“Unpacking the Conditions and Factors that Drove the Tunisian Revolution Through Theory”

POLIS 595 Capstone Project

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this research paper is to provide a better understanding behind the conditions and factors that influenced the Tunisian Revolution in 2011. Many experts believed that Tunisia represented a relatively stable political and economic society that for the previous decade made improvements in GDP gains, UN and international development objectives, and increased education rates among citizens. However, the country deemed by many experts as the most stable country in North Africa, quickly spiraled into revolution that eventually spread into various regions of North Africa and the Middle East. The objective of this paper is to determine if structural theory, a revolutionary theory used by social scientists to study 18th and 19 century revolutions, accounts for and identifies the causal factors associated with contemporary or modern revolutions. I will utilize qualitative data and descriptive statistics to look at various economic, political, and social factors that drove the revolution in Tunisia. I believe that structural theory still explains the casual factors that drive revolution movements in the modern day.
INTRODUCTION:

A famed historian named Crane Brinton once said, “revolutions are only predictable once they become inevitable.” Tunisia provides a case in point. The country made rapid transformations since gaining independence from France in March of 1956. The political structure seemed strongly entrenched since President Ben Ali ascended to power in 1987. Reforms allowed increased political participation for women, state investment in education produced high primary and secondary graduation rates across all social classes, and free trade agreements with European and Western countries resulted in increased economic growth and investment in the Tunisian economy. The international community praised Tunisia’s commitment to agreed global frameworks such as Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), improvements in women’s political rights, and greater political participation for opposition parties in Tunisian politics. Even with the known restrictions on public protests and Tunisia’s label as a “police state” the existing political structure seemed relatively impenetrable to internal or external pressures. Even the World Bank provided positive praise of Tunisia in its 2010 country brief noting: “Tunisia has made remarkable progress on equitable growth, fighting poverty and achieving good social indicators.” The report concluded that “Tunisia is far ahead in terms of government effectiveness, rule of law, control of corruption and regulatory quality.”

However, despite this glowing assessment, the foundation of the Tunisian political system crumbled by years end. During the early afternoon hours on December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a local produce vendor, set himself on fire outside a local municipal building in the town of Sidi Bouzid. In the following days mass protest erupted across Tunisia and by January 14, 2011 the prominent political institutions in place for the previous 55 years became no more. The events that occurred in Tunisia sparked a revolutionary wave that swept across North Africa and the Middle East, dismantling similar political institutions.

Since the establishment of the modern state system (Westphalian System) revolutions have routinely occurred that challenged and changed political, social, and economic orders of the state. Over time numerous theories have examined the causal factors and components that drove revolution to occur. One particular group of scholars, known as “structuralists,” looked at the political, social, and economic dynamics within states in an attempt to better understand the power dynamics and factors that stressed state stability. I will focus on the arguments made by structural theorists in an attempt to understand or unpack the major factors that contributed to the 2011 Tunisian Revolution to determine if this social theory accounts for the causal factors of revolution in a contemporary case. These accounts assert that structural imbalances within Tunisian political, economic, and social spheres of society led to revolution in 2011. In my analysis, I will examine the structural aspects of Tunisian society to understand and

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explain the conditions that brought about the necessary components for revolution to occur in Tunisia.

“REVOLUTION” A WORKING DEFINITION:

Before I analyze the various theories that contributed to the understanding of revolutionary activity I must define the phenomena that is “revolution.” Developing a working definition with appropriate left and right limits will allow us to not only provide greater clarity, but dissociate activities that may become misconceived as revolutionary activity. Numerous definitions exist from theorists that describe the phenomena of revolution. However, experts in the field and study have commonalities regarding the definition of revolution. Jeff Goodwin defines revolutions as not only mass mobilization and regime change, but also more or less rapid and fundamental social, economic or cultural change, during or soon after the struggle for state power.\(^2\) Jack Goldstone sees them as, “an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in society, accompanied by formal or informal.”\(^3\) Theda Skocpol sees revolution as a “rapid fundamental and violent change in dominant values and myths, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and governmental activities.”\(^4\) Based on these definitions revolution is a phenomena or occurrence that brings about change to social, political, and economic orders of a state through the mobilization and collective grievances of various social groups by some violent means.

Common misconceptions label other occurrences as revolutionary activities or movements, but fail to encompass the qualities discussed above. Examples such as civil war, rebellion, and coups may fall into these categories but normally associate different phenomena, objectives, and outcomes. Civil war, maybe the most debated topic, encompasses two competing groups vying for power, those that support the current state and those who oppose it. Normally, the objectives of contending groups look to break away or create new institutions or recognized physical boundaries and leave the previous ones intact. Yale political scientist, Stathis Kalyvas, defines civil war as, “armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities.”\(^5\) However, some instances of civil war or conflict become revolutionary if the movements become successful in the objective of dismantling previous institutions and gain enough support to mobilize mass movements against a state, however they achieve these objectives at


much slower rates and through different mobilizations of support. Harvard Professor David Armitage makes this comparison in his analysis of civil war and revolution by defining civil war as, “organized collective violence within a single polity which leads to a division of sovereignty and consequently a struggle for authority.” His definition shows that civil war focuses on the competing interests of groups for political autonomy or control and not the mass mobilization of social groups or class within society to extinguish or change institutions of the state. Overall, as stated by Professor Armitage, “Civil wars are destructive; revolutions are progressive. Civil wars are sterile; revolutions are fertile with innovation and transformative possibilities.” Separating the different types of activities is important to the study of revolution because it establishes boundaries and keeps the study focused to specific events. A hypothetical would be trying to label all violent activities as war. The definition becomes vague and applicable to almost all types of political violence. Developing a focused definition allows greater insight into the study of specific occurrences, processes, and outcomes to better understand the phenomena.

Other activities exist that might also bring about political change, but not through the same means or mechanisms as revolution. Coups simply replace one leader with another and change little regarding the previous state institutions and balance of societal power. Finally, rebellion looks to change or dislodge specific policies of the state and not the institutions of the state itself. The occurrences discussed above can occur during a revolution, but fail to represent or encapsulate the full measures of activity necessary to define revolution. Based on the analysis of revolutionary activity discussed above we can now look at social theory that explains the causation of revolutionary activity.

STRUCTURAL THEORY:

Revolutionary theorists known as “Structuralists” came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s. They attempted to answer the more detailed observations of factors that contributed to revolutionary movements or activities within states. The term structure, applies to the social, political, and economic dynamics within a state. Think of this relationship as a house built on social, political, and economic pillars within a society. In this case, the pillars dictate the type of political control, social groups or affiliations, and economic policies and dynamics within a state. All these policies create a unique environment within a society and establish the left and right limits for individuals, or in this case potential revolutionary actors, to operate. The potential for revolution becomes apparent if one pillar outpaces the growth or inclusiveness of another and the structure will lose balance. Structuralists take a non-reductionist view regarding states and observe that states “gather resources from their societies; are in competition for territory, military strength, and trade; and that some states will fare poorly during this competition

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and experience sever political crisis.” Based on these observations structuralists look at what type of states or political environments are prone to disorder. Structuralists mainly look at the components that make the state vulnerable to revolution. They take more of a systematic top-down approach when looking at the weakness of the state. Theda Skocpol presents her theory of revolution in “States and Social Revolutions.” She focuses on agrarian societies and conducts a comparative analysis of France, China, and Russia. Skocpol asserts that revolutions are rapid and fundamental transformations of a society’s political, economic, and social structures. She distinguishes revolution by its ability to change these structures through various internal and external pressures placed on the pillars within a state. The pressures can be a variety of things; war, trade embargoes, stagnated economic growth, and outdated political institutions are a few examples. She explains that revolutions occur when the structure within society becomes weakened due to external pressures of other states. The pressure from outside states create internal pressures and reveal inadequate policies or relationships that stress the pillars of society that do not modernize rapidly enough with the evolving international situation. Eventually, the political and military mechanisms of the state disintegrate, and revolution occurs from below based on pressure weakening the structure from above.

Based in the initial observations discussed above Structuralist began to label specific types of societies or structures based on political, economic, and social interactions within a state. They labeled each state to understand the unique conditions that erode state control. In his article “Revolutions in Modern Dictatorships” Jack Goldstone looks at how power is maintained in “neopatrimonial states.” He describes how dictators maintain power by keeping the population in competition among strictly enforced class or social structures. The pressures to modernize and advance the state require the dictator to understand the demands of elites, workers, state bureaucracy, and the temptation to monopolization of resources to allies may prove fatal to the leader. Additionally, the reliance on or acceptance of foreign support of investment may disturb the balance of power within the structure.

Jeff Goodwin also places importance on the structural factors that allow revolution to occur within states. In his article, “Toward a New Sociology of Revolutions” he stresses the need to move away from generalized theories of revolution and place greater emphasis on the autonomy or power dynamics of individual states. In his article he analyses various structural theorists’ arguments on revolution and concludes that

8 Goldstone, “Revolutions.” 7.

9 Skocpol, “States and Social Revolution.” 23-40.

10 Neopatrimonial States: phrase coined to label states as patrimonial in nature or based on an administrative system of patron relationship with a political ruler and citizen. Can be a state or even a small communal level type of governance.

political, social, and economic relationships within a state are the causal factors for revolution. Finally, he concludes that in contemporary cases, that “autonomous, corrupt, and repressive personalist dictatorships are most prone to revolutionary movements.” Similarly, Tim McDaniel argues that “revolutions can only be comprehended from a global understanding of particular formations that recognize how culture, politics, and economics are interconnected.” In his book *Autocracy, Modernization, and Revolution in Russia and Iran*, he makes the point that “autocratic modernization” created large gaps in the political, social, and economic relationship of society. The desire to modernize or adopt specific economic policies create a divide within the existing political and social structure of society and allow the necessary conditions for revolution to occur in these states.

Based on the factors discussed above a new group of theorists came to prominence in the late 20th and early 21st century to explain what became known as “Agency” or “path dependency” of revolutions. These theorist built off the research of structuralists, but focused more on the importance of individual actors, ideology, leadership, and other factors that push revolutionary activity. Jack Goldstone points out that not all aspects of revolution are predetermined by structural factors. He instead makes the point that key actors make a difference whether revolution is successful and evolves. Theorists such as Eric Selbin focus on the importance of individuals, ideas, ideology, and other components that drive revolutionary actors to act the way they do. The agency theory explains why groups mobilize, the process of the revolutionary movement, and the outcomes. Agency in its simplest form focuses on why individuals create groups and mobilize to accomplish political goals. Dr. Dipak Gupta explains this phenomenon in his book “Understanding Terrorism and Political Violence.” The author looks at the dimensions of terrorist organizations the concept of collective action and the importance of beliefs to mobilize individuals toward a cause. He presents the ideas of deprivation, rational choice, and collective action. His findings explain why groups mobilize and the importance of individuals in movements of political violence against a state. He presents his data from an economists’ perspective, but the model offers a different approach to understand the argument of agency theorists looking at individuals and the factors that mobilize groups against a government. However, the ability for the mobilization of groups, ideology, and leadership is dependent on the type of environment these groups and individuals operate. As previously stated, the structure within a state or society provides the left and right limits or blueprint for individuals to operate. Additionally, the importance of individuals, leadership, and ideology becomes important during different stages of revolution. However, the early or casual stage, that develops a crisis to

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incapacitate state control, relies more on the structural imbalances within a state and to better understand the casual factors for revolution we must look at Tunisia through a structural lens.

Overall, the structuralist theory of revolution explains the factors that stress political, social, and economic mechanisms of states. The causation can be internally and externally based on the type of society, its relationship with other states, and the factors that contribute to state stability. Based on these observations by the various revolutionary theorists we must understand how the state maintains power in order to label the political structure of the state we wish to analyze. Categorizing the state by its political intuitions or power dynamics provides not only the factors that fracture state control, but the left and right limits for individuals or revolutionary actors to operate. Overall, there is merit in understanding what factors impact state stability, and analyzing how states maintain power provides greater clarity into the vulnerabilities of the state. In order to understand the vulnerabilities of state power in the case of Tunisia, an in-depth historical analysis of state control prior to the 2011 revolution.

THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF TUNISIA PRIOR TO 2011:

The political structure of Tunisia prior to the revolution of 2011 on paper seems to resemble that of a representative democracy. In theory, the three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judiciary) provided the appropriate checks and balances and limited one person or groups strangle hold over coercive power of the state. On paper, term limits for the president and admittance of opposition parties for political participation seemed to cast a democratic identity or process to the Tunisian political system. However, greater historical analysis shows that the political system of Tunisia, prior to the revolution in 2011, hinged on single party control of legislative mechanisms of the state with extreme singular coercive power vested in the executive by the only two presidents since Tunisian independence in 1956.

Following liberation from French colonial rule President Habib Bourguiba ascended to power in 1956. During his tenure, Bourguiba concentrated the power of the executive branch of government and maintained singular rule over the Tunisian political system of governance. He ensured his political party, Neo-Destour, maintained strict control of parliament by outlawing opposition parties to participate in national elections and developed a non-competitive electoral system with limited impact on challenging or changing government leadership. During his tenure he passed numerous modernist and social reforms, such as political participation for women in government and state sectors, access to government funded education for Tunisian citizens, and government assistance programs for the poor and underprivileged sectors of Tunisian society. During his tenure Bourguiba declared himself “president for life” and maintained a secular government opposed to Islamist or religious affiliations within many aspects of Tunisian society. Based on his fears from previous incidents between islamist and secular divides in neighboring Algeria, Bourguiba either exported those he viewed as religious extremists or by presidential and parliamentary decree limited their
participation within government and other sectors of society.\textsuperscript{16} Essentially, the decades following French colonial centered around a dictatorial regime focused on painting political power over all state systems of government. Fadhel Kaboub, a research associate at Harvard’s Kennedy School, recalls an interview with Bourguiba, when asked about Tunisia’s political system, he replied, “The system? What system? I am the system.”\textsuperscript{17}

During his tenure Bourguiba routinely transitioned the leadership within the Neo-Destour Party. Based on parliamentary procedure, the party with the most seats within the Chamber of Deputies elected a representative from their party to serve as Prime Minister. Bourguiba ensured persons placed in the position had limited political backgrounds and leadership potential. Individuals placed on other high positions within the government shared similar qualities to ensure no individual or groups challenged Bourguiba’s position within the Tunisian system. However in the 1980s Bourguiba’s failing health, rising age, and increased pressure by Tunisian citizens due to poor economic performance allowed newly appointed Prime Minister, Zine El-Abedine Ben Ali’s ascent to to power.

In November 1987, Ben Ali became the second President of Tunisia. During the early stages of his presidency, he instituted political reforms aimed at quenching Tunisians desire for greater democratic principles of government. He removed the life term limit of the Presidency and adopted a maximum of three five-year terms. Ben Ali freed political prisoners, allowed previously banned political organizations to participate in politics, promised the inclusion of previously banned islamist groups, and other increased democratic reforms under the National Pact of 1988. Additionally, President Ben Ali adopted the democratic policies of the IMF and World Bank’s Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) following a decade of financial crisis in 1992. The program aimed at free trade agreements with foreign nations, greater private investment, and the relinquishment of state control of various Tunisian economic industries. The early concessions by the newly appointed Tunisian President seemed a step toward positive democratic reforms.

However, democratic change and inclusion were short lived during the period of Ben Ali’s rule. Amendments to the constitution limited the prospect of opposition parties gaining any foothold inside the Tunisian National Assembly. Small changes, such as needing the signature of thirty members within the National Assembly to run for political office, became a requirement prior to elections. As Fadhel Kaboub noted, “Ben Ali continued to promote the illusion of political pluralism by increasing the number of seats reserved for the opposition parties in the national assembly, but the “majority lists” election rules were constantly tweaked to marginalize influence of the opposition while


always giving them hope for the possibility of gaining more seats in the future." Over the course of presidential elections Ben Ali again routinely amended the constitution, when his term limit expired following the 2004 election, he amended the constitution again to allow unlimited term limits to the president until the age of 74. Islamist opposition parties never gained a foothold in Tunisian politics and Ben Ali routinely used the threat of Islamists to justify the actions of his secret police cracking down on public protest and state control over various platforms of social media, internet, press, and public broadcasting. Ben Ali renamed the Neo-Destour Party to Rassemblement Constitutionel Democratique or Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) and maintained a super majority over the legislative arm of the Tunisian Government.

The graphs above above show the election results from the 2004 National Assembly (left) and previous three presidential elections (right) prior to the 2011 revolution. The 2004 election results show the lowest seat holding by the RCD during the party’s existence and the weak opposition to the presidency by any challenging party. A 2000 case study by Larbi Sadiki, of the British Journal of Middle East Studies, explains that every Tunisian household maintained two members that voted for RCD candidates.

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19 Many experts considered that he would amend the constitution prior to the 2014 Presidential Election due to the fact he was 73 during the 2009 election and he would be ineligible to run in 2014.

20 Data compiled from UN election results. I created the graphs myself with the compiled data. I utilized the previous three presidential elections because 1999 marked the first time a challenger received the required 30 signatures to appear on a Presidential Election Ballot. Ben Ali ran unopposed in the previous elections.
based on the 9.5 million population. The author concluded that numbers became skewed in an alarming rate and that Tunisia shows limited prospects of a democratic representative society, rather one of presidential patronage.\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, one Tunisian noted in a 1990s interview that “In this country the deal is simple. We leave politics to the president, and he in exchange leaves us to eat. You eat and you keep quiet.”\textsuperscript{22}

Overall, the historic associations and policies of Tunisian politics prior to the 2011 revolution show an extreme concentration of power in a single party system controlled by a single individual. Over the course of nearly sixty years Tunisian political power rested in the RCD and the two singular state leaders that ensured limited political opposition against the RCD, as well as, internal to their party to ensure the longevity of their political positions across decades of rule. Investigating other structures of Tunisian society will establish the greater clarity in the role of the regime and policies in economic and social aspects of of Tunisian Society.

THE ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF TUNISIA:

In 1992, following a decades-long economic and agricultural crisis that swept across Tunisia President Ben Ali adopted Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) policies of the World Bank and the IMF. The program provided monetary support to the failing Tunisian economy based on the long term goals of privatizing State Owned Enterprises (SOEs), liberalizing markets to ensure completion and growth, trade agreements to support export growth, improving governance and fighting corruption.\textsuperscript{23} In theory, these policies would allow greater private investment within Tunisia to not only develop key areas of critical infrastructure and job creation, but allow increased competition to drive commodity prices down. Coupled with the development of export-focused commodities, economic sustainability and growth would follow. In the case of Tunisia, however, the “conditionally” brought on by the SAP allowed Ben Ali and small members of his inner circle to concentrate vast quantities of wealth in relatively small actor of society.

In a World Bank Report titled “All in the Family,” analysts explained that during the period following the privatization of major sectors of the Tunisian economy Ben Ali, his immediate family members, and small members of his inner circle accounted for the direct ownership of over 662 enterprises, and assets that totaled over 13 billion USD that accounted for more than one quarter of the Tunisian GDP in 2011.\textsuperscript{24} Ben Ali limited inter-competition within banking, telecommunication, natural resource development,

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{22} Sadiki. “Bin Ali's Tunisia.” 69.
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media, and various other industries to ensure his inner circle maintained a monopoly across monopoly Tunisian enterprises. The Tunisian economy also relied heavily on exports and foreign manufacturing investment. European countries accounted for roughly 80% of the Tunisian export market and market impacts, such as those seen in during the 2007-2009 European economic crisis greatly impacted the Tunisian economy. Even with an average 3.7 percent increase in annual GDP over the previous decade, inflation in Tunisia averaged 4.5 percent. Overall, these factors of over-reliance on regional foreign investment and government corruption, monopolization over Tunisian infrastructure, and the failure to allow inclusive investment of industry greatly impacted employment prospects and alleviation of regional inequalities within Tunisia.

Job creation suffered greatly in the period leading up the the revolutionary events of 2011. While the Tunisian unemployment rate remained relatively stable over the previous decade, hovering around 14 percent, the unemployment rate among youth rose to over 20 percent and spiked in 2010-2011. College graduates fared even worse with unemployment rates surpassing 35 percent and some graduates with law or economics degrees had roughly a 50 percent rate of employment. The over reliance on a tourist based economy that stagnated over the recent decade at an increase of only 1.2 percent and the inability for the government to create jobs in sectors of higher employment based on the monopoly markets established by the Ben Ali Regime created negative impact on the employment opportunities within Tunisia. Additionally, government investment in coastal regions and major city centers outpaced interior regional investment by 65%. Unemployment in internal or land locked regions of Tunisia hovered at roughly 30% while coastal regions averaged under 10 percent. Internal regions also experienced three times higher levels of poverty than coastal regions.

The various factors discussed above show the Tunisian economic model as a corporatist system controlled by Ben Ali and his close associates. The Structural Adjustment Programs of the World Bank and IMF aimed to develop an inclusive and liberalized economic model aimed at growing the Tunisian economy and standard of living. However, the corruption and control by President Ben Ali created a small percentage of the population to control vast amounts of wealth, a fragile economy prospect reliant on the consumer industries, small regional invest, and a model unable to assimilate the needs of youth and educated calluses of society.

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF TUNISIA:

Elite, middle, and lower classes existed within the Tunisian social structure of society. Based on the political and economic analysis of the Tunisian state discussed above, a small sector of privileged elite maintained control of various large quantities of wealth. The ability for average citizens to improve their social standards or class became

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increasingly difficult due to government policies and controls that limited growth. However, two social groups within the Tunisian structure played important roles in establishing the revolutionary potential within the state. The first group, developed out of government liberal reform policies, while the second became depoliticized based on Ben Ali’s desire to limit the of political opponents or intervention among apparatuses of the state.

The first group within the Tunisian social structure looks at the rise of a highly educated section of society with large numbers of newly educated youth. The actions of the Ben Ali regime essentially created what I label as a new elite class within the Tunisian social structure of society. A study by the World Bank showed that Tunisian youth accounted for roughly 33 percent of the Tunisian population, however, this group became extremely marginalized due to policies by the Ben Ali Regime and unemployment within this section of society surpassed 45 percent. Coupled with greater access to education and lack of economic opportunities the Tunisian state under Ben Ali essentially created a highly educated class with no prospect for upward mobility or ability to increase their social and economic placement within society. While educated youth can not be seen in the same sphere as members of the RCD or Ben Ali family, but they play an important role in the fact that a highly educated sector of society became ostracized and stagnated.

The second group of importance within Tunisian society focuses on the military. Ben Ali, like Bourguiba wanted to limit the prospect of not only political intervention from challengers, but the prospect of a military coup or corruption within his government. However, unlike Bourguiba, Ben Ali limited the prospect of intervention by downplaying the role of the military and increasing the role of his secret police within the Tunisian structure. Once again 1991-1992 was an important year, especially pertaining to Tunisia’s relationship regarding control and authorities of the military. In May 1991, the Ministry of Interior uncovered a suspect coup against Ben Ali that included members of the military and outlawed political parties sharing islamist sentiments. A study by the Carnegie Endowment for Iteration Peace shows that “244 officers, noncommissioned officers, and soldiers, including three of the six assistants to the army chief of staff were charged in the events.”

Following these events, Ben Ali took a more direct role overseeing the military leaving the position of Chief of Staff of the Armed forces vacant. During the next two decades he only appointed personal associates to fill high military positions. Additionally, regional

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27 18-25 years of age.


associations also played a key role in military command and leadership. High ranking officers became associated with coastal regions and lower ranking soldiers came mainly from interior or poorer regions of the country. Even within the military class of Tunisia, regional divisions became apparent. The report described the Tunisian military as “Underpaid, under-equipped, and deprived of political influence, the bulk of the officer corps resented Ben Ali and felt betrayed by those generals who benefited from the system. Those at the very top who owed their positions to Ben Ali’s favoritism.”

The following decades also saw a shift in state funding to support the Ministry of Interior police forces instead of the military. During this period the budget of the interior ministry increased the defense budget by 165 percent and remained that way since 1992. Tunisia effectively became a police state and the military became the smallest standing defense force in the North African and Middle East Region.

Overall, the Tunisian Military and youth sectors of society represent two important marginalized groups within the Tunisian state. Ben Ali never predicted his policies would create a marginalized section of society that encompassed the largest social group within Tunisia. Additionally, his policies to limit the involvement of the military within the Tunisian structure marginalized a group, that during his time of need, failed to intervene on his behalf during the events of 2011.

LABELING THE “SULTANISTIC” TUNISIAN STATE:

In keeping with structural theory, we must label the state based on our analysis. Labeling the state provides a better understanding of not only the weakness of that state, but the necessary components that allow revolution to occur. Based on the economic, political, and social polices of the state I can label Tunisian as a highly oppressive, unrepresentative, corporatist state. Power rested sole in the hands of an autocrat only concerned with enhancing his personal wealth, political livelihood, and keeping a depoliticized based to ensure his dominance over all aspects of the state. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt used the term neopatrimonial to describe these states, in his 1973 book “Traditional Patrimonialism and Modern Neopatrimonialism.” The definition describes the relationship in a state “that appears to be a modern bureaucratic and party-based government, but in fact, single powerful person rules society through an expensive system of patronage, rather than impersonal laws.”

More recent theorists, such as Jack Goldstone, described personalistic regimes in the Middle East as “Sultanistic” dictatorships. Goldstone explains provides a compelling summary these regimes in a Foreign Affairs article, “understanding the Revolutions of 2011.”

“Sultanistic regimes have a national leader that expands his personal power at the expense of formal institutions. Sultanistic dictators appeal to no ideology and

30 Grewal. Quiet Revolution.

31 Goldstone. Revolutions Theoretical, Comparative, and Historical Studies. 70.
have no purpose other than maintaining their personal authority. They may preserve some of the formal aspects of democracy -- elections, political parties, a national assembly, or a constitution -- but they rule above them by installing compliant supporters in key positions and sometimes by declaring states of emergency, which they justify by appealing to fears of external (or internal) enemies. Behind the scenes, such dictators generally amass great wealth, which they use to buy the loyalty of supporters and punish opponents. Because they need resources to fuel their patronage machine, they typically promote economic development, through industrialization, commodity exports, and education.”

The passage above provides a clear representation of the reality within Tunisia prior to the events of 2011. Goldstone highlights all the applicable contradictions and issues present during the structural analysis of the Tunisian state in the previous sections. He continues to explain that these regimes seek relationships with foreign states or institutions to bolster their own wealth, aim to depoliticize segments of their class structure, and reinforce the populations need for the services of the dictator. Overall, labeling Tunisia as a “Sultanistic” dictatorship allows us to analyze the necessary components for revolution to occur within these states.

Other theorist focused on these types of states through the table of personalistic, autocratic, or dictatorial regimes. Thomas Walker described a similar relationship examining the Nicaraguan Revolution during the colonial occupation period of the Spanish and the modern capitalistic system pre revolution. Both periods saw extreme amounts of wealth in the hands of a small elite class, or in the case of Somoza, a small inner circle of the regime. Even with high rates of economic prosperity, only small sectors of society saw upward mobility and during these periods. Leaders manipulated state systems to support their inner circles politically and economically, normally at the expense of the population.

WEAKNESSES AND NECESSARY COMPONENTS FOR REVOLUTION IN “SULTANISTIC" STATES:

Based on structural theory, sultanistic states have unique vulnerabilities that stress the stability of the state and the ability for the ruler and his elite to maintain power. Various causal factors may present themselves in this type of society, but specific necessary components must present themselves for revolution to occur. Developing a better understanding of these components will allow us to test whether these aspects became apparent in the lead up to the Tunisian Revolution or if other factors contributed to the events of 2011.

Various theorists such as, Walter Goldfrank, Theda Skocpol, Jack Goldstone Thomas Walker, and Jerrold Green share similar beliefs regarding the components necessary for

revolution to occur in states that share “Sultanistic” qualities discussed in the previous
section. The first necessary component discussed by these theorists looks at a crisis
that incapacitates state control. The crisis can come in many forms and numerous
policies or situations can build upon one another. Essentially, the crisis cripples the
state’s ability to respond or represent the image as an authority with coercive powers
over the population. The second component looks at the breakdown or dissent among
the elite class within society. Infighting among elites occurs when too much wealth or
power becomes concentrated among small areas of the ruling elite. The ruler must keep
the elite class within internal competition and must perform a careful balancing act to
meet the expectations of this social class. Once elites defect, they have the potential to
justify or support movements against the state and leave the chief executive with few
defense other than armed force. Third, mass discontent must be apparent across
various sectors of society. The causes that create discontent range from poor economic
policies, conflicts between traditional organizations and modern state bureaucratic
mechanisms, the monopolization of resources by the ruler or government, policies that
fuel regional separations and divides, and various other policies. Fourth, a unifying
motivation to rebel against existing government institutions across society. The unifying
motivation can be shared beliefs, experiences, or even trigger events that bring about
shared sentiments for change across vast sectors of society. Finally, the fifth event is a
permissive world context that allows the revolutionary actions within a state to occur.
Structuralists view states from a non-reductionist model and that their interactions and
competitions impact internal policies and events within states. Essentially, the
actions of outside states or international institutions can directly impact the revolutionary
potential and situation within states. Normally, some type of foreign condemnation,
policy, or action allows a revolutionary movement to occur. Likewise, foreign intervention
can stall a revolutionary movement or potential within a state as well.

ANALYSIS OF THESE COMPONENTS IN THE CASE OF TUNISA:

Revolutionary theorists explain that misery, inequality, and discontent for government
institutions and policies fail to account for the unique occurrences of revolution alone.
Structural theorists argue that certain necessary components for revolution, outlined in
the previous section, must occur in a unique situation or period to bring about the
unique events that encompass revolutionary activity. Based on the analysis of structural

33 Goldfrank, Walter. “Mexican Revolution,” Revolutions Theoretical, Comparative, and Historical

34 Walker, Thomas. “Nicaraguan Revolution,” Revolutions Theoretical, Comparative, and

35 Green, Jerrold. “Countermobilization in the Iranian Revolution,” Revolutions Theoretical,
2003. 236-238.

36 Skocpol, Theda. “Revolutions: A Structural Analysis,” Revolutions Theoretical, Comparative,
theory, the components of Tunisian societal structure, and the weaknesses of that structure we can identify the necessary components for revolution in the contemporary case of Tunisia.

First, mass discontent for government policies, poor economic performance, and corruption presented themselves in the lead up to the events of 2011. Even with the noticeable improvements in the World Competitiveness Index and GDP growth over the previous decade Tunisian citizens perceptions of their of their wellbeing soured over that time. A Gallup poll conducted during the years of 2009 to 2012 showed a dramatic decrease in “public opinion on well-being/life evaluation, employment, satisfaction with basic infrastructure, and the perception that businesses can succeed without heavy government interference or control.”37 The poll showed dramatic decreases by 30% in the public's perception for employment opportunity, 20 percent in the desire for opening private enterprises, and a 35% in the government's infrastructure support and services.38 The poll also shows that the primary driver in the mass protest movements hinged on unemployment and government corruption accounting for roughly 60 and 30 percent respectively.


The data supports these opinion polls based on high unemployment rates among the youth population, around 40-45 percent, that accounted for a third of the Tunisian population. Additionally, regional inequalities and lack of investment in infrastructure and basic services played a major role. In the map above I merged data from the World Bank to geographically associate unemployment across Tunisia. The map shows disproportionate rates of overall unemployment from coastal to interior regions of Tunisia. Government investment in coastal regions greatly surpassed interior regions. Only 50 percent of the population of interior regions had access to safe drinking water and sanitation, poverty occurred at rates four time greater than coastal regions, and maternal mortality rates were three times as high. The factors discussed above coupled with high inflation rates across the Tunisia (4.7 percent over the previous decade) and the extreme corruption of the Ben Ali inner circle discussed in the economic section provided a mass discontent across the Tunisian population. The map also shows how the revolution unfolded. Mass protests in the interior regions of the country quickly spread to the coastal regions and eventually the capital of Tunis.

Second, the self immortalization of Mohamed Bouazizi became the unifying motivation for the mass discontent felt across Tunisian society. In the months leading up to the revolution mass demonstration for employment and government policies occurred across the nation. However, the actions by Bouazizi became the symbol of the revolution. He represented the inequality felt by the average citizen among the Tunisian population. When authorities confiscated his fruit cart and his cries for fairness and compassion were met with to his face, a symbolic gesture of humiliation. Following the events he told his friends "he would let the world know how unfairly they were being treated, how corrupt the system was," and completed his act of martyrdom.\(^\text{39}\) Those near the local market posted video of Bouazizi's actions on social media and in the following days the sentiments of inequality and dissatisfaction that seemed hidden for decades boiled over to the streets across Tunisia. In an interview with protesters in Sidi Bouzid, the city where the events occurred, an unnamed individual noted that "every family here has somebody who lost a job or was denied a raise or was called in by state security," Machat said. “Bouazizi just gave us the courage to let it out.”\(^\text{40}\)

Third, the elite component within Tunisia fractured during the period following Mohamed Bouazizi self immortalization that became the unifying motivation for revolution. First the large concentration of wealth within Ben Ali's immediate family members and close allies within the ruling elite created resentment among those outside his inner circle. In the previous section, analyzing the weaknesses of Sultanistic Dictatorships, the ruler must ensure competition among his elite class. If too much wealth becomes


concentrated in a small section of the class then greater pressure and animosity focuses on the dictator, in this case Ben Ali this occurred. First, the trade unions played a central role in undermining the elite structure of society. The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) had historic associations in the independence movement form colonial occupation. Following the departure of French rule the organization became the major bridge between political and economic policies of the state. Many high ranking members within the UGTT became involved with the RCD, however, over time the increase in corporatist model removed much of the unions authority and power over time. Events of mass protest in the 1970s and 80s further decreased the unions role in the political spectrum even through many high ranking members still maintained political affiliations with the RCD. However, following the events of December 2010 and the increase in mass protest the UGTT local and region offices became a sounding board for frustrated workers and citizens protesting Ben Ali’s policies. The UGTT became a powerful opponent to the regime and system it once supported and numerous leaders voiced discontent with he policies of the ruling elite.

The military took a similar path to that of the UGTT. As previously discussed in the assessment of the Tunisian social structure, the military became ostracized under Ben Ali. Once an intricate member of the the Tunisian elite under President Bourguiba, the military became disconnected under Ben Ali. Following the suspected coup in 1991 Ben Ali limited funding and participation in defense directives to high ranking members of the military. Over time, the military became disassociated with the elite structure, replaced with that of the secret police, but when the protest movement became to great Ben Ali called on the military to quell the protest movement. However, when Ben Ali ordered his officers to fire on protesters outside the presidential palace in Tunis, General Rachid Ammar refused. In the following days General Ammar removed his troops from the city and allowed the protest to ensue. Even the Prime Minster, Mohamed Ghannouchi, played his part by dissolving the RCD controlled government once Ben Ali fled the country to Saudi Arabia. The actions by these individuals and organizations show the fragility of the elite structure prior to and during the early events of the Tunisian Revolution.

Fourth, a permissive world context greatly aided the revolutionary fever within the Tunisian state. Revolution can quickly come to an end or quickly ensue if the global context allows. As Walter Goldfrank points out in his analysis of the Mexican Revolution a tolerant or permissive world context must occur to allow the actions of revolutionary actors. In the case of Tunisia the inaction and support for democratic transition and free choice by numerous world leaders sealed the fate for non-interventionism on behalf of the Ben Ali regime. In a news article published by the BBC, reporters gathered the reactions from various leaders across the globe. U.S. President Barack Obama condemned violence against the Tunisian people, supported their protest against a repressive government, and hoped for a democratic peaceful transition. EU foreign

policy chief, Catherine Ashton, expressed support for the Tunisian peoples democratic aspirations. The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, voiced his concerns for a peaceful transition and that the desires of the Tunisian people must be heard. Overall, these responses show a transition from support of the Ben Ali regime to the support of democratic transition. Even with strong U.S. relations in counter terror in the Maghreb Region of North Africa, the vast export economic relationship with the EU, and the various agreed frameworks and policies between Ben Ali and the UN no one came to his aid or support incountering the revolutionary fever inside his country. Instead the leaders and countries of the free-world outright supported transition and his removal from power. Released classified U.S. documents from wikileaks also fueled anti-regime sentiments. During previous administrations the U.S. admiringly knew of Ben Ali’s activities and highlighted his numerous corrupt practices. The documents further fueled anti-regime sentiments and showed the ability of outside agencies to impact internal domestic issues. Additionally, the international economic policies of the Structural Adjustment Program exacerbated economic deprivation within Tunisia and allowed Ben Ali to concentrate greater power within his regime.

Finally, these relationships and the fifty years of government corruption, repression, and limited opportunities created a revolutionary situation for a mass protest movement to incapacitate the mechanisms of state control and action. The mass protest movement that swept across Tunisia aided by social media outlets quickly impacted the ability of the government to respond to meet the demands of the people. Protests grew from internal regions to major cities centers of Carthage and Tunis. No action by Ben Ali could quell anti-regime sentiments that festered for decades. His promise for 300,000 newly created jobs and wage increases across the country did nothing to quell the sentiments that built over the previous half century. Overall, the mass protests across the country incapacitated the corporatist state and the ability for the mechanisms of that state to function.

POINTS OF CONCERN:

While structural theory accounts for the causal factors associated with the Tunisian Revolution there are still other areas or factors that need to be addressed for future study. First, social media or “technology” played a large role in advancing what Crane Brinton referred to as the “fever” of revolution. Technology allowed the self immortalization of Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010 to spread across Tunisia. Thirty years ago his actions may have only been tales of folklore or exaggerations from frustrated citizens over-embellishing the truth. However, since nearly five million Tunisians, roughly half of the population, accessed social media regularly, the actions of Bouazizi became a mobilizing force behind revolutionary thoughts and sentiments in Tunisia. The power of social media and technology must not be overlooked when looking at revolutions in the contemporary age. Similar to Samuel Huntington’s “system disequilibrium” theory, modernization, or in this case modern technology, must be taken into account when looking at the factors that allow the revolution to spread at rapid

42 BBC. “In quotes: Reaction to Tunisian crisis.” BBC, January 15, 2011.
rates. Another factor that must be studied with greater detail hinges on the importance of the military during revolution. In the case of Tunisia, Ben Ali kept his military relatively dissociated from the ruling elite and society in general. The inability and unwillingness for the military to react on behalf of Ben Ali shows the importance of military choosing to remain impartial during critical stages or junctures. Had the military under General Ammar chosen to suppress the protests would the events of Tunisia unfolded differently? The question is hard to answer, but provides the importance to understanding the power dynamics within critical structures of state control and why certain states with strongly embed military relationships within social structures of society, like North Korea, are relatively immune to revolutionary activity? The answer and even question require greater analysis but develop the importance of understanding structural dynamics of states and their potential imbalances.

CONCLUSION:

Tunisia presents an interesting case because it set in motion a wave of revolutions that swept across North Africa and the Middle East. Many theorists such as Stephen Walt predicted that Tunisia resembled an outlier case that other authoritarian leaders would learn from. However, a few months later Walt would write a second article explaining what he failed to understand once revolutionary activity spread to Egypt. Overall, he insisted that each case is difficult to predict, but developing a better understanding of the factors that stress state control and the institutional dynamics present in each state allow greater clarity in the understanding each states susceptibility to revolutionary activity. Tunisia also represented a unique occurrence where the role of social media expanded the reach and rate that revolutionary activity spread. Social media platforms, the internet, and news outlets played a large role in mobilizing individuals and must be accounted for in future cases of revolutionary activity. Tunisia also represented a unique occurrence because of the relatively “leaderless” nature of the revolution, no one group or individual became the focal point. While Mohamed Bouazizi represented the “Jasmine” movement, Tunisia failed to generate a Lenin or Mao type leader. The advent in internet and media platforms may play a greater role in future revolutionary movements and must be taken into account when studying future cases.

In this paper, I analyzed the structural theory of revolutions and showed that theory used to explain the causal factors of historical cases of revolution still applies in the contemporary age. I analyzed the political, social, and economic structure of Tunisia to label the state as a sultanistic dictatorship. Next, I discussed the weaknesses of these types of regimes, the necessary components for revolution to occur, and analyzed the events of Tunisia in that context. In the end, structural imbalances within Tunisian political, economic, and social spheres of society led to revolution in 2011 and support the theories of structural scholars.

Based on my analysis, I can conclude that the necessary components for revolution argued by structural theorists were present in Tunisia. The components built off one another to develop a revolutionary situation and with the actions by Mohamed Bouazizi in December of 2010, created the spark that set the revolution in motion. Overall, the events of 2010-2011 developed out of decades discontent and failed policies of the state that fermented over time to create a revolution that shaped the landscape of the North Africa and the Middle East. My analysis shows that revolutionary theory used to explain the events of historical revolutions applies in the contemporary age.
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