Democratization

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdem20

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To cite this article: Rory McCarthy (2023): Autonomous activism and accountability in a democratic transition: evidence from Tunisia, Democratization, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2023.2192931

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2192931

Published online: 05 Apr 2023.

DEMOCRATIZATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2192931

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Autonomous activism and accountability in a democratic transition: evidence from Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

How do citizens in the Arab world hold their governments to account between elections? Diagonal accountability mechanisms in the literature show how citizens can constrain executive power by imposing reputational costs, by using legal action, or through watchdog oversight. However, citizen mobilizations in the Arab world are often autonomous, reflecting low political trust and ineffective political parties and therefore weakening potential accountability mechanisms. This article uses a structured, focused comparison of protest episodes during the Tunisian transition to theorize three alternative mechanisms used in autonomous mobilizations. Autonomous movements develop legitimacy for their claims by reinterpreting initial grievances as legitimate claims for greater popular participation in decision-making. Although these movements all insist on their independence from parties and unions, they develop temporary and expedient alliances with political actors for greater leverage. When movements have sufficient local resources, they try to establish lasting collective capacities to demonstrate alternative models of development. These findings contribute to a richer understanding of the varied mechanisms behind accountability processes in new democracies by showing how autonomous movements deploy alternative strategies to shape the quality of their emerging democratic system.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 13 July 2022; Accepted 14 March 2023

KEYWORDS Accountability; democratization; autonomous activism; Tunisia; protest

Introduction

How do citizens in the Arab world hold their governments to account between elections? Recent work on political accountability has highlighted diagonal mechanisms through which citizens use civil society, the media, or social mobilization to pressure the government or constrain its power.[1] By exerting pressure diagonally citizens can influence direct accountability mechanisms, whether they are vertical, as in competition between or within political parties, or horizontal, as in checks and balances from state institutions like the judiciary and legislature.[2] Citizens may make claims

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to enhance popular decision-making in new democracies,[3] act as watchdogs monitoring government performance,[4] or even halt democratic erosion.[5]

However, protest movements in the Arab world since the 2011 uprisings have often been independent and autonomous,[6] refusing cooptation by political parties or trade unions.[7] This stance reflects low levels of political-institutional and social trust across the region, in both authoritarian and democratic systems,[8] at a time when political parties themselves appear unable to perform their key accountability functions.[9] In a context of democratic disillusionment,[10] and weak political trust, diagonal accountability mechanisms might appear ineffective in constraining government power.

This article bridges work on accountability mechanisms and autonomous activism to ask how citizens in a new democracy hold government accountable, and with what outcomes. I draw on the case of the Tunisian transition, applying a structured, focused comparison of three episodes of contentious protest, to theorize how citizens hold their government to account through autonomous activism. Tunisia is a valuable case for study because citizens made a wide range of claims on their government during the transition, when the character of the new state was under negotiation. These episodes came just before the election of a populist president in 2019, which began a period of democratic backsliding.

I identify three mechanisms that autonomous protest movements use to hold the government accountable. First, movements develop legitimacy by framing their claims as a demand for popular participation in decision-making. Second, although movements insist on their independence, they form temporary, expedient alliances with formal political actors for greater leverage through other accountability institutions. Third, movements with sufficient local resources try to establish lasting collective capacities, which demonstrate alternative models of democracy. These findings contribute to a richer understanding of the mechanisms behind accountability processes in emergent democracies.

Work on democratic disillusionment often highlights individual-level material assessments of democracy's perceived failings, especially when high expectations for reform go unmet.[11] Survey evidence points to a consequence-based logic, in which attitudes towards democracy among Arab citizens are shaped by their perceptions of its political, economic, and religious consequences.[12] However, democratic disillusionment can also produce collective mobilization for corrective action. Holding the government accountable during a transition is just as essential in generating support for the emerging system as government performance and provision of goods.[13] Political accountability has broad policy relevance: accountable and inclusive institutions are one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals,[14] and in an era of autocratization,[15] the mechanisms by which citizens seek to constrain government power are increasingly under debate.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I consider the tension between accountability mechanisms and autonomous mobilization. Second, I theorize three mechanisms of collective mobilization that explain societal accountability and autonomous activism. I then explain case selection and the methods used, before conducting a structured, focused comparison of the three Tunisian cases. Finally, I consider the implications of the findings in a broader discussion.

Diagonal accountability

Political accountability constrains executive power: citizens delegate authority to their government, require the government to answer for its decisions, and apply sanctions if those explanations fall short.[16] A spatial conception of accountability points to three mechanisms: vertical, acting through party competition and voting at election time; horizontal, involving pressure from state institutions; and diagonal (sometimes described as societal or social accountability),[17] involving actors outside the formal political process, including civil society, media, and mobilized citizens, whose pressure in turn activates vertical or horizontal mechanisms.[18]

Diagonal accountability mechanisms are not a broad account of any non-institutional protest. Not everything is accountability.[19] Rather, diagonal accountability is one way to constrain power and reinforce democratic institutions. It captures the mechanisms through which civil society and media activities force political decision-makers to explain and justify their actions.[20] Citizens may exert pressure by imposing reputational costs on political actors through social mobilization, or through media revelations and denunciations; by legal action, to secure favourable judicial decisions; or through establishing watchdog organizations, which maintain oversight over government policy.[21] Thus citizen organizations pursue legal cases to obtain effective public services,[22] or they integrate themselves into public sector oversight systems to pursue administrative accountability or audit local public spending.[23] Successful citizen controls often work through interaction with state actors, including when mobilized citizens are embedded within horizontal accountability mechanisms.[24]

However, these citizen-led mechanisms are much more diffuse than vertical or horizontal mechanisms and may at best only exert low levels of control over the exercise of power.[25] Mechanisms may require favourable conditions, including press freedom, political competition, government transparency, and, as Grimes argues, the presence of "sympathetic, reform-minded elites."[26] Furthermore, if citizen organizations do not trust political parties to effectively channel their claims, then the diagonal mechanisms identified in the literature are likely to be less effective. Autonomous protest movements may be able to impose reputational costs through social mobilization, but they are less likely to try to work with state actors, or to institutionalize themselves.

Autonomy in collective action is a diffuse concept, shaped by local and national contexts, and dynamic in its mechanisms. Böhm, Dinerstein, and Spicer identify three conceptions of autonomy: autonomous practices towards capital, based on self-valorization of labour; independence from political parties and trade unions that work through state power; and self-organization and self-determination as a challenge to hegemonic development discourses.[27] Autonomous movements may try to establish "autonomous geographies," or spaces of collective forms of politics, identity, citizenship, where they prefigure the kind of society they aspire to create.[28] Research on autonomous movements often highlights their critiques of the state, their rejection of the idea that the state can deliver radical social change, and even their attempts to dissolve state power.[29] In practice, however, their behaviour is more ambiguous. In constrained circumstances, autonomous movements and formal political parties may still rely on each other for resources, legitimacy, and support.[30] Shifts in context may turn movements away from earlier anti-statist positions to instead join other actors in making reformist, pro-democracy claims.[31]

The Tunisian cases considered in this article all share a demand for democratic accountability. Claims may initially be voiced as a demand for jobs or anger at corruption and marginalization, but these are claims about access to decision-making through which citizens demand a say in what their rights are and how to obtain them. Cycles of protest across the Middle East and North Africa have sometimes been compared to the Latin American popular sector incorporation struggle.[32] Indeed, the political crisis in an emerging democracy like Tunisia resembles the experience of "democratic deepening" in Latin America from the 1980s onwards, where contention focused on claims for greater popular sovereignty in new democracies.[33] However, in this "incorporation crisis,"[34] political parties and unions were key actors, reflecting the strength of the political left in Latin America and providing an effective channel for claim-making. Given the weakness of the left in the Arab world, the mechanisms at work in this region are likely to be different.

Autonomous accountability mechanisms

This article asks how citizens in a new democracy hold their government accountable by looking at autonomous protest mechanisms. I propose three mechanisms that explain how autonomous movements pursue democratic accountability in a transition. First, autonomous movements develop legitimacy for their claims by framing demands in terms of popular participation in decision-making. Second, although movements insist on their independence, they may form temporary, expedient alliances with formal political actors for greater leverage through other accountability institutions. Third, movements with strong enough local resources try to establish lasting collective capacities, which demonstrate alternative models of democracy. These mechanisms go beyond tactics involving reputational costs, legal action, and watchdog oversight, to capture the specificities of autonomous movements.

Protest movements need to generate legitimacy for their claims to overcome two key challenges. First, these movements are self-appointed; they are neither elected nor part of a state institution.[35] Second, they need to demonstrate that their claims are not self-interested. In a democratic transition, protest movements are likely to harness the promises of political elites to establish legitimacy, certifying their demands.[36] This process can reinvigorate structural grievances, which are usually considered too diffuse to cause collective action,[37] by giving them urgency in a new democratizing context. It allows movements to attribute the perceived failings of the new system directly to the political elite. Because these grievances are interpreted as breaches of the normative commitments of the new transitional era, with its promises of political and socio-economic reform, they enable mobilization for protest. This is a form of "rightful resistance," in which subordinate groups assert claims through approved channels in order to exploit divisions among the powerful.[38] In the Tunisian case studies, collective actors gave their claims a moral dimension by calling out the gap between the explicit commitments of the new 2014 constitution and its implementation.

Although movements insist on their independence, they may form temporary, expedient alliances with formal political actors to exert greater leverage on other accountability institutions. I argue that despite their autonomous character, these movements do not close off the possibility of working with other actors but instead assess when they should interact with rival political agents. Movements are wary of co-optation because working with parties or unions may damage their integrity and

independence. However, in other cases they can engage in reluctant alliances when they perceive benefits, or when they need support from other accountability mechanisms to win concessions or to secure implementation of previously promised concessions. I examine how movements interpreted their own autonomy and why they sometimes engaged with political actors.

In a third mechanism, movements with strong enough local resources try to establish lasting collective capacities. While changing political outcomes at the national level remains challenging, movements may make more progress at the local level. The crisis in the contemporary Arab world, especially in Tunisia, is often diagnosed as a problem of political, social, and economic marginalization, in which the state fails to provide services, protection, and inclusion.[39] Protest movements have an opportunity to develop collective capacities which are not just oppositional politics but a way to build civic engagement, encouraging local democratic practices and exposing government shortcomings.[40] Local capacities act to model the movement's claims in action, to generate legitimacy by showing progress, and to bring in the support of transnational networks linking similar local-level projects elsewhere.

Research design

I adopt a comparative case study approach to consider how autonomous protest movements mobilize to make claims for accountability during a democratic transition. This article leverages case study variations within a single country, taking protest movements as a unit of analysis. The comparative approach focuses on analytically equivalent phenomena to identify the mechanisms shaping mobilization and its varied outcomes.[41] Drawing on the idea that similar grievances may be interpreted in varied ways depending on context,[42] I take a practice-oriented approach to the way meanings are constructed, focusing on collective, not individual, meaning-making.[43] This approach allows an analysis of what concepts like democracy mean to political actors and under what conditions their mobilizing activities emerge.

I conducted interviews with 57 men and women involved in different protest movements across Tunisia during the period 2016–22, mostly in Arabic. I use a case study logic aimed at saturation through multiple, sequential interviews to examine the range of mechanisms at work.[44] I followed a snowball sampling strategy at first, because trusted referrals help access hard-to-reach groups,[45] but I also sampled for range, identifying sub-categories of each group and interviewing individuals from these categories.[46] I protect the anonymity of my interviewees, to enable them to speak freely and because protest is still frequently repressed by government authorities. Interviews and observations in the field were supplemented with primary source material including published statements, social media postings, Arabic and French language news reports, local civil society reports, and video clips of protests.

I make a structured focused comparison of three Tunisian protest movements which challenged the democratic system established after the 2011 uprisings. The cases were selected from among the most high-profile protest movements of the transition period: the Kamour campaign in 2017–21 was a protest demanding jobs in the oil industry and regional development spending in the southern governorate of Tataouine;[47] the Manich Msamah ("I do not forgive") campaign in 2015–17 challenged a law that would have effectively excluded corruption cases from the transitional justice process;[48] and the villagers of the Jemna oasis, in the southern governorate of Kebili,

Table 1. Descriptive information on the three Tunisian protests under examination.

Protest	Date	Key grievance(s)	Scale	Protester social background
Kamour campaign	2017–21	Unemployment, right to natural resource wealth	Regional	Unemployed workers & graduates in marginalized urban and rural areas
Manich Msamah	2015–17	Corruption of the political and business elite	National	Young, urban, middle class, well educated, politically experienced activists
Association for the Protection of the Jemna Oases	2011—	State expropriation of common land	Local	Farmers, teachers, union activists in a rural village

ran a campaign from 2011 to the present for the right to collectively repossess a date palm estate.[49] This case selection controls for the broad political and economic conditions of the Tunisian transition, because all cases took place in the same time period after the 2011 uprising. The three cases vary in outcomes: some were more successful in achieving their aims than others. However, drawing on Simmons and Rush Smith, this analysis is also concerned with variations in political processes, sites, relations, repertoires, and grievance interpretation, in an expansive mode of qualitative comparative inquiry.[50] Examining the lived experience of those involved in protest and how they gave meaning to their actions enables a focus on the pattern of mechanisms at work. The three cases, which operate at a local, regional, and national scale, are chosen to compare mechanisms despite variations in the social and economic characteristics of the protesters involved. These variations shaped behaviours in many ways, including access to resources, repertoires of action, and grievance interpretation. This case selection not only captures as much information and nuance on the puzzle of autonomous protest as possible,[51] but also acknowledges the heterogeneous, complex reality of protests across different sites within the same national context.[52] Table 1 summarizes descriptive information about the three cases.

Tunisia is a valuable country for analysis because of the trajectory of its democratic transition. After a popular uprising in 2010–11 toppled the authoritarian regime, a democratic semi-presidential system was consolidated through three rounds of elections in 2011, 2014, and 2019. The V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index (EDI), which reflects suffrage, freedom of association, clean elections, elected officials, and freedom of expression in line with Dahl's polyarchy, rose for Tunisia from 0.19 in 2010 to 0.73 in 2020 (where 0 is not democratic and 1 is fully democratic).[53] However, political reform outpaced socioeconomic reform, resulting in years of popular protests over a range of issues,[54] widespread perceptions of corruption and critiques of poor economic performance, and a marked decline in political trust.[55] Turnout at legislative elections dropped from 53.9% in 2011 to 35.9% in 2019.[56] In July 2021, after the period under study here, the incumbent populist president, Kais Said, froze parliament and gradually concentrated executive power in his own hands, rewriting the constitution and marginalizing political parties. Tunisia's EDI score dropped to 0.56 in 2021.

Analysis

For each case, I ask three questions: How did the protest movement generate legitimacy for its claims? How did strategic interactions with other political actors affect mobilization? And what, if any, collective capacities developed as a result of these mobilizations?

The Kamour campaign

The Kamour campaign involved thousands of young, mostly male, protesters from the southern city of Tataouine, and surrounding villages. They included both graduates and non-graduates, who were either unemployed or precariously employed, and who had few prior connections with local trade unions, political parties, or other civil society organizations. They lived in a region of Tunisia which was historically marginalized but which was also a key site of natural resource wealth, with large oil and gas fields stretching into the desert further south. Action began with a four-month protest from February 2017, when hundreds of young unemployed men blocked roads in the southern city of Tataouine and then staged a sit-in near desert oil installations to demand jobs in the oil industry and greater regional development spending.[57] In a key act of disruption, protesters shut down the primary north–south oil export pipeline at Kamour for a month. In June 2017, the government offered concessions, promising 4,500 new jobs, mostly in a state environment company, and 80 m dinars ($26 m) in annual development spending. But when implementation of the agreement faltered, protesters staged another round of road-blocks and sit-ins in July-November 2020, again shutting the pipeline, before the government made a new commitment to create jobs, to provide loans for small projects, and to create the previously promised 80 m dinar annual development fund.

Protest organizers gave legitimacy to the Kamour campaign by scaling up initial grievances over unemployment into a regional claim for equitable distribution of natural resource wealth. Initial claims over unemployment reflected the challenging context of the southern Tataouine governorate, where in 2017 unemployment ran at 32.4%, double the national average, with 45.9% graduate unemployment.[58] Interviewees described the atomizing effects of unemployment as provoking despair and indignity. But during the protest, this individualized material grievance was reinterpreted as a moral frame, symptomatic of the historic marginalization of the Tataouine region which could only be resolved by a share of natural resource wealth in compensation. Protesters critiqued a pattern of resource exploitation, in which oil, phosphates, gypsum, and other resources had been extracted from southern and interior regions to the benefit of the more prosperous northeast.[59] Protest demands were not just for new jobs, but also that one member of each family be recruited, and that a portion of oil revenues be paid into a regional development fund.[60] Interviewees explained this not as a new grievance, but as "historic" or an "accumulation." As one said: "For sixty years they've been taking oil, and there's nothing to prove there's oil in this town. That's why it was an accumulation for people."[61] However, they stopped short of demanding nationalization of the oil industry, despite pressure from some campaigners outside Tataouine. Instead, protesters underscored their legitimacy by citing the new 2014 constitution, an early achievement of the democratic transition, which protected the right to associate and demonstrate peacefully, stipulated parliamentary oversight of natural resource contracts, and committed the state to use positive discrimination to balance development across all regions.[62]

From the start, the Kamour activists strongly resisted overtures from political parties and the local branch of the Union générale tunisienne du travail (UGTT), the largest and most influential union. Few had any experience within parties or unions; many had abstained from voting in earlier elections. They lacked both political connections and political experience. Instead, they self-organized in a horizontal

structure in which each of 80 neighbourhoods was represented in a co-ordination, and they bypassed mediators to negotiate directly with government ministers. Interviewees frequently spoke of their hostility towards parties. One said: "I believe neither in parties nor in elections. All of them are thieves."[63] Another said: "All of them are running after power. They're eating each other and that's it."[64] Ministers, including then prime minister Yousef Chahed, travelled to Tataouine in 2017 to negotiate, but each offer of concessions produced escalations, both in the number of jobs demanded and in the protest repertoire. Although politicians and unionists had been sympathetic to the protests at first, they dropped their support after the protesters refused a modest offer of concessions from the prime minister. Some among the protesters later saw this as a strategic mistake because it left them with no political allies to monitor implementation of the agreement. However, protesters did seek the protection of the military, which they perceived as more neutral than other security forces and which ultimately allowed them access to the pipeline to shut off the tap at Kamour.[65] This access is what enabled protesters to impose their claims on government ministers. When promised jobs did not materialize, a second protest episode began in May 2020, and the pipeline was again shut. However, this time rather than pursuing their previous autonomous strategy, the coordination now worked in a diagonal mechanism with civil society groups, local parliamentary deputies, and union officials to develop a broader regional negotiating team to endorse their claims and to monitor their implementation.[66]

As unemployed young people in a marginalized region, the Kamour protesters had few obvious mobilizing resources. However, they tried to develop local support for their claims. Although they set up roadblocks across the city, these were porous, and army vehicles, civil protection forces, and ambulances were allowed through. Protesters solicited donations of food, money, and tents from local shopkeepers and moved their sit-in camp out from Tataouine into the desert in part because they feared losing the community's support by prolonging roadblocks in the city. Yet attempts to institutionalize the protest coordination as a local political actor failed, with little support, for example, for an activist list in the 2018 municipal elections in Tataouine. Nonetheless, the protests achieved some success. A new agreement in November 2020 confirmed most of the previous government commitments of new jobs and development spending, and went further, dropping legal cases against protesters from the 2017 episode and adding new financing for local entrepreneurial projects, to be managed by the governorate's regional council.[67] The 2020 agreement resonated across other marginalized regions, inspiring similar waves of direct action protests, with similar repertoires of shutting pipelines or otherwise blocking access to natural resources in several marginalized towns, including Gabes, Kasserine, Redeyef and beyond.[68] Yet, these other protests often failed to win the sympathies of local citizens, or struggled to develop sufficiently deep local roots, or were simply ignored by the government.[69] The Kamour protesters, by contrast, maintained a loose structural framework which could be reactivated for protest; they called a three-day general strike in the governorate in February 2021 to pressure the government for more rapid implementation of their agreement.

Manich Msamah

The Manich Msamah ("I do not forgive") campaign emerged from a group of young, well-educated, and politicized male and female activists from Tunis and other cities in

the relatively affluent northeast. These were activists who often had prior experience of organizing, whether as university students, in political parties, through the media, or in civil society organizations. Theirs was a national level protest movement that began in Tunis and spread to other governorates in 2015 with a narrow focus on opposition to a draft law, entitled Exceptional Measures on Reconciliation in the Economic and Financial Sectors, which had been proposed by President Beji Caid Essebsi in July 2015. The draft law was presented as crucial to revive investment and to mark "a final turning of the page" of the failings of the past at a time of consensual government.[70] It proposed to set up a confidential, government-appointed reconciliation commission through which corrupt officials and businessmen could offer to repay their ill-gotten gains at a low interest rate in return for an amnesty from prosecution, effectively undermining the public transitional justice framework run through the Truth and Dignity Commission.[71] Manich Msamah organized demonstrations and innovative protests against the draft law for more than two years. Although they succeeded in twice delaying the draft and in securing an amendment that reduced its scope, the legislation was eventually enacted as the Law on Administrative Reconciliation in September 2017.

The Manich Msamah campaign presented its opposition to Essebsi's reconciliation law as an urgent critique of a democratic transition in crisis. Organizers interpreted the bill as a counterrevolutionary attempt to row back the anti-corruption demands of the 2011 uprising, which had challenged the former regime's crony capitalist model. The amnesty, they said, would avoid assigning responsibility for past crimes, dilute the ongoing Truth and Dignity Commission of any value, and "support the same old system and what it represents, which is injustice and failure."[72] It would create impunity, leaving in power the corrupt, economic elite with their "stranglehold" on the economy and administration.[73] The activists drew a direct link between elite corruption and structural social problems of dispossession and marginalization.[74] In this moral critique of a stagnant transition, the protesters argued the new bill would deepen the crisis of public trust in government and worsen what they called "social tension" (*al-iḥtiqān al-ijtimāʿī*). Like the Kamour protesters, Manich Msamah used the new constitution to underscore the legitimacy of their critique, arguing the draft bill violated constitutional principles of good governance, separation of powers, and prevention of corruption and tax evasion.[75]

Like the Kamour campaign, Manich Msamah insisted on its autonomy from all political parties, describing itself as political but not partisan.[76] The group self-organized around a horizontal structure, in which decisions were taken by consensus. However, it was much more open to imposing diagonal pressure through formal political actors. In comparison to the Kamour protesters, the Manich Msamah participants, men and women, had more political resources. They were better educated and well connected, often with experience of activism, in parties, student unions, or other social movements. Organizers refused cooptation, but they saw a cost to being left politically isolated. As one founder put it: "The campaign tried to surround itself with a politically diversified belt that allowed it to grow its audience and involve sympathizers from opposition parties."[77] Another described an attempt to reach beyond established opposition groups: "We have young people who are confident in themselves and their abilities but who do not find a framework that allows them to act. How can we create that alternative?"[78] The campaign worked to build expedient alliances to hold ruling elites to account. The first demonstration, in August 2015, was held outside the headquarters of the UGTT, in Tunis, to pressure the union, ultimately successfully, for its support.

The following month the campaign invited several political parties to join in a large demonstration in Tunis, a form of diagonal pressure for accountability which, by virtue of its scale, forced the government to delay debates on the draft. Manich Msamah also worked with civil society groups, and won international support, including from the Venice Commission.[79] These interactions with political and civil society actors changed Manich Msamah's approach. In July 2016, when the draft was about to be considered again, the campaign sent a formal, detailed critique of the proposal to all parliamentary deputies in a direct appeal for support. This written critique broadened the campaign's grievance interpretation from moral claims against impunity for the corrupt to a legalistic critique, which carefully demonstrated how the draft contravened the constitution, economic policies, and the existing transitional justice process.[80] Several opposition parties and dozens of civil society groups gave their support, even if these new connections did not outlive the two years of protest.

However, in terms of building local capacities, Manich Msamah was much less successful, and there was some self-criticism over this from organizers after the campaign. Organizers insisted in reflective interviews after the protest episode that their actions had revitalized the political opposition at a time of stagnation, but they acknowledged having failed to shift the trajectory of the transition or to establish a lasting alternative to discredited formal political actors.[81] Many were critical of the horizontalist structure, for slowing decision-making. One admitted the protest repertoire had prioritized highly visible action, falling into "the trap of the spectacle," rather than establishing deep roots in the community and demonstrating to the public the tangible cost of elite corruption.[82] Some tried to institutionalize Manich Msamah as a political movement, proposing it run for the 2018 municipal elections. But the group was divided and disillusioned. "For us what hurt is that we didn't succeed in creating a dynamic of construction … We should have declared that this movement would become a political alternative."[83] Another said: "If we were not able to succeed it was because the conditions were not favourable, it wasn't yet mature enough, and we weren't yet ready."[84] As individuals, however, many of the activists saw their experience as formative and continued to work within parties, civil society, or other social movements, including campaigns on food sovereignty and against a proposed free trade deal with the European Union.[85]

The association for the protection of the Jemna Oases

The Jemna campaign grew out of a collective protest by farmers in a village in the southern, rural governorate of Kebili. Organizers were older male villagers, who had worked in the public sector locally and who had experience in local political parties and trade union branches. They were effective at generating support for their cause from journalists and activists in Tunis, and from other rural collective organizations abroad. Both organizers and participants lived in the village and often owned small parcels of agricultural land, where their families had historically farmed date palms. Their protest was a long-running, local-level campaign to regain possession of the village's large date palm oasis, which had been appropriated as a French colonial project and then nationalized as state land after independence. During the 2011 uprising, hundreds of villagers staged a three-month sit-in at the oasis to reclaim the land which had historically belonged to the villagers. Under the leadership of a locally elected Association for the Protection of the Jemna Oases, the villagers contributed funds to restore,

expand, and farm the date palm estate, and agreed through a participatory decision-making process to invest the profits from the annual date harvest into local community projects. Successive governments worked to shut down the association for illegally occupying the land and tried to force majority control to the state, even at one point freezing its accounts, in what became a high-profile contest between villagers and the state.[86] In late 2017, the Jemna villagers won the promise that they could manage the oasis as a non-profit cooperative, although the formal legal status of the association was not agreed. The Jemna campaign benefitted from policy change too: in June 2020 parliament passed a law committing the Tunisian state to finance the development of a social solidarity economy, the first such law in the Arab world.

The Jemna villagers argued the legitimacy of their claims on two grounds. First, the historic dispossession of village land was presented as an expropriation of natural resources. It was the political opportunity of the 2011 uprising that reinvigorated a historic grievance, "the rights of our ancestors."[87] Villagers held documents demonstrating historic possession of the land and years of fruitless claims filed with ministries to regain possession. This dispossession was framed as a moral grievance. One organizer said: "There was that feeling of injustice: it was our land, and it was taken from us."[88] The loss was collective: the date palm estate was a "contested commons" that became the locus for a political and institutional struggle.[89] Jemna villagers perceived their relationship to the land as unlike dependence on employment from natural resources, like oil: "We have an emotional relationship. We adore the land. It's not possible for us to give it up," said one.[90] Second, the underdevelopment of the estate, with its low harvest, was explained as evidence of incompetent, corrupt management by regime cronies. "This project uncovered the corruption of the state," said one organizer.[91] Two businessmen close to the former regime had leased the land from the state but had left the date palms underdeveloped and in poor condition. Under the oversight of the association, new palms were planted and production increased significantly, and profits were reinvested in developing the village.

Protest organizers in Jemna tried to exploit strategic interactions to advance their claims through diagonal mechanisms. Like the Kamour and Manich Msamah protesters, the Jemna activists were mistrustful of political parties. However, as in the case of Manich Msamah, the association's leaders were well educated and often had party or union experience, usually with leftist or centrist parties, but including the right-wing Islamist party Ennahda too. Yet, they insisted on prioritizing the date palm project ahead of partisan loyalties, and political party support for their cause was limited. Although Jemna organizers had been in regular discussions with government officials since the association was established, relations soured in 2016, when a new government sought to regain state control over the date palm estate. The association's accounts were frozen to stop the sale of the autumn harvest. One minister declared the association illegal, and the then prime minister, Yousef Chahed, warned that public goods seized from the state would be recovered.[92] To resist this pressure, the Jemna activists engaged widely with civil society groups at a regional, national, and especially at an international level to impose a reputational cost on the government by raising the profile of their campaign, attending conferences abroad, and inviting groups to visit and to publicize the association's project.

However, the Jemna activists went well beyond the Kamour and Manich Msamah campaigns in not just insisting on their autonomy as an organization, but in developing lasting local, self-governing collective capacities. The Jemna association, with

around a dozen elected leaders, held frequent public meetings and took majority decisions on how to run the date palm estate. The first decision was whether to divide up the estate and apportion land to each Jemna family, as some proposed. The association leadership convinced the community to take collective ownership of the land, and asked for voluntary contributions, to pay to pollinate, fertilize, and irrigate the palms. Public meetings were held after the annual autumn harvest, and villagers agreed to spend the profits on local development, including a covered market, a football pitch, the renovation of school classrooms and a health centre, the funding of a local ambulance, and hiring around 150 workers for the estate. Organizers presented their work as an act of self-reliance, replacing a state that had failed to meet its responsibilities. "In the absence of the state, we were the state … We always counted on ourselves. We expect nothing from the state," said one organizer.[93] The financial and developmental achievements of the association exposed the failings of the previous estate management.

This collective capacity development operated as a mechanism to hold the government accountable by demonstrating an alternative model of democracy. The Jemna activists presented themselves as advocates and "pioneers" of the concept of a social solidarity economy, an alternative development strategy which would encourage non-profit cooperative organizations working towards economic and social goals.[94] This framing of the project tapped into a concept which was already circulating among policy elites: strategies for a social solidarity economy had been proposed by the UGTT shortly after the 2011 uprising, and were already mentioned in a government-led social contract signed in 2013 and in the government's 2016–20 development plan.[95] The strategy was endorsed by the enactment in June 2020 of the Law on the Social and Solidarity Economy, which enabled state financing of non-profit cooperatives and created an institutional presence within the government to oversee the new sector. The public, generative character of the Jemna protest movement built collective solidarity around their cause, helped to resist government attempts to reappropriate the land, and demonstrated the value of an alternative economic model.

Discussion

This article used a structured focused comparison of protest episodes in Tunisia to examine how autonomous citizen mobilizations hold the government to account during a democratic transition. Even though each protest episode varied not just in outcomes, but also in terms of scale, geography, and the social and economic characteristics of the protesters, the analysis reveals similar calculations underway around three mechanisms. Autonomous movements developed legitimacy for their claims by reinterpreting initial grievances as legitimate claims for greater popular participation in decision-making. All three movements, despite their different socio-economic characteristics, shared an insistence on protecting their independence from parties and unions, in a sign of the breadth of mistrust of political institutions as the democratic transition unfolded. Nonetheless, each movement managed temporary and expedient alliances with political actors for greater diagonal leverage. When movements had sufficient local resources, they tried to establish lasting collective capacities as an alternative method of exposing policy failures, imposing reputational costs, and holding government to account. These mechanisms present an alternative to existing

frameworks of understanding to show how autonomous movements impose their own accountability strategies in constrained conditions.

The framing of legitimate claims for democratic participation was a mechanism employed across all cases, to avoid the appearance of particularistic self-interested demands. It often involved an appeal to constitutional commitments as a certification of protest claims, and distinguishes these mechanisms from other forms of non-institutional protest. These were not mere demands for material goods, nor were they challenges over failings of procedural checks and balances. Instead, they represented a claim for greater citizen participation in decision-making, and a deepening of the democratic experience, echoing in some ways the Latin American incorporation struggle.[96]

All three movements adopted autonomous principles in a context of politics beyond parties, insisting on their independence from formal political actors, and establishing self-governing structures, often along horizontal lines. However, even though they resisted co-optation, each group struggled with questions of how to interact with parties, unions, and other civil society groups. The result was a series of short-term expedient alliances, but a reluctance to institutionalize the protest movements within existing parties or as new parties, even at the local level. Whether protesters had access to political networks or not, mistrust of formal political actors remained high. Political parties were not seen as effective or reliable allies in channelling citizen claims. Instead, in some cases, activists using disruptive tactics on their own succeeded in gaining access to the highest-level ministers for face-to-face negotiations over their claims. Although these movements provided information to parties about perceptions of the transitional regime and imposed reputational costs through social mobilization, the diagonal mechanism of pressuring parties or state institutions to act on their behalf was not consistently effective.

Developing local collective capacities to act as an accountability mechanism required some level of local resources to work. For Manich Msamah, these local resources were not sufficiently well developed. The campaign's decentralized structure, in which activists were responsible for their own protests across the country was seen as a nimble advantage at first, but later some organizers admitted they had failed to connect their broad national-level anti-corruption goals to specific local grievances in the lives of citizens. In Kamour and Jemna, however, there were efforts to set up local capacities. In Kamour, activists established a form of oversight or monitoring, holding the government to account for its promises on equitable job creation and exerting influence in how new regional development funds were distributed across communities. They maintained in abeyance the ability to restart protests as necessary, whenever implementation of the agreement stalled. The Jemna villagers made the most significant advances in this direction, using self-reliance and the collective capacity of the productive date palm estate as a challenge to state marginalization of their region. They contested the hegemonic development strategy by offering an alternative social solidarity economic project, which held government to account by demonstrating an alternative democratic model. The villagers succeeded in winning legitimacy and resilience by connecting their generative project with a larger debate about alternative strategies at a time of economic stagnation.

Contextual conditions mattered for these different claims; some were significantly more costly for the government to concede. In the case of the Kamour demand for job creation, the government was under constant pressure from international

financial institutions to reduce the size of the public sector payroll. This meant its capacity to create jobs to win social peace was highly limited, however disruptive the Kamour protests. For Manich Msamah, powerful interests, this time the political and business elite, were resistant to a deep anti-corruption process for fear of losing influence and power. These elites were crucial to government support, and so major concessions were unlikely. In the case of Jemna, however, the villagers' local-level claim was not as costly to the political and business elites, and it resonated with earlier debates over the social solidarity economy. This enabled the villagers to make progress with their claims, while drawing on the leverage of international support they had garnered for their cause.

The range of outcomes was mixed, but even though diagonal accountability has only diffuse power, it did achieve some gains. The Kamour protesters won significant concessions, even if implementation of government promises stalled repeatedly. Manich Msamah succeeded in watering down, though not halting, the reconciliation law and in training a new generation of activists. In Jemna, villagers were most successful, albeit at a small scale, winning acceptance of their claim and developing a lasting, self-organized project that was held up as an alternative development model. These alternative diagonal accountability mechanisms show that accountability works not just on procedural questions of democratic checks and balances, but also to claim the right to greater citizen participation in an emerging democracy.

Conclusion

This article presents a structured, focused comparison of three high-profile protest episodes during the Tunisian democratic transition, to reveal the alternative mechanisms used by citizen mobilizations which insist on autonomy from the political process. At a time of democratic disillusionment across the Arab world, and elsewhere, these cases demonstrate the calculations and strategies within movements through which citizens organize autonomously to hold the government accountable over the quality of democracy. In conditions of low political trust across the Arab world, and when political parties are ineffective in aggregating and articulating popular claims and increasingly peripheral as political actors, these alternative autonomous citizen mechanisms are even more significant.

In the months after the protest episodes examined here, Tunisia entered a phase of democratic backsliding, when the president shut down parliament in July 2021 and gradually concentrated executive power in his own hands, rewriting the constitution and further marginalizing political parties, which were prevented from fielding or funding candidates in the December 2022 elections. His autocratization in this new democracy raises new questions for future research on how autonomously organized citizens and formal political actors might work together to impose accountability controls on the arbitrary exercise of executive power.

Notes

1. Lührmann, Marquardt, and Mechkova, "Constraining Governments".
2. Goetz and Jenkins, "Hybrid Forms of Accountability".
3. Etzo, "The Unfinished Business".
4. Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, *Enforcing the Rule of Law*.

5. Laebens and Lührmann, "What Halts Democratic Erosion?"
6. Sika, "Civil Society"; Jöst, "Mobilization Without Organization".
7. McCarthy, "Transgressive Protest".
8. Spierings, "Trust and Tolerance"; Sika, "Contentious Activism".
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10. Kilavuz and Sumaktoyo, "Hopes and Disappointments".
11. Ibid.
12. Benstead, "Why Do Some Arab Citizens"; Spierings, "Democratic Disillusionment?"
13. Foweraker and Landman, *Citizenship Rights*, 236.
14. United Nations, "A/RES/70/1".
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16. Lindberg, "Mapping Accountability".
17. Grimes, "The Contingencies of Societal Accountability"; Malena, Foster, and Singh, "Social Accountability".
18. Lührmann, Marquardt, and Mechkova, "Constraining Governments".
19. Lindberg, "Mapping Accountability".
20. Ibid.
21. Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, *Enforcing the Rule of Law*, 17–9.
22. Etzo, "The Unfinished Business".
23. Goetz and Jenkins, "Hybrid Forms of Accountability".
24. Malena, Foster, and Singh, "Social Accountability".
25. Lindberg, "Mapping Accountability", 215–6.
26. Grimes, "The Contingencies of Societal Accountability", 385.
27. Böhm, Dinerstein, and Spicer, "(Im)Possibilities of Autonomy".
28. Pickerill and Chatterton, "Notes Towards Autonomous Geographies".
29. Böhm, Dinerstein, and Spicer, "(Im)Possibilities of Autonomy"; Flesher Fominaya, "Autonomous Movements".
30. Flesher Fominaya, "Autonomous Movements".
31. Flesher Fominaya, "European Anti-Austerity".
32. Weipert-Fenner and Wolff, *Socioeconomic Protests*.
33. Roberts, *Deepening Democracy?* 30.
34. Silva and Rossi, *Reshaping the Political Arena*; Rossi, "The Second Wave of Incorporation".
35. Lindberg, "Mapping Accountability", 215.
36. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, 145.
37. Hechter, Pfaff, and Underwood, "Grievances".
38. O'Brien, "Rightful Resistance".
39. Zemni, "Tunisia's Marginalized"; Sadiki, "Tunisia's Peripheral Cities".
40. Voss and Williams, "The Local in the Global", 354.
41. George and Bennett, *Case Studies*, 19–22.
42. Simmons, "Grievances Do Matter".
43. Wedeen, "Conceptualizing Culture".
44. Small, "How Many Cases Do I Need?"
45. Cammett, "Political Ethnography".
46. Small, "How Many Cases Do I Need?"
47. McCarthy, "Transgressive Protest".
48. Miller, "I Do Not Forgive!"
49. Ben-Slimane, Justo, and Khelil, "Institutional Entrepreneurship".
50. Simmons and Rush Smith, *Rethinking Comparison*, 12–3.
51. Flyvbjerg, "Five Misunderstandings".
52. Small and Calarco, *Qualitative Literacy*, 47–79.
53. Dahl, *Polyarchy*; Coppedge et al., "V-Dem Dataset V12".
54. Weipert-Fenner and Wolff, *Socioeconomic Protests*.
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57. McCarthy, "Transgressive Protest"; Meddeb, "Life on the Edge".
58. "Gouvernorat de Tataouine En Chiffres", 29.

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60. McCarthy, "Transgressive Protest".
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62. Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia.
63. Author Interview #35, 12 April 2018, Tataouine.
64. Author Interview #18, 13 August 2017, Tataouine.
65. McCarthy, "Transgressive Protest".
66. Gobe, "La Tunisie en 2020"; Meddeb, "Life on the Edge".
67. Gobe, "La Tunisie en 2020".
68. Ibid.
69. Saidani, "Tunisie. Les mouvements sociaux".
70. "Projet de Loi Organique"; McCarthy, "The Politics of Consensus".
71. Gobe, "La Tunisie en 2015".
72. Manich Msamah, "Li-Madha Nahnu Didd Mashru".
73. Bouraoui, "Trois Questions".
74. Riahi, "Manich Msamah".
75. Manich Msamah, "Li-Madha Nahnu Didd Mashru".
76. Bouraoui, "Trois Questions".
77. Riahi, "Manich Msamah".
78. Tlili, "L'émergence d'une Nouvelle Génération".
79. Venice Commission, "Interim Opinion".
80. Manich Msamah, "Li-Madha Nahnu Didd Mashru".
81. Author Interview #57, 8 February 2022, Tunis.
82. Riahi, "Manich Msamah".
83. Author Interview #54, 5 February 2022, Tunis.
84. Author Interview #57, 8 February 2022, Tunis.
85. Aliriza, "New Documentary".
86. Kerrou, *Jemna*.
87. Author Interview #7, 7 August 2017, Jemna.
88. Author Interview #9, 7 August 2017, Jemna.
89. Ben-Slimane, Justo, and Khelil, "Institutional Entrepreneurship".
90. Author Interview #4, 6 August 2017, Jemna.
91. Author Interview #5, 7 August 2017, Jemna,
92. AFP, "Tunisie".
93. Author Interview #4, 6 August 2017, Jemna.
94. Author Interview #4, 6 August 2017, Jemna.
95. Kerrou, *Jemna*, 392.
96. Silva and Rossi, *Reshaping the Political Arena*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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