A stylized graphic featuring a globe in the background. Overlaid on the globe is a large, dark green number '1'. A thick, dark green swoosh curves over the top right of the '1'. A thin white circular line with two small white dots at its ends encircles the '1' and the swoosh.

1

**The “Arab Spring Index”.
Analyzing the democratization of
the Tunisian Revolution through
the Political Opportunity Theory.**

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Introduction

Under the Political Process Theory, political opportunities comprise a very strong conceptual tool for understanding the emergence of collective action initiatives, i.e. riots, protests, strikes, etc. Political opportunities focus on the world “outside” social movements as, according to this theory, certain political demonstrations can emerge depending on the political context; hence, studying the different dimensions of political opportunities could improve our understanding of why certain movements are successful and others do not thrive.

The Arab Spring revolutions have been studied from a myriad of perspectives, and although some authors tacitly analyze the contextual factors that have ignited protests, little attention has been given to political opportunities

as a separate category for analysis. Consequentially, this article develops an exploration of the outcomes of the Arab Spring posing “political opportunities” at the core of the enquiry. More concretely, the article studies the case of Tunisia and explores a key dimension of political opportunities: openness to citizens’ participation. Tunisia represents a successful attempt of political change from authoritarianism to democracy and it is relevant to study how different dimensions of political opportunity changed since the irruption of the Arab Spring.

The article is divided as follows: the first section develops a contextualization of the Arab Spring uprising, highlighting, on the one hand, the most relevant events and, on the other hand, how several academics have analyzed its development and consequences. Then, the chapter analyzes the Tunisia case, in order to better understand the specificities of the Arab Spring uprisings in this country. The following section develops the theoretical framework based on the political opportunities structure and, after establishing its relevance for better understanding the Arab Spring, there is an operationalization of the dimension “openness to citizens’ participation” using the Varieties of Democracy research project. Then, the next section analyzes each individual indicator for the case of Tunisia. Finally, the concluding remarks are developed, stating that openness to citizens’ participation was a key element to better understand the relative success of the Arab Spring in Tunisia.

The Arab Spring What is the Arab Spring and how has it been studied?

The Arab Spring's concept has included a myriad of popular movements in the Middle East and Northern Africa during the first and second decades of the 21st Century. According to Howard and Hussain (2013: 3), the Arab Spring was “the cascading popular democracy movements that began in Tunisia, inspired Egypt, and consequently animated other movements across the region”. This concept includes a process of popular riots and manifestations with different results: while in some countries implied the overthrow of authoritarian governments, in others those governments could maintain the control of the country and repress the demonstrators or start bloody civil conflicts. In this sense, Ardiç has pointed out how the Arab Spring included rebellions and revolution mechanisms, as this period witnessed massive popular manifestations, military coups and violent movements organized by the opposition (2012: 11-14).

Some authors have considered the Arab Spring as the fourth wave of democracy, following the democratic transition of over thirty countries from Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa, between 1974 and 1990 (Weyland 2012). In fact, other authors have questioned if the Arab Spring is a new wave of democracy or, on the contrary, if it is a continuation of the third wave (Abushouk 2016). Relatedly, authors like Samir Amin consider the Arab Spring as one of the numerous waves of revolutions in the Middle East and signal the similarities to the Latin American Spring during the 90s and the first decade of the 21st Century (Amir 2011).

Given the current relevance of the Arab Spring, its causes have been widely analyzed –i.e. Tejerina et al 2013 and Israeli 2017. Some authors have signaled the relevance of the political grievances (Bellin 2012). In Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, where Presidents have been governing during decades through repressive policies, protests were perceived as a way of modernizing the State and the economy (Asongu & Nwachukwu 2016). In fact, other authors have focused on the economic motivations behind the flourishing of the Arab Spring and how the increase in schooling and unemployment levels –provoked by the economic stagnation– contributed to the loss of governmental legitimacy in Tunisia and Yemen (Campante & Chor 2012; Tejerina et al. 2013).

On a complementary fashion, other authors consider the religious conflicts among Shiite and Sunnite as the main ignitors of the Arab Spring (Halverson et al. 2013; Hoffman & Jamal 2014). In countries like Syria, where the Shiite minority controlled most of the national political power, Salafist and insurrectionist movements were mainly composed by Sunnites: Ousting al-Asad regime was not only a way of achieving a more democratic government, but also opening the national government to the participation of non-Alawite population. Relatedly, in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunnite moderate pan-Islamic organization, played a key role in the *Lotus revolution* and in the post-Mubarak government under the Presidency of Mohamed Morsi.

Finally, other authors have explained the Arab Spring revolutions as the consequence of the generational gap within these countries (Cavatorta 2012; Allagui & Kuebler 2011). In this sense, protests were mainly headed and organized by the young population through the use of

social media mechanisms: text-messaging, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts... (Ackerman 2011). In fact, the use of these new mechanisms, hardly controlled and repressed by the old traditionalist governments, allowed the organization of a strong and cohesive opposition movement and avoided an effective response by the repressive forces –more used to a classic party-controlled opposition (Christensen & Christensen 2013).

Therefore, the Arab Spring constitutes a complex conflict concerning political, economic and social spheres. In this sense, some authors have already used social science theories in order to obtain a better understanding of the emergence of the demonstrations and the consolidation, success or fail of the Arab uprisings (Debuysere 2018; Beinin 2016; Chenoweth and Ulfelder 2017). More concretely, Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) used the RMT to evidence how, during the Egyptian Revolution, Social Media became a key resource to structure and coordinate the anti-government protests that led to Mubarak's overthrow. In this line of thought, Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) analyzed the influence of political opportunities during the Arab Spring through the study of social media data of twenty Arab countries.

Concerning specific studies on Tunisia, Beinin (2016) studies the relevance of the Tunisian Trade Unions – especially of the Tunisian General Federation of Labor (UGTT) – during the popular protests and during the consolidation of the post-Ben-Ali government. Pilati et al. (2019) deepened in this hypothesis and focused on the impact of informal groups in the configuration of the demonstrations and in the further constitution of transitional governments in Egypt and Tunisia. Finally, Moaddel (2012) developed a critical approximation

both to the Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) and to the POT, evaluating how effectively they predicted the participation of the Arab population in the demonstrations. In addition, Dupont and Passy (2011) also questioned the already existing studies and analyzed the potentialities of the RMT, the POT and the Framing Theory (FT).

Tunisia in the Arab Spring

On 17 December 2010, the suicide of a Tunisian street vendor whose produced cart was confiscated by governmental forces ignited social unrest and popular protests against the authoritarian government of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Within the denominated *Jasmine Revolution*, massive popular protests spread over the country, mainly against the corruption and the economic crisis in the Ben Ali's administration. On 14 January 2011, due to the incapacity of repressing the riots and the increasing defections within the military and police ranks, Ben Ali finally left the Presidency and flew to Saudi Arabia (Dabashi 2012). In 2011, the Constituent Assembly, democratically summoned, elected Monced Marzouki as the Tunisian president until 2014.

The overthrow of the Tunisian dictatorship soon led to new uprisings in numerous countries of the region, but with different results. On 25 January, thousands of Egyptians started mobilizing against Hosni Mubarak's regime, demanding the call for democratic elections and the improvement of economic conditions. After the manifestation of 1 million citizens in Tahrir Square and the failed attempts of negotiating a political and economic agreement with the opposition, the government tried to violently repress the demonstrators. Finally, on 11 February Mubarak resigned and the military forces assumed the

transition government, initiating a period of instability that led to the election of Mohamed Morsi in 2012 and then to a military coup –due to popular protests against Morsi’s “authoritarian drift” (Ketchley 2017).

Moreover, some authors have signaled similarities between the Tunisian and the Yemeni governments. In January 2011, thousands of citizens –supported by the main political parties of the opposition– organized riots and manifestations all along Yemen. The main demand was to call for a change in the authoritarian government of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was accused of the misadministration in the country and the high levels of poverty and inequality. After intense negotiations within the government and the opposition, Saleh agreed to stop the constitutional reform designed to perpetuate him in the Presidency and, instead, he resigned (Dabashi 2012). Nonetheless, the election of the new President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi –voted on 2012 in a single party election– was rejected by the Houthi population, who took control of Sana and began a civil war still ongoing (Sharp 2017).

Methodology

This article revises key literature pertaining the Arab Spring, its contextual and political process and then it offers a detailed analysis of the Tunisian case. Tunisia was chosen as a case study in this chapter because it comprises a “successful case” within the Arab Spring revolutions; hence it would be of academic importance to revise what were the conditions that allowed Tunisia to improve its democratic consolidation.

To carry out this analysis, this book chapter relies on the literature from the Social Movements Theory scholarship and intertwines it with the actual operationalization of the political opportunities concept. More specifically, the Political Opportunity is revised and operationalized in order to apply it into the analysis of Tunisia during the Arab Spring.

After discussing the different dimensions that political opportunities have been traditionally operationalized into, the dimension of openness to citizens' participation is evaluated in detail. To achieve the latter, this book chapter relies of the Varieties of Democracy Database in order to find proxies that allow a proper assessment of Tunisia's openness to citizens' participation.

The Varieties of Democracy Database is a world renowned and rigorous database on democratic indicators. In this sense, this database provided information to a myriad of studies about democracy, including research works about the impact of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the consolidation of democratic regimes (Grahn and Lührmann 2020), about the political participation in new democracies (Fernandes et al. 2015) or even about the evolution of the democratic values in a global perspective (Mechkova and Lührmann 2017). Concerning the Arab Spring, some authors analyzed the political structure and the organization in the Middle East (Karimi 2018), as well as the impact of political mobilizations on democratic consolidation processes (McMann 2018).

Therefore, this database allows to observe the evolution of the individual indicators selected in order to better explain the trend experienced in the Tunisian case. Complementarily, the analysis relies on specialized literature and sources

such as Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and others. Finally, after an individual analysis is developed, indicator by indicator, key conclusions are proposed.

Theoretical framework: Political Opportunities

Political Opportunities in the Arab Spring: an operationalization of the “openness to citizens’ participation” dimension

The political opportunity theory (POT) has been the conceptual framework for a variety of studies: Tarrow’s “Power in Movement” (1994), McAdam’s “Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency” (1982) or Tilly’s “Mechanisms in Political Processes” (2001). This theory states that contextual factors (political opportunities) are the key to understand the emergence of collective action initiatives and eventual social movements’ formation. According to Meyer and Minkoff, its basic premise “is that exogenous factors enhance or inhibit prospects for mobilization, for particular sorts of claims to be advanced rather than others, for particular strategies of influence to be exercised, and for movements to affect mainstream institutional politics and policy” (2004: 1458). In a complementary fashion, Tarrow defines POT as the study of “consistent - but not necessarily formal or permanent - dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure” (1994: 85).

In this sense, the political opportunity structure (POS)’s main goal is to understand ‘*when*’ collective action initiates. Hence, the existent POT academic literature focuses on the world *outside* a social movement. Under the POT

conceptual framework, social movements develop their repertoires of collective action (i.e. protests) because they are able to take advantage of the contextual political opportunities that surround them. In addition, this theory also focuses on the main dimensions of opportunity necessary to understand the different political changes, including a myriad of variables, i.e. the state capacity (Amenta et al. 1994) or the changes in public policy (Meyer 2005).

In this line of thought, some authors distinguished two lines of development within the POT (McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1996): a first branch, mainly composed by US researchers, focused on the emergence of “windows of opportunities” –i.e. Tarrow 1989–; and a second branch, mostly composed by European researchers, focused on the study and understanding of the political structures –i.e. Eisinger 1973. In fact, according to Giugni, “while the first approach has focused on political opportunities in a more dynamic fashion, the second, more static approach has paid more attention to political opportunity structures” (2011: 272).

Nonetheless, conceptualizing political opportunities is not as easy task as contexts can vary from place to place. However, Tarrow (1998: 76–80) refines it into several interrelated groups that, as different as they may be, they necessarily have to be perceived by the actors: (1) the degree of openness in the polity; (2) the stability of political alignments and divisions within the relevant elite; (3) the presence of allies and support groups; and (4) and repression or facilitation of dissent by the state. The operationalization developed by Tarrow (1998) focuses on the institutional factors that affect the emergence of collective action initiatives; hence the present analysis should bear in mind the latter clarification.

The operationalization of POS is relevant in order to better analyze the eventual success or failure of collective action initiatives. However, several approximations have produced disparate results, implying a lack of common understanding of the concept. For instance, some scholars included factors relevant to one specific case, avoiding the possibility of creating a generalizable theory. In fact, this problematic has led to the critic of several authors, like Meyer (2004: 131-132), because of the lack of a strong empirical testing of the POT researches.

Taking into account the challenges of analyzing POS, this chapter follows the recommendations of McAdam et al. (1996): avoiding unnecessary dimensions within the conceptualization of political opportunity. In congruence with the latter, this chapter evaluates Tunisia's political opportunities taking into account key indicators from the research project Varieties of Democracy (2020). As previously mentioned, the Varieties of Democracy Database develops rigorous indicators that can be used as proxies of political opportunities' operationalization, making the analysis easier in terms of determining the trends that openness to citizens' participation showed over the period of study.

More concretely, the openness to citizens' participation dimension will be evaluated as it is considered key when understating the relative success Tunisia had on its democratization process after the Arab Spring. This is the case as the Arab Spring Uprising was button-up, implying that citizens' participation was a key variable and could potentially explain the institutional factors that allowed the instauration of a potential democratic consolidation within the country. Taking into account the theoretical discussion developed in the preceding section, the final operationalization of this indicator is as follows:

Table 1. Dimensions, indicators and variables

Dimension	Individual indicators	Variables
1.Openness to citizens' participation It is desirable to increase citizen's participation as it raises the chances of having an ideal scenario for the presence of collective actors and social movements 1.1 score 1 is desirable 1.2 score 4 is desirable 1.3 score 1 is desirable 1.4 score 4 is desirable 1.5 score 1 is desirable 1.6 score 4 is desirable 1.7 score 1 is desirable 1.8 score 4 is desirable	1.1 Civil liberty index	Question: To what extent is civil liberty respected? Clarification: Civil liberty is understood as liberal freedom, where freedom is a property of individuals. Civil liberty is constituted by the absence of physical violence committed by government agents and the absence of constraints of private liberties and political liberties by the government. Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1).
	1.2 CSO Repression	Existence of governmental attempts to repress civil society organizations This variable is represented with a score: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 0: Severely. The government violently and actively pursues all real and even some imagined members of CSOs. They seek not only to deter the activity of such groups but to effectively liquidate them. 1: Substantially. The government arrests, tries, and imprisons leaders of and participants in oppositional CSOs who have acted lawfully. 2: Moderately. In addition to material sanctions, the government also engages in minor legal harassment (detentions, short-term incarceration) to dissuade CSOs from acting or expressing themselves.

Dimension	Individual indicators	Variables
1.Openness to citizens' participation It is desirable to increase citizen's participation as it raises the chances of having an ideal scenario for the presence of collective actors and social movements 1.1 score 1 is 1.2 desirable 1.3 score 4 is 1.4 desirable 1.5 score 1 is 1.6 desirable 1.7 score 4 is 1.8 desirable	1.2 CSO Repression	3: Weakly. The government uses material sanctions (fines, firings, denial of social services) to deter oppositional CSOs from acting or expressing themselves. 4: No. Civil society organizations are free to organize, associate, strike, express themselves, and to criticize the government without fear of government sanctions or harassment.
	1.3 Freedom of expression index	Project Manager(s): Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell Question: To what extent does government respect press and media freedom, the freedom of ordinary people to discuss political matters at home and in the public sphere, as well as the freedom of academic and cultural expression? Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1).
	1.4 Government censorship effort - Media	Extent of governmental direct or indirect efforts of censorship on media. This variable is represented with a score: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 0: Attempts to censor are direct and routine. 1: Attempts to censor are indirect but nevertheless routine. 2: Attempts to censor are direct but limited to especially sensitive issues. 3: Attempts to censor are indirect and limited to especially sensitive issues.

Dimension	Individual indicators	Variables
	1.4 Gov-ernment censorship effort - Me-dia	4: The government rarely at-tempts to censor major media in any way, and when such exceptional attempts are dis-covered, the responsible offi-cials are usually punished.

Source: created by the authors based on Varieties of Democracy (2020).

Figure 1. *Civil liberties index in MENA and Tunisia (1990-2018)*

Source: created by the authors based on Varieties of Democracy (2020).

Civil liberties and political rights are among the most relevant components of political opportunities, mainly because their existence or their absence are a clear indication of the quality of democracy consolidation. Civil

liberties lie at the core of the definition of democracy as it is with these liberties that communities can effectively participate in any democratic process. Robert Dahl (1999), states that civil liberties have to be included in any definition of democracy in order to overcome the dichotomy between positive and negative liberties.

In this sense, it is relevant to study how civil liberties changed before and after the Arab Spring in order to assess their relevance within the broader category of political opportunities. In this case, political opportunities would increase when civil liberties follow an upward pattern too. This section explores this category for Tunisia.

In general terms, the civil liberties index has remained stable for the MENA region. However, if we observe the pattern followed by Tunisia, there is an evident upward trend, especially from 2010 to 2011 –the year prior to the emergence of the Arab Spring wave of protests. In the case of Tunisia, the civil liberties index depicts a dramatic increase and has not returned to its levels prior to the irruption of the Arab Spring which implies that the situation has been favorable and civil liberties have consolidated after Tunisia changed its political regime.

Ben Ali political regime generically repressed any forms of political dissent, neglecting citizens' free exercise of key civil and political rights. In fact, Ali's autocratic government, human rights campaigners, news correspondents and members of the opposition were constantly surveilled, harassed and even imprisonment. Other authority abuses such as physical and psychological torture in police were widely documented and denounced (Kausch 2009; EMHRN 2010). In fact, freedom of association was almost non-existent. Almost all organizations and

associations that were closely related to political issues were bureaucratically bullied and denied legal registration (Kausch, 2009) –with known exceptions: The Tunisian League for Human Rights. Consequentially, independent, but not recognized, organizations were not allowed to meet in public and cause discomfort to the official regime (EMHRN 2010).

Although there have been several accomplishments in Tunisia, especially as the outcome of the Arab Spring and the end of an autocratic government, there are other problems that have not allowed Tunisia to consolidate democratic project. According to the Freedom in the World Report (Freedom House 2020), “the influence of endemic corruption, economic challenges, security threats, and continued unresolved issues related to gender equality and transitional justice remain obstacles to full democratic consolidation”.

As previously mentioned, and despite the fact that civil liberties index depicts one of its highest positions in the period studies, there are still some problems that Tunisia needs to tackle. Although the Tunisian Constitution actively protects academic freedom (Article 33), self-censorship is clearly an issue, which is entrenched within the Tunisian society. Certain topics remain a “taboo” and although citizens have obtained more civil rights, there are some cases on which they cannot exercise such rights. For example, students have denounced being unable to perform research projects on topics such as sexuality and gender identity. Other sensitive topics relate to the role of Islam within in violent extremism (Freedom House 2020). Regarding the possibility of publicly demonstrating, the Tunisian Constitution guarantees both the rights to assembly and peaceful demonstration throughout the

Articles 35-37 of its 2014 Constitution. In fact, public demonstrations on a variety of topics regularly take place, especially since the irruption of the Arab Spring demonstrations. Despite this is the case (and it is reflected on Graph 1), a counterterrorism law that was adopted in 2015 has imposed important constraints on public demonstrations (as well as the declaration of various states of emergency). On August 2019, the state of emergency was renewed and, among other things, it allows security forces to prevent public gatherings (i.e. protests) as they are considered likely to break the social order. Even though the official position from the government defends that declaring the state of emergency is important to diminish security concerns, it has been argued that it is a political tool to control social conflict.

In fact, hundreds of people were incarcerated in 2017 and 2018 at various demonstrations against economic austerity measures proposed by the regime. International Non-Governmental Organizations such as Amnesty International noted “in several 2019 statements that many who participated in such protests in Gafsa were later tried and convicted in absentia by a first-instance court in that city. Demonstrations in 2019, such as those in Sidi Bouzid in April following the deaths of a number of agricultural workers, as well as celebrations of the successful completion of the presidential elections, remained peaceful and free of police intervention” (Freedom House 2020).

Marginalized groups’ participation in Tunisia’s political arena continues to be an important concern and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations constantly work to increase their political participation. In 2017, a law was passed to guarantee the participation of women, people with disabilities

and people under 35. Although there have been several improvements, some segments of the population still lack full political rights. More concretely, presidential candidates must be Muslim, and there are still criminalizing laws for homosexuals, avoiding LGBT+ people from active political participation.

Figure 2. CSO repression in MENA and Tunisia (1990-2018)

Source: created by the authors based on Varieties of Democracy (2020).

In the case of the “CSO repression” indicator, Graph 2 depicts an improving in the possibility of organizations to reunite. From 2010 to 2011 there was an improvement of this indicator (depicting values close to 4: No. Civil society organizations are free to organize, associate, strike, express themselves, and to criticize the government without fear of government sanctions or harassment). The latter could have been a consequence of the Arab Spring protests, and

as a consequence, the government stopped its policies of repression against civil society organizations.

In fact, within the Arab Spring context, a very progressive decree guarantees the freedom for NGOs to operate within the national territory. Furthermore, this law outlines the standards and specific procedures to allow the formal creation of organizations and groups. A large amount of new NGOs began operating after the Arab Spring uprisings. These groups developed several activities, including conferences, trainings and educational programs.

However, in 2018 a new law equated NGOs with businesses. Under the law, all NGOs (and businesses) have to register at the National Registry of Institutions, and to provide sensitive data including staff information. Failure to comply with this registration requirement may result in incarceration and the payment of a fine. Consequentially, citizens may perceive that although in theory CSO are allowed in Tunisia, this law would allow the government to control them. In fact, critics sustain that the requirement increases imply an unnecessary monitoring and oversight of civil society by the government. Furthermore, registration applications could be rejected discretionally at the governmental office (Human Rights Watch 2019).

Prior to the irruption of the Arab Spring political phenomenon, Tunisia could not develop a strong body of opposition forces due to the systematic repression of political opposition. In fact, organizations challenging the government had relatively low levels of freedom of expression and association, hence they had little capacity to criticize the regime or eventually mobilize the population. Similarly, at the same time, Tunisian citizens were constantly intimidated by the regime (both legal and symbolic),

and in general terms, people tended to suppresses their unconformities towards the government or simply became politically apathetic (Human Rights Watch 2019).

Regarding the situation with legal parties, besides the RCD (the ruling party), only six parties were represented in parliament and despite these parties developed an independent and critical agenda, they were helpless when influencing the regime's agenda as, in real terms, the parliament lacked any meaningful power. In addition, and contrary to what occurs in other southern Mediterranean countries, moderate Islamists were almost politically deactivated in terms of formal participation (Amnesty International 2020).

During the early 1990s, Ben Ali's regime violently repressed the al-Nahda party and after its members were related to violent Islamist movements by the regime, al-Nahda was dismantled, prominent leaders went into exile while others were imprisoned or tortured. In addition, the Tunisian General Union of Labour (UGTT) was interfered by the government: the leaders were not independently appointed (Kausch 2009; Human Rights Watch 2010).

Even though under Ali's regime, political protests and strikes did not periodically occur, leaders were unable to mobilize large support because most public demonstrations they were not collectively formed but were instead restricted to specific interests. Consequentially, civil and parliamentary organizations were unable to mobilize the Tunisian society.

Figure 3. *Freedom of expression index in MENA and Tunisia (1990-2018)*

Source: created by the authors based on Varieties of Democracy (2020).

The Tunisian Constitution guarantees rights such as freedom of opinion, thought, expression, information, and publication, with some restrictions. The freedom of expression index has significantly improved after the outburst of the Arab Spring and has remained high, meaning that, in fact, the Arab Spring uprising changed the country's dynamics and broader respect for freedom of expression. More concretely, press freedom has improved in recent years, and many independent media groups operate within the country. In 2018, Tunisia also subscribed the International Declaration on Information and Democracy, which proposes key principles for good practices (Freedom House 2020)

Despite the latter, in 2019 several journalists and activists were reported as victims of intimidation and pressure

from government officials. Moreover, reporters covering sensitive topics such as government's security are vulnerable to harassment and possible arrest. In addition, there is a lack of transparency regarding information access; for instance, it is difficult to obtain ownership data or the funding of public advertising. This preoccupation extends to the electoral processes as, for example on the 2019 elections; Tunisian journalists were concerned about an excessive government influence over public media (Amnesty International 2019).

Similar to the guarantee of freedom of expression specific rights, the Tunisian Constitution grants people's freedom of belief and conscience for all religions. Although these are positive remarks, blasphemy remains illegal and police forces can use this resource in order to legitimize arrests. In a country where Islam is enshrined as the only religion of the state, members of other religions, such as Christian converts, often experience harassment and discrimination. Regarding private discussion is considered to be open and free; some topics remain sensitive, including religious intolerance and criticism of the military. Furthermore, homosexuality remains illegal, posing serious difficulties for an open discussion of LGBT+ people's rights and concerns (Wagner 2012).

All in all, the eventual success of Tunisia's political transition relies on the strengthening of existing political forces and the financial resources they can obtain in order to pursue their political agenda. Several opposition campaigners who were harassed during the autocrat government of Ben Ali have been able to return from exile and register their organizations and political parties. As of 2011, more than fifty political parties were successfully registered to compete in formal election processes within

the Constituent Assembly process –this time with a higher chance of actually winning seats.

In general terms, civil society in Tunisia, including both political parties and social forces, did play a key role within the country’s transition process, especially in the bargaining dynamics vis-à-vis the interim government. In fact, their presence was very relevant as they acted as “guarantors” of a successful transition. Several political parties and civil society organizations, including the UGTT, formed the Council for the Protection of the Revolution in order to closely observe the role of interim authorities. Later, they became part of the Committee in charge of designing the law and procedures for the Constitutional Assembly (Freedom House, 2020).

Figure 4. *Government censorship effort – Media Index in MENA and Tunisia (1990-2018)*

Source: created by the authors based on Varieties of Democracy (2020).

The Government Censorship (Media) Index analyzes how intense the government tries to censor –directly or indirectly– the print or broadcast media, especially concerning websites with politic content. The Government Censorship (Media) Index has considerably increased after the Arab Spring overthrew Ben Ali’s government and established a democratic system. Therefore, likewise the Freedom of Expression Index, this index evidences how the new political system changed the national political dynamic and granted free expression and information through the Media.

Even though Tunisia experienced constant censorship from the governmental institutions, between 1991 and 1996 Internet was free of any surveillance and repression (York 2012). Nonetheless, when public Internet spread over the country, Ben Ali created the *Agence Tunisienne d’Internet* (Tunisian Internet Agency-ATI), benefiting from a centralized Internet access to increasingly censor any dissident content. These efforts included, among others, web-blocking proxy filters, inspection technology, governmental hacking attacks and website defacement techniques (Wagner 2012: 486). “Internet censorship became extensive and sophisticated, with Interior Ministry agents routinely monitoring personal e-mail accounts, blocking sensitive websites and supervising Internet cafes to discourage criticism” (EMHRN 2010).

In addition, radio and television were also controlled through an extent censorship network directed to control any non-pro-official content and the repression of any political dissidence. These measures included the closure of independent newspaper, printing and distributing constraints, police confiscations or even judicial prosecution –as the judicial system was constantly controlled by Ben Ali’s government (RSF 2007).

Nonetheless, the Tunisian authorities were not able of controlling social media like Twitter or Facebook, which became a useful tool to share forbidden information and even to coordinate opposing actions (Paciello 2011: 9). In fact, during the first decade of the 21st Century, the increasing opposition movement joined through the media tools and created a strong movement composing the secular liberal and Islamist organizations (Fraihat 2016: 61). Most concretely, in Angrist's words (559):

That decade saw substantial growth in the number of Tunisian websites featuring political content. An ICG report quoted Tunisian cyber-activists saying that while at first they were divided ideologically, the experience of censorship unified them very quickly. Over time, activists came to share a very generally democratic orientation and advocated a shared common aspiration for basic political liberties online as well as off-line, rather than any specific political agenda.

Later, on 13 January 2011 Ben Ali's televised speech, he promised complete freedom of information and the elimination of any kind of governmental political censorship (Aouij, 2011). Despite this speech was followed by a quick removal of the restrictions to Internet, these efforts were worthless, as next day the increasing popular unrest made him to resign and fly to Saudi Arabia (Wagner 2012: 485).

The post-Ben-Ali's government aimed at guaranteeing freedom of opinion, thought, expression and information through a myriad of political changes: restraining the direct or indirect governmental censorship, closing historically repressive institutions -i.e. the *Agence*

Tunisienne de Communication Extérieure (Tunisian Agency of Foreign Communication - ATCE)– or controlling the police harassment over journalists. Nonetheless, the National Constituent Assembly faced the problematic of guaranteeing freedom of expression by implementing liberal politics in collaboration with the *Instance Nationale pour la Réforme de l'Information et de la Communication* (National Authority for the Reform of Information and Communication -INRIC) vis a vis avoiding the rupture with the Islamist groups which participated in Ben Ali's overthrown and asked for a more restrictive political system. This duality explains, for example, that despite the Tunisian Constitution of 2014 guaranteed freedom of expression, opinion and thought, journalists were condemned by religious offense. For example, Nessma, a private TV channel, was sanctioned in 2012 by showing an image of Ala (El País 2012).

As a conclusion, despite achieving an intense improved in the Government censorship effort – Media Index, Tunisia still has the pending task of increasing the freedom of the journalists and of avoiding the governmental harassment and control over the Media (Amnistía Internacional 2012). In this sense, Journalists without Borders established Tunisia's main problematics as follow: creating and empowering independent institutions, decentralizing the Media –mostly focused on the Capital–, supporting alternative Media, promoting and ethical formation of journalists and restraining the political interference in journalism.

Conclusions

As previously explained, there has been an intense academic work concerning transitions to democracy's processes and especially over the political, economic and cultural impact of the Arab Spring. In this sense, different theories have tried to explain this phenomenon, focusing on the influence of the political structure, on the social movements or on the access to the different resources. In this line of thought, this research used the Varieties of Democracy Database with the purpose of evidencing how the dimension "openness to citizens' participation" has improved in Tunisia after the Arab Spring. All the selected indicators (Civil Liberties, Freedom of Expression, CSO Repression and Government Censorship effort) depict a more favorable scenario after the overthrown of Ben Ali's autocratic government. More concretely, the Tunisian transitional government reached a moderately successful democratic system, open to the citizen's participation and without systematic governmental repression. Although this is the case, there are still several challenges that Tunisia must overcome in order to consolidate its democratic political project and deal with increasing political problematics.

Taking into account the theoretical framework developed in this chapter, and after the operationalization of the openness to citizens' participation dimension, it is possible to conclude that the individual institutional factors that were evaluated throughout the chapter allowed to better understand the dynamics of collective action and the subsequent process of democratic consolidation in Tunisia. When the political opportunities improve, it is more likely to observe the emergence of collective action, however it does not mean that a democratic process will start. In this

chapter, we have seen that although a democratic path started, its consolidation would not depend on citizens' participation alone and, on the contrary, there are other legal and political factors that are of key relevance.

The 2014 Constitution guarantees, in theory, several rights that allow people to fully exercise their citizenship. However, there are practical and bureaucratic procedures that hinder the full respect of Tunisia's new Constitution. Among Tunisia's several issues, corruption continues to be an endemic practice difficult to eradicate and one that hinders the development of other good practices within the country.

The progress made on all the indicators analyzed in this chapter show that the Arab Spring revolution had an effect on Tunisia's political landscape. In fact, Tunisia's political opportunities regarding openness to citizens' participation improved, meaning that its citizens are more empowered –both legally and morally– to initiate collective action initiatives when needed. As freedom of expression and civil liberties improve, and CSO repression and government censorship effort diminished, it is more likely to see the emergence of independent organizations capable of effectively challenging the government.

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