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A new offer of commitment and work for qualified youth? Democratic monitoring associations in post-Ben Ali Tunisia

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Abstract

This article about youth in democratic watchdog associations aims to provide clues to understand how individuals socialized in an authoritarian regime initiate new social practices. These associations were born and developed after the fall of the Ben Ali regime thus constituting a social world in which inclinations to a form of militant commitment strongly linked to the accumulation of all kinds of capital (academic, social, cultural) were able to be realized. This associative sector appeared, especially after the 2011 elections, as an attractive field both as an expression of a particular form of militant engagement and as a practical means for constituting a basket of marketable skills. It has enabled a young, French-speaking elite with a good level of English language skills, trained in the best Tunisian universities to develop its national and transnational social capital as well as managerial, legal and IT skills. In doing so, these young people have been led to define a commitment outside of classical representative politics, while playing a key role as guarantors of the democratic processes (control of elections) and as critical actors for responsive government work.

Key words: Tunisia, youth, activism, associative work, democracy, expertise

Introduction

On January 14, 2011, the flight of President Ben Ali sealed the end of the authoritarian regime he had ruled for 23 years. In the first months after the departure of the deposed Head of State, political change was reflected in the development of multi-partyism, the opening of the media sector and the liberalization of the non-profit and voluntary sector.

The decree-Law of September 24, 2011 on associations liberalized the legal regime, replacing the requirement for prior authorization with a simplified declaratory prescription. The "process of pluralistic effervescence" (Allal and Vannetzel: 5) sparked by the popular uprising of 2010-2011 thus led to the creation of hundreds of associations, some of which positioned themselves as organizations of mobilization and citizen awakening. At birth, most enrolled in the "revolutionary" enthusiasm, recruiting among volunteers and relying on the involvement of their leaders to organize conferences, symposiums, citizen cafes etc. throughout the country.

Beginning in February 2011, the decision to elect a National Constituent Assembly (NCA) led to a proliferation of electoral observatories whose mission was to follow the ballot and thereby contribute to its authenticity. Some of these observatories were chartered as associations or networks of associations in order to receive funds to operate as observers, thus mobilizing hundreds, even thousands of individuals.

At the same time, multilateral institutions (specialized organizations of the United Nations, the European Union), Western cooperation agencies (American and European), as well as transnational professional human rights NGOs, were pouring in or reinforcing their representations in Tunisia, a country that seemed to be a laboratory for democratic experimentation. The "call for democracy" carried by these various NGOs revolved around two key notions, "civil society" and "good governance". For all of these operators, the central issue was to support the voluntary sector which promotes the democratic norm, by providing technical assistance and financing.

From 2012, the Tunisian political dynamics, driven by the newly formed National Constituent Assembly (NCA) and the election in late 2011 of a transitional government opened the way to the formation of associations concerned with the democratic nature of actions undertaken by the provisional Institutions. In order to better control the public authorities, they organized themselves around the functions of "vigilance, notation and denunciation" (Rosanvallon 2006: 68). These collectives, in this way combined a capacity for counter-expertise, questioning, and even for lobbying, which served as vehicles for "putting public problems into circulation" (Neveu 2015: 54).

Finally, the encounter of these local actors with various transnational and international organizations beginning in 2012 led to an "NGOnization" (Petric 2012: 75) of the sector, and a transformation of these voluntary organization into "professionalized machines" (Siméant 2003: 167) capable of generating "credible expertise" in exchange for access to Western donor resources. They cultivated contacts with representatives of the Tunisian community and invited them to events designed as "capacity building", including training sessions on good governance, human rights, *et cetera*. At the same time, they issued calls for tenders and/or directly solicited associations, to encourage them to develop "projects" eligible for their funding. The voluntary organizations then became "entrepreneurs of civil society" (Offerlé 2003: 10) bearers of a "public-driven legitimacy"¹ whose beneficiaries would be Tunisian citizens.

Thus a market for skills articulating militant and professional logic was formed in which young graduates of higher education were inserted into active life where, before the revolution they were generally little involved in both militant and political networks.

It is precisely this qualified youth that is the object of this article. By analyzing the professionalization process of the best known media watchdog associations (I), we propose to show that we are dealing with young activists oscillating between work and engagement (II), who, with their capacity for counter-expertise, position themselves as *democracy makers* (Guilhot 2005), artisans to the public of active and participative citizenship (III).

¹ In his definition of the legitimacy of associative action, Matthieu Hély (2009) distinguishes a "private legitimacy", where the beneficiaries are the members of the association, of a "public legitimacy" where the beneficiaries are not members.

Box: a look back at the survey

The survey was conducted in 2017 and 2018 using a sample of 16 young members of democratic watchdog associations², a category built on the notion of "surveillance democracy" developed by Pierre Rosanvallon (2006), referring to the surveillance exercised by certain social actors vis-à-vis public institutions to remedy situations which were considered to violate democratic norms. The recurrence, since 2012, of the names of some of these organizations in the media (press, audiovisual, web) prompted us to make it an area of investigation. More precisely, we started from the hypothesis that this specific associative sector could be the space for the exercise of a form of "moral militancy" (Reynaud 1980: 271-286) addressed to all citizens on behalf of the young people confronted with the political changes brought about by the fall of the Ben Ali regime. To understand both the logic of the inclination of these young people to engage in these collectives and the type of symbolic rewards with which they could be gratified, we conducted biographical interviews which we used to try to understand the meaning they gave to their commitment. The analysis of these interviews led us to qualify our initial hypothesis (see below). Our choice of organizations focused on the most "visible" associations (*Al Bawsala*, *Mourakiboun*, *Doustourna*, I-Watch³) and the Tunisian branch of a transnational NGO, Article 19, an NGO headquartered in London. The representatives of these organizations introduced us to young people (according to our criteria of being between 20 and 35 years old, although most were in fact, between the ages of 28 and 32) who agreed to answer a semi-structured biographical questionnaire given face-to-face.

Professionalization of democratic monitoring associations: associative enterprises between local integration and global resources

With the exception of the transnational NGO Article 19, which presented itself from the outset as a professional organization and a branch of a parent organization, the other four democratic watchdog associations with which we worked arrived at professionalization more or less quickly.

They all explicitly display in their name the will to monitor political institutions: the term *Mourakiboun* covers a semantic field that goes from observation to control passing through censorship and monitoring; *Al Bawsala*, the compass, refers to an instrument that indicates the right direction, in this case that of democracy; *Doustourna* means, "Our Constitution", and refers to a text written by the members of the collective with the participation of "Tunisian citizens",⁴ I-Watch, whose Arabic name is *Ana Yâqedh* (I am alert / on alert) explicitly refers to the watch lexicon.

² The names of the young people surveyed in the article are pseudonyms

³ Watch is a special case. It was created in February 2011 and has been working since 2016 as a section of the transnational NGO, Transparency International (TI), headquartered in Berlin. But I-Watch remains independent from TI.

⁴<http://doustourna.org/index.php/fr/projets/notre-constitution>

The professionalization took place progressively from the election of the NCA, on October 23, 2011. The new international offers of financing, the drafting of a new Constitution, the elections and the prospects for the establishment of new political institutions led these associations to "rationalize" their actions. Confronted with a limited offer of private national financing, and relatively low and discretionary public funding, the liberal provisions of the 2011 law on associations, particularly governing their financing opened up broad access for these organizations to international resources. The conditions of eligibility of their projects for international funding prompted them to implement practices, knowledge and know-how in line with the standards set by the donors (Cheynis 2013: 147-173).

The search for efficiency, perceived both as the result of the influx of international resources and as the means of access to these same resources, led some of these associations to break, at least in part, with the logic based on volunteering. The amateurism of the early days did not withstand the call for economic consolidation of an associative action that sought to adapt, at least until the end of 2014, to a particularly unstable political environment.

The militant commitment of the founders and young activists gave way to the salaried work of permanent staff recruited by the associations. Increasing budgets, the development and diversification of funding sources, integration into partnerships with transnational NGOs and multilateral institutions all required the adaptation of full-time professional skills, in addition to the recruitment of consultants, sometimes also from the ranks of organization volunteers. Thus, teams of young employees were recruited on relatively well-paid fixed-term contracts (CDD) for this age group (from 1,000 to 1,800 dinars⁵) who are to manage projects over cycles of an average of three years.

Doustourna: the demand for participatory democracy

The most emblematic case of this evolution is the association *Doustourna*. Two months after the fall of the Ben Ali regime in March 2011, former activists of the far-left group "Perspectives" in association with neo-militants on the left published a political platform "the manifesto of March 20" (in reference to the date of independence of Tunisia). The stated objective was the drafting of a Constitution in participative mode. As early as July 2011, this group mobilized 350 people in Mahdia to write a draft Constitution with the help of Tunisian and foreign constitutionalists. The text was published on a website created for the occasion, *Doustourna.org*, to "collect comments and suggestions, and allow citizens to make their contribution."⁶ A draft thus finalized was sent to political parties for adoption at the future NCA. In addition, the awareness of the national campaign's potential as a platform encouraged the collective to submit 11 candidate lists under the *Doustourna* label (no candidate was elected).

In January 2012, *Doustourna* decided to create a "network" association to "pressure constituent delegates to adopt the principles of the Constitution proposal".⁷ Promoting a

⁵ A secondary school teacher is paid around 1,200 dinars, and a university lecturer around 2,000 dinars. A logistics officer in the associations earns between 500 and 1,000 dinars.

⁶ [Http://doustourna.org/index.php/fr/qui-sommes-nous/historique-des-activites](http://doustourna.org/index.php/fr/qui-sommes-nous/historique-des-activites)>

⁷ Interview with Hechmi Ben Frej, an actor within the far-left movement "Perspectives", and founding member of *Doustourna*, May 14, 2018.

discourse on participatory democracy, the groups seek to develop "the institutional tools best able to guarantee the direct participation of the people in public affairs and the monitoring of state institutions".⁸ The structuring of the association network is supposed to create decentralization and horizontality since the local and regional *Doustourna* cells are autonomous.

Initially, it was up to *Doustourna* to affirm the existence of a secular social and political project carried by forces aligned against Ennahdha and the government Troika. Hence, this collective devoted its first year of existence to the organization in December 2012 of the first ever meeting of Tunisian civil society.⁹ The association, which relied exclusively on the volunteer work of its members, is now increasingly reliant upon foreign funding. The association's annual general meeting, although initially organized by a steering committee with participating partner associations and project donors, are now supported by George Soros' Open Society Foundations, Oxfam, the International Federation for Human Rights and the Euro-Mediterranean Network for Human Rights. By accepting funding from the international donor community, *Doustourna* demonstrates engagement for drafting "ambitious projects" that can be financed and traced by donor stakeholders.

In 2013, *Doustourna* developed a proposal for a project baptized *El Majless* (the Assembly). The project funded by the UNDP for 12 months proposed "a communications channel in Arabic (both electronic and paper versions) bridging the gap between the NCA and Tunisian students". The newspaper reports on the work of the NCA then gathers students' opinions which they report back to the delegates.

The organization of the second National Assembly in December 2013 (aimed at the presidential and legislative elections), as well as the implementation of specific programs, confirmed *Doustourna*'s reputation as one of the main Tunisian NGOs for monitoring governmental and parliamentary activities.

A dichotomy has developed which distinguishes between the Association's voluntary members, some 300 to 400 individuals distributed in local cells (*khalaya*) across the Tunisian territory and a central executive of 8 or 9 fixed-term contract employees,¹⁰ attached to different projects.

Mourakiboun: an election observation association

Created in 2011, the *Mourakiboun* association presented themselves as election observers. The Association's main activity required the mobilization of thousands of election observers. Initially led by Rafic Halouani, son of a family politicized on the left of the Tunisian political spectrum, *Mourakiboun* is a network of three associations who joined forces to observe the elections of October 23, 2011 throughout the national territory.¹¹ Thanks to funding for European Union efforts to form a core of Tunisian

⁸[Http://doustourna.org/index.php/fr/qui-sommes-nous/notre-plateforme](http://doustourna.org/index.php/fr/qui-sommes-nous/notre-plateforme)>

⁹The UGTT, the center of the Tunisian trade union movement along with several human rights associations led by former left and far left activists converted into associative work, participated in the organization of the assizes (the Tunisian League of Human Rights, the LTDH, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights.)

¹⁰ *id*

¹¹ The Tunisian Association for Democratic Awakening, Mouwatana (citizenship) and the Tunisian Association of Development Law.

associations with electoral expertise, *Mourakiboun* was successful in monitoring the 2011 elections. Even so, the question is raised of how to ensure the organization's longevity and ensure that the expertise gained in monitoring the election of delegates for the NCA is not lost between elections. In particular, the question is raised on how to maintain coordination between a central team in Tunis and between 4,000 and 6,000 observers spread across the Tunisian territory. The solution that was adopted is to diversify projects so that there would be continuity between a more or less permanent team of employees linked to the network's founders, and volunteer coordinators and their assistants (the long-term observers) who reside in the constituencies.¹² Thus, the electoral observation organization develops projects that are sometimes far removed from electoral issues,¹³ but which together support a team of about ten employees.

Al Bawsala, the apostle of "open society"

The *Al Bawsala* association was very quickly professionalized. Founded in 2012 by human rights activist Amira Yahyaoui,¹⁴ the Association is a beneficiary of George Soros' Open Society Foundations, the association's primary source of funding. Some multilateral institutions, including the World Bank and decentralized cooperation services of Western countries, also provided financial assistance at first.

Initially, *Al Bawsala* sought to endow the NCA with Open Data capabilities. In other words, it sought to exploit the possibilities of data mining to give Tunisian citizens an overview of the activities of the NCA. To this end, the association developed a first project, *Marsad Majles* (Assembly Observatory), whose objective is to provide an online platform offering Tunisians free access to data related to the political activities of deputies elected to the NCA.¹⁵ This work requires the significant mobilization of human resources especially if it is to produce timely information on the day-to-day activities of delegates and their caucuses, including proposals, votes, speeches, real attendance, as well as collect documents, reports and committee minutes. No less important is founder, Amira Yahyaoui's commitment to recruit exclusively among young people under 30 "to have a young association that creates employment".¹⁶ *Al Bawsala* today employs a salaried staff and trainees while its Municipalities Observatory (*Marsad Baladia*) manages a network of volunteers present in all 350 Tunisian municipalities.

Since 2012, the Association complements the national media agenda by regularly publishing online statistics concerning constituent absenteeism and denouncing elected

¹² Interview with Malik (Mourakiboun, 30, IT engineer), June 7, 2017.

¹³ In 2017, Mourakiboun embarked on a project funded by the transnational American NGO Democracy International to encourage Tunisian voters to vote, while conducting a study program on the state of basic health and health clinics. Tunisia.

¹⁴ The latter comes from a family of human rights activists: her father, a magistrate, was dismissed under Ben Ali after publishing a letter in which he denounced attacks on the independence of the judiciary, while his cousin Zouhair Yahyaoui, host of a dissident website was arrested and tortured by the Tunisian police. Released in 2005, but weakened, he died of a heart attack. The same year, Amira Yahyaoui left Tunisia to take refuge in Paris where she studied mathematics and advocated for human rights, before returning to Tunisia in 2011, shortly after the fall of Ben Ali. See Marie Verdier, "Amira Yahyaoui receives the Jacques Chirac Foundation Award," *La Croix*, November 21, 2014.

¹⁵ <https://www.albawsala.com/projets/marsad_majles>

¹⁶ Marie Verdier, op. cit.

officials who are quick to vote salary increases for themselves or extend the term of their electoral mandate when that term has not been fixed by the NCA.

The Association's presence in Parliament [the Assembly of People's Representatives (ARP)], along with accumulated political capital allow the parliamentary observatory, *Marsad Majles* to play a lobbying role for the drafting of laws. *Al Bawsala's* success with international and national media has enabled it to launch two other "observatory" projects in 2014: *Marsad Baladia* (the Municipalities Observatory), and *Marsad Budget* (Budget Observatory), whose team "monitors management and control of the [Tunisian] budget process".¹⁷

The implementation of these various projects has crowned the rise of *Al Bawsala* whose budget is around one million DT.¹⁸ The organization that has to recruit new staff is "run like a business"¹⁹ and now employs around 20 people.

I-Watch, a professional track to lead the "war on corruption"

I-Watch was created in March 2011 by Achref Aouadi and Mouheb Garoui, respectively, 25 and 23 year-old students, building on a pre-revolutionary Lions Club Student Chapter and a "debate" club. Similar to other associations interested in supporting the political participation of young people, particularly Volunteer Youth, *I-Watch* joined with other associations to develop various projects underwritten by international partners.

While monitoring electoral activities since 2011, *I-Watch* has specialized in the fight against corruption and transparency. It organizes consciousness-raising activities and public initiatives (artistic competitions, annual awards) aiming to reward whistle-blowers in the field of corruption. At the end of 2013, the association became the Tunisian contact for Transparency International (TI), before merging with the TI network in 2016, a move which opened up new perspectives for finance and international support. *I-Watch* has cultivated professionalism in its work by diversifying its international partnerships, far beyond its relations with Transparency International. For the association, it is a matter of carrying out large-scale actions within the Tunisian territory, working directly and unapologetically with foreign donors without the customary call for project proposals from donors with whom it maintains regular contacts.

I-Watch continues to develop new projects, including a toll-free number where citizens can denounce corruption, and a legal support and reception center for whistleblowers and victims of corruption, the YALAC, Yakdh Advocate Legal Advice Center. The organization conducts "governance" studies of Tunisian public institutions, in the interest of evaluating institutional performance for the "pillars" of the fight against corruption (the National Integrity System), and ways to improve the governance of natural resources.

¹⁷<https://www.albawsala.com/projets/marsad_budget>

¹⁸ See the 2016 audit report: <<https://www.albawsala.com/financing>>. It should be noted that in 2016 the main contributor to the association is the George Soros Foundation, Open Society (more than a third), followed by the European Union, Oxfam, and other donors.

¹⁹ Larbi Chouikha interview with Lakhdar, Tunis, May 29, 2017. Farida, for her part, describes the Tunisian subsidiary of Article 19 in similar terms. However, the latter is a smaller associative company that employs 8 employees, Interview with Farida (31 years old, graduated from finance), Tunis, May 7, 2018.

In 2016, when the organic law relating to the right of access to information was voted by the Assembly of the People's Representatives,²⁰ the association embarked on an arm-twisting contest with *Nessma TV* and its CEO, Nabil Karoui, who had been accused of tax evasion, declaring war on corruption. Its notoriety as an association of "young people" known for their aggressive communications, had already attracted media attention,²¹ in particular concerning its foreign sponsors. According to the Executive Committee freshly elected at the Association's most recent Annual General Meeting (February 2018) *I-Watch* is a team of some twenty permanent employees, who are currently reorganizing themselves into teams for improve efficiency.

This professionalization of organizations is logically accompanied by staff reorganization. Moreover, the young people surveyed value professional skills in the service of the "cause of democracy". Supervisory associations offer them the opportunity to fit into an ambivalent reality that balances "between work and commitment" (Simmonet, 2012: 195-212), thus building careers that articulate, in varying degrees, activist passion and professional logic.

Professionalized militancy? Young people between work and commitment

An offer of "salaried engagement" (*ibid.*) Proposed by these associations requires the implementation of academic knowledge in the service of militant expertise. An advanced degree appears to be an indispensable condition for involvement in this type of organization (Desrues, Arranz, 2015: 15-40), which, in fact, recruits among individuals with strong academic and cultural capital. Our respondents were all graduates of higher education in disciplines easily mobilized by organizations: law, computer science, management and finance, coaching, information and communication, but also in graphics and fine-arts. The level of education for the sample was rather high since 12 of 16 respondents held the equivalent of a Master's Degree (a Baccalaureate degree +5 years of university training). The other 4 subjects had the equivalent of a Bachelor's degree (a Baccalaureate +3 years of University studies)

Our respondents were recruited among the upper and middle socio-professional categories of Tunisian society: the fathers were administration-grade civil servants, banking executives or executives working in private industry, landowners, doctors, entrepreneurs, secondary school teachers or active army officers.

The entry of young people into democratic monitoring associations: biographical observations and trajectories

The role of early socialization is often put forward by the sociology of activism to account for commitment to a cause. Those who have had politicized and / or militant parents would tend to have an "early experience of collective action" (Mathieu, n. d.). In

20 Access to information procedures for all public institutions and bodies receiving public funds are now a privileged investment of many associations, including Article 19 and Al Bawsala.

21 They have been fueled in recent years by the logistical and financial support provided by I-Watch collective "Manich Msamah" (I do not forgive) who, between 2015 and 2017, tried to prevent the adoption by the ARP of the presidential bill of economic and financial reconciliation, accused of consecrating the impunity of the corrupt Ben Ali regime.

our case, this form of socialization appears to have been less significant than in established democratic contexts: the feeling of having been a potential target of arbitrariness or of experiencing authoritarian coercion made political and militant activity much more risky. At best, this was an unspoken fact that ran through family bonds (the circulation leaflets of an opposition party, for example). The study subjects' responses showed that Ben Ali's authoritarian power sought to create the conditions for relations of exclusive loyalty among governors and governed in a passive attitude typical of apathy which does not contribute to the reproduction of the authoritarian social order.

However, it is possible to identify among the biographical interviews instances of socialization (prior associative experiences as in a theater or film club, in scouting ...) or meetings (teachings by some professors) likely to create receptivity to voluntary involvement in a post-authoritarian Tunisia. Further, towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century, news reports and televised images of Tunisia and the Arabic-speaking world seen on Tunisian or foreign channels, promoted the notoriety of a few engaged artists like Bendirman, who addressed properly Tunisian topics. Information access via the Internet and proxy servers which allowed web users to circumvent censorship, nurtured political sensitivities and an appetite for political topics among these young people. For the militant, memories were marked during that first decade of the 21st century by demonstrations in support of Palestine and in opposition to the war in Iraq. It is difficult to say however, whether these led directly to an inclination toward associative engagement, especially given the common perception of associations and cultural clubs being taken over by members of Ben Ali's party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally, was dissuasive for some potential participants.²²

Four of our subjects however, were members of an international student association during the Ben Ali period: Khawla of *Doustourna*, Khaled of *I-Watch*, Bechir of *Al Bawsala* and Malik of *Mourakiboun*. If the first three were content to simply mention in passing their membership in the International Association of Students in Economics and Business (AEISEC), Malik emphasized the formative role of this organization which, according to him, had a vocation to strengthen "human development and leadership".²³

It is clear that the political and militant socialization of our respondents did not reflect any formal political engagement undertaken in the years prior to the fall of Ben Ali. None of our respondents (except for one who was already radicalized at the fall of the regime), had contact with the more visible opposition organizations such as the LTDH (*Tunisian Human Rights League*) or Amnesty International Tunisia.

By this time however, the formation and accumulation of "militant capital" was not completely absent. It represented separate cases in our sample of individuals whose family and loved ones were more engaged in politics and agreed to bear the costs (Ayari 2017). Two of our interviewees (Nouredine of *Mourakiboun* and Farida of *Article 19*) referred to their parents' the commitment to explain their activist and professional trajectory. Both are from inner Tunisia. They also made their regional origin a fundamental factor in their commitment by pointing to the image of a rebellious and dissenting inner Tunisia, stigmatized by the elites of the Sahel and Tunis (Camau: 2018).

22Larbi Chouikha interview with Hayet (Al Bawsala, journalist by training, graduate of the Institute of Press and Information, 28 years old), Tunis, May 29, 2017.

23Interview with Malik (Mourakiboun, 29, consultant), Tunis, 7 June 2017.

The "revolution" was, for the respondents, a biographical break, even though their participation in the protest movements was more or less intense (from actual physical involvement to mere presence on social networks). The cases discussed below illustrate the difference in the nature of their commitment in the uprising from December 2010 to February 2011.

Noureddine (*Mourakiboun*, 30, a Fine Arts graduate, coordinator of in-field programs), building on his militant capital was involved from the first hours of the revolution in the collective actions: he participated at the end of December in the sit-in led by lawyers in Tunis and attended trade union meetings which took place at the UGTT headquarters in Tunis. Present in Regueb²⁴ at the beginning of January, the police repression in the city drove him to return to Tunis on January 12, where he participated in the demonstration on January 14, which saw President Ben Ali abandon power. He attended the two protest episodes referred to retrospectively as Kasbah 1 and Kasbah 2 (January-February 2011) that resulted in the election of the NCA.²⁵

Habib (project manager at *I-Watch*, holder of a Master's degree in public law)²⁶ was, like Noureddine, a student at the time of the outbreak of the 2010-2011 popular uprising. Enrolled at the School of Legal, Political and Social Sciences of Tunis since 2010, he quickly joined the ranks of UGET. He, too, participated in the sit-ins of Kasbah 1 and 2: he became familiar with the whole "Tunisian civil society", who, according to him, was largely created in the crucible of these sit-ins. At the end of 2012, he left the UGET, which he considered too disturbed by internal radical left-wing partisan struggles, to "focus on his studies". During his studies, however, he spent three years as a legal expert for Young Leaders Entrepreneurs, an association for the promotion of entrepreneurship in marginalized areas, funded by USAID. He discovered *I-Watch* "by chance", at the end of his studies, via a post on Facebook and through another association sharing the same building as *I-Watch*.

Bechir (29, graduate of the *Institut Supérieur de Gestion* - Higher Management Institute), head of the Marsad Budget project in *Al Bawsala*, did not have an associative or political commitment before the revolution.²⁷ In early 2011, he returned to Tunis at the beginning of February 2011, where he took part in the sit-ins of Kasbah 1 and 2. After seeing a post on Facebook by a former classmate²⁸ Founder of *Sawty*²⁹, a citizenship awareness association, he contacted him, joined the organization, and became, in late 2011, its vice president. He joined the initiative of "Bus citizen" launched by a collective of organizations in 2011 and whose objective was to encourage rural and disadvantaged populations to vote in elections to the NCA.

24Home of his parents, this city of 12,000 inhabitants is located about thirty kilometers from Sidi Bouzid, the starting point of the "revolution". Interview with Noureddine, Tunis, April 5, 2017.

25On these two episodes that marked the Tunisian post-Ben Ali political trajectory, see Chouki Hmed (2016).

26 Interview with Habib, Tunis, July 3, 2018.

27Interview with Bechir, Tunis, June 26, 2018.

28Yassine Redissi, son of the political scientist Hamadi Redissi. Founding member of Sawty, he is now a city of Marsa municipal councilor.

29Created in February 2011, Sawty rather recruits in affluent circles of the northern suburbs of Tunis. It has been a gateway for several members of *Al Bawsala*, like Lakhdar, *Marsad Majles's* manager, and Sawty's co-founder.

Thus, the revolution was the crucible for some employees of our associations, of politicization and increased commitment, without the issue of professionalization in associative activities being immediately raised. For the other young people, participation in the protest movements was more tenuous: admittedly all had an intense activity on social networks and more particularly *Facebook*, but their physical participation in the protest episodes was more sporadic.

However, they were confronted with a particularly unstable situation whose stakes were the construction of a new political regime. This situation coincided roughly with the middle and the end of their academic cycle. Between 2011 and 2013, most were still students or had just graduated from higher education. Therefore, the question of their professional integration, as well as their position vis-à-vis the political changes, was raised with acuity, as a new offer of positions, as employees or consultants, emerged in the Tunisian associative world. Entering the sphere of supervisory associations was thus the way to satisfy both their adherence to certain political values and their need to enter the labor market. They combine in varying degrees to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish, based on the model of humanitarian action, what is activism and what is professionalized sociopolitical work (Dauvin and Siméant 2002).

From volunteer commitment to employee commitment?

Our interviewees almost all had voluntary associative experience related to "civic commitment", sometimes as a founding member. In the few cases to the contrary, it is the associative work itself that heightened their interest in topics related to politics and human rights.

It is no surprise that we find Nouredine in the first category. Unlike other young people, he cumulated concomitant adhesions. While still a student, close to the Progressive Democratic Part³⁰ he became a member of the Tunisian General Union of Students (UGTE), the student union close to Ennahdha which he subsequently left, because it was too closely identified with the Islamist party and "partisan politics ". He was also involved in the creation of the association *Mouwatana* (Citizenship), which was the founding organization of the *Mourakiboun* network. He thus became a volunteer within *Mourakiboun* via *Mouwatana*. After graduating from the fine arts program in 2012, he doubled his activities and took "the path of associative life as a professional".³¹

The plurality of statuses (volunteer, employee, even consultant) within the association can give both flexibility to the organization and allow members to acquire professional expertise that is all the more appreciated as it is linked to international know-how (Cheynis 2016).

Amel's trajectory illustrates this assertion. A graphic design and audiovisual student until 2013, her friend networks in the rather affluent district of Ennasr in Tunis led her to volunteer for *Mourakiboun* at the time of the 2014 elections. Following this first experience in electoral monitoring, she was solicited by Mehdi Jomaa, the former prime

30 The Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) was founded under the name of Progressive Socialist Rally in 1983, gained legal recognition on 12 September 1988 and was renamed Progressive Democratic Party in 2001. The PDP gathered a broad range of currents from leftists and pro-democracy activists to former islamists.

31 Interview with Nouredine, cit.

minister of the last transitional government, then eager to get into politics.³² After working for 8 months as a digital communication manager in Mehdi Jomaa's team (2015-2016), she applied for a job with *Mourakiboun* and *Al Bawsala*. The signing by *Mourakiboun* of a contract with the American NGO Democracy International (DI) to carry out a project on an awareness campaign on citizen commitment validated her return to the organization of election observation, this time as an employee.

As for Malik of *Mourakiboun*, he was successively, and even at the same time a volunteer, a consultant and an employee. After the fall of Ben Ali, uncertainty about the political future of Tunisia encouraged him to follow the news. A graduate computer engineer in 2013, he accepted a job offer from the American NGO DI who intended to create a subsidiary on Tunisian territory. DI, who provides financial and technical assistance to democratic watchdog associations, sent Malik to work with *Mourakiboun* in preparation for the 2014 elections. Some of Malik's network friends were already there as volunteers or employees. Little by little, although he had only been assigned to *Mourakiboun* by his employer to technically assist his colleagues, he moved to the headquarters of the association, where, in addition to the work for which he was paid by DI, he volunteered and built up his knowledge of voting methods. Once his mission with DI was completed, he remained with *Mourakiboun* as a volunteer while providing consulting services to the National Democratic Institute (NDI),³³ one of *Mourakiboun*'s main donors. After the elections, he went through a phase of paid employment within the association which he didn't handle well. Therefore, he found his path back as a consultant mainly with *Mourakiboun*.

In the name of civic commitment, one of our respondents traded a career with lucrative prospects against precarious employment. Khawla (*Doustourna*, 31), employed as soon as she graduated as a computer engineer in 2010 by a multinational software and financial services firm, Vermeg, had a hard time with her initial professional socialization which did not satisfy her "ethically".³⁴ In addition to her work, she attended conferences and events organized by *Doustourna*. At the end of 2013, she learned that *Doustourna* was preparing to organize the second convention of civil society. She offered her services to the organizing committee and spent a few months as a volunteer within the association. Recruited under fixed-term contracts in 2014, she relied on the expertise she had acquired on the job at Vermeg (project management) or during her initial training (computer science) to design the project of which she is now the coordinator.

Thus, voluntary activism is sometimes a gateway to forms of non-profit professionalization. Conversely, but in the same logic of employee commitment, three of our respondents³⁵ entered into the association workforce directly.

The case of Sadri, 33, project manager at *Article 19*, who had never before been involved in activism, is illustrative in this respect. A graduate from the *Ecole supérieure de l'audiovisuel et du cinéma* (Higher School of Audiovisual and Cinema - ESAC) in Tunisia, he studied at Columbus in the United States (2015-2017) where he was awarded

32 Interview with Amel (*Mourakiboun*, 28), Tunis, April 28, 2017.

33 NDI is an American NGO close to the Democratic Party.

34 Interview with Khawla (31 years old, IT engineer), project manager at *Doustourna*, Tunis, April 19, 2018

35 Hayet (*Al Bawsala*), Omar (*Marsad Budget Project Assistant*, *Al Bawsala*) and Sadri (*Project Manager*, *Article 19*)

a Master's degree in cinema. He developed documentary film projects on subjects which, according to him, are difficult to approach in the Tunisian context (the LGBTIQI + community and the migration issue). In May 2017, back in Tunisia, his sociability network helped him be recruited by *Article 19* where he replaced a friend, working on a project aiming at raising awareness of hate speech in schools. He described his insertion in the NGO as a link between the topics in his documentary film work that fell within the field of human rights and his recruitment by *Article 19* as an "activist employee".³⁶

In general, our respondents introduced themselves as watchmen and experts in "civil society" charged with scrutinizing the politico-administrative world, and able to rely on technical and even "scientific" skills. They took up the notion of "watchdog" organization, developed by transnational NGOs. They are thus part of a form of professionalized / professionalizing activism in which activists structure their "activism around the model of expertise" and value the "adjustment of professional skills to the targeted objective" (Collovald 2001: 135).

A professionalized and professionalizing commitment: democratic expertise as a symbolic and professional reward

The professional practice of our respondents puts them in a position of virtuous citizens, paragons of political legitimacy related to the construction of their expertise and the characteristics of their association which leads them to evaluate the work of elected officials, governors and public authorities in order to give citizens the capacity to participate in the political decision-making process.

But the prerequisite for this explicit desire to influence public action is the learning of democratic "good practices" promoted by both international institutions and transnational NGOs.

Become an expert in democracy

Becoming an expert presupposes, of course, acquiring "know-how", if only to develop skills in project management, writing and evaluation. These associations are strongly supported by international donors who provide them with skills and training.

Noureddine (*Mourakiboun*) was fully aware of what his associative commitment has brought him in terms of professional socialization. His professionalized activism has inspired him to acquire skills in the most diverse fields related to associative action.³⁷ Also today, in addition to his status as a *Mourakiboun* employee, he is the general secretary of *Mouwatana* who, according to him, has expanded its action into "economic citizenship". In other words, the association has access to funding to promote entrepreneurship and public-private partnerships, particularly in marginalized areas of Tunisia. It cooperates with *Initiative France*, an associative network which finances and supports the creation of companies and acts internationally by supporting the creation of

36 Interview with Sadri, Tunis, June 19, 2018.

37 Interview with Noureddine, quoted: "During the 6 previous years, I participated in almost 200 training workshops. [...] I was trained in the World Forum for Democracy in Strasbourg, in the Council of Europe. I participated in the writing of reports on human rights in Tunisia, [...] I was trained in election observation here in Mourakiboun.

local associative platforms whose stated objective is to support economic and social development.

Malik insists on the benefits he has gained from *Mourakiboun*'s collaboration with NDI in the computer processing of electoral data. Indeed, the American NGO relied on the Tunisian association to implement one of its favorite tools for election observation, the parallel vote tabulation or rapid counting of votes from a sample of representative polling stations at the national level. The success of this scheme was paramount both for *Mourakiboun* and for NDI, which had "invested a lot of money and expertise".³⁸

In general, democratic watchdog associations attach great importance to the "training" component of their members, as much to ensure the effectiveness of their advocacy and evaluation activities as to care for external communication. This training, beyond an occasional recourse to foreign experts and trainers on certain specific subjects, also relies for the most part on encouraging its employees to take initiatives, many of whom claim to have learned the essential "on the job". Most of these associations value the fact that their employees take ownership of assigned projects and encourage the versatility, exchanges and circulation of internal memos between the different departments and projects.³⁹ Thus, project leaders and assistants are often encouraged to act as activists and representatives of the association, rather than as mere performers, even going so far as to comment and critique the organization's other programs. Such praise of spirit of initiative and proposal goes hand in hand with the recruitment (even co-opting) of employee profiles in line with the values promoted by the association.

The professional socialization within the associations, the learning capital as well as regular encounters with actors in the politico-administrative sphere nurture, among respondents, the feeling of being honest brokers of Tunisian citizenship, of being intermediaries between the governors and the citizens whose interest lies in being informed and educated.

These associations thus constitute for their teams spaces for the acquisition of specific professional know-how that can later be valorized, and that most respondents see as a path for the future reform of parties and/or public administration. In this way, they position themselves as the actors of a "counter-democracy" (Rosanvallon 2006). As such they are an expression of the mistrust of politicians who are likely to circumvent the new institutions supposedly at the heart of the new democratic functioning (elections, parliament, executive agency...). These suspicions tend to be even more intense among those young people, involved in watchdogs associations, who originally already have a critical attitude towards partisan politics and representative democracy. Hence the exaltation of "civil society" (the expression is omnipresent in all of the respondents' narratives), identified with the secularist associative sector, whose main mission would be to put pressure on politicians cut off from the requirements of participatory democracy.

Also the key word found in the respondents' vocabulary but also among association spokespersons is the word "accountability" in the sense of "giving account". The

³⁸Interview with Malik, cit.

³⁹ I-Watch, since its recent administrative reform of February 2018, which seems to echo internal discontent, but also the willingness that everyone can express on all subjects on behalf of I-Watch before the media, organizes each Friday different thematic workshops for his team, called "forums", where they can train in subjects they master less.

associations' objectives are to put into place instruments which allow citizens to cultivate an informed view on the action of their elected officials and administration. In general, our young interviewees see themselves as birth attendants for participatory democracy and empowerment as part of the emancipation and confidence-building of Tunisian citizens.

In doing so, the work of these "associative frameworks" has an explicitly normative dimension. For them it is a matter of producing recommendations to governors so they implement "transparent" public mechanisms through which they become accountable to the citizenry.

Experts responsible for the evaluation of politico-administrative practices, in the name of "accountability"

In their professional work, the activists of our voluntary corps employ multiple technical competences intended to promote and update the values of transparency and good governance. They implement methodologies for evaluation, sensitization and advocacy - the three cardinal axes of their action - often inspired by those put in place by transnational NGOs, but adapted internally in the context of multiple interactions with the Tunisian environment. The respondents tend to claim the construction of measurement and evaluation tools specific to the Tunisian context.

Thus, the imperative to evaluate the actions of public decision-makers drives these young people to find the "right" evaluation tools. In this context, the use of "hard" sciences and numerical data is one of the most important registers for justification of the activities of the association's "scientists". More broadly, for young people, these organizations are spaces where they can assert their capacity for abstraction and be the indispensable experts to develop indicators to measure the more or less transparent or democratic nature of public action.

The production of data is, for example, the preferred field of Khawla who leads the Citizen Initiative project for Elected Political Accountability (*Ntalbek w Nhasbek* in Arabic) at *Doustourna*. This program, successively funded by Oxfam and the European Endowment for Democracy, aims to "establish active citizenship in Tunisia by involving citizens in the elaboration of electoral programs of political parties, by monitoring their electoral campaigns and by following the work of the people's representatives in the parliament."⁴⁰ Based on the analysis of data collected in Parliament, the Citizen Initiative consists mainly in establishing meaningful indicators of fulfillment of election promises among elected candidates. Khawla emphasizes her scientific background as a means of quantifying reality and so complementing the understanding of her more literary colleagues or jurists.⁴¹

The measurement and evaluation tools developed by these associations are often duplicated by advocacy and lobbying initiatives developed for public actors, sometimes through inter-association coalitions. Malik considers that the modalities and collection of electoral data for *Mourakiboun* are particularly effective to the extent that they have contributed to the adoption by the Independent Higher Electoral Authority (ISIE) of "best practices" guidelines in the field of electoral registration and measurement of abstention

40 <[Http://doustourna.org/index.php/fr/projets/ntalbek-w-nhasbek](http://doustourna.org/index.php/fr/projets/ntalbek-w-nhasbek)>

41 Interview with Khawla, cit.

rates. From this point of view, it should be noted that the feeling of having an impact on public action and on public actors predominates among the respondents.

Despite the complex history of their presence in the Assembly,⁴² the members of the *Al Bawsala* association evoke the effectiveness of their advocacy among certain deputies with whom they are in direct contact as a result of spending time with them. The daily presence at the Assembly of *Marsad Majles'* assistants helps them, in this regard, to lobby the most receptive deputies on a regular basis. Two of our interviewees mentioned in particular the adoption of the Whistle Blower Protection Law by the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) a law to which *Al Bawsala* would have greatly contributed.⁴³ Sawsen however, a 32 year old lawyer and *Mourakiboun* project manager, expressed disappointment in that she was not successful in securing adoption for several amendments to the 2016 electoral law presented by *Mourakiboun* that would have facilitated access to finance for young candidates prior to local elections.

At the same time, this evaluation and lobbying activity provoked reactions from politico/administrative staff and pro-government media. Indeed, these denounced the foreign funding of the various watchdog associations, pretending these were in fact, fifth-column operations. *Al Bawsala* and *I-Watch* have thus often been the subject of media and/or political conspiracies on this account, sometimes going so far as to question their very existence.⁴⁴ Our respondents, when questioned about funds of foreign origin, answered by pointing to the transparency of the funds' origins, or the fact that all Tunisian administrations whatsoever, presently require foreign funds to carry out their projects and even to ensure their day-to-day operations.

Finally, in addition to advocacy work, these associations devote a considerable effort to popular education and raising awareness for democratization issues. The publication of evaluation results and public approval for the work they do is all the more important as these associations practice participatory democracy using an open data approach.

Like any entrepreneur with public problems, these organizations are confronted with the challenges of securing public support for the work they do, not only in the public space, but also among the "institutions and places reserved for the organization of public debate" (Neveu 2015: 155). The popularization of a cause, notably, by relying on third party media, supposes both promotion and dissemination. Our interviewees insisted on the need for pedagogy and the careful shaping of their evaluation and information messages, despite the sometimes technical nature of the data produced by the associations.

To overcome this difficulty, *Al Bawsala* systematically produces explanatory videos and interactive graphics. Like *I-Watch*, it tends to internalize this activity, hiring full-time web and graphic designers and even journalists (as was the case for Hayet). For the most

42 "We have come a long way since 2011, when we did not let the first team, Amira Yahyaoui and Selim Kharrat [the current president of *Al Bawsala*], [...] be part of the Parliament. They used tricks to enter ... fake journalist cards; they practically spent their days hiding in order to attend the activities. From there was born a fait accompli, but still not accepted by the deputies to have a watchdog. Interview # 2 with Lakhdar, Project Manager *Marsad Majles*, February 13, 2018.

43 Larbi Chouikha interview with Lakhdar and Hayet from *Al Bawsala*, cit.

44 For example, during the "Manich Msamah" (I do not tolerate) movement, MPs and the government reportedly made explicit contact with *I-Watch's* donors to ask that they no longer fund the association. In this regard, the leaders of the association deny any use of foreign funds in their participation in the movement: they would have used their own funds.

part, our interviewees also insisted on the need to know how to "fiddle with", sometimes simple, home-made products in order to provide educational materials acceptable to the various media audiences: internet, newspapers, even TV.⁴⁵ It has always been a question of knowing how to "give of one's self", even outside of one's official mission or one's field of competence: Nora (*Doustourna*, 31 years old), responsible for information and project documentation "*Ntalbek w Nhasbek*", had to take over the voice-over of a June 2018 video summarizing the second project report.⁴⁶

As for Khawla, she considers that in order to reach the general public, it is necessary to develop "popular tools" that will spread information, partnering with media as necessary, co-opting an electronic publication, an associative radio It is a matter of mediating between the government and the governed by establishing "a bidirectional channel" and "a relationship of horizontality between citizens and elected officials."⁴⁷

Ultimately, the associative engagement of our respondents places them at the same time in close contact and in a distant relationship with political parties, elected officials and public institutions. In other words, relations between these young people and politicians may certainly be summarized as "familiarity, self-evaluation and motivation" (Siméant 2003: 169), but also as mistrust.

Conclusion

By observing young people in democratic watchdog associations we were looking for clues to understand how individuals socialized in an authoritarian regime, "inaugurate new social practices" (Devaux, 2005: 261).

These voluntary groups constitute a social world in which the inclination to a form of militant commitment is strongly linked to the accumulation of all kinds of capital - academic, social and cultural. This associative field developed, particularly following the 2011 elections, as an attractive field, both as an expression of moral and political militancy (a matter of sustaining the country's turn toward participatory democracy), and as an opportunity to create a market for specific skills. At the same time, it enabled a young, francophone elite with a good command of English and trained in the best Tunisian universities to develop its national, but also its transnational, social capital as well as managerial, legal, technological and administrative skills.

Of course, when we conducted the interviews, they were still members of these associations. But it is quite conceivable that this form of professionalized militancy will lead to international careers in the field of multilateral institutions and transnational NGOs, like that of *Al Bawsala's* founder, Amira Yahyaoui. Yahyaoui's trajectory as founder of the *Al Bawsala* association, is in this respect illustrative of a double effect of professionalization and peer recognition both nationally and internationally. Appointed in February 2016 by the President of the Republic of Tunisia as a member of the Higher Committee of human rights and fundamental freedoms, she left *Al Bawsala* to join the board of Silatech, an NGO created by the mother of the current Emir of Qatar for the purpose of supporting young Arabic speaking entrepreneurs.

⁴⁵Interview n ° 2 with Lakhdar, Tunis, February 13, 2018, cit.

⁴⁶Interview with Nora, Tunis, June 23, 2018.

⁴⁷Interview with Khawla, cit.

Although their intention is to pass the torch to younger members of their respective associations in the coming years, most of the young employees of these associations have a long-term interest in continuing to invest in the “Public Good”, a leitmotiv which the interviewees regularly mentioned. The defense of “transparency”, “good governance” and “fundamental rights and freedoms” seems to become an integral part of their public life, and a determinant of a few of their future professional projections. The investment of these young people in the associative sector has brought them new opportunities for activism and work following political change. It has also provided opportunities to define new commitments outside of classical representative politics without relinquishing their civil role as guarantors of fair elections and government work and as critical players in the process.

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