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“We are not leaving.”

Tunisian civil society organisations in the context of
democratic backsliding.

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Abstract

Recent decades have seen the emergence of a global trend of democratic backsliding, in which authoritarianism is gaining traction, leading to a weakening of democratic practices, institutions, governance, and norms. Interestingly, this trend is noticeable in Tunisia, which just over a decade ago experienced a political revolution and began a democratisation process in which civil society played a central role. Given the once again shifting political context in Tunisia, understanding its active civil society in relation to the current democratic backsliding is relevant. Thus, this thesis aims to investigate how civil society actors and organisations understand and manage Tunisia's current democratic backslide. This was done through a thematic analysis using primary qualitative data collected from eight interviews with respondents engaged within Tunisian CSOs and applying the theoretical frameworks of Power and Systems Approach and Political Opportunity Structure. The findings show how Tunisia's democratic backslide is understood as complex, interconnected changes in power dynamics across different levels in society, shaped by several political opportunities and threats, to which CSOs use strategies including elements of empowerment and unity in collective action to manage their agency.

Key words: democratic backsliding, civil society, civil society organisations, Tunisia

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Key concepts and definitions

Authoritarianism	A form of government characterised by concentration of political and governmental power to a single authority or a small group, maintained by repression of oppositional forces, reductions in the rule of law and limitation of political pluralism, individual freedoms, and political participation. It encompasses several typologies of authoritarian forms of government, such as autocratic, oligarchic or hybrid-regimes, in which there is a blurred boundary between democratic and authoritarian governance.
Civil society	The sum of institutions, organisations, and individuals in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests other than pure economic or political gain. A space outside of the government and private sector within a state in which actors work collectively to contribute to societal development.
Democracy and democratic governance	A form of government in which power is vested in the hands of the population and a system of administration that upholds democratic principles. An ideal definition of democracy ensures accountability, transparency and public participation in governance and decision-making, either directly or through elected representatives.
Democratic backsliding	A process of regime change toward authoritarian leadership instituting repressive measures within states, leading to a gradual decrease or weakening of democratic practices, institutions, governance, and norms.
Democratisation	A process of transitioning a political system towards more democratic practices, such as increased political participation, representation and protection of democratic freedoms and rights.
Populism	A political style and thin ideology, meaning that populists do not need to have any specific type of ideology, but that there is a shared political language and imagination. Populists use rhetoric which positions a population against the ruling elite in many cases, and seemingly portray themselves as representing the voice of the large mass that the ruling elite is disregarding.

List of abbreviations

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
MENA	Middle East and Northern Africa
POS	Political Opportunity Structure
PSA	Power and Systems Approach
UGTT	Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail.

“[T]he country’s strong civil society saved the day.”

– Weilandt, 2018, 211 (on the implementation of the National Dialogue in Tunisia 2013–2014)

“The civil society that seemed so vibrant and the democratic politics that had seemingly flourished, all of it collapsed very quickly under the concerted attack by a head of state intent on establishing himself as yet another autocrat.”

– Masmoudi & Marks, 2022, 11 (on the events following the suspension of the Tunisian National Parliament on July 25th, 2021)

1. Introduction

Civil society plays an important role in filling public space untouched by the state and private sector and is arguably a large part of the structure and development of society overall. Some perspectives describe it as foremost an essential component in democratisation processes, whilst others emphasise that civil society most importantly should be considered as a counterweight to the state (Moldavanova et al., 2023). Hence, there is no universally accepted definition of what civil society as a concept entails, but a broadly shared understanding is that “civil society is the sum of institutions, organisations, and individuals in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests other than pure economic or political gain” (Anheier & Toepler, 2023, 82), and this thesis follows this definition. Nevertheless, civil society organisations (CSOs) and civil society actors perform a diverse range of functions, from dealing with service-provision, empowerment, community building, political participation, advocacy, and watchdog functions (Strachwitz & Toepler, 2022).

The interplay between civil society and governments has long been of interest in research (Grahn & Lührmann, 2021). Additionally, in international development, civil society has become increasingly regarded as an “imagined agent of development”, many times being considered more effective than governments in providing development needs (Van Leeuwen & Verkoren, 2012, 82). Nevertheless, the scope of civil society is to a certain degree dependent on what type of culture and governance it is operating under – the more restrictive governance, the less gamut for action (Moldavanova et al., 2023). Being considered an essential pillar in democratisation processes, most of the research on how civil society relates to governance has focused on contexts of political transitions shifting from authoritarian to democratic (e.g., see Bernhard et al., 2017; Della Porta, 2013; Diamond, 1999; Hermansson, 1992; Przeworski, 1992; Putnam, 1995; Tocqueville, 1969; Zimmer, 2018). However, in recent decades, a global trend of democratic backsliding or authoritarianism, signified by a turn towards authoritarian and more repressive state leadership, as well as weakened support for democratic practices, institutions, governance, and norms, has emerged in which regimes and segments of populations are showing more affinity towards authoritarian governance (International IDEA, 2022; Moldavanova et al., 2023; Obuch et al., 2018). Understanding these developments of democratic backsliding is important for future research and work in the field, and particularly how civil societies are affected also garners further exploration (V-Dem, 2023).

Over a decade since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region has been experiencing turbulent political developments. At the heart of

the uprisings was a desire for social and political change, and in most of the countries these changes were never realised (Zayani, 2023). However, the case of Tunisia was of a unique character. The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia 2010–2011 generated a new political culture based on freedoms, pluralism, rotation of power and civic engagement, which led Tunisia to be regarded as a lone success story of the Arab uprisings (Maboudi, 2022; Mako & Moghadam, 2021; Zayani, 2023). After the dictatorship of Ben Ali was pressured to end in 2011, significant changes towards becoming a democracy were made through Tunisia's rapid political transformation, instituting politically transitional bodies and an orderly transition of political power, as well as taking constitutional measures and enshrining political freedoms (Blackman, 2023; Zayani, 2023; Zeidan, 2022). With these changes, the political sphere changed and became more liberalised, with an abundance of political parties being formed, free elections being held at local and national levels and the Tunisian civil society opening legally, socially, and economically (Hudáková, 2023). The institutional reforms and the adoption of the 2014 constitution were significant steps in Tunisia's democratic transition, championing freedoms and human rights (Blackman, 2023; Zayani, 2023).

Tunisia's political transition from authoritarian dictatorship to a country undergoing democratisation would not have been possible without the engagement of Tunisian civil society and CSOs (Fortier, 2019; Mako & Moghadam, 2021). Through the bottom-up initiatives, engagement and vocal criticism expressed by CSOs, a new culture of government accountability was instituted (Fortier, 2019; Zayani, 2023). With new legislations and freedoms on associational life, civil society was also able to expand and evolve in line with the growing desire for civic engagement among the Tunisian population (Hudáková, 2023; Zayani, 2023). This is evident in the increase of registered CSOs that took place in Tunisia following the revolution, and which at the present are calculated to be more than 24,000 (Fortier, 2019; IFEDA, 2023).

Notwithstanding the achievements made for a peaceful political transition, Tunisia has also faced many major political, economic, and social challenges during the last decade (Hudáková, 2023; Klaus, 2023; Marks, 2017; Masmoudi & Marks 2022; Ridge, 2022; Zayani, 2023). For example, although actions were taken towards a democratic transition, the country still experienced the instability of the political scene with widespread corruption, political assassinations, and the slow pace of reform (Freedom House, 2023; Zayani, 2023). Furthermore, an on-going economic crisis, enduring social unrest and unrealised aspirations of youth and developments of Tunisia's inner regions also impacted the level of political trust among the population (Zayani, 2023). This combination of strides towards democratic change

and the variety of challenges that exist emphasises the complexity of the Tunisian context. Democratic transitions rarely take place without being met with challenges. However, Tunisia is currently considered to experience a democratic backslide (Freedom House, 2023; Ridge, 2022). This shift from democratic development back towards authoritarian governance has been marked as becoming more apparent since the appointment of current President Saied in 2019 (Freedom House, 2023; Ridge, 2022). Some examples of developments signifying Tunisia's democratic backslide are: the suspension of the national parliament on July 25, 2021, by President Saied; the amendment to the 2014 constitution consolidating more political power to the presidential office in July 2022; the disregard of low voter turnouts in national elections, increasing international liaisons with hybrid regimes and authoritarian leaders; and oppression of journalists and opponents to government (Freedom House, 2023; Ridge, 2022). These actions have many times been met with eruptions of protests by civil society and the Tunisian population, but these efforts have many times mainly been addressed by authorities in attempts to stifle the protests (Freedom House, 2023).

Democratic transitions do not typically follow a straight line of action (Berman, 2007; Eibl & Lyng, 2017). Thus, that a democratic backslide is currently happening in Tunisia is not surprising. However, despite democratic backslides typically indicating repression towards civil society, the Tunisian civil society still manages to be active and operating under these shifting governmental forms (Boughzala & Ben Romdhane, 2019; Fortier, 2019; Zayani, 2023). Therefore, a further exploration on how Tunisian CSOs manage shifts in civic space can contribute to the discourse on the role of civil society in transitional politics.

1.1 Purpose and research question

Considering these aspects, this thesis focuses on how civil society actors and CSOs understand and manage changes in civic space in relation to the current democratic backslide in Tunisia. In doing so, the nexus of civil society and shifting political contexts can be explored further. Thereby, this thesis is guided by the following overarching research question: *How do actors engaged in civil society organisations (CSOs) understand and manage Tunisia's current democratic backslide?*

To answer this, two sub-questions were formulated:

- I. Applying a Power and Systems approach, how can Tunisia's democratic backslide be understood from people engaged in civil society?
- II. What political opportunities and threats are perceived by civil society actors in Tunisia in relation to the current democratic backslide?

The thesis attempts to answer these questions through using semi-structured interviews as primary data collection. In total, eight interviews were conducted with respondents engaged in Tunisian CSOs working with functions such as human rights advocacy, various types of empowerment and being political watchdogs. This was done to carry out a thematic analysis and discussion guided by two theoretical frameworks, the Power and Systems Approach, and Political Opportunity Structure.

Researching current events can prove a perilous process, given that the period between the moment of writing the research and its publishing can be long, “while political life does not stop in between” (Przeworski, 2019, xi). Nevertheless, this thesis does not claim to search for a perfect explanation, but rather aims to capture an understanding of the situation of civil society actors and CSOs in Tunisia in the first four months of 2023. In doing so, the results of these findings can aid future research on the relationship between CSOs and democratic backsliding.

1.2 Disposition

This thesis begins with introducing the role of civil society as well as the contextual background on Tunisia's political transitions in the last decade and its current democratic backslide. Chapter two presents a literature review highlighting Tunisia's democratisation process and civil society, connecting these to democratic backsliding. The theoretical frameworks – Power and Systems Approach (PSA) and Political Opportunity Structure (POS) – are presented in chapter three, and chapter four highlights the methodology of the study. Chapter five presents the findings from interviews with members of Tunisian CSOs, and chapter six provides an analytical discussion on the findings. Finally, chapter seven presents concluding remarks and reflections for further research.

2. Literature review

This chapter outlines and discusses relevant literature to the study. The first section explores the field of democratisation, discussing its development and criticisms. The second section describes previous democratisation research in Tunisia, whilst the third section deals with democratic backsliding, including reflections on the Tunisian case. The concluding section presents the contribution of this thesis.

2.1 The field of political transitions: democratisation and its development

The field of democratisation processes is vast and multidisciplinary, and focuses on the processes, causes and outcomes of democratisation, with studies mainly highlighting political transitions from autocratic to democratic governance (Arugay, 2021; Diamond, 1999; Huntington, 1968; Kauffman, 2023). Some key aspects in the literature involve the dynamics of transitions and the challenges of sustainable democratic consolidation, the importance of government contestability in democracies, and the implications democratisation has for economic development, human rights protection, and international relations (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2005; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Tranditis, 2016).

Transition research focuses on what conditions make democracy possible and allows it to thrive, emphasises that political transitions take place from a combination of both top-down and bottom-up actions, and highlights that “the essence of democracy is the habit of dissension and conciliation over ever-changing issues and amidst ever-changing alignments” (Prezeworski, 1992; Rustow, 1970, 363). Moreover, political liberalisation is strongly connected to democratisation, and is defined by increasing freedoms such as the right to association, free speech and press, often occurring after extensive periods of repression of collective action or political opposition (Fortier, 2019; Kauffman, 2023). Overall, democratisation is considered a non-linear process that introduces new political incentives (Della Porta, 2013; Eibl & Lynge, 2017).

Early democratisation research was mainly based on comparative case studies regarding developments in Latin America and Eastern Europe during the late 1990s (Hermansson, 1992). However, Waylen (1994) emphasises that research on democratisation mainly focused on transitions from non-democracies to democracies, lacking vital perspectives from other types of settings and of marginalised groups in society. Additionally, the concept of ‘consolidated democracies’ is also questioned for its usefulness, in view of the challenges to democracy countries traditionally deemed democratic are facing around the world, such as

increasing political polarisation and populist speech (Ottaway, 2023). Thus, it has been highlighted as imperative to decolonise and re-theorise transitional terminology, rooting the understanding and analysis of democracy within local histories, practices, and contexts (Brooks et al., 2019; Kohn & McBride, 2011).

Furthermore, research on democracy and transitions in the Muslim countries are notably lacking in earlier research as it was largely believed that Islam and democracy were inherently incompatible (Stepan, 2018). Recognising that political developments in the Arab world occur without some kind of cultural exceptionalism connected to religion (Ibid.) is important in order to develop the field of democratisation (Cavatorta, 2018). Countries which can be considered democratic in modern times endured a long and fledgling path to democracy, which is why other parts of the world should not be expected to reach a similar degree in the span of just a few years (Berman, 2007). Moreover, civil society as a concept developed in liberal democracies is not easily transferable to authoritarian settings (Iaconantonio, 2020; Plaetzer, 2014). It is important to consider the different types of challenges and conditions actors face when working towards democratic transition in authoritarian settings (Ahram & Goode, 2016).

2.2 Tunisia – a decade of democratisation and the role of civil society

The democratic transition in Tunisia has been a subject of intense inquiry. Before delving into the current setting of Tunisia as a state in a democratic backslide, understanding the political processes and role of the Tunisian civil society of the last decade is important.

The fall of Ben Ali in 2011 opened a space which numerous actors saw as an opportunity to participate in the country's upcoming sociopolitical transformation (Fortier, 2019; Zayani, 2023). The political liberalisation following this was expressed in various ways through political reforms, freedoms of expression and association, and the development of a pluralistic society (Fortier, 2019; Zayani, 2023). As Fortier (2019) presents, CSOs were able to leverage opportunities in Tunisia to advocate for emancipatory goals and contribute to the consolidation of democratic values in the country, challenging and changing the power structures in the country. Thus, Tunisia's civil society became re-invigorated, and it represents one of the most important achievements following the revolution (Fortier, 2019; Hudáková, 2023). Mainly, this is because civil society was largely driven by groups that were marginalised during the previous authoritarian period¹, leading to a diverse bottom-up involvement of

¹ For example, groups including youth and women, as well as cultural and religious minorities.

citizens in social, cultural, economic, and political life in the country (Hudáková, 2023; Sigilliò, 2023).

Ottaway (2023) describes the initial success of the Tunisian democratisation process, including aspects such as favourable structural conditions, an element of luck, and major actors embracing politics of the possible rather than absolute ideologies. In particular, Ottaway (2023) emphasises the agency, timely interventions and good leadership by civil society actors and Tunisian CSOs as a significant factor for the initial successful democratisation process, exemplifying this with the creation of the National Dialogue Quartet and the 2014 constitution.² The role of civil society was thus central for Tunisia's democratic development in the last decade (Blackman, 2023; Fortier, 2019; Hudáková, 2023; Obuch et al., 2018; Ottaway, 2023; Sigilliò, 2023). This is reflected in literature on civil society in democratisation contexts, which states that civil society is believed to have a significant potential to help strengthen existing democracies or de-throw authoritarian regimes (Grahn & Lührmann, 2021; Hudáková, 2023; Toepler et al., 2020; Zimmer, 2018). Ottaway (2023) also reflects that even if large crowds or street mobilisation did play a large part in the beginning of the democratisation process, as it unequivocally led to the flight of then President and dictator Ben Ali, it was the transformation of this street action into effective political pressure by several CSOs that led to civil society gaining agency in Tunisia. This domestic action, the existence of strong organisations and how they transformed their actions into agency, was crucial to the initial success of the Tunisian democratic transition (Ibid).

Grahn & Lührmann (2021) state that the role of civil society during independence struggles is highly relevant for the democratic outcome. Thus, civil society has a great potential impact in nurturing democratic governance. The presence of a vibrant and autonomous civil society and CSOs willing to play by democratic rules prior to the critical juncture of independence is positively related to the level of democracy after independence (Ibid.). Vice versa, presence of non-democratic CSOs or CSOs not willing to play by democratic rules also have the possibility of undermining democracy, but this did not happen in Tunisia (Grahn & Lührmann, 2021; Hudáková, 2023). In Tunisia, both long before the Jasmine revolution and the following political transition, secular liberals and Islamists were opposing the authoritarian

² On July 30th, 2013, four of Tunisia's largest and most politically influential CSOs joined together and formed the National Dialogue Quartet, an initiative to find a new way forward to a democratic Tunisia and institutionalise freedoms and human rights, which resulted in a new constitution amongst other things. The CSOs involved in the quartet were: the Tunisian General Labour Union, Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT); the employers' federation, Union Tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce et de l'artisanat (UTICA), the order of lawyers, Ordre national des avocats de Tunisie (ONAT), and human rights group Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme (LTDH) (Ottaway, 2023).

government, and despite disagreeing in many areas, they held organised meetings where they agreed upon democratic rules (Stepan & Linz, 2013). Thus, when the transition started, they were relatively prepared for democratic governance (Grahn & Lührmann, 2021). Also, Hudáková (2023) highlights the uniqueness of the Tunisian case, since CSOs in the MENA region are routinely observed to reinforce and perpetuate authoritarian regimes, rather than democratise.

Furthermore, Tunisia's civil society also maintains an inherent political role (Sigillio, 2023). Not only were CSOs involved in the drafting process of the 2014 constitution and in helping the country's political forces to towards a peaceful transition, but they also engage in public debates, influence legislation, provide training and opportunities for their members, and mobilise segments of society for their causes (Hudáková, 2023; Maboudi, 2022; Sigillio, 2023). However, this does not mean that civil society is a panacea for all political problems. For example, CSOs are not a substitute for political parties, even if they can articulate citizens' positions and grievances, and provide public services or specialised expertise. As Hudáková (2023, 124) puts it "[CSOs] cannot be relied on to resolve deep structural issues that require government intervention and political, social, and economic reforms" such as corruption, nepotism, and the deteriorating economic situation in Tunisia. Also, CSOs cannot be expected to articulate and channel all citizen activities, since many Tunisians remain sceptical of CSOs despite their importance during the democratic transition (Arab Barometer, 2022; Hudáková, 2023). A generational divide is also present in the way Tunisians participate in civil society, since many younger Tunisians have opted to pursue their political agendas and interests by engaging in loose, horizontally organised networks or groups that mobilise around a single issue, rather than joining formal, older, and established CSOs (Hudáková, 2023). Since this is happening at the same time as a rise in populism and turn away from traditional politics in Tunisia, the function of various Tunisian CSOs to act as mediators between the political and private sphere, as well as actors, is important to uphold (Ibid.). This shows the complexity of the Tunisian context and demonstrates that transitions present narrow windows of opportunity for the groups engaged in changing political systems (Lachapelle & Hellmeier, 2022; Sigillio, 2023).

2.3 Democratic backsliding

Conducting research in authoritarian settings is inherently difficult due to the general lack of transparency and security risks (Ahram & Goode, 2016). Nonetheless, given the rise of authoritarianism in recent decades, looking closely into this issue is important to gain an

understanding of current political trajectories (Obuch et al., 2018; Przeworski, 2019). The symptoms of this authoritarian increase are not just political but decrease of trust in institutions extends to the media, banks, private corporations, and even religious leadership (Obuch et al., 2018). Additionally, populism has taken a universal hold in societies, where people with different political views, values and cultures increasingly regard each other as enemies (Mounk, 2019; Obuch et al., 2018; Przeworski, 2019). Obuch et al. (2018) note that contemporary research on authoritarianism emphasises the role of the state and of institutions for the maintenance of dominance, but neglects the significance of non-institutional influences to a large extent. Consequently, the role of civil society is often not taken into adequate consideration in research, even if evidence shows that civic space is diminishing in contexts of democratic backslide (Ibid.).

In the case of Tunisia, a so-called ‘perfect democracy’ where the voices of all citizens are equally accounted for in determining governmental action was not created after the revolution (Ottaway, 2023). The Tunisia that emerged in the decade after the revolution can be understood as a country where various political players abided democratic procedures and where the government respected the law. However, Ottaway (2023) states that some segments of the population had a stronger voice and held more power to influence government decisions than others and were thus able to take advantage of the shift from dictatorship to democracy. Before the revolution, power mainly resided in the presidency and Ben Ali’s flight resulted in a power vacuum difficult to manage (Ottaway, 2023; Sigilliò, 2023).

To understand the reversal of Tunisia’s democratic transition, Ottaway (2023) accentuates three important aspects. First, the democratic transition went about at an uncertain pace, due to the need for negotiation and compromise between many different political forces (Ibid.). As Ottaway (2023, 35) states “[m]ost democratic transitions are slow processes, not sudden events and even less so the outcome of revolutions”, which the Tunisian population was not prepared for. The accompanying instability to the slow transition created doubts about the future of the country internally, and had significant negative economic consequences (Ibid.). In addition, Tunisia had been experiencing socioeconomic challenges for decades, and the large systematic changes impacted these conditions negatively (Marks, 2017; Ottaway, 2023; Weilandt, 2018; Zayani, 2023).

Second, the extent of compromises that Tunisian leaders and organisations made to resolve successive impasses also led to the democratic backslide (Ottaway, 2023). The political plurality and increase in political parties following the revolution was considered a positive, democratic development. However, it also led to contention and difficulties in considering all

possible stances and issues (Fortier, 2019; Ottaway, 2023). For example, some parts of Tunisia's population developed nostalgia for a dictatorship where the so-called 'rules of the game' were clearly defined, in comparison to the context of the unsettled social, political, and cultural situation in Tunisia during the transition, which made the future difficult to predict (Fortier, 2019). Also, democratic transitions do not inherently sweep away the old regimes and systems in place, and many Tunisians have complained about how members of Ben Ali's regime remained in positions of influence or did not pay restitution for their corruption under the old regime (Ottaway, 2023). Another point connected to this is how large CSOs, most prominently the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), developed a complicated relationship with the government during the decade following the revolution, with the central leadership being more willing to co-opt with the regime while local branches remained more activist (Ibid.).

The third reason behind the reversal of the transition was the weakening of the distinction between the ruling coalition and opposition in Tunisia (Ibid.). Following the 2014 elections, the Tunisian government included two major rival parties³, and democracy does not function well without a strong opposition which can open the possibility of voting the incumbent government out of power (Béteille, 2012; della Porta, 2013; Ottaway, 2023). Moreover, parties or ruling coalitions that remain in power for too long often run the risk of corruption or of becoming complacent, which also is bound to weaken the democratic process (della Porta, 2013). Some of the leaders who had been crucial to the success of the transition in the beginning of the political change process started to undermine it by attempting to remain at the centre of decision-making (Ottaway, 2023). Thus, when President Saied suspended the parliament in 2021, the democratic institutions that had been built during the previous decade no longer provided the balance of countervailing forces which could have helped in addressing mounting problems (Ibid.).

Additionally, Ridge (2022) identifies that Tunisia currently has potential for further democratic backsliding through the implementation of liberal albeit anti-democratic actions by President Saied. Substantial support for liberal institutions and civil rights in Tunisia exists, but democracy itself is not strongly supported (Ibid.). Ridge (2022) concludes that the action of President Saied to suspend the national parliament on July 25th, 2021, demonstrates how potential authoritarians can act strategically during democratic regressions to avoid popular

³ The social democratic party Nidaa Tounes could not form a cabinet capable of winning a confidence vote in parliament without the participation of Ennahda, a self-defined Islamic democratic party with influences from social conservatism and economic liberalism (Ottaway, 2023).

reprisals. Ottaway (2023) endorses this view and highlights the rather populist rhetoric of the President.

A context with a similar experience to Tunisia is Turkey, which until a decade ago also was regarded as a model for Middle Eastern countries in balancing Islam and democracy (Iaconantonio, 2020). Iaconantonio (2020) investigated whether and how CSOs in Turkey responded to the contrary pressures of both an increasingly authoritarian regime, as well as citizens' demands for transparent and participatory institutions. The study lends insight into the potential for CSOs to be a democratising force in countries facing democratic backslide and amongst other things concludes that 1) state repression and inherent societal dilemmas together restrict CSOs' capacities to build an internal democracy, 2) CSOs undertake both strategic external and internal work to adapt to changing contexts, 3) relationships between CSOs and the state under authoritarian regimes take a variety of forms beyond a dichotomy of cooptation and confrontation dichotomy, and 4) how organisations experience this political complexity and respond to it depends on certain organisational characteristics (Ibid.). It was also found that authoritarian pressures, which take both coercive and soft forms, are widespread across all types of CSOs. Many times, literature on civil society under authoritarian regimes refers to restrictions imposed on CSOs operating more political functions, such as human rights advocacy, whereas service-providing CSOs, e.g. CSOs fulfilling functions related to health and welfare, are rather thought to be favoured given their provision of welfare benefits to society and in how they are less inclined to participate in political matters (Ibid.). However, Iaconantonio (2020) showed that both types of CSOs were similarly impacted by the repression on civil society by the government, in both direct and more subtle ways.

Concerning this, a common feature of authoritarian regimes is that they do not tolerate any independent organisations, and in the cases that they do these would have to be non-political and thereby non-threatening to the structure of power for the regime (Przeworski, 1992). In authoritarian settings, leaders employ an abundance of strategies to control and repress civil society actors, such as enactment of restrictive laws, forced supervision or closure of CSOs, biased judicial proceedings, denial of the right to protest peacefully, criminalisation, arrests, imprisonment, arbitrary detentions, and intimidation of civil society members (Iaconantonio, 2020). Also, in autocratic contexts many CSOs, particularly service-providing ones, might be prone not only to tolerate, but also at least indirectly support non-democratic settings by prioritising serving the community through their various welfare-related activities over taking a stance on political matters (Obuch et al., 2018). Nevertheless, as Moldavanova et al. (2023, 10) states, service-providing CSOs "tend to be more capable of functioning 'under

the radar' [...] thus escaping the closing space'' and can therefore also contribute to democratic structures in both direct and indirect ways.

2.4 Contribution

Implementing a study in a setting as complex as the current Tunisian context may prove difficult, since the full impact of the 2010–2011 revolution may not come into view for several decades (Blackman, 2023). Nevertheless, this thesis aims to contribute to filling several research gaps, including adding to the general literature on democratic backsliding as well as shedding light on transitions in predominantly Muslim countries, which notably is lacking (Cavatorta, 2018; Stepan, 2018). Moreover, as previously emphasised, CSOs are an understudied albeit important actor in contexts of transitions, non-democratic settings and during democratic backsliding (Obuch et al., 2018). Only recently have questions regarding how, if, and to what extent civil society might exist under non-democratic or authoritarian governments become visible within political science (Ibid.). The contribution of this study is therefore to further understand the possible effects of democratic backsliding and political transitions by focusing on CSOs perspectives in Tunisia's transitional context.

3. Theoretical framework

This chapter presents the theoretical frameworks used for the study. The study applies a Power and Systems Approach (PSA) as formulated by Duncan Green and Sidney Tarrow's synthesis of Political Opportunity Structure (POS) theory to highlight the impact Tunisia's shifting political context and democratic backslide have on civil society actors and organisations.

3.1 Power and Systems Approach

In 'How Change Happens', Duncan Green (2016) conceptualises a Power and Systems Approach (PSA). Exploring the process of social and political change, Green (2016) emphasises the interconnectedness of power dynamics and broader systems that shape social outcomes. In this thesis, power as a concept is defined as the ability of individuals, groups, or institutions to exert influence over others, shaping decisions and actions. Power is understood as relational and dynamic, arising from the interactions and relationships among different actors within societies or systems (Ibid.). In turn, systems are understood as social and political networks of inter-linked parts and actors that influence each other, e.g. individuals, groups and institutions in this thesis (Bowman et al., 2015). The PSA is a framework for analysis related

to understanding forms of power dynamics and levels in systems which may influence the outcomes of actions by change-makers, such as activists or organisations, in contexts where they aim to create meaningful and transformative change (Bowman et al., 2015; Green, 2016).

In order to generate either social or system change, understanding how power is distributed and can be re-distributed between and within social groups is imperative (Finnemore & Goldstein, 2013; Hopwood et al., 2005). Green (2016) highlights how the most discussed form of power is what often is referred to as ‘visible power’ describing it as:

“[T]he world of politics and authority, policed by laws, violence and money. It gets bad press, conjuring up images of force, coercion, discrimination, corruption, repression and abuse. But visible power is also necessary to do good, whether to implement enlightened public policies or to prevent acts of violence by the strong against the weak”

(Green, 2016, 29).

Typically, activists seeking social and political change focus their efforts on those who wield visible power, such as presidents or politicians in leadership positions. However, underpinning visible power are oftentimes subtle interactions among a much more diverse set of actors connected to *hidden* or *invisible power*. Hidden power refers to what goes on behind the scenes, such as power of lobbyists, and “comprises the shared view of what those in power consider sensible or reasonable in public debate” (Ibid., 29). Invisible power often determines the capacity of change movements to influence both visible and hidden power and “causes the relatively powerless to internalise and accept their conditions, therefore shaping the belief systems” (Ibid., 30). Acknowledging these different types of power can in turn facilitate analysis and creation of strategies for systems change (Bowman et al., 2015). However, only contemplating visible, hidden, and invisible power can be dispiriting when working for change. Fortunately, Green (2016) describes an optimistic approach encapsulating ways to consider opportunities and possibilities of change to describe the level of empowerment for an organisation or individual to create change (see Table 1).

Table 1: Green's (2016) optimistic approach to view power

Power within	Personal self-confidence and a sense of rights and entitlement.
Power with	Collective power, through organisation, solidarity, and joint action.
Power to	Meaning effective choice, the capability to decide actions and carry them out.
Power over	The power of hierarchy and domination.

This approach and model consisting of four kinds of power suggests a more comprehensive approach to promoting change rather than only addressing visible power and denouncing hidden and invisible power (Ibid.). Personal empowerment can be the first step to social transformation, since unless people first develop a sense of self-confidence and a belief in their own rights (power within), efforts to help them organise (power with) and demands to have a say (power to) may not succeed (Ibid.).

Systems thinking, on the other hand, focuses on the broader systems that shape social and political outcomes (Bowman et al., 2015; Green, 2016; Sanneh, 2018). As a concept, systems thinking can be applied to a variety of fields, from social to natural scientific. Overall, thinking systematically enables analysis to recognise complexities and multidimensionality, and that change in one part of the system can have far-reaching effects on other parts of the system through so-called feedback-loops and cycles of change (Green, 2016; Sanneh, 2018). As Sanneh (2018, 6) states, "Everything is connected to everything". Social, economic, and political systems can both facilitate and impede the progress of system change, and understanding these systems is crucial for identifying points of leverage and opportunities for change (Green, 2016; Sanneh, 2018). Three levels can be considered in analysis of how to go about system change: *micro level* examines individuals and individual-level interactions, *meso level* examines groups, units and organisations, and *macro level* examines the political-administrative environment, such as national systems, regulations, and cultures (Green, 2016).

The PSA provides questions for analysing how change can be created, and suggests the kinds of questions that should be asked to create meaningful change, such as:

Table 2. (Non-exhaustive) List of questions in a Power and Systems analysis, as presented by Green (2016, 18).

What kind of change is being aimed for (individual attitudes, social norms, laws and policies, access to resources)?

What precedents exist that we can learn from (positive deviance, history, current political and social tides)?

Who are the stakeholders of power and what kind of power is involved in this context?

What kind of approach makes sense for this change (traditional project, advocacy, multiple parallel experiments etc)?

What strategies are we going to implement? How can we learn about the impact of our actions or changes in context (e.g., critical junctures)?

In sum, the PSA emphasises that creating change requires interconnectedness, a willingness to engage with a broad range of stakeholders, and to build coalitions to identify and address root causes (Green, 2016; Kasser et al., 2013). Furthermore, it is necessary to decide whether the change aimed for is an attempt to make the current system better, or if it strives to tackle deeper structures of power (Green, 2016).

3.2 Political Opportunity Structure

In combination with Green's conceptualisation of a PSA, this study also applies Sidney Tarrow's (2011) synthesis on Political Opportunity Structures (POS), which is helpful in research of shifting political contexts, such as Tunisia's democratic backslide. Tarrow (2011) explores the dynamics of social movements and collective action, and how they can challenge and transform political power structures in various settings. A chief argument deals with how people start engaging in contentious politics. When political opportunities, such as divisions between elites or diminishing capacities for repression, emerge and a repertoire of collective action is strategically employed, a cycle of contention begins which can broaden collective engagement (Aslanidis, 2015; Tarrow, 2011). Thus, when collective challenges revolve around broad cleavages in society, they can bring people together through cultural or identity measures to construct social networks, which thereafter leads to collective actions that can result in sustained interactions with opponents (Aslanidis, 2015; Tarrow, 2011). Thus, from a POS

perspective, social movements, defined as “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities”, are not just reactive responses to political crises, but work proactively and influence political processes, bringing about significant societal changes (Aslanidis, 2015; Tarrow, 2011, 9).

To further understand this cycle of contention, Tarrow (2011) provides a central concept of the *political opportunity structure*, which refers to a set of political conditions that enable or constrain the activities of social movements. Essentially, social movements, or collective challenges, are more likely to emerge and succeed with their aims when an opening in the political system exists, allowing for greater participation and influence by non-state actors⁴. Political opportunities are also emphasised as being resources external to the group and they are shaped by features in the political system, which in turn shape patterns of interaction between movements and political actors (Aslanidis, 2015; Tarrow, 2011). Thus, at the most general level, political opportunities are shaped by political regimes (Tarrow, 2011).

Tarrow defines *opportunities* as “consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent or national – sets of clues that encourage people to engage in contentious politics” (2011, 32). They also encompass the perceived probability that social protest actions will lead to success in achieving a desired outcome, whatever this may be. Balancing opportunities are so-called ‘*threats*’ which are understood as factors that discourage and constrain collective action and contention (Ibid.). Threats relate to the risks and costs of action or inaction, rather than the prospect of success for a movement or group to engage in contentious politics. How opportunities and threats combine shape decisions taken regarding collective action (Goldstone & Tilly, 2001). POS is therefore not an invariant model or framework, which inevitably produces a social movement, but is to be understood as a set of clues regarding when contentious politics can emerge and set in motion a chain of causation (Tarrow, 2011).

Furthermore, Alimi (2009) expands on the theorising of POS by relating it to highly repressive settings. Because although the lion’s share of contentious politics in the world are taking place in repressive, authoritarian environments or undemocratic regimes, theorising of POS is mainly based on contentious episodes in politically liberal settings (Ibid.). Therefore, in repressive settings, the ability of collective actors to seize political opportunities and trigger mobilisation is more uncertain and should not be taken for granted (Ibid.).

⁴ The term ‘non-state actors’ refers to individuals or organisations that are not affiliated with, directed by or funded by any government. It includes civil society actors.

In sum, the theoretical frameworks of PSA and POS and their key concepts of *power*, *systems*, and *political opportunities and threats* will be relied on for the analytical discussion. Since a PSA can position civil society actors and organisations in contexts where they are working for change, and POS emphasises structural and political opportunities and threats shaping civil society actors' and organisations' abilities to realise their goals, together they can provide a comprehensive insights into how the respondents understand Tunisia's democratic backslide and how their CSOs manage the changes in civic space.

4. Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodological choices of the thesis. It begins by describing the qualitative research design and moves on to explore the data collection, sampling, and strategy for analysis to answer the research questions. The chapter ends with reflections on ethical procedures, power, and positionality, as well as considerations on trustworthiness and limitations of the study.

4.1 Research design

This thesis is guided by a qualitative methodological approach, using the context of CSOs in Tunisia as a case study to understand how they work to create change and manage political opportunities within a shifting political context. The study can be described as an inductive thematic analysis based on data collected from semi-structured interviews with respondents engaged in CSOs that focus on functions such as empowerment, advocacy, and watchdog aspects in Tunisia. The study has an explorative character, aiming to investigate a phenomenon little understood in research and uses interviews to develop understandings drawing on the respondents' knowledge regarding how CSOs in Tunisia's manage the changing civic space through a social constructivist and interpretivist approach (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Hammett et al., 2015).

The study uses a qualitative approach since it is preferred for research focused on obtaining a complex, detailed understanding of issues and in cases where authors want to empower individuals to share their stories, experiences, and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The focus of the study is to develop the understanding of CSOs role in political transitions by letting the respondents' perspectives through interviews be at the centre of the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Hammett et al., 2015). Thus, exclusively using quantitative measures and statistical analyses would not have fit the research problem framed in this study

(Creswell & Poth, 2017). Using a mixed methods approach for the methodology was considered at the start of the study, since this approach can enhance trustworthiness of research and ensure further reliability through triangulation (Hammett et al., 2015). However, due to the scope and timeframe of the thesis, my personal lack of resources to travel, and a consideration of ongoing instabilities in Tunisia⁵ this approach was not carried out. Moreover, the unique context, history, current events, and power structures within Tunisia motivated the choice of a single case study. Rather than conducting a comparative case study, the thesis can solely focus on CSOs in Tunisia, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of the context (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

4.2 Interviews

The collection of data for the study consisted of semi-structured interviews through videoconferences. The interviews were conducted from February 20th, 2023, until April 6th, 2023. In total, 8 interviews were carried out with people engaged and working in Tunisian CSOs (see Appendix I).

The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided for a conversational tone and made sure to include predetermined questions to direct the conversations around the central topic (Hammett et al., 2015). For this purpose, an interview guide was established in preparation for the interviews based on the theoretical frameworks, and specific follow-up questions were added based on individual responses (see Appendix II). To ensure that answers from the respondents stayed relevant to the topic of interest for the study, open-ended questions were used, and the interview guide was structured so as to let the interviews be dynamic and lively (Esaiasson et al., 2017; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014; Patton, 2015). The open-ended questions allowed for the respondents to articulate their own thoughts and ideas and engage in wide-ranging discussions. This demanded me as an interviewer to be attentive and more of a conversational partner, posing follow-up questions that might diverge from the interview guide. However, this also prompted the respondents to give more developed answers and let them “organise their answers to their own framework” which increases the validity of their responses

⁵ These ‘ongoing instabilities’ refer to events related to an escalation of instability taking place in Tunisia during the writing of the thesis. These include events such as: an escalation of targeting arrests and crackdown of political opponents to the President and government by Tunisian authorities, which continuously also were met with protests from parts of the population, civil society and at times also international actors; an increase of hate-speech and racism against immigrants and mainly black people in Tunisia from the government, following a statement from the President in late February, which has been met with nation-wide protests; and the continuation of an economic crisis (see for example: Amnesty International, 2023a; Amnesty International, 2023b; BBC, 2023; White, 2023).

(Aberbach & Rockman, 2002, 674). Another way to increase the validity of qualitative interviews is to ask for clarifications and to summarise the respondents' replies, which was done when necessary (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). It is important that researchers are critical and reflexive in relation to any pre-existing assumptions regarding the topic during the data collection, so I strived to be open and flexible to any unexpected information that could arise (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014; Rapley, 2001).

The data collection was done virtually via Zoom. Conducting data collection by videoconferencing is a useful alternative to the more traditional face-to-face methods used in qualitative research and offers unique features such as greater flexibility in time and location whilst still maintaining aspects of traditional interactions (Archibald et al., 2019; Hammett et al., 2015; Lobe et al., 2020). Zoom as an interview platform has also been rated above other interview mediums, including face-to-face methods, telephone, and other videoconferencing platforms, which is why this platform was used (Archibald et al., 2019). Since I lacked resources to travel and conduct face-to-face interviews, the use of videoconferencing proved to be a valuable opportunity. Only one respondent experienced some issues in internet connectivity, but these were quickly resolved. Additionally, ethical and safety issues are given extra attention during computer-mediated research in comparison to traditional in-person communication, which suited the study in terms of security (Lobe et al., 2020).

4.3 Sampling

The method used for sampling the respondents is based on a purposeful sampling strategy, meaning that the respondents were selected because they purposefully could inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Therefore, individuals engaged in one or several CSOs were approached, since they hold insight into opportunities or challenges CSOs in Tunisia face. Furthermore, since the thesis focuses on the impact of political shifts in Tunisia, the sample is delimited to CSOs working with relatively more political functions, such as human rights advocacy, empowerment, and watchdog functions. Instead of including perspectives from service-providing CSOs, the scope of the thesis and the notion that CSOs engaged in more political functions experience more of an impact from political shifts guided this decision (Moldavanova et al., 2023). Nonetheless, the sample was put together through contacting CSOs via online platforms and email-addresses, previously established contacts in Tunisia, and the Swedish embassy in Tunis, Tunisia's capital. After each interview, the respondents were also asked if

they could contribute to a snowball sampling strategy. Snowball sampling can be recommended in this case of study as a safe option for data collection, since a foundation of trust between respondents and the researcher is important due to potential security reasons given the ongoing instabilities (Hammett et al., 2015). However, it was difficult to ‘get the snowball rolling’. In the end, the sampling of data resembled that of convenience sampling, meaning the sample is the one that was available to the study (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Furthermore, the respondents can also all be considered as part of the Tunisian youth⁶, since they all described in some way how they grew up and became adults during and after the 2010–2011 uprisings and the events that followed, and their ages ranged between 22 to 31. The findings might therefore mainly express the understanding of youth who are actively working towards meaningful change in Tunisia and exclude perspectives of other age groups. However, the respondents’ individual experiences leading to their civil society engagement and their respective levels of engagement are diverse, ranging from being volunteering members to full-time employees within their CSOs. Additionally, the respondents’ demeanour towards whether their own efforts, as well as those of other CSOs, will create meaningful change also differed, displaying a range of perspectives on the situation for Tunisian CSOs.

4.4 Data analysis

The primary sources of data for the study are the transcripts from recorded interviews. After the transcribing was completed, the material was read through several times to notice any patterns and to get well-acquainted with the findings, a practice common for thematic analyses (Bryman, 2012). Even though thematic analysis is considered quite underdeveloped for being a procedure for data analysis since it only has few specifications or steps outlining how to tackle qualitative data, it is frequently used for qualitative research (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Furthermore, searching for themes is an activity discerned in many approaches to qualitative data analysis. Bryman (2012) states that, because of the flexibility and ability to be deployed in various contexts of study, thematic analysis has gained popularity among research methods. A general strategy for assisting a thematic analysis of qualitative data is provided by Ritchie et al. (2003, 219) who describe a “matrix-based method for ordering and synthesising data” providing a useful way to organise data, which this thesis found

⁶ The operational use of the term “youth” depends on relative sociocultural, institutional, economic, and political nuances that vary from country to country (UN, 2023). Therefore, the term ‘youth’ in the study refers to the generation of Tunisians who grew up during the Arab uprisings and the events following them, which would include Tunisians between about 18 – 35 years old.

advantageous to draw on. In this thesis, a theme is regarded as a category identified through the data which relates to the research focus and provides a basis for a theoretical understanding, which also aims to make a theoretical contribution to the literature on civil society in shifting political contexts (Bryman, 2012).

When conducting the data analysis, an inductive approach was utilised to distinguish the themes most frequently brought up by the respondents. The formulation of the interview guide meant that open and broad questions enabled the respondents to truly shape the story (Appendix II). Through the analysis I was able to determine the patterns and themes, which led me to establish five highlighted themes from the interviews: *identity, power of CSOs* (including sub-themes *unity and coalitions* and *centralisation*), *politics, socioeconomic issues*, and *uncertainty*. These themes derived from the material are the product of thorough reading and rereading of the transcripts. This repetition of reading through the transcripts, as well as working with the material, is essential to identify, formulate and analyse the themes for the study (Bryman, 2012; Weston et al., 2001).

As an analytical approach, a thematic analysis does not provide a way of thinking about how to manage the themes and data, but instead it is based on the researcher's awareness of recurring ideas and topics in the data (Bryman, 2012). The theoretical framework of the thesis will thus later be applied and used in the discussion of the findings and themes brought forth by the interviews, letting the data analysis simply emphasise the perspectives of Tunisian people engaged in CSOs on how they manage opportunities in a shifting political context.

4.5 Ethics, power, positionality, and reflexivity

Applying ethics and reflexivity is imperative for social science research, especially when primary data is collected through interviews to protect respondents from potential harm during the entire thesis process (Banks & Scheyvens, 2014; England 1994; Hammett et al., 2015; Ragin and Amoroso, 2011). As such, each respondent was informed of the purpose of the study, how their perspectives would be incorporated, and the ethical principles guiding the thesis to create a safe and trusting environment (Banks & Scheyvens, 2014; Bryman, 2012; Hammett et al., 2015). These principles include the ensuring of informed consent of participation and for audio-recordings of the interviews, how participation is completely voluntary and that the respondents are free to stop or retract their interviews at any time, and that anonymity is ensured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

Even though the interviews were designed and approached in a way to shift potential power structures, I remained aware that power dynamics between the respondents and myself as a researcher still exists to some degree (Banks & Scheyvens, 2014; Hammett et al., 2015). Being a female from a Scandinavian country with a long-standing democratic tradition and practice, and conducting research related to democratic backsliding in Tunisia as an outsider, I was sure to reflect on the perspective and privileges I bring to the research (Sultana, 2007). The knowledge gained through research is the result of context, power relationships and the positionality of the researcher, meaning that findings always are partially dependent on these aspects (Ibid.). Thus, I made sure to schedule the interviews according to the respondents' availability and to be up to date regarding news and contextual information. Also, I was guided by feminist strategies for these types of reflections throughout the entire research process (Banks & Scheyvens, 2014; England, 1994). Letting the interviews be free-flowing by actively listening and showing interest to connect with the respondents allowed for an openness in the interviews (Hammett et al., 2015).

Furthermore, involving respondents belonging to a relatively marginalised group⁷ improves their overall representation (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011; Scheyvens et al., 2014). As a researcher, a challenge lies in finding the ways in which the marginalised can enter discourses on their own terms so that we can learn from them and not let the research be made for self-serving purposes, a reflection considered throughout the writing process (Scheyvens et al., 2014).

4.6 Trustworthiness

Bryman (2012) states that trustworthiness can measure how good a qualitative study is and presents four aspects to assess this: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Regarding credibility, which deals with internal validity, the study was carried out according to tenets of good research practice. Especially during the data collection, ethics and reflective practices were applied. A more randomised sample, including perspectives of other generations, could have possibly added more generalisability and credibility to the study. However, "the intent in qualitative research is not to generalise the information [...], but to elucidate the particular, the specific" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, 126).

⁷ According to Scheyvens et al. (2014), youth is considered an important albeit comparatively less powerful group in society, whose voices deserve to be heard. Given that they make up a large percent of the world's population, their interests are of interest to be served (Scheyvens et al., 2014; UN, 2023).

Similarly in terms of transferability, due to the study being of qualitative design, the findings are difficult to generalise to other contexts and the study is thus indicating a low level of external validity. However, as previously stated, the results of the study are to be used as a way of understanding the contextual significance, and the data derived from the interviews can be used as a database for making judgements about possible transferability of the findings to other contexts (Bryman, 2012).

Dependability is used to understand the reliability of the findings. It is a measurement to see whether the results can be reproduced under the same conditions. Therefore, the methodology has been presented in as much of a transparent manner as possible. An audit carried out by peers could strengthen the dependability, but given the thesis' scope this was not possible to be carried out (Ibid.).

Finally, confirmability regards the objectivity of the researcher. Reaching complete objectivity is impossible in social research, due to positionality and power-relations, as previously discussed (Ibid.). This means that I, as a researcher, attempted to not let my personal values or theoretical inclinations sway the findings, but instead, to fully put the respondents' perspectives in focus (Ibid.). I believe this has been done to the largest extent possible, with my own interests mainly being a part of the selection of the research case.

4.7 Limitations

Before presenting the findings and discussion, some limitations of the study will be addressed. First, an important factor that made the data collection difficult was the ongoing turmoil in Tunisia. During the period of data collection, many CSOs were occupied with actively defending human rights issues. Therefore, it proved difficult to attain respondents for the study, even if several outreach strategies were employed to broaden the sample.

Second, since the main languages spoken in Tunisia are Arabic and French, this put constraints on the data collection, as English had to be used for the interviews since I am not fluent in either of the languages. However, the respondents and I worked together to find common understanding in the conversations, repeating statements and sentiments when needed and a respondent validation was performed. Therefore, I interpret that limitation will not affect the analysis (Ibid.). Moreover, since I had to interview respondents who were comfortable in speaking English, this led to only youth participating as respondents. Using a translator could have been advantageous to prevent any possible representative bias, but limited resources made

this idea too difficult to proceed with (Ibid.). Thus, the findings can be regarded as a good starting point for further inquiry.

Third, another limitation is that only one form of data was collected for analysis. Typically, qualitative researchers gather multiple forms of data, eg. interviews, observations, and documents, instead of relying on one single form (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The reasons for this relate to the previously mentioned difficulties regarding lack of resources to travel to Tunisia to obtain observational data, as well as the language constraints regarding analysis of published documents in Arabic and French.

5. Findings

This chapter outlines the most recurring themes and sub-themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. These themes are *identity*, *power of CSOs*, (including sub-themes *unity and coalitions* and *centralisation*), *politics*, *socioeconomic issues*, and *uncertainty*. Each section presents the main ideas connected to each theme and provides the foundation for answering the research questions.⁸ The respondents will be referred to as *Respondent 1 (R1)* and so forth throughout the thesis.

5.1 Identity

The theme of identity was brought up throughout the interviews by the respondents. By identity, this encompasses how they view their own identity as Tunisians, and what it means in terms of being a part of their CSO and participating in civil society. The respondents describe the “*Tunisian experience*” (*R1*), that is, how Tunisia is perceived as a democratic and pacifist leader in the Arab region. However, they also highlighted that Tunisian people in general seem to have lost their sense of engagement in comparison to the 2010–2011 revolution and the beginning of the political transition.

“We went from an active civil society to a more passive civil society, because the Tunisian people have been through a lot.” (R1)

In general, the respondents agree that Tunisians overall are hardworking people that typically come together in adversity, but the current situation being different and complex has led to a

⁸ See Appendix III for a few additional quotes from the interviews that are not included in this chapter, but still remain relevant to the thesis.

general fatigue in working towards democratic change. The interviews also show that there is a lot of hope in the younger generation which is considered more “*confident*” (R7), “*inclusive*” (R3) and “*innovative*” (R7, R8). Youth are considered the ones standing up for marginalised groups and voicing their opinions more loudly, showing that there is concern about how the “*generational gap is causing a lot of tension*” (R7).

Furthermore, R5 and R7 state that Tunisia is experiencing an identity crisis. They describe this crisis as complex and dependent on several aspects, such as socioeconomic deterioration, rise of populism, and weak state institutions. They connect the identity crisis to the democratic backslide, saying Tunisia has a “*leadership crisis*” (R5), referring to how President Saied was elected and still has political support because people feel like there is no alternative to his leadership. In the same vein, R7 mentions that Tunisians in general are historically and presently comfortable with living under more authoritarian conditions.

“[W]e as Tunisians need, and this is one of the complexities that we have as a people, we always need someone who is holding power over us. /.../ We like having someone governing us, controlling us. /.../ We now see the same pattern as existed with Ben Ali and Bourguiba.” (R7)

R7 explains the identity crisis in Tunisia by saying that one problem lies in how Tunisians do not understand their own context and draws on the multidimensionality to being Tunisian. R7 accounts for different aspects of being North African and Arabic, as well as having a history of being colonised and wanting to develop and be at “*the same level internationally*” (R7) as other countries.

Nevertheless, the importance of civil society action and engagement within CSOs is expressed by all respondents and they are seemingly proud to be a part of civil society in Tunisia. The respondents highlight that without civil society, Tunisia would not have had the same development trajectory when it comes to democracy and conflict management, and being part of the change to create a better country for all Tunisians is at the core of the respondents’ civil society engagement.

“The Tunisian civil society has a strong presence and a strong impact on the country. This presence on many occasions has been able to save the country and stop the country from going into chaos. Even though the situation right now is not the best, it could have been way worse. Civil society is always working actively to make sure that any Tunisian is

empowered and has rights and opportunities. There is a saying, 'rights are not given, they're taken', so it's a fight for rights and it's a continuous fight. Tunisians are always fighting this fight and [my CSO] will always be there to make sure that our voices are heard." (R1)

5.2 The power of CSOs

Considering how the respondents regard the power of their CSOs and describe the work they do, there was a consensus that Tunisian CSOs are particularly powerful in creating change, whether it be through smaller or bigger actions and functions such as creating awareness of human rights or hosting trainings on corruption and transparency.

"I think that even small actions can have a huge impact. As an activist, if you make one or two of your friends aware of their rights they can go on to share this knowledge with others and then they will pay it forward and this will allow more people to be aware of their rights." (R1)

This view of how the work of CSOs has an impact and creates change is echoed from the respondents' descriptions concerning the identity of engaging in civil society above. There is a general belief among the respondents in the abilities of civil society and CSOs to counter antidemocratic changes because of the influence civil society had on the democratic transition following the 2010–2011 revolution.

Emphasis was also placed on how the respective CSOs of the respondents and civil society at large might need to restructure their work to adapt to the current political context. The respondents point out that the actions of the current government are changing the power balance and level of security in Tunisia, through implementation of more restrictive laws, increasing the oversight of CSOs, and more disruptive measures such as suspending the parliament for example.

"I think that we need to restructure how we work, how civil society should act. Because what we have been doing until now is not fruitful anymore. We need to change. The regime is changing, the 'democracy' is changing. [Tunisia] is not an actual democracy anymore. We need to change what we are doing to adapt to the power imbalance." (R2)

Additionally, several respondents point out the importance of outreach to a broader population in Tunisia to educate more people on how the human rights and freedoms that the democratic transition brought might be in danger. As well as to use outreach to engage more people who are not actively participating in civil society, since it can be difficult to join organisations or causes unless you already have an established network (R1, R2, R7). Also, putting more focus on international outreach was stressed by respondents who mentioned that their CSOs network with other CSOs or NGOs based in other countries to connect, learn others' strategies, and exchange ideas about opportunities and challenges (R3, R8).

However, some respondents also stated that the everyday work of their CSOs also needs to continue as is and that the focus of their CSOs currently is to ensure they can continue performing their functions (R1, R6).

“[W]e have to keep doing what we have been doing for decades, to protest and document. For us engaged, we no longer see people as engaged in the political scene anymore. People are afraid, tired and basically fed up with the situation. So it is hard to get them back on track.” (R1)

Some respondents also confessed to being unsure of what CSOs can achieve if the government keeps adding restrictions to the already difficult situation they are working within. For example, R5 stated that civil society is fulfilling functions that should be administered by the government, such as providing proper education and building local communities in marginalised areas, but that even so it is becoming more and more difficult to take initiatives concerning these matters. Nonetheless, respondents engaged in large and comparatively older CSOs were less worried and showed confidence that their CSOs will persist and act as a powerful counterpart if Tunisia's civil society becomes more restricted by governmental actions, with R2 expressing *“[w]e are not leaving”*.

5.2.1 Unity and coalitions

Creating unity and coalitions was highlighted by the respondents as the most prominent and successful approach to enforce and strengthen the collective power of CSOs. They described this both in relation to how they can cooperate and perform their everyday functions by collaborating with their respective areas of expertise to realise objectives, as well as in terms of banding together against larger injustices and threats to civil society or the Tunisian population.

“The good side of the Tunisian civil society is that we are used to working and networking together. We choose the topic and we can collect people and gather people and set goals for everyone to work on this topic. It’s in our history.” (R3)

Networking between CSOs is also a strength according to several of the respondents, exemplifying how easy it can be in terms of communication, leading to fast spread information among CSOs. All respondents agree that efforts to create coalitions in civil society are important to create new opportunities and balance out the power of the state, even if it has become more difficult in recent years with the political sphere being more difficult to work with and understand.

“In the past it was easier because we were less divided, especially in the era of dictatorship. We were all against the dictatorship. After the revolution, people have been divided for a while, for several reasons. For example, queer activists are focusing more on queer issues. Feminists are focusing on women’s rights, you know others, for example. But since Kais Saied’s coup now, we’re going back to the first step, that we have to be unified. You have to work together because we’re facing a dictatorship. I think the time now, it’s similar to the time before the revolution.” (R3)

5.2.2 Centralisation

Another sub-theme related to the power of CSOs is centralisation, meaning that a lot of the available resources for CSOs are mainly located in the capital, Tunis. Many respondents emphasised how a lot of the Tunisian CSOs and civil society are centralised.

“Civil society is very centralised in Tunis, like all the civil society organisations are there because the opportunities, funders, and all of the interesting events are there. And then for the rest of the country, there are still civil society organisations there and they are growing in numbers /.../ but they don’t have the same quality. You can definitely see how the CSOs outside of Tunis still need more practice, expertise and skills to be built further and work better. The CSOs that are in Tunis, they benefited from years of free and extensive trainings after the revolution when a lot of capital went into building Tunisia’s civil society, and the rest don’t have the same opportunities.” (R7)

The respondents agree that it is negative that this centralisation leads to marginalisation of areas outside of Tunis in terms of expansion of knowledge and expertise, as well as funding opportunities. However, they also point out that a positive aspect of CSOs being farther from the centre allows them and other civil society actors to have a greater operational width, in cases where they do possess resources to perform their functions (R6, R8). Being further from the political centre presents the opportunity of CSOs to feel less pressure and impact from the political sphere. Similarly, depending on whether the activities of CSOs are considered more political or not, the respondents state that it is still possible to operate without feeling any pressure from the state (R5, R6).

5.3 Politics

One aspect that the respondents particularly highlighted which strongly influences the opportunities and challenges of the work of CSOs was the interconnectedness between politics and civil society in Tunisia. One respondent stated that Tunisia's *"political system is chaotic"* (R1) and another expressed that *"we [in civil society] need to be part of the political system"* (R2) to balance the political power. Consequently, civil society has come to be inherently political, and many people engage in civil society to express their political opinions because it feels safer there than through political parties (R7, R8). CSOs are also acting as democratic watchdogs and an oppositional force in Tunisian politics, without being political parties (R1, R2, R8).

"In Tunisia post-revolution, the political context was really frustrating. Basically we have been, from the revolution until now, in a political crisis. So we know that civil society is an alternative for people who don't want to participate in political parties, but at the same time want to express their opinions and make initiatives. /.../ In Tunisia more than 50% of CSOs have been created just for this reason, as a way not to be directly involved in politics, but to express themselves in a safe way." (R8)

The respondents agree that the main challenge to the work of CSOs in Tunisia is the changing political order. This leads to CSOs having to adapt their strategies to remain as a force for democratic change (R2, R3, R6).

“We are very political, and we adapt our strategies by being more political, by attacking the head of the regime by saying that we cannot build a good democracy and a real democracy, while Kais Saied is ruling, so I think we have to put on standby other topics we have to focus on the political aspect of democracy.” (R3)

Also, the respondents express that the Tunisian civil society cannot become neutral, since civil society, even during the dictatorships of Bourgiba and Ben Ali, was a platform for advocacy, although then without the freedom of expression (R3, R7). Some respondents point out that their CSOs have had to take more political actions as a reaction to the actions of the regime, such as President Saied’s suspension of the parliament in 2021 and the succeeding consolidation of political power within the presidency (R2, R3).

Furthermore, the political situation is much more strained in the last few years and since the appointment of President Saied, with there being more controls of CSOs’ activities and increase of arrests and violence towards activists or politically oppositional voices (R1, R2, R4, R8). However, there are still opportunities for those CSOs that work with less political causes and that are not situated in the region of the capital. Instead, the challenges for these types of CSOs deal more with long administration processes and difficulties in collaborating with local governments (R5, R6).

5.4 Socioeconomic issues

During the last decade, Tunisia has been faced with many socioeconomic issues and they have had an impact on the work of CSOs. Many of the respondents stated the severity of the current economic situation and mentioned the challenges it adds to.

“Our work is always challenging, especially with the instability of the political scene and the increase of socioeconomic problems. People are suffering more. Criminality is increasing. People can no longer afford to live the way they live. There are many factors that deepen these problems, so things are more difficult because people are more afraid. The work, I think, is always evolving and you’re always trying to innovate and to reach more people, even with less resources.” (R1)

Tunisia’s economic situation and crisis was also connected to the changes in governance by the respondents (R3, R4, R5). In relation to Tunisian politics, they described how economic stability has been pivoted against democratic governance in recent years, and how a large part

of the Tunisian population seemingly wants economic stability to be prioritised above democratic rights. This is also considered one of the reasons behind the support for the current President and government, even if economic issues persist in Tunisia under their governance (R3, R4).

5.5 Uncertainty

Finally, the theme of uncertainty was echoed throughout all interviews. This entails that the situation is difficult to understand, predict and work within. Throughout the interviews, the respondents expressed that there is no guarantee of what the future will bring.

“What is happening currently, it’s critical. The future is so unexpected. You don’t know what is coming for us.” (R1)

The respondents emphasise that the actions taken by the president and government both on domestic and international matters are difficult to manage for CSOs. R5 states that *“I cannot tell you where I see Tunisia in 5-10 years, because there is a huge lack of insight into governmental strategies”*. Nevertheless, despite this uncertainty on what will happen in Tunisia, some respondents emphasise that Tunisian CSOs will continue to stand their ground whatever comes.

“Honestly, there is no clear vision on what’s gonna happen. How things are gonna go. But I can say from the perspective of the civil society, from us in CSOs, we’ve surpassed the conflicts that exist between us and face this challenge together. The CSOs are sticking together and are even making statements together, communicating together and sharing the same cause for action.” (R8)

6. Analytical discussion

To answer the research question and its two sub-questions, this chapter discusses the findings and themes derived from the respondent interviews through applying the perspectives of power, systems, and political opportunities and threats related to the two theoretical frameworks, PSA and POS. The chapter ends by summarising the analytical discussion.

6.1 Power and systems

This first section especially aims to answer the first sub-question regarding how Tunisia's democratic backslide can be understood from people engaged in civil society from a PSA, and thus aims to emphasise the interconnectedness of power dynamics and broader systems in relation to the themes presented by the thematic analysis.

As previously stated, to create change, it is important to understand what power exists in a given context, as well as how it is distributed and can be redistributed (Finnemore & Goldstein, 2013; Hopwood et al., 2005). The thesis recognises power as the ability of individuals, groups, or institutions to exert influence over others, shaping decisions and actions, and as something dynamic and relational depending on interactions and relationships between actors (Green, 2016). Based on this, power is shown to be the core of the interviews, whether from a political perspective or a sense of empowerment.

In relation to the forms of power categorised as visible, hidden, or invisible, visible power was most prominently discussed by the respondents. This mainly entailed the power of the current president and government. All respondents mentioned how change in state leadership is necessary to bring about democratic change and empower the Tunisian population, similarly to the situation before the revolution. In accordance with the theory, the respondents who described themselves as activists or seeking social and political change predominantly focused on discussing the repressive actions and power of President Saied. Moreover, the respondents affirmed how Tunisian civil society is inherently political (Sigilliò, 2023) and stated that civil society generally “*cannot be neutral in a country where there is this constant clash*” (R7) with the political sphere. Furthermore, the respondents also reflected on how the current democratic backslide came to be in the first place and highlighted how the “*biggest mistake*” (R5) made following the revolution was that the new leadership did not know how to govern democratically. Thus, we can conclude that for sustainable and meaningful democratic change to come about in Tunisia, not only must civil society stand its ground and find agency during repression from the state, but visible power in Tunisia needs to change into true democratic rule and institutions for sustainable governance needs to be implemented, which several respondents highlight.

Regarding hidden power, perspectives on this in relation to Tunisia's political sphere was not brought up by the respondents. This is unsurprising since the respondents are not part of any group setting the political agenda in Tunisia. Nonetheless, one type of hidden power that could be interpreted from the respondents would be one that possibly exists among

Tunisian CSOs. The communication, networking, and collaboration between CSOs that the respondents mention hint at the shared power among Tunisian CSOs to set the agenda on what issues to work together on. Also, I see the respondents' reflections on centralisation as another expression of this hidden power, since they emphasised how CSOs in Tunis received more attention, training and opportunities for funding following the revolution. So, while there seemingly exist shared power between Tunisian CSOs, there still appears to be a divide in relation to financial and knowledge resources.

Invisible power was also brought up by some of the respondents. Principally, invisible power can be interpreted in how several respondents talked about their work focused on empowering others through providing trainings on human rights or through spreading awareness of injustices. It was also highlighted in relation to the identity and leadership crisis mentioned by R5 and R7, which can be understood as stemming from the context of political flux since 2010 until today. Understood from both the respondents and Green (2016), lack of identity including self-confidence and sense of individual rights can harm CSOs' effectiveness and allow authoritarian state leadership to continue their rule. Moreover, perspectives involving identity are seemingly lacking from literature related to Tunisia's political transition and further inquiry on this would be relevant, since the findings of this study points towards the importance of identity as a foundation for democratic development.

Applying Green's (2016) optimistic approach to understanding power onto the highlighted themes allows for insight into the work of CSOs in their current setting. Regarding the previous reflections on invisible power, personal self-confidence and sense of individual rights form the category of 'power within' in Green's framework. Relating to the reflections above regarding invisible power, is the personal self-confidence and sense of individual rights which makes out the category of 'power within' in Green's framework. From examining the respondents' replies, it becomes apparent that CSOs need to do identity-related work to deal with the political transitions, due to challenges posed by the increasing nostalgia for dictatorship and the undermining of human rights and freedoms by the state leadership. The respondents state that this identity-work is done either through methods for empowerment or informing others about their rights. In doing so, CSOs can reach new groups of people and spread awareness of their message further. However, several respondents mentioned the difficulties in performing such outreaches, which underlines the importance and relevance of committing to outreach related work towards Tunisian population. Furthermore, the respondents mention the potential of using strategy as a method for engagement, but the

practical nature of this is not further explored in the interviews, and nostalgia thus remains a barrier to democratic change.

‘Power within’ can also be strengthened by appreciating and understanding the ‘power with’ that exists among Tunisian CSOs. The implementation of a broader populational outreach can also be interpreted to unify and create coalitions among CSOs for collective action, which the respondents highlight is important to claim and use the agency inherent in Tunisian civil society. Since several respondents compared the current situation to the time before the revolution in 2010–2011, a unified civil society can be understood as a, if not the most, powerful strategy to create democratic change. Furthermore, in the ways the respondents emphasised the positive and negative aspects of centralisation in Tunisian civil society, efforts to empower CSOs in more marginalised communities can also be interpreted to strengthen their ‘power within’ using ‘power with’.

In the end, these efforts to promote ‘power within’ and create a ‘power with’ by civil society engagement and coalitions of CSOs are made to create a ‘power to’. This would mean that civil society overall, as a representative of the Tunisian people, would have the ‘power to’ demand a say in societal decision-making. However, the ‘power to’ is difficult to utilise when ‘power over’ exists without forms of accountability, such as in authoritarian settings. In the Tunisian context, this would be made up of the power held by the president and government, according to the respondents. Particularly in the years since the appointment of President Saied, increasing repression on the operational gamut of civil society actors and organisations, as well as of political opposition parties and politicians, has resulted in a decrease of influence from civil society on state matters, as expressed by the respondents and reported in previous research (Ottaway, 2023; Ridge, 2022). Although Green (2016) highlights that ‘power over’ is essential for positive development, such as democratisation, it needs to be divided by several instances for checks and balances to be carried out. In the Tunisian context this power is gradually consolidated to President Saied (Ridge, 2022). ‘Power over’ can therefore be understood as similar to the thesis’ discussion of visible power.

In relation to this perspective of power, there are difficulties in positioning the themes of socioeconomic issues and uncertainty. These themes are relatively out of reach based on the respondents and their CSOs’ gamut for action, so while socioeconomic issues and uncertainty can influence and be influenced by the other themes mentioned, they cannot be directly connected to any of the definitions of power in Green’s optimistic approach.

Considering the findings from a systems point of view, the themes can be distinguished on three levels of micro, meso, and macro systems as described by Green (2016). At a micro

level, the theme of identity was prominent from the interviews since it relates to individuals and individual-level interactions (Ibid.). Overall, the identity of being Tunisian and taking part in civil society was predominantly highlighted by the respondents. The beliefs of the respondents' and other CSOs in Tunisian society mirrors that of how Tunisia is considered the lone democratic success story of the Arab uprisings in previous research. At the same time, this view may well be conflicting with the increase of general engagement fatigue or exhaustion among the Tunisian population which the respondents refer to. This fatigue is something several respondents express their CSOs are trying to adapt to on a meso level given the changing political context, as described in chapter 5.2 which shows the complex dynamic of CSOs. Furthermore, the respondents highlight how Tunisia's civil society cannot have a "one-size-fits-all" approach, and instead require complex but consistent communication and collaboration to maintain agency as well as create change.

At a macro level, politics as a theme can be positioned, since the findings concerning it deal with the political-administrative environment and the broader societal system at large, which is directly external to the operational reach of the respondents individually and as part of their CSOs. Given the influence of politics on the other themes as mentioned previously, and also in understanding the effect macro levels may have on meso and micro levels within larger systems, we can understand how everything really is connected to everything (Sanneh, 2018). It is important to remember this complexity and multidimensionality, which also means that changes in one part of a system can affect other parts of the system through so-called cycles of change (Green, 2016; Sanneh, 2018). To exemplify, if political CSOs unify and decide to oppose the government through protest actions aiming to protect human rights, these actions that originated from the micro and meso levels might start taking place at a macro level, which in turn might create a loop back towards the micro level and empower more parts of the population to know their rights and participate in the protest actions. Furthermore, this macro-meso-micro connection has already occurred before in Tunisia, leading up to the Jasmine revolution.

Notably, similar to the discussion on power, the themes of socioeconomic issues and uncertainty are more difficult to position in a systems approach. This can be due to their very own nature of not being directly tangible and external to civil society actors and organisations when applying the PSA. Instead, these themes will be discussed further in relation to POS.

All in all, applying a PSA to the study's findings show that Tunisia's democratic backslide can be understood as changes in divisions of power. Furthermore, the findings also highlight some of the various approaches Tunisian CSOs have had to deal with in this power

change. Although CSOs strive to hold a ‘power to’, created from encouraging ‘power within’ and ‘power with’, they are hampered by the ‘power over’ of the president and the government. The respondents in this study show how they not only want to change the power imbalance now that more political power has consolidated in the presidency, but also wish to continue their everyday work, for example consisting of empowering others and acting as a political watchdog. The complexity and multidimensionality of the Tunisian case discerned by the study resonates with previous literature on how political transitions impact all levels of societies and systems and emphasises unity among CSOs to increase their power and agency. Moreover, the discussion rather illustrates civil society and CSOs a main balancing act against the current political forces by the Tunisian government. While this is true according to the respondents’ statements, this study also recognises that political opposition in the form of other politicians and political parties also remain in Tunisia.

6.2 Political opportunities and threats

This section of analysis considers the second sub-question of the thesis, regarding what political opportunities and threats are perceived by civil society actors and organisations in Tunisia in relation to the current democratic backslide. As previously presented, political opportunities and threats are resources external to, and shape decisions for, groups of collective action (Aslanidis, 2015; Goldstone & Tilly; 2001; Tarrow, 2011). Hence why this study applies a combination of PSA and POS to provide a more holistic comprehension of the current situation for Tunisian CSOs, since the PSA provides insight into the internal strategic analysis and POS encompasses external political factors that affect the work of CSOs. Thus, the themes regarding politics, socioeconomic issues and uncertainty are considered relevant for POS analysis.

The respondents distinctly highlighted the impact of Tunisian politics on the work of their CSOs and mainly stressed the risks and possible costs of action that CSOs or activists may face due to how the freedom of expression has become more restricted in recent years. Some respondents stated that “*the main challenge [of CSOs] is the new political order and the new regime, because it's uncommon and unconventional*” (R3) and that “*the government right now, and the political leadership is the main challenge for those opportunities and for people. People are afraid to implement initiatives*” (R8), emphasising that Tunisia’s political leadership pose prominent threats towards CSOs’ operations. Furthermore, as the respondents highlight, some CSOs are considered political actors, and this threat directly concerns their

work in particular. Nonetheless, the work of less political or service-providing CSOs is still at risk to experience repressive measures in direct or subtle ways in authoritarian settings (Iaconantonio, 2020). This was also brought up by some respondents who pointed out how their work is not as affected by the current political contexts, either due to how they are working far from the political centre in Tunis or because their work is not perceived as directly political or oppositional to the current government. However, they also maintained that their work might face more restriction, unless political CSOs are present, highlighting the significance of the protection more politically inclined CSOs provide with their existence and unity in work against greater injustices.

Additionally, a couple respondents also brought up how nostalgia for dictatorship and authoritarianism has increased among the Tunisian population, since the period following the revolution in Tunisia has been rather unsettled socially, politically, and economically (R5, R7), a sentiment backed up by Fortier (2019). The populist but stern approach of President Saied has garnered support due to, for example, his alleged promises and focus on building a stable economy. However, according to the respondents, the economic situation has only deteriorated while citizens continue to lose their democratic rights, turning the whole ordeal into a lose-lose situation. In the same vein, the respondents emphasised that the socioeconomic issues, such as the on-going economic crisis and decreasing levels of trust among the population, that Tunisia has faced during the last decade and is experiencing currently pose political threats to their operations.

Furthermore, the respondents emphasise that a majority of the Tunisian population just wants to live a reasonable and fair life, but because of how Tunisia has been experiencing “*crisis to crisis*” (R8) in terms of politics and economics, this has resulted in an exhaustion to have more people join in causes with democratic goals, since they mainly want economic stability. This notion is also supported by previous research, showing that substantial support for liberal institutions and civil rights exists in Tunisia, but democracy itself is not strongly supported (Ridge, 2022).

However, socioeconomic issues can also be understood as a catalyst in bringing people together in collective action (Tarrow, 2011). The respondents do point out that the current situation is similar to how it was before the revolution in 2010-2011, and therefore pressures felt by the collective might be seen as an opportunity to engage more people in the cause. Although, it is difficult to determine this from the respondents’ answers, given that they are already engaged and willing to create democratic change, in comparison to perspectives of other groups that might be less inclined in joining work for societal causes. Thus, further

inquiry into other perspectives is needed for a more comprehensive understanding of this complex situation.

Regarding the theme of uncertainty, this was mainly referred to as an unpredictability of the future and concern for further repressions on Tunisian society by the government. For example, the respondents referred to uncertainty regarding the increasing arrests of fellow members in their or other CSOs, as well as politicians opposing the president and government, and how this increases the risk for political persecution. In a way, uncertainty as a theme encompasses all possible threats that might arise due to the authoritarian development, but which cannot be pinpointed yet. This should mainly be understood as a threat according to the respondents, since it concerns the lack of insight and transparency of governmental actions and priorities, as well as how it is stemming from the already increasing restrictions on civil society, such as more controls and inspections of CSO activities by the state, which leads to further uncertainty of what CSOs can do and how much civic space is being encroached upon.

Uncertainty could perhaps also be regarded as an opportunity to keep CSOs alert and adaptable to the situation, in whatever way it might unfold. Because political opportunities also signify the perceived probability that collective action, such as social protests, eventually leads to success in achieving a desired outcome (Tarrow, 2011). The uncertainty of the current Tunisian context can serve as a springboard and perhaps aid CSOs in strategising how to maintain their agency, protest the consolidation of political power to the presidency, and more. This also relates to the steadfast belief amongst most of the respondents that civil society and CSOs can counter the democratic backslide and be a force in shifting the political transition back towards democratisation processes once again.

6.3 Summary of discussion

The discussion was structured relying on the two sub-questions of the thesis to answer the overarching research question on how civil society actors and organisations understand and manage Tunisia's current democratic backslide. Applying the PSA to the findings, the study concludes that Tunisia's democratic backslide can be understood as shifts in power dynamics across multiple levels of systems. Tunisian CSOs navigate these power-changes through efforts aiming to foster 'power within' and 'power with', through strategies of empowerment of individuals' sense of rights, outreach, and unifying of organisations. Moreover, this is done to reach a level of 'power to', meaning to have the opportunity to demand a say in decision-making processes which has been lost under the current government's power consolidation

referred to as a ‘power over’. The context of Tunisia's democratic backslide is thus characteristically complex given the interconnectedness between the themes presented by the respondents, the various types of power and interactions between micro, meso, and macro systems.

Analysing what political opportunities and threats are perceived by the respondents in relation to the current democratic backslide, the study concludes that repression from the state and deep-rooted socioeconomic issues together restrict the capacities of CSOs to work for democratic practices and values. The findings thus support previous research on the topic (e.g. Iaconantonio, 2020) and highlight the contextual challenges for Tunisian CSOs. Additionally, the theme of uncertainty which was stressed among the respondents can be interpreted as encompassing future threats that might take place given the previous acts of repression by the government. However, uncertainty can also be interpreted as an opportunity for CSOs to prepare and adapt to whatever may happen in the future, serving as a springboard for CSOs to strategies on how to maintain their agency and protest further authoritarian actions by the president and government. Furthermore, political opportunities also include the perceived probability that collective action eventually leads to success in achieving desired outcomes as Tarrow highlights, and thus the belief in the work of their CSOs and collective civil society action, which the respondents express, display another political opportunity.

7. Concluding remarks

This thesis aimed to investigate the overarching research question regarding how civil society actors and organisations understand and manage Tunisia’s current democratic backslide. To do this, the study was guided by the two sub-questions: *Applying a Power and Systems approach, how can Tunisia’s democratic backslide be understood from people engaged in civil society?* and *What political opportunities and threats are perceived by civil society actors in Tunisia in relation to the current democratic backslide?* Thus, the study explored previous research on democratisation processes and democratic backsliding with reflections on the Tunisian case through a literature review. Thereafter, the theoretical frameworks PSA and POS were presented to guide the analysis. Through eight semi-structured interviews with respondents engaged in Tunisian CSOs working with functions focused on human rights advocacy, empowerment and being political watchdogs for example, primary qualitative data was collected and discussed in a thematic analysis which positioned the respondents’ answers at the centre of the study.

All in all, the main findings and conclusions show that Tunisia's democratic backslide can be understood as complex and interconnected changes in power dynamics in various forms and on several levels of societal systems. The PSA highlighted how the respondents and their CSOs position themselves against the political power held by the government, and how they strategise to increase individual empowerment and collective action to have the agency to have a say in political decision-making. Furthermore, from a perspective of POS, political threats are perceived in relation to the repressions by the state leading to pressures in the civic space, as well as from deep-rooted socioeconomic issues which has resulted in an increasing exhaustion and a desire for stability among the Tunisian population. The notion of uncertainty highlighted by the respondents is interpreted as encompassing possible future threats towards collective action but can also be understood as an opportunity together with the strong belief in civil society action among the respondents. These opportunities can thus be used by CSOs to adapt and prepare for future restrictions and strategise efforts for empowerment and unity, like in the time before the Jasmine revolution.

To expand on the study's findings, it would be relevant to explore the Tunisian case further. This could be done through performing similar research on a larger scale, to conduct in-depth research of the themes derived from the interviews, or by including perspectives from service-providing CSOs which this study delimited itself to. The thesis recognises that processes on democratic backsliding, as well as democratisation, includes an abundance of actors, and including perspectives of service-providing CSOs could highlight a sector which might not be as affected by authoritarian measures, but still be important to the overall development of Tunisian society. Ultimately, the thesis covers only one small piece of the puzzle of the Tunisian case, and given its complex context, conducting studies on levels of trust, populism, religion, and relations between actors could also be relevant to expand the knowledge of the impact of Tunisia's political transitions. Furthermore, given that democratic backsliding continues to be a global trend, it is crucial to expand on the research of what consequences it brings forth and how it can be understood and managed on a worldwide scale.

Finally, political life in Tunisia has not stopped in between the writing of this thesis and its publication. As such, this thesis may not claim a perfect explanation of the impact of Tunisia's democratic backslide on the civic space. However, the findings can still portray an understanding of the situation for civil society actors and organisations in Tunisia and hopes to have elucidated the respondents' perspectives and steadfast determination to remain a force for empowerment and rights in Tunisia, no matter what may come.

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Appendices

Appendix I – Respondent table

N.	Date of interview	Gender	Role of respondent	Work of CSO(s) concerns:
1	20/2/23	F	Programme officer	Defending human rights and Human Rights Defenders (HRDs).
2	22/2/23	M	Activist, founder of CSO, treasurer of CSO	Defending human rights, focus on sexual and women's rights.
3	22/2/23	F	Programme officer	Defending human rights and HRDs, youth empowerment.
4	15/3/23	M	Founder of CSO, researcher and program manager	Defending human rights, focus on sexual and women's rights, watchdog organisation.
5	15/3/23	F	Programme officer, volunteer	Fair and proper education for children and empowerment of youth, capacity building.
6	16/3/23	F	Consultant and project leader	Development focus. Women's and youth empowerment and participation in local activities and governance. Gender Based Violence (GBV). Economic empowerment.
7	27/3/23	F	Programme officer	Democracy promotion and defending human rights.
8	6/4/23	M	Civil society programme coordinator	Watchdog association, Increasing transparency and working against corruption.

Appendix II – Interview guide

Topic	Question	Follow-up question
<i>Background</i>	Tell me a bit about yourself?	
<i>Respondent's personal experience working in civil society/in a CSO</i>	What is your CSO?	What is your role within this CSO? What do you do?
		How did you get involved in this CSO?
	What led you to start engaging in civil society?	
	What does being active in civil society mean to you, relating to your own values and beliefs?	
<i>Respondent's perspective on civil society and CSO work in Tunisia</i>	What is the role of your CSO in Tunisian society?	How has it impacted your community/the society at large?
	Can you describe how the public space that civil society/CSOs operate in Tunisia works?	
	How much does your CSO work together with other Tunisian CSOs?	Does your CSO interact with the international community in any way?
	Could you describe how the position of civil society in Tunisia has shifted since the revolution in 2010–2011?	Has the work of your CSO/CSOs become easier or more difficult over the past decade and why?
	What opportunities do you see that you as an individual in civil society and as a part of a CSO have to create change?	

	What do you see as constraining these actions for change? What are some challenging aspects of participating in civil society in Tunisia?	
	How does your CSO work to create opportunities/realise its aims and goals in the public space?	
	Where do you/your CSO aim to go from here in terms of working with the challenges put on civil society currently?	
<i>Respondent's thoughts on Tunisia's democratic backslide</i>	What are your thoughts on the current democratic backslide in Tunisia?	
	What are the prospects for democratic change in Tunisia?	
	What are your thoughts on how the situation is looking in Tunisia currently, with the economic crisis as well as democratic backsliding?	In your opinion, would economic stability in Tunisia lead to political or democratic stability, or vice versa?
<i>Other reflections</i>	What comes to mind when you hear the word 'empowerment'?	
	Is there anything else you would like to bring up before we finish this interview?	

Appendix III – Additional quotes from respondent interviews

“There is some nostalgia to Ben Ali’s regime because on the front, it was perfect. You know, economic stability, shiny image internationally. You can do whatever you want as long as you don’t go against the regime or as long as you don’t go against their ideology. You can do whatever you want, more or less. And then the revolution happened, and people found themselves being able to express themselves and everything. I think the mistake in Tunisia, what happens is that we prioritised political rights over economic and social rights in a way. And so we created these parties and these associations and people could talk about whatever they wanted and express everything. But then we’re ten years later. We’re like, there is no productivity in the country, there is no real wealth being created. Prices are increasing, but salaries are not increasing and unemployment is high. People are leaving the country. We have a huge brain drain. So this is why people are frustrated and they’re like “what did we get from this democracy? What did we get from this ability to express ourselves” and also you have with that you can add on this mediocre image that was happening like a mediocre landscape that was happening from 2011 to 2021 until the coup d’etat happened, I called it a coup d’etat because for me it is. Because that’s still a controversy, apparently like calling it a coup d’etat or not, and but I do agree that the landscape was very mediocre. It was very degraded and like the Parliament was very much divided and parties were just not willing to compromise and you know, not willing to just compromise, honestly. So people are fed up and I understand. And these circumstances were just perfect for what happened in 2021, you know? And up until now, the President is still popular more or less, yes, but he’s still popular, even with everything that’s happening just because people are just spiteful, like it’s spiteful. They’re like, “OK, yes, economically speaking, we’re doing very badly, but at least the old political figures from 2011–2021 are getting imprisoned for their wrongdoing.’ So I think at this point people don’t care anymore. They don’t care about politics anymore. Like no one cares. People are being arrested here and there, and no one cares really. Because we’re barely able to afford food and just a normal basic living, and the middle class is just shrinking.” (R5)

“To be honest, there is a very important number of people in Tunisia, they are into economic stability and they don’t mind any kind of dictatorship. For me, I’m not into that way of thinking. Even if you are in this situation with this new government and new president, I think I’m more into going back to democracy, even though we have to sacrifice a little bit of the economy. But we have to mention that even with this regime and president who’s pretending that he’s protecting the economy and saying that he’s sacrificing

democracy for the economy, he's not doing well economically. So both economically and politically we are losing. At least we can win if we focus on democracy.” (R3)

“Going after democracy has given us economic instability and a lot of poverty. So now in Tunisia, people say ‘we don't need democracy, we don't need freedom, we need a good economy. We need work, money and food. That's it. Freedom and democracy and election transparency, we don't need them now. Now for us, economic stability is the priority and building good infrastructure. That's what we want. The rest, we can take it later, it's not important for us now.’” (R4)

“What is happening currently, it's critical. The future is so unexpected. You don't know what is coming for us. The thing about instability in the country, now we are becoming another dictatorship, and there are different factors that make it more difficult to have human rights and empowerment.” (R1)