Ali regime, Steffen Erdle notes 'the complete submission of the government apparatus under the control of the Palace' but suggests that

> One of the main benefits of [this] process is that it has considerably smoothed the work of the government. Before, the state bureaucracy in general, and the central government in particular, used to be the focus of all sorts of struggles and squabbles within society and the regime, as it was one of the places where fundamental policy choices were made… . The 'de-politicization' of the administration, however, has allowed for a certain 'normalization' of its daily work, and taken officials out of the 'line of fire' – meaning that they can increasingly work to their own rules again, without being over-laden with 'hidden agendas'.[270]

[268] Interview with Fouad Mebazaa, Tunis, 30 May 2016.
[269] For example, interviews with Ali Chaouch, Tunis, 11 February 2017; Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 22 July 2017; Kamel Morjane, Tunis, 26 May 2016.
[270] Steffen Erdle, *Ben Ali's 'New Tunisia' (1987–2009): A Case Study of Authoritarian Modernization in the Arab World*, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2010, pp. 150–151.

For Erdle the government ceased to be a location 'where fundamental policy choices were made'; instead it came to equal an 'administration', mostly concerned with executing decisions made in the Palace. Erdle suggests that this enhanced the efficiency of the cabinet because officials were no longer harbouring 'hidden agendas'. However, while ministers might not have held secret agendas themselves, they certainly pursued those of the Palace. This did not make the cabinet more effective but undermined its very *raison d'être*, that is, to propose and enforce policy. How the Palace's mounting political dominance affected the inner working and political capital of the RCD – and its relation to the state – are key subjects the following sections seek to address.

The party and the state

The last chapter demonstrated that one of the key demands of RCD activists was that Ben Ali separate state and party structures, at least to some degree; they believed that their entanglement had substantially weakened Bourguiba's PSD, especially in his last decade in power. Most activists, however, had never asked for a complete dissociation of the state from the RCD, because this would pave the way for rival parties to challenge their political dominance. They only wanted the RCD to acquire more independent leverage – most importantly, to appoint political representatives and propose policy – in order to reinforce its role as a social elevator and political compass, functions that had progressively eroded under Bourguiba and reinforced his decline. Some feared that a similar scenario might repeat itself under Ben Ali, especially once Carthage came to dominate politics. Not only did Palace officials create a shadow cabinet and determine the composition of ministerial staff, they gradually also decided to hand-pick the ministers themselves. Franck Moroy cynically noted that by the mid 1990s government appointments came to resemble a 'game of musical

chairs' – the music being controlled in Carthage.[271] Naturally many RCD activists felt uneasy about Carthage's mounting grip over the government, which weakened their ability to nominate political figureheads and affect key decisions. Some began to call openly for the dissociation of the state from the party, at least to some extent. In response to such requests – alongside fervent demands from the opposition to completely separate state and party – Ben Ali reflected, in a November 1990 speech:

> What can we expect of the separation between the state and the party, which some demand? Would this mean that the government would have to implement the political programme of a party other than the party which won the elections, or should we implement the programme of the RCD by a government that does not emerge from this party? If this was the case, it would be a political heresy without precedent![272]

Clearly Ben Ali did not take the demands to dissociate the RCD from the state seriously. His remarks sound almost like a mockery of those requesting a separation. In his speech Ben Ali did nothing to address the state's influence over the party, or state–party relations more generally. Instead, he dived into a discussion of how a separation would supposedly undermine the government's representativeness. Ben Ali suggested that it would mean that a minority party could dominate the government – not only a false inference but also not at all the issue at stake.

The Political Academy

Some party members decided that they would not stand by and remain passive as the RCD lost most of its capacity to propose political representatives and affect policies; they tried to contest the party's political marginalisation. In 1997 they created the Political Academy, through which they sought to cultivate a new party elite. Ryadh Saada, former head of the

[271] Franck Moroy, 'Tunisie: Chronique Intérieure (1996)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1998, 35, Paris: CNRS, p. 673.
[272] 'Séparation État-Parti', *La Presse*, 8 November 1990, p. 1.

academy, explained: 'we wanted to train people so that they could take on leading positions in politics as well as the state'.[273] Admission to the Political Academy was extremely competitive: annually only one RCD member was selected per governorate; candidates needed to be at least forty years of age and hold a university degree. For a year academy members came together once a week to enhance their leadership skills and participate in networking events. They were introduced to senior political representatives, in part to learn from their experience but also to promote their profiles in Carthage. Saada explained:

> We wanted the President to get to know [RCD activists] he [could] nominate… . The Political Academy was meant to be a pool of skills and competence [with which] the President could surround [himself]. He could get to know their level of education, their political training. [Political Academy members] were people who had proven themselves![274]

Naturally it wasn't the President who met academy members, but Saada hoped that Ben Ali could learn about them via representatives who had participated in one of their networking events. The idea was that the Political Academy would become recognised as a leading source for recruitment, something which would have significantly bolstered the RCD's capacity to propose appointments and affect policies. However, Saada conceded that 'this did not work well', as only a few Political Academy members ended up being appointed to high-ranking positions.[275]

The apparent failure of the Political Academy must be understood in a context in which Palace officials deliberately sought to weaken the RCD and bring it under the control of Carthage. As the last chapter demonstrated, the RCD's membership base had risen sharply during the first years of Ben Ali's rule. To reinforce his political leverage and legitimacy,

[273] Interview with Ryadh Saada, Tunis, 24 July 2017.
[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid.

Ben Ali had denominated the RCD a central force behind his declared political 'Change' and conceded to some key demands of party activists. However, a few years into his presidency Ben Ali remarked to some of his trusted collaborators that he believed the party had become 'too big for its own good'.[276] A brief anecdote helps to explain this: in 1989 Ben Ali had recalled one of his distant relatives, Kamel Morjane, from a senior post at the United Nations to become the RCD's international relations adviser. Morjane remembered that other party officials were not pleased with his appointment as he had no background in party activism and was an 'outsider'; after nine months of being prevented from 'doing anything' he went back to the United Nations.[277]

Morjane's account illustrates that in Ben Ali's early years RCD officials had refused some of his appointments and even pushed some presidential protégés out of senior party posts – signalling to Ben Ali that the RCD could not be fully trusted to serve first and foremost his own interests, even once he had gained a grip over its most important leadership structures; as a military man he anyway never had much confidence in the party. One former RCD leader elaborated:

> '[Ben Ali] couldn't bet…that RCD followers would always be on his side…that he could always count on them… . However, the structures of the state are always there. State representatives just follow orders. So he reinforced [the state].'[278]

Many authoritarian leaders have propped up state structures to shield themselves from party competitors and to gain control over the modes of recruitment and promotion,[279] especially

[276] Interviews with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017; Oussama Romdhani, Tunis, 31 May 2016.
[277] Interview with Kamel Morjane, Tunis, 26 May 2016.
[278] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[279] For example, Joseph Stalin's reinforcement of state structures was a key strategy to establishing control over the Communist Party. He even challenged the traditional Marxist doctrine of the gradual 'withering away of the state' to strengthen the leverage of the state. See, for details, Alfred B. Evans, *Soviet Marxism-Leninism: The Decline of an Ideology*, Westport: Praeger Publisher, 1993, pp. 38–39. For a comparative perspective see Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The Decline of the Party in Single-Party African States', in Joseph La

once they have consolidated their rule and no longer depend on the party's support. Ben Ali decided that strengthening state structures demanded a change in the leadership of the RCD. It is somewhat challenging to retrospectively analyse different RCD leadership styles and visions, especially because they were closely aligned with those of the Palace. Moreover, since the 2010–11 uprisings almost all former party figureheads have pretended that they were opposed to a fusion of the state and the party, in an attempt to prop up their political legitimacy. Yet interviews revealed that the RCD's various Secretaries General were to varying extents invested in the party and that, in the mid 1990s, a new leadership emerged that was almost exclusively concerned with reinforcing the state.

Differing leadership visions

The last chapter showed that the RCD's early leadership was marked by figures who possessed significant political capital of their own – Hedi Baccouche, by virtue of his role in the fight for independence, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Abderrahim Zouari, a well-known lawyer who harboured wider political ambitions. Baccouche cared deeply about the RCD, given its historic roots in the nationalist movement, while Zouari thought that bolstering the RCD would further his own political interests. Unlike Baccouche, Zouari wasn't a pure product of the party but had a long career in the state – he had served as the governor of various regions and eventually even became head governor, a post which oversees all other governors. However, neither Zouari nor Baccouche ever advocated a complete separation of the RCD from the state. They wanted only to strengthen the RCD by bestowing upon it some independent leverage vis-à-vis the state.

Palombara and Myron Weiner (eds.), *Political Parties and Political Development*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, pp. 201–216.

In February 1990 Ben Ali appointed Chedli Neffati as RCD Secretary General. Unlike Baccouche and Zouari, Neffati was a pure product of the administration, having graduated from the prominent National School of Administration. Like Zouari, Neffati also made a career as governor and then head governor. In an interview Neffati said that, despite his background in the state, he felt very strongly about the RCD and had participated in Destourian politics since his childhood. He affirmed that his mission as Secretary General was to bolster the party and dissociate it from the state's structures. He elaborated:

> I tried to strengthen the party. Why? Because I really thought that Tunisia would embark upon a democratic opening… . If you want to have democracy…it is necessary that the party counts on itself… . I told everybody who worked with me: now [the party] needs to rely on itself, not on the support of the government, the governors, [or] *délégués*. We began to work [on this], we began to become independent, to separate ourselves from the state. …We began to [count] on our own competencies, our own means, our own activists.[280]

Neffati suggests that under his leadership the RCD became more independent from the state. He is a prime example of a high-ranking party official insisting with vigour and determination that he tried to separate the RCD from the state in order to further democracy, and his outwardly charming demeanour could easily lead the listener to accept his affirmations uncritically. Even American diplomats in the 2000s were convinced that Neffati held politically liberal views; in a US Embassy cable they called him the 'first [government] insider who has directly argued in favour of more political reform'.[281] However, this contrasts with how other RCD officials described Neffati: Mohamed Ghariani said that Neffati was first and foremost an 'administrator';[282] Adel Kaaniche affirmed that he was just following the orders of Ben Ali and his then Interior Minister and strongman, Abdallah

[280] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[281] US Embassy in Tunis, 'GOT Insider Says Tunisia Ready for Faster Political Reform', *Wikileaks*, 17 July 2007, 07TUNIS958_a, secret.
[282] For example, interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.

Kallal.[283] This suggests that Neffati was chosen as RCD Secretary General mainly because he was a trusted civil servant with limited political ambitions of his own.

There are other indications that Neffati was not the political reformer he claims to have been, such as his fierce anti-Islamist rhetoric, which was spread by regime officials in the late 1980s and 1990s to justify their political dominance. As Interior Minister between 1988 and 1990 Neffati must also have played a key role in repressing Ennahda. In the 2000s some officials believed that the Islamist 'threat' was under control and that Tunisia was ripe for further political reforms: Neffati may have supported a political opening in these later years, after he ceded the RCD leadership, but it is unlikely that he ever wanted to fully dissociate the state from the party to install a competitive democracy.

While Neffati seems to have resembled more a high-ranking bureaucrat than a party figurehead with political capital of his own, he was still more invested in Destourian politics than Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, who succeeded him as RCD Secretary General in June 1996. Regime insiders frequently described Ben Dhia as 'Ben Ali's man', affirming that he worked only to reinforce the power of the President.[284] According to Neffati, Ben Dhia's 'sole mission [as RCD Secretary General] was to…reduce the party',[285] an analysis other interviewees shared.[286] To illustrate how Ben Dhia's RCD leadership vision differed from his, Neffati described an encounter he had with him in later years, when Ben Dhia was appointed head of the Presidential Cabinet. He said:

> I was in the office of Ben Dhia…with a few other people. Ben Dhia – perhaps he did this on purpose in front of me to [provoke] me – he said to one of our colleagues: 'I was RCD Secretary General for three years, but I never phoned my representative in the regions,

[283] Interview with Adel Kaaniche, Tunis, 26 July 2017.
[284] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.
[285] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[286] For example, interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.

> never! I only knew the governors who represented the state and the government. I always called the governors, who then instructed the [regional] Secretaries General [to do something]'. This was a conception totally opposed to mine and I replied: 'I was Secretary General for five years and four months…but I never called a governor!'[287]

Neffati probably exaggerated his disagreement with Ben Dhia – who was one of the most disliked former Ben Ali officials – and it is unlikely that he 'never' called a governor, especially because – as previous head governor and Interior Minister – he must have known most of them personally. However, Neffati's anecdote still suggests that he and Ben Dhia differed in their visions for the RCD; the fact that Neffati wonders whether Ben Dhia was deliberately trying to provoke him at the meeting only underlines this. While as a trusted civil servant Neffati mostly followed the orders of the Palace, he still possessed some agency of his own. Liaising with the regional RCD Secretaries General instead of the governors may have been one of the ways in which he sought to bolster the party.[288] By contrast, Ben Dhia deliberately marginalised the RCD's representatives in the regions to reinforce the state.[289]

Under Ben Dhia the party networks merged with those of the state to an unprecedented extent – all from the highest leadership levels, to regional structures, and local cells. Indeed, given the RCD's high level of centralisation and pyramid-like structure, Ben Dhia's policies had a real trickle-down effect. French academic Béatrice Hibou has argued that the RCD came to 'operate and behave much more as a bureaucratic apparatus than as a political party, with…a parallel hierarchy to that of the administration'.[290] She suggests that tasks and

[287] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[288] Note that I was unable to independently confirm that Chedli Neffati was primarily in touch with the RCD's regional representatives and not the governors.
[289] Other interviewees also suggested that Ben Dhia greatly strengthened the state.
[290] Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, Cambridge: Polity, 2011, pp. 87–88.

benefits were unequally distributed between the party and the state, a tendency which was 'to the advantage of the state bureaucracy',[291] elaborating that

> the conceptualization, implementation and management [belonged] to the administration; the publicizing, the choice of beneficiaries, the financial and social advantages and, above all, the legitimacy all [belonged] to the RCD.[292]

In reality the networks of the state and party – as well as the duties of their representatives – sometimes co-existed, like Hibou suggests, but also overlapped, especially when it came to implementing economic and social programmes and absorbing their benefits. Regional and local officials typically moved back and forth between state and party posts, a rotation process that closely interwove both structures. Also, if material advantages 'all [belonged] to the RCD', this would surely have conferred an 'advantageous' position on the party – not the 'state bureaucracy', as Hibou argues.

Where networks did not overlap, activities and benefits were divided, a trend that triggered a real co-dependency between the state and party. The RCD networks were much more comprehensive and far-reaching compared to those of the state. They included not only the state and its administration but also schools, universities, associations, unions, and the media; geographically, they stretched even to the most remote regions, including neighbourhoods with little state representation. This vast structure made the RCD indispensable in terms of functions ranging from mobilisation and advocacy to 'publicizing' and 'recruitment', as Hibou suggests, not to mention the political recognition the RCD reaped for any successful policies – even if they were devised by state representatives.

[291] Ibid., p. 115.
[292] Ibid.

The state's increasing edge in deciding key politics and appointing political representatives not only reduced the RCD's agency and agenda-setting capacities, it also de-politicised many party activists, who increasingly became executors rather than architects of policies. They adopted the state's 'forms of bearing, speech, and behaviour [that were] regarded as acceptable or unacceptable, reasonable or unreasonable'.[293] Many RCD members came to resemble more trusted administrators rather than party activists *per se,* a tendency that made them easier to control. It is because of the RCD's increasing subordination to Carthage, coupled with its wide-ranging networks, that Ben Ali came to rely heavily on the party to install a vast system of policing and control. He managed to legitimise this, at least to some extent, by playing up rising domestic and regional security concerns.

An emergent security paradigm

The 1990–91 Gulf War and the eruption of the civil war in neighbouring Algeria put security and stability at the top of the political agenda in Tunisia. The regional turmoil also bestowed upon Ben Ali and his RCD a new wave of popularity, even if it was to prove short-lived. When Iraqi forces began bombing Kuwait on 2 August 1990, Ben Ali initially stood with his American allies in support of the latter. However 77% of Tunisians backed Iraq – including many RCD activists – compared to only 9% who sided with Kuwait.[294] Some RCD followers were seen protesting in the streets alongside activists of other political trends, waving Iraqi flags in support of their 'brothers and sisters'. On 14 August RCD members even created a National Committee for the Support of Iraq.[295] Given this public pressure, including from within the RCD's own ranks, Ben Ali saw no other option than to

[293] Compare Charles Tripp, 'Performing the Public: Theatres of Power in the Middle East', *Constellations*, 2013, 20, 2, p. 204.
[294] Zakya Daoud, 'Chronique Tunisienne (1990) – Annexes Documentaires', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1992, 29, Paris: CNRS, p. 789.
[295] Ibid.

side with Saddam Hussein, even to the temporary detriment of relations with the US.[296] This illustrates that in the early 1990s the RCD grassroots could still exert substantial influence – though their leverage decreased a few years later, when Ben Ali officials reinforced the state, a process discussed in previous sections. On 20 January 1991, the RCD Political Bureau met in Carthage to declare its solidarity with Baghdad. A couple of days later Prime Minister Hamed Karoui pronounced his backing of Hussein and finally, on 26 January, Ben Ali announced 'the official support of Tunisia for the people of Iraq',[297] a stance that received wide domestic acclaim.

The Algerian civil war further helped to prop up Ben Ali's support base domestically as well as amongst Western allies – above all France. The conflict in Algeria erupted in January 1992 when the army decided to cancel legislative elections in anticipation of an Islamist victory, hence terminating the country's first experiment with democracy. Tunisian authorities sought to instrumentalise the increase in violence between rival factions by suggesting that bloodshed was inevitable when Islamists gained too much power. Such discourse came to resonate with the public and international partners, at least to a certain extent, especially once some insurgent groups carried out bombings with large civilian casualty rates – though the Algerian regime is said to have infiltrated some of them. Afraid of a repetition of the Algerian scenario back home, many members of Tunisia's non-Islamist opposition came to back Ben Ali, considering him the lesser of two evils. Tarek Chaabouni reflected that 'everybody [feared]…that if things turn bad in Tunisia we will be like Algeria'.[298] Such perceptions temporarily widened Ben Ali's support base to almost pre-

[296] In response to Ben Ali's siding with Saddam Hussein, the US reduced economic assistance from about 30 million USD in 1990 to 8 million USD in 1991 and 1 million USD a year later; however, in 1993 support was back to pre-war levels. See, for details, Kenneth J. Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 192.
[297] Zakya Daoud, 'Chronique Tunisienne (1991)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1993, 30, Paris: CNRS, p. 942.
[298] Interview with Tarek Chaabouni, Tunis, 1 October 2015.

1989 elections levels, though back then he had also enjoyed the endorsement of some Ennahda followers, who were now either imprisoned, exiled, or active underground.

Fear that Tunisia might become the next Algeria was further stoked by mounting domestic tensions, pitting those Ennahda activists who continued to operate underground against the regime and its RCD. A small group of Ennahda members decided to take matters into their own hands. On 17 February 1992 – one month after the Algerian army cancelled the legislative elections – grassroots activists set fire to the RCD's Coordination Committee in the district of Bab Souika, central Tunis, where two guards had been spending the night; one of them was so severely burned that he later died from his wounds. Most Ennahda officials claimed that the perpetrators had decided without the leadership's knowledge to set fire to the RCD building – a carefully chosen target symbolising Ben Ali's authoritarian rule and repressive policies. They also affirmed that the assailants did not intend to harm anyone and were unaware that two guards were inside the building.[299]

By contrast, RCD officials claimed that the attack – which became known as the Bab Souika affair – was carefully planned by the wider Ennahda movement; they subsequently rounded up and tried twenty-eight people in a process which Amnesty International described as non-transparent and unfair.[300] Five of the perpetrators were sentenced to death by hanging, a verdict which was carried out on 9 October 1991.[301] Crucially, authorities claimed that the assailants purposely burned the guards in the building. Chedli Neffati, who was appointed Interior Minister following the Bab Souika affair, recounted the events as follows:

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[299] Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 73–74.
[300] 'Tunisia: Heavy Sentences After Unfair Trials (MDE 30/023/1992)', *Amnesty International*, 19 October 1992, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde30/023/1992/en/, last accessed 13 February 2018.
[301] 'Further Information on UA 219/91 (MDE 30/20/91, 28 June 1991) – Tunisia: Death Penalty', *Amnesty International,* 10 October 1991, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde30/024/1991/en/, last accessed 13 February 2018.

> They [Ennahda activists] committed this severe mistake…in [Bab Souika]…on the night of 17 February… . There were two guards who watched the [RCD building]. …Four or five young [Ennhada] activists entered the house, they tied them to their chairs, dispersed petrol, started a fire, and left. One of the guards died from his burns.[302]

It is noteworthy that many interviewees from the non-Islamist spectrum recounted exactly the same course of events, which has become part of Tunisia's national consciousness, at least to some extent. RCD officials and their extended networks in associations and the media worked hard to spread this account, affirming that the Bab Souika affair laid bare Ennahda's violent and malicious intentions.[303] They even published brochures about the attack in English in an attempt to promote their version of events amongst Western allies.[304] Such efforts were somewhat successful; many Western partners uncritically adopted the official narrative about the Bab Souika affair. Most were unaware that the previous year an RCD propaganda plot to discredit Ennahda had been uncovered. This scheme, entitled 'Nipping the evil in the bud', intended to assert 'that the Islamists were not only the adversaries of the regime but the enemy of the entire society';[305] it was meant to show that Ennahda constituted an 'alien ideological threat…preventing the expression of "authentic…national ideology"' – a common way through which authoritarian leaders justify their 'paternalistic conception of nationalism'.[306] Infiltrating Ennahda's associations, spreading lies and rumours – everything was permitted in order to eradicate this 'evil', an illustration of how far some RCD activists were willing to go to undermine their biggest political opponent.[307]

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[302] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[303] For example, interview with Naziha Zarrouk, Tunis, 30 January 2017.
[304] One such brochure concerning the Bab Souika affair is available at the *Centre d'Études Maghrébines à Tunis*.
[305] Jean-Pierre Tuquoi and Nicolas Beau, *Notre Ami Ben Ali: l'Envers du 'Miracle Tunisien'*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999, p. 70.
[306] Compare Andrew F. March, 'From Leninism to Karimovism: Hegemony, Ideology, and Authoritarian Legitimation', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2003, 19, 4, pp. 310–311.
[307] Jean-Pierre Tuquoi and Nicolas Beau, *Notre Ami Ben Ali: l'Envers du 'Miracle Tunisien'*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999, p. 70.

In a rare interview, Mohamed Ghannouchi, Prime Minister between 1999 and 2011, admitted to me that the regime 'exploited [Bab Souika] to imprison the Islamists…and to pursue radical policies'. He elaborated that the Bab Souika affair was used to 'demonstrate that Tunisia was right to resort to force to counter this danger [Ennahda]'.[308] Authorities took advantage of the public outrage over the death of the guard to announce the discovery of an even bigger plot, only two months after Bab Souika. They said that Ennahda activists, together with a group of sympathisers in the military, were conspiring to topple the regime, even planning to assassinate the President.[309] While some Ennahda supporters indeed plotted against the regime at the time – though it is unlikely that they had any concrete plans to kill Ben Ali – the army's involvement was entirely made up. Afraid of the military, Ben Ali officials sought to weaken it and imprisoned some influential officers, alongside hundreds of Ennahda followers, many of whom were innocent.[310]

Most observers, however, did not question the authorities' narrative of the 'plot' and believed that officials had just managed to prevent the eruption of Algerian-type turmoil at home. In March 1992, the French weekly *Paris Match* published an article entitled 'How Tunisia subdued its religious extremists – an example Algeria should try to follow', reflecting the fact that Tunisia appeared quite stable after the arrests and seeing this as validation for Ben Ali's repressive policies.[311] In a similar vein Noureddine Sraieb, writing for the prestigious French *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, evaluated that the regime's

[308] Interview with Mohamed Ghannouchi, Tunis, 2 August 2015.
[309] See, for details, Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 74–75.
[310] Ibid.
[311] Quoted in Jean-Pierre Tuquoi and Nicolas Beau, *Notre Ami Ben Ali: l'Envers du 'Miracle Tunisien'*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999, p. 72.

'growing suspicion' of the Islamists 'appears justified'.[312] Such affirmations helped Ben Ali authorities to migrate from their pre-1989 elections promises of a political opening and democratisation to a credo focusing almost exclusively on stability and security. At the RCD's second congress, in the summer of 1993, party officials called upon their followers to 'preserve the equilibrium and the stability of the society and to protect its security'.[313] They further elaborated that 'what endanger today the stability of societies are not so much foreign threats but the risk of implosion caused by phenomena of rejectionism, insubordination, and deviances of thought and behaviour'.[314] Such securitisation of regime opponents – first and foremost Ennahda – was widely internalised by RCD activists, to the extent that many still echo this discourse. For example, Sofien Kadri, a former RCD activist from Sidi Bouzid, told me that 'Ben Ali struck [some opponents] hard', maintaining that 'to lead a state it is sometimes necessary to strike hard'.[315] How such a credo furthered the rise of a security state and what role RCD activists took therein are central topics the following sections will discuss.

Propping up intelligence

The arrest of the group of military officials who were wrongly accused of conspiring with Ennahda to topple the regime set in motion a wider action to reduce the influence of the army and place it under the aegis of the Interior Ministry and Carthage. Tunisian academic Noureddine Jebnoun has rightly suggested that Ben Ali officials invented the military's involvement in the 'plot' with the sole aim to 'decapitate the army' and to '[shift the]

[312] Noureddine Sraieb, 'Tunisie: Chronique Intérieure (1992)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1994, 31, Paris: CNRS, p. 955.
[313] 'Ouverture des Travaux du Congrès de la Persévérance: Le Rassemblement et les Exigences de l'Avenir', *Le Renouveau*, 30 July 1993, p. 8.
[314] Ibid.
[315] Interview with Sofien Kadri, Regueb, governorate of Sidi Bouzid, 27 June 2016.

balance [of power] from the Defence to the Interior Ministry'.[316] Following the officers' arrest, the Defence Ministry lost much of the independence it had until then managed to retain. Henceforth its officials had to report to the Interior Ministry all sensitive activities, such as military exercises – including their location, time, and weapons used – information that was subsequently verified by informants.[317] The Interior Ministry's role was further elevated as its representatives took on key roles in influential security bodies. These included the National Security Council, which Ben Ali had established in November 1987 'to collect, study, analyse and evaluate information about domestic, foreign and defence policies in order to safeguard internal and external security'.[318]

Naturally Interior Ministry officials also took a central role in Carthage's security establishment, and many Interior Ministry employees came to work inside the Palace. In addition, Ben Ali sought to strengthen his influence over the ministry by appointing particularly loyal presidential associates to its head. Interior Ministers typically possessed limited political capital of their own and were rotated on a regular basis so that they could not acquire too much influence. In the 1990s they included Mohamed Jegham, who subsequently became head of Ben Ali's cabinet, and Chedli Neffati, who afterwards served as RCD Secretary General – an indication of the extent to which officials switched between senior posts in the state, Carthage, and the party. Ben Ali further reinforced his grip over the Interior Ministry by personally appointing all representatives of its different divisions and instructing them to report to the Palace. Jebnoun found that 'nearly every directorate within the Interior Ministry had its own connection with the Carthage Palace and [Ben Ali's] inner

[316] Noureddine Jebnoun, *Tunisia's National Intelligence: Why 'Rogue Elephants' Fail to Reform*, Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2017, p. 34.
[317] Ibid.
[318] See, for details, decree 87-1297 of 27 November 1987 (amended by decrees 88-251 and 90-1195).

circle';[319] in other words, the Interior Ministry essentially became an extension of the Palace's security apparatus.

The centralisation of intelligence was key to Ben Ali's endeavour to create a security state that could serve as a bulwark against dissent. Once he had gained a monopoly over the state's security establishment, Ben Ali reinforced its capacities, a tendency which can be well illustrated by the rise in the number of wiretaps under his rule. While in the mid 1980s only around twenty wiretaps were recorded and most of them concerned foreign missions, the amount rose to as many as 5,000 in 2004,[320] most of which targeted ordinary citizens – a development underpinned by a roughly eightfold increase in the Interior Ministry's budget during that period.[321] It is in this context that Tunisian academic Olfa Lamloum affirmed that 'the ideology of policing became an essential part of the dominant state ideology'.[322] The securitisation of Ennahda alongside elements of the army furnished the ideological justification for the establishment of a massive system of surveillance. Its practical implementation was facilitated by the Interior Ministry's vast control over regional and local state structures. In particular, Interior Ministry officials – in consultation with the President – were responsible for appointing all key state representatives: the governors, the *délégues*, all the way down to the *omda*, representing the lowest state echelons, the 2,073 geographical sectors. On paper the *omda* served a variety of functions – social, economic, and cultural – but many interviewees insisted that they were primarily the arms of the Interior Ministry. For example, when asked about the profile of the governors and *délégues*, Chedli Neffati

[319] Noureddine Jebnoun, *Tunisia's National Intelligence: Why 'Rogue Elephants' Fail to Reform*, Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2017, p. 32.
[320] Ibid.
[321] In 1984 the Interior Ministry's budget was 92 million TND; it was expanded to 127 million in 1988 and to 549 million in 1998; this multiplication continued throughout the years and in 2010 the budget climbed to as much as 1.106 billion. See, for details, Derek Lutterbeck, 'Tool of Rule: The Tunisian Police Under Ben Ali', *Journal of North African Studies*, 2015, 20, 5, p. 816.
[322] Olfa Lamloum, 'Le Zaim et l'Artisan Ou de Bourguiba à Ben Ali', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1998, 37, Paris: CNRS, p. 394.

said that 'they are very well informed…they are the Interior Ministry' – a statement which suggests that as head of that ministry he considered them part of its apparatus.[323] Moreover, when I inquired about the *omda's* characteristics, one interviewee described them as 'the people who know everybody in their district'[324]; a local RCD activist simply affirmed that 'they controlled'.[325] This contrasts with how former *omda* themselves portrayed their duties. They typically stressed their social and economic responsibilities[326] – tasks that governors and *délégues* also highlighted during interviews – a trend indicating that state representatives under Ben Ali still downplay their intelligence and policing functions.

While the governors, *délégues*, and *omda* were charged with security, they were generally not the ones gathering information about possible 'threats'. Many analysts suggested that the police were the central actors behind the collection of intelligence, alongside the key role they played in the physical repression and torture of dissidents. Their numbers under Ben Ali have typically been estimated at 130–140,000,[327] a ratio of about 1:80 officers to inhabitants. However, new data reveals that this estimate is exaggerated, and that under Ben Ali the internal security forces – which include not only the police but also the National Guard and civil defence – amounted to about 49,000, a figure which does not stand out by regional standards; indeed, the police was even enlarged after Ben Ali's ousting because the force was considered too small.[328] While the police performed some surveillance functions,

[323] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[324] Interview with Firas Guefrech, Tunis, 30 September 2015.
[325] Interview with Sami, Bardo, September 2015.
[326] For example, interview with Souheil, *omda* under Ben Ali, Tunis-Bab Souika, September 2015.
[327] For example, Jean-Pierre Tuquoi and Nicolas Beau, *Notre Ami Ben Ali: l'Envers du 'Miracle Tunisien'*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999, p. 96; Steffen Erdle, *Ben Ali's 'New Tunisia' (1987–2009): A Case Study of Authoritarian Modernization in the Arab World*, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2010, p. 144.
[328] Lea Lavut, 'Building Partnerships Towards a Democratic Police Force in the Post-Revolutionary Tunisia Context', *Journal for Deradicalization*, 2016, 8, p. 109. See also Derek Lutterbeck, 'Tool of Rule: The Tunisian Police Under Ben Ali', *Journal of North African Studies*, 2015, 20, 5, pp. 813–831.

it was the RCD with its vast structures that provided the central source of intelligence and control, alongside many informal networks that were linked to the ruling party.

Spying, repression, and control

Some of the RCD's policing and coercion activities occurred within the framework of the state administration; data from 1993 indeed reveal that about one-third of RCD activists were civil servants – the largest professional contingent[329] – an indication of the extent of overlap between state and party structures. As mentioned earlier, state representatives were typically expected to be party members and often rotated between party and state posts, a tendency which created a direct interlinkage between the Interior Ministry, state structures, and the RCD. More generally speaking, party membership was often a precondition for becoming a civil servant, even on a local level. As part of their securitisation of political opponents, Ben Ali officials came to use RCD membership as a way to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' citizens: if you did not have a membership card, you risked being considered a dissident.[330] Employment depended not only on the jobseeker's political loyalties, but also on those of their relatives. If you had a cousin or uncle who was a member of Ennahda – a connection that could easily be determined with the help of the Interior Ministry – this could put an end to your career. Through such measures RCD officials directly participated in the creation and perpetuation of a vast system of economic exclusion of regime opponents and their relatives.

[329] Note that this data refers to the participants at the RCD's second congress in 1993, but there is no reason to believe that it does not reflect wider trends within the party, especially given the large number of congress attendees. See, for details, 'Faites Connaissance Avec les Congressistes', *La Presse*, 22 July 1993, p. 4.
[330] Jean-Pierre Tuquoi and Nicolas Beau, *Notre Ami Ben Ali: l'Envers du 'Miracle Tunisien'*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999, p. 79.

Professional cells

The RCD's approximately 2,000 professional cells underpinned the party's visibility in the state's public sector. The professional branches originated in the time of Bourguiba, who created PSD cells in all public-sector companies to counter the sway of the UGTT. However, as shown in the last chapter, Ben Ali managed to win over influential UGTT leaders shortly after taking power. Throughout the 1990s Ben Ali further reinforced his control over the union, to the extent that he even opened the UGTT's 19th congress in April 1999. At that event unionists also adopted a resolution supporting Ben Ali's candidacy for the presidential elections in October – an illustration of how the UGTT's leading cadres had become totally coopted.[331] During Bourguiba's rule the professional cells had been in constant conflict with the UGTT, but – given the union's relative amenability under Ben Ali – in the 1990s they came to focus almost entirely upon reinforcing the RCD's leverage in the public sector. Naturally after Ben Ali's fall in 2011 many former professional cell leaders maintained that their job was merely to oversee public sector companies and promote the quality of work. As Monji Salem, the former head of the RCD's thirty professional cells in Gafsa, which gathered around 4,500 members, affirmed:

> The RCD's existence in all state institutions…was a force for the RCD. The RCD…offered services and monitored all abuses in the public sector administration – all abuses! The Rally was there and demanded to stop all abuses![332]

Clearly Salem is in denial that professional cell members were themselves the engineers of many 'abuses', which were often institutionalised. The heads of professional cells were similar in rank to the chief managers of companies, and they were typically feared by employees. One former professional cell leader at the post office in Bab Souika told me, full

[331] Olfa Lamloum, 'Le Zaim et l'Artisan ou de Bourguiba à Ben Ali', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1998, 37, Paris: CNRS, p. 385.
[332] Interview with Monji Salem, Gafsa, 22 June 2016.

of pride, that he used to 'wear a tie' at work and was well respected.[333] While he perceived his position as a sign of status, to many of his colleagues it likely signalled impunity and vast influence. Indeed, it was the professional cell leaders who typically pushed for hiring practices based on patronage rather than qualifications, a tendency that undermined the professionalism and quality of the workforce. They also gathered information about suspected opposition activists – hence acting like a sort of internal company police – and, in cooperation with state representatives such as the *délégues* or *omda*, made sure that employees who were exposed as such promptly lost their jobs.

RCD cells

While the policing, control, and marginalisation of dissidents relied greatly on the triangular relationship between the party, the state administration, and the Interior Ministry, it became so effective only because the RCD networks extended beyond the realms of the state. The RCD's 7,500 grassroots cells gridded the entire country, covering every municipality and neighbourhood. Hibou has suggested that through its many cells the RCD 'equally [integrated] all Tunisians who so [desired]'; consequently 'the party…[absorbed] within itself the conflicts, the struggles, the rivalries, and the relations of force between personalities and segments of society'.[334] In this Hibou somewhat exaggerates the RCD's level of inclusion, as the relatives of political dissidents were typically denied party membership; however she is right to observe that the RCD's 'high degree of social integration' allowed it to surveil large segments of society – indeed, its massive membership base even helped it to gather information about those Tunisians who were not part of its networks. In a rare interview, Firas Guefrech, a former RCD follower who in 2015 became

[333] Interview with Habib, Tunis-Bab Souika, September 2015.
[334] Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, Cambridge: Polity, 2011, p. 91.

adviser to President Essebsi, provided some insights into how party members pursued surveillance and reporting activities. He said:

> Imagine I work for the party in a neighbourhood and I see a stranger…What do I do? I write a report. I say who I saw, what the person did and give [this information] to the head of the party… . We also did this with political opponents. We reported who prayed, who made a mistake. We denounced them. That's how it was under Ben Ali.[335]

Guefrech's comments suggest that RCD followers closely tracked the activities of political opponents – likely shadowing their every move – in hope they would make a 'mistake', which could subsequently be used to pressure, coerce, or even blackmail them. People who were regularly seen praying at mosques were suspected of being Ennahda followers and were reported to the RCD figureheads. While Guefrech affirmed that monitoring and reporting activities were 'generally spontaneous' he similarly stated that 'indicators' for this kind of work existed 'in the framework of the party'.[336] This suggests that spying on political opponents was an institutionalised practice within the RCD and played an important part in what party activism was all about. RCD followers were trained in recognising 'indicators' of suspicious activities and reported on them to their superiors. Further, in the event that a local crisis emerged, RCD cells were held accountable.[337]

Though not all RCD members pursued surveillance functions, Guefrech's comments suggest that they were commonplace. To many of these 'RCD spies' intelligence gathering and reporting was part of being a good citizen. Some of them still affirm that such activities were carried out only to guarantee security and stability, and that the repression and marginalisation of political opponents was never an end in itself. In interviews former RCD

[335] Interview with Firas Guefrech, Tunis, 30 September 2015.
[336] Ibid.
[337] Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, Cambridge: Polity, 2011, p. 86.

followers sometimes even lamented that such practices ceased to exist after 2011. One cell activist sullenly said that 'denunciation was common under Ben Ali because he wanted to guarantee security – now we have neither [denunciation nor security]!'.[338] This statement implies that the post-2011 instability was due to the disintegration of Ben Ali's security apparatus, including the RCD's monitoring and reporting functions – exemplifying that many RCD activists still fail to see that the policing, coercion, and repression of dissidents under Ben Ali were amongst the key factors leading to the eruption of the 2010–11 protests in the first place.

RCD students

Aside from the local RCD cells, there were other party structures that took a key role in the surveillance and repression of regime opponents – especially its youth and student wings. Being a renowned 'RCD spy' at university was almost a guarantee of a successful career in later years. The case of Sofien Toubel – an official under Ben Ali who in 2013 became a leading figure in Nidaa Tounes – is particularly revealing in this respect. Many interviewees – including from the RCD's own ranks – testified that in the mid 1990s at the University of Tunis El Manar Sofien Toubel became infamous for filing reports for the RCD on political opponents, typically those belonging to the UGET – a tendency showing that after the massive repression of Ennahda, party activists sought to counter leftist contenders, a topic further discussed below.[339] Mohamed El Moez Marzouk, a former RCD activist from Monastir, suggested that Toubel's later promotion to governor was a 'reward' for his policing activities on campuses,[340] an analysis with which other interviewees concurred.[341] Though it is impossible to know for sure if Toubel's appointment as governor was indeed

[338] Interview with Sami, Bardo, September 2015.
[339] For example, interviews with Mohamed El Moez Marzouk, Monastir, 25 July 2017; Amine Ben Mansour from Gafsa, Skype, 3 June 2016.
[340] Interview with Mohamed El Moez Marzouk, Monastir, 25 July 2017.
[341] Interview with Amine Ben Mansour from Gafsa, Skype, 3 June 2016.

due to his earlier spying activities, Marzouk's account is still instructive as it illustrates that many RCD activists closely associated monitoring and intelligence-gathering with the prospect of a successful career – an example of 'sunk investment', that is, 'the conditioning of…benefits on prior costly service'.[342]

The RCD's spying activities at university were particularly important because historically campuses had been bastions of the opposition. Though in the late 1980s and early 1990s authorities had cracked down on Ennahda and the closely affiliated UGTE student union, leftist opposition activism still prevailed. The UGET was very active, especially at the Faculty of Law and Arts in Tunis. One of its former activists affirmed that 'the youth of the UGET was highly visible at almost all faculties throughout the 1990s'.[343] However, in the late 1990s UGET activism actually decreased, at least on some campuses, owing to a carefully designed strategy to weaken the union. Some of the ways in which Ben Ali sought to gain a grip over universities – such as his recruitment of influential professors and coopting of certain UGET figures – were discussed in the preceding chapter. Naturally the RCD students' spying activities also reduced the sway of the UGET. Amongst the RCD students' tasks was to identify the UGET's most influential activists and to report anything that could be used to threaten, harass, or even expel them.

However, it was only when Ben Ali officials decided to undertake deep changes within the spatial location and distribution of universities that the bastion of the UGET gradually came under threat. In the 1990s, indeed, authorities devised a strategy to 'diversify' the opportunities for higher education by establishing universities throughout the country. The objective was to have one campus per governorate, a plan portrayed as a way to support

[342] Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 164.
[343] Interview with Amine Ben Mansour from Gafsa, Skype, 3 June 2016.

marginalised regions and enhance their infrastructure.[344] It is unclear whether this was a deliberate strategy to weaken the UGET or if this outcome was merely one of its by-products, but the new campuses came to be dominated by RCD students. One former UGET leader explained that

> historically the UGET was active in big faculties…but with the diversification of universities, we began to have campuses throughout the country…and that's where the Destourian students came to dominate.[345]

The new campuses did not have a history of opposition activism, so it was easier for RCD activists there to gain influence. They not only kept a watch and reported on suspected opponents, but were also institutionally represented through their student wing and affiliated associations, which organised a range of activities. The RCD's growing force on campuses is illustrated well in its representation on faculty research councils through which university professors and students advised on key educational matters. Every year students organised research council elections to determine their representatives. While in the early 1990s UGET activists gained the majority of seats nationwide, RCD followers soon began to dominate. Hassouna Nasfi, an RCD student leader at the time, estimated that the party's vote share at the research council elections was '25% in 1994, 55% in 1995 and 1996. Then starting from 1997 we arrived at 90% of seats', he said.[346] While Nasfi insisted that the elections for student representatives were 'free', opposition activists typically reported that the results were rigged, or that they were physically prevented from casting a vote.[347] The RCD students' growing sway on campuses endowed them with new confidence and by the late 1990s they not only surveilled and reported on opponents, but also harassed them and

[344] Interview with Naoufel Aziz, Tunis, 24 July 2017.
[345] Interview with Samir Abidi, Tunis, 30 June 2016.
[346] Interview with Hassouna Nasfi, Bardo, 24 May 2016.
[347] For example, interview with Amine Ben Mansour from Gafsa, Skype, 3 June 2016.

participated in the falsification of election results to deny them any institutional representation.

Associations

Alongside the reinforcement of its student wing, the RCD integrated many associations and 'NGOs', whose decentralised nature and large number – official data put them at 8,000 – were instrumental in widening its oversight. In universities, associations were typically linked to the ruling party or relied on its facilities for events. In addition, many influential 'national organisations' came to display openly their loyalty to Ben Ali and his RCD, including UTICA and the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT). In November 2006 an American diplomat attended a UNFT event about Tunisian values, which, he said, 'turned out to be more of a political rally…in support of Ben Ali and his policies'. Amongst other manifestations, UNFT activists 'hung red and purple banners (the color of the…RCD…) in the streets' to display their support of the ruling party.[348]

Up until the 1990s the only truly independent association with any leverage was the LTDH, which had a membership base of about 4,000 stretching throughout the country.[349] Upon taking power Ben Ali officials had sought to coopt the LTDH leadership, but without success. The authorities consequently decided, in 1992, to pursue legal channels to gain a grip over the association. In March 1992, a new law was passed that denied associations the right to reject candidates. This paved the way for RCD activists to infiltrate the LTDH. Moncef Marzouki, the LTDH leader at the time, initially sought to defy the law and refused

[348] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Womens' "NGO": Less Hijab, More Ben Ali', *Wikileaks*, 1 November 2006, 06TUNIS2679_a, confidential.
[349] Noureddine Sraieb, 'Tunisie: Chronique Intérieure (1992)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1994, 31, Paris: CNRS, p. 956.

to admit the new RCD adherents; however, in February 1994 Marzouki was forced to cede the leadership owing to what he described as a 'real coup' within the LTDH.[350]

Marzouki's successor, Taoufik Bouderbala, pursued a conciliatory approach towards the Ben Ali authorities and allowed RCD figures to integrate into the league's leading ranks. Abbes Mohsen, an RCD official who worked with the LTDH, explained how under Bouderbala the composition of the association's various offices was determined:

> In [the office of] Belvédère, for example, we put three RCD members, two communists, and five MDS activists. In the Tunis office we put five RCD members, four communists and only one activist from the MDS. The composition of the offices was negotiated intelligently.[351]

The key takeaway from Mohsen's statement is that LTDH representatives were selected by authorities, and he probably overstated the weight of the political opposition in the league's local chapters. Mohsen acknowledged, however, that despite Bouderbala's accommodating stance and the RCD's sway over the LTDH, the authorities sought to further 'strangle the league…to make it [even] more compliant'.[352] While this substantially weakened the LTDH, it is noteworthy that some activists continued to defy the RCD members. For example, in 2005, league activists closed several offices that were controlled by the ruling party, a decision that led the Tunis Court of First Instance to suspend all LTDH activities.[353]

Neighbourhood Committees

Concurrent to the RCD's struggle for control over important national organisations and 'NGOs', the authorities implemented further oversight in neighbourhoods throughout the

[350] Interview with Moncef Marzouki, Tunis, May 2015.
[351] Interview with Abbes Mohsen, Tunis, 22 July 2017.
[352] Ibid.
[353] 'Tunisia: Intimidation of the Tunisian League for Human Rights Must Stop (MDE 30/015/2005)', *Amnesty International*, 7 September 2005, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE30/015/2005/fr/, last accessed 27 February 2018.

country. In 1991 they created about 5,000 'Neighbourhood Committees', which enjoyed associational status but were institutionally linked to the Interior Ministry, specifically its 'General Administration for Regional Affairs' division. The prerogatives of the Neighbourhood Committees were defined broadly. Legislation number 1753 on the structural organisation of the Interior Ministry, which created the committees, stipulated that they were tasked to 'look after the events of the neighbourhoods, follow up on its activities, and organise…internal, national, regional, and local forums'.[354] Ben Ali associates also stressed that they promoted the development of neighbourhoods, ensured their cleanliness and organised cultural events.[355] In reality, however, the committees served to bring neighbourhoods under the direct control of the Interior Ministry, and their composition and tasks closely resembled those of the RCD cells. One interviewee, reflecting a typical account, explained that

> Everybody [in the committees] was a member of the ruling party… . It was important for committee members to belong to the RCD otherwise they couldn't be trusted. …There were a few exceptions [but] generally you found almost the same people [in the RCD cells and Neighbourhood Committees].[356]

Moreover, just like the RCD cells, the Neighbourhood Committees performed monitoring and surveillance functions in their districts. Though some also pursued social and cultural activities, these were clearly not their priority. Adel Kaaniche maintained that the Neighbourhood Committees

> used Tunisians as spies! Its members were willing to play the game of espionage, to follow indicators [drawn up for spying activities], to shadow people… . Instead of doing politics we [Tunisians] became spies![357]

[354] Legislation number 1763 from 23 November 1991 on the amendment of legislation number 453 from 1 April 1991 on the structural organisation of the Interior Ministry.
[355] For example, interview with Sadok Chaabane, Tunis, 20 July 2017.
[356] Interview with Naoufel Aziz, Tunis, 24 July 2017.
[357] Interview with Adel Kaaniche, Tunis, 26 July 2017.

Naturally Kaaniche's statement is an exaggeration and not all Tunisians conducted espionage. His account is, however, revealing as it highlights the extent to which some party followers became frustrated as they increasingly performed security functions instead of proposing and discussing policies. Given that the Neighbourhood Committees pursued the same surveillance tasks as the RCD grassroots, the question arises as to why they were created in the first place. It is likely that Ben Ali officials sought to strengthen the sway of the Interior Ministry and further subdue the party, which the President never fully trusted. Though the RCD cells also coordinated with the Interior Ministry, the committees went a step further as they structurally belonged to it. One interviewee deplored that the committees were 'competing' with the party and 'existed in parallel'.[358] The committees also monitored the RCD cells – and vice versa. This suggests that officials were increasing paranoid about 'subversive' activities, including from within their own ranks. Everybody was a potential suspect and RCD members were not exempt from this.

The RCD abroad

Ben Ali officials were particularly anxious about the activities of Tunisians living abroad. Many European countries, especially France, Germany, and Italy, were home to large Tunisian communities. In the 1990s these migrants were joined by hundreds of exiles from Ennahda and other opposition parties. Their presence threatened to tarnish the image of Ben Ali, especially once some exiles spoke out about their experience of repression and torture in Tunisia. The creation of ATCE in 1990, which was tasked with counterbalancing their stories and spreading news favourable to Ben Ali, must be understood in this context. In addition, officials established hundreds of associations throughout Europe that served as a propaganda tool of the regime.

[358] Interview with Abbes Mohsen, Tunis, 22 July 2017.

Most famously, the 'Rally of the Tunisians in France' (RTF), located at the Rue Botzaris in Paris, was officially charged with all sorts of cultural activities. Like many Tunisian associations, it openly displayed its loyalty to Ben Ali and his RCD, for instance, through pictures of the President and banners with the ruling party's colours.[359] Following Ben Ali's ousting in January 2011, some of the association's documents were seized and published online. These so-called 'Botzaris leaks' demonstrate that the RTF was none other than the RCD headquarters in France. Headers on some of the seized documents displayed the name 'Rally of the Tunisians in France', but next to it is detailed in Arabic 'Constitutional Democratic Rally, Central Committee in France' with the official logo of the RCD.[360]

Part of the reason why officials sought to conceal the fact that Botzaris was the RCD's France headquarters was that this would have threatened its associational status, through which it enjoyed substantial financial benefits. Amongst other details, documents reveal that in 1994 the RTF received 110,000 French francs (FF) – around 17,000 euros (EUR) – in public money from the Social Action Fund for Immigrant Workers and their Families, as well as 80,000 FF – about 11,500 EUR – from the city hall in Marseille for social and urban development projects.[361] Alongside the money received from the French state, the Botzaris leaks provide evidence that RCD officials asked Tunisian public sector companies based in France to pay the salaries of party activists. Such 'shadow jobs', in which party members were fictively employed by the state, were common and contributed to the blurring of state and party ties. In several letters, the RCD head in France explicitly asked that firms such as Tunisair, the Tourism Office, and the Tunisian Shipping Company pay the salaries of some

[359] '"Botzarileaks": Les Archives du RCD à Paris Révèlent les Malversations du Parti de Ben Ali', *Les Observateurs*, 21 September 2011, http://observers.france24.com/fr/20110921-botzarileaks-archives-rcd-paris-revelent-malversations-parti-ben-ali-tunisie-revolution, last accessed 1 March 2018.
[360] Ibid.
[361] '"Botzarileaks": Des Organismes Publics Français ont Versé des Subventions au Parti de Ben Ali', 23 September 2011, *Les Observateurs*, http://observers.france24.com/fr/20110923-botzarileaks-suite-organismes-publics-francais-ont-verse-subventions-parti-ben-ali-rcd-tunisie-botzaris, last accessed 1 March 2018.

'employees and civil servants' who worked either for the RTF, or an affiliated association.[362] Indeed, Jean-Pierre Tuquoi and Nicolas Beau established that alongside the RTF office 'around a hundred partner associations were created, which gathered the disabled, poets, writers, as well as boxers or taxi drivers'.[363] This decentralised approach to regrouping the Tunisian community in France had a 'double advantage': it made it easier to attract financial support from the French state but also strengthened the RCD's 'capacity to infiltrate hostile milieus'.[364]

Just as with their local chapters, one of the key functions of the RCD abroad was to monitor and surveil opposition activists. Seifeddine Ferjani, who was exiled in London with his father, an Ennahda leader, told me that regime figures used to shadow his family. 'At the beginning [they] were even searching our rubbish to collect information about us,' he said. 'Once we caught them and took pictures, then the British authorities talked to them and this stopped.'[365] It is not entirely clear whether such informants operated via the Tunisian Embassy or the RCD headquarters – probably both were involved. Indeed, the Botzaris leaks suggest that the party had a much wider role in the monitoring of the opposition than previously assumed, including during election times. They reveal inter alia that it was the RCD – and not the embassy, as stipulated by the law – that scrutinised the voting results of Tunisians in France. They also selected election observers, whose job it was to identify and report on people who did not cast a ballot for the ruling party – a relatively easy task given that votes could be identified through a system of coloured cards that were slipped into

[362] '"Botzarileaks": Les Archives du RCD à Paris Révèlent les Malversations du Parti de Ben Ali', *Les Observateurs*, 21 September 2011, http://observers.france24.com/fr/20110921-botzarileaks-archives-rcd-paris-revelent-malversations-parti-ben-ali-tunisie-revolution, last accessed 1 March 2018.
[363] Jean-Pierre Tuquoi and Nicolas Beau, *Notre Ami Ben Ali: l'Envers du 'Miracle Tunisien'*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999, p. 192.
[364] Ibid.
[365] Interview with Seifeddine Ferjani quoted in Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 88.

transparent envelopes. In a typical example of such monitoring and denunciation activity, one observer handed in an election report in which she detailed 'all the information about the people [she] saw who voted for the "blue card" or "golden card" [of the opposition]'.[366]

Silencing dissent

Naturally the illegal monitoring of votes cast in France was only a reflection of much wider electoral interference at home. During general elections in 1994, Ben Ali – who ran unopposed – claimed 99.9% of the votes, and the RCD received 144 out of 163 parliamentary seats. Following a change in the electoral law, 19 parliamentary seats had been reserved for the opposition: these were divided amongst parties that were relatively loyal to the Ben Ali regime. The MDS, which gained ten seats, was headed by Mohamed Moada at the time, who pursued a reconciliatory line with the regime. In an interview in *La Presse* in 1992 he stressed the need 'to revise the concept of the political opposition' because 'a switch of power of 100% has become outdated'[367] and, in reference to the presidential elections, pronounced the 'immutable confidence' of MDS activists in Ben Ali.[368]

Other parties that gained seats included the Unionist Democratic Union (UDU) with two mandates. The UDU was founded in November 1988 by Abderrahmane Tlili, an RCD member at the time. Mohamed Jegham explained that shortly after taking power Ben Ali 'pushed some people he knew to create…so-called opposition parties', but these parties

[366] '"Botzarileaks": Les Archives du RCD à Paris Révèlent les Malversations du Parti de Ben Ali', *Les Observateurs*, 21 September 2011, http://observers.france24.com/fr/20110921-botzarileaks-archives-rcd-paris-revelent-malversations-parti-ben-ali-tunisie-revolution, last accessed 1 March 2018.
[367] Mohamed Moada quoted in Noureddine Sraieb, 'Tunisie: Chronique Intérieure (1992)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1994, 31, Paris: CNRS, p. 977.
[368] Jean-Pierre Tuquoi and Nicolas Beau, *Notre Ami Ben Ali: l'Envers du 'Miracle Tunisien'*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999, p. 73.

'were of course not at all from the opposition'.[369] The UDU was part of the RCD's network and its sole purpose was to bolster Ben Ali and the ruling party by conveying an image of ostensible political pluralism. However, despite the loyal opposition's public backing of the regime, authorities were not willing to extend the favour of limited representation to the May 1995 municipal elections, and the RCD claimed 99.86% of the votes.

To some leaders – including from the more accommodating opposition – the municipal election result was just too difficult to accept. Mohamed Moada wrote an open letter to Ben Ali denouncing the lack of political freedoms. Together with several other prominent opposition activist he was sentenced to jail on trumped-up charges. Kenneth Perkins remarked on the situation that 'the government was cracking down on outspoken secular political opponents and human rights advocates, who now joined al-Nahda militants as political prisoners'.[370] Alongside Mohamed Moada, these included Khemais Chammari, a LTDH activist, and Moncef Marzouki, the former league president who created the Congress of the Republic (CPR) party, which remained illegal.

While authorities widened the scope of repression to a range of opposition forces, they also decided to change their strategy for the 1999 elections and bestow legal parties with a greater voice in parliament. This carrot and stick approach to political domination is a very common strategy amongst authoritarian leaders.[371] In November 1997 Ben Ali announced that opposition parties would henceforth be granted a share of 20% of seats in parliament and local assemblies. For the first time he also opened up the presidential elections to other candidates, though a variety of 'safety' clauses ensured that only two figures were qualified

[369] Interview with Mohamed Jegham, Tunis, 19 July 2017.
[370] Kenneth J. Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008 p. 197.
[371] See, for example, Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds, 'Why the Modest Harvest?' in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds.)*, Democratization and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014, p. 131.

to run besides himself: Abderrahmane Tlili and Mohamed Belhaj Amor, another loyal opposition leader who openly expressed his support for Ben Ali.

While allowing opposition forces a greater voice, the electoral stipulations ensured, of course, that power would ultimately remain with Ben Ali and his RCD. To bestow some substance to their claim to widespread support, Ben Ali and RCD officials increasingly solicited public endorsements from a wide range of associations, companies, and professional orders, a practice that had been less common under Bourguiba. Vincent Geisser observed that the 1999 electoral campaign was launched by

> the publication of messages supporting the President from quasi all mass organisations (women, youth, scouts, workers), state companies (banks, insurances, officers…), private companies (Tunisian and international) and diverse professional orders (lawyers, doctors, architects…).[372]

Already months before the elections newspaper pages were covered with such advertisements in support of Ben Ali and the ruling party. It was only as a second step that RCD followers began campaigning. Party activists distributed flyers and leaflets throughout the country, and organised events in support of the President and their party.[373] Their massive mobilisation was meant to suggest that the overwhelming victory of Ben Ali and his RCD owed to their large base rather than rigged elections: in 1999 Ben Ali officially scored 99.45% of the vote and the RCD received all seats other than the 20% that had been reserved for the opposition.

[372] Vincent Geisser, 'Une Fin de Règne qui n'en Finit pas', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, Paris: CNRS, 2002, 38, p. 335.
[373] Ibid.

It is notable that this 'authoritarian upgrading'[374] of the Ben Ali regime was accompanied by increasing coercion and control within the ruling party. RCD activists not only participated in the marginalisation of opposition parties but also increasingly silenced voices within their own ranks that were deemed too critical. The RCD's leftist members were the first victims. Amongst other figures, Moncer Rouissi – the former adviser of Ben Ali who joined his cabinet shortly after he took power – testified that he was marginalised beginning in the mid 1990s.[375] One of his colleagues, Khemais Ksila – a former UGTT activist and LTDH leader who had joined the RCD's leading ranks – was even imprisoned in 1998 after he denounced the repressive practices of the regime.

The last chapter showed that at the RCD congress in 1988 party officials had appointed all Central Committee members, but that they had promised that during subsequent congresses elections would be the rule. Shortly before the second RCD congress in 1993, Secretary General Chedli Neffati reaffirmed that the party base 'can henceforth chose their representatives according to their likings'. He even addressed in front of journalists the supposedly negative side effects of this 'generalised voting' – such as that party members with a low level of education could be elected – elaborating that 'they will be respected like all others'.[376] Neffati and other officials suggested that the apparent elections at the congress evinced the RCD's democratic credentials, a discourse some academics assumed uncritically: Steffen Erdle wrote that the 1993 congress witnessed an 'opening', as 'most of the delegates…and two-thirds of the central committee [members]' were elected.[377]

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[374] This concept is borrowed by Steven Heydemann, who describes it as a set of processes 'that are explicitly designed to stabilize and preserve authoritarian rule in the context of ongoing demands for political change'. For details, see Steven Heydemann, 'Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World', *Brookings Institution Saban Center Analysis Paper* No. 13, 2007.
[375] Interview with Moncer Rouissi, Tunis, 21 July 2017.
[376] 'Déclarations de M Chédli Neffati, Secrétaire Général du RCD, aux Journalistes', published in Noureddine Sraieb, 'Tunisie: Chronique Intérieure (1993)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1995, 32, Paris: CNRS, p. 626.
[377] Steffen Erdle, *Ben Ali's 'New Tunisia' (1987–2009): A Case Study of Authoritarian Modernization in the Arab World*, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2010, p. 113.

However, interviewees systematically contradicted this account. They testified that in 1993 voting was nothing more than a masquerade as membership of the Central Committee was predetermined, a practice that persisted during subsequent congresses.[378]

Ideological reinforcement

Officials sought to mitigate and distract from their blatant authoritarian practices by refining and reinforcing the ideological underpinnings of the RCD, often in the framework of the Political Academy. Though Ben Ali officials kept advancing the promise of democracy, they now stressed that this was 'a complex and difficult process', a discourse intended to suggest that free multiparty politics would not occur at any point soon but would prove a long-term project.[379] In addition, by the mid 1990s authorities not only affirmed that the RCD's 'avant-garde role' made it the driving force behind Ben Ali's supposed 'Change', but equated the party with a wider 'civilisational project'[380] or 'enterprise'[381] – one which was threatened by opposition forces that worked 'against the system',[382] that is, by those who did not endorse Ben Ali or the RCD. While officials rarely elaborated in much detail what their 'modern' and 'avant-garde' ideological project entailed, in a 21 March 1990 speech Ben Ali stated that

> today the significance of Independence has become a synonym of economic strength, presence on the international scene, attachment to our values and achievements, the mastery of science, industry, technology.[383]

[378] For example, interviews with Naziha Zarrouk, Tunis, 30 January 2017; Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[379] Sadok Chaabane, *Ben Ali, Bâtir Une Démocratie: De la Lutte des Croyances à la Compétition des Programmes*, Tunis: Maison Arabe du Livre, 2005, p. 68. Note that Chaabane was one of the principal ideologues of the Ben Ali regime.
[380] 'La Motion du Règlement Intérieur: Garantir la Cohésion et l'Unité des Rangs Pour Préserver les Acquis', *Le Renouveau*, 1 August 1993, p. 7.
[381] 'Solidaires Dans l'Excellence', *Le Renouveau*, 1 August 1998, p. 9.
[382] Sadok Chaabane, *Ben Ali, Bâtir Une Démocratie: De la Lutte des Croyances à la Compétition des Programmes*, Tunis: Maison Arabe du Livre, 2005, p. 13.
[383] 'Ben Ali à l'Occasion de la Fête de l'Indépendance: La Démocratie est la Responsabilité de Tous', *La Presse*, 21 March 1990, p. 4.

This statement is important insofar as it illustrates Ben Ali's effort to reinterpret the meaning of independence – the main ideological referent of the Destour – which he stressed was no longer about 'the evacuation of foreigners from our territory' but about wider socio-economic, technological, and cultural achievements.[384] It is notable that one of the main values Ben Ali officials sought to highlight was their apparent promotion of women's rights. Bourguiba had already supported the creation of some influential women's associations and propounded pioneering legislation to promote gender equality, most importantly the Personal Status Code, which was further developed under Ben Ali. However, Ben Ali sought to take matters a step further and also bolster women's standing in the state and party – at least outwardly. Naziha Zarrouk, one of the first women to join the RCD leadership ranks, explained that 'we [RCD leaders] very much enhanced the representation of women within the party institutions and in policy-making instances, such as in ministries or the cabinets of ministers'.[385] During the RCD's 1993 congress, the proportion of women in party leadership positions rose from 1.5 to 3%.[386] The 1998 congress, which took place under the slogan of 'excellence', further increased the number of female figureheads, as a new stipulation required 20% of Central Committee members to be female. At the event Ben Ali declared that 'we refuse [to accept] that the woman is lagging behind compared to the man…because we cannot succeed in the path of excellence without the woman'.[387] While the number of female leaders drastically increased under Ben Ali, they were of course instrumentalised, amongst others, to promote a 'modern' image of Tunisia for the benefit of its Western partners. Also, it was only RCD women who had a chance to be promoted –

[384] Ibid.
[385] Interview with Naziha Zarrouk, Tunis, 30 January 2017.
[386] 'Déclarations de M Chédli Neffati, Secrétaire Général du RCD, aux Journalistes', published in Noureddine Sraieb, 'Tunisie: Chronique Intérieure (1993)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1995, 32, Paris: CNRS, p. 626.
[387] 'La Vitesse Supérieure', *Le Renouveau*, 1 August 1998, p. 8.

female opposition candidates were repressed – and then only those from the political elite, as women remained starkly underrepresented within the lower echelons of the party.

Growth, stability, solidarity

The 1998 congress slogan 'excellence' refers to another goal Ben Ali stressed in the above speech, namely that of 'economic strength'. In interviews many former officials insisted that in this respect '[Tunisia] was a success';[388] some even pronounced the 1990s a 'golden era' owing to the supposed 'economic and social growth' then underway.[389] Data from the International Monetary Fund suggest that in the 1990s growth rates were peaking at about 5% annually.[390] Many interviewees cited praise from international donor institutions as 'evidence' of their exemplary performance at the time.[391] Succeeding economically and making Tunisia a '"tiger" of the Mediterranean'[392] became one of the key concerns of the RCD leadership. They pronounced growth as one of the preconditions for solving other challenges. For example, party figureheads affirmed that socioeconomic strain made people more prone to join 'extreme' groups; addressing the causes of this strain would reduce their salience, which would allow authorities to embark upon a wider political opening[393] – a clever attempt at tying democratisation to economic success. Of course, even in times of growth the political system remained closed.

[388] For example, interviews with Abbes Mohsen, Tunis, 22 July 2017; Afif Chelbi, Tunis, 22 September 2015.
[389] For example, interview with Sofien Kadri, Regueb, governorate of Sidi Bouzid, 27 June 2016.
[390] 'Tunisia: Selected Issues', *International Monetary Fund*, Country Report No. 16/47, Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2016, p. 3.
[391] For example, interviews with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 22 July 2017; Afif Chelbi, Tunis, 22 September 2015. In a 1995 report the World Bank noted approvingly that 'the government plays an enormous role in creating an environment that promotes entrepreneurial agility, strong human resources, and labor force flexibility'. See, for details, 'Republic of Tunisia Towards the 21st Century, Country Economic Memorandum', *The World Bank*, Report No. 14375-TUN, October 1995, p. 62.
[392] Robert J. King, 'The Political Logic of Economic Reform in Tunisia', in Azzedine Layachi (ed.), *Economic Crisis and Political Change in North Africa*, Westport: Praeger, 1998, p. 107.
[393] Interviews with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 22 July 2017; Afif Chelbi, Tunis, 22 September 2015.

The RCD's mission did not stop at fostering economic strength, however. 'Solidarity' became one of the catchphrases the RCD used to suggest – at least outwardly – that everybody should be able to benefit from growth; nobody should be left behind.[394] Some RCD cells and affiliated associations organised charity work to support the poor. One former grassroots member told me, full of pride, that he had never had to pay for his children's notebooks and pens for school, because they were provided by the party.[395] There were other ways in which Ben Ali officials sought to make 'solidarity' one of the guiding principles of the state and party, at least formally. In 1994, the National Solidarity Fund (FNS) – often referred to as the 26–26 Fund after its postal account number – was launched to enhance infrastructure in marginalised areas and help some particularly deprived individuals. The same year the Local Council for Development was created to identify socioeconomic, cultural, and educational priorities in specific districts. In addition, in 1996, the National Employment Fund (FNE) was set up, most importantly to provide training opportunities for the jobless. A year later the Tunisian Bank of Solidarity (BTS) was created to help the disadvantaged access finances and microcredit. While formally these institutions were part of the state, it is notable that at the 1998 congress activists portrayed their creation as a party event. *Le Renouveau* announced that 'the congress celebrated the establishment of the Tunisian Bank of Solidarity…which shows that employment is the first priority of the country'.[396] Moreover, one article, entitled 'Solidarity amongst excellence', pronounced that 'the Tunisian social fabric had the privilege to become imbued with the concept of solidarity', elaborating that this 'phenomenon' owed to the 'New Era' of Ben Ali and the RCD.[397]

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[394] Sadok Rebah, former Social Affairs Minister, quoted in Noureddine Sraieb, 'Tunisie: Chronique Intérieure (1995)', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1997, 34, Paris: CNRS, p. 802.
[395] Interview with Sami, Bardo, September 2015.
[396] 'Préservation des Acquis Sociaux et Renforcement de l'Emploi, une Responsabilité Collective', *Le Renouveau*, 1 August 1998, p. 9.
[397] 'Solidaires Dans l'Excellence', *Le Renouveau*, 1 August 1998, p. 9.

Naturally things were not as glorious as the authorities tried to suggest. The RCD's charity work mainly benefited party followers and was often reserved for those with connections to the local leadership. During the Eid festival officials received food and gifts to be distributed to the poor in their neighbourhoods, but one activist from Bab Souika testified that they 'reserved at least half of the presents for their friends'.[398] Any independent, depoliticised charity was banned. When representatives of the Lions Club – one of the largest international service organisations – decided to buy the Eid sheep for several poor families, who had been identified as the most deprived in a district, the local RCD President intervened and provided his own list of people 'in need'.[399] In a similar vein the new development institutions served primarily as an instrument of clientelism and patronage. Béatrice Hibou remarked that 'access to BTS microcredit is made all the easier if the candidate for the loan is a member of one of the various associations linked to the party'.[400] Moreover, the members of the Local Council for Development included the municipal president, party activists, and the *omda*, indicating how deeply the new institutions were embedded in the state's security structures in order to control access to resources. RCD officials also commonly pressured people to contribute to the FNS and FNE – which relied on public and private donations – sometimes employing 'intimidation, or even repressive practices'. Not all people who ended up giving money actually had the means to do so comfortably.[401]

[398] Interview with Sami, Tunis-Bab Souika, September 2015, quoted in Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 113.
[399] Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, Cambridge: Polity, 2011, p. 201.
[400] Ibid., p. 190.
[401] Ibid., p. 195.

Conclusions

Though authorities depicted the RCD as a driving force behind economic growth, solidarity, and stability, the party increasingly transformed into a network of patronage, repression, and control. Scholars of comparative authoritarianism typically stress the important role ruling parties play in facilitating power-sharing amongst the loyal elite and coopting the opposition;[402] they mostly discuss the rise of a security state in terms of the police and the military, even in instances where the author recognises 'the complementary of repression and co-optation via regime-sanctioned political parties'.[403] The previous chapter showed that during times of authoritarian consolidation the RCD indeed played an important role in coopting the opposition as Ben Ali sought to broaden his support base. However, once Ben Ali had firmly established his rule he deliberately subdued the party, which became a tool of coercion and control. This chapter highlighted the RCD's important policing and monitoring functions beginning in the 1990s, which came to extend to key national organisations, associations, the universities, and even to the diaspora community – arenas the security services and military would have had much more difficulty infiltrating and controlling.

It is notable that the dual reinforcement of the RCD's security functions and socioeconomic clientelism worked relatively well in the 1990s. This is because they provided real benefits for party members and opportunities for upward mobility, at least to some extent. Though party activists had lost much of their political leverage to Carthage – most importantly their capacity to propose government appointments and decide upon key policies – they were still in control of their economic networks. The development institutions created at the time

[402] For example, Barbara Geddes, 'What do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1999, 2, pp. 115–144; Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
[403] Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 165.

provided many with new possibilities for socioeconomic advancement. Naturally profits were made on the back of large sections of society who did not belong to the ruling party, were excluded from any advantages, and were often fiercely repressed. The RCD's patronage structures changed, however, when relatives of the President came to have a say in the Palace and party. In the 2000s some of Ben Ali's family members entered the RCD and eventually climbed to its highest ranks, a dynamic that marginalised many longtime activists, as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

4. THE FAMILY'S QUEST FOR PARTY LEADERSHIP

The party became a machine…to control the country…and Ben Ali became completely adrift, it was his family who ruled. It was his family who destroyed the wealth of the country. This was the end of the regime.

Abada Kefi, Bardo, 26 May 2016

In 2003 Stephen Juan King wrote that the RCD had become a party of 'rural notables' and 'the urban bourgeoisie'.[404] The same year, scholars Michael Camau and Vincent Geisser similarly affirmed that the RCD's 'exceptional longevity' owed to its 'intermediary function between central and peripheral elites' from the 'Neo Destour net'. [405] In contrast to such accounts, this chapter shows that, starting from the early 2000s, an increasing number of Ben Ali relatives and their associates integrated into the RCD, which strongly reduced its mediating function and marginalised key figures within its elite, including many regional notables. Ben Ali family members initially used the RCD as a tool to prop up their economic assets, but in the late 2000s some also developed a keen political interest as the presidential succession became a critical topic, and any future President was expected to emerge out of the RCD.

[404] Stephen J. King, *Liberalization Against Democracy: The Local Politics of Economic Reform in Tunisia*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.
[405] Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Le Syndrome Autoritaire: Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003, p. 217.

Ben Ali and his relatives replaced the traditional RCD elite with a younger generation of activists who hailed from deprived backgrounds, and whose economic and political success thus depended entirely on their allegiance to the ruling family. These family 'stooges' or 'proxies' came to dominate inner RCD affairs. The increasing visibility of the presidential family and their associates led many Tunisians, such as the above-quoted Abada Kefi – a parliamentary deputy[406] and lawyer who defended Ben-Ali era officials after the uprisings – to suspect that they were actually the ones ruling the country and that the President was no longer in charge. He believed that the RCD had become a 'machine', the sole objective of which was to reinforce the family's grip on power. Many interviewees similarly affirmed that the RCD became an 'empty shell'.[407] While rightly identifying a growing ideological void within the party, such statements are partially misleading, as they imply that the party performed no functions or activities beyond serving the regime's immediate interest. In fact, throughout the 2000s, the RCD actually remained a source of social identification and belonging, especially for followers in the regions. Party activists also continued to organise events and provide basic social services, though the scope of these was much more limited than in earlier years of Ben Ali's rule.

Abada Kefi's statement illustrates the extent of mistrust towards the presidential family, a tendency visible even within parts of the RCD inner circle. Indeed, this chapter shows that longtime party followers were dismayed when Ben Ali relatives came to exert real influence within the party. As a result, internecine tensions began to mount, and some marginalised party activists even began to contest the growing role of presidential relatives and their stooges. However, their contentious activity was mostly limited to the regions and was

[406] In October 2014, Abada Kefi was elected lawmaker for Nidaa Tounes, but he left the party shortly thereafter.
[407] For example, Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, *La Régente de Carthage: Main Basse sur la Tunisie*, Paris: La Découverte, 2009, p. 63; 'RCD, Voyage à l'Intérieur du Parti-État', *Jeune Afrique*, 2481, July/August 2008, p. 38.

typically expressed in inconspicuous ways, given the high costs associated with more visible forms of dissidence. However, a small number of RCD followers decided to challenge the incumbents openly; some even sided with other opposition movements, though only a minority, such as when major protests erupted in the city of Gafsa in 2008 against preferential hiring practices at the local phosphate company. This chapter demonstrates that, rather than attempting to ameliorate the plight voiced by an increasing number of people, Ben Ali officials responded by further reinforcing their grip on power. This culminated in 2008, when presidential relatives and their cronies usurped the RCD party leadership, a process that has not been investigated so far.

A looming succession crisis

The President's family developed a keen interest in integrating into the RCD at a time when Ben Ali's succession was becoming a topic of heated discussion and speculation, including within the regime's own ranks. Debates about the President's succession were triggered by a variety of factors, such as Ben Ali's advancing age, rumours of him being ill and increasingly absent from the decision-making process, and declining popular support for his regime. Many Tunisians who had supported Ben Ali eagerly in his early years in power remained hopeful into the 1990s that some of his promised political and economic reforms would bear fruit. However, they affirmed that by the 2000s this prospect had drastically declined. For example, Nejib, a former RCD activist and truck driver from Tunis, said that each year on 7 November he had used to wait impatiently for Ben Ali's annual speech, delivered in commemoration of the day he took power in 1987: 'It was a discourse that made us dream, in which salary rises and financial benefits were announced, as well as infrastructure projects and [other plans] to ameliorate the living conditions of Tunisians'. Nejib stressed, however, that eventually he and his friends lost faith that Ben Ali's promises and announcements would come to fruition: 'In the last five to ten years, the speech no

longer made us dream', he said.[408] Nejib's statement reflects a wider sense of frustration not only in the general population but also among card-carrying RCD base activists. Disillusionment was often fuelled by the rising presence of Ben Ali relatives and their associates in politics and business, accompanied by a decrease in opportunities for many citizens – topics discussed in detail in subsequent sections. In addition, many interviewees cited one event as particularly detrimental to their trust in the regime: in April 2002, a military helicopter crashed in the town of Warfalla Laj al-Dukhan, west of Tunis, killing the Army Chief of Staff and twelve officers of the military,[409] an institution very popular among the people. Many alleged that Ben Ali was behind the incident, seeking to eliminate influential army officials who could have posed a threat to his rule. The regime's failure to convincingly explain or launch an investigation into the event only reinforced such suspicions, including within the highest ranks of the RCD.[410]

It is unclear whether his years in power and declining popularity ever prompted Ben Ali to consider ceding the presidency. Some of his relatives affirmed that this was the case, and that Ben Ali intended to avoid making the same mistake as Bourguiba – that is, of becoming President for life. Afif Chiboub – the brother-in-law of Dorsaf, Ben Ali's middle daughter from his first marriage – informed me that Ben Ali initially sought not to present himself for the 2004 presidential elections. He suggested that, following the 1999 presidential ballots, Ben Ali wanted to change the Constitution to create the position of Vice-President, which would have allowed him to delegate some of his responsibilities and prepare for a smooth succession. Chiboub even affirmed that Ben Ali already had someone in mind for this post: senior official Mohamed Jegham, the former Director of the Presidential Cabinet, who

[408] Interview with Nejib, Tunis, 29 June 2016.
[409] See, for details, Noureddine Jebnoun, 'In the Shadow of Power: Civil-Military Relations and the Tunisian Popular Uprising', *Journal of North African Studies*, 2014, 19, 3, pp. 302–303.
[410] For example, interviews with Naziha Zarrouk, a previous ambassador to Lebanon and RCD Vice-Secretary General, Tunis, 30 January 2017 and Arbi, former RCD student activist, Tunis, 19 September 2015.

hailed from Ben Ali's own hometown of Hammam Sousse. Having taken on in 1997 the important directorship of the Presidential Cabinet, he became Defense Minister two years later. Chiboub said the idea of a Vice-President was dropped only 'following fierce opposition from within Ben Ali's entourage, especially from his wife…who talked him out of it'. In an attempt to add credibility to his account, he pointed out that 'subsequently Jegham was [demoted] to an ambassadorial post'.[411] However, most government officials who worked closely with Ben Ali vehemently opposed Chiboub's account, and Jegham could have become an ambassador for a variety of reasons.

Amongst other people, Chedli Neffati – the former RCD Secretary General and Social Affairs Minister, who had already worked closely with Ben Ali under the Bourguiba regime – asserted that Ben Ali would 'never' have ceded power voluntarily, and was visibly amused that anyone could suggest otherwise.[412] His account is somewhat more credible than Chiboub's, given that ever since taking office Ben Ali had tried jealously to control and centralise all political affairs. A relative of the President, Chiboub likely sought to save his own skin by suggesting that Ben Ali never intended to become a quasi-President for life. It is noteworthy, however, that some figures from the 'Sousse clan' reportedly sought to prepare Jegham – who had excellent ties to its business elite, including to heavyweights such as Kamel Eltaief, one of Tunisia's most influential entrepreneurs – as a possible future presidential candidate in case Ben Ali decided not to run again.[413] However, such preparations are unlikely to have resulted from Ben Ali signalling that he might cede power. Rather, they reflect a growing disconnect between him and some senior officials, and the latter's uncertainty about the future of Ben Ali's reign.

[411] Interview with Afif Chiboub, Tunis, 13 February 2017.
[412] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017. Note that Hamed Karoui shared Chedli's analysis. Interview with Hamed Karoui, Tunis, 1 February 2017.
[413] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.

Holding onto power

A quickly changing geopolitical climate initially facilitated Ben Ali's clinging to power at a time when confidence in his rule was slowly dissipating, including within some inner parts of the regime. In particular, the 11 September 2001 al-Qaeda-led attack on the World Trade Center was perceived as a real 'blessing' for the regime because, in the words of Éric Gobe, it 'revitalised the role of Ben Ali as an important ally in the fight against Islamist terrorism'.[414] This was even more the case after the April 2002 Djerba bombing, the first large-scale al-Qaeda assault in Tunisia, which killed 14 German tourists, four Tunisians, and one French citizen. In response to the attack, lawmakers in parliament adopted a new counter-terrorism law, which they sold to the public as facilitating the arrest of jihadis. Yet in practice, the wording of the legislation was kept sufficiently ambiguous to bestow authorities with sweeping powers to crack down on a variety of activists, including political dissidents. Opposition figures claimed that their hopes that the regime would encounter greater pressure and be forced to offer increased political accountability were shattered once everyone started talking about countering terrorism, including their previous partners in the West.[415]

With new confidence, Ben Ali quickly pushed through a constitutional referendum, held on 26 May 2002, which abolished the three-term limit for Presidents. It also raised the age limit of any incumbent President from 70 to 75, thus formally allowing him to remain in power until 2014. The RCD became the main tool to ensure prompt advertisement and adoption of the constitutional changes, which were prepared by the Presidential Cabinet and rubber-

[414] Éric Gobe, 'Tunisie 2002: Un Référendum Pour Quoi Faire', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 2004, 40, Paris: CNRS, p. 381.
[415] Interviews with various opposition figures under Ben Ali, including Habib Mokni, senior Ennahda official, Tunis, May 2015 and Tarek Chaabouni, former leader of the Ettajdid party, Tunis, 1 October 2015.

stamped by parliament prior to the plebiscite. Ali Chaouch, RCD Secretary General at the time, recalled:

> The party did not participate in the preparation of the constitutional amendment, which was launched by the Presidential Cabinet. Only the [RCD] Political Bureau was asked to discuss the basic features of the project, but that's it. …However, parliamentary committee leaders are Destourians, that is, those who took part in discussing the project in parliament were party activists. …So the party did not participate directly in the choice [of the referendum]…but the party is disciplined…and must of course support the project that was presented by its President and adopted by parliament; hence we organised a conventional electoral campaign.[416]

Chaouch's comments highlight the high degree to which the RCD managed to enforce unity and discipline. This was despite the referendum being 'very controversial', as Chaouch acknowledged, 'not only amongst the political opposition but also amongst some people who were with the regime'.[417] Indeed, many former RCD activists, such as Mohamed Ben Khallifa, the previous party leader in Bizerte, told me they were far from convinced by the referendum but decided not to voice any criticism, at least in public, because they believed 'they couldn't do anything about it'.[418] This illustrates that, well into the 2000s, Ben Ali could rely on the RCD's full institutional support irrespective of mounting internecine disagreement with his policies.

The day after

While the constitutional changes gave Ben Ali ten more years in power, some provisions were introduced that suggest the President had also begun to think about the era after his rule ended. Specifically, amendments were included that outlined legal channels for the transfer of power in cases of presidential incapacity, illness, or death. These allowed the

[416] Interview with Ali Chaouch, Tunis, 11 February 2017.
[417] Ibid.
[418] Interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017. Information corroborated through other interviews.

President to delegate his powers to the Prime Minister if he was temporarily incapable of ruling the country – a provision replacing the clause Ben Ali used to oust Bourguiba, which stipulated that the Prime Minister could determine the President's incapacity himself. The constitutional reform also enshrined legal immunity for the President, specifying that this included the period after ceding power. A law passed in 2005 further elaborated the benefits any former President and his family would enjoy. Amongst other entitlements, it granted a past President a life annuity equivalent to what he earned in office; in Ben Ali's case, reportedly 21,000 TND per month (9,200 USD)[419] – a striking amount compared to Tunisia's average income of 795 TND (348 USD) per capita.[420] The law also stipulated that when a President died his wife would continue to enjoy benefits such as housing, healthcare, and security and support staff, as well as 80% of his life annuity.[421]

Partially because of these provisions, rumours started to circulate – including within the RCD – about the President being ill, possibly terminally, and no longer able to rule the country. The ubiquitous spread of gossip about the ruling clique is a key feature during the decay of authoritarian regimes, a time marked by a general atmosphere of stagnation or crisis, often in relation to uncertainty about the ruler's successor.[422] In particular, Ben Ali was alleged to suffer from prostate cancer, a suspicion uttered even by foreign diplomats.[423] Ben Ali's daughter, Nesrine, vehemently denied these accounts, affirming her father had

[419] 'Zine El Abidine Ben Ali: Un Salaire de 21.000 DT et un Retrait de 500.000 DT une Semaine Avant Son Départ', *Business News*, 30 January 2011, http://www.businessnews.com.tn/zine-el-abidine-ben-ali-un-salaire-de-21000-dt-et-un-retrait-de-500000-dt-une-semaine-avant-son-depart,520,23307,1, last accessed 23 September 2018.
[420] Author calculations, based on World Bank data for the year 2010: 'World Development Indicators', *The World Bank*, n.d., http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=TUN, last accessed 20 March 2017.
[421] See, for details, law No. 2005–88 of 27 September 2005, 'Traduction Française Pour l'Information', *Journal Officiel de la République Tunisienne*, No. 78, 30 September 2005, http://www.cnudst.rnrt.tn/jortsrc/2005/2005f/jo0782005.pdf, last accessed 27 March 2017.
[422] Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 139–142.
[423] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Succession in Tunisia: Finding a Successor or Feet First?', *Wikileaks*, 9 January 2006, 06TUNIS55_a, secret.

'only normal health problems for his age'.[424] With a severe form of prostate cancer, it would indeed have been difficult for Ben Ali to father a child, Mohamed, who was born in 2005. Throughout the 2000s, Ben Ali also continued to appear regularly in public, and was said to look healthy during meetings.[425] Still, Nesrine's acknowledgement that her father had 'normal' health issues could be an understatement. It suggests that the President's physical condition was not ideal and he could have suffered from all sorts of illnesses, at least occasionally.[426]

Many people close to Ben Ali asserted that, in addition to his advancing age and alleged illness, the birth of his son made him spend more time at home and less at his office.[427] They said that, after five daughters, Ben Ali was overjoyed finally to have also a son, and that playing with Mohamed on a regular basis became a priority for him. When asked whether the birth of her brother changed her father, Nesrine affirmed that this was 'true'. Later in the interview, she tried to qualify her response somewhat, saying:

> When you accumulate, accumulate, and accumulate [mandates], you get tired at the end, and he was getting old. I don't think it was…my brother who changed a lot, …but he took the time to play with him, to see him. However, I don't think this changed the hours he spent in office.[428]

The amount of time Ben Ali spent with his son remains unclear. However, it is improbable that, as Nesrine suggested, his schedule and presidential commitments were mostly unaffected – particularly as prior to Mohamed's birth he was known for working solidly all

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[424] Interview with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 13 February 2017.
[425] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Succession in Tunisia: Finding a Successor or Feet First?', *Wikileaks*, 9 January 2006, 06TUNIS55_a, secret.
[426] A close ally of the President's family, Mohamed Ghariani, affirmed Ben Ali had 'prostate issues' but 'managed to get them under control through medical treatment in Germany'. Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.
[427] Interviews with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016; Mahmoud Cheikhrouhou, former personal pilot of Ben Ali, Tunis, 1 July 2016; Mohamed Ghannouchi, Tunis, 2 October 2015.
[428] Interview with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 13 February 2017.

day without breaks. One former official said that Ben Ali's work discipline had once been so strong that he always picked up his phone or called him back personally – except for during his last years in office, when he was sometimes unreachable.[429] Nesrine recognised that, in the 2000s, her father was not as vigorous and energetic as he had once been – yet some people close to the President, such as Afif Chiboub, went so far as to claim that Ben Ali became 'completely cut off from the rest of the world'. Afif Chiboub said that even some presidential relatives, presumably his daughters from his first marriage, did not see him 'as much as they used to', reproaching the President's new wife and entourage for 'isolating' him.[430]

While Afif Chiboub's statements are exaggerated – Ben Ali certainly possessed agency – they reflect the extent to which frictions had begun to grow between rival family clans, and that family members were aware that an end to Ben Ali's rule was approaching. Indeed, Nesrine admitted that she and other relatives repeatedly asked Ben Ali about a succession plan, trying to push for someone younger who would not pose a threat to the family's interests.[431] In the Arab republics of Syria, Egypt, and Libya rulers were grooming their sons to succeed them, in the case of the former successfully,[432] but this was certainly not feasible in Tunisia given Mohamed's young age. Even foreign diplomats seemed clueless when it came to possible succession scenarios.[433] This was extremely worrying for the President's relatives. By the mid 2000s, most of Ben Ali's daughters had come of age and married, and their husbands had established themselves as wealthy and influential public figures. The next section introduces the main family clans, their leading figures, and their assets.

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[429] Interview with Adel, a former official of the Ben Ali regime, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[430] Interview with Afif Chiboub, Tunis, 13 February 2017.
[431] Interview with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 13 February 2017.
[432] See, for details, Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.
[433] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Tunisia: What Succession Scenario?', *Wikileaks*, 9 May 2008, 08TUNIS493_a, secret.

High stakes, many clans

Most of the key players within Ben Ali's family emanate from two lineages: (1) the three children and in-laws from the President's first marriage with Naima Ben Ali, born Kefi, and (2) the relatives of his second wife, Leila Ben Ali, formerly Trabelsi. Ben Ali's own side of the family – particularly his seven siblings and their relatives – was also highly influential, especially in his hometown Hammam Sousse. Naturally, many more people were linked to the Presidential Palace through more distant relatives. Steffen Erdle speaks about 'a tightly knit web of altogether about 60 "ruling families" whose inner core involved a three digit number of individuals'.[434] This section will focus on the relatives of Naima and Leila, given their particular weight in the Ben Ali galaxy of power. Ben Ali's divorce of Naima and marriage with Leila, and the wider economic and political transformations both induced, are crucial to understanding the demise of his regime.

As her maiden name indicates, Naima's family hails from the rural mountainous Kef region in the northwest. Yet, upon marrying Ben Ali, Naima managed to integrate into and forge close ties with the Tunisois elite. This owed in part to the high status of her father, Mohamed Kefi, a former officer in the French army who was very well respected in recognition of his important role in delivering ammunition to Tunisian guerrillas during the struggle for independence and, his appointment in 1964 to the important post of Director-General of Military Security.[435] Naima's success owed also to the clever alliances she and Ben Ali

[434] Steffen Erdle, *Ben Ali's 'New Tunisia' (1987–2009): A Case Study of Authoritarian Modernization in the Arab World*, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2010, p. 146.
[435] Sharan Grewal, 'A Quiet Revolution: The Tunisian Military After Ben Ali', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 24 February 2016, p. 14. Note that General Kefi had once been Ben Ali's superior and was behind his quick ascent within the military hierarchy. Indeed, in 1964 – the same year Ben Ali married Naima – Kefi charged Ben Ali, back then a simple staff officer, with creating a military security department, which he would head for ten years. See also 'President Ben Ali: Ben Ali's Biography', *Changement*, [archived]: https://web.archive.org/web/20101021083832/http://www.changement.tn/english/president-ben-

forged with prominent Tunisian family clans, most obviously by marrying their children into them.

Ben Ali and Naima have three daughters. Ghazoua, the oldest, married Slim Zarrouk, his name suggesting a descent from the old Zarrouk family of Tunisois notables. Following the marriage, Zarrouk obtained important economic holdings such as the company Tunisie Plastiques Systemes, which produces plastic equipment for the multimedia, automobile, aviation, and housing sectors. The middle daughter, Dorsaf, wed Slim Chiboub, a former volleyball champion, whose ties to the Palace facilitated his presiding over Tunisia's National Committee of Olympics and the prominent football club Esperance, positions through which he rose to become one of Tunisia's most established public figures. His business holdings – also developed through his marriage to Dorsaf – focused on sports franchises, advertising, and retail. The youngest of the three, Cyrine, wed Marouane Mabrouk, who hailed from a prominent Tunisois family. The Mabrouks already had a foot in the economy prior to Marouane's marriage, specifically in food and real estate, but his kinship to the President helped him to diversify his assets: Mabrouk gained shares in a wide range of sectors, including banking, retail, tourism, and telecommunications. Together, Cyrine and Mabrouk also launched Tunisia's first private internet provider, Planet Tunisie.[436]

Despite the quick – and what some might consider undeserved – economic ascent of Ben Ali's sons-in-law, it is important to highlight that their success did not figure too negatively within elite circles. This was most obviously because Zarrouk and Mabrouk themselves

ali/ben-ali-s-biography-zine-el-abidine-ben-ali-president-of-the-tunisian-republic--2.html, last accessed 21 March 2017.

[436] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Corruption in Tunisia Part IV: The Family's Holdings', *Wikileaks*, 5 July 2006, 06TUNIS1672_a, confidential.

hailed from prominent families, which subsequently also profited from their ties to the President, whereas Chiboub was recognised as related to an important businessman, Taoufik Chaibi, and as a self-made sports champion. Indeed, to many their marriages into the Palace were part of an ongoing reinforcing and balancing of alliances, which for centuries had allowed prominent families to impose themselves on the political and economic arenas. Members of old family clans and figures from Ben Ali's early ruling clique often stressed their close ties to Naima and her relatives. For example, Chedli Neffati, the former RCD Secretary General, said his wife was close friends with Naima and that his family was honoured to have been invited to the wedding of Cyrine[437] – naturally, a unique opportunity to forge even deeper personal and professional ties to the ruling family.

There were other reasons for elite circles to be relatively accepting of the fast-growing wealth of Ben Ali's sons-in-law. Amongst other factors, in Tunisia the concept of nepotism is sometimes interpreted positively as 'caring for one's family' – provided people don't 'exaggerate'.[438] More importantly, Zarrouk, Chiboub, and Mabrouk were cautious not to appear too aggressive in their economic endeavours, so many elite figures considered them no threat to their own interests. Their business deals typically focused on commerce and they did not seek to take a leading role in lucrative sectors dominated by old elites, such as real estate, tourism, automobile, and aviation – very much unlike the relatives of Ben Ali's second wife, Leila.

The coming of the nouveaux riches

The background of Leila and how she met Ben Ali have been the subject of many rumours and heated discussions. Many people suggest she was a hairdresser, alluding to the

[437] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[438] For example, interviews with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017; Mehdi, a neighbourhood leader, Tunis-Bab Souika, September 2015.

possibility that she got to know Ben Ali while cutting his hair.[439] Others told me that Ben Ali met Leila randomly on the streets of Tunis, when his car accidentally bumped into hers.[440] Yet, while the story of their first encounter remains a closely guarded secret, interviewees revealed that Leila was certainly not a hairdresser but rather Ben Ali's longtime mistress.[441] Indeed, following a failed first marriage and with her family unequipped to provide for a promising future – Leila had ten siblings, and her father was a simple merchant in the medina of Tunis – Leila became known within regime circles as the courtesan of several high-ranking officials. For example, alongside her relationship with Ben Ali, Leila was also the mistress of Farid Mokhtar, a senior official and brother-in-law of Mohamed Mzali, the former Prime Minister under Bourguiba.[442]

Interviewees suggested it was not unusual for officials such as Ben Ali to have extramarital relationships, although they naturally sought to keep them confidential out of fear of a public outcry and possible demotion. In the case of Ben Ali, senior figures who worked with him typically stated that they had become aware of his affair with Leila by 1986. That year their private liaison attracted attention within some regime circles when Leila became pregnant and decided to keep her child. Chedli Neffati, who worked for several months in 1987 at the Interior Ministry – when Ben Ali was Interior Minister – stated:

> One day [Leila] told Ben Ali he would become the father of an illegitimate daughter. This was very serious…an extramarital, illegitimate child in the Muslim world, in addition he was Interior Minister! Ben Ali was very lucky because Bourguiba didn't know. Nobody

[439] Many academics have internalised this account. They include: Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, p. 72; Jeremy Bowen, *The Arab Uprisings: The People Want the Fall of the Regime*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2012; James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 45.
[440] For example, interview with Anis Boughattas, Tunis, 29 January 2017.
[441] Interviews with Hamed Karoui, Tunis, 1 February 2017; Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017. Note that in her memoirs, Leila Ben Ali confirmed she had never been a hairdresser. See, for details, Leila Ben Ali, *Ma Vérité*, Paris: Éditions du Moment, 2012, pp. 105–106.
[442] Interviews with various former government officials, including Hamed Karoui, Tunis, 1 February 2017; Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017; Ali Chaouch, Tunis, 11 February 2017.

> told Bourguiba, because people were afraid of Ben Ali, who was a very tough Interior Minister… . If Bourguiba had known, he would have fired him immediately![443]

Given how delicate Ben Ali's situation was, and that he risked not only losing his reputation but also his job, some of his close allies reportedly advised him to 'solve' the problem.[444] According to a trusted family friend, Ben Ali sent the pregnant Leila to Italy, where she gave birth to a girl, Nesrine, in secrecy on 16 January 1987.[445] The family friend elaborated that Kamel Eltaief – the influential businessman and longtime aide of Ben Ali, from his hometown Hammam Sousse – even tried to convince him to buy a house for Leila and the child in Italy, hoping this would allow him to dissociate himself from them.[446] What happened next is subject to controversy. Several sources suggested that shortly after Nesrine was born, Ben Ali visited Leila and the baby in Italy. Some affirmed this was just a courtesy visit, while others implied that Ben Ali wanted to 'take care' of the situation once and for all, possibly even intending to kill the child.[447] Whatever the purpose of the visit, all interviewees said that upon seeing Nesrine he changed his mind and decided to become a 'real' father to his illegitimate daughter.[448]

Once Ben Ali became President in November 1987, he was of course at liberty to determine for himself how to handle his new family situation. Reportedly, the President's close advisers recommended finding a legal way for Nesrine to become his legitimate child while he remained married to Naima. 'The problem was that [Leila] stole Ben Ali's heart. He became crazily in love with her', recalled Chedli Neffati, elaborating that the President only developed these strong feelings following Nesrine's birth.[449] Ben Ali finally took the

[443] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[444] Interview with Ahmed, a close friend of the Ben Ali family, Tunis, 5 February 2017.
[445] Ibid. Information corroborated through other interviews.
[446] Ibid.
[447] Ibid.
[448] Ibid.
[449] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.

decision to divorce Naima in 1988 to marry Leila, which he did several years later in 1992. Still visibly agitated by Ben Ali's choice, Chedli Neffati stated:

> Some people might think [marrying Leila] was personal. No, it is no longer personal if you are President of the Republic! …[Naima and Ben Ali] were fighting all the time, they disagreed a lot. But Ben Ali's big mistake was to divorce her and to officially marry this woman [Leila]… . She had been with a very large number of men and was not suited to become [first lady]![450]

Chedli Neffati's comments highlight how, from the very beginning, elite circles refused entirely to accept Leila. Her background was considered too controversial, especially when compared to Naima's respectable family history. Thus, Ben Ali's divorce of Naima was taken also as a 'divorce' of her friends in the elite, and tensions between them and Leila quickly heightened in subsequent years.

As Naima had done before her, Leila took advantage of her status as first lady to promote her relatives to key economic posts. In contrast to Naima's family, however, Leila's relatives sought to gain a stake in all key branches of the economy. They included highly visible sectors such as automobiles, aviation, and others traditionally dominated by the elite. Commenting on the business interests of Leila's family, an American diplomat said in the mid 2000s that they 'extend to virtually every corner of the economy from information and communication technology, to manufacturing, retail, transportation, tourism, banking, and agriculture and food processing'.[451] Only offshore activities were relatively immune from the family, with Tunisian businessmen established abroad reporting little interference by presidential relatives[452] – arguably because a good external image was a political priority under Ben Ali.

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[450] Ibid.
[451] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Corruption in Tunisia Part II: The Anatomy of Exploitation', *Wikileaks*, 29 June 2006, 06TUNIS1630_a, confidential.
[452] Interview with Faouzi Elloumi, CEO of Elloumi Group, Tunis, 28 September 2015.

But inside Tunisia, possible competitors in sectors where the family operated were systematically and ruthlessly sidelined, including through blackmail and extortion.[453] While virtually all of Leila's close relatives developed a key economic interest, some of them emerged as particularly aggressive and monopolising actors. These included Leila's youngest and favourite brother, Belhassen Trabelsi; his niece Nesrine characterised him as 'a 100% capitalist', thus suggesting a keen appetite for profits.[454] Belhassen launched Karthago Airlines, the first private airline in Tunisia, and also became a leading figure in sectors as diverse as tourism, retail, telecommunications, and manufacturing. Many formerly high-ranking figures said that Belhassen came to dine with Ben Ali on a regular basis. Reportedly, the President valued the information his new brother-in-law relayed through his wide network of employees, many of whom acted as informants on future business deals and opposition figures.[455] Naturally, the quick ascent of Belhassen to an economic heavyweight and a trusted aide of the President was disturbing to many longtime Ben Ali supporters in the more traditional elite, some of whom had suffered massive economic losses because Belhassen had forced them out of business. Figures who had known Leila and her family since the 1980s – when she was still the mistress of Ben Ali – were particularly enraged. Chedli Neffati, whose tasks at the time included gathering information about Leila's family on behalf of Ben Ali, presumably to protect the latter from any unintended leaks about their liaison, disdainfully recalled: 'I knew Belhassen in 1989. He had nothing, not even a moped'. He elaborated: 'It is not a crime to come from a very poor family and become wealthy – as long as you respect the law!'[456] In reality, of course, many elite figures

[453] Interviews with victims of extortion by the Trabelsi family, including Dhamir Mannai, Tunis, January 2014 and Khayem Turki, Tunis, February 2014.
[454] Interview with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 16 February 2017.
[455] Interviews with various former government officials, including Hamed Karoui, Tunis, 1 February 2017; Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017; Ali Chaouch, Tunis, 11 February 2017.
[456] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.

particularly despised Leila's relatives for the supposedly low educational level that came with their modest family background, denouncing them as primitive *nouveaux riches*.

Aside from Belhassen, another key figure within the Trabelsi family was Leila's nephew Imed. In 2006, Imed attracted international attention when he stole a yacht from a well-known French businessman with his cousin Moaz. Their theft became known when the yacht appeared, freshly repainted, in the harbour of Sidi Bou Said, the upper class coastal town north of Tunis.[457] Imed was imprisoned on corruption charges following the 2010–11 uprisings. His lawyer, Anis Boughattas, explained that 'Imed began his first steps in the business world in 1999 [when] he asked his aunt [Leila] to help him make a career.'[458] Subsequently, Imed rose to become a key figure in the economy with interests allegedly including the illegal trafficking of goods, including drugs. Boughattas' account that Leila personally intervened to help Imed is credible, given that many interviewees suggested he was her 'favourite nephew'. The affection Leila held for Imed – and, accordingly, his steep economic rise – led him to become a fierce competitor of Belhassen. Thus, the two relatives never engaged in even the pettiest business deal together.[459] Many interviewees affirmed that Imed's success came despite Ben Ali's personal distaste for him, which indicates that the first lady quickly rose to become an independent economic actor. She allegedly even helped her mother, Hajja Nana, to become self-sufficient, which the latter did by facilitating business deals, sometimes in exchange for a commission.[460] Naturally the family's role as an economic intermediary came at the expense of the Tunisois elite and regional notables who traditionally held this function.

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[457] See, for details, Jacques Follorou, 'Une Affaire de Vol de Yachts Trouble la Relation Paris-Tunis', *Le Monde*, 20 August 2009, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2009/08/20/une-affaire-de-vol-de-yachts-trouble-la-relation-paris-tunis_1230218_3212.html, last accessed 25 June 2018.
[458] Interview with Anis Boughattas, Tunis, 4 February 2017.
[459] Ibid.
[460] Interviews with Brahim Nacef and Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017.

The fact that Leila helped her favourite relatives, Belhassen and Imed, to attain so much wealth highlights the importance of personal and emotional affiliations in analysing neopatrimonial politics. This is also crucial to understanding the strategy she and her relatives pursued towards the elite. While sidelining actors perceived to be in conflict with their economic interests, the family engaged in a strategy of revenge against figures who had tried so hard in the mid 1980s to convince Ben Ali to rid himself of Leila and Nesrine. Naturally, Kamel Eltaief – who wanted Leila and Nesrine resettled in Italy – became a key target. Following a series of attacks on his businesses, Kamel Eltaief delivered an interview to *Le Monde* in October 2001 in which he denounced Leila's family's corruption and what he claimed to be a regime-initiated intimidation campaign against him. One month later he was arrested and sentenced to a year in prison.[461]

This is not to say that Leila's relatives tried to dissociate themselves entirely from elite actors in politics and the economy. Indeed, similarly to Naima, Leila also fostered close ties to some Tunisois notables to better establish her family in the capital. In 2004, Nesrine would wed Sakher el-Materi, who hailed from an important political family: his father had plotted a coup against Bourguiba in 1962. Moreover, Belhassen married Zohra Djilani, whose family was part of the Tunisois aristocracy. Zohra's father, Hedi Djilani, was the head of Tunisia's powerful UTICA employers' union. While born wealthy, his ties to the Presidential Palace certainly helped him to secure even more business deals.[462] Evidently, the Trabelsis built alliances according to an 'either with or against' logic – people who

[461] 'Tunisie: Reprise du Procès de Kamel Eltaief', *Le Monde*, 22 November 2001: http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2001/11/22/tunisie-reprise-du-proces-de-kamel-eltaief_4151370_1819218.html?xtmc=kamel_eltaief&xtcr=4, last accessed 26 March 2017.
[462] Following Zohra's marriage, Hedi Djilani acquired Financiere Tunisienne, Imobiliere Echarifa, Hannibal Lease, and Manufacture Tunisienne d'Exploitation Industrielle, amongst other companies. See also US Embassy in Tunis, 'Corruption in Tunisia Part IV: The Family's Holdings', *Wikileaks*, 5 July 2006, 06TUNIS1672_a, confidential.

became part of their inner circle were protected and the rest considered enemies. They were much less cautious than the Kefis to safeguard the interests of the Tunisois elite and would go so far as to marginalise anyone challenging their thirst for profits and influence.

The RCD's central role

Alongside the Trabelsis' forging of ties to certain important elite actors, the RCD took a central role in their efforts to amass and protect their wealth; this was especially the case because the Trabelsis did not themselves hail from an established family with longstanding business networks of its own. This section maps out the main ways in which the RCD served the family's financial interests, highlighting the party's central role in fostering economic deals. Indeed, even entrepreneurs who had suffered economic losses because of the Trabelsis, and who were critical of Ben Ali, frequently told me they still had to engage with RCD figures. Some used the metaphor of 'fire in the winter' to describe their situation: if you are too close to it you will burn, but if you are too far away you will freeze to death.[463] Thus, they depicted it as rational and necessary to keep RCD officials within some proximity, hoping that such ties would protect them, at least to a certain extent. The role of the RCD was even more significant for people who conducted business directly with the Trabelsis or were otherwise related to them. Typically, they integrated into the RCD's leading ranks. Hedi Djilani explained:

> In a small country like Tunisia, you cannot live without politics. If you are not an important political actor, you are at the very least influential. [How can]…an idea pass or a choice be accepted if you are not a political actor? I was a major economic actor and a major political actor. I was a member of the [RCD] Central Committee. The Central Committee actually did not have a lot of power, but the fact that I was President of UTICA gave me a certain influence.[464]

[463] Interview with Dhamir Mannai, Tunis, January 2014.
[464] Interview with Hedi Djilani, Tunis, 6 February 2017.

Djilani stressed that while he was both economically and politically highly influential, his presiding over UTICA was what made him an important figure in politics, not his RCD Central Committee membership per se. Indeed, his economic leverage allowed him to initiate policy proposals – which presumably often served his own interests or those of his family and cronies – while his RCD post helped to bestow legitimacy upon the decisions taken.[465] When asked more directly what kind of advantages he enjoyed as a presidential relative, Hedi Djilani stated they centred on administrative facilitations. Taking the example of real estate, he said: 'If you are a normal citizen and ask for an authorisation to construct something, it will take you two years [until you receive it]. If you are from the Ben Ali family, it takes two hours.'[466] The extended delay and frequent de facto denial of authorisations excluded many citizens from large swaths of Tunisia's economy. In contrast, the RCD's omnipresence in both the state bureaucracy and key public sector companies through professional party cells allowed the family to obtain permits promptly. This 'bureaucratic authoritarianism' is a common means of exercising control.[467] Hedi Djilani insisted 'that was it' and that he 'never did anything against the law'. However, the RCD's monitoring and coercive functions suggest that family members also used the party to 'muzzle' rivals, and multiple reports exist about figures such as Belhassen and Imed eliminating competitors, sometimes forcefully.[468] Illustrating the extent to which the nexus

[465] Hedi Djilani elaborated that he also pursued 'the politics of football' by heading the club Espérance Sportive de Tunis for several years, a position that helped him to become a central public figure. 'When Esperance wins, you have two million people who are happy', he said. Heading football clubs was indeed an important way for senior figures of the Ben Ali regime to establish themselves without being perceived as stepping on the toes of the President. It allowed them to garner an independent support base, at least to a certain extent, whereas figures within the RCD were doomed to remain in the shadow of its President, Ben Ali (interview with Hedi Djilani, Tunis, 6 February 2017).
[466] Interview with Hedi Djilani, Tunis, 6 February 2017.
[467] See, for example, Nazih Ayubi, 'Arab Bureaucracies: Expanding Size, Changing Roles', in Giacomo Luciani (ed.), *The Arab State*, London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 129–149; note that the concept of 'bureaucratic authoritarianism' is closely associated with Guillermo O'Donnell and David Collier's study of authoritarian regimes in South America, where they used it mainly to describe the rise of military leaders through bureaucracies. See, for example, Guillermo O'Donnell, *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Argentina, 1966–1973, in Comparative Perspective*, California: University of California Press, 1988.
[468] See, for example, US Embassy in Tunis, 'Corruption in Tunisia Part IV: The Family's Holdings', *Wikileaks*, 5 July 2006, 06TUNIS1672_a, confidential.

of politics and the economy had come to service the interests of the President and members of his family, one American diplomat wrote in 2006:

> President Ben Ali attended the opening session of [the] 14th UTICA congress on November 21 and was introduced by current UTICA Chairman Hedi Djilani… . Djilani's introduction was predictably laudatory, stressing that UTICA's members had responded to all of Ben Ali's directives… . The only thing UTICA wanted in return, said Djilani, was for Ben Ali to remain in power.[469]

The 'directives' given to UTICA at that time mainly revolved around a massive privatisation programme, which Ben Ali had commenced in the 1990s with the support of international financial institutions and which was intensified in the 2000s. Though publicly promoted as 'liberalising' the economy, this drive led to the concentration of a very large volume of private assets with the presidential family – a reality of crony capitalism that resulted in a real distortion of economic activity, as representatives of the International Monetary Fund have retrospectively acknowledged.[470] Mohamed Ghannouchi, Prime Minister between 1999 and 2011, remembered that the Trabelsis frequently acquired businesses through proxies – lesser-known individuals who presented themselves for privatised projects that ultimately benefited the presidential family.[471] The next sections illustrate that many Trabelsi business partners held key RCD and ministerial posts, and scrutinises how some presidential relatives themselves gained relevance in the ruling party.

[469] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Ben Ali Announces New Policies to Facilitate Business', *Wikileaks*, 24 November 2006, 06TUNIS2798_a, unclassified.
[470] Bob Rijkers, Caroline Freund, and Antonio Nucifora, 'All in the Family: State Capture in Tunisia', *The World Bank*, Policy Research Working Paper, No. 6810, March 2014; 'The Unfinished Revolution: Bringing Opportunity, Good Jobs and Greater Wealth to All Tunisians', *The World Bank*, Development Policy Review, Report No. 86179-TN, May 2014.
[471] Interview with Mohamed Ghannouchi, Tunis, 2 August 2015.

Elite engineering

The 2000s witnessed an extensive process of elite engineering in Tunisia. This consisted mainly of marginalising longstanding high-profile RCD figures and simultaneously promoting family associates to key party posts. While the objective of this process was partially financial, in that many associates were promoted to influential economic positions, the intention was also to protect the regime from senior figures who might eventually seek to challenge Ben Ali, given that he was no longer as vigorous as in his early years in power. Alongside marginalising key officials, limiting access to the President became a central tool to 'protect' Ben Ali. Chedli Neffati explained:

> They [Ben Ali's entourage] said the President is a bit tired, we need to protect him, especially he should never lose his temper, get angry, because that's not good for his health. So we need to establish filters, …everything needs to go through [Abdelaziz] Ben Dhia. All reports that come from ministers, all problems [they raise]. And Ben Dhia together with Belhassen and Leila decided which topics to pass on to the President.[472]

Several important deductions can be drawn from Chedli Neffati's statement. First of all, the establishment of 'filters' reinforced the sway of the Trabelsis, as they began to control, at least in part, the flow of information between ministries and the Palace.[473] At the same time, Chedli Neffati's statement highlights that the regime's 'number two' was not a family relative but Ben Dhia, the longtime Ben Ali adviser and former RCD Secretary General. This is significant insofar as many interviewees affirmed that Ben Dhia worked first and foremost for the President, not for the Trabelsis.[474] Indeed, the Trabelsis were closer to Abdelwahab Abdallah – another Palace associate – but Ben Dhia won a power battle with

[472] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[473] Note that restricting access to authoritarian leaders is a common way to protect their power base, especially during the decay of their regimes; in Algeria, a group of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's allies even publicly requested to meet him in 2015 after they had not seen the President in over a year. See, for details, Carlotta Gall, 'Who Runs Algeria? Many Doubt It's Ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika', *The New York Times*, 23 December 2015 https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/24/world/africa/suspicions-mount-that-ailing-president-abdelaziz-bouteflika-is-no-longer-running-algeria.html, last accessed 25 June 2018.
[474] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.

him in the late 1990s and succeeded him in his positions as spokesperson and special adviser of Ben Ali in 1999 (despite this, Abdallah retained key posts, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, between 2005 and 2010). This illustrates that the Trabelsis did not gain full control over Palace affairs. Ultimately, Ben Ali remained in charge of filling the most important posts. Former RCD Secretary General Mohamed Ghariani rationalised Ben Dhia's promotion as follows:

> Ben Ali wanted [an adviser] only for himself. Ben Dhia worked for him, not for his family. …The President is intelligent, he does not like when people hurt his family, but he also does not want someone who is totally dependent on his family. Ben Dhia played the game of being only dependent on the President. He was loyal to Ben Ali, but did not have a problem with his family.[475]

Ben Dhia's promotion came as part of a wider reshuffling of cabinet and RCD posts, which the President ordered in 1999 and again – in consultation with Ben Dhia – in 2001, 2003, and 2004. As part of this restructuring Bourguiba-era figures, many of whom had assisted Ben Ali in taking power in 1987 or risen in the early years of the 'Change', were at best demoted and usually sacked. This was naturally not to inject fresh life into politics, as Ben Ali and his advisers claimed, but to tighten the President's inner circle in face of a looming succession crisis. During the 1999 reshuffling, the most prominent dismissal was that of longtime Prime Minister Hamed Karoui, who was replaced by Mohamed Ghannouchi, a previous Economy and Finance Minister from Sousse. Hamed Karoui told me:

> [My dismissal] was normal, I had been Prime Minister for ten years. In addition, it occurred the day [Ben Ali] had to make an oath following the [1999] elections… . He was so embarrassed he didn't dare to tell me [about the dismissal] himself. The information was delivered to me by Mohamed Jegham, who was the Director of the Presidential Cabinet at the time.[476]

[475] Ibid.
[476] Interview with Hamed Karoui, Tunis, 1 February 2017.

Though dismissed as Prime Minister, Hamed Karoui retained his appointment as RCD Vice-President, mainly an honorary post. He elaborated:

> The Prime Minister is automatically [RCD] Vice-President, but even when I was no longer Prime Minister, Ben Ali kept me as Vice-President. My successor [Ghannouchi] became second Vice-President. My role [as Vice-President]? It was to follow affairs, to discuss with the President and, mostly, to preside over the Political Bureau or the Central Committee in the absence of the President.[477]

What is striking about Hamed Karoui's discourse is that it is markedly defensive of the regime, despite his sidelining. While his position as RCD Vice-President was clearly a demotion, Hamed Karoui tried to suggest that he was satisfied with it, as it allowed new faces to enter politics and instigate 'renewal'. However, many of his close allies, who were also marginalised at that time, somewhat qualified his response, affirming that nobody would have left their post voluntarily.[478] By stressing that Ben Ali did not dare to tell him personally about his demotion, Hamed Karoui further sought to convey that the President held him in high esteem. The vast majority of figures sidelined by Ben Ali in the 2000s expressed a similar discourse, which highlights how despite their marginalisation they remained deeply respectful of and faithful to the President.[479] Scholars Amin Allal and Vincent Geisser affirmed that RCD activists who were 'relatively detached from the business and mafia circles of the Palace families…generally belonged to the liberal wing of the RCD'.[480] Yet the deep admiration many of them harbour for Ben Ali to this day suggests tensions with the party were not about issues of 'liberalism'. Rather, they arose due to the conflicting interests of different regime clans; in conversations with American diplomats and with me, figures such as Hamed Karoui appeared anything but liberal.[481]

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[477] Ibid.
[478] For example, interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[479] For example, interviews with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017; Abderrahim Zouari, Tunis, 9 February 2017.
[480] Amin Allal and Vincent Geisser, 'La Tunisie de l'Après-Ben Ali', *Cultures & Conflits*, 2011, 83, p. 123.
[481] Hamed Karoui said that opposing the regime in the name of human rights 'doesn't mean anything' and that 'human rights activists were paid by foreign countries' (interview with Hamed Karoui, Tunis, 1 February

According to some regime insiders, Hamed Karoui was sidelined in part because Ben Ali thought he 'interfered a lot' in government affairs.[482] Hailing from Sousse, he presumably also fervently opposed the ascent of the Trabelsis. Yet, given his participation in the struggle for independence, his legitimacy within the party was of such a calibre that he retained the honorary post of Vice-President – at least for the time being. Most other Bourguiba-era figures were completely discarded, especially those with experience in offices considered 'sensitive' for the presidential succession line. These included the Interior and Defence Ministers, whose support was crucial for any future President, as well as high-profile officials such as the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and the RCD Secretary General, who were well known and could acquire both domestic and foreign support. Moreover, the President's entourage felt particularly threatened by figures who had direct access to the President, typically those who had already worked with him under Bourguiba or during the early years of the Change. These included Abderrahim Zouari, who was nominated Secretary General of the RCD in November 1999, replacing Ben Dhia. Under Ben Dhia's recommendation, Zouari was dismissed only a year later as part of the adviser's efforts to establish 'filters' between high officials and the President. Zouari explained:

> For them [Ben Ali's entourage] I was a danger, the Secretary General of the RCD is known at the national and even international level… . Ben Dhia controlled everything and all issues passed through him… . I was not used to that and was in direct contact with the President. [Ben Dhia] was not pleased. He said I was 'undisciplined'.[483]

Alongside his Secretary General position, Zouari had held a range of important RCD and cabinet posts. Some regime insiders told me that he had become a 'political animal' with his

2017). Moreover, in 2007 he affirmed that 'Tunisia was pursuing political reform at an appropriate pace and [blamed] weak opposition parties for not being more active'. See, for details, US Embassy in Tunis, 'RCD VP Lauds Party Influence, Bemoans Opposition Weakness', *Wikileaks*, 26 June 2007, 07TUNIS841_a, confidential.

[482] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.

[483] Interview with Abderrahim Zouari, Tunis, 9 February 2017.

'own interests' and 'plots', in other words, a potential future threat to the presidency.[484] His wide experience and high profile even led some American diplomats to place him on a list of potential presidential successors.[485] Zouari's dismissal must also be understood as part of the Palace's regional and intra-family rivalries. Indeed, Mohamed Ghariani said Zouari's origin in the region of Kef helped him to become close to Naima Kefi and her son-in-law Marouan Mabrouk, whose mother also hailed from Kef.[486] This underlines the importance of regional cleavages in national politics. Zouari could have been a future presidential candidate of Ben Ali's first family, a scenario the increasing sway of the Trabelsis undermined. At the same time, Zouari's ties to Naima's side of the family ensured he did not completely disappear from the political scene following his dismissal as Secretary General. In September 2002, he was nominated Youth and Sports Minister; however, this portfolio was very limited. His continuing political presence again reflects that the Trabelsis did not have full control over political affairs, although they could certainly initiate and accelerate specific trends. It also reflects that Ben Ali continued to bestow limited influence to relatives and aides of his first wife. Some of the President's former allies said this was to 'calm' and 'manage' the disputes between the two sides of his family,[487] but he was, of course, at the very heart of their conflict.

While some key figures such as Zouari and Karoui remained present in politics, albeit with much-reduced visibility, most were completely shut out of public office. Chedli Neffati said that, upon his dismissal as Social Affairs and Solidarity Minister in 2004, his former colleagues broke off contact with him. Even figures who used to work for Neffati and owe much of their careers to his support were implicated. Citing the case of Rafik Belhaj Kacem,

[484] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.
[485] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Tunisia: What Succession Scenario?', *Wikileaks*, 9 May 2008, 08TUNIS493_a, secret.
[486] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.
[487] Ibid.

who became Interior Minister in 2004, Neffati exclaimed, still visibly indignant about the extent of his isolation: 'He used to be my head of cabinet at the Interior Ministry. I was at the origin of his promotion. But then he stopped talking to me…he didn't call me once to ask how I was doing!'[488] Clearly, nobody wanted to be associated with figures who no longer enjoyed the trust of the Palace.

The Congress of Ambition

The RCD's July 2003 congress accelerated the marginalisation of many high-profile officials. This occurred under the usual rubric of Change, alongside the congress theme of 'Ambition'. At the closure of the four-day event, articles in *Le Renouveau* announced that 'the level of renewal of Central Committee positions had reached 48.4%'; in other words, almost half of its members had been dismissed.[489] Amongst other people, Beji Caid Essebsi, a Foreign Minister under Bourguiba and Parliamentary President in the 1990s, lost his Central Committee membership – supposedly because he had once been close to Bourguiba's wife, Wassila, and accordingly could not be fully trusted.[490] Significantly, the congress extended the marginalisation of prominent RCD figures to middle-ranking and regional party posts, alongside associated state structures. One of those targeted was the RCD student leader at the time, Hassouna Nasfi. From a family of rural notables in Gabes, Nasfi stated that he 'left' political life in 2003 and his father, a *délégué*, 'retired' the same year, allusions many people use to gloss over the fact they were actually dismissed.[491] Those activists who hailed from influential families but remained present in political life often were designated to honorary posts, such as that of RCD Vice-Presidency in a specific governorate, where they were instrumental in bestowing a degree of legitimacy upon the

[488] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[489] Abdelkrim Dermech, 'Le Rassemblement Gagnera Sous la Conduite de Ben Ali le Pari de l'"Ambition"', *Le Renouveau,* 1 August 2003.
[490] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[491] Interview with Hassouna Nasfi, Bardo, 24 May 2016.

RCD's vast restructuring. Mohamed Ben Khallifa, who is well known in his governorate of Bizerte and hails from a family with a long history of Destourian party activism, said that, without prior consultation, authorities informed him one day he was now Bizerte's RCD Vice-President.[492] Despite such deep structural changes, Ali Chaouch, RCD Secretary General at the time, sought to convince me that the congress was actually very conventional, with no far-reaching decisions being made. He said:

> I organised the congress with my team, not alone…you know we worked collectively…according to the rules, because [the RCD] is an old party… . We had a lot of congresses in the past and some were historic, others were ordinary. The congress of 2003 was ordinary.[493]

When I asked more specifically about the choice of congress theme and the issues raised by participants, Ali Chaouch elaborated, after some deliberation:

> We started having a severe [employment] crisis… . It was for this reason that the congress was organised under the slogan of 'Excellence', that is, trying to reach a different [development] level.[494]

The fact that Ali Chaouch confused the theme 'Ambition' with that of the 1998 congress, 'Excellence', could signify that his involvement in the event was in fact limited. Ben Dhia could have been the key figure behind its organisation. It certainly illustrates that conference themes had become little more than empty slogans. Indeed, the sole 'ambition' Ben Ali and his entourage pursued during the 2003 event was accelerating the RCD's internal restructuring to pave the way for his smooth re-election in 2004. So, following Ben Ali's routine confirmation as President of the RCD – Ali Chaouch commented that 'he was re-elected by acclamation, that's the tradition of the party…nobody challenges him as long as

[492] Interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017.
[493] Interview with Ali Chaouch, Tunis, 11 February 2017.
[494] Ibid.

he is the President of the Republic'[495] – Ben Ali announced his candidacy for the 2004 elections. Vincent Geisser and Éric Gobe rightly observed that 'every effort was made [during the congress] to show to the people that the idea of Ben Ali's candidacy came from the party, not from the *rais* ['President'] himself',[496] an illustration of the RCD's persistent legitimation function. As such, *Le Renouveau* repeatedly stressed: 'Ben Ali said yes to the homeland's call to run for presidency in 2004' – not vice versa.[497]

The general elections, held on 24 October 2004, were similarly staged. On election day everything was done to suggest that voting occurred with 'transparency' and 'respect for the law',[498] but Ben Ali was re-elected by an obviously rigged 94.48% and the RCD received 87.59% of the votes.[499] Even RCD activists who were still relatively committed at the time, such as Mohamed Ben Khallifa from Bizerte, affirmed: 'in 2004 the elections had lost all their value…it was only propaganda', elaborating that he still tried to 'make people live a normal election, even though we knew the results beforehand'.[500] It is noteworthy, however, that in the months preceding the elections the Central Committee held two extraordinary meetings,[501] perhaps out of fear that the newly engineered political elite might not be able to keep up the image of wide popular support for Ben Ali.

[495] Ibid.
[496] Vincent Geisser and Éric Gobe, 'Tunisie: Consolidation Autoritaire et Processus Électoraux', *L'Année du Maghreb*, 2006, 1, Paris: CNRS, p. 329.
[497] 'Ben Ali Dit Oui à l'Appel de la Patrie', *Le Renouveau,* 29 July 2003.
[498] For example, on the day of the elections Ben Ali delivered a speech stressing 'the respect for the law and its application, as well as the liberty of choice, transparency and sincerity' ('Ben Ali's Address to the Tunisian People', *Le Renouveau,* 24 October 2004).
[499] 'Consécration de la Transparence, du Respect de la Loi et de la Neutralité de l'Administration', *Le Renouveau,* 26 October 2004.
[500] Interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017.
[501] Vincent Geisser and Éric Gobe, 'Tunisie: Consolidation Autoritaire et Processus Électoraux', *L'Année du Maghreb*, 2006, 1, Paris: CNRS, p. 329.

Tracing the rise of family associates

Many interviewees affirmed that the new political class consisted of marionette-like figures who strictly followed orders but had few obvious competencies; they were 'nobodies' who '[owed] everything to the leader'[502]. For example, Brahim Nacef, who hails from the governorate of Bizerte and is a doctor of pharmacy, stated that authorities 'chose officials who were totally dedicated to the party, who were active in the party…yes-men…who agreed with everything they were being asked'.[503]

It is noteworthy that one of Tunisia's most infamous 'yes-men' – denounced as such by numerous interviewees – was Mohamed Ghannouchi, who succeeded Hamed Karoui as Prime Minister in 1999. Naturally, the rise of figures who seemingly blindly followed orders was not limited to the national level. Brahim Nacef said such figures came also to dominate party structure in Bizerte. He elaborated that nobody ever asked him to take a leadership position within the RCD, though he was one of the most accomplished men and, as a pharmacist, was a respected notable in his town of Ras Jebel, and used to entertain friendly relations with the authorities.[504] During municipal elections he presented himself for the RCD, but his name always featured at the bottom of the party list so he was never elected. Nacef charged that people were promoted purely on the basis of their loyalty to the regime and that their qualifications were not taken into account.[505]

One of Nacef's close friends, Mohamed Ben Khallifa, further elaborated that the old RCD elite had joined the party out of 'passion' and 'commitment'. He contrasted their

[502] Compare Jeroen Van den Bosch, 'Personalism: A Type or Characteristic of Authoritarian Regimes?', *Politologická Revue,* 2015, 21, 1, p. 15.
[503] Interviews with Brahim Nacef, Bardo, 7 February 2017.
[504] Among other initiatives, Brahim Nacef created a sports club, a centre for the disabled, and several associations in Ras Jebel.
[505] Interviews with Brahim Nacef, Bardo, 7 February 2017, and Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017.

motivations with those of the newcomers, whom he called 'arrivistes' and 'mercenaries' and accused of adhering to the party only in order to make money.[506] Such assertions somewhat reflect the degree of bitterness and jealousy the old elite harboured towards those who took their positions. Yet they also reveal a struggle for Destourian legitimacy, in that the old guard claimed they alone constituted committed and 'true' party activists. While certainly not all of the 'arrivistes' joined the party solely out of self-serving and materialistic objectives, some certainly enriched themselves through their newly acquired posts. Monji Salem, a longtime RCD activist in Gafsa, observed:

> The corruption came from the Ben Ali family, the Trabelsis and from some specific lobbies. The Trabelsis created lobbies and with them dirty money began to circulate everywhere. …The lobbies worked for the family, they were active in all regions.[507]

It is striking that already in the mid 1990s influential Trabelsi proxies – Salem's so-called 'lobbies' – could be identified at both the national and regional level. Initially they primarily served the family's economic interests. Amongst other people, in 1995 Bourguiba-era figure Slaheddine Ben Mbarek was dismissed as Commerce Minister. His successor, Mondher Zenaidi, who later became Tourism Minister, was a key proxy of the Trabelsis, particularly of Leila and Belhassen. Mohamed Ghariani said 'he facilitated the family's business interests in commerce [and] tourism', specifying that 'it was with Mondher Zenaidi that Belhassen built his hotels, other family members received import and export authorisations because of him'.[508] Reportedly, the Trabelsis were particularly interested in Zenaidi's services because he was from a prominent Tunisois family and eager to help to counter the economic sway of the Sousse clan.[509]

[506] Interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017.
[507] Interview with Monji Salem, Gafsa, 23 June 2016.
[508] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.
[509] Ibid.

Only when Ben Ali's succession became a topic of concern did his family seek to promote their associates to more political posts. Naturally, even then Ben Dhia remained highly influential and responsible for filling many party positions. Indeed, all RCD Secretaries General after Zouari were trusted aides of Ben Dhia. Some of them also had close ties with Ben Ali relatives. Steffen Erdle described Ali Chaouch, who succeeded Zouari, as someone who conformed to the general profile of past RCD Secretaries General because, as many previous party strongmen had done, he served briefly as Interior Minister between 1997 and 1999.[510] Yet, while a superficial analysis might lead to such conclusion, deeper investigation shows that many features clearly set Chaouch apart from his predecessors.

According to Mohamed Ghariani, Chaouch was 'someone loyal who respected his position in the hierarchy, not someone who made plots, such as Zouari'.[511] Thus, in contrast to Zouari, he strictly abided by Ben Dhia's enforcement of 'filters' between the Palace and party. Chaouch told me that Hamed Karoui, not Ben Ali, informed him about his nomination as Secretary General, and that he 'didn't disturb Ben Ali for issues he could solve with his Vice-President'[512] – statements that suggest his access to the President was quite limited. Moreover, in terms of his regional affiliation Chaouch hails from a small, deprived town in the interior region of Siliana, not from the Sahel – the coastal belt to the east – or Tunis like so many of his predecessors. Even more importantly, Chaouch never acquired a university degree,[513] which is a stark irregularity for a senior official in a country that prides itself on its high number of doctors, engineers, and lawyers. Instead, he made his career through the bureaucracy and party activism. As such, he was one of the RCD newcomers who rose due

[510] Steffen Erdle, *Ben Ali's 'New Tunisia' (1987–2009): A Case Study of Authoritarian Modernization in the Arab World*, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2010, p. 163.
[511] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.
[512] Interview with Ali Chaouch, Tunis, 11 February 2017.
[513] Ibid. Note that Chaouch said he began a degree in economics, but at the age of 22 had to stop his studies and earn money for 'family reasons'; official biographies typically state that he acquired the degree.

to their 'total dedication' and strict observation of rules, irrespective of their professional qualifications and regional networks.

Chaouch's successor Hedi Mhenni, a medical doctor, was appointed in 2005 to the post of RCD Secretary General likewise primarily because of his strict execution of orders from Carthage, and specifically from Ben Dhia. Mhenni and Ben Dhia hailed from two neighbouring towns in the Sahel – Sayada and Moknine, about 4 kilometres apart – and had been friends for a long time. Regime insiders told me that Mhenni 'followed whatever Ben Dhia asked him'[514] and that he was 'the guy who couldn't say no'.[515] In addition to his ties to Ben Dhia, Mhenni was friends with Mohamed Gueddich, another Palace adviser and a doctor, who was personally in charge of the President's health. Mohamed Ghariani even speculated that Mhenni's daughter was married to a son of Gueddich.[516] Between 2002 and 2004, Mhenni was Defense Minister, then briefly served as Interior Minister before being nominated RCD Secretary General. Neffati commented on Mhenni's career that 'nobody expected him to become a political leader, a minister, and especially not the RCD Secretary General!', an illustration that few of the old guard really appreciated such newcomers. Mhenni is a key example of how Ben Ali's entourage placed their most trusted stooges in sensitive posts in the 2000s, at a time when Ben Ali's health was deteriorating and his succession becoming a matter of concern.[517]

It is worth mentioning that many Tunisians have never heard of either Ali Chaouch or Hedi Mhenni, which exemplifies the extent to which they were essentially shadows following the

[514] Interview with Zouhair Mdhafer, Tunis, 10 February 2017.
[515] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[516] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.
[517] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.

real powerbrokers in Carthage.[518] Hedi Mhenni's successor, Mohamed Ghariani, is well known in Tunisia, but this is because he was the last RCD Secretary General and therefore very much in the spotlight during the 2010–11 uprisings. Indeed, prior to his appointment Ghariani had been an ambassador, but he had never held any government portfolio. Born into an impoverished family in Kairouan, central Tunisia, Ghariani joined the RCD at a young age, and as a student rose to the position of RCD youth leader. Similarly to Chaouch, Ghariani was a pure product of the party; just like his two predecessors, he was promoted to Secretary General because he had developed strong ties to Ben Dhia.

Some figures of the Bourguiba-era elite affirmed that Ghariani was not very well qualified as Secretary General because he had earned a degree only in sociology, not in a more respected discipline such as medicine, engineering, or law.[519] Such statements reflect a certain educational elitism, common among the old guard, which devalues most subjects in the humanities and social sciences. They also highlight that earlier and later RCD figureheads hailed from distinct educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Steeped in French education, the old guard typically preferred to converse with me in French. In contrast, the French of many party newcomers was everything but flawless and they preferred talking in Tunisian Arabic. Though many of them enjoyed a university education, Ghariani's case highlights how their degrees were not as highly esteemed as those of their predecessors, and the entrance requirements of their studies were more flexible. The somewhat lower professional status of party newcomers is linked to their backgrounds. They often hailed from deprived families in rural areas with little access to lucrative education, in contrast to the notables and entrepreneurs who had dominated the political elite during Ben

[518] In comparison, the same people would typically know about Abderrahim Zouari and Abdelaziz Ben Dhia – real political heavyweights (interviews and informal conversations in Tunis, Sidi Bouzid and Gafsa, June 2016 and February 2017).
[519] Interviews with several former government officials, Tunis, 1 and 2 February 2017.

Ali's early years. Many important RCD figures who made their careers in the 2000s told me their families were 'very poor'. Alongside Ghariani, these included Anis Boughattas, the Vice-Secretary General of the RCD's 2008 congress, who hails from a rural village in the Monastir governorate,[520] and Akram Sebri, an activist in his thirties from a small town in central Kairouan; in 2004, Sebri became a member of the RCD National Council, an advisory body, and in 2007, he was promoted to Secretary General of the RCD youth.[521] For them, RCD activism constituted the only way to climb up the socioeconomic ladder and acquire a certain status in society, a standing many representatives of the old guard enjoyed simply by virtue of an important family name. Hedi Djilani elaborated:

> In the regions, the RCD is an etiquette…the RCD is important, RCD leaders are important. When ministers visit a region, they invite RCD leaders. When regional meetings and events take place, RCD leaders take part in them… . As an RCD leader you are considered a notable in your region. In Tunis, RCD membership is a bit less important, given the range of influential figures there. But [for example] in Siliana or Beja, a member of the RCD Central Committee is a personality, a deputy is a personality![522]

Djilani's statement highlights that, in the regions, senior RCD membership constituted a key source of social capital to the extent that party officials were even considered part of the nobility. Naturally, this was very attractive to the new generation of RCD leaders, who were typically born into an environment with limited financial means and societal standing. Their rise was conditional on their loyalty to the Trabelsis, who hailed from a very similar socioeconomic background, or to one of their associates. Nowadays, of course, few people want to admit they served Ben Ali's family. However, many interviewees were willing to provide examples of how the family gained a foothold in their regions and the kind of

[520] Interviews with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016; Anis Boughattas, Tunis, 29 January 2017.
[521] Interview with Akram Sebri, Tunis, 26 May 2016.
[522] Interview with Hedi Djilani, Tunis, 6 February 2017.

people who helped therein. Gley Kaabachi, a regional notable who in the 2000s worked in the municipal administration in Gafsa, recalled:

> [One day] a guy entered my office. I knew him well, he is the average type, neither from an important family nor wealthy. He handed me the business card of Madam Leila explaining that he is her lawyer… . Then he showed me a contract of Belhassen Trabelsi stating that he bought a big stretch of land [in Gafsa]…even though the land belonged to the state and couldn't be sold![523]

It is striking how Kaabachi, who hails from a prominent family in Gafsa, insisted that the Trabelsi aide who helped Belhassen acquire the land was a very 'average type' of person. Kaabachi was still visibly bitter when recounting that Belhassen bought the land illegally and stressed that many people in Gafsa, including wealthy landowners, suffered from his vast holdings in the city. However, some RCD figures were more accepting of the Trabelsis' business projects as long as they did not collide with their own economic interests. Mohamed Ben Khallifa from Bizerte remembered:

> One time in the municipality of Ras Jebel, a person came to me saying that Belhassen had sent him because he had a problem with a construction project… . I welcomed him and we had a small discussion of five minutes. He talked politely to me and I said we would…accelerate the procedures so [Belhassen] would obtain the authorisation to construct [his buildings] as soon as possible.[524]

When I enquired as to whether Belhassen's project hurt Bizerte, Ben Khallifa said it didn't. Indeed, he insisted that his construction was legal and even assisted the region's development somewhat, because it came with infrastructure obligations such as a working sanitary system and electricity supply.[525] This illustrates that the Trabelsis' business stakes per se were not always subject to popular disapproval. Rather, people were concerned by the

[523] Interview with Gley Kaabachi, Gafsa, 22 June 2016.
[524] Interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017.
[525] Ibid.

multiple – and sometimes indirect – trickle-down effects of their projects; for example, in terms of how jobs and social services were distributed and patronage exercised.

The anecdotes of Ben Khallifa and Kaabachi highlight how the Trabelsis' holdings provided new economic opportunities for intermediaries in the regions. The people they encountered in the above examples were middle-ranking at most, but high-profile figures with ties to the family naturally profited as well, sometimes substantially. Abderrahman Chorfi, a former head of an RCD cell in Jendouba, explained that one day Mouldi Ayari, a close friend of Hedi Djilani and former Vice-President of UTICA, was promoted to the governorate's RCD Secretary General. Chorfi charged that Ayari became 'very influential' in the 2000s, but did little to help with Jendouba's unemployment crisis and marginalisation, instead directing profits towards his cronies.[526] Clearly, the family's business interests affected much wider patterns of economic resource distribution, which touched all social echelons. Ben Ali relatives marginalised longtime regional RCD figureheads. In a phenomenon paralleling Theda Skocpol's findings on the underlying reasons behind the social revolutions in France and China, tensions in Tunisia began to mount between 'politically powerful landed upper classes' and state incumbents, who 'sought to mobilize resources'.[527] The subsequent section briefly discusses the case of Rafaa Dkhil, an important Trabelsi associate from Bizerte, to shed more light on this.

The case of Rafaa Dkhil

Rafaa Dkhil was born into a simple family in the Bizerte town of Ras Jebel and later studied commerce and management in Tunis. It is not known when he first met the Trabelsis but, as an American diplomat observed, starting from the 1990s Dkhil acquired high-ranking posts

[526] Interview with Abderrahman Chorfi, Jendouba, 29 May 2016.
[527] Compare Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 50

in government, party, and business 'simply for the "benefits"' he offered to the family.[528] Dkhil was not only close to Belhassen but also befriended other influential family members. Brahim Nacef, who went to school with Dkhil in Ras Jebel, alleged that he became the 'darling of Leila and her mother', asserting that he 'kneeled down before the powerbrokers, just so he could become close to them'.[529] Owing to the trust the presidential family came to place in him, in 1991 Dkhil was appointed head of the Gafsa Phosphate Company, one of Tunisia's most important enterprises. Many interviewees suggested that in this function Dkhil enabled presidential relatives to profit directly from the lucrative phosphate industry, for example by using the transportation and manufacturing equipment of firms owned by the Trabelsis.[530] In 2001, Dkhil received two further promotions: in January he was nominated Secretary of State to the Minister of Industry and in October he became CEO of Tunisair, the prestigious national airline. It is notable that Dkhil's promotions occurred concurrently with Belhassen's launching of Karthago Airlines and, in his new posts, he is rumoured to have substantially facilitated the company's creation. Amongst other favours, Tunisair allegedly provided free services and equipment to Karthago Airlines.[531] In exchange for his promotions, Dkhil is said to have offered free trips to the presidential family, including for the Hajj in Saudi Arabia.[532] While many such allegations are difficult to verify, it is noteworthy that almost everyone in Bizerte seems to be able to recount examples of Dkhil's corrupt business deals with the presidential family, some of which were latterly officially confirmed to have been true.[533] This illustrates the great influence and visibility he acquired

[528] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Tunisia: What Succession Scenario?', *Wikileaks*, 9 May 2008, 08TUNIS493_a, secret.
[529] Interview with Brahim Nacef, Bardo, 7 February 2017.
[530] For example, interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017. Note that I was unable to confirm such allegations.
[531] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[532] Interview with Brahim Nacef, Bardo, 7 February 2017.
[533] In February 2016, the Tunis Court of First Instance found Dkhil guilty of financial wrongdoing and abuse of power, among other reasons, because he created fictitious jobs at Tunisair. The case was dismissed shortly thereafter owing to procedural inconsistencies. See, for details, Rabaa H., 'Tunisie: Rafâa Dkhil Condamné à Deux Ans de Prison', *Tunisie Numérique*, 2 February 2016, https://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-rafaa-dkhil-condamne-a-deux-ans-de-prison/, last accessed 28 June 2018.

in his governorate, but also the acute awareness people there had of his transgressions – to the extent that many of them seem to have become part of the region's collective memory.

As a result of his ties to the presidential family, Dkhil became not only a regional strongman but also a member of the RCD Central Committee, which gave him considerable sway over local nominations, the distribution of social services, and other economic favours the party had to offer. It is important to highlight that it was not because of his relations with the Trabelsis or his senior RCD post that people in Bizerte started despising him and rumours about his corrupt deals began to circulate. Rather, it was because his connections and influence did not spill over and commute into economic benefit for his region – quite the contrary. Brahim Nacef recalled:

> There was an extraordinary hostility against Dkhil in Bizerte, in his hometown and in the entire region…[because] despite all the influence he had, he didn't do anything for…the people of Bizerte…nothing at all! Even when some went to see him to ask for a job, for example at Tunisair, he said no. He closed all doors. Because what interested him were his people and his political future, not what happened to the children of Bizerte![534]

Nacef's comments highlight that, as Dkhil moved up the social ladder, he sought to dissociate himself from the environment he grew up in, which had little to offer for his career aspirations. Moreover, investing into Bizerte would likely have conflicted with his complete allegiance to the Trabelsis, which did not allow for any competing loyalties, regional or otherwise. Nacef further elaborated that Dkhil was interested in hiring people who worked only for him, not for the general good of the region.[535] Ben Khallifa, Bizerte's RCD Vice-President in the early 2000s, corroborated his account. He stated:

> During the 2004 election campaign, Rafaa [Dkhil] called me. He was a minister at that point. …I told him about the problem we had with the youth, …I said [in Ras Jebel] we created some committees [to help them] but that they have little financial means… . I

[534] Interview with Brahim Nacef, Bardo, 7 February 2017.
[535] Ibid.

> asked him if he could help. He replied: 'I don't give a damn about Ras Jebel'. Imagine! He said this to me! I was so exasperated I swore all kinds of things and then hung up. Given how I behaved, you know what he did? He fired me![536]

Ben Khallifa's account is probably accurate, given that he was generally quite loyal to the regime. His anecdote highlights on the one hand that only full obedience mattered to new regional strongmen like Dkhil, and that anyone voicing discontent risked losing their job. On the other hand, it also shows that despite the repressive system some people still dared to voice opposition, at least occasionally. Khallifa's rebuke of Dkhil can be considered an instance of resistance against his indifference to the plight of the people and the wider regional marginalisation it fostered. It illustrates the rise of contention within the RCD following the sidelining of longtime leaders and activists, especially in regions that were not a priority for the family. The next section discusses further forms of resistance and civil disobedience that occurred in response to the domination by Ben Ali relatives and their proxies of senior posts in state and party.

Forms of resistance

Until the mid 1990s, Ennahda constituted Tunisia's principal opposition force, but in the 2000s a range of other actors sought to challenge the Ben Ali regime. One of their most important initiatives was the 18 October Movement, a cross-ideological coalition demanding greater rights and freedoms.[537] In addition, for many people the internet became a medium through which to voice their discontent. The dissident site Tunisnews.net was launched in 2000, followed by TUNeZINE.tn in 2001 and Naawat.org in 2004. Despite the great dangers of opposition activism, in the mid 2000s an increasing number of people became active on

[536] Interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017.
[537] Much has been written about the political opposition under Ben Ali. See, for example, Rikke Haugbølle and Francesco Cavatorta, 'Will the Real Tunisian Opposition Please Stand Up? Opposition Coordination Failures Under Authoritarian Constraints', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2011, 38, 3, pp. 323–341.

these websites. It is notable that they hailed from a range of backgrounds, and some identified as Destourians.

Consider the example of Neila Hachicha-Charchour, the daughter of Mahmoud Charchour, a senior official of the Bourguiba regime, who had been an ambassador to Lebanon and was an important RCD figure until he passed away in 2001. In 2003, Neila Hachicha-Charchour created the Liberal Mediterranean Party, which, according to Vincent Geisser and Éric Gobe, had no base at all and until 2004 served solely to publicly support Ben Ali, including advocating for his reelection as President that year.[538] Then suddenly, in 2005, Hachicha-Charchour completely changed her political stance and launched an online campaign against the regime, targeting particularly the Trabelsis. Among other initiatives, Hachicha-Charchour created a blog named '*yezzi fock*' ('that's enough'), which called upon the people to 'organise a virtual protest campaign against the autocratic Tunisian regime'.[539]

When asked what prompted her change of heart, Hachicha-Charchour affirmed that she started the '*yezzi fock*' initiative out of indignation over the fact that in 2005, merely a year after the presidential elections, some RCD activists had already started discussing Ben Ali's next candidacy in 2009. She was also increasingly appalled by the business practices of Ben Ali's new son-in-law, Sakher el-Materi, who married Nesrine in 2004.[540] Indeed, in 2005, el-Materi made a fortune with the privatisation of the Banque du Sud through practices French journalists denounced as insider deals.[541] He subsequently bought the company

[538] Vincent Geisser and Éric Gobe, 'Des Fissures Dans la "Maison Tunisie"? Le Régime de Ben Ali Face aux Mobilisations Protestataires', *L'Année du Maghreb*, 2007, 2, Paris, CNRS, p. 85.
[539] Neila Charchour Hachicha, 'Yezzi…Fock', *Nawaat*, 3 October 2005, https://nawaat.org/portail/2005/10/03/yezzi-fock-nch/, last accessed 29 April 2017.
[540] Email interview with Naila Hachicha-Charchour, 15 April 2017.
[541] Florence Beaugé, 'Le Parcours Fulgurant de Sakhr El-Materi, Gendre du Président Tunisien Ben Ali', *Le Monde*, 24 October 2009, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2009/10/24/le-parcours-fulgurant-de-sakhr-el-materi-gendre-du-president-tunisien-ben-ali_1258326_3212.html, last accessed 29 April 2017.

Ennakl, an automobile distributor, which shortly thereafter became the official car supplier of the public administration. Also in 2005, he formed the industrial group Princesse El Materi Holding, which, among other activities, came to manage lucrative cruise activities at the Tunis port of La Goulette. It is unclear why el-Materi decided to add 'Princesse' to his surname and whether it refers to Nesrine. In any case, this choice stoked fears among many people, who interpreted it as yet another sign that the mode of domination in Tunisia increasingly came to resemble that of a monarchy. One RCD leader commented that '[the presidential family] wanted to reign over Tunisia as if they were kings!'.[542] Hachicha-Charchour said that el-Materi's acquisitions 'confirmed that [Ben Ali's] in-laws believed they were entitled to economic goods!'.[543]

Hachicha-Charchour was not only alarmed by the quickly rising profile of el-Materi but also by the increasing number of public appearances made by Leila Ben Ali. Indeed, starting in the mid 2000s Leila began to be seen regularly on television delivering speeches, particularly in support of vulnerable groups such as women, children, the elderly, and disabled. She also came to head the prominent state-run Centre for Research, Studies, Documentation, and Information on Woman (CREDIF) and created the BASMA Association for the Promotion of Employment of the Disabled ('basma' meaning 'smile' in Arabic). Hachicha-Charchour believed that the first lady's supposedly 'benevolent activities' were purely self-serving, alleging that she sought thus to enhance her social capital to pave the way for a political career. Like many interviewees, Hachicha-Charchour suspected that Leila was aspiring to succeed Ben Ali as President, which would have allowed her to protect her own leverage and that of her family once her husband was no longer able to do so. Leila herself has rejected such accusations,[544] and her daughter Nesrine

[542] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.
[543] Email interview with Naila Hachicha-Charchour, 15 April 2017.
[544] See, for details, Leila Ben Ali, *Ma Vérité*, Paris: Éditions du Moment, 2012, p. 125

told me it was Ben Dhia who pushed her mother into taking a more prominent public role.[545] However, it is unlikely that the first lady would have agreed to this if she hadn't harboured certain political ambitions of her own.

The creation of the Destourian Democrats

Hachicha-Charchour's political turnaround is reflective of more widespread frustration with the regime, which in the mid 2000s became apparent not only among putative opposition parties that were traditionally loyal to the regime but also within the inner ranks of the ruling party. Most illustrative of this trend was the creation of a clandestine group of RCD challengers who called themselves 'Destourian Democrats'. In 2005, they published a set of dissident communiqués judged authentic by civil society activists and foreign diplomats at the time.[546] In their statements, the group suggested their members were 'neither numerous nor few',[547] claiming they reflected the 'silent majority of RCD activists who no longer recognize themselves in the mediocre practices of the government'.[548] To this day, the identities of the Destourian Democrats remain a mystery and, despite many efforts, I was unable to make out the group's members.

Given the broad range of party leaders interviewed for this thesis, and that nowadays it is no longer controversial to talk about dissident activism under Ben Ali, it is improbable that the Destourian Democrats included senior RCD figures. Rather, they were likely middle-ranking members who were marginalised in the mid 2000s, alongside certain party chiefs. In their statements, they wrote in elegant French, appeared politically connected and had

[545] Interview with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 16 February 2017.
[546] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Anonymous Communiqués Allege RCD Discontent With Ben Ali', *Wikileaks*, 18 May 2005, 05TUNIS1047_a, confidential.
[547] Destourian Democrats Communiqué of 8 April 2008, cited in Ibid.
[548] 'Des Destouriens Démocrates Révèlent et Dénoncent les Dérives et les Crimes de Ben Ali et de Son Système', *TUNeZINE*, 28 February 2005, http://www.tunezine.tn/read.php?1,148167, last accessed 14 April, 2017.

insider knowledge of the political establishment – features untypical of grassroots activists. Moreover, Hachicha-Charchour said she had been in contact with one of the group's members via a dissident blog. Though he remained anonymous to protect himself, Hachicha-Charchour learned that he knew her father from the time of Bourguiba, which suggests that at least some members might have belonged to the generation of PSD activists that subsequently integrated into the RCD. This could also explain the detailed knowledge some communiqués furnished about political developments in the Sahel,[549] a region overrepresented in politics during Bourguiba and particularly during Ben Ali's early reign, but whose sway the Trabelsis sought to counter.

One statement, published on 28 February 2005, further underpins the Destourian Democrats' likely connection to the RCD old guard. In this statement, the Destourian Democrats refer to a set of well-known public figures as their model, citing Ahmed Mestiri, Beji Caid Essebsi, Mustapha Ben Jaafar, and Mohamed Jegham among others.[550] As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, Essebsi and Jegham did not leave their high-ranking RCD posts voluntarily but were marginalised. This suggests that the primary root of the Destourian Democrats' frustration lay in the structural changes induced within the RCD at the time – not the lack of democratic politics per se. Their statements focused on denouncing the corrupt practices of the Trabelsis, charging that they were 'stealing the wealth, resources, and the means of production of the country'.[551] In particular, they attacked Belhassen and el-Materi as the most unscrupulous of the President's relatives, and furnished details about some of their controversial business deals. One of the goals of the Destourian Democrats was to raise public awareness of the presidential family's dubious acquisitions. Their decision to publish

[549] Ibid.
[550] Ibid.
[551] Ibid.

in French, as opposed to Arabic, made their statements easily accessible to many foreigners and embassy staff in Tunis.

Clearly, the Destourian Democrats and their dissident statements constituted an important form of resistance from within the RCD. The group's members took great personal risk to make their grievances public and they succeeded in gaining attention from civil society representatives, political opponents, and fellow RCD activists, some of whom discussed their statements with foreign diplomats.[552] Arguably this was already an important achievement at the time, given that the Palace did not tolerate any sort of criticism, least of all when it targeted the President and his relatives. Though the Destourian Democrats remained the sole instance of concerted opposition from within the RCD, individual cases of resistance also increased in the mid 2000s, particularly on the regional level. Indeed, on the national level, party figures did not defy the elite engineering that was underway, not even those who were sidelined as a result of it. Chedli Neffati explained:

> Nobody dared to [resist the changes]. …The presidential family was too strong and acted without soul and mercy… . Anyone saying a word [against] the family…would have been crushed, destroyed.[553]

To underline the extent to which party leaders themselves were afraid of the Palace, Neffati told me that he and his friends sometimes shared stories about the harsh treatment of political dissidents in jail, an experience they surely did not want to risk going through themselves. Other party officials also testified that contention from within the RCD was nonexistent on the national level.[554] However, in the regions some party followers sought to

[552] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Anonymous Communiqués Allege RCD Discontent With Ben Ali', *Wikileaks*, 18 May 2005, 05TUNIS1047_a, confidential.
[553] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017. His account was corroborated by other interviews with RCD leaders on the national level.
[554] For example, interviews with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017; Brahim Nacef, Bardo, 7 February 2017. Note that some RCD leaders in Tunis claimed they became dissidents in the years before Ben

stand up against the injustices and transgressions they witnessed. This became most evident during a major uproar in Gafsa in 2008.

The Gafsa protests

In January 2008, protests erupted in the governorate of Gafsa against unemployment and preferential hiring practices at the local phosphate company. The demonstrations, geographically clustered around the mining basin area, lasted for several months. They were the most important revolts since the 1984 Bread Riots under Bourguiba, and – just as back then – security forces cracked down violently on the protesters, killing several. Outside Gafsa, the events received little coverage. The state media did not report on them, and only limited video footage and articles about the protests made it onto social media. Naturally, though, inside Gafsa it was impossible for the authorities to pretend everything was in order, so RCD leaders there sought to discredit the protesters by portraying them as violent 'terrorists' who wanted to instigate instability and chaos in Tunisia, possibly with the help of foreign states. Yet such propaganda had only limited impact as many local RCD members, especially among the rank and file, knew people at the phosphate company – the largest employer in the region – and some even worked there themselves. Several former RCD members testified that they understood and sympathised with the grievances of the local demonstrators, many of whom were youthful and held university degrees. Alaa Eddine Rouached, an RCD student leader at the time, for instance recalled:

> The RCD [leadership] declared that these demonstrations were linked to terrorism, that they were organised by foreign countries…by Islamist extremists… . However, I didn't [see] Islamists or terrorists [protesting in Gafsa]. I saw young people searching for jobs. I saw people with economic situations that were very difficult.[555]

Ali's ousting; however, their accounts were not judged credible because they were unable to elaborate much on their supposed opposition activism.

[555] Interview with Alaa Eddine Rouached, Skype, 12 June 2016.

Alaa Eddine Rouached affirmed that he talked with the RCD leadership in Gafsa and even contacted members of the National Bureau in Tunis to inform them about the roots of the uproar in the mining basin, initially believing they might have sincerely misunderstood the nature of the protests. However, instead of responding to his assessment of the situation they advised him to move to Tunis and enrol at the university there – according to Rouached, presumably in the hope that studying in the capital would make him 'forget' about the Gafsa events.[556]

Rouached was not the only RCD activist affected by the turmoil in the mining basin. After moving to Tunis, Rouached started following social media sites that provided sporadic updates about the situation back home. There, he noticed that some RCD activists he knew also expressed sympathy for the protesters. 'Some [RCD members] wrote [on Facebook] that [the demonstrators] are poor workers [and] incapable of the violence they are accused of', he remembered, elaborating that 'their posts were subsequently deleted and [authorities] prohibited them from talking again [about Gafsa]'.[557] While such online support for the protesters was typically limited to the RCD grassroots, interviews revealed that even some high-ranking officials of the party sided with them, even if not publicly.

Amine Ben Mansour, a local student activist of the leftist UGET, told me that due to the Gafsa events his father's support for the regime crumbled, even though he had been a longtime RCD leader in the governorate.[558] Ben Mansour said that up until 2008 he had frequent political quarrels with his father, who disapproved of his leftist activism and did not believe his stories about the mounting scale of regime repression, including on campuses. However, his father's stance changed completely with the unrest in Gafsa; 'when he saw

[556] Ibid.
[557] Ibid.
[558] Interview with Amine Ben Mansour, Skype, 3 June 2016.

with his own eyes what was happening, he became totally against Ben Ali', Ben Mansour said.[559] When asked how this manifested, Ben Mansour explained that his father did not renew his RCD membership card and tried to stay away from party events – a quiet but presumably already risky form of contestation for a senior RCD official, particularly given the charged political atmosphere in the governorate at the time.

Some RCD figures even appear to have gone as far as offering support to the protesters. Sami Amroussia, a leader in the demonstrations who today represents the leftist Popular Front alliance in Gafsa, said that many RCD officials acted as informants and conducted monitoring and policing services during the unrest; yet a small minority also provided help to the protesters, sometimes unexpectedly. Among other incidents, Amroussia remembered that one night he and his friends were in the middle of distributing articles about the violence the protesters endured when the police caught them by surprise. The next thing he recalled was the door of a nearby house opening and the owner inviting them to come inside and hide. The homeowner later refused to give them up to the police – a brave act of resistance that caught Amroussia completely by surprise, especially because it came from a well-known RCD figure in the neighbourhood.[560]

Naturally, such acts of resistance were very rare, especially among RCD representatives. Most party members who sympathised with the protesters' plight simply decided to withdraw from political activism, typically in a gradual and very quiet process, in the hope that regime figures would not notice. This constituted a form of silent and passive resistance against the regime and its repressive methods, a trend that would become much more apparent and widespread during the 2010–11 mass protests. Alaa Eddine Rouached even

[559] Ibid.
[560] Interview with Sami Amroussia, Gafsa, 23 June 2016.

went so far as to claim that the RCD in the governorate became divided into two: 'One group continued to support Ben Ali and wanted to solve the problem of demonstrations with the security services', he said. 'But others understood that these young protesters were only looking for jobs.'[561] During interviews, senior RCD leaders tended to belong to the first group, especially those who could be identified as allies of regional strongmen. However, as the accounts of Ben Mansour and Sami Amroussia illustrated, important exceptions existed even among the party's higher echelons. In contrast, more youthful activists were mostly sympathetic to the protesters – a generational divide that is of little surprise, given that the demonstrations themselves were dominated by young people.

The Soliman Group

The Gafsa events reflect how high-level corruption and nepotism, which – as the earlier discussion of Rafaa Dkhil illustrated – were notorious at the phosphate company, gradually trickled down to lower echelons of the society and party. This is not to say that the RCD ceased completely to provide any benefits to its rank and file in the 2000s, but the distribution of such benefits became more unequal, exclusive, and generally more limited. One grassroots activist stated that until the ousting of Ben Ali he continued to receive items such as notebooks and pens for free, and that local party chapters provided gifts during national holidays and Ramadan. However, he noted that in the last years of Ben Ali such presents became more rare, suspecting that party representatives kept half of them for themselves.[562] Even more importantly, party activism no longer guaranteed a job – not even a minor post somewhere in the public administration – and many RCD members testified that they were struggling to make ends meet.[563] Thus, even for party activists it became evident that the RCD did not fulfil the premises on which it was built, that is, to promote

[561] Interview with Alaa Eddine Rouached, Skype, 12 June 2016.
[562] Interview with Hamza, a former RCD grassroots activist, Tunis-Bab Souika, 1 October 2015.
[563] For example, interview with Alaa Eddine Rouached, Skype, 12 June 2016.

economic redistribution and social justice, not to mention the republican virtues of civic participation and control.

Aside from the socioeconomic uproar which this dynamic caused in Gafsa, other channels emerged through which people manifested their discontent with the regime. In particular, Tunisia experienced a religious resurgence in the 2000s. This entailed a sharp increase in women wearing the Islamic headscarf, not only out of religious conviction but also to symbolically display disagreement with a regime in which figures such as Leila Ben Ali pretended to champion Western-style women's rights but fiercely persecuted dissidents, including many female activists.[564] This chapter will not explore this religious revival in much detail, as it owed not only to internal developments in Tunisia but also to ideological factors and international developments, especially the Iraq war. However, it is notable that in the 2000s a range of people became attracted to religion, usually peacefully, but in some cases to follow violent forms. This development was significant to the extent it affected even a limited number of people with links to the RCD – in itself a striking trend.

One example is illustrative in this regard: in 2006, five Tunisians and one Mauritanian founded the Soliman Group, the name referring to the town in which it was later raided and dismantled by security forces. Its members plotted to attack state and security institutions to bring down the regime by force, with the goal of replacing it with a religious state. The Soliman Group existed only for six weeks, but it is noteworthy that it managed to quickly expand its membership, numbering 40 at its height.[565] While its members came from a range of social backgrounds, they 'all…harboured grievances against the Tunisian state and its repressive security regime', specified one of their defense lawyers at the time.[566] This

[564] Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 108.
[565] Ibid., pp. 125–126.
[566] US Embassy in Tunis, '2006/2007 Terror Cell in Tunisia: What Happened and Why', *Wikileaks*, 24 January 2008, 08TUNIS75_a, secret.

included figures with links to the ruling party. One diplomat, who in February 2008 attended the Soliman trial, recalled:

> An observer at the trial told [me]…she had attended law school with defendant Mohamed Amine Jaziri. While he was a 'rebel' at the time, she pointed to his mother in the crowd and [said]…the elegantly dressed woman was President of the ruling RCD party office in [Sidi Bouzid]… . If educated and privileged Tunisians inside the regime cannot prevent their children from supporting extremism, one has to wonder about the less fortunate.[567]

Clearly, nobody was immune from religiously inspired activism against the regime and the sons and daughters of prominent RCD families were implicated along with others, reflecting the extent of disenfranchisement. As the Soliman Group and the Gafsa turmoil illustrate, by the late 2000s popular grievances had reached such a level that some people began to openly defy the regime, including from within its inner circles – though their channels and methods often differed considerably. However, rather than addressing their plight, the presidential family sought instead to further reinforce their grip on power, going as far as usurping the very leadership of the RCD, in illustration of the fact that internecine contestation can trigger authoritarian reinforcement, especially in the short term as incumbents seek to immunise themselves against their challengers.

Usurping the party leadership

The Soliman militants and Gafsa protesters vividly exposed the fragility of the regime, a development that deeply unsettled the presidential family. By the late 2000s, Ben Ali's relatives had managed to acquire at least 273 companies, often in the most lucrative sectors.[568] Many more businesses were owned by more distant kin and cronies. A 2014

[567] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Appeal Court Reduces Sentences of Some "Soliman" Terrorists', *Wikileaks*, 22 February 2008, 08TUNIS168_a, confidential.
[568] 'Al-Yawm al-Iʿlami hawla al-Tasarruf fi al-Amwal wa-l-Mumtalakat al-Musadara: Min al-Musadara ila al-Tasarruf' (*Media Day on Disposal of Confiscated Funds and Property: From Confiscation to Disposal*), Al-Lajna al-Wataniyya li-l-Tasarruf fi al-Amwal wa-l-Mumtalakat al-Maʿniyya bi-l-Musadara aw al-Istirjaʿ li-Faʾidat al-Dawla (*The National Committee for the Disposal of Funds and Property Designated for Confiscation or Disposal for the Benefit of the State*), Tunis: November 2013, http://www.finances.gov.tn/images/presentation_CGAC.pdf, last accessed 3 May. 2013.

World Bank report revealed that 220 of these firms accounted for a striking 21% of all private-sector profits, totalling 233 million USD in 2010 alone.[569] To protect these assets in an increasingly volatile political environment, the family tightened its grip over the party. Mohamed Ghariani explained:

> You can be economically influential, but if you aren't politically influential, you won't be left with anything. So [family relatives] integrated into the party to protect their interests. …They believed that all political matters post-Ben Ali would be managed by the party.[570]

Therefore, in the late 2000s, some presidential relatives integrated into the RCD's decision-making structures. As Mohamed Ghariani described, this was mainly to defend their economic stakes; however, this section demonstrates that certain family members also harboured a keen interest in politics as such. The family's integration into the RCD upper echelons was facilitated by the new party elite who owed their posts to the Palace. Alongside creeping internecine resistance against the regime, presidential relatives were worried about the nearing prospect of a post-Ben Ali era. Indeed, by the late 2000s the presidential succession had become a critically pressing issue, as constitutional provisions allowed Ben Ali to remain in power only until 2014. The President might have attempted to change the Constitution yet again to prolong his time in office. However, this would have been a risky undertaking in an environment marked by mounting disapproval of his rule, including among his own ranks. Ben Ali's former allies suggested he would never have dared to alter the Constitution once more,[571] but such discourse might have been crafted in retrospect to bolster the President's image by suggesting his rule was not as misguided and unrelenting as commonly understood.

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[569] Bob Rijkers, Caroline Freund, and Antonio Nucifora, 'All in the Family: State Capture in Tunisia', *The World Bank*, Policy Research Working Paper, No. 6810, March 2014, p. 3.
[570] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.
[571] For example, interviews with Kamel Morjane, Tunis, 26 May 2016; Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016.

The family's anxiety about 'the day after' rose to such an extent that its leading figures began to compete among themselves for the presidential succession line. This occurred indirectly in the form of rival family clans contending for economic and political dominance. Nesrine Ben Ali explained: 'there was a race for everything [in the family]: bigger houses, bigger companies…[because of] competition', joking that 'it was like a real telenovela'.[572] The prevailing belief was that the most influential and powerful relative would eventually impose the successor of Ben Ali, either taking the presidency himself or controlling it more inconspicuously through a trusted stooge.

The internal frictions within the presidential family became so pronounced they gradually trickled down to the RCD structures. Naziha Zarrouk, a former ambassador to Lebanon and deputy RCD Secretary General, recounted that the party became divided along the lines of family clans, with members prioritising their allegiances to specific presidential relatives over competing affiliations and interests, including to the party. Zarrouk specified that she was part of Leila Ben Ali's clan, elaborating:

> I became close to Leila Ben Ali… . The Trabelsis had their own ambitions, they wanted to enrich themselves, but [Leila] was very human. Some say I cannot [judge] because I was close to her… . However, I witnessed many of Leila's actions in support of women – abused women, young mothers… . I saw this myself and…I am not afraid to testify about it![573]

Zarrouk, alongside many other female RCD leaders, praised Leila's advocacy for women and more generally her supposedly 'modernist' outlook, typically affirming that her activities and vision were paramount and much more significant compared to the economic transgressions committed by her family. It is notable that the first lady's female associates mostly hailed from the francophone elite and feared that the Islamic revival of the mid and late 2000s would strengthen religious actors, whom they accused of promoting 'retrograde'

[572] Interview with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 13 February 2017.
[573] Interview with Naziha Zarrouk, Tunis, 30 January 2017.

politics. Beyond Zarrouk, a key associate of Leila was Saïda Agrebi, who was a member of the RCD Central Committee, founded the Tunisian Organisation of Mothers in 1992, and was commonly known as the right hand of the first lady.[574] This is not to say that Leila had only female cronies, but they were particularly common within her clan, and the party was otherwise dominated by male figureheads.

Leila's work for women illustrates that some presidential relatives sought to publicly defend certain convictions and ideas, presumably in large part to build a support base, a tendency that suggests their ties to the Palace alone were insufficient to enable them to become politically established. This also allowed different family members to distinguish themselves from one another. Beyond Leila, the main contenders for the presidential succession were Belhassen Trabelsi, who was driven purely by materialistic objectives and did not propose any particular political vision, and Sakher el-Materi, the husband of Nesrine, who – quite contrary to Leila – portrayed himself as a practising Muslim to capture more traditional portions of society. However, it is noteworthy that the different ideas propagated by presidential relatives were often only of secondary importance to those senior party officials with substantial financial interests. Indeed, interviews suggested that in the 2000s some businessmen even switched their alliances to specific relatives depending on who they believed was more likely to enlarge their business stakes.[575] This reveals that the process of elite engineering was, at least occasionally, a two-way street and some proxies only answered to specific figures in the family if they were the best placed to serve their interests.

Partially because of the business elite's somewhat pragmatic forging of alliances, in the last years of Ben Ali's reign the balance of power constantly shifted between the three presidential contenders. While many Tunisians affirm that Leila was a key candidate for the

[574] Tounssihor, 'Saida Agrebi Bras Droit de Leila Ben Ali' [video file], 16 April 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjGyXL69v2Y, last accessed 3 May 2017.
[575] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.

succession, evidence suggests that, in the last two years of Ben Ali, Sakher el-Materi and Belhassen Trabelsi were the ones leading the race for the presidency. This was because even though Leila harboured political ambitions she never herself integrated into the RCD – unlike her two rivals, as will be shown shortly. Arguably, by the mid 2000s Leila had become such a conspicuous public figure that many people would have equated her integration into the RCD with her de facto succeeding the President. Naturally, Ben Ali and his advisers wanted to avoid giving such a perception so as not to appear weak – and because Leila remained a deeply controversial figure among the RCD's old guard and many other Tunisians, who did not believe in her benevolent activities or rejected her ascent on religious or misogynistic grounds.[576]

The RCD was such an important structure for the presidential succession because of its persistent mobilisation function, high degree of internal party discipline, countrywide networks, and ability to provide a source of political legitimation. Moreover, any presidential successor needed the support of powerful RCD ministers, particularly the Prime, Interior, and Defence Ministers – possibly emerging out of one of these posts himself. Equally importantly, Article 57 of the Constitution stipulated that if the President died or was no longer able to exercise his functions, the head of parliament – traditionally a leading RCD cadre – would temporarily take over his duties and organise upcoming elections. Though this figure was not allowed to run as a candidate in this presidential ballot, he still held a lot of power and could influence the succession scenario. Thus, any contender needed him as an ally.

It is in this light that Belhassen Trabelsi and Sakher el-Materi developed a key interest in the party. Belhassen Trabelsi was better connected within both the business world and the RCD,

[576] Among other criticisms, many interviewees sneered that Leila was an 'easy woman', suggesting that she had had sexual relations with many men. For example, Ibid.

given that he had been influential for a much longer period of time – essentially since Leila married Ben Ali. However, he had no political credentials or ambitions per se, and considered politics solely as a means to further enrich himself. It is for this reason that he sought to groom his most trusted associate for the presidency – that is, Mondher Zenaidi,[577] who as Transport, Tourism and Commerce Minister had assisted him in acquiring so much wealth in the first place. A member of both the RCD Central Committee and the Political Bureau, Mondher Zenaidi left the Commerce Ministry in 2007 to become Public Health Minister. Arguably, his ministerial reshuffle was part of the succession preparations and meant to boost his political standing and capital among the public, especially because he was expected to launch major health reforms. In 2008, an American diplomat listed Zenaidi among the most likely successors to Ben Ali:

> With a wealth of economic experience…and a long history of RCD activism, Zenaidi is increasingly rumored to be a candidate for the Prime Ministry. However, he is largely unknown among Tunisians and needs to demonstrate success in the troubled health sector before he will gain public support.[578]

As Prime Minister, Zenaidi would have held a key position to contest the succession of Ben Ali – not least because the 2002 constitutional changes stipulated that the President could delegate his powers to the Prime Minister, if he was temporarily incapable to govern. Moreover, in contrast to the head of parliament, the Prime Minister was allowed to run for office immediately after the President died or became unable to carry out his duties.

In contrast to Belhassen Trabelsi, Sakher el-Materi was a relatively new arrival on the public scene, becoming an important economic stakeholder only after his marriage to Nesrine in 2004. However, el-Materi possessed a certain claim to political capital – or at least this

[577] Mohamed Ghariani repeatedly affirmed that Mondher Zenaidi was the presidential candidate of Belhassen Trabelsi (interviews with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016 and 8 February 2017).
[578] US Embassy in Tunis, 'Tunisia: What Succession Scenario?', *Wikileaks*, 9 May 2008, 08TUNIS493_a, secret.

perception was one that his allies in the party sought to cultivate. They stressed that he hailed from an important Tunisois political family owing to his father's history of opposition activism against Bourguiba.[579] In addition, his wife Nesrine was Ben Ali's favourite daughter,[580] and they both exercised considerable leverage within the Palace. Indeed, even Ben Dhia and RCD Secretary General Mohamed Ghariani gradually came to support el-Materi's candidacy. The fact that Ben Dhia – who had previously never entered into family machinations and answered only to the President – decided to back el-Materi illustrates the extent to which the succession had become a pressing issue. Everyone in the Palace began to worry about the day after, even Ben Ali's most trusted advisers – a scenario reminiscent of Bourguiba's last years in office.

However, el-Materi was only in his late twenties at the time and constitutionally still too young to contest the presidency, the minimum age for which was set at forty. He therefore decided to get close to Kamel Morjane, the distant relative of Ben Ali who once represented Tunisia at the United Nations and who in the 2000s headed the Defence and then Foreign Affairs ministries. Many westerners hoped Kamel Morjane might emerge as Ben Ali's successor, describing him as 'outgoing and friendly' and part of the 'liberal' wing of the regime.[581] El-Materi supported his candidacy and sought him as a mentor, until he reached the age to contest the presidency himself. As part of this strategy, he came to portray himself as a liberal and reformist figure along the lines of Morjane. He did this by acquiring the media group Dar Assabah in 2009, which gave a certain voice to political opponents, naturally only as long as they did not challenge the foundations of the regime. In addition,

[579] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016.
[580] A range of interviewees affirmed that Nesrine is Ben Ali's favorite daughter, elaborating that he felt guilty that she was born out of wedlock (for example, interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017). Nesrine repeatedly stressed how close she is to her father (interviews with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 10, 13 and 23 February 2017).
[581] See, for example, US Embassy in Tunis, 'Tunisia: What Succession Scenario?', *Wikileaks*, 9 May 2008, 08TUNIS493_a, secret; US Embassy in Tunis, 'Ambassador's Courtesy Call with Minister of Defense', *Wikileaks*, 4 January 2007, 07TUNIS29_a, secret.

el-Materi positioned himself as a reconciliatory political figure who allowed some space for the repressed religious opposition, even seeking dialogue with the Ennahda exile movement.[582] Moreover, in 2007 he launched the religious Zitouna FM radio and two years later created the Zitouna Bank, which specialised in Islamic banking. Ghariani elaborated:

> With Radio Zitouna, we played the card of the Islamists, and with Dar Assabah, we played the card of the modernists, the progressives. Sakher [el-Materi] was not a thinker, but we wanted him to learn how to manage political life…by proposing reforms and a political opening… . One year before the revolution, Dar Assabah had almost become an opposition newspaper![583]

It is noteworthy that Ghariani's reference to el-Materi not being 'a thinker' likely alludes to his limited education – he repeated at least two years in high school and never went to university, allegedly owing to drug consumption among other issues. It is in part for these reasons that many figures in the RCD believed he was unfit to run the country, denouncing Ghariani and Ben Dhia's efforts to groom him for the highest office. Moreover, Ghariani's recount of el-Materi's political strategy, using the personal pronoun 'we' rather than 'he', raises the questions of whether el-Materi was actually in charge of it, and the extent to which senior figures such as Ghariani and Ben Dhia exploited his inexperience and comparative youthfulness in the hope of forging roles for themselves in the post-Ben Ali era. When asked about these issues, Ghariani suggested it was a 'two-way street'. Sometimes el-Materi 'manipulated' him and Ben Dhia and sometimes it was the other way around.[584] El-Materi's wife Nesrine, for her part, held that senior political figures pushed him into taking a more prominent role, as did his politicised father Moncef el-Materi.[585] However, el-Materi would certainly not have let himself be pressured too much had the prospect of becoming Tunisia's next President not appealed to him at least somewhat.

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[582] Interview with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 13 February 2017.
[583] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016.
[584] Ibid.
[585] Interview with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 13 February 2017.

The congress of succession

Competition between Sakher el-Materi and Belhassen Trabelsi, the two frontrunners for the succession, heightened in the summer of 2008, and especially during the RCD's fifth congress: a four-day event that kicked off on 30 July. Organised around the theme 'Challenge', the congress promised to focus on strategies to tackle mounting unemployment and poverty in Tunisia. This theme was certainly chosen to calm the protests in Gafsa, which by then were still ongoing, and to prevent them from spreading to other regions. However, far from representing an opportunity to discuss and address the growing socioeconomic challenges, in reality the congress paved the way for one of the two presidential forerunners to succeed Ben Ali. During the event, both el-Materi and Belhassen integrated into the RCD Central Committee. Reportedly, el-Materi first announced his intention to become a member of the committee and, upon hearing this plan, Belhassen followed suit so as not to be outflanked by his younger rival.[586] Ali Chaouch commented on their integration into the party's highest echelons:

> Sakher [el-Materi] presented himself at the elections, he was elected at the local level and then to the Central Committee, it is important to recognise this… . Of course, everyone knew that the President wanted him to be elected and party activists were disciplined [so] he was elected… . By contrast, Belhassen Trabelsi was part of the list of Central Committee members who were [appointed] by the President.[587]

Chaouch here underlined how the ways in which el-Materi and Belhassen joined the Central Committee differed. In his eyes, el-Materi's election to the Central Committee bestowed his membership with greater legitimacy than Belhassen's appointment. This illustrates that, to some figures, internal party procedures and regulations still mattered, even if they were a simple masquerade – el-Materi's election was certainly staged. But apart from Chaouch and some other family cronies, most congress participants were deeply distrustful of their ascent

[586] Interviews with Naziha Zarrouk, Tunis, 30 January 2017; Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.
[587] Interview with Ali Chaouch, Tunis, 11 February 2017.

within the party, if they did not outright reject it. Their scepticism was fuelled by el-Materi's manner at the congress. Mohamed Ben Khallifa recalled:

> What upset me so much during the congress was that Sakher [el-Materi] showed up with his escort…four to five people who protected him. It was very badly perceived and hurt me a lot… . Did he really believe that we Destourians would harm him? …He wanted to show off…to show that he was above everybody else![588]

Ben Khallifa suggested that el-Materi appeared presumptuous and arrogant at the event, a perception many other attendees shared.[589] Though Ben Khallifa reflected that el-Materi came with bodyguards mainly to show off, it is also possible that he did not feel safe, and el-Materi was probably well aware that his Central Committee membership was deeply controversial among party activists of all ranks. This was particularly the case because major structural changes were initiated during the congress that allowed el-Materi and Belhassen not only to integrate into but also to gain a grip over the party's governing organ. Specifically, the Central Committee was enlarged from 250 to 343 posts, and 83% of its seats were replaced.[590] The new members hailed from two principal groups: businessmen and youthful party activists. The party leadership justified the integration of the former by suggesting their economic expertise was needed to tackle unemployment and poverty.[591] Yet in reality the businessmen were proxies of Belhassen and, to a lesser extent, of el-Materi, and their ascent in the party facilitated the family's control of it. Moreover, the promotion of youthful party activists was sold as part of the RCD's efforts to promote a younger generation of members to leading party posts.[592] However, sources within the party's leadership at the time suggested that their integration into the Central Committee served

[588] Interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017.
[589] One congress participant from Gafsa called Sakher el-Materi a 'brat' and 'big baby' (interview with Abderrazek Soulieh, Gafsa, 23 June 2016).
[590] 'Le RCD Par les Chiffres', *Le Renouveau*, 30 July 2008, p. 7.
[591] For example, interview with Ali Chaouch, Tunis, 11 February 2017.
[592] For example, 'La Jeunesse Tunisienne: Détermination Renouvelée à Relever le Défi', *Le Renouveau*, 30 July 2008, p. 7; interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017.

solely to pave the way for el-Materi's political future. Apparently, Ben Dhia and Ghariani sought to groom a new generation of party leaders on which el-Materi could rely once he was old enough to compete for the highest office.[593]

As part of el-Materi and Belhassen's quest for party leadership, most of the remaining Bourguiba-era officials were discarded, especially vocal figures who could have posed a challenge to their presidential ambitions. They included Hamed Karoui, who was dismissed as RCD Vice-President. Given these wide-ranging changes, most party activists quickly realised the only 'challenge' the congress sought to tackle was that of the presidential succession. Many interviewees maintained it was the 'worst congress ever'.[594] One said 'it marked the end' of the party.[595] Even Tunisians who were not part of the RCD said they were alarmed by the congress because it 'meant that the family got the party'.[596] Indeed, el-Materi and Belhassen now exerted key control within the RCD's central organ, in addition to the sway they already held over many ministers, party leaders, and advisers in the Palace.

Aside from preparing el-Materi and Belhassen for the looming presidential succession, the congress also arranged for Ben Ali to remain in power for another term – officially his last term. Again, everything was done to convey the image that Ben Ali was merely responding to the people's 'call to run again'.[597] During the subsequent general election held on 25 October 2009, Ben Ali was confirmed by an obviously rigged 89.62% and the RCD gained a clear majority in parliament. It is notable that el-Materi used the occasion to become a lawmaker in parliament alongside Afif Chiboub – the brother in law of Dorsaf, Ben Ali's youngest daughter with Naima – which illustrates that despite el-Materi's sharp rise,

[593] Interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017. Note that Mohamed Ghariani denied this account (interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 8 February 2017).
[594] For example, interview with Abderrahman Chorfi, Jendouba, 29 May 2016.
[595] Interview with Mohamed Ben Khallifa, Ras Jebel, governorate of Bizerte, 9 February 2017.
[596] Author conversation with Bochra, a Tunisian political observer and economist, Tunis, 24 February 2017.
[597] For example, 'Ben Ali Dit Oui à l'Appel du Devoir', *Le Renouveau*, 30 July 2008, pp. 2–6.

relatives of Ben Ali's first wife did not completely disappear from the political scene. After the ballots, popular celebrations were staged at the Olympic Stadium of Rades, nine kilometres south-east of Tunis, which has a 60,000-strong capacity and appeared to be full in pictures subsequently circulated by the state media. This shows that party officials still managed to enforce a certain degree of internal discipline – though in this case, mobilisation was allegedly achieved by paying activists to participate in the celebrations.[598]

While it was still feasible to feign a certain degree of stability and support for the regime at the national level, this was much more challenging locally. Indeed, municipal elections held on 9 May 2010 – just months before the 2010–11 uprising – laid bare the extent of the RCD's internal crumbling. Many party followers recounted that they decided not to vote, among other reasons because they no longer recognised the names of those running on local RCD lists.[599] One of them held that in some localities party representatives even struggled to come up with a list, as many longtime activists did not want to present themselves in the ballots.[600] Those who ended up running were often opportunistic newcomers, regime cronies, or family members who sought to gain relevance on the local level. Among others, Imed Trabelsi was elected mayor of La Goulette, which hosts the port of Tunis, a strategically important location for his illegal trading business.

Conclusions

The municipal elections illustrate the deep gulf that emerged between the RCD grassroots and a leadership they believed was only serving the President's family and associates. Essentially, the RCD had come to resemble a family party, its internal cleavages and

[598] Note that Mohamed Ghariani denied such allegations but conceded that participants received free food and beverages, arguably already an important incentive for many grassroots activists, who struggled to make ends meet (interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016).
[599] Interview with Alaa Eddine Rouached, Skype, 12 June 2016.
[600] Interview with Hassouna Nasfi, Bardo, 24 May 2016.

patronage structures increasingly mirroring the various clans of the President's kins. Research on authoritarian politics frequently treats the ruling family as a single unit. For example, Roger Owen writes that 'sons and other relatives must all be considered as part of a single team dedicated to the promotion of a mutual family interest' – though he recognises that in some cases 'sons…[are] potential rivals'.[601] By contrast, this chapter has displayed the extent of internal frictions and leadership struggles amongst presidential relatives themselves, especially at times of uncertainty about the succession. The interests of the leaders of rival clans were everything but 'mutual', as the candidate with the most political and economic leverage was expected eventually to succeed Ben Ali, or to impose a stooge as a successor. Most Palace associates eventually came to support Sakher el-Materi. This insight rectifies common accounts according to which 'there had been no signs of an official process of grooming in…Tunisia' before the 2010–11 uprisings.[602]

This chapter has also highlighted how studying the networks of presidential relatives and their associates, their expansion, and alliances, including with the ruling party, can help to better understand wider trends of neopatrimonial rule and authoritarian decay. The increase in hiring practices based on loyalty rather than competencies strongly reduced economic and political stewardship, a tendency that was further reinforced through the capture of key resources by family members and their associates. The mobilisation and growth of the family networks in the late 1990s and particularly in the 2000s was facilitated by an overall climate of political stagnation and by anxieties about the future of the presidency; at the same time, it also strongly furthered the overall decay of the regime, especially as

[601] Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 44.
[602] Ibid., p. 150; see also Anthony Billingsley, *Political Succession in the Arab World: Constitutions, Family Loyalties and Islam*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010.

competition between rival family factions heightened and some RCD followers began to challenge their marginalisation, especially in the regions.

Indeed, this chapter showed that the family's grip over economic and political resources marginalised not only large portions of the RCD rank and file, but also key allies in the elite, including Bourguiba-era figures and regional notables. Some of these party losers began to contest the new incumbents, especially figureheads in regions that become completely cut off from business opportunities. In retrospect many of these party losers affirmed that they would 'never' have accepted presidential relatives to take over the party, let alone to succeed Ben Ali as President.[603] However, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that, by the late 2000s, the Ben Ali family had already gained control over the RCD's key decision-making organs and was well advanced on the path towards a dynastic-like succession, and that there were no apparent threats to the unfolding of this scenario. Indeed, the rise of internecine contention even prompted the presidential family to reinforce their grip over power. However, growing discontent within inner regime circles paved the way for wider transformative change when countrywide protests suddenly erupted in December 2010, a topic the following chapter will tackle in more detail.

[603] For example, interview with Chedli Neffati, Tunis, 2 February 2017.

5. A COUP AMID THE UPRISINGS

The Destourian family was at the very heart of the regime's weakness. It killed the regime and thereby it got itself killed.

Mohamed Anour Adhar, Bardo, 26 May 2016

Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation on 17 December 2010 in the marginalised region of Sidi Bouzid sparked mass protests that soon engulfed the entire country and even swept to neighbouring states. On 14 January 2011 Ben Ali left Tunisia amid the turmoil. He would never return. While much has been written about the uprisings in Tunisia, specifically the protest dynamics,[604] the response of the RCD to the eruption of countrywide protests remains a 'black box' and a key subject of controversy. When I broached the topic, many interviewees were quick to affirm that the mass protests occurred largely out of a sense of indignation at the RCD machinery – along with police repression and economic downturn – a narrative that has also become widespread among experts on Tunisian politics.[605] Any more nuanced account of the RCD at the time of the demonstrations is commonly perceived as 'counterrevolutionary' by those who took to the streets and who assert that their struggle led Ben Ali to flee the country. Yet when inquiring about specific people and events linked to the former regime, interviewees came to reveal

[604] In addition to the literature cited in Chapter 1, see also Nouri Gana (ed.), *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013; Alcinde Honwana, *Youth and Revolution in Tunisia*, London: Zed Books, 2013; Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

[605] For example, Laryssa Chomiak, 'The Making of a Revolution in Tunisia', *Middle East Law and Governance*, 2011, 3, pp. 68–83*;* Peter J. Schraeder and Hamadi Redissi, 'Ben Ali's Fall'*, Journal of Democracy*, 2011, 22, 3, pp. 5–19; Léa-Lisa Westerhoff, 'A Tunis, l'Impatience des Enfants de la Révolution', *Libérati*on, 8 January 2011, http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/01/18/a-tunis-l-impatience-des-enfants-de-la-revolution_708035, last accessed 9 September 2018.

that RCD activists' role in the protests were much more complex than is commonly understood, and key to understanding why Ben Ali left on 14 January 2011.

This chapter demonstrates that former RCD activists today offer a multitude of accounts about the uprisings and at the time reacted in diverse ways to the protest movement, dynamics which are indicative of the deeper fractures within the ruling party. In particular, I reveal that at the time of the uprisings, tensions heightened between different wings of the RCD, pitting associates of the Ben Ali family – who sought to defend the regime – against the many party 'losers', who became dissenters in the uprisings. Party officials who had been sidelined typically performed acts of passive resistance in the hope of propping up their own standing within the party. Internecine contention also evinced a generational and regional dimension, as many young RCD activists joined the protest movement, especially in marginalised governorates and those with a particularly high number of deaths during the uprisings. Most importantly, through interviews with key informants this chapter demonstrates that the absence of countermobilisation supportive of Ben Ali provided a political opportunity for figures within the elite to move against the President. Indeed, the breakdown of the Ben Ali regime and his departure to Saudi Arabia was not a direct consequence of the mass protests but owed to a secret coup d'état, which occurred amidst the demonstrations.

This is not to suggest that the collapse of the Ben Ali regime was inevitable, however. Ben Ali's ousting was highly contingent upon a series of decisions taken by influential actors. This chapter reconstructs key decisional moments in which 'individual actors…[exercised] substantial power to channel the direction of subsequent events'[606] – sometimes in

[606] Ronald Aminzade, 'Historical Sociology and Time', *Sociological Methods and Research*, 1992, 20, 4, p. 463.

unintended ways. Indeed, the tumultuous events were beyond the control of either the party or the elite, who underestimated the people's broader discontent and their own capacity to restore order once Ben Ali left. Pressure from the streets gradually forced them to dissolve the RCD. It is this very process that Mohamed Anour Adhar, a member of parliament who hails from a Destourian family, refers to in the epigraph of this chapter when stating that the Destourians 'killed the regime' and, by doing so, unwillingly 'killed' themselves.

Conflicting narratives

This section briefly illustrates RCD activists' diverse accounts of the uprisings, which are key to better understanding some of the frictions that arose within the party at the time of the uprisings and that significantly shaped them. These narratives also provide the basis for critically scrutinising the empirical evidence concerning the RCD's responses to the protests, which will be detailed in subsequent parts of the chapter. It is important to highlight that since the departure of Ben Ali many activists have changed their perceptions of the protest movement, sometimes entirely. A key challenge was to disentangle, at least as far as possible, their more recent viewpoints of the uprisings from how they perceived and reacted to them in 2010–11. Three main themes dominated discussions with them: (1) RCD followers as victims, (2) the uprisings as a western conspiracy, and (3) RCD activists as revolutionaries.

Discourses of victimisation

The victimisation account stipulates that the protest movement unjustly scapegoated and attacked former RCD activists. Abir Moussi, Vice-President of the RCD Coordination Committee at the time of the uprisings, has championed this narrative. She portrays the party as the main target of what she suggests were violent and primitive protesters. Many local party leaders have come to endorse Moussi's discourse of victimisation. They deeply respect

her for having been one of the few officials who dared to sharply denounce the protesters and to defend the RCD during the turmoil in 2010–11 and even in its aftermath. In an interview with me, Moussi elaborated:

> We tried to engage the youth and their families [during the uprisings], to make them understand that the situation is not that easy, that unemployment exists everywhere in the world, and that it is better not to burn public buildings, but to find peaceful solutions.[607]

Moussi clearly sought to portray the RCD as having played an educational and enlightened role in the face of what she suggests were ignorant and erratic protesters who did not understand the complexity of the events. Moussi further accused the protesters of attacking RCD activists and even killing them, affirming:

> One RCD deputy in the region of Kasserine was burned…but of course for the revolutionaries, one RCD activist less is not a problem! …There were others who died of heart attacks because they were accused of corruption, even though they were public servants, even high public servants! These people did not accept such accusations, they suffered, and some died.[608]

Though violence against RCD activists certainly occurred during the protests, Moussi likely exaggerated its scope, and other interviewees could not confirm that an official was burned in Kasserine.[609] Irrespective of its actual accuracy, Moussi's discourse has become popular among many former party followers who fail to accept that the elevated social status they enjoyed under Ben Ali had come under threat following his departure. Let's take the example of Abderrahman Chorfi[610] – the former RCD cell leader in Jendouba, and a fervent admirer of Moussi. Chorfi told me that he and his family, who were all party activists, strongly opposed the 2010–11 protest, which he portrayed as a criminal attack upon

[607] Interview with Abir Moussi, Tunis, 31 May 2016.
[608] Ibid.
[609] For example, interview with Kamel Morjane, Tunis, 26 May 2016.
[610] Interview with Abderrahman Chorfi, Jendouba, 29 May 2016. All subsequent information in this section about Chorfi was collected during the same interview.

'Destourians'. Chorfi's sharp condemnation of the demonstrations was voiced despite his otherwise critical stance towards Ben Ali and his family's 'excesses'. Yet, while Chorfi strongly disapproved of the neopatrimonial tendencies of the regime, he never questioned the overall legitimacy of the Destour's political dominance. Indeed, he went to great lengths to whitewash RCD activism in his city, suggesting that party followers there worked hard to improve the life of the people. Eager to 'prove' his point, Chorfi showed me numerous pictures of the many RCD events he participated in and the awards he received for some of his 'honourable' contributions to the city. Such demonstrations are typical of middle-ranking RCD officials, who want to convey that they were unjustly targeted by the protest movement. Echoing Moussi's victimisation narrative, Chorfi stated '[we] Destourians hoped that change would be peaceful, we refused [the protesters'] path of violence!' Chorfi continuously stressed that force was directed mainly towards party followers and other representatives of the regime, who, he said, were the main victims of the uprisings.

Plots and conspiracies

Closely linked to discourses of victimisation is often a firm belief that the protest movement and Ben Ali's departure were, at least partially, the result of some kind of plot – although RCD activists disagree about who was behind it. Many seem convinced that, during former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's 2008 visit to Tunisia, US officials decided to move against Ben Ali, a plan that was carried out during the 2010–11 demonstrations.[611] A former RCD senior member typically affirmed that 'Ben Ali refused to meet Condoleezza Rice during her visit'; though this is factually incorrect, as a meeting did take place,[612] he

[611] For example, interviews with Abderrahman Chorfi, Jendouba, 29 May 2016; Alaa Eddine Rouached, Skype, 12 June 2016; Abderrazak Souileh, Gafsa, 23 June 2016.
[612] See, for example, Glenn Kessler, 'In Tunisia and Algeria, Rice Asks for Cooperation', *The Washington Post*, 7 September 2008, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/09/06/AR2008090600777.html, last accessed 14 July 2016.

insisted that 'at this moment, we all knew that Ben Ali's era was over. That's what the Americans wanted – it was not an Arab Spring or a revolution'.[613]

To provide 'evidence' that the protests were carefully plotted by foreign powers, many interviewees claimed that the self-immolation of Bouazizi was manipulated. During a conversation with me, Mounir Ben Miled – a prominent businessman and former member of the RCD Central Committee – exclaimed that Bouazizi was an 'illiterate' and a 'parasite'. Still visibly agitated by the events of 2010–11, Ben Miled went on to affirm that Bouazizi 'didn't even deserve to be greeted' and that it is 'better for Tunisia that he is dead!'.[614] Figures such as Ben Miled typically present the fact that some news outlets wrongly stated that Bouazizi was a university graduate – he received only a basic education – as 'evidence' that the event was exaggerated to serve foreign interests.[615] In a similar vein, they maintain that Bouazizi would not have been celebrated a 'martyr' without western influence, as it is forbidden for a Muslim to commit suicide.[616]

Advocates of the conspiracy theory claim that a coup d'état took place on 14 January 2011, overthrowing Ben Ali, and offer a multitude of accounts about its supposed perpetrators. RCD family associates typically view Kamel Morjane as complicit in the events they say were unleashed by the Americans. Morjane, who was Foreign Minister at the time of the uprisings following a long career at the UN, was perceived to be close to western powers.[617]

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[613] Interview with Abderrazak Souileh, Gafsa, 23 June 2016.
[614] Interview with Mounir Ben Miled, Tunis, 24 May 2016.
[615] For example, like many other journalists, *The Guardian*'s Brian Whitaker reported that 'Mohamed Bouazizi…had a university degree but no work'. For details, see Brian Whitaker, 'How a Man Setting Fire to Himself Sparked an Uprising in Tunisia', *The Guardian*, 28 December 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/28/tunisia-ben-ali, last accessed 14 July 2016.
[616] For example, Abderrazak Souileh, a former RCD activist in Gafsa, who called Bouazizi a 'drunk' and a 'tramp', sharply denounced that 'even imams said [Bouazizi] was a martyr', although 'this defied Islamic law' (interview with Abderrazak Souileh, Gafsa, 23 June 2016).
[617] For example, interviews with Taoufik Taleb, Gafsa, 21 June 2016; Mohamed Bechir Ben Dhifi, Gafsa, 21 June 2016.

Others named figures in the defence and security establishment as key to driving Ben Ali out of power. Some of these figures indeed had a stake in his departure, as will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. It is important to highlight that many medium-level officials also view their party leaders as having been complicit in Ben Ali's ousting. They typically single out then-RCD Secretary General Mohamed Ghariani as having done too little to support the President. Bitter about the course of events, Taoufik Taleb, a former party leader in Gafsa, who still considers Ben Ali 'the legitimate President of Tunisia', stated:

> We were almost 3 million party members. …Imagine 3 million RCD followers that take to the streets, they could have easily neutralised the demonstrations! …It is for this very reason that I believe that the key party leaders in Tunis were complicit [in the coup d'état].[618]

Taleb is clearly in denial that being a card-carrying RCD member did not equal wholeheartedly supporting the party or its President. Like some other former party followers, Taleb called for an investigation into RCD internal affairs at the time of the uprisings to identify who was responsible for the party's relative passivity during the unrest and thereby, as he maintains, was an accomplice in Ben Ali's overthrow.[619]

RCD activists as revolutionaries

In contrast to adherents of conspiracy theories and narratives of victimisation, some former RCD activists propagated the notion – counterintuitive at first glance – that RCD followers were 'revolutionaries' who took to the streets against Ben Ali. This account is prominent among those grassroots activists who decided to participate in the protests, a trend subsequent sections will scrutinise in more detail. In addition, some former senior officials try to lend themselves some revolutionary legitimacy and enhance their image and that of

[618] Interview with Taoufik Taleb, Gafsa, 21 June 2016.
[619] Mohamed Ghariani is well aware of such accusations and deplored that some former RCD activists consider him a 'traitor', which, he insisted, 'is not true' (interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016).

the former ruling party by positioning both on the side of the protesters. Mohamed Ghariani and, to a lesser extent, Kamel Morjane have championed this narrative.

Ghariani and Morjane are keen to highlight the historically important role people from the south and interior played in the nationalist Destour movement against the French; they maintain that, because of this experience, southerners remain more combative and revolutionary than most other Tunisians: 'They have become used…to pressure the government into enacting reforms', Ghariani informed me, adding that, historically, 'the party has been their only voice, their trusted voice'.[620] Ghariani went on to suggest that the RCD was a driving force behind the protest movement in the south, including in Sidi Bouzid, where demonstrations first erupted. Abir Moussi, whose job was to oversee the party's regional structures and membership, also affirmed that some card-carrying members took to the street but, in contrast to Ghariani, she said that these activists betrayed their party's principles and therefore cannot be considered 'true' Destourians.[621] This discourse of denying RCD protesters their Destourian identity has been reiterated by many midlevel activists of the victimisation camp. For example, Abderrahman Chorfi insisted that protesting RCD activists 'were not real Destourians but infiltrated the movement. …They had Islamist roots or were [leftist] opponents'.[622] This indicates that the different narratives discussed not only concern the RCD's actual role during the uprisings but also reflect a competition for Destourian legitimacy. Whereas Moussi's camp suggests legitimacy is rooted primarily in the injustice inflicted upon RCD activists at the time of the uprisings, Ghariani affirms it is due to the party's key role in the protest movement.

[620] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016.
[621] Interview with Abir Moussi, Tunis, 31 May 2016.
[622] Interview with Abderrahman Chorfi, Jendouba, 29 May 2016

Naturally Ghariani and Moussi also disagree on the role high-ranking party officials played during the uprisings. Ghariani countered Moussi's more uncompromising stance towards the 2010–11 protesters, and maintained that: 'The former political class did not play the anti-revolution card. From the very beginning it tried to implement reforms and this is very important!'[623] Ghariani's pro-uprising rhetoric certainly has self-serving ends, not least because he rejoined politics in 2013 and wants to come across as a pro-democracy force. His discourse also does not reflect his actual stance during the revolts, as he certainly did not support the protest movement. However, Ghariani's insistence that demonstrations in the south and interior were driven by RCD followers deserves further inquiry. The following section attempts to disentangle how party members in Sidi Bouzid perceived the eruption of protests and reacted to them.

A Destourian revolt?

At the time of the uprisings, Sidi Bouzid was home to about 650 active RCD cells, each consisting of 200–300 members.[624] In total the 415,900-strong[625] governorate included about 162,500 card-carrying RCD members; that is, 39.1% of its population.[626] Ghariani and Moussi suggested that Sidi Bouzid was the governorate where RCD membership rates among the population were the highest nationally.[627] During interviews and group discussions conducted in Sidi Bouzid, it quickly became apparent that many party followers had been lenient towards, or even actively supporting, the protests – though their rationales for doing so differed considerably. Many senior officials hoped that the protests would pressure the government into improving the economic situation in Sidi Bouzid and enhance

[623] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016.
[624] Interviews with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016; Abir Moussi, Tunis, 31 May 2016.
[625] The data is for 2011 and was retrieved from 'Al-Nashra al-Shahriyya li-l-Ihsaʾiyyat' *(Monthly Bulletin of Statistic*s), Tunis: Al-Maʿhad al-Watani li-l-Ihsaʾ (National Institute for Statistics) September 2012, p. 9, http://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/bms_sept12.pdf, last accessed 17 July 2016.
[626] These calculations are based on an estimated average of 250 members per RCD cell.
[627] Interviews with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016; Abir Moussi, Tunis, 31 May 2016.

the standing of its party activists within the wider RCD structure – an objective many younger activists initially shared. However, while senior officials wanted to maintain the party and typically did not actively participate in the demonstrations, many younger followers came to call for a complete overhaul of the regime once the protests turned more violent.

Senior RCD members' early embrace of the demonstrations was underpinned by the fact that even many of Sidi Bouzid's prominent party leaders were deeply affected by the city's poverty and high levels of unemployment. Abderrazek Daly – a lawyer in his sixties from one of the most important families in Sidi Bouzid, and the governorate's RCD Vice-Secretary General at the time of the uprisings – is a case in point. Daly's much-frequented law office in the centre of Sidi Bouzid is still decorated with an RCD flag, a rare public demonstration of persistent loyalty to the former ruling party. Still, when the demonstrations erupted in December 2010, Daly considered them to be legitimate. He explained:

> Within the [RCD] we were convinced that we must have these demonstrations because we are an impoverished region, we are a ruined region. Our children have no work. For my part, I am from the RCD but I have four [family members] with law degrees who are jobless: my wife, my sister, as well as my two brothers![628]

Like many other high-ranking party officials, Daly defended the protests, which initially focused on socioeconomic concerns – even if it certainly did not cross his mind to participate in them – as people close to him were affected by unemployment. By quietly supporting the demonstrations, Daly claimed that his main hope was 'that the region of Sidi Bouzid can have its share in the political system, that's all'. For many former senior RCD officials such as Daly, strengthening Sidi Bouzid's anchorage in the political system was

[628] Interview with Abderrazek Daly, Sidi Bouzid, 25 June 2016. All subsequent information relating to Daly was collected during the same interview.

closely associated with socioeconomic advancement. Daly positioned himself within a group of RCD followers whose rationales for supporting the protests were purely economic and who were 'convinced that the political system must exist and has to resist'. He elaborated about this camp:

> Some RCD followers said that we…need to defend the RCD because that's our political system. …They did not say that they wanted to overthrow Ben Ali. They were against the Trabelsis and other thieves, but they did not say they were against Ben Ali.

While Daly was critical of the most prominent exploiters of the political system, that is, the Trabelsis, he clearly supported Ben Ali. Indeed, Daly harboured deep disdain for RCD members who gradually came to ask for regime change, particularly party cell activists. Mohamed Ghariani, who visited the southern governorate during the protests, confirmed the active participation of RCD cell members in the protest movement in Sidi Bouzid and their call for political change. Ghariani said that some cell leaders even encouraged their members to take to the streets because they were very close to their constituencies, who pressured them into supporting the protests.[629] In an attempt to discredit party activists who came to call for the overthrow of the regime, Daly said that 'at the level of the local and regional cells [in Sidi Bouzid], [RCD followers] were profiteers'. He reflected that 'they were no activists with well-defined objectives…and were not interested in their [party] and Destourian political solutions'. Visibly agitated, Daly went as far as to claim that, for party cell activists who called for the fall of Ben Ali, 'being Destourian was a facade' – echoing Moussi's discourse of denying protesters a Destourian identity.

To further discredit those RCD followers who had called for regime change, Daly claimed that they were pursuing foreign agendas. Like other conspiracy theorists, Daly also insisted

[629] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016.

that Bouazizi's self-immolation was exaggerated, even suggesting that Bouazizi did not actually want to burn himself but did so accidentally after drinking a small quantity of petrol and subsequently smoking a cigarette.[630] Daly's degrading portrayal of Bouazizi, who was well known in central Sidi Bouzid, as sufficiently foolish to kill himself 'by mistake' somewhat calls into question his previous claim that he cared for Sidi Bouzid's many young residents who struggled to make ends meet. Rather, Daly and other senior party members supported the economic demands of the protesters primarily out of self-serving motives. They hoped that pressure on the regime would bolster their own socioeconomic sway and that of their close associates. These high-ranking officials now blame the RCD activists who demanded the overthrow of the regime for the economic downturn, which has only deepened in Sidi Bouzid in the years since Ben Ali left. They charge that the many development projects promised to the city during the protests – in which they had hoped to become key stakeholders – were not implemented because of his departure.[631]

The RCD activists who asked for regime change did not believe that the authorities' promises of jobs and development were sincere. In contrast to senior figures such as Daly, young activists have developed a deeply ambiguous relationship towards the former regime. Many are ashamed and wish to hide their previous political affiliation, particularly at the level of the rank and file, which makes research into RCD grassroots activism during the uprisings somewhat challenging. In one case, previous RCD officials helped to organise a group discussion with people who they said were young former party members in Sidi Bouzid.[632] Yet when I first broached the topic of the RCD during the uprisings, one

[630] This account is contradicted by eyewitnesses who talked to me and by video footage of Bouazizi's self-immolation.
[631] For example, Abderrazek Daly maintained that 'Sidi Bouzid lost a very big possibility [as] starting from 25 December 2010…President Ben Ali ordered big [business] heads to establish themselves in Sidi Bouzid. They were about to create 5,000 to 6,000 jobs' (interview with Abderrazek Daly, Sidi Bouzid, 25 June 2016).
[632] I conducted the group discussion with Zaineb Salhi, Wafa Fola, Samir Bargougui and Mohamed Tayeb Ben Rzouga in Sidi Bouzid, 25 June 2016.

participant, Zaineb Salhi, hastily stated: 'we [group discussants] were all revolutionaries and everything that happened before January 14th was against the former Rally party'. Visibly nervous and affronted by the research topic, Salhi added 'I can personally confirm that before January 14th nobody in this group was a member of a political party!' – a confirmation she made despite not knowing two of the other participants.

Rather than talk about the RCD, these young people were keen to narrate their revolutionary activism and individual contributions to the protest movement in Sidi Bouzid. Questioned more closely about the role of the RCD during the protests, the participants initially affirmed that all members of the former ruling party were at their homes at the time of the uprisings because they feared the protesters. 'They were afraid of the youth [because] some young people burned their cars and their houses', one stated.[633] Yet even while fiercely criticising former RCD officials, all discussants regularly spoke highly of the former senior party members who had organised the group discussion, such as Daly. To them, praising these officials was not contradictory to uttering fierce anti-RCD rhetoric. Indeed, it seemed almost irrelevant to the group that Daly had been the RCD Vice-President at the time of the uprisings.

This raises the question of the identities of the RCD officials who the group discussants fervently claimed were attacked by the protesters.[634] One possibility is that they are actually the same people they praise today, given that many former RCD officials are still the city's main powerbrokers, and they may not wish to alienate these influential figures.

[633] This contradicts the statements of RCD senior members, who typically claim they were present during the protests and tried to reason with those demonstrators who went as far as to demand the overthrow of the regime and the dissolution of the RCD. It is important to note that, in doing so, these former officials wish to convey that they were not part of the RCD's networks of corruption, but were sufficiently respected by the people that they did not have to hide during the unrest.
[634] The discussants avoided identifying the party figureheads who they claim the demonstrators targeted.

Alternatively, they could be referring to RCD family associates known locally for engaging in corruption or entertaining ties with the Trabelsi network,[635] but exclude more inconspicuous party officials. Indeed, as shown in the case of Bizerte's Mohamed Ben Khallifa, discussed in the previous chapter, regional RCD Vice-Presidency posts were mostly honorific nominations and typically filled by people who possessed significant political legitimacy, such as by virtue of their activism in the independence movement or their important family clan – as was the case with Daly. But Ben Ali family associates were the real powerbrokers of governorates and headed the RCD's regional structures, and these were most likely the figures towards whom the group directed its disdain.

The group discussants' praise for key figureheads such as Daly also highlights that party membership is only one among a range of important affiliations in Sidi Bouzid; ties to a specific family clan are at least as important. It is probable that group participants initially overstated their dislike of the RCD and the extent to which its officials were the target of the protests out of fear of exposing themselves as former party activists or sympathisers, particularly in front of people they did not know well. In fact, after more than an hour of discussion, one of the participants, Samir Bargougui – a local businessman – had had enough of the others attacking the RCD. In the middle of a heated argument about RCD corruption in Sidi Bouzid, Bargougui suddenly proclaimed: 'My family was in the RCD and I am proud of it!' He went on to explain that his agriculture business had suffered tremendously in the years before the uprisings because his produce did not sell well. Beyond these socioeconomic concerns, Bargougui was deeply affected by the self-immolation of Bouazizi. Bargougui claimed he had known Bouazizi personally because the two of them frequented the same café – the last time the night before Bouazizi's self-immolation. 'I was

[635] At several points the discussants maintained that, even in marginalised Sidi Bouzid, the Trabelsis and their proxies sought to gain a foothold in the local economy, particularly in agriculture. I was unable to confirm these accounts.

the first one [in my family] to participate in the protests', he stated, visibly full of pride, affirming that his relatives supported his revolutionary endeavours.

Apologetic in the face of Bargougui's unexpected revelation, Salhi, who had been so critical of the RCD, conceded that 'not all RCD activists were wrongdoers'. Salhi even admitted that there were RCD members in her own family, who, she insisted, 'are not wrongdoers, they are not thieves, they are good people'. For Bargougui, however, Salhi's proclamation did not go far enough. Echoing the discourse of RCD followers as revolutionaries, he proclaimed:

> All RCD activists who were part of big RCD families [in Sidi Bouzid] protested and encouraged the protests to turn into a revolution. …RCD followers were revolutionaries. …The RCD no longer wanted Ben Ali, because the four years prior to the uprisings we experienced real economic problems. …Who do you think was behind Ben Ali's fall? The [RCD activists] of Sidi Bouzid!

Bargougui's allegation that the participation of RCD followers in the protest movement in Sidi Bouzid forced Ben Ali out of power illustrates that former party membership is not only a source of shame among its youth. Some grassroots activists, such as Bargougui, are still proud of having belonged to the RCD and participated in the protests. It is noteworthy that Bargougui stresses that the RCD protesters were from 'big…families', that is, influential families of rural notables. This suggests that the uproar there wasn't primarily about the 'RCD versus protesters', but about the marginalisation of longtime activists, rural notables, and the region as a whole. Sidi Bouzid is one of Tunisia's most disenfranchised governorates and prominent families there were increasingly cut out of economic development projects, which were disproportionally directed towards the Sahel area and Tunis[636] – strongholds of the Ben Ali family.

[636] By 2010, 95% of foreign direct investment was absorbed by Tunis, Nabeul, Sousse, Monastir, Sfax, and Bizerte – coastal towns where the Trabelsis dominated economic affairs. See, for details, Mongi Boughzala

Overall the group discussion highlighted that it is still very controversial for most former youth members to talk about their previous affiliation with the RCD. None of the discussants directly admitted that they had belonged to the ruling party[637] – not even when, in the course of the two-hour-long discussion, the general narrative switched from depicting the entire RCD as a key target of the protesters, to accusing only some of its former officials of wrongdoing, to Bargougui going as far as portraying RCD activists as revolutionaries. Moreover, the group's sometimes divergent and contradictory statements about the party and its role in the uprisings suggests that, even in Sidi Bouzid, former party activists' responses to the uprisings were deeply heterogeneous. The key divide was threefold: between family associates, who supported the regime until the very end; rural notables of important families, who demanded reforms to elevate their own standing within the party hierarchy; and a protesting party base that called for the overthrow of the regime.

In many cases, the protesters' fierce anti-regime stance was reinforced by personal relationships with victims of the uprisings; their deaths constituted focal points revealing the repressive nature of the regime.[638] Aside from Bargougui's ties to Bouazizi, RCD followers were deeply affected by the death of Sidi Bouzid resident Chaouki Ben Lakhdhar Ben Houssine Hidri, the first person killed by a bullet during the uprisings; he was the son of a prominent Destourian activist, Houssine Ben Lakhdher.[639] When talking to Chaouki's widow, who still lives in his rural hometown of Menzel Bouzaiane, I decided not to broach the topic out of respect for her loss and fear of unwontedly tarnishing the image of her

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and Mohamed Tlili Hamdi, 'Promoting Inclusive Growth in Arab Countries: Regional and Rural Development and Inequality in Tunisia', *The Brookings Institution, Working Paper*, February 2014, p 6.

[637] Bargougui only implicitly suggested he was a party member when he stated that he is from an RCD family.

[638] Compare Susanne Lohmann, 'The Dynamics of Informational Cascades: The Monday Demonstration in Leipzig, East Germany, 1989–91', *World Politics*, 1994, 47, pp. 42–101.

[639] Houssine Ben Lakhdher passed away shortly after the uprisings. I was unable to confirm whether he belonged to the RCD or one if its predecessors.

deceased husband in front of her two children. However, Chaouki, who had the means to study in Iraq and even spent some time in the US, was clearly better off than some of the other residents in his town.[640] This illustrates that anyone participating in the demonstrations, or simply happening to be outside at the time of the unrest, risked their life.[641]

Once the police used live bullets against protesters and snipers began to target random people walking on the streets, even some medium- and senior party officials came to sharply denounce Ben Ali's handling of the situation. Sofien Kadri, a member of the executive bureau of RCD students who hails from Regueb, a rural village in Sidi Bouzid, is a case in point.[642] Regueb, where Kadri founded the party's first local office, witnessed a particularly high number of deaths during the uprisings.[643] In an interview, Kadri recalled painfully that his cousin was shot during the protests, as was his neighbour, a woman who left two children behind. In response to these events, he claims to have written a letter demanding to see Mohamed Ghariani to protest the deaths in his village and hoping to receiving answers about the violent events, but the RCD Secretary General never responded to his request. Visibly struggling to explain the happenings, Kadri elaborated that the origins of the snipers shooting at the people were never determined, and that they may have come from outside Tunisia. Evoking the possibility that the violence may have been enacted, at least in part, by external forces has become a prominent narrative among some previous party officials, who

[640] Interview with Fatma, Chaouki's widow, Menzel Bouzaiane, governorate of Sidi Bouzid, 26 June 2016.
[641] One of Chaouki's brothers, Alaa Hidri, was also severely wounded in the course of the uprisings. For details, see Henda Chennaoui, 'Retour de Manivelle: Quand la Police et la Justice s'Acharnent Contre les Jeunes de la Révolution Tunisienne!', *Nawaat*, 1 June 2014, http://nawaat.org/portail/2014/06/01/retour-de-manivelle-quand-la-police-et-la-justice-sacharnent-contre-les-jeunes-de-la-revolution-tunisienne/, last accessed 19 July 2016.
[642] Interview with Sofien Kadri, Regueb, governorate of Sidi Bouzid, 27 June 2016. All subsequent information relating to Kadri was collected during the same interview.
[643] In Regueb, a village of roughly 7,800 residents, four young men and one woman were killed during the protests. For details, see Muhammad al-Arabi al-Zuraibi, *al-Regueb min al-Tahrir ila al-Taʿmir* (*al-Regueb: From Liberation to Reconstruction*), Tunis: Dar Al-Qalam Publishing and Distribution, 2016, pp. 219–220.

deny that Ben Ali is the prime suspect and most likely to have given the orders to shoot his own people.[644]

Sidi Bouzid's 'traitors'

The high number of victims in Sidi Bouzid, including family members of RCD activists and presumably even party followers themselves, was a key factor driving the protests' increasing hostility towards Ben Ali. Thus, a mounting number of demonstrators came to call for the overthrow of the regime. Even some midlevel officials with links to victims of the uprisings, such as Kadri, became progressively lenient towards the protesters. This contrasts with RCD officials in governorates with few or no victims, who tended to denounce the turmoil. Indeed, even in marginalised governorates such as Jendouba – where unemployment and poverty levels are almost as high as in Sidi Bouzid, but nobody died during the uprisings – midlevel officials tended to view the protests as an attack on their elevated social status, particularly once demonstrators called for the overthrow of the regime.[645] Yet the rank and file – particularly young people and card-carrying RCD members who were not involved in any specific party activism – mostly joined the protests, even in regions with no civilian deaths, where their superiors continued to support Ben Ali until the very end.

During interviews, many former RCD activists from locations with few or no victims charged their counterparts in Sidi Bouzid and neighbouring Kasserine – where major

[644] In another case, Ben Miled, a former member of the RCD executive committee and a fervent conspiracy theory adherent, insisted that 'the head of the national guard wrote three times to the entire national guard that they are not allowed to use real live bullets'. He elaborated that therefore 'nobody knows' who really shot at the protesters, or 'whether they actually were from Tunisia' (interview with Mounir Ben Miled, Tunis, 24 May 2016).

[645] It is noteworthy that the authorities' promise of major economic development projects in the south heightened the fears of further economic marginalisation among those from rival regions, such as Jendouba, who were excluded from such concessions.

protests also erupted promptly after the self-immolation of Bouazizi, and which had the highest death toll of all regions – with not having been 'true' Destourians; some even denounced them as traitors. Zakaria Bendhaher, a former member of the RCD leftist wing who joined Nidaa Tounes after the uprisings, asserted that, in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, 'the RCD is something entirely different'.[646] Bendhaher, who hails from Gafsa, explained that, following the regime's harsh crackdown on the 2008 Gafsa protest movement, people from the phosphate city learned their lesson, which is why only a few took to the streets in 2010–11.[647] Bendhaher sharply denounced the revolutionary endeavours of RCD activists in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, arguing that in these governorates:

> There are no real RCD activists. [People there] are anti-patriots, they are not Tunisians. In Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine they are not Tunisian, they can't be! They have remained Berbers. …They have no clue about what is happening in the world, they do nothing except eating and sleeping!

He elaborated:

> There is a real difference between the people from Gafsa and the *khorbech* [local saying close to 'uncultured' or 'uncivilised'] from Sidi Bouzid. In Gafsa our big family clans are at the borders of the city, they protect our city from [illegal people]. But in Sidi Bouzid they are all *khorbech*, they are all Bedouins!

Clearly, Bendhaher tried hard to portray the citizens of Sidi Bouzid as ignorant and uncivilised. He attributed Sidi Bouzid's supposed backwardness to the 'Berber' roots of its people. In doing so, he sought to hint at the supposed superiority of Tunisians of Arab origin, completely disregarding the fact that some citizens in Gafsa are also not 'pure' Arabs

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[646] Interview with Zakaria Bendhaher, Gafsa, 24 June 2016. All subsequent information relating to Bendhaher was collected during the same interview.

[647] Many interviewees in Gafsa confirmed that few people took to the streets in the mining city. Yet, far from Bendhaher's affirmation that the people there had 'learned their lesson', such limited mobilisation is likely due to the trauma of the regime's violent crackdown against its 2008 protest movement and fear of repeating similar bloodshed. For example, Sami Amroussia, the leftist opposition activist, affirmed that when the UGTT organised a protest on 12 January 2011, 'not even twenty people participated in it, because [most citizens of Gafsa] were afraid' (interview with Sami Amroussia, Gafsa, 23 June 2016).

but have Amazigh ancestors. To further degrade the people of Sidi Bouzid, Bendhaher used the Bedouin metaphor to suggest that they are without country allegiance and hence unpatriotic. One of the consequences, he elaborated, is that Sidi Bouzid is full of 'illegals'. Bendhaher affirmed that this tendency stands in stark contrast to Gafsa's reliance upon old family tribes, who protect the city's borders from unwanted people seeking to enter.[648] By denying Sidi Bouzid's people their Tunisian roots, Bendhaher sought to undermine the legitimacy of their revolutionary demands.

Bendhaher's degrading remarks about his RCD counterparts in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine illustrate the extent to which frictions emerged during the uprisings and have persisted between party members of different governorates, pitting those from regions with a large number of victims against those from areas with fewer or no deaths. Bendhaher's remarks also encapsulate many RCD activists' persistent denial of the people's plight in marginalised localities such as Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine. During interviews many of them completely disregarded or downplayed the level of poverty and police violence endured in these regions.[649]

Whereas activists such as Bendhaher were not shy to denounce party followers who protested in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, many felt even more strongly about a minority of members who took to the streets in their own governorates, where most continued to support the regime until the very end. For many of them, the 'treason' associated with protesting against Ben Ali was much more personal in their own regions. Let us take the example of

[648] Aside from calling the citizens of Sidi Bouzid or Kasserine 'bedouin', 'berber' and 'khorbech', many interviewees from rival governorates also denounced them as 'barbarian' or as '*zebla*' [trash].
[649] Bendhaher even wrongly alleged that, owing to the large number of card-carrying RCD members in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, people there used to receive a lot of money from the former President – who, he asserted, went to great lengths to develop Tunisia's interior and southern regions. RCD activists willing to concede that poverty in the south is a problem but who stood with Ben Ali during the uprisings typically seek to downplay its extent by asserting that poverty is a global problem and not unique to Tunisia.

Monji Salem, a leader of the RCD professional cells in Gafsa, who, like many other former party officials, still daily frequents the same café in front of the former party headquarters. Salem recounted that a few days before the departure of Ben Ali he saw a leading RCD activist protesting, even demanding the downfall of the ruling party. Salem was visibly still struggling to explain how a RCD 'brother' – not from Sidi Bouzid or Kasserine but from his own beloved city – could possibly take to the streets, and even challenge the ruling party. He felt deeply betrayed by his RCD 'brother', a common sentiment of party members who still harboured a sense of allegiance to the RCD 'family' at the time of the uprisings.[650]

It is notable that despite his fierce condemnation of the demonstrations, Salem – like many other RCD activists who were still dedicated to the regime and ruling party – did not do much to counter them, for example, by talking to the protesters or trying to initiate rallies in favour of the President. Indeed, party followers launched few pro-Ben Ali activities at the time of the uprisings. The following section discusses why their endeavours remained so limited – a factor crucial to understanding the President's departure on 14 January 2011 – as well as the ways in which some activists still sought to counter the protest movement.

Sidelined loyalists

When demonstrations first erupted in mid December, some RCD members who were still committed to the regime initially sought to counter the protesters by reporting their identities to the security forces.[651] Particularly prevalent among these were student leaders at universities, and some loyal followers of local cells and Neighbourhood Committees, whose tasks included monitoring dissidents and reporting 'suspicious' activities. For example, Firas

[650] In an attempt to explain why Adil Akmi joined the protests, Salem suggested that Akmi may not have been a 'real' Destourian but rather an Islamist who infiltrated the RCD.
[651] When the protests first erupted, the confidence of many loyal RCD students was bolstered by the fact that only days before they had scored a landslide victory in the university council elections – even if the results were obviously rigged.

Guefrech – a former member of the RCD student executive committee – explained that 'we tried at the beginning to control the demonstrations by going to the police and telling them who took part in them'.[652] Former student leader Alaa Eddine Rouached confirmed such activities, stating that initially 'some youth activists and RCD members of neighbourhood cells [prepared] lists of the protesters [and gave them] to the police'. Thereby they hoped to become closer to the RCD powerbrokers: '[They] wanted to show to the leaders that they are active, that they are servants of Ben Ali and the RCD', Alaa affirmed.[653] However, such endeavours were generally limited to the first week of the protests and became impossible once they grew in magnitude.

Ben Ali, however, did not consider that the apparently limited nature of the RCD's pro-regime pursuits reflected any real threat to his rule. Indeed, until the last days of the uprisings, Ben Ali never even asked the RCD to launch pro-regime activities, such as rallies in his defence. This may have reflected a fear that this would empower rivals in the party, but also illustrates his erroneous belief that he could control the riots through a security response alone, just as he had done in Gafsa in 2008.[654] Ben Ali's decision not to involve the RCD early on constituted a key decisional moment that affected the direction of subsequent events: the party's marginalisation further divided the RCD and pushed even loyal activists underground. It was a key miscalculation on the part of Ben Ali and illustrates the extent to which the RCD net completely lost its role of ensuring persistent information flow – one of the most important functions of ruling parties in authoritarian regimes – in that it failed to inform the President of the severity of the situation on the ground. Interviewees who were in touch with the President at the time of the uprisings typically stated that Ben Ali initially

[652] Interview with Firas Guefrech, Tunis, 30 September 2015.
[653] Interview with Alaa Eddine Rouached, Skype, 12 June 2016.
[654] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016.

believed he would be able to gain control over the demonstrations in a matter of days.[655] As a consequence, the President, who was in the middle of a family holiday in Dubai when the protests first erupted, returned to Tunis only on 28 December 2010, when protests were fast increasing in magnitude and had even reached the capital city. Even then, the President appeared relatively unconcerned when his plane arrived at the Tunis–Carthage International Airport. Nabil Chettaoui, former Director of Tunisair (the company that provided Ben Ali's presidential plane), whose job included greeting the President upon his arrival at the airport, remembered:

> When [Ben Ali] came out of the presidential plane he appeared very relaxed… . Together with some colleagues, I stood in front of the plane and we were surprised. Generally, Ben Ali does not like social movements. When there is a problem, he is annoyed. So we expected that he would be annoyed when leaving the plane, because of the demonstrations… . We didn't understand.[656]

In the days following his return, Ben Ali mostly coordinated with the defence and security establishment. Ghariani recalled that 'Ben Ali managed the crisis essentially with the Interior Minister, the Defence Minister, and his principal [advisors]'. In addition, Ben Ali officials bolstered pro-regime propaganda, which was spread through traditional media outlets as well as the internet in response to the central role social media was playing in the rapid growth of the protest movement. More than ever before, the RCD's daily newspaper, *Le Renouveau*, praised the President's many achievements, while entirely ignoring the fact that demonstrations had erupted in the south – a strategy also pursued by other regime mouthpieces. State propaganda at the time of the uprisings appeared particularly cynical given that 2010 was the United Nations International Year of Youth, an initiative widely publicised in the country because it had been launched by the UN's Tunisian

[655] Ibid.
[656] Interview with Nabil Chettaoui, Tunis, 29 June 2016.

representatives.[657] Thus, on the first anniversary of the adoption of the Tunisian initiative – which happened to be the day after the self-immolation of Bouazizi – events were staged throughout the country to celebrate Ben Ali's supposed 'avant-gardist approach' vis-à-vis young people.[658] *Le Renouveau* lauded 'the forward-looking vision of the head of state and the particular interest he has in promoting the youth'.[659] Media outlets throughout the country kept reiterating this narrative, in complete denial of the many young victims killed by the security forces.

A prime undertaking of some party figureheads was to continue to propagate an overall picture of law and order and widespread support for Ben Ali, even at a time when many political analysts feared the turmoil might eventually lead to a civil war. Throughout the uprisings, *Le Renouveau* continued to publish articles on a daily basis detailing the many 'honourable' events supposedly taking place in favour of Ben Ali and his RCD, even in remote and marginalised locations in the south and the interior. However, when asking specific RCD activists about events *Le Renouveau* wrote they had participated in, it was not uncommon for them to have no recollection of them at all, a tendency which reveals that the extent of pro-Ben Ali activism was often amplified and sometimes staged. This was even the case at the level of the RCD Political Bureau. Indeed, in several articles *Le Renouveau* mentioned activities and meetings of the Political Bureau, but in interviews its members had often no memory of them whatsoever.[660]

In late December, official media outlets switched from a strategy of ignoring the protests to one of vilifying them while celebrating the economic concessions the President announced

[657] Interview with Samir Abidi, Tunis, 30 June 2016.
[658] 'Année Internationale de la Jeunesse: La Consécration d'une Démarche Avant-Gardiste', *Le Renouveau*, 19 December 2010, p. 8.
[659] Ibid.
[660] Interviews with Kamel Morjane, Tunis, 26 May 2016; Fouad Mebazaa, Tunis, 30 May 2016.

he would make to some marginalised governorates.[661] Naturally many high-ranking party officials participated in this regime propaganda, trying very hard to discredit the demonstrations and laud Ben Ali. The office of the Chamber of Deputies, dominated by the RCD, released a statement denouncing 'all forms of violence, anarchy, and irresponsible behaviour' and 'the slander campaign orchestrated against Tunisia'.[662] The statement also affirmed the deputies' 'complete commitment to the reform choices of President Ben Ali and cohesion around his person'.[663] For his part, Ghariani, the only RCD official who visited Sidi Bouzid during the uprisings, on 24 December, declared at a speech he held in the governorate that 'Tunisia rejects…the attempts of opponents to exploit isolated incidents in order to question the wider achievements in the country'.[664] It is noteworthy that a picture of the Sidi Bouzid visit published in *Le Renouveau* shows that only roughly 50 people attended his speech,[665] illustrating the degree to which the party's support base had eroded in the southern governorate.

When asked in more detail about the nature of the activities he pursued at the time of the uprisings, Ghariani claimed he had only talked to the demonstrators and tried to calm the situation. Most RCD interviewees delivered a very similar, almost mechanical-sounding response to the same question, suggesting they may have prepared it in advance; their actual activities may have been more extensive. Moreover, it is questionable whether any of them actually talked directly to the protesters as they claim; many probably stayed away from the

[661] For example, on 25 December 2010, *Le Renouveau* announced that Sidi Bouzid was awarded three development projects worth 15 million TND and creating 698 jobs. Also, Kasserine was awarded a series of projects, including an industrial park. For details, see 'Sidi Bouzid: Signature de Trois Projets de Développement Intégré Pour un Investissement de 15 MD', *Le Renouveau*, 25 December 2010, p. 3, and 'Plan de Développement des Gouvernorats de l'Intérieur: Une Première Tranche de Projets au Profit de la Région de Kasserine', *Le Renouveau*, 25 December 2010, p. 2.
[662] 'Le Bureau de la Chambre des Députés Dénonce les Campagnes Calomnieuses Orchestrées Contre la Tunisie', *Le Renouveau*, 28 December 2010, p. 3.
[663] Ibid.
[664] 'M. Mohamed Ghariani Préside un Meeting à Sidi Bouzid', *Le Renouveau*, 25 December 2010, p. 3.
[665] Ibid.

demonstrations as they feared for their own safety. An interview with Akram Sebri, the Secretary General of the RCD youth at the time of the uprisings – who was under tremendous pressure, given that many of the party's approximately 350,000 youth members joined the protests – further suggests this.[666] Sebri initially affirmed the only activism he pursued during the uprisings was to 'try to calm the demonstrations…by pacifist means, [such as] communication, dialogue, and negotiations', stressing that '[RCD activists] were not allowed to do anything against the protesters'. Yet, in the course of the interview, he conceded that even during the height of the unrest all party leaders kept working at the RCD headquarters, situated on Avenue Mohamed V in central Tunis, where they sought to come up with various responses to the upheaval. He stated:

> Every time we had a new situation, we [leaders] met to decide [what to do about it]. Sometimes we met two or three times per day. …The atmosphere was characterised by panic, because the situation was entirely new, we never lived a similar experience. As a result, the decisions were characterised by a lot of panic.

Sebri's admission that RCD leaders met several times per day to coordinate possible party responses to new developments in the uprisings raises the question as to what they might have decided. Many of their endeavours were likely related to managing damage control. For example, many RCD followers who joined the protests said that videos and pictures of known party activists in the demonstrations were rapidly taken down from the web, probably because RCD leaders believed they might encourage even more of their own to join the riots.[667] Thus, the party elite in Tunis may have been involved in developing strategies to identify RCD members in videos and pictures to help block them online. Moreover, Sebri's insistence that the party leadership panicked during the unrest reveals the high level of contingency during the unrest, which may have led some officials to resort to

[666] Interview with Akram Sebri, Tunis, 26 May 2016. All subsequent information relating to Sebri was retrieved during the same interview.
[667] Interview with Alaa Eddine Rouached, Skype, 12 June 2016.

'harsher' measures in an attempt to contain the protests. This could have involved identifying and threatening central figures in the demonstrations. Some RCD activists have also been accused of attacking protesters on the streets. But even if some assaults on protesters occurred, they likely constituted isolated instances, as most RCD activists certainly did not dare to confront the far more numerous demonstrators.

The old guard's revenge

Unlike the RCD headquarters in Tunis, many of the party's regional chapters were completely deserted two weeks into the uprisings, even in fairly stable governorates with few or no victims and where limited numbers of people took to the streets. In Gafsa, for example, party activists recalled bitterly that, two weeks after the protests erupted, the RCD's main chief there – a Ben Ali family associate – left his office in the regional headquarters. He never returned, so they had nobody to instruct them how to respond to the upheaval. The same happened in Jendouba, where most midlevel officials vehemently denounced the uprisings, which they viewed as a threat to their elevated social status in the city. At the same time, they were frustrated that their party leaders did not even have the courtesy to tell them what to do – if anything – in response to the protests.

This absence of communication owed to the deeper structural ruptures within the RCD between Ben Ali family associates, who were typically promoted to positions as regional party chiefs, and historic party leaders, who were marginalised in the 2000s, a tendency the previous chapter discussed in much detail. In defiance of what they perceived to be degrading treatment by their leadership, the old guard did not bother trying to stage pro-regime activities such as local rallies. In fact, many historic figures believed that by remaining passive they would send a signal conveying that they also wanted things to

change.[668] This attitude has become known among former RCD ranks as 'a form of silent protest'.[669] This form of contention is similar to the support party officials in marginalised governorates or regions with many victims evinced towards the protesters, but there it was driven primarily by socioeconomic disenfranchisement or the immediacy of the horrors of the repression. By contrast, the old guard's passive resistance owed to the enormous sway the Trabelsi family had come to wield over the party, a dynamic that had strongly diminished their influence. The general turmoil in the country provided them with a rare opportunity to display their discontent without fear of sanctions or reprisal. In response to their marginalisation one leading figure who worked closely with the President – Samir Abidi, who became Communications Minister on 29 December 2010[670] – even told his constituency at the time of the uprisings that he had recommended to the President that he divorce his wife.[671] However, when I broached the topic, Abidi admitted that nobody would ever have dared suggest such a thing.[672] The fact that Abidi felt compelled to pretend to his followers to have recommended to the President he divorce Leila illustrates the extent to which many RCD activists hoped the uprisings would force Ben Ali to distance himself from the Trabelsis.

The RCD's old guard hoped their passive stance would put pressure on the regime, forcing its powerbrokers to rethink the role of the RCD as well as how nominations within the party

[668] Interview with Abderrahman Chorfi, Jendouba, 29 May 2016
[669] Interview with Alaa Eddine Rouached, Skype, 12 June 2016.
[670] Samir Abidi replaced Oussama Romdhani, whom Ben Ali swiftly sacked upon his return from Dubai to Tunis. Romdhani told me that his dismissal was indicative of the President's misperception that 'by changing faces he can renew his political life' (interview with Oussama Romdhani, Tunis, 31 May 2016).
[671] Interviews with RCD activists from Gafsa, Samir Abidi's hometown, on 21 June 2016. Specifically, the interviewees claimed that Abidi told them that he wrote Ben Ali's speeches, in which he proposed concessions the President would make. They said that Abidi wrote in his draft speeches that Ben Ali would divorce his wife, but every time he received them back this section was crossed out. It is noteworthy that many interviewees compared relations between Ben Ali and Leila to those of Bourguiba and his wife, Wassila, whom the late President divorced when he believed she had become too influential. They thought Ben Ali might do the same with Leila.
[672] Interview with Samir Abidi, Tunis, 30 June 2016.

were being handled. Clearly, their disappointment at the May 2010 municipal elections, which saw the ascent of many figures without any party experience or Destourian family background, still loomed large. Chorfi, the party cell leader from Jendouba who so fervently denounced the uprisings, bitterly recalled that during the protests he and his colleagues 'waited for Ben Ali to make adjustments, for him to do something new for the party, for the country. But he was busy with his family, his son, and tourism [in Dubai]!'.[673] Like many RCD activists from prominent Destourian families, Chorfi especially denounced the role of Ghariani within the party, who he said 'was worth nothing' and was 'not suited to become Secretary General'. In particular, Chorfi criticised that Ghariani was close to the Ben Ali family, especially to Leila and Sakher el-Materi.

It is important to emphasise yet again that, despite their fierce disapproval of many developments within the Ben Ali regime, figures such as Chorfi never questioned the basis of its existence or that of the party. They erred on the conservative side of the protest movement, and the passive resistance in which they engaged was mainly a complaint against the marginalisation of key Destourian activists in favour of simple family puppets and did not touch upon the regime as such. Many thought it appropriate to remain silent because they did not believe their passive stance would pose a threat to Ben Ali's power base or the existence of the RCD. Indeed, after 25 years under Ben Ali, most Tunisians never seriously believed the President could be forced to give up power, let alone through pressure from the streets. As Hassouna Nasfi, the former RCD student leader who hails from Gabes, elaborated: 'not even 1% [of the people] believed that the President would leave the country'.[674] In fact, it is doubtful whether the old guard would even have pursued a silent protest had they suspected what might come next; that is, Ben Ali leaving the country and

[673] Interview with Abderrahman Chorfi, Jendouba, 29 May 2016.
[674] Interview with Hassouna Nasfi, Bardo, 24 May 2016.

shortly afterwards the RCD's dissolution. This illustrates the stark contrast between their contentious intentions and the actual outcomes of the uprisings.[675] The goal of their passive resistance was to boost their own standing and capital in society – not to destroy its very basis.

Eroding countermobilisation

Just as many RCD officials overestimated the stability of the regime, Ben Ali inaccurately evaluated the extent of his own power base and capacity to mobilise his constituency, if need be. While promising economic concessions, in two speeches the President infamously stressed that the uprisings owed to 'false and unchecked allegations', constituted instances of 'fabrication and defamation',[676] and were engineered by 'a small group of hostile elements who are offended by the success of Tunisia'.[677] Faced with mounting protests, on 13 January 2011 Ben Ali took a slightly more reconciliatory stance. He claimed he had 'understood' the people and would establish an 'independent commission…to look into corruption, bribery, and the mistakes of officials'. He declared there was 'no presidency for life' and that he had been 'misled' by some people who were 'hiding the truth from [him]'.[678] Yet he refrained from explicitly implicating the Trabelsis, thereby neglecting a key grievance of wide sections of society, including from figures within the regime, who despised the vast monopolisation of resources by Ben Ali's relatives and their cronies.

[675] Charles Tilly has highlighted the importance of distinguishing revolutionary intentions from outcomes. See, for details, Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1978, pp. 189–222.
[676] English transcript of Ben Ali's speech of 27 December 2010. For details, see 'Tunisia: Speech by President Ben Ali', *al-Bab*, n.d., http://al-bab.com/documents-section/tunisia-speech-president-ben-ali, last accessed 3 August 2016.
[677] English transcript of Ben Ali's speech of 10 January 2011. For details, see 'Tunisia: Speech by President Ben Ali', *al-Bab*, n.d.,http://al-bab.com/documents-section/tunisia-speech-president-ben-ali-0, last accessed 3 August 2016.
[678] Amjadrus, 'The Last Speech of Bin Ali' [video file in Arabic], 17 January 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kANXV_onYhQ, last accessed 23 September 2018.

In an attempt to convey an image of popular support, on 11 January 2011 Ben Ali for the first time tasked RCD officials with organising rallies to counter the anti-regime protests taking place on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the main street in downtown Tunis, located in front of the Interior Ministry. Buses carried willing activists to the city centre, but most ended up joining the opposition when they saw the massive crowd of angry people.[679] They likely feared clashes with the far more numerous anti-regime camp. This illustrates the importance in regime collapse of 'de-assurance' processes, that is, the 'fragmentation, defection, and loss of confidence' among the regime, which occurs alongside 'the increasingly large and frequent demonstrations of the masses'[680]. The RCD protesters' de-assurance was facilitated as few were likely fervent supporters of Ben Ali; most had joined probably because of incentives provided to them, such as free food and beverages and possibly even money.[681] The pro-Ben Ali crowd on Avenue Habib Bourguiba thus quickly evaporated, indicating that the President's capacity to mobilise his own constituency – one of the most important sources of capital on which authoritarian leaders rely – had completely eroded. On 12 January 2011, RCD officials in Sousse sought to stage another rally to denounce 'the violent incidents and troubles' in the country, but pictures of the event show they managed to gather 100 to 200 people at most.[682] Further pro-regime protests were organised on the evening of Ben Ali's 13 January speech. Scholars Abdelaziz Belkhodja and Tarak Cheikhrouhou attested that:

> hundreds of [rented cars] were driven in the streets (which were deserted because of the curfew) honking loudly, [the supposed festivity] underpinned by songs, portraits [of the President], and flags. In order to influence foreign diplomats, groups also drove to neighbourhoods in which ambassadorial residencies of influential countries were

[679] Interviews with RCD activists who observed the protests, including Sofien Kadri, Regueb, governorate of Sidi Bouzid, 27 June 2016.
[680] Rasma Karklins and Roger Petersen, 'Decision Calculus of Protesters and Regimes: Eastern Europe 1989', *The Journal of Politics*, 1993, 55, 3, p. 589.
[681] Ghariani confirmed that protesters received free food and beverages, but denied they were paid (interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016).
[682] 'À Sousse: Marche Populaire Imposante de Dénonciation des Actes de Violence et de Troubles', *Le Renouveau*, 13 January 2011, p. 5.

> located… . At the windows, dazed citizens watched them. Some of them joined the staged euphoria. But realising that the scenario was everywhere the same, internet users quickly unveiled the masquerade on social media.[683]

The fact that the protesters drove in rental cars to hide their identities illustrates the extent to which publicly rallying for Ben Ali constituted a key security risk, even after the ostensible reforms he had announced. And even this brief moment of staged enthusiasm on 13 January 2011 evaporated later in the evening when the news broke that, on that day alone, 39 Tunisians had been killed.[684]

The next day, confrontations between the police and protesters risked culminating in a bloodbath. Particularly worrying was the fact that security forces were running out of tear gas, meaning they would soon have no other option than resort to live bullets to protect sensitive institutions. At around 2PM on 14 January 2011, protesters stormed an administrative subdivision of the Interior Ministry situated a few hundred metres from its headquarters. Around the same time, the Bouchoucha jail in Tunis city centre, where many political prisoners were held, came under siege. Authorities feared that a great number of arms and explosives stocked in the prison would fall into the hands of the protesters. Concurrently, an unprecedented mass of several tens of thousands of people came together on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, loudly calling for the fall of the regime. It is worth mentioning that their anger contrasted with the pragmatism of key opposition party leaders, who proclaimed they welcomed the reforms Ben Ali had announced the previous evening.[685] Ghariani said he had been in touch with figures from opposition parties and that many of

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[683] Abdelaziz Belkhodja and Tarak Cheikhrouhou, *14 Janvier: l'Enquête*, Tunis: Apollonia Editions, 2013, p. 51.
[684] Ibid.
[685] For example, Nejib Chebbi said Ben Ali's speech was 'important politically and corresponds to the expectations of civil society and the opposition'. Mustapha Ben Jaafar declared that the speech 'opens up possibilities'. For details, see 'Tunisian Opposition Welcomes President Ben Ali's Pledge', *BBC*, 14 January 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12188439, last accessed 3 August 2016.

them had agreed to participate in a live political debate, scheduled to air the evening of 14 January from al-Wataniya – Tunisia's main public television channel – an initiative meant to bestow substance on the reforms announced by the President the previous night.[686]

Most protesters, however, became even more enraged by such political stunts, which did not answer their demands but rather reflected the extent to which the political class was detached from the concerns of the population. Tasked once again with organising counterdemonstrations that day, Ghariani was afraid the situation on the ground might escalate. If RCD activists were driven to Avenue Habib Bourguiba, he feared, they would be confronted by an unparalleled crowd of furious protesters, and major clashes between them might ensue.[687] Knowing that security forces were running short of tear gas and that live bullets would be the next step, Ghariani panicked. He repeatedly tried to phone Ben Ali to receive instructions about what to do, but the President never answered his calls.[688] Ghariani consequently decided to coordinate with Ahmed Friaa, the Interior Minister;[689] they agreed to cancel the rallies.[690] The fact that Ben Ali did not even bother to take Ghariani's calls illustrates the extent to which he clearly did not consider the RCD a priority in his endeavours to gain control over the unfolding chaos – in retrospect a severe miscalculation. In the midst of the turmoil, some angry activists sought to take matters into their own hands. The Trabelsis were a major target.

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[686] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016.
[687] Ibid.
[688] Ibid.
[689] On 12 January 2014, Ben Ali sacked Interior Minister Rafik Haj Kacem and replaced him with Ahmed Friaa, a member of the RCD central committee.
[690] RCD activists told me they were informed by text message that the rallies were cancelled (for example, interview with Hassouna Nasfi, Bardo, 24 May 2016). It is noteworthy that Ghariani sought to take sole credit for having recalled the protesters. He affirmed that he 'took his responsibility' and thereby prevented a bloodbath (interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016).

Where are the Trabelsis?

Popular resentment towards the Trabelsis was exacerbated by prominent dissident blogs, such as *Nawaat*, which published increasing volumes of information about their corruption and nepotism in the weeks and months prior to the uprisings, often using Wikileaks as a key source. One article, posted two days before the self-immolation of Bouazizi, highlighted that 'of the 22 diplomatic cables about Tunisia that are already available, three talk about Sakher el-Materi alone'.[691] The piece, which features a French translation of one of the US Embassy cables about Ben Ali's son-in-law and highlights his life of 'great wealth and excess',[692] was widely shared on social media during the uprisings, reinforcing protesters' contempt for the Trabelsi clan. Many Tunisian dissident sites were almost exclusively devoted to sharing incriminating information about Leila's relatives.[693] Some demonstrators marched with placards in protest against the family, sometimes bearing the question: 'Where are the Trabelsis?',[694] in illustration of the extent to which finding and punishing key members of Ben Ali's family was a central concern.

Well aware that they constituted a key target of the protesters, the Trabelsis began to panic. One of them – Nejia Jeridi-Trabelsi, the mother of Imed Trabelsi, who was married to Leila's brother Naceur – told me that during the uprisings they 'lived in fear and were under shock'.[695] Their anxiety seems to have been so great they even temporarily forgot about some of their own internal frictions and power struggles. Particularly unsettling to many was

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[691] 'Tunileaks – Tunisie: Un Diner Avec Sakhr El Matri [Traduction]', *Nawaat*, 15 December 2010, https://nawaat.org/portail/2010/12/15/tunileaks-tunisie-un-diner-avec-sakhr-el-matri-traduction/, last accessed 9 August 2016.
[692] The US Embassy in Tunis cable translated on *Nawaat* is entitled 'Tunisia: Dinner with Sakher el-Materi' (09TUNIS516_a, classification: secret) and is available on Wikileaks.
[693] For details, see, for example: 'Les Magouilles des Ben Ali, Trabelsi, Materi and Co', 'Tunisie: Comment s'Enrichit le Clan Ben Ali?', and 'Trabelsi Lorgne sur les Casinos', all published on 11 January 2011, *Al Hiwar*, http://www.alhiwar.net/ShowNews.php?Tnd=13204, last accessed 9 August 2016.
[694] One placard with this slogan was captured in a picture shared by the blog Nachoua, 'La Révolution des Braves', http://www.nachoua.com/Jan-2011/Revolution.htm, last accessed 9 August 2016.
[695] Interview with Nejia Jeridi-Trabelsi, Tunis, 4 February 2017.

that Ben Ali tried very hard to avoid contact with the most notoriously corrupt, including Belhassen, well aware that being seen with key members of the clan would only enflame further opposition to his rule. Rather, Ben Ali sought rapprochement with family members of his first wife, Naima, who were much more accepted by the people. Ghariani remembered that at the time of the uprisings:

> [The family] of Naima tried to push Ben Ali to distance himself from Leila and her brothers. …It was a conflict between the [former and the current] wife, a conflict between two families. It was…presented as a conflict between democrats and non-democrats. However, in reality it was a conflict of interests.[696]

Naima's family, particularly Ben Ali's eldest daughter Cyrine and her husband Marouane Mabrouk, sought to save the President by playing the reformist card, a strategy they believed would also enhance their own standing within the family hierarchy. Mabrouk even charged one of his close friends and business partners, the French-Tunisian Hakim el-Karoui – a well-known public figure in both countries – with advising the President directly on how to manage the crisis. El-Karoui sent two letters to the President on 12 and 14 January 2011.[697] In the first letter, he recommends that Ben Ali 'send a clear and strong signal about those who claim themselves to be part of [his] network and are at the origin of the injustice felt by the people', but stops short of referring directly to the Trabelsis. The second letter urges the President to get rid of his infamous adviser Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, as well as to demonstrate that he is serious about combatting corruption. El-Karoui also suggests the President announce a government reshuffle to take place in the subsequent days. It is noteworthy that Mabrouk and Cyrine were also in touch with several key figures of the government to widen their scope of influence. For example, Samir Abidi, then Communications Minister, said that

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[696] Ibid.

[697] A copy of the letters was published in: Mathieu Magnaudeix and Lénaïg Bredoux, 'Hakim El Karoui a Conseillé Ben Ali Jusqu'au Bout', *Nawaat*, 8 February 2011, https://nawaat.org/portail/2011/02/08/hakim-el-karoui-a-conseille-ben-ali-jusquau-bout/, last accessed 9 August 2016.

Cyrine 'called him often' during the uprisings. In one instance, Cyrine phoned him after security forces cracked down on a group of protesting intellectuals and artists on Avenue Habib Bourguiba. She reportedly said it was unacceptable that violence had been used against them and asked Abidi to do something about it, a request the Minister followed.[698]

For his part, Mabrouk sought rapprochement with Kamel Morjane. In a conversation with me, Morjane maintained that Mabrouk's role during the uprisings 'was very positive…he was encouraging [Ben Ali] to open up the government'.[699] Morjane said that Mabrouk 'called [him] many times from the presidency' – correspondence, he stressed, he 'didn't tell anybody [about] before'.[700] In particular, Morjane supported Mabrouk and el-Karoui's plan to reshuffle the government. Morjane's resignation from government on 13 January 2011, and public announcement on the morning of 14 January that a government of national union was 'feasible',[701] must be understood in this light. Indeed, Morjane probably believed that by putting some distance between himself and the unfolding of violent events, he would naturally emerge as one of the key leaders in the aftermath of the uprisings. The television debate with prominent opposition party figures, scheduled on al-Wataniya on the evening of 14 January 2011, was a sign that, under the advice of Cyrine and Mabrouk, the President may indeed have introduced some new faces into government. However, given his poor record on democratisation, it is unlikely that he had a genuine government of national unity in mind.

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[698] Samir Abidi said he suggested the Minister of Culture, Abderraouf el-Basti, receive the group of intellectuals and artists and apologised to them – a proposition the President supposedly accepted. Abidi affirmed the plan was to film the meeting to convey that the reforms the President had announced were finally bearing fruit (interview with Samir Abidi, Tunis, 30 June 2016). Note that I was unable to independently confirm his account.

[699] Interview with Kamel Morjane, Tunis, 26 May 2016.

[700] Ibid.

[701] 'Tunisie: Gouvernement d'Union "Faisable"', *Europe 1*, 14 January 2011, http://www.europe1.fr/international/tunisie-gouvernement-d-union-faisable-e1-371903, last accessed 9 August 2016.

While relatives of Ben Ali's first wife clearly believed that they could save the President – and even lead the country once the turmoil was under control – the Trabelsis' anxiety grew day by day. Some family members feared the President might eventually be forced to arrest some of their own to calm the protesters' spirits. Their distress was exacerbated when some demonstrators decided to take things into their own hands by attacking the property of prominent members of their clan. Hedi Djilani testified that 'on 13 January people came to burn my house. I was at home with my children and grandchildren. They burned all our houses'.[702]

In the midst of the rapidly accelerating hostility towards the Trabelsis, Sakher el-Materi decided to speak out during a parliamentary plenary session on 13 January, which was aired live in an attempt to legitimise Ben Ali's commitment to more transparency.[703] El-Materi took the opportunity to announce his 'joy' about the decisions taken by the President. He tried very hard to convey that he 'understood' the protesters, stressing that the government had failed 'to discuss with the youth'. He also affirmed that officials were to blame for the 'hatred' against them, urging them to welcome international journalists to Tunisia. By calling for these changes, el-Materi attempted to portray himself as a reformist figure along the lines of Cyrine, Mabrouk, and Morjane.[704] At the same time, el-Materi affirmed that Al Jazeera, which had covered the Tunisian uprisings in great depth, was in receipt of 'wrong

[702] Interview with Hedi Djilani, Tunis, 6 February 2017.
[703] Information about el-Materi's speech was accessed via a video recording of it, which is available on YouTube. For details, see Rideaudur, 'Sakhr El Materi ne Sait pas Parler Arabe – 13 Janvier – Tunisie' [video file in Arabic], 16 January 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCTJROhdm70, last accessed 9 August 2016.
[704] Mohamed Ghariani confirmed that, during the uprisings, 'Sakher played the card of being close to the others [Cyrine, Mabrouk, and Morjane], he played the role of a reformer' (interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 27 May 2016).

information'. [705] The fact that el-Materi sought to deny Al Jazeera agency reveals the limits of his reform endeavours and that his main reason for speaking out was to protect his own skin.

Naturally el-Materi's speech and its transmission on public television was deeply controversial, at a time when security forces were cracking down violently on protesters. Many regime opponents were quick to ridicule his performance on social media, suggesting that his speaking in Tunisian dialect in parliament – where classical Arabic is the norm – was an indication of his low educational level.[706] Well aware of the controversy caused by el-Materi's speech, some deputies and ministers retrospectively pretended that it had also filled them with indignation. For example, Afif Chelbi, then the Industry and Technology Minister, maintained that it caused 'tremendous tension between the members of the government and the MP [el-Materi]', adding that 'we believed that it was no longer sustainable that Ben Ali had members of his family in parliament'.[707] However, there is no evidence that on 13 January 2011 anyone in parliament dared speak out against el-Materi, or that the atmosphere there was full of tension because of his speech, as Chelbi claims.[708] Indeed, contrary to Chelbi's testimony, then Ettajdid deputy Tarek Chaabouni insisted in reference to el-Materi's discourse that 'nobody dared to say anything publicly about the family of Ben Ali, there was not a word of protest, not even a word!'[709] Moreover, Chaabouni suggested that the only unusual thing about that day was the extent of ministers' and deputies' confusion and distress, mentioning in passing that, far from criticising el-

[705] Rideaudur, 'Sakhr El Materi ne Sait pas Parler Arabe – 13 Janvier – Tunisie' [video file in Arabic], 16 January 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCTJROhdm70, last accessed 9 August 2016.
[706] The previously referenced title of the YouTube video of el-Materi's speech in parliament mockingly states: 'Sakhr El Materi does not know how to speak Arabic'. Note that during his speech el-Materi regularly struggled to finish sentences, a dynamic that underlined his overall nervous appearance.
[707] Interview with Afif Chelbi, Tunis, 22 September 2015.
[708] While videos of el-Materi's eight-minute intervention are widely available on social media, I was unable to find a recording of the entire plenary session of 13 January 2011.
[709] Interview with Tarek Chaabouni, Tunis, 1 October 2015.

Materi's intervention, 'Afif Chelbi was running in the corridor asking me what was going on'.[710] These officials were panic-stricken and 'seeking behavioural cues from others', which is typical in moments of collective uncertainty.[711]

Ben Ali's decision not to distance himself from the Trabelsis in his 13 January 2011 speech combined with the particularly high number of civilian deaths that day and with el-Materi's controversial speech to raise tensions between protesters and the regime to an unprecedented level. The conflict risked turning into a civil war. Out of fear of being targeted that night, many of Leila's relatives sought refuge in the President's Palace in Sidi Dhrif – even very distant family members who had never met one another.[712] Nejia Jeridi-Trabelsi explained:

> Cars of the military or the police attacked our houses. …It was organised. …They destroyed the doors of the houses and entered, taking all valuables. …The [masked men] took everything of value. After that they called upon the people to attack their houses. ...Many of us sought protection at the Palace.[713]

It is impossible to know for sure whether the men attacking the Trabelsi houses were indeed from the security forces. It has, however, been established that some police officers turned a blind eye to the ransacking that subsequently occurred in the houses.[714] Moreover, an anonymous Tunisian journalist who witnessed the looting affirmed that people took items of little value, such as televisions. He interpreted this as a sign that the Trabelsis may have anticipated being attacked and taken their most valuable belongings with them.[715] While in some instances this may have been the case, Tunisian scholars Abdelaziz Belkhodja and

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[710] Ibid.
[711] Ivan Ermakoff, 'The Structure of Contingency', *American Journal of Sociology*, 2015, 121, 1, p. 100.
[712] Abdelaziz Belkhodja and Tarak Cheikhrouhou, *14 Janvier: l'Enquête*, Tunis: Apollonia Editions, 2013, p. 53.
[713] Interview with Nejia Jeridi-Trabelsi, Tunis, 4 February 2017.
[714] Florence Beaugé, 'Tunisie: Incertitude sur le Sort des Trabelsi Après la Mise à Sac de Leurs Résidences', *Le Monde*, 14 January 2011, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/14/les-residences-de-la-famille-trabelsi-a-tunis-mises-a-sac_1465757_3212.html, last accessed 10 August 2016.
[715] The journalist was quoted in Ibid.

Tarak Cheikhrouhou found that many family members fled their properties in such a rush they did not even have time to take their passports with them.[716] The fact that many left so abruptly, yet their most valuable items were sometimes no longer in their houses by the time protesters and looters arrived, lends some credibility to Nejia Jeridi-Trabelsi's claim that the attacks were carefully planned – whether by groups of protesters, criminal gangs, or elements within the security forces. In any case, the Trabelsis thought they had been left on their own and acted accordingly.

Fearing for their lives, many Trabelsis promptly decided to leave Tunisia the following day. At around noon on 14 January 2011, Belhassen Trabelsi asked an official at the Tunis – Carthage Airport to reserve him and his family seven places on the next flight leaving the country. In parallel, other Trabelsi family members prepared their escape. After those who had arrived empty handed were issued new passports by the Palace staff, they left for the airport accompanied by the Intervention and Diplomatic Protection Group, an elite security unit charged with protecting the presidential family.[717]

The plot

While the Trabelsis were fleeing for their lives, Ben Ali decided to get his wife and children out of the country for a few days, which he believed was sufficient time to get the protest movement under control. Around noon on 14 January 2011, Director of State Protocol, Mohsen Rhim, called Nabil Chettaoui, the head of Tunisair, and asked him to prepare the presidential plane for Ben Ali's family, who he said wanted to perform the *Umrah* in Saudi Arabia. Chettaoui immediately phoned Ben Ali's pilot, Mahmoud Cheikhrouhou.[718]

[716] Abdelaziz Belkhodja and Tarak Cheikhrouhou, *14 Janvier: l'Enquête*, Tunis: Apollonia Editions, 2013, p. 57.
[717] Ibid., pp. 57–58.
[718] Interview with Nabil Chettaoui, Tunis, 29 June 2016.

Cheikhrouhou – who has spoken only once before on record about some of the events that day[719] – told me that, though it would have typically taken him several days to prepare for such a trip, he was tasked with getting everything ready within three hours at most. [720] After Chettaoui's call, Cheikhrouhou left for the airport, where he met Ben Ali and his family. A particular challenge was that Leila wished to keep the flight plan and destination secret, even to the airport control board. As a result, Cheikhrouhou decided to pretend to fly to Djerba and, once he arrived there, ask the Libyan officials for authorisation to enter their airspace and continue the flight via Egypt to Saudi Arabia.[721] Many newspapers would later wrongly report that the presidential plane was flying over France – with *Le Monde* even stating that it landed near Paris.[722] However, the family never intended to leave for France, possibly because authorities there were forced to distance themselves from Ben Ali after Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie had caused a domestic uproar by offering to share French police expertise to help quell the unrest.[723]

While Cheikhrouhou prepared the plane for Ben Ali's family, the Trabelsis were waiting only a few hundred metres away in the VIP lounge of the airport for their departure. Accompanied by the masked forces of the Intervention and Diplomatic Protection Group, their arrival had drawn much attention. Pictures of them at the airport were soon shared on social media, further igniting the spirits of angry protesters. Less well known is that news of the Trabelsis' attempt to leave the country also unnerved many members of an increasingly

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[719] He talked to the Tunisian researchers Abdelaziz Belkhodja and Tarak Cheikhrouhou.
[720] Interview with Mahmoud Cheikhrouhou, Tunis, 1 July 2016.
[721] Ibid.
[722] See, for example, Angelique Chrisafis and Ian Black, 'Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali Forced to Flee Tunisia as Protesters Claim Victory', *The Guardian*, 15 January 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/14/tunisian-president-flees-country-protests, last accessed 10 August 2016.
[723] Then Foreign Minister Kamel Morjane said that later that day he received a call from Michèle Alliot-Marie, who, in the presence of Nicolas Sarkozy, informed him that, if Ben Ali intended to leave for France, they would 'not accept him' (interview with Kamel Morjane, Tunis, 26 May 2016).

demoralised security force. For almost a month, police officers had been working relentlessly day and night. In some instances their relatives had decided to join the protest movement, which the police had been ordered to suppress, putting many security officials in a very difficult position.[724] As a result, even high-ranking security officials were appalled when they learned the Trabelsis were about to escape. Lieutenant Colonel Samir Tarhouni, then Commander of Tunisia's Antiterrorism Brigade, recalled:

> I knew that to 80% the revolution took place because of the corruption of this family. I had been convinced of this for a while. Like all Tunisians, I believed the problems [in the country] ran very deep, because I knew numerous things about [the family]. And when one knows these things from close by, one becomes convinced that every day will be worse than the preceding day.[725]

He elaborated:

> We were about to shoot unarmed people and the entire family wanted to escape. In other words, those who are responsible for our situation wanted to leave the country. And [when I heard this] I said with a strange fervour 'I swear that nobody escapes!'.[726]

For Tarhouni, learning that the Trabelsis were about to leave the country – just before an impeding bloodbath in which his forces would have played a key role – constituted a tipping point. Together with a few colleagues he headed for the airport to prevent them from escaping[727] – a key decisional moment in the uprisings, which changed the direction of events. Arriving there around 2:20 pm, the group started searching for the Trabelsis, who no longer appeared to be in the VIP lounge. Tarhouni's wife happened to work as a controller at

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[724] Email interview with Youssef Chokri, the son of a high-ranking police officer in Gafsa who joined the protests, 30 May 2016.
[725] 'Témoignage de Colonel Major M. Samir Tarhouni Sur le Déroulement des Événements du 14 Janvier 2011 à l'Aéroport de Tunis Carthage', in Abdeljelil Temimi (ed.), *L'Observatoire de la Révolution Tunisienne*, Tunis: Fondation Temimi Pour la Recherche Scientifique et l'Information, 2015, p. 49.
[726] Ibid., p. 52.
[727] Ibid., p. 53. Note that Tarhouni's account was corroborated through video footage of the operation at the airport obtained by the author. See also, Pierre Puchot, '14 Janvier 2011 à Tunis: Le Jour Où Ben Ali est Tombé', *Mediapart*, 10 November 2011, https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/071111/14-janvier-2011-tunis-le-jour-ou-ben-ali-est-tombe, last accessed 5 July 2018.

the airport, and informed him that a private plane was about to take off. However, when Tarhouni went to see it he only found Ben Ali's daughter Cyrine and her children, who were apparently also attempting to leave the capital for a few days, so he continued his search. The fact that Tarhouni seemingly did not care about the departure of Cyrine illustrates the extent to which anger was directed almost exclusively towards Leila's family and not at the relatives of the President himself.[728] Subsequently, Tarhouni demanded that a high-ranking official at the airport, Zouhair Bayyati, tell him: 'Where are the Trabelsis?', pretending he had received instructions 'from above' to arrest them.[729] When he learned that members of the family were on a bus at the airport waiting to board their plane, Tarhouni ordered Bayyati to stop their transport so he could take them into custody. During their conversation, another key figure, Ali Seriati, the Head of Presidential Security, phoned Bayyati to enquire whether the Trabelsis' departure was proceeding as planned. Tarhouni took the opportunity to inform Ali Seriati that he was about to arrest the Trabelsis.[730]

It is worth noting that, though Tarhouni insisted that he took the decision to arrest the Trabelsis single-handedly – they were taken into custody soon afterwards – it is questionable as to whether he would have been able to complete his mission without powerful allies. In particular, it is possible that Seriati plotted secretly with Tarhouni to overthrow the regime. Seriati's sudden insistence that Ben Ali join his family on their trip to Saudi Arabia lends some credibility to this. Ben Ali's pilot, Cheikhrouhou, said that Seriati convinced the

[728] It is noteworthy that some conspiracy advocates claim Tarhouni's lack of interest in arresting Cyrine is evidence that he acted on Ben Ali's orders, arguing that it was Ben Ali himself who had decided to arrest the Trabelsis. According to this narrative, Ben Ali was never aware of the great damage the Trabelsis inflicted upon Tunisia, but once he realised it he immediately sought to correct his mistake. However, if Ben Ali had truly decided to arrest the Trabelsis to calm the protesters, he surely would have publicised and taken credit for it.
[729] 'Témoignage de Colonel Major M. Samir Tarhouni Sur le Déroulement des Événements du 14 Janvier 2011 à l'Aéroport de Tunis Carthage', in Abdeljelil Temimi (ed.), *L'Observatoire de la Révolution Tunisienne*, Tunis: Fondation Temimi Pour la Recherche Scientifique et l'Information, 2015, p. 53.
[730] Ibid., pp. 55–56.

President at the last minute to take off with his family by claiming he was no longer able to guarantee his security, given what had just happened to his wife's relatives a few hundred metres away at the airport.[731] The President agreed to leave – another key decisional moment – though he intended only to drop his family in Saudi Arabia and return to Tunis the next day. In the meantime, Seriati was tasked with investigating who had given the unauthorised order to arrest the Trabelsis.[732] Cheikhrouhou said that Seriati even had to unload his own luggage from the plane, as he had initially arranged to travel with the family to Djeddah. For his part, Seriati said he convinced Ben Ali to leave the country to avoid bloodshed, a statement that could be interpreted as an implicit recognition that he was complicit in his ousting.[733] Ben Ali and his family members, for their part, consider Seriati as a key conspirator against the President.[734]

Around the same time that Ben Ali and his family took off, Rachid Ammar – Chief of Staff of the Tunisian Armed Forces, who had kept a low profile during the unrest – received a call from the Defence Minister, Ridha Grira, who reportedly asked him to leave for the airport to liberate the Trabelsis while tackling Tarhouni's group[735] – an order Ammar did not carry out. However, Grira still ensured that Seriati, whom he probably believed to be behind a plot

[731] Interview with Mahmoud Cheikhrouhou, Tunis, 1 July 2016. See also Noureddine Hlaoui, 'En Video, le 14 Janvier, Raconté par Ali Seriati', *Businessnews*, 27 July 2011, http://www.businessnews.com.tn/article,534,25864,1, last accessed 5 July 2018.
[732] Cheikhrouhou's description of the events reflects Ben Ali's own account of the circumstances of his departure. Interview with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 6, 13, and 18 February 2017 and 'Tasrih al-Raʾis bin ʿAli – 20 Huzayran 2011' (*Declaration of President Ben Ali – 20 June 2011*). Published via his lawyer, Akram ʿAzuri, Beirut, 20 June 2011. https://www.scribd.com/doc/58287370/Declaration-de-Ben-Ali-Du-20-Juin-2011, last accessed 5 July 2018.
[733] Interview with Slim, an associate of Ali Seriati, Tunis, 8 February 2017.
[734] Interview with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 13 February 2017; see also Ben Ali statement about the events of 14 January 2011, published via his lawyer [in Arabic], https://www.scribd.com/doc/58287370/Declaration-de-Ben-Ali-Du-20-Juin-2011, last accessed 5 July 2018.
[735] For example, 'Témoignage de Colonel Major M. Samir Tarhouni Sur le Déroulement des Événements du 14 Janvier 2011 à l'Aéroport de Tunis Carthage', in Abdeljelil Temimi (ed.), *L'Observatoire de la Révolution Tunisienne*, Tunis: Fondation Temimi Pour la Recherche Scientifique et l'Information, 2015, p. 56; Pierre Puchot, *La Révolution Confisquée. Enquête sur la Transition Démocratique en Tunisie*, Paris: Sindbad, 2012, p. 39.

against the President, was arrested shortly after Ben Ali's departure.[736] Although at first sight it may appear that Grira's actions were meant to protect the President, it is possible that the Defence Minister was actually trying to prepare his own coup d'état, in which he wanted nobody to interfere.

The turmoil of the previous weeks indeed provided key figures such as Grira with an unprecedented opportunity to move against an increasingly isolated President.[737] Mancur Olsen has highlighted the intrinsic fragility of authoritarian leaders, whose survival very much depend upon the perception that they are invincible. 'If the cadre observe a moment of vacillation, an incident of impotence, a division of leadership, or even a collapse of analogous regimes, all the power of an imposing regime can vanish in the night air'.[738] Ben Ali's departure exposed how vulnerable he was – to the extent he had easily been persuaded to leave his country amid the unfolding chaos. It is in this light that subsequent events of that evening must be understood. Shortly after the presidential plane took off, several high-ranking officials met at the Interior Ministry, where they plotted to oust Ben Ali. Mohamed Ghannouchi, who attended the meeting, told me:

> I was at the Interior Ministry with the Interior Minister, the Defence Minister, the Chief of Staff of the Tunisian Armed Forces, [and some] members of the national security council. We held a meeting [and decided] that we needed to enact constitutional provisions to replace Ben Ali.[739]

Ghannouchi stressed that Grira was the person taking the lead in conspiring against Ben Ali:

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[736] See, for details, Noureddine Hlaoui, 'En Video, le 14 Janvier, Raconté par Ali Seriati', *Businessnews*, 27 July 2011, http://www.businessnews.com.tn/article,534,25864,1 last accessed 5 July 2018.
[737] Contacted by me in July 2016, Grira, who was diagnosed with cancer, said that due to his medical treatment he was unfit for interviews.
[738] Mancur Olsen, 'The Logic of Collective Action in Soviet-Type Societies', *Journal of Soviet Nationalities*, 1990, 1, 2, p. 17.
[739] Interview with Mohamed Ghannouchi, Tunis, 2 October 2015. In this section all information relating to Ghannouchi was retrieved during the same interview.

> The Defence Minister affirmed in the presence of the Chief of Staff of the Tunisian Armed Forces and [the other] officials…that the army is not capable of guaranteeing the security of the President if he ever wants to return to the country. If [Ben Ali tried], there would be a bloodbath. That's what he declared.

Under the pretence of being unable to protect the President, Grira pushed Ghannouchi to apply Article 56 of the Constitution and announce that, as the Prime Minister, he would take over power for a while – a key decisional moment that formally ousted Ben Ali.[740] Article 56 states that 'Should the President of the Republic fail, temporarily, to assume his duty, he can delegate, by Degree, his authorities to the Prime Minister but cannot dissolve the parliament'. Grira's decision to enact constitutional provisions to oust Ben Ali, even though they were not formally applicable – Ben Ali had not delegated power to Ghannouchi – recalls Ben Ali's own constitutional coup against Bourguiba in 1987. Grira himself wished to keep a low profile, probably so as not to raise suspicions that he had a hand in Ben Ali's fall; as Defence Minister, he anyway already held the most influential position in the country. At 6:45PM, in a short television statement on Channel Tunis 7, Ghannouchi declared: 'I provisionally take over the function of interim President', elaborating that 'President Ben Ali was temporarily incapable of exercising power'.[741] Furious when hearing the statement, Ben Ali called Ghannouchi from the plane. He ordered him to take back what he had said on television so that he could return to Tunisia, but Ghannouchi refused.[742] While Ghannouchi now portrays himself as a key figure behind Ben Ali's departure, his refusal to follow Ben Ali's orders and retract his statement was probably not a willing one, given that he was a key associate of the President – his infamous 'yes-man' – with little

[740] Note that Ghannouchi pretended that it was he who had pushed for the application of Article 56; this is unlikely, given that Grira was the main person in charge (interview with Mohamed Ghannouchi, Tunis, 2 October 2015). Ghannouchi's account has been internalised by most researchers and academics. See, for example, Pierre Puchot, '14 Janvier 2011 à Tunis: Le Jour Où Ben Ali est Tombé', *Mediapart*, 10 November 2011, https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/071111/14-janvier-2011-tunis-le-jour-ou-ben-ali-est-tombe, last accessed 5 July 2018.
[741] For details, see, for example, 'Constitutional Debate After Ben Ali', *Al Jazeera*, 14 January 2011, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/01/201114204942484776.html, last accessed 21 August 2016.
[742] Interviews with Nesrine Ben Ali, Viber, 6 February 2017; Mohamed Ghannouchi, Tunis, 2 October 2015.

political capital of his own. However, he had little hope of protecting Ben Ali and helping him return to Tunisia in the face of Grira's fierce determination to overthrow him.[743]

Soon after Ben Ali's plane arrived in Djeddah, his pilot Cheikhrouhou saw Ghannouchi's declaration on television. Bewildered, he called his boss, Chettaoui. According to Chettaoui, Cheikhrouhou asked him what to do in response to Ghannouchi's unexpected announcement.[744] In contrast, the pilot stated that he explicitly told the head of Tunisair that he wished to return to Tunisia immediately and alone.[745] Chettaoui subsequently called Ghannouchi for instructions. He affirmed that Ghannouchi handed his call over to Grira, who was with him, and ordered Chettaoui to call the pilot back. Ghannouchi, for his part, claimed that he personally instructed Chettaoui that the pilot return to Tunisia without Ben Ali.[746] These contradictory statements illustrate the extent to which many of the key actors on 14 January 2011 now seek to retrospectively bolster their legitimacy by claiming to have been decisive in Ben Ali's ousting, though most of them were actually just following orders. Of all their accounts, Chettaoui's is likely to be the most credible, as he was only an interlocutor and thus had little at stake. After receiving Grira's orders, Chettaoui phoned Cheikhrouhou and ordered him to fly back to Tunis immediately. It is notable that Ben Ali could easily have prevented his pilot from returning, for example by placing him under surveillance, which he failed to do. This severe miscalculation made his ousting irrevocable: Ben Ali had not only been tricked into leaving Tunisia, but now also no longer had a pilot to fly him home.

[743] Ghannouchi told me that Ben Ali even suggested Ghannouchi become interim President until he returned to Tunisia.
[744] Interview with Nabil Chettaoui, Tunis, 29 June 2016.
[745] Interview with Mahmoud Cheikhrouhou, Tunis, 1 July 2016.
[746] Interview with Mohamed Ghannouchi, Tunis, 2 October 2015.

The dissolution of the RCD

Though Ben Ali intended only to drop his family in Saudi Arabia and then return to Tunisia, following his departure news outlets around the world proclaimed the success of Tunisia's 'revolution',[747] propagating the rumour that the President was 'forced to flee as protesters claim victory'.[748] The silence of key figures, such as Grira, behind the President's overthrow, and the eruption of major demonstrations in other countries in the region, reinforced the perception that it was solely people power that was behind Ben Ali's sudden 'escape'. Grira and Ghannouchi likely remained quiet about the details of the events on 14 January 2011 to protect themselves from accusations of having engineered a coup d'état. They believed they would naturally acquire key posts in the post-Ben Ali era, enabling them to reconfigure state and party to their own advantage.

However, Grira and Ghannouchi soon came to realise they were far from being in control of events. Immediately after Ghannouchi's televised speech on the evening of 14 January 2011, judges began to challenge the decision to evoke Article 56 of the Constitution to replace Ben Ali. A constitutional committee subsequently convened, deciding that instead Article 57[749] applied, bestowing not the Prime Minister but the head of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, with the post of interim President. More importantly, Ben Ali's departure and the widespread belief in a 'Tunisian revolution' had energised demonstrators with new confidence; they had an epistemic impact on the protesters in that they altered their 'expectations about collective outcomes' which increased the 'likelihood of these outcomes'.[750] An article published in *The*

[747] For example, 'How a Fruit Seller Caused Revolution in Tunisia', *CNN*, 16 January 2011, http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/01/16/tunisia.fruit.seller.bouazizi/, last accessed 24 August 2016.
[748] Angelique Chrisafis and Ian Black, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali Forced to Flee Tunisia as Protesters Claim Victory', *The Guardian*, 15 January 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/14/tunisian-president-flees-country-protests, last accessed 10 August 2016.
[749] Article 57 of Tunisia's 1959 Constitution states: 'should the office of President of the Republic become vacant because of death, resignation, or absolute disability', the head of parliament 'shall immediately be vested with the functions of interim President of the Republic'.
[750] Ivan Ermakoff, 'The Structure of Contingency', *American Journal of Sociology*, 2015, 121, 1, p. 80.

Economist reported that after the President left for Saudi Arabia his 'party emerged as a new focus of pressure', with looting of local RCD offices occurring on a daily basis.[751] One protester on Avenue Habib Bourguiba proclaimed: 'After Ben Ali and his wife, we want to bring down his thieves'.[752] Another deplored that 'The regime's head has been cut off but the beast is still breathing'.[753] Naturally RCD activists were panic-stricken when they realised they suddenly constituted the centre of attention for many protesters. Many party followers had remained quiet – or even supported the protests – in the hope they could force Ben Ali to distance himself from the Trabelsis and rethink how nominations were being handled within the party, never imagining that the RCD itself would eventually come under threat. Alaa Eddine Rouached, the former party activist and self-proclaimed 'silent protester' in the uprisings, maintained – still visibly horror-stricken – that after Ben Ali left, everybody from the RCD was 'attacked on Facebook, [some houses] were burnt. I believed it was the beginning of a civil war', he said.[754] Like many other party activists, Rouached decided not to leave his house for a couple of weeks out of fear for his safety.

In an attempt to appease the protesters' appetite for even more wide-ranging change, Ghannouchi announced the establishment of independent commissions to investigate corruption and human rights abuses, and promised widespread political reforms, including abolishing censorship, releasing political prisoners, and organising free elections within six months. However, when forming a government of national unity on 17 January 2011, his decision to retain RCD officials in key posts and to provide only minor positions to the legal

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[751] 'Ali Baba Gone, But What About the 40 Thieves?', *The Economist*, 20 January 2011, http://www.economist.com/node/17959620, last accessed 24 August 2016.
[752] Quoted in Lin Noueihed and Christian Low, 'Police Fire Shots to Disperse New Tunis Protest', *Reuters*, 20 January 2011, http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-54283420110120, last accessed 24 August 2016.
[753] Quoted in Angelique Chrisafis, 'Tunisia Protest Town Fears for Unfinished Revolution', *The Guardian*, 7 February 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/07/tunisia-protest-kasserine-unfinished-revolution, last accessed 24 August 2016.
[754] Interview with Alaa Eddine Rouached, Skype, 12 June 2016.

opposition brought into question his commitment to reform and galvanised further protests. It also led four of the newly appointed ministers to resign from the cabinet just one day after its creation. Ghannouchi sought to defend the inclusion of former regime officials by affirming that their 'great expertise' was 'needed in this phase'; he called upon the people to give them 'a chance so that [they] can put in place this ambitious programme of reform'[755] – a discourse echoing Ben Ali's praise of technocrats to justify his authoritarian policies. In a similar vein RCD officials evoked their supposedly superior political experience and high profile to justify their decision to join the government. Kamel Morjane explained that shortly after Ben Ali left:

> I went to see the Prime Minister and he told me that he has to have a new government and he asked me to [join it]. …He insisted very much and especially he used an argument which I could not contradict. [Ghannouchi said] I cannot have a minister who doesn't know anybody and who isn't known to anybody. You have no choice [but] to stay with me. And I said in this case I accept.[756]

It is important to note that, while protesters called for a complete overhaul of the regime and the dismantling of the RCD networks, important opposition parties such as the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) defended the RCD members in government. A member of the PDP executive committee even went as far as to denounce the resignation of the four ministers from Ghannouchi's unity government as 'irresponsible'.[757] PDP officials only demanded that the RCD announce a separation between party and state; they did not criticise the party's filling of all key government posts,[758] thereby implicitly recognising the Destour's persistent leadership. Naturally the perceived complicity of legal opposition forces such as

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[755] Quoted in 'Tunisie: Le RCD Radie Ben Ali de Ses Rangs', *Le Monde*, 18 January 2011, http://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2011/01/18/tunisie-le-gouvernement-de-transition-de-plus-en-plus-conteste_1467084_1466522.html, last accessed 24 August 2016.
[756] Interview with Kamel Morjane, Tunis, 26 May 2016.
[757] Angelique Chrisafis, 'Tunisia's Caretaker Government in Peril as Four Ministers Quit', *The Guardian*, 18 January 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/18/tunisia-caretaker-government-ministers-quit, last accessed 24 August 2016.
[758] Ibid.

the PDP in perpetuating the RCD's dominance further infuriated many protesters. Demonstrators soon targeted the RCD headquarters on Avenue Mohamed V, seeking to take it by assault. In an attempt to counter the attacks on their party and discredit the protest movement, some RCD activists are believed to have paid militias to instigate further chaos. Bedma Askri, a lawyer from Kasserine, stated that a group of about 1,000 bandits assaulted public buildings in the rural city. She affirmed that 'The RCD paid criminals and thugs around 15 TND each to do this'.[759] While it is impossible to verify this account independently, it is entirely plausible that some party figures sought to discredit the new authorities and their capacity to gain control of the turmoil. Alaa Eddine Rouached remembered that after hearing of the President's departure, some of the most loyal party followers, who had defended Ben Ali until the very end, 'switched off their phones…and went into [hiding]. He maintained that even within the RCD nobody was able to reach them.[760] While many just disappeared until the situation calmed down, some influential figures may have tried to take matters into their own hands by organising attacks on protesters.

However, it is unlikely that they coordinated with the RCD leaders in Tunis, who, as some observers affirmed, were mainly 'confused' and 'didn't understand anything of what was happening'.[761] Amid the turmoil, Ghariani, for his part, quickly sought to jump on the revolutionary bandwagon to save his own skin and protect the party. In official statements published in the days after Ben Ali left, RCD leaders tried very hard to position themselves on the side of the struggle for change, calling upon their militants to 'continue to strengthen

[759] Quoted in Angelique Chrisafis, 'Tunisia Protest Town Fears for Unfinished Revolution', *The Guardian*, 7 February 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/07/tunisia-protest-kasserine-unfinished-revolution, last accessed 24 August 2016.
[760] Interview with Alaa Eddine Rouached, Skype, 12 June 2016.
[761] Ibid. Note that Rouached affirmed that he talked with Ghariani and other leaders several times in the period immediately following Ben Ali's departure.

solidarity between the members of Tunisian society…and to work towards the construction of a new democracy, which excludes nobody'.[762] Moreover, an RCD statement declared that Tunisia's former President was henceforth banned from the party, as were six close associates of his family. This divorce between Ben Ali's family and the party was a key demand of many of its own members. In addition, Mohamed Ghannouchi and Fouad Mebazaa officially resigned from the RCD, in what the party announced was a step towards assuring 'separation between the institutions of the state and political parties'.[763] Subsequently more RCD ministers and deputies left the party, a tendency that triggered the dissolution of its Political Bureau and Central Committee. However, the closure of some party structures was probably intended to be only a temporary measure to appease the protesters and calm the general atmosphere.

Aside from the pressure on the streets, the RCD leadership also came under fire from some of its own activists. In some governorates, particularly those that had seen a high number of victims of the uprisings, where the trauma of repression and violence still loomed large, the party's rank and file even started calling for the dissolution of the RCD. Muhammed al-Arabi al-Zuraibi, a Tunisian historian from Regueb, a rural town in Sidi Bouzid that suffered a particularly high number of casualties, observed:

> 15 January marked the beginning of loud demands for the dissolution of the ruling party in Regueb… . To circulate and realise this demand, the idea of resignation was brought up for self-dissolution of the RCD. Therefore, a resignation form was drafted by some activists in Regueb. The [RCD] Secretary General of the federation responded to this demand on 19 January 2011, followed by other members,

[762] Cited in 'Tunisie: Dissolution du Bureau Politique du RCD', *L'OBS*, 20 January 2011, http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20110120.OBS6606/tunisie-dissolution-du-bureau-politique-du-rcd.html, last accessed 24 August 2016.
[763] Quoted in 'Tunisie: le RCD Radie Ben Ali de Ses Rangs', *Le Monde*, 18 January 2011, http://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2011/01/18/tunisie-le-gouvernement-de-transition-de-plus-en-plus-conteste_1467084_1466522.html, last accessed 24 August 2016.

> including dozens of heads and members of divisions who arrived at the municipality to sign the document to resign from the party.[764]

The document obliged its signatories to:

> resign from the RCD and stand with the people of Regueb and the entire Tunisian people in the choices and demands calling for the separation between the state and the party with the aim to construct a true democracy [with] freedoms.[765]

Without a leader capable of keeping the party united and providing its members with a new vision, the RCD grassroots structures soon crumbled in many localities such as Regueb. The mass resignations in Regueb indicate that some RCD activists indeed believed in popular freedoms and multiparty politics. Others may have signed the letter out of a thirst for revenge and frustration with what they perceived to be a useless party that only perpetuated the region's misery. The resignation form appears almost like an act of redemption, enshrining its signatories' rejection of the ruling party and their support for the protesters' demands.

In the face of persistent demonstrations against the RCD and the weakness of the party structures, Farhat Rajhi, a lawyer who was appointed Interior Minister in Ghannouchi's second government of national union – which was created on 27 January 2011 after a previous union government failed to garner popular support – decided, on 6 February, to criminalise all RCD activities and any meetings of its members and to close all of its offices.[766] Protesters, however, continued to call for the official dissolution of the RCD; they also demanded the fall of the government, which still featured many Ben Ali-era

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[764] Muhammad al-Arabi al-Zuraibi, *al-Regueb min al-Tahrir ila al-Taʿmir* (*al-Regueb: From Liberation to Reconstruction*), Tunis: Dar Al-Qalam Publishing and Distribution, 2016, p. 225.
[765] A copy of the resignation form is available in Ibid., p. 227.
[766] 'Dans l'Attente de sa Dissolution, Suspension du RCD et Fermeture de Ses Locaux', *Tunisie Numérique*, 6 February 2011, http://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-a-lattente-de-sa-dissolution-suspension-du-rcd-et-fermeture-de-ses-locaux/6295, last accessed 24 August 2016.

heavyweights such as Ghannouchi, Grira, and Morjane. It is noteworthy that some new cabinet ministers were also part of the old guard that that had been marginalised under Ben Ali; they included Mohamed Jegham and Moncer Rouissi, who sought to stage a political comeback as Ministers of Commerce and Tourism and of Social Affairs respectively. However, faced with persistent popular opposition, Ghannouchi was finally forced to resign from his position as Prime Minister on 27 February 2011 and his cabinet was dissolved. This illustrates that, despite their critical role in ousting Ben Ali, senior members of his regime failed to gain a grip over the uprising. They never stopped shaping its trajectory, however. Indeed, following Ghannouchi's departure, interim President Mebazza made sure that his successor, Beji Caid Essebsi, also came from within the ruling party, though Essebsi, who had long been marginalised by the Ben Ali family, was less well known and therefore more easily accepted by the people. Mebazza explained:

> I knew [Essebsi] from before. When he was Interior Minister, I was Director of National Security. When he was Foreign Affairs Minister, I was ambassador in Geneva. …He was someone who knew the wheels of the state at a period when it was necessary to secure the wheels of the state![767]

Soon after becoming Prime Minister, Essebsi announced free elections for a Constitutional Assembly, tasked with rewriting the country's Constitution. He also paved the way for the dissolution of the RCD by court order – the Destourians' ultimate concession in the face of pressure from the streets. A video taken during the trial shows angry protesters, some dressed as judges and standing on tables in the court room, shouting 'RCD *dégage*' and chanting the national anthem. Abir Moussi, charged with defending the party, is having her

[767] Interview with Fouad Mebazaa, Tunis, 30 May 2016.

hair pulled and being called a 'slut' by the protesters.[768] On 9 March 2011 the RCD was officially dissolved by court order.

Conclusions

Why did the Ben Ali regime, long considered one of the most stable in the Arab world, collapse so swiftly in January 2011? While most scholars have focused on the protest dynamics and cascade models to answer this question, this chapter has revealed that the sudden breakdown of the Ben Ali regime and the President's departure to Saudi Arabia was not a direct consequence of the mass mobilisation. Countrywide demonstrations were a necessary factor, but not sufficient for the President's ousting. Far from defending the President in times of crisis, the ruling party became a major liability as it exposed the regime's internal fragmentation and the wider discontent among its ruling cadres. The RCD not only failed to organise rallies in support of Ben Ali, many of its activists engaged in passive resistance – either because of the trauma of civilian deaths in their immediate environments, their regional economic marginalisation, or in protest against the increasing control over inner party affairs exercised by the presidential family. Of course, the RCD's family associates supported the President until the end, and most other officials wanted only to strengthen their own position within the party; they sharply denounced the grassroots call for wider regime change. The heterogeneous RCD discourses about the uprisings convey the extent of internecine regime frictions and the fact that these have endured, and in some cases been reshaped, after 2011.

The breakdown of the Ben Ali regime was not inevitable, however. This chapter has reconstructed key decisional moments in which actors steered the direction of subsequent

[768] TUNISIEINFOS, 'Haqiqat Kull Ma Jara Dakhil Qaʿat Jalsa Tafasil Ma Jara' (*The Truth of Everything that Happened in the Courtroom, the Details of What Happened*) [video file], 3 March 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6ylHKlfNm8, last accessed 25 August 2016.

events, sometimes with unintended results. Amongst the most important were (1) Ben Ali's decision not to involve the RCD early on, which antagonised even loyal activists and later deprived him of his capacity to organise counter-demonstrations; (2) Tarhouni's choice to head to the airport to prevent the Trabelsis from leaving; (3) Ben Ali's decision to follow Seriati's advice and take the plane for Saudi Arabia – he could also have insisted on staying; (4) Defence Minister Grira calling back the pilot, whose movements Ben Ali failed to monitor; and (5) Grira pressuring Ghannouchi to invoke Article 56 of the Constitution, which formally ousted Ben Ali.

The mass protests reinforced and sustained these choices; at the same time, Ben Ali's departure altered the demonstrators' own goals and expectations in that an increasing number of people became convinced that a 'full revolution' was possible, illustrating the deeply reciprocal relations between processes of mobilisation and inner-regime contention. These collective dynamics gained their own momentum, with unintended and unpredictable outcomes. If the demonstrators were surprised by the apparent success of their mobilisation, regime figures were bewildered by the extent to which they lost control of events. RCD followers, for their part, were startled by the speed with which the party collapsed.

6. CONCLUSION

The fall of dictatorships during the 2010–11 Arab Spring may have owed to factors internal to these regimes themselves – at least as much as to the mass protests. My PhD thesis has indeed demonstrated how, in the Tunisian case, internal grievances, power struggles, and the rise of dissent and contention were central reasons behind the regime's collapse. It proposes a new framework integrating the field of contentious politics into the study of political institutions in dictatorships, which furnishes novel insights into the inner workings of authoritarian regimes, their stability, and processes of breakdown. Mass institutions such as ruling parties, with their broad membership bases, are particularly subject to constant flux as different factions struggle for relevance, and some may engage in dissent and even at times contentious politics. During periods of upheaval, they can either uphold their support for the leader or decide to withdraw it and put pressure on the ruling cadres to induce beneficial reforms, thereby shaping the outcome of the unrest. At the time of the 2010–11 uprisings in Tunisia many RCD activists hoped that their decision not to rally for Ben Ali would incite him to critically rethink the role of the ruling party and the regime's marginalisation of historic party activists. Yet the 2010–11 uprisings and the 2008 Gafsa protests also demonstrated that party activists were no more immune than members of the wider protest movements to the violence employed by security forces. For many RCD followers the incidents of repression they witnessed constituted focal points that spurred them either to join the protest movement – this was often the case amongst youthful members – or to withdraw their support for the regime in less conspicuous ways, such as through passive acts of resistance or by not renewing their membership.

However, even during periods of stability, in the times when Ben Ali's power was firmly established, party activists were not simple servants of the President. It is undeniable that the RCD featured a high degree of inner discipline and that followers were regularly engaged in pro-regime activities, such as electoral campaigning, organising rallies, and spreading regime propaganda, even when they were dissatisfied with incumbent party officials. Yet notwithstanding such outward displays of support, many activists declined to stand passively by as Ben Ali accumulated greater power and personalised his rule, especially once this began to occur at the expense of the party. Ben Ali broke his power-sharing deal with the RCD, which progressively lost its capacity to affect policies and nominate representatives in state and party. In the hope of regaining some of their early political leverage, party followers created the Political Academy, whose purpose was to train and nurture a new generation of ideologically dedicated leaders. Moreover, when increasing neo-patrimonial rule led Ben Ali family members to dominate political affairs and place their associates into leadership posts, some local RCD activists displayed their discontent in the open. Nevertheless they remained a minority, given that any acts of disobedience could easily cost them their jobs or, worse, freedom; many more followers simply retreated from party activism, at least on a day-to-day basis.

None of this is to suggest that RCD activists pushed Ben Ali towards greater accountability, let alone democratic politics – far from it. But mass parties, contrary to the popular clichés that often reduce them to mere rubber-stamps at the service of dictators, are in fact deeply heterogeneous institutions in which a constant jockeying for power and influence takes place amongst rival factions – to the extent that some may even advocate a leadership change. Of course, these internal party struggles can only be understood against the backdrop of incumbents' continuous efforts to maintain stability, protect their interests, and accumulate even greater wealth. Indeed, while party challengers became empowered during times of

political upheaval, when it proved less costly for them to display dissent, this was less the case during periods of relative stability. The latter were marked in Tunisia by Ben Ali's attempts to use his position as head of the RCD to instigate deep changes within the party that helped him to control it more tightly from within and tame its activists. Upon ascending to the presidency, Ben Ali widened the grassroots structures of the party and enlarged its membership base. Though this was a strategic move to showcase his popularity and legitimacy, it ultimately weakened the party. Almost anyone was able to join – the only exceptions were opposition figures from the far left and Islamist activists – with the result that the RCD's ideological underpinnings crumbled. The ever-wider membership base also reduced the benefits that individual party members enjoyed from the distribution of economic resources, specially once Ben Ali family members came to dominate party affairs. To immunise himself against internal party opposition and challengers, Ben Ali shifted the centre of power to the Palace and introduced the practice of top-down appointments, as opposed to internal elections, within all central party structures. This allowed him to place his own people into key posts. Ben Ali also reinforced the RCD's monitoring and policing functions – to identify and crack down not only on opposition activists but, increasingly, also internecine contenders. Though ultimately the RCD became the President's Achilles' heel, it was thanks to the party's countrywide network, security and legitimation functions, and high level of inner discipline that Ben Ali was able to dominate politics for almost 25 years in the first place.

The RCD after 2011

The RCD was formally outlawed in March 2011, but of course its networks, deeply rooted in society, did not suddenly cease to exist. The study of internecine regime contention and dissent also helps to shed new light onto dynamics of authoritarian revival and resilience following their collapse, as internal challengers typically seek to dominate politics after the

fall of dictators. The case of Tunisia is striking: it was figures from within the regime who actually instigated Ben Ali's departure to Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011 and sought to take over power following his ousting. And, though these coup-conspirators lost control over the course of subsequent events – given the strength of the protest movement – they never stopped shaping the trajectory and aftermath of the uprisings. In the months following Ben Ali's ousting most party figures maintained a low profile, fearing a political backlash. Some senior officials in the party and security establishment were even arrested, including Mohammed Ghariani, Ali Seriati, and Ridha Grira – the RCD Secretary General, Ben Ali's security chief, and the Defense Minister at the time of the uprisings. Their incarceration owed in part to a desire on the part of the new government officials, led by interim Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi – a former RCD figure who was marginalised in the 2000s – to signal a break with the authoritarian practices of the Ben Ali regime. Yet it was likely also intended to prevent these figures from staging possibly yet another coup. Nonetheless, even in this febrile political context and amid preparations for Tunisia's first democratic elections, certain Ben Ali strongmen sought to re-enter politics and revive the RCD network, though only a minority at first.

Most importantly, Kamel Morjane, the Foreign Minister at the time of the uprisings, created the National Destourian Initiative ('the Initiative') party in April 2011 – just a month after the RCD's official criminalisation. Well aware of the peoples' disapprobation for senior RCD figures, Kamel Morjane decided to promote lesser known Destourian activists to leading party posts. These included RCD student chiefs and the sons and daughters of well-known party figureheads who did not have themselves a background in politics but defended the interests of the RCD network. However, during Constituent Assembly elections in October 2011, the Initiative gained only five seats, suggesting that people's appetite for Destourian politics initially remained limited. This had, however, already changed by the

following year, when an economic and security crisis began to grip the country, prompting growing numbers of people to regret the 'revolution' in the belief that life under Ben Ali had been better. RCD figures sought to capitalise on this. In June 2012, Beji Caid Essebsi founded the Nidaa Tounes party. At the regional level, Nidaa Tounes leaders were often the same individuals as those who had headed the RCD, though the party was more attentive to the interests of regional notables, who had been marginalised under Ben Ali. On the more visible national level, however, Essebsi pursued the same strategy as Morjane and promoted many second-rank RCD figures to senior positions. He also integrated leftists and UGTT activists, to mask the revival of the RCD networks and suggest Nidaa Tounes constituted a broad ideological tent – only to sideline most of them once the party emerged as the strongest force in parliamentary elections in 2014. This approach reflects Ben Ali's own strategy of widening his support base in his early years, when he was still consolidating power, and his subsequently narrower rule to shield himself against any challengers.

A range of other RCD leaders have sought to create their own Destourian parties in hopes of staging a political comeback. In September 2013, Hamed Karoui, Ben Ali's longtime Prime Minister, created the Free Destourian Party, headed by Abir Moussi, the Vice-President of the Coordination Committee at the time of the uprisings, and including many other well-known RCD leaders. The Free Destourian Party has so far failed to garner political clout, indicating many Tunisians' enduring distrust for Ben Ali's key associates. Its creation, alongside that of Nidaa Tounes and the Initiative, highlights the fact that RCD figures have failed to organise as a single block. This is in large part because of longstanding frictions between rival RCD clans and their struggles over Destourian identity and leadership, which have only intensified following the departure of Ben Ali. For example, in terms of their ideology, Nidaa Tounes and the Initiative are strikingly similar – they seek cooperation with Ennahda and defend an economically liberal programme, amongst other points – but

leadership battles between Morjane and Essebsi have undermined any attempts at uniting their forces. By contrast, the Free Destourian Party pursues more confrontational policies towards opposition forces, specifically Ennahda. Its members have distanced themselves from the more conciliatory approach of Nidaa Tounes and the Initiative, whose followers they accuse of having abandoned the RCD during the uprisings and hence of responsibility for Ben Ali's fall and the criminalisation of their party.

Deep frictions *inside* each of these RCD successor parties are a further source of division and instability. Many such internecine struggles have their roots also in the Ben Ali era, but they have been reshaped and, in some cases, heightened after the uprisings. Most importantly, following the 2014 parliamentary elections, Nidaa Tounes suffered a series of resignations and defections. In total, 19 deputies left the party, downgrading Nidaa Tounes to the second strongest presence in parliament, after Ennahda. It is notable that most deputies resigned because of their dismay with the son of Beji Caid Essebsi, Hafedh, who came to dominate inner party affairs once his father was elected President in 2014, even though he had no background in politics. Essebsi would also like to see his son succeed him as President, but he lacks popular support.[769] This indicates that a tradition of neopatrimonial politics is still a central divisive factor amongst former RCD activists. While Ben Ali managed to enforce stability and discipline for a long time despite mounting internal displeasure with his family, this is much more difficult in a democratic context, where the display of internecine discontent and contention is much less costly.

The resurgence of neopatrimonial politics is closely related to RCD successor parties' failure to establish and uphold a well-defined institutional and legal frame, including rules of

[769] Anne Wolf, 'Can Secular Parties Lead the New Tunisia?', Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2014.

procedure, regulating, for example, the ways in which executive board seats are allocated. As a result, the tasks and composition of different party organs are constantly being challenged from within and leaders tend to promote their close associates to key posts. Indeed, interviews suggested that all senior positions are filled at the discretion of the chief figureheads and that internal democratic practices are entirely absent, a trend leaving many party 'losers', who are not granted favourable posts, disgruntled with the leadership.[770] One interviewee recounted that she left the Initiative party in 2014, when Morjane downgraded her to a second-rank post, even though she had represented the party in parliament for three years.[771] Many former RCD figures have switched their party affiliations several times, in the hope of being allocated a rewarding position. While partially driven by opportunism, such changing allegiances also suggest that party figureheads have failed to adapt the procedures and traditions that used to organise the RCD to the new political environment: followers expect at least a certain degree of internal accountability and transparency if they are to remain loyal, especially when they themselves are not the ones securing the most lucrative posts. Internal autocratic practices indeed do not work well in a multiparty democracy.

Another key source of contention is the legacy of Ben Ali and the RCD itself. Those former RCD activists who were loyal to the regime until the end would like to see a revival of their party; they are typically in denial about the many wrongdoings of which the RCD is accused. By contrast, many previously sidelined party followers, who became dissenters in the uprisings, have distanced themselves from the RCD. Instead, they seek to reclaim legitimacy through the notion of the 'Destour'. They hope to prop up their image by branding themselves as 'Destourians' – the heirs of the independence movement – in

[770] Interview with Mohamed Ghariani, Tunis, 20 July 2017. Note that Ghariani joined Nidaa Tounes in September 2013, two months after his release from prison, but later integrated into the Initiative.
[771] Interview with Amira Marzouk, Tunis, 29 September 2015.

contrast to the 'RCDists', who are more closely associated with the Ben Ali era. Even President Essebsi has sought distance from the legacy of the RCD: he refers to Nidaa Tounes' RCD base solely as 'Destourians' and, perhaps more strikingly, has copied aspects of the appearance and speech of Bourguiba, whose legacy has been revived after the uprisings. The fact that Essebsi has sought to imitate, at least to some extent, Tunisia's first President only indicates that his own political capital remains limited. Indeed, so far no single figure has emerged to unite and lead the RCD's increasingly divided and fractured former constituency.

Beyond Tunisia: the Arab Spring and inner regime contention

While this thesis focused on internecine struggles in Tunisia's RCD, many of its findings are of course relevant to better understanding the workings of ruling parties in other authoritarian regimes, both during times of stability and periods of upheaval. Of course, some scholars have mentioned dynamics of internal contention within ruling parties, but they have most often analysed these only through the prism of 'defection', such as when midlevel Communist Party officials broke with their chief leaders during the collapse of the Soviet Union.[772] Wider dynamics of internecine contention and the range of repertoires they follow are often discarded as being too challenging to investigate, with some researchers even outright asserting that the inner workings of authoritarian regimes, let alone of their ruling parties, are a 'black box'.[773] Certain scholars of course have sought to go beyond this: in his study of the Kerdasa neighbourhood in Cairo, Hani Awad remarked upon a 'struggle between the old and new "guard"' within the NDP leadership in the 2000s. He found that in local elections in 2010, longtime NDP figures were replaced by 'amateurs with no history of

[772] The lens of defection and its limited use for understanding inner party contention was discussed in the introduction to this thesis.
[773] For example, Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, 'The Single-Party Dictator's Dilemma: Information in Elections Without Opposition', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 2011, 36, 4, p. 499.

public service'.[774] Those longtime party leaders who tried to resist their sidelining were being 'subjugated and humiliated, mostly by the security services'. As a result, the police found almost no allies amongst the old guard in Kerdasa during the Egyptian Revolution.[775] This mirrors the marginalisation of historic RCD activists and rural notables in the 2000s, and the silent forms of protest in which these party losers engaged during the uprisings. Yet whether some NDP activists also went further, and joined the protest movement, has not been investigated.

Internecine struggles within ruling parties have spurred and, in some cases, aggravated conflict in other Arab Spring countries: in 2013 Tik Root, reporting on Yemen's longtime ruling party – the General People's Congress (GPC), created by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh – highlighted that the 'political crisis brought longstanding divisions within the GPC to the surface'. In particular, the GPC split into two camps, one supporting Saleh and his son, whom he had hoped to groom as a successor; the other, led by former Prime Minister Abdul Kareem al-Eryani, challenged their political domination and increasingly neopatrimonial rule.[776] Following Saleh's assassination in December 2017, yet another GPC faction emerged and went as far as allying with the Houthis, who had long opposed the GPC's rule. This illustrated the sometimes contradictory and counterintuitive internal dynamics within authoritarian regimes and their ruling parties, to the extent that some party losers may even decide to ally with outside opponents who have until that point been their archenemies. In a similar vein during Syria's revolution, longtime frictions within the Baath party burst out into the open. As early as 2005, internal disagreement became public when then Vice-President and Baath figurehead Abdul Halim Khaddam criticised President

[774] Hani J. D. Awad, 'Forgotten As History: Politics and Space in the Cairo Peri-Urban Fringe', *Unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2018*, pp. 209–210.
[775] Ibid., pp. 210–212.
[776] Tik Root, 'A Shake Up in Yemen's GPC?', *Foreign Policy*, 22 February 2013, https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/02/22/a-shake-up-in-yemens-gpc/, last accessed 18 September 2018.

Bashar Assad and his marginalisation of historic party leaders, amongst other points, and exiled himself to France. Much like the GPC's pro-Houthi faction, Khaddam went as far as allying with those whom the wider Baath party and Bashar Assad in particular consider their mortal enemy – the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.[777] Frictions within the Baath party only intensified during the Syrian crisis. While the Baath party emerged as a particular target of the protestors and later of the rebels, with many senior and mid-level Baathists being assassinated, countless rank-and-file members and even some leaders resigned their membership and either engaged in silent protest or outright joined the revolution.[778] In June 2012 President Assad promoted popular Baath figure Riadh Hijab as Prime Minister, likely with the aim of strengthening his support amongst party activists and unifying the membership base. But only two months later, in August 2012, Hijab decided to switch sides and backed the revolution.

Clearly the Arab Spring exposed wider dynamics of inner-regime dissent. The contention within Tunisia's RCD does not seem to have been an exceptional trend. Indeed, much of the internecine conflict within Egypt's NDP and Yemen's GPC was triggered by their presidents embarking upon courses of increasingly neopatrimonial rule and trying to groom family members as successors – just as was the case in Tunisia. In Syria, where Bashar Assad had managed to succeed his father, the Baath party increasingly fractured as he reinforced his grip over the party and its longtime figureheads, who constituted key challengers to his rule. While this thesis therefore suggests that the Arab Spring may have been triggered as much from within authoritarian regimes as from the outside, much remains

[777] Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 177–179.
[778] Compare Aron Lund, 'The Baath Party and the War in Syria: An Interview With Sami Moubayed', *Carnegie Middle East Center Diwan*, 17 November 2013, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/53490, last accessed 18 September 2018.

to be done to better uncover the configurations in which internecine contention can emerge and to locate the seeds of internal dissent, which are often planted decades earlier. This makes for an exciting research agenda. For instance, more research could be conducted specifically on the marginalised factions of ruling parties in dictatorships. This would involve investigating incumbents' rationales for sidelining certain party activists and the mechanisms they employ in doing so. It would also require scrutinising how party losers may contest their marginalisation and seek to alter power structures to their advantage – a process that can be understood only against dictators' continuous efforts to maintain control and subdue any challengers. This research angle further calls for a study of those focal points and critical junctures that lead party losers to display their discontent in the open, and, in some cases, even become dissenters. This thesis has developed a tentative theoretical frame for investigating challengers from within the regime, including what I call a 'repertoire of internecine contention' – silent protests, passive resistance, defections, and public demonstrations, amongst other mechanisms – but this frame will certainly need to be developed and tested with comparative examples.

One other avenue for research would be to study the ways in which inner regime contention varies from the types of contention elaborated by movements directed against the regime, and how both might interact and mutually reinforce each other, especially during times of contentious politics such as the Arab Spring. Of course, all of this requires ample data on the specific internal dynamics of authoritarian regimes, which can be challenging to obtain. However, while access to leadership levels can be difficult, regional and local figureheads are easier to reach and, because they tend to be less tainted by the party propaganda typical of officials in capital headquarters, often provide even more valuable insights into key points of conflict and contention. Such research would allow for a more accurate understanding not only of some of the factors underlying the Arab Spring, but also of the diverse trajectories

and outcomes it manifested in different countries. Indeed, as scholars have often missed the key role played by regime officials themselves in the fall of dictators, they have as a result also underestimated such figures' strength and willingness to dominate the political scene after uprisings. Most Arab Spring countries have either seen an authoritarian revival, as in Egypt, or slid into civil war, as in Yemen, Libya, and Syria. Even Tunisia's nascent democracy remains inherently contested, as many RCD figures seek to make comebacks and some propose a return to past practices, though they have failed to organise as a unified front – so far.

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