

The New Tunisian Public Sphere: Navigating the Battlefield of Passions

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The post uprising Tunisian public sphere is rife with antagonism and forms of othering. The framing of the uprising was disputed between the narratives of 'the success Arab spring story' cherished by the international community and national elites and that of a deep malaise, rooted in socio-economic crises and exacerbated by pressing questions of a 'pure' national identity, perceived by some as hijacked by rog internal elements and international agencies. The inability of the new regime to allow spaces for an agonistic and open debate on the post uprising crises and the legacy of the former regime has widened divisions between the two competing narratives, ultimately empowering the rise of a populist ultra- nationalist discourse championed by the current president Kais Saeid, presenting himself as the 'saviour' of a revolution that deviated from its initial path. This chapter argues that this malaise finds its roots in a conflict between two contradictory public spheres: an elite one, led by a rational coercive free conversation around reforms and achievements, and a subaltern one controlled by the fears of the 'other' and fuelled by growing despair and disappointment from the outcomes of a 'hijacked' revolution.

The chapter argues that the current impasse within the new Tunisian regime is somehow the outcome of a missed opportunity to engage in an agonistic dialogue around how to protect the ideals of the uprising while allowing the multiple identities of the new Tunisian public sphere to take shape in media and political arenas, beyond political infightings. The chapter employs Habermas concept of the public sphere and its critique, especially regarding the applicability of the ideal of "communicative rationality", in which arguments and counterarguments compete to reach a rational and disinterested consensus. The chapter considers Mouffe's critique of such discursive space; the new Tunisian public sphere appears to be defined by a struggle of passions that are not necessarily conciliable. This is a struggle that can be manageable if it is allowed to thrive in agonistic dynamics in politics and media. This agonism is not possible without the recognition of conflicts, passions and contestations as being central to what politics is about. The chapter is based on an analysis of the media regulatory reform and data from a large fieldwork I conducted in the country, through several field visits, between 2012 and 2022, allowing me to capture processes of transformations in journalistic identities and practices while coping with multiple political upheavals.

The Tunisian uprising: a missed opportunity?

The international community has celebrated Tunisia's transition to democracy as a unique Arab success story, given the meagre outcomes of the uprisings or revolts that swamped the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) starting late 2011. In 2015, The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the National Dialogue Quartet committee, a group of civil society actors, for saving the country's path to democracy from following the fate of similar fragile transitions to democracy that fell into civil conflict or extreme autocracy. The Nobel committee praised the group for making "decisive contribution" to democracy when the country "was on the brink of civil war". The then president of the country, the late Beji Caid Essebsi, considered the award as a celebration of the country's commitment towards a "path of consensus"¹. It is the same culture of consensus that is being denigrated in the discourse of the current president Kais Saied, elected with large majority in 2019, on the basis of a populist discourse that attracted a large vote, especially among young Tunisians, largely disenchanted from the failure of successive governments to find a solution to a worsening economic crisis and a chronic corruption. They were mainly attracted by his vilification of this culture of consensus, seen as the main driver of the widespread corruption, instrumentalizing the state to the benefit of old and new elites.

Saied, the strongman of the new state, a former law professor and outsider from the political sphere, started his campaign against the 'corrupt' elites by implementing a series of drastic measures, such as dissolving the parliament, suspending most of the constitution and ruling by decree². These measures, inspired from the textbook of dictatorship, did not trigger a strong reaction from within the political or media spheres. Rather, they were largely conceived as a corrective path allowing the revolution of the 'People' to embrace its original path, having been 'highjacked' by the centrist islamist party *Ennahda* that ruled the country leading governmental coalitions. The culture of consensus that was branded as a testament to the Tunisian polity's ability to bridge differences, was portrayed, in the narratives of Saied and his supporters, as a detriment against a transparent, efficient, and equitable modern state. The referendum of July 2022, called by Saied to endorse a new constitution largely drafted by himself, is considered another major democratic setback. Endorsed despite a very low turnout, the new constitution, unlike the country's 2014 constitution that represented a collective vision of a nation able to bridge its divides, is a one-man vision, asserting his complete control over the system, by granting him large executive prerogatives, in a hyper-presidential

¹ BBC, Nobel Peace Prize for Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, October 9, 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34485865>

² Al Jazeera, Tunisia's president dissolves parliament, extending power grab, March 30, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/30/tunisias-president-saied-dissolves-parliament>

system with few checks on his power³. Recently, Saied was accused of controlling the electoral commission responsible for the presidential elections of October 2024, in order to eliminate all serious competitors and to pave the way for his re-election. Human Rights Watch accused the judiciary of serving the president's plan, saying they "have prosecuted, convicted or imprisoned at least eight prospective candidates" for October's vote⁴.

President Saied's power grab in July 2021 has led to dismantling some major achievements of the 2011 uprising and threatened to bring the country back to the autocratic playbook. Major setbacks are renewed restrictions on the freedom of expression, including arbitrary detention and prison sentences for journalists and activists, the political instrumentalization of the judiciary and the return of some features of the police state. Today, the country does not score high in international indexes of civil and political freedoms, ranking 118 in Reporters without Borders world press freedom index for 2024 (the country was ranked 73 in 2020 and 94 in 2021). According to the same report, the constitutional amendments of July 2022 that granted the president broad legislative powers to the detriment of the parliament, have jeopardised the sacred separation of powers, press freedom and the independence of the judiciary⁵. Most worrying is the new Decree- Law 54 of September 2022 on the so called 'fake news', perceived as a tool to stifle dissent in the public sphere. It criminalises the production and spread of "false news, false data, rumours, false documents or documents that are falsified or falsely attributed to others, with the aim of infringing the rights of others or prejudicing public security or national defence or sowing terror among the population", acts that are punishable by five years in prison and a fine of 50,000 Tunisian dinars (15,670 euros). The charges could raise to up to 10 years in prison "if the person targeted is a public official or similar."⁶ The lack of clarity on what is 'fake news' or 'rumours' opens the door for the instrumentalization of this decree, used as a powerful tool to silence dissenting opinions and to hinder critical investigative reporting⁷.

³ Brookings, Tunisia new constitution will only worsen its political crisis, July 06, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/tunisias-new-constitution-will-only-worsen-its-political-crisis/>

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/29/tunisia-court-allows-former-minister-znaidi-to-run-for-president>

⁵ Reporters Without Borders, Tunisia profile, World Press Freedom Index, <https://rsf.org/en/country/tunisia>

⁶ Reporters Without Borders, Tunisian journalism threatened by decree criminalising "rumours and fake news", September 09, 2022, <https://rsf.org/en/tunisian-journalism-threatened-decree-criminalising-rumours-and-fake-news>

⁷ Zeineb Ben Ismail, En Tunisie, le decret 54 veut faire taire les voix de l'opposition, Inkyfada, July 18, 2023. <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2023/07/18/decret-54-opposition-tunisie/>

The Decree- Law is criticised for infringing upon international human rights standards and contradicting the principles of necessity and proportionality⁸.

The crackdown against critics, including from the journalistic community, continues to intensify. The latest episode is the arrest of activist Siham Bensidrin who headed the country's Truth and Dignity Commission, on the first of August 2022. She had been under investigation since 2021 on dubious charges relating to her leadership of the commission and banned from leaving the country since 2023⁹. In April 2024, journalist Mohamed Boughalleb was sentenced to prison for six months for 'insulting' a public official¹⁰. An extreme and unprecedented five-year prison sentence passed against a radio reporter in 2022 had a shilling effect on Tunisian media. The journalist was convicted for violating the provisions of Tunisia's anti-terrorism law and penal code, in one of his reports of the government's anti-terror operations. His lawyers claim that he is being persecuted for refusing to disclose his sources, one of crucial rights for journalists consecrated by the new press code¹¹. The latest victim of the controversial Decree-Law 54, to date, is a female lawyer and prominent critic of the government crackdown on political dissidents. Sonia Dahmani was arrested in May 2024 after making sarcastic remarks in a TV programme, considered as "false information" and "disruption of public order". The Tunisian Lawyers Council responded to the arrest by calling for a nationwide general strike¹². The new president, labelled by his opponents as the new autocrat, has already managed to narrow down the spaces of dissent by a roundup of arrests targeting high-profile critics including politicians, trade unionists, judges, business and media figures, decried as a political witch hunt, according to Amnesty International. In February 2023, at least ten people were arrested in one week, upon vague claims of conspiracy against the state¹³. The arrest of Rached Ghannouchi, the

⁸ IFEX, Tunisia: Grave step backwards for freedom of expression and access to information, July 26, 2023, <https://ifex.org/tunisia-grave-step-backwards-for-freedom-of-expression-and-access-to-information/>

⁹ Eric Goldstein, "Tunisia Appointed a Transitional Justice Czar, and Then Imprisoned Her," Dawn.com, September 4, 2024. <https://dawnmena.org/tunisia-appointed-a-transitional-justice-czar-and-then-imprisoned-her/>

¹⁰ Middle East Monitor, Tunisia journalist sentenced to 6 months in prison for insulting an official, April 19, 2024. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240419-tunisia-journalist-sentenced-to-6-months-in-prison-for-insulting-an-official/>

¹¹ Reporters Without Borders, Journalist's five-year jail sentence sends "terrifying" message to Tunisia's media, May 17, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/journalist-s-five-year-jail-sentence-sends-terrifying-message-tunisia-s-media>

¹² MASSINISSA BENLAKEHAL, Tunisian lawyers call for strike over arrest of their colleague amid crackdown on dissent, Associated Press, May 12, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/tunisia-crackdown-lawyer-arrest-critic-saied-54b43a00c7624fbeda3ef72f38d1c9eb>

¹³ Amnesty International, Tunisia: President Saied must immediately stop his political 'witch hunt', February 17, 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/tunisia-president-saied-must-immediately-stop-his-political-witch-hunt/>

leader of the *Ennahda* political party, in April 2023, is the most important in this campaign of arrests that targeted a string of around 20 opposition figures. The arrest, based on allegations of conspiracy against the state security, sent a strong signal about the fate of democracy in the new republic and the culture of consensus that was once cherished by the national elites and the international community in praising the so-called Tunisian model¹⁴.

Despite these alarming conditions, Tunisian media seem to be adjusting to, rather than rebelling against the swift regression in freedoms and rights, reflected negatively in the country's international ranking and in international media coverage. The power grab by President Saeid has seen former narratives of glorification of the leader back again in the headlines of major press publications, co-existing with critical reporting, the latter being again punished and restricted¹⁵. In a recent report about the constraints and frequent attacks against journalists, radio journalist Morad Zeghi talks about an environment of uncertainty about what journalists can cover without facing retaliation, reflecting on the lack of communication with authorities and the under-reporting of certain subjects. He commented: 'Concretely, we go on working. But there are journalists who wonder each time when it will be their turn to have problems'¹⁶. According to Mehdi Jlassi, former head of the National Syndicate of journalists, the vagueness of the Decree-Law 54 is reviving self-censorship habits, since there are no clear red lines, journalists must avoid to breach; legal pursuits can target any topic or field of publication and is likely to be politically motivated to deter journalists from expressing dissent. As he explained, most of these pursuits are initiated by the executive branch, mainly ministers, through instructions sent to the public prosecution, concerning 'a litigious statement, article or interview.'¹⁷

If freedom of expression was the main gain from the 2011 revolution, it is the first and main victim of Saied's crackdown on newly acquired liberties. The revival of the features of the police state is another setback; these include arbitrary arrests, travel bans, and prosecutions before military courts. The police forces are back to the use of excessive force against peaceful demonstrators and a wave of anti-immigrant racism in February

¹⁴ The Guardian, Opposition party leader is latest critic of Tunisian president to be arrested, April 17, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/17/rached-ghannouchi-critic-of-tunisian-president-is-latest-opposition-figure-to-be-arrested>

¹⁵ Fatima el Issawi, Media Reform in Tunisia: A Volatile Process, Centre for international Media Assistance (CIMA), October 2022, https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CIMA_Tunisia-Working-Paper_web-150ppi.pdf

¹⁶ Lilia Blaise, Tunisia: Media Under Pressure, Orient XXI, May 10, 2024. <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/tunisia-media-under-pressure,7322>

¹⁷ Internews, Tunisia media landscape assessment, 2024, p26, <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Internews-Tunisia-Media-Landscape-Assessment-Update—2024-compressed.pdf>

2023 fuelled by the president's discourses have led to increased violence and arbitrary arrest targeting Black African foreigners, making headlines in international media¹⁸.

A unique and elitist public sphere versus subaltern voices

Is the decline of the civic spaces in Tunisia the outcome of fatal mistakes in the political arena? Or is it the fruit of missteps in communicating and framing the transition's challenges to the public and the choices made by those leading the media reform? What went wrong?

The media reform in Tunisia followed a Habermasian model in aiming to build a public sphere that would ideally offer a discursive space for a rational debate that would strengthen a deliberative democracy. The reformed media landscape would ideally provide "the communicative presuppositions that allow better arguments to come into play in various forms of deliberation" leading to enabling what Habermas calls the "ideal speech situation".¹⁹ Reforming the former media structures adopted as a major goal that of allowing a diversity of voices to be fairly represented while following international standards and universal precedents in media democratization. In my early years of conducting empirical research in the country, in 2012, the head of the then established consultative committee to lead the media reform (*Haute instance pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution, de la réforme politique et de la transition démocratique*, INRIC), Tunisian journalist Kamel Labidi argued for the role of the public media to lead by establishing the traditions of a rational, open and inclusive public debate. His argument was the following, as he told me: "Public opinion prefers to rely on public institutions that can provide high professional standards. Private media was not more professional under the former regime and was sometimes used for spin and defamation against activists and journalists".²⁰ A doubtful goal, given the heavy burden of the state media, historically manipulated as mouthpiece of regimes. The ideal of an inclusive and coercion free participatory debate continued later to form a central direction in reforming the media sector; the values of the public media were also expected to expand to private media projects that mushroomed immediately after the revolution²¹. Ensuring the fairness of representation of diverse views was one of major tasks for HAICA, a statutory body with executive powers, formed in 2013, after fierce opposition and

¹⁸ See details in Human Rights Watch report on Tunisia for 2024: <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/north-africa/tunisia>

¹⁹ Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy," in Seyla Ben- habib, ed., *Democracy and Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 24.

²⁰ Fatima el Issawi, Tunisian Media under Transition, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 10, 2012, p9, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2012/07/tunisian-media-in-transition?lang=en>

²¹ The latest official figures indicate 53 radio stations: 12 public, 19 private, and 22 run by civil society groups. The broadcast sector counts 10 TV stations, including 2 public and 8 private TV channels.

sustained delays in enacting it. The new body was entrusted with the mission of regulating and monitoring the broadcast sector, hence becoming the guardian of a pluralistic media landscape. HAICA enjoys a wide range of powers including ensuring that broadcasters' political programmes enshrine the principle of fairness in airtime and that the production and content follow ethical obligations according to international standards, among other obligations. Acknowledged by the constitution of 2014 as the guardian of this nascent pluralism, the Article 127 of the constitution gives this body the responsibilities for "the regulation and development of the audio-visual communication sector" in order to "ensure freedom of expression and information, and the establishment of a pluralistic media sector that functions with integrity."²² The commission itself became a battlefield in the struggle over the identity of the new regime, fighting to safeguard its large powers²³ as well as defining the meanings of media pluralism in a highly polarized society. Its regular reports on how media abide -or not- by their ethical obligations including fair representation of parties are a routine process that has very limited impact on media content and operations²⁴. One of my interviewees, Zuhair Latif, journalist and owner of the private TV channel, Telvza TV, likened HAICA to a 'kind policeman' who gives light fines to punish offenses but has no power in deterring them²⁵.

Pluralism or the battlefield of passions

The institutionalisation of this pluralism, through creating legal and constitutional means for enacting fairness in politics and media, in line with Habermas' requirements for a thriving public sphere, did not lead to the expected outcomes in the Tunisian case. Claiming subjectivity and individual/collective positionalities, in the fierce power struggle over the identity of the new State, meant that the ideal of "communicative rationality", in which arguments and counterarguments compete to reach consensual decisions by the "force of the better argument"²⁶, was an unrealistic target for the contested Tunisian transition. For this ideal to be enacted, there is a need for "communities to distance themselves from their taken-for-granted beliefs and traditions so that they bring "universal principles of justice into the horizon of the specific form of life of [the]

²² The constitution of 2014. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2014

²³ HAICA's powers include issuing licenses for broadcasters and the ability to sanction media outlets for ethical breaches and offenses with penalties ranging from infringement notices to fines and ultimately to the suspension or even withdrawal of operating licenses.

²⁴ See HAICA website: <https://haica.tn/fr/>

²⁵ Fatima el Issawi, Media Reform amid Political Upheaval in Tunisia: A Volatile Process, Centre for international Media Assistance (CIMA), October 2022, p 9, https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CIMA_Tunisia-Working-Paper_web-150ppi.pdf

²⁶ Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, C. Lenhardt and S. Weber NicholSEN, trans. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 88-89.

particular community.”²⁷ Engaging in this debate, participants should transcend their own interests to seek serving those of the community, so that the outcome is not “mere agreement” but a “rational consensus.”²⁸

The acute polarization taking place in the political field soon overran the media platforms transforming them into a battlefield of passions, far from the expectations of reasoned debate. The Tunisian case supports the claim of a public sphere that is led by struggle rather than consensus, in line with political theorist Chantal Mouffe critique of Habermas. Expecting rational consensus in polarized contexts is unrealistic, since any act of coming together or any agreement is undeniably the fruit of “power politics or clever rhetoric than real consensus.”²⁹ Instead of the logic of the best argument will win by the power of persuasion, a struggle over power is a more plausible outcome, since “meaning can happen only by advancing a master signifier, at the expense and exclusion of other signifiers”.³⁰ Mouffe’s call for agonistic politics- and media narratives- necessities a recognition of conflicts, passions and contestations as being central to what politics is about. If pluralism is the “defining feature of modern democracy”³¹, then a public sphere should recognise the diversity of values and identities; the ensuing contestations can be irreconcilable and will not necessarily reach a consensus or aim for such outcome. Hence, agonistic politics aims to live with these differences, by considering the other not as an ‘enemy’ that one would aim to erase, but as an ‘adversary’ who has the right to exist and to claim legitimate differences. The ultimate goal of democratic politics is to transform “antagonism” in relations into an “agonism” that accepts differences. In this scenario, “compromises are possible; they are part of the process of politics. But they should be seen as temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation.”³²

In the same vein, feminist political theorist Nancy Fraser sees Habermas concept of a singular public sphere as an idealization. She argues for multiple public spheres in which “subaltern counter publics”, struggling to find a place in the dominant public sphere, can still push from outside to impact it, thus creating alternative spheres. For Fraser, “arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single,

²⁷ Ilan Kapoor, *Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? The Relevance of the Habermas-Mouffe Debate for Third World Politics*, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, [Vol. 27, No. 4 \(Oct.-Dec. 2002\)](#), pp. 459-487, p463.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 463

²⁹ *Ibid*, 464

³⁰ *Ibid*, 464

³¹ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 18-19

³² Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 745-758, 755

comprehensive, overarching public.”³³ These counter publics are parallel discursive spaces in which “weak/marginal social groups invent and circulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs”.³⁴

Media/politics agonism?

The political opening in the first years that followed the 2011 uprising has bolstered diversity in voices and opinions in the media, at an unprecedented scale. The weak institutionalization of the media reform, on the one hand, and the arm-wrestle between those who supported this reform and those who opposed it, for some in the name of freedom of speech, on the other hand, led to a chaotic and fragmented media scene. Chief among the reasons behind such malaise is the failure to recognize the struggle between identities and values as being a natural feature of the new Tunisian society, thus expected to take shape in the public debate, in media as in politics, in an agonistic shape. The media reform focused extensively on the establishment of a plural public debate that would champion the strongest argument, with care for balance and fair representation, following the Western model of impartial reporting. However, those who modeled this new media system neglected the importance of irreconcilable differences that drive passions within the multiple Tunisian publics and their media. Most importantly, they underestimated the danger of turning these conflicts into a material for negative polarization on media platforms for the sake of serving the power, political infightings or scoring large audiences. Alike the experiences of media reform in Latin America, the marketization of media, by opening the door for private politically driven media projects, did not lead to a more democratic and representative media sector³⁵. The large investments in media projects by wealthy businessmen with political ambitions exacerbated media instrumentalization, despite early efforts by journalists and their syndicate to draw a line between the editorial decision-making processes and the media barons’ interests. Soon, the acute negative polarization in politics invaded media platforms translated into antagonism feeding the political polarization and being fed by it. Could the ideal of an agonistic debate between irreconcilable differences find

³³ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” *Social Text*, 25/26: 56-80 (1990), 66

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ See Silvio Waisbord, “Media in South America: Between the Rock of the State and the Hard Place of the Market.” In *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, eds. James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, London: Routledge, 2000; Paolo Mancini, “Instrumentalization of the Media vs. Political Parallelism.” *Chinese Journal of Communication* 5 (3) 2012: 262–280; Philip Kitzberger, “Media-Politics Parallelism and Populism/Anti-populism Divides in Latin America: Evidence from Argentina” *Political Communication* 40:1, 2023, 69-91; Kjetil Selvik and Jacob Hoigilt, Journalism under Instrumentalized Political Parallelism, *Journalism Studies*. 2021, 22 (5), 2021, p653-669.

an enabling environment when the ideal of a disinterested public sphere, following Habermas's model, became clearly not achievable?

Antagonism and expression of exclusion became a daily practice in the political arena despite the classic narratives celebrating the so-called culture of consensus. In July 2021, a parliamentary deputy from Islamic currents slapped a female MP from the opposition, physically attacking her, after she interrupted one of these tumultuous parliamentary sessions. The female MP, known for her hate of islamists, posted on her Facebook page, after the incident that triggered a wide uproar in the country: "this is their true face...violence...insulting women...defaming chaste women...hegemony...violations."³⁶ The polarization that took mainly the shape of a struggle between conservative Islamic and elitist secularist currents extended to social media where campaigns of denigration and dehumanization often based on rumors attracted large participation. Research by the BBC Media Action in 2022 found that Tunisians are highly exposed to disinformation, false or misleading information. According to the survey, 96% of respondents reported having encountered it while 39% said they deal with false information daily. 70% of them said they are highly concerned about the level of false and misleading information on social media while 76% expressed concerns about the potential harmful effect it may have on the parliamentary elections (that took place in December 2022)³⁷. The role played by Facebook as a major source for information exacerbated this chaos. According to the editor of the flagship investigative news website Inkyfada, Malek Khadrawi, one major issue is the tendency of mainstream media to rely on Facebook posts, leading to disseminating serious accusations without evidence, such as accusing a parliamentary deputy of engaging in terrorism or other similar serious unfounded allegations. He explained:

Facebook became a major player in the news coverage, and this is a very dangerous issue because it relies on rumours and not on any form of serious investigative reporting. We tackled important issues such as the grooming of young men to join ISIS in Syria, but this is a serious issue and cannot be treated lightly to attack the political adversary without any proof, as it is often the case³⁸.

President Saïed took the rhetoric of exclusion to unprecedented levels by openly using dehumanizing narratives against his opponents, to the extent of calling to their erasure. As an example among many, he labelled the opposition a "cancer" that can only be "cured with chemicals". Opening a local project, he addressed the crowd saying: "The state is ravaged by corruption - but the Tunisian people will cleanse its institutions of the

³⁶ Middle East Monitor, Tunisia MP repeatedly slaps female colleague in parliament, July 01, 2021. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210701-tunisia-mp-repeatedly-slaps-female-colleague-in-parliament/>

³⁷ BBC Media Action, Understanding Tunisian social media users experiences of and reactions to information disorder, July 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/summaries/social-media-tunisia-july2022>

³⁸ Virtual interview with author, May 2020.

cancer that has spread through the country.”³⁹ He lately expanded these narratives to black migrants whom he accused of fomenting crime and violence in the country. His statements unleashed a wave of violence against these migrants, supported by ordinary Tunisians who felt responsible for ‘cleansing’ their society from the ‘intruders’ driven by a nationalist fever. Saied claimed that “the unspoken goal behind these successive waves of irregular migration is to consider Tunisia a purely African country, with no affiliation to the Arab and Islamic nations.”⁴⁰

The political antagonism became an attractive material for TV talk shows, eager to compete over large audiences, by fuelling the public’s passions and divisions. This new format championed by private TV channels, became popular, especially amid the scarcity of substantial news coverage. The popular TV slots invested mainly in debating the heated headlines in the political arena, with a central actor in this show, the *chroniqueur*, who represents a prominent political party or ideological camp, tasked with creating a show of emotions that would galvanize large audiences. The debate follows the French model, whereby a neutral moderator discusses burning headlines in the news of the day with two or more commentators who represent opposing views and compete to denigrate each other by performing a dramatic show of emotions. It is also the same model spearheaded by Al-Jazeera flagship debate programme (the opinion and the other opinion) that posited itself as an innovation in opening new windows for Arab dissent and managed to infuriate many Arab autocrat leaders. This circus of disagreement is presented by one of these popular TV commentators as “positive sedition, aiming to create a conflict, to push them (the politicians) to say what they are trying to hide”. For Neji Zghiri, commentator for *Attesia* TV channel, it is a “professional provocation with the aim to reveal the truth”, he told me in an interview in Tunis in 2019. The *chroniqueur* is expected to be a knowledgeable expert in Tunisian political system, legacies, and history. He is expected to give meaning to the news of the day and to take side, where and when required. According to Zghiri, the show of disagreement on stage is a must:

If the audience feels that the commentators speak in the same direction, they will think there is an agreement between them or that the session is being controlled. Sometimes, a colleague commentator goes in a direction, and, although I agree with him, I try to argue for the opposite direction, to keep the balance.⁴¹

This celebration of polarization expanded to various forms of media, while remaining mainly the domain of televised talk shows. The call for subjectivity and identity was loud in my interviews with journalists, from equally private and public media, with limited-although very important- exceptions. The ideal of an open debate led by the strongest

³⁹ The New Arab, President Saied calls Tunisia opposition a 'cancer', February 07, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/president-saied-calls-tunisia-opposition-cancer>

⁴⁰The New York Times, Tunisian President vilifies migrants, February 03, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/02/world/middleeast/tunisia-president-migrants-africa.html>

⁴¹ Interview with author, Tunis, May 2019.

argument was even more difficult to reach for the journalists of the public TV, frequently labeled as the 'media of shame', accused of serving the power in place. A sit-in by *Ennahda* supporters in 2012 demanded the 'purification' of the state broadcaster from what they called the 'agents' of the former regime, raising the slogan of 'the people want to change the media.'⁴² An editor of a newspaper supporting the *Ennahda* led ruling coalition at that time, told me about what he called 'hidden lobbies' in media aiming to topple the government.⁴³ The recent decision to ban political parties from participating in talk shows on public TV platforms, unilaterally taken by President Saied, used as excuse the need to contain this polarization, although the decision infringes one of main goals of the public broadcaster, that of representing different views across the political spectrum⁴⁴. The few days I was allowed to spend in the newsroom of the public broadcaster (radio and TV) in Tunis in 2019, to observe their practices, echoed the same story: in the public TV, journalists told me that the news editor decided to cancel all editorial meetings to avoid these are used as a theatre for ideological struggle among the team's members. A mid-career female journalist told me that the few meetings that were organized witnessed heated discussions among staff, driving the management to halt them. One of the news editors of the public TV channel, Imad Barboura, explained how the requirement of "political balance" has limited their agenda to reporting on the activities of main political parties without being able to engage in a reporting that better reflects the public's interests, including issues that drive divisions among its factions:

We became part of the power balance between parties. This limits our ability to provide in-depth reporting as we find ourselves restricted in how we tackle some events. The coverage of the parliament is worrisome: We are compelled to reflect the power balance; otherwise, we will face criticism on why this or that party is not represented, including possible angry calls (from politicians)⁴⁵.

The call for subjectivity and claiming identities was voiced powerfully in most of my interviews with journalists. While the ideal of a fair representation of political currents was recognized by some, it was strongly rejected by others, claiming loyalty to their political or ideological identity. Among them Sofian Ben Hamida, the then news editor of Nesma TV station, at that time acting as a staunch opposition to *Ennahda* party. Asked about how the channel represented diverse currents in the first elections post regime change in October 2011⁴⁶, he responded saying this was not their major concern:

⁴² El Issawi, *Tunisian media under transition*, 15.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ *Middle East Monitor*, Political parties banned from state TV, union says, January 11, 2022.
<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220111-political-parties-banned-from-state-tv-union-says/>

⁴⁵ Media Reform amid Political Upheaval: Media Reform in Tunisia, p11

⁴⁶ *Reuters*, Timeline: Tunisia's bumpy path to democracy, October 14, 2019.
<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1WT1XB/>

During the elections, we decided that we will be ourselves, without any censorship and without denying our values. We are a modern secular TV channel, and we don't think that we should be apologetic about it.⁴⁷

A junior radio reporter, in that same period, immediately after the uprising in 2012, talked about what he called 'mistakes of subjectivity' in moderating debates in which he intervened when an opinion expressed by participants was against his convictions. Another junior journalist in the national official news agency told me that, despite reporting accurately on all political parties and currents, the headlines or focus of the reporting will always reflect some of her own subjectivity: 'it is my eyes that capture the news, so a part of me is inevitably in it.'⁴⁸ Most of journalists interviewed stressed that there is nothing called pure neutrality, even in Western media. Abdel Razzaq Tabib, former head of the public radio, talked about the impossible line of separation between journalists and their political allegiances, despite multiple staff training and new guidelines. He voiced his frustration that:

Most journalists continue to believe that personal connections with politicians are crucial for their roles. Leading journalists are in direct contact with those in power and discuss with them how they should tackle some polemic topics or who they should invite to their shows⁴⁹.

The few new projects that were launched under the banner of alternative media have attracted much attention, while expected to act as the provider of new inquisitive media practices. Khadrawi stresses that Inkyfada is not neutral; it does not side with a political camp but rather with the ideals of the revolution, concerned mainly with protecting media and civil rights that were the main slogans of the 2011 uprising. For him, the divide, portrayed by international media as an ideological one, between conservative Islamists and progressist secularists, is a farce or an inaccurate reading of the Tunisian society. This portrayal is denied by the fact that the secularists are equally conservative, due to their support for some regressive policies such as voting against women's right for equal inheritance⁵⁰. For Thameur Makki, editor of Nawaat news and magazine website, that used to act as the sole opposition voice under the former regime, defending secularist beliefs is not at odds with the requirements for fair representation. The pluralism in the public sphere is not perfect, according to him, but it can still leave some spaces for alternative voices:

There is no healthy pluralism today in Tunisia, but we are allowed to be represented in the battlefield of narratives; we are also not alone in this field; we are protected by some 'guns' such as the decree-laws that were secured through

⁴⁷ El Issawi, *Tunisian Media in Transition*, p17.

⁴⁸ Interview with the author, Tunis, February 2012.

⁴⁹ *Media Reform amid Political Upheaval: Media Reform in Tunisia*, p11

⁵⁰ Alessandra Bajec, Will inheritance equality ever be up for debate in Tunisia?, Al-Jazeera, August 22, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/8/22/will-inheritance-equality-ever-be-up-for-debate-in-tunisia>

the media reform to enshrine media rights. Thanks to these amendments, we can be part of the debate⁵¹.

Representing views on media platforms is not only a matter of a power struggle of identities and values. It is partly controlled by the media owner agenda and the need to secure advertisement revenues, to survive a narrow and competitive market. Zuhair Latif, journalist and owner of Telvza TV, talks about taking careful decisions about who to invite to his talk shows:

The funding forces us to take sides and to invite some figures to talk shows and ignore others. If we want to be independent from all camps, we will find ourselves outside the game and we will not enjoy any financial support⁵².

The guardians of pluralism

The civil society and international media assistance are considered as the guardian of the fragile media pluralism. Tunisian media has attracted huge efforts and investments from international media assistance without delivering the expected outcomes, according to most of journalists and media stakeholders I interviewed. International media development programmes that took mainly the form of training on new skills, championed the model of Western-led detached watchdog journalism with focus on independent reporting and balance or fairness in representing various political and ideological views. This fairness was especially important in the coverage of electoral campaigns and was followed largely by the public broadcaster. I have vivid memories of my meeting with the editor of the public TV channel, in his office, when he proudly showed me a handwritten table on a board behind his desk in which he noted carefully the airtime granted to each political party, in the evening news bulletin, in an attempt to keep track of how his institution is delivering fairness of representation. This high awareness of the requirements of a plural media landscape was a tangible fact but it was not sufficient to respond to the needs of the media institutions.

Training programmes largely focused on developing individual journalists' skills, while neglecting to connect them to the larger needs of the media outlets. As argued by Khadrawi of Inkyfada, "the international support focused on journalists and ignored that they will have to go back to their institutions after the training where they will not be able to implement what they learned, because these institutions don't follow the same principles."⁵³ If this training has helped improving journalists' skills introducing them to the principles of normative journalism, it did not improve the quality of media production and media operations in general. It is not possible, within the limitations of this article, to evaluate all training or support programmes delivered so far. However, most of journalists and media stakeholders interviewed flagged the lack of compatibility between these programmes and the conditions of production in media institutions as well as the

⁵¹ Virtual interview with author, May 2021

⁵² Media Reform amid Political Upheaval: Media Reform in Tunisia, p13

⁵³ Ibid

choice of priorities, often decided according to the donors' agendas. The unease between the providers of these programmes and the media management was also reflected in the choice of some of these donors to avoid bureaucratic media structures where the implementation of programme is thorny. As an example, Tunisia Programme Manager for International Media Support Asma Ajroudi explained that they opted for working with media partners with whom they have shared values and willingness to communicate, leading to favouring alternative media and avoiding private televised networks or public media. For her, building partnerships with alternative media is not only a guarantee for efficiency for their programmes but also a way to "create a balance with the media we cannot reform."⁵⁴ Empowering radical change in the media landscape seems an unachievable target.

The dynamic civil society remains a central actor in supporting a diverse and healthy public sphere, but this role is somehow undermined by political divisions within its multiple factions, along with a fatigue syndrome. According to leading journalist Abdel Razzak Tabib, "the civil society was active and influential; today all these organizations are weakened and most of them are overwhelmed by internal problems".⁵⁵ Against the backdrop of leaks about a possible new regulation that would curtail and limit its activities, President Saied recently staged an attack against the Tunisian civil society likening it to "an extension of foreign powers". In a ministerial meeting held late February 2022, Saied claimed that these organizations are "an extension of foreign powers that seek to control the Tunisian people with their money," calling for a ban on foreign funding⁵⁶. Similarly, the national syndicate for journalists, the most representative body for journalists, is weakened by the scope of responsibilities it is facing, especially the continuous deterioration of journalists' working conditions, including arrests, harassment, and weak job security. Although a culture of collaboration for the support of media rights is existing, this movement of solidarity is informal and lacks a clear direction, according to the head of the journalists' union, Mehdi Jlassi:

We need to adopt a proactive strategy and not [allow] the government and political parties to set the agenda for media policies. One main reason for this situation is the huge pressure on the union to resolve problems related to journalists' working conditions as being our priority⁵⁷.

Conclusion

The choice of a consensus model for the Tunisian transition has led to emptying politics from its meaning, since politics is defined by struggles, passions and contestations. This

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ El Issawi, Tunisian Media Reform amid Political Upheaval, a Volatile Process, p4.

⁵⁶ Lamine Benghazi, The Suffocation of Civil Society in Tunisia: A Chronicle of a Slow Constriction, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, November 09, 2023, <https://timep.org/2023/11/09/the-suffocation-of-civil-society-in-tunisia-a-chronicle-of-a-slow-constriction/>

⁵⁷ Media Reform amid Political Upheaval: Media Reform in Tunisia, p16

model has led to a weak political opposition and a dysfunctional state system in which policies became mere power tactics. In the communication realm, this model led to chaotic attempts to embed impartiality in news coverage; the resulting media bias was driven by severe media instrumentalization, on the one hand, and by the eagerness of most journalists to claim their subjectivity, as being a main definer of their identities, on the other hand.

As rightly argued by Voltmer, emerging media systems are unique types that are a blend of inherited structures, the constraints of the transitions, and the reform's choices⁵⁸. The new Tunisian media system was somehow a continuation of the past, blending features from the old and the new regimes and embracing the struggles that often brought the transition to a deadlock. It is undeniable that media and political pluralism expanded post revolution. This pluralism brought emancipation by allowing an unprecedented visibility of views, but this diversity is painted in the colours of antagonism and the exclusion of the 'other'. The choice of the media reform to embrace the Western-led model of impartial reporting did not match the realities of the Tunisian society, neither it met the expectations of the journalistic body. The required detachment from politics is also unrealistic, given the high level of media-politics parallelism and the eagerness of Tunisians to have their say about the future of their country, in the political and media arena, despite their lack of trust in their media.

It is expected that transitions to democracy are tumultuous and don't follow a linear path. In Tunisia, successive governments' failure to address the roots of a long-standing economic crisis empowered popular disheartenment from the revolution's achievements as well as the nostalgia of the strongman capable of making things work. A recent survey by the Arab Barometer found a high level of scepticism among Tunisians from the importance of democracy for them; 73 percent of respondents believe democracy is "indecisive". The survey's results also reflect the scope of confusion within the public; 54 percent found the country more democratic than it used to be before 2011, while 46 percent said democratic practice is "less" or at the same level than it used to be under the dictatorship of Ben Ali⁵⁹. While the economic crisis continues to worsen, President Saied seems more a 'fading star' to borrow from French *Le Monde* newspaper, rather than the saviour of the nation⁶⁰. A recent survey by Inkyfada found that "Tunisians are increasingly hostile with Saied's handling of the government, but a significant number are afraid to speak their minds. With economic conditions steadily worsening, the political situation is looking more similar to the end of the regime of the former dictator,

⁵⁸ Katrin Voltmer, *The Media in Transitional Democracies*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

⁵⁹ Arab Barometer, *Tunisian political views: splintered and confused*, April 16, 2024. <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2024/04/tunisian-political-views-splintered-and-confused/>

⁶⁰ *Le Monde*, *Kais Saied's Tunisia, a fading star*, February 27, 2023. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/02/27/kais-saied-s-tunisia-a-fading-star_6017438_124.html

Ben Ali, when widespread unhappiness co-existed with a veneer of acquiescence to the security state.”⁶¹

Today, the supporters of media reform should create a solidarity momentum around the crucial mission to safeguard the gains from the 2011 uprising. But it is also urgent to rethink this reform and to what extent importing models from Western experiences can meet the expectations of Tunisian people from their media. An urgent question is the following: How to give voice to the multiplicity of Tunisians’ identities, values, and sensitivities without unleashing the beast of antagonism? a question that the media reformers are yet to answer.

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⁶¹ Inkyfada, Kais Saeid: How the fear bias affect the opinions of Tunisians, October 27, 2023.
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