Tunisian Peasants Organization of Political Action and Production: *Tansiquiet* and Cooperatives

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Abstract
Historically silenced, the revolutionary potential of Tunisian peasants has evolved from mere opposition to structures of power submitting producers to value absorption, dispossession and displacement to organized demands and systemic alternatives. In the 2021's nationwide peasant protests, embryos of farmers' organizations formed in the shape of *Tansiquiet* (coordinations) of small-scale peasants. Among the demands, cooperativist organization of production was loudly pronounced. This article traces back the history of peasant struggles against institutional policies from the nineteenth century until the late agitations of 2021. Then it will explore Tunisia's legacy of cooperativism by analyzing the 1960s experience. Later, it will discuss the 2022's presidential law of *Shariket Ahliya* (Communitarian Enterprises) which was welcomed by a number of *Tansiquiet*. Finally, some theoretical questions on development will be raised.

Introduction

> *The Bedouins, on the other hand, live separate from the community. They are alone in the country and remote from militias. They have no walls and gates. Therefore, they provide their own defense and do not entrust it to, or rely upon others for it* (Ibn Khaldoun, 1377/1967)

2021 was the tenth anniversary of the 2010-2011 uprisings, sparkle of the "Arab Spring" that has spread across the Arab/MENA region. After ten years of this bourgeois revolution, the only clear and undebatable outcome was the fall of the one-party and one-president governance and the implementation of a parliamentary multi-party regime. The process of the free voting mechanism started in October 2011 with the elections of representatives charged with writing a new constitution: "The Constitution of the Revolution". Protests did not cease even after the establishment of the process of "Democratic Transition" and demands focused on political punctual issues such as the investigation on the assassinations of the protestors during the uprising and the accountability of the agents of the services of order who were involved, reparations for the families of the martyrs and the wounded (Smith, 2012) and the liberation of protestors who are retrospectively being prosecuted (Bribri, 2014).

In 2014, the transitional phase ended with the legislative and presidential elections organized at the end of the year. This electoral milestone painted a new political landscape: The alliance between the two parties who won the majority of the votes in the legislatures; *Nidaa Tounes* and *Ennahdha* Movement. The former is a phoenix rising from the ashes of ex-cadres of the party that ruled over Tunisia since the independence in 1956, in other words the party against which the people revolted in 2010-2011. The latter is the largest Islamist party in Tunisia that had been repressed, since its creation in 1981, by the ruling-party. This political alliance provoked mobilizations that are digging deeper into economic issues. In 2015, activists who have been involved in the mobilizations since 2011 took the streets of Tunis to protest against a law proposed by the President Beji Caid Essebsi, the founder of Nidaa Tounes, that postulates

amnesty for the businesspersons who are accused of corruption activities executed during the Ancien regime (Salman and Chomiak, 2016).

Away from Tunis, the capital city, socio-economic mobilizations, e.i.; employment demands, wage reforms, developmental projects… did not stop to gush almost everywhere in all Tunisia. Acts of protestation culminated in front of production units of natural resources. Other than the everlong turmoils in the phosphate mining region in the South-West that even have preceded the 2010 uprisings, since 2008, protestors resorted to sit-ins against foreign petroleum companies. First, in 2016, in the archipelagos of Kerkennah, Center-East coast of Tunisia (JawharaFm, 2016). Second, in 2017, in the deep south of Tunisia, the habitants of the governorate of Tataouine blocked the production of oil extracted from the region (MosaiqueFM, 2017). These movements were majoritarily led by young unemployed locals and the demands focused on the creation of jobs in these companies and the mandatory social responsibility of these multinationals in the development of the region (Feltrin, 2018; Ajl, 2019).

The evolution of the character of the demands shows a shift from the purely political needs towards socio-economic issues questioning the model of development that, allegedly, did not show any evolution after the uprisings of 2010-2011. On the other hand, the new political regime did not seem to be willing and able to respond to the popular demands due to its class structure dominated by businesspersons. The parliament of 2014 contained 25 businessmen and women representing 11% of the members with 13 from *Nidaa Tounes* and 3 from *Ennahdha* (Beji Okkez, 2014). Moreover, these parties rely on private donations and investments in order to fund their political activities and electoral campaigns (Dahmani, 2017). The post-2011 political process represented an opportunity for the economic elites to (re-) enter the political sphere (Kchouk, 2017).

The 2019 legislative elections were dominated by *Ennahdha* party after the gradual fragmentation of *Nidaa Tounes* due to internal conflicts and the death of its founder and historical leader, ex-president of the republic, Beji Caid Essebsi. The economic policies of the ruling class faced a deadlock with the advent of Covid-19, especially in the period spanning from the end of 2020 to 2021 when the death toll reached disastrous levels (WHO, 2023).

The post-2011 decade deepened the general idea that social change is inherently carried by urban populations concerned only with political issues, the issues of *polis*. However, several scholars suggested that the uprisings of 2010-2011 are rooted in the countryside, *pag*us (Ayeb, 2011; Elloumi, 2013; Gana, 2012) and that the events of that condense historical point are the expression of an unresolved agrarian question extrapolated to the city (Ajl, 2018). Indeed, as much as the final protests that led to the escape of the head of the state, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali in the evening of January 14th 2011, happened in Tunis' and big cities' streets, the sparkle of the revolt ignited in Sidi Bouzid, the newly-urbanized majoritarily-rural region in the center of Tunisia (Fautras, 2013).

In the cities themselves, protesters and rioters were mainly dwellers of peri-urban neighborhoods, unemployed graduates and students (ILO, 2011; Ayeb and Bush, 2019). Waves of internal migration show the following: First, the direction goes from the highly-rural interior regions of the south and the west, towards the eastern coastal areas of Tunis, the Sahel region and Sfax (Beji Okkez, 2016). Second, diverse economic opportunities, though precarious, are more likely to exist in the latter areas due to the uneven development that was implemented since the establishment of the independent state (Salhi, 2017). This is manifested, for example, in the concentration of universities in the coastal region. Third, by consequence, the three major

demographics that were in protests and riots are the offspring of a rural exodus caused by the obstruction of the agrarian question (Timoumi, 2008). These three categories are orphaned from their lands and the urban orphanage does not seem able to embrace them.

By 2021, the streets and neighborhoods of Tunisia were full of protesters and rioters who expressed discontent with the general sanitarian and economic situation. Indeed, between January and February 2021, 2727 protests exploded all around Tunisia, almost 900 more than the number of 2020 for the same period (Tebini, 2022). Often eclipsed by the urban and peri-urban agitations, the Tunsian countryside flounced as small-scale peasants could not keep up anymore with issues such as the high prices of inputs and the decline of state subsidies rates and its social intervention in land tenure, access to resources, protection from the markets… (Gasmi and Dovdar, 2021). In the first trimester of 2021, through 170 protest actions in different regions (OST, 2021), Tunisian peasants started to organize in "*Tansiquiet mahaliya li sighar al fallaheen"* (Local Coordinations of Small-Scale Peasants) as they no longer feel represented in formal agricultural organizations. The most outspoken alternative economic organization pronounced by different *tansiquiet* was cooperativism. Novelty promised by the 2021 peasant agitations is firstly manifested by the fact that the countryside is expressing its concerns within its socio-geographical arena and secondly that the symptoms of a sick old agrarian question are being dealt with intrinsically with an emphasis on organization and the might of an alternative path to take. In 2022, the President of Tunisia Kais Saied decreed a law favoring collective organization and local development in the form of *Shariket Ahliya* (Communitarian Enterprises). This proposal was welcomed by the rural protesters of 2021 and several enterprises have been already established since.

Tunisia's post-colonial history is not unfamiliar with the organization of agricultural production in cooperatives as the newly-independent state implemented such policies during the 1960s. The decade-long experiment was abandoned and substituted with a liberal approach inserting Tunisia's economy in the international markets. The cooperativist experience left mixed opinions still debated today.

In this article, I trace back the history of interactions between institutional policies and peasant struggles since the nineteenth century through the pre-colonial pre-capitalist monarchy reign, then during the French colonial rule and the national liberation struggle, afterwards at the era of the independent state until the political change of the 2010-2011 uprisings. This first part demonstrates all along the evolution of peasant mobilizations from mere political opposition to the status quo to croquis of alternatives developed through struggle and autonomous organization calling for cooperation between small-scale peasants to thwart local and international monopoly capital. Next, another historical analysis will tackle Tunisia's legacy of cooperativism when it was adopted as a development model in the 1960s. Then, I will explore the new law of Communitarian Enterprises as it is written, advertised and received by the revolting peasants. Finally, some theoretical reprimands will question the solidity of this demarche of development in regards to external relations with the actually existing world-system.

History of policies and struggles

> I prefer to speak of waves rather than cycles, because "cycles" suggests determinism, whereas "waves" is more fluid and dynamic. Marx used the concept of waves in 1848 to show that within a revolution there are movements, and that these come in waves. (Álvaro García Linera, 2021)

The events of 2021 are not only the result of social unrest that exploded in 2010, peasant struggles against central authorities are documented back to the nineteenth century when historical Tunisia was a monarchy. During this era, Tunisian society was predominantly peasant (Valensi, 1977) and tributary pre-capitalism was reigning by heavy taxations.

Chérif (1980) details the types of peasant rebellions from individual acts, local collective mobilizations to uprisings. Trapped under the crashing hammer of taxes and debt, Tunisian peasants resorted to waylay and robbery of caravanes carrying commercial goods of landlords and rich traders. This mechanism of "grab-back" was common in the hinterlands of Tunisia. Moreover, struggles over land and water resources were visibly recurrent and they generally resulted in mass incarceration of peasants and expulsion from reclaimed lands. In a more organized manner, different Tunisian tribes rebelled by disobedience to pay tribute to tax collectors. These acts expanded extensively through the first half of the nineteenth century until they culminated in the revolt of Ali Ben Ghedhahom in 1864 after a central decision to double the taxes on adult males (Ibn Abi Dhiaf, 1901). This large-scale and multi-tribal revolt was heavily oppressed by the Beylical authorities (Bachrouch 1991; Ganiaj, 1965; Salama 1967), yet it marked Tunisia's revolutionary history as one of the slogans painted on the wall of the government building in Tunis during the uprising of 2010-2011 reads: "The grandchildren of Ben Ghedhahom have triumphed" (Nabli, 2021). Less than two decades after the *Majba*[1] Revolt, in May 1881, French colonization substituted tributary encroachment with mere land dispossession. Few months later, leaders of Tunisian tribes held meetings and decided to take resistance actions targeting settlers and army members (Al Hammas, 2014).

The French colonial campaign on Tunisia was primarily agrarian even before the official military invasion and political submission in 1881. French capitals speculated on Tunisian lands taking advantage of the shady property laws oscillating between tribal communal usufruct and the central appropriation by the monarch and his agents (Elloumi, 2013). Four years into official colonization, French settler authorities decreed a Land Law on July 1st 1885 introducing private property of land (Auzary-Schmaltz, 2008) in order to facilitate transactions between settlers (Giudice, 2009) ending centuries of communal management of land between the inhabitants of historical Tunisia. Dispersed direct actions against landlords, their properties and their aids were the common means to fight agrarian settler-colonialism (Timoumi, 2011) until geopolitical turmoil condensed during World War II and the Arab-Zionist war of 1948. Glimmers of organization of an armed national liberation movement sparkled at the beginning of the fifth decade of the twentieth century. Peasants, shepherds and petty-commodity producers from the hinterlands of occupied Tunisia aggregated in groups and bands called *Fallaga*[2] (Ajl, 2019). In January 1952, the political faction of national liberation, the Neo-Destour party, embraced the violent path to independence and supported the *Fallaga* by declaring the armed struggle. This moment represented a shifting point in the evolution of resistance as it took a national scale that led to the independence of Tunisia in 1956 (Timoumi, 2008).

Even though the French military left Tunisia, rudiments of capitalist agriculture were imprinted on Tunisian soil. By 1957, around 60% of agricultural production was destined to export due to decades of colonial implementation of production choices that are meant to respond to the incentives of the international market (Sethom, 2004).Political independence did not guarantee economic autonomy as the leadership of the new independent state was ideologically western-

[1] Tribute, tax
[2] Bandits, pejoratively used by French colonial authorities against armed national liberation movement's members

leaning due to its petty bourgeois class origins (Ruf, 1975) and its intellectual French training (Salhi, 2017). Historical Arab fascination of western progress goes back to the nineteenth century when intellectuals started questioning the civilizational ebb of the Arab-Islamic world (Arsalan, 1930). In the post-colonial phase, ideological conflicts intensified during the building of the newly-independent states between the Pan-Arab socialist-leaning path of development and a westernized open-to-capitalism model. In Tunisia, this antagonism sharpened between the two lines amongst the Neo-Destour party and the West-leaning faction triumphed by eliminating the other line's leaders and popular base, which was highly peasant (Ajl, 2019).

Post-colonial Tunisian leadership raised the banner of "catching-up [the advanced world] via modernization" (Ayeb and Bush, 2019). The adoption of the Green Revolution was the on-ground translation of this mantra in the agricultural sector. During the season of 1967-1968, varieties of Mexican soft wheat, developed by CIMMYT, were introduced in Tunisian fields. Quantitatively, they turned out to show high productivity rates, nevertheless, this experiment provoked socio-economic disparities by marginalizing semi-modern and traditional sectors, concentrated in the western and southern regions of Tunisia (Gachet, 1971). The social effects of the Green Revolution manifested further through the acceleration of class differentiation in the countryside. The high reliance on production inputs favored large-scale farming and rich landlords over poor and landless peasants who gradually became agricultural workers or city migrants (Lawrence, 1988). This process was a "biologization of the social question" to avoid land distribution and self-reliant development by means of homogenization of inputs, knowledge and socio-economic models to deepen dependency of the South to North's industries and academic institutions (Cornilleau & Joly, 2014). The Green Revolution in Tunisia, supported by USAID and Ford Foundation, was a confirmation of the colonially-implemented capitalist agriculture and a Cold War strategy of containment against socialist agrarian reforms following the Chinese model (Ajl and Sharma, 2022). Suspiciously, the Green Revolution was introduced in Tunisia during its socialist era of the 1960s.

As a matter of historical fact, the ending of the socialist phase was initiated through the dismantlement of the agricultural cooperatives and leasing and renting collectivized land to private investors. Then, by the 1970's the economic system opened up in a clear political line. First outcome: rural exodus of 380 thousand persons between 1969 and 1975 transferring the Tunisian agrarian question to the city (Timoumi, 2008). The insertion in the global market by abiding to the international division of labor and the paradigm of comparative advantages has based the incentives of Tunisian agricultural production on the export of cash-crops and the import of basic food needs especially cereals imported at a rate of 52% by 1982 (Timoumi, 2008).

After nearly 30 years of independence, bread riots exploded, by the end of 1983, in Guebelli, a rural region in southern Tunisia, before the expansion of the social unrest to different regions of the country reaching big cities (Dakhli, 2021). This uprising was a response to austerity measures included in the 1984 finance law, which were assisted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, stipulating to double the consumer prices of cereal products and by-products (Seddon, 1986; Stora and Ellyas, 1999). The unease was contained by police oppression and political concession as the president of the republic declared the return to the previous prices in a televised speech (RTT, 1984).

Barely two years later, the IMF returned to Tunisia, in 1986, with loans and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) suggesting the decrease of state subsidies to agricultural production and the privatization of distribution circuits of food products (Jouili, 2008). Following the process, Tunisia became a member of the General Agreement on Tariffs and

Trade (GATT) in 1990 and the government signed a partnership agreement with the European Communities (later to become the European Union) in 1995 concerning the ease of tariffs of agricultural products.

This political trajectory suffocated Tunisia's economy as unemployment reached high levels by the end of the 2000s (The World Bank, 2010) especially among the population with advanced education (The World Bank, 2010). The 2008 financial crisis manifested as a food crisis in Tunisia (Akari and Jouili, 2010) and social unease culminated to ultimately explode in December 2010 when a dispossessed peasant turned into a street vendor of fruits (Fautras, 2015) self-immolated after a quarrel with an administrative police agent declaring the starting point of the so-called 'Arab Spring'.

Peasant political response matured during the 2021 protests addressing structural issues such as dependency to inputs, state support withdrawal and market pressure (Msellmi, 2022; Nabli, 2022). Furthermore, embryos of autonomous organization started to flourish, rejecting adherence to classical syndicates and unions (Trabelsi, 2021) and calling for cooperative production among small-scale peasant producers (Gasmi and Dovdar, 2021).

Tunisia's cooperativist legacy

Half a decade after the independence of Tunisia from French colonialism, the ruling party Neo-Destour, decided to adopt a socialist path for the development of the national economy. This chosen path is based on the organization of the economic sectors in cooperatives with an emphasis on agricultural production. The *Perspectives décennales* (1962 - 1971) ten-year plan projected to provide a minimum annual wage of 50 Tunisian dinars while limiting foreign aid of investment in the process under 50 percent and guaranteeing national savings at the level of 20 percent of the GDP (State Department of Planning and Finance, 1962). This choice comes from a conviction of the incapacity of the liberal economic policies adopted in 1956 to respond to the socio-economic demands of a newly-independent society (Gagnon, 1974). On the eve of independence, Tunisian political leadership assumed an ideological perspective relying on private capital by reinforcing the rural and urban bourgeoisies (Zghal, 1965). This rudimentary and scattered class failed to preserve the scale of investment that was achieved by foreign settler capital which led to a stagnation of internal production due to the weakness of the productive forces and the lack of national control over money and change (Amin, 1966a) provided that national financial institutions were not implemented yet[3]. On the other hand, the newly-independent state reigned over a population that was around 70 percent rural with a majority of small-scale peasants as about 450.000 families were exploiting 7 ha per property on average and between 200.000 to 500.000 persons were under- or unemployed (Zghal, 1965).

According to the taxonomy of land reforms suggested by Bandyopadhyay (1996), the Tunisian government resorted to land reform in a context of decolonization with a direct involvement of ex-colonizers and gradual withdrawal of settlers . The first process of this land reform was the "tunisification" of lands that were still under the control of settlers even after the declaration of independence on March 20th, 1956. About 4000 foreign families possessed 10 percent of the most fertile agricultural lands located in the humid and semi-humid Northwestern region of Tunisia, exploited at a high technical level on large properties of 200 ha per exploiter on average (Zghal, 1965). Political independence did not guarantee immediate land independence. Ben Saad (2015) details the steps of Tunisian reappropriation of its own agricultural territory.

[3] The Tunisian Central Bank was established in 1958 and the local currency, Tunsian Dinar, was introduced in 1960

First, in 1957, under the pressure of the revolutionary action of the Algerian national liberation movement at the Tunisian western borders, French authorities suggested a joint protocol with Tunisia stipulating the voluntary sale of settler lands to the Tunisian state and private exploiters. In parallel, many settlers abandoned Tunisian lands after the independence and were not substituted with local exploiters. In result, agricultural production declined therefore the Tunisian government decreed a law of reappropriation of forsaken lands in 1959. This law was minimally applied as the French government intervened by imposing compensations for the ex-settlers. Consequently, both governments signed the *Protocoles de cession à la Tunisie des terres des agriculteurs français* (Protocols for the transfer of French farmers' land to Tunisia) in 1960 and 1963. Accordingly, the Tunisian state purchased colonial lands and the payments were guaranteed by French loans. Finally, the war of Bizerte in the most Northern point of Tunisia, which led to the expulsion of the last French soldier from the Tunsian territory, paved the way for *Al-Jalaa Az-zirai* (Agricultural Evacuation) declaring the full tunisification of land, e.i. only Tunisians have the right of property, by law of May 15th, 1964. Nevertheless, this last phase was also assured by compensations.

The adoption of a strain of socialism based on cooperatives represented a point of convergence between the two paramount organizations involved in the struggle against French colonialism: the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) and the Neo-Destour party. Neo-Destour was founded in 1934 as a split faction from the Free Destour Party protesting against the reformist attitude of its bourgeois and aristocratic leadership. Habib Bourguiba, a young lawyer with a humble family background from the eastern coastal region of Sahel, led Neo-Destourians who were the in-between-wars generation who received western education and adopted tactics, forms of organization and slogans of French parties (Nouira, 1954). The Neo-Destour, compared to other national liberation movements in the Arab world, assimilated more profoundly western political concepts and methods (Moore, 1962). Descending from petty bourgeois families of artisans, settled olive-growers of Sahel, teachers, religious judges and other well-off professions, the new blood of the party earned the privilege to pursue academic training in France (Rudebeck, 1970). Furthermore, their views on decolonization revolved around state capture and centralized statist development (Hazbun, 1994) led by intellectual elites. Therefore, their struggle took a diplomatic political shape. On the other hand, the syndicalist central UGTT was founded in 1946 after divergences and feuds with the Tunisia-based section of the French labor union CGT over discrimination against local workers and the syndicate's negative opinions on national liberation. UGTT was established by Farhat Hached, a young orphan courier of a company of public transportation from the eastern island of Kerkennah. The Tunisian labor union inherited a political line based on economic analysis of the struggle against colonization relying on the power of Tunisian workers' organization in colonial facilities (Hazbun, 1994). This political line is rooted in the cooperativist movement that flourished in the1920's under the leadership of M'hamed Ali Al-Hammi, one of the first syndicalists in Tunisia's history (Haddad, 2015). Hached used to call workers to seek sovereign self-improvement and self-reliance and he preached for small-scale labor-intensive autonomous industrial production to fight dependency to colonial commodities (Hazbun, 1994).

Symbiotic tendency between Neo-Destour and UGTT was achieved at the dawn of the 1950's when Hached has become the *de facto* leader of the national liberation movement, by January 1952, when Bourguiba was arrested by colonial authorities (Yousfi, 2015, 27). Both organizations found mutual interest in uniting efforts as the union needed political support against colonial oppression and the party seeked popular reach and mobilization provided by the syndicalist implantation (Yousfi, 2015, 33). Notwithstanding some moments of divergence especially during the last years of the national liberation struggle, the syndicalist-partisan unity

was consolidated during the building of the newly-independent state. Firstly, when UGTT, along with the union of industry, trade and handicrafts (UTICA) and the union of agriculture (UNAT) formed the 'National Front' that was represented in the constitutional and legislature parliaments of 1956 and 1959 respectively. Secondly, the secretary general of UGTT, Ahmed Ben Salah, was appointed, in 1961, secretary of state of planning, finance and economy to implement UGTT's 'Social and Economic Program' that was drafted in the sixth congress of the union in 1956. This program was presented as a project for the national economy based on state planning aiming to liberate Tunisia from the socio-economic apparatus inherited from colonization (Abid, 2002). Superminister Ahmed Ben Salah, unlike his predecessor Farhat Hached, was a teacher who studied in France descending from a merchant family of the Sahel. During his syndicalist career, he was a member of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and his socialist tendencies were inspired by the Scandinavian social-democratic model (Kahlaoui, 2020). In his words (Ben Salah, 2012), he clarified that the socialism he advocates for is not against private property and initiatives and not in line with the dictatorship of the proletariat (p23). Ben Salah's socialism is fighting against exploiters, speculators and cultural elites (p69) through the institutional change of social structures instead of class struggle (p185).

UGTT's 'Social and Economic Program' was transformed, in 1961, into a ten-year plan; *Perspectives Décennales de Développement* (1962 - 1971) that was followed, in May 1963, by a law declaring the establishment of cooperatives in the agricultural sector. One year later, Neo-Destour changed its name to Socialist Destourian Party as a recommendation of its seventh congress. President Habib Bourguiba stressed on the observation that Tunisia is a backward country, thus, socialism is the path to take in order to overcome backwardness and achieve economic development and human advancement especially that capitalism is unable to succeed in a backward country (Secrétariat d'Etat à l'Information, 1965). In another speech in Cairo, Egypt, Bourguiba has recalled that socialism is the path of efficiency and progress that is being taken by the United States and the Western European countries. He also specified that Destourian socialism does not adopt class struggle but the fight against exploitation is effective by spreading awareness among the people and persuasion of political opponents (cited in Timoumi, 2008). Destourian socialism seems to be adopted out of economic and political necessities (Amin, 1966b) not from ideological motivations (Rudebeck, 1970). It is also a form of anticipation of the ideologically-embedded socialist tendencies held by neighboring newly-independent Algerian leaders (Ashford, 1967).

The ten-year plan specified that the Tunisian economic system will rely on the synergy between three sectors: public, private and cooperative. A three-year plan (*Plan triennial* 1962 - 1964) was adopted and it detailed that the reforms are concerning the transformation of the current agrarian structures in order to adapt them to planning. In fact, this process aimed to modernize the 'latecomer' (*retardataire* [sic]) sector, e.i. the traditional small-scale self-consumption-oriented sector (Elloumi, 2013). The modernization efforts were materialized by the creation of highly mechanized pilot projects with the goal of increasing agricultural productivity (Ben Saad, 2015; Zghal, 1966). These pilot farms were large-scale at the image of modern colon farms (Parsons, 1965) and they resulted from the collectivization of the tunisified state lands and small parcels that were exploited by peasants who contributed by the third of the total collectivized lands while big landowners provided little to nothing lands (Ayeb Bush, 2019; Ben Salah, 2012). Overall, cooperative lands were enlarged about five times from 1964 to 1969 (Gagnon, 1974).

The cooperative project aimed to resume the colonial efforts to fixate nomadic populations of the central and southern regions of the country (Bessaoud, 2016) via the creation of a sedentary

landed peasantry (Simmons, 1971). Nevertheless, this top-down strategy of collectivization led to a sort of 'kulakization' (Amin, 1970) as small-scale farmers resorted to sell their lands out of fear of confiscation and the buyers were big landowners (Simmons, 1971). The cooperative experience seemed like a social pact between large-scale landholders and the urban petty bourgeoisie ruling the state and the administration (Bessaoud, 2016). Peasants concerned by the reforms were absent in the mobilization as their representation was due to their quantitative social role and burden rather than advocative action, thus the program was carried by bureaucrats (Zghal, 1965). As a matter of fact, cooperative cadres received technical and administrative training whereas working peasants were only executioners (Zghal, 1966). Moreover, managerial officials enjoyed steady pay notwithstanding the fluctuations of the harvests each year unlike the working peasants who were financially dependent on production rates (Simmons, 1971). On the other hand, the project was encouraged by the United States administration (Ashford, 1967) and was funded at 40% of the total investments by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (Timoumi, 2008). Destourian socialism was implemented via the construction of a national administrative elite (Amin, 1966a) as a form of state socialism based on technocratic pragmatism favoring elites over the masses (Amin, 1970). In the words of Amin (1970,194): "Cooperatives, hailed by certain ideologists as a 'step forward towards socialism', appear in the Tunisian case as a form of transition... towards capitalism".

Communitarian Entreprises: Renewed form of cooperativism?

The independence of Tunisia from French colonialism in 1956 represented a historical moment for political change. Dispersed events and actions accumulate quantitatively until they reach a funnel instant resulting in a quantitative change. State building in the 1960s was carried, intellectually and practically, by institutional elites without a clear guidance or claims from the masses. It was a top-down process that did not hold long until popular dissent manifested either organized and represented by political parties/labor unions or spontaneously clustered as an expression of dissatisfaction. The uprisings of 2010-2011 culminated in the 'Arab Spring' funnel. Nationwide unease demanded the change of a socio-economic system which favored eastern coastal regions in matters of development and urban petty-bourgeois 'middle-classes' in channels of value absorption from marginalized rural and urban semi-proletarianized underemployed classes (Salhi, 2017). Post-2011 process seemed not to respond to socio-economic demands as protests did not cease to occur asking for employment, regional development, access to natural resources and land (Ajl 2018; Feltrini 2018; Kerrou, 2021) , and lately the affairs of the countryside.

The peasant agitations of 2021 happened during the reign of Kais Saied, elected president of the republic in 2019, an 'outsider' of the establishment, considered 'populist' by scholars and human rights activists. Saied's discourse, opposing the new parliamentary democracy, revolved around national and popular sovereignty by emphasizing socio-economic change over mere political shifts. Accordingly, he legislated a decree, on March 20th 2022, the 66th anniversary of independence, signing it on video "[...] on the same table where the bad-mentioned Treaty of Bardo [the colonization treaty] was signed as well as the law of 1964 on the nationalization of agricultural land" (Présidence Tunisie, 2022). The new law concerns the creation of *Shariket Ahliya* (Communitarian Entreprises CE) which represents the president's "promises since 10 years" (idem) responding to the needs of the unemployed youth for a legal framework to fulfill their dreams of "employment, freedom and national dignity" [the slogans of the 2010-2011 uprisings]. Furthermore, in the same speech, the president declared that the law is a step

towards "popular sovereignty over the nation". In a visit to a CE specializing in agricultural production and exploiting state-owned land, the president mentioned notions such as 'right to access land', 'food-sovereignty' and 'self-reliance' (Présidence Tunisie, 2023). These slogans go in line with what the minister of social affairs declared on October 29th 2023, that these enterprises are a tool for "an alternative new model of development to Tunisia from the interior" and that this model is based on "the partnership between the state and citizens" (African Manager, 2023).

The text of law (JORT, 2022), also, reflects this political demarche as it states that this law advocates for social justice, just distribution of resources and collective work and practice (Art. 2). It also calls citizens to participate in development prioritizing the Human and valuing collective action over individual profit (Art. 6). These enterprises are bound to corporate social responsibility (Art. 5) as they are called to allocate 20% of profit for social, cultural and environmental activities in the region where they operate (Art. 55).

Peasant movements mobilizing during the agitations of 2021 welcomed the new law as they established CEs for they consider this framework to match their aspirations to take control over their small-scale production in a cooperative manner. Dairy producers of Ouled Jaballah, the first to establish a *Tansiquia* (coordination) of small-scale peasants during their protests in February 2021 (Mornagui and Delpuech, 2021), created a CE on October 16th 2022 (Shems FM, 2022). In fact, by October 2023, 75 CE were established and 35 are still under creation (African Manager, 2023).

The new model is still at the beginning of its implementation to be fully assessed. However, it raises several questions on how to pursue development in a country highly dependent on the international markets to satisfy basic needs of its citizens, especially food. We noticed evolution of peasant struggles progressing from resistance to colonial and post-colonial policies to more concrete political acts leading to regime change arriving to the shaping of embryos of independent peasant organizations; *Tansiquiet*, as an outcome of the 2021 mobilizations, fighting to implement alternatives such as cooperation notwithstanding its historical controversial charge. Clearly, the law of CE does not specify a form of land or agrarian reform as, first, it is directed to all economic sectors other than agriculture, second, it shied away from precising the forms of land access and tenure relations when it mentioned 'collective lands' in Article 5 of the text of law. With the absence of structural state intervention to overcome dependency on inputs for agricultural production, as an example, the drain of value will persist and profitability of these enterprises will decline due to international and national market incentives and pressure. On the other hand, although the law indicates that the enterprises are destined to work on regional development according to local needs (Art. 3), nothing clarifies how these needs would be determined. Finally, producers are represented only on the economic level as shareholders and board voters (Art. 6) while they seem to have no direct involvement with the national political choices.

Both the cooperatives of the 1960s and the CE excite an old time debate on development in a country peripheral to the global capitalist system that emerged in parallel with the establishment of post-colonial states questioning political choices, technical tendencies and social mobilization and agency.

Development in the peripheries

Alongside legislative measures such as the law of the CE, which could perhaps liberate the productive forces and develop them, a much more important political framework needs to be urgently discussed. Tunisia belongs to the periphery of a world-system that is highly polarized as plunder of value is continuous and exponential (Hickel et al., 2021). Insertion in the international market obeying to the incentives of comparative advantages has deepened Tunisia's dependency to external pressure on its own development. Tunisia's agriculture is export-led, producing fruits for the international market in exchange of hard currency and importing basic nutrition needs such as cereals at a rate of 80% (ONAGRI, 2020). It seems that this economic model does not respond to local needs.

Intellectual heritage does not lack alternative patterns to bondage the hemorrhage of value. Indeed, debates over development, and by extent underdevelopment, emerged at the dawn of the establishment of newly-independent Third-World states (Amin 1974; Arghiri, 1972; Rodney, 1972). Drawing on a history of anti-colonial struggle emphasizing autonomous developmental paths in contrast to the capitalist one from Indian *Swadeshi* under British colonialism (Trivedi, 2003) or North African 'self-reliant industrialization" under French colonialism (Hazbun, 1994) to fully-developed Korean ideology of *Juche* (Kim Jong Il, 1982), many Third-World political thinkers suggested theories of development based on self-reliance (Amin, 1977; Dowidar, 1977; Parthasarathi, 1976; Patel, 1975) and technology transfer and appropriateness (Abdalla, 1977; Agarwal, 1995). Amin (1990) synthesized this intellectual wave by advocating for the theory of delinking as a developmental path for countries languishing under the periphery of capitalist world accumulation. Tunisia, also, has its own intellectual legacy of thinkers who followed this line of withdrawal from a world system that caused internal underdevelopment (Ajl, 2018). This heritage should be revived and revised according to the new challenges for an alternative popular sovereign model of development.

Accordingly, internal reforms, as progressive as they can be, would not stop the leak of value without reforms regarding international relations. On a first attempt, Third-World leaders of the newly-independent post-colonial states adopted sovereign national projects yet they lacked popular engagement and participation so they were 'denied' by the invasion of the neoliberal deluge (Kadri, 2015) because they maintained dollarization and dependency to imports which led to a 'comparadorization' of the national bourgeoisie (Kadri, 2016). The waves of decolonization of Third-World countries happened in parallel with the establishment of a new economic world order on the ruins of the imperialist wars, shifting the barycenter of hegemony across the Atlantic ocean. The two World Wars represented a culmination of the international system's heaped up crisis extending from the second half of the nineteenth century. The post-war era, dubbed *Les Trente Glorieuses* (The Glorious Thirty) was an epoch of relative equilibrium between three international blocks: The Socialist Eastern bloc, the social-democratic Western bloc and the Eastern-leaning Third-World (Amin, 1996). Social Democracy in Western Europe, and to some extent in the US, was a tactic of necessity out of fear of the expansion of the socialist revolution at-home, inspired by and envious of the condition of the working-class in the USSR and the People's Republics as a strategy of containment when the contradiction between capital and labor intensified. This was an opportunity for Third-World countries to autonomously implement their developmental path provided the decline of plunder of their resources thanks to national liberation from direct colonization and the collective political *renaissance* and cooperation born from the Bandung conference and the non-alignment movement. Unfortunately, as much as these projects were politically charged, their practical implementation, which did not fully address international relations nor consider popular mobilization, plus direct imperialist aggression, failed to break free from global capitalist encroachment. Theories, mentioned above, were a reaction to these limping projects in an attempt to consolidate them.

Today, the global system seems to be shaken by multiple crises whether it is financial in 2008, health-related in 2020 or geopolitical in 2022, paralleled with the rise of the People's Republic of China and the attempts of the BRICS to de-dollarize their exchanges (IFIMES, 2023). In response, the World Economic Forum (WEF) discussed in 2020 shifts in the paradigm of the international economic system from 'shareholder capitalism', the pillar of neoliberalism advocated by the doctrine's godfather Milton Friedman (Friedman, 1970), to 'shareholder capitalism' (Lashitew, 2020). This "renewed social contract" calls for the integration of people and the planet in business-produced solutions. This appears as a concession resembling the one of the *Trente Glorieuses* with the substitution of the Eastern socialist bloc with China and the national liberation movements with resistance in Africa and the Arab world. Klaus Schwab, founder and chairman of the WEF, himself referred to post-war Western social democracy when advancing his suggestion about shareholder capitalism (Schwab and Vanham, 2021). The US administration, in the words of its national security advisor Jake Sullivan, is also considering "renewing American economic leadership" to overcome "the risks of overdependence" caused by the financial crisis, the pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine (Sullivan, 2023). This statement was commenting on economic policies with regard to China. It criticized trickle-down economic policies that drove inequalities, market inefficiency, the choice to privilege finance over industries, dependency due to liberalization and inequality's damage on democracy as "the middle class lost ground and the wealthy did better than ever". On this ground, Sullivan suggested a "new consensus" based on investments on public goods such as climate and health by the implementation of a "modern American industrial strategy". On a world scale, the US discussed this tendency with the EU, Canada and Japan (the imperialist Triade) and they are aiming to assist emerging industrial countries, in a manner similar to the Cold-War campaigns of aid for development. Core capitalist countries seem to reproduce the same strategy of 'bending for the storm' and this represents an opportunity for peripheral nations to fight for their development. Amin's Delinking's English subtitle is "Towards a multipolar world" and multipolarity appears to be on track. This entails the push for a New Bandung (Amin, 2017; Yeros, 2021).

Conclusion

Tracing back historical interaction between peasant's agency to resist and impose political change on one side and the institutional implementation of policies on the other, this article aims to engage with future evolutions of the Tunisian agrarian question and its place in development. The study of the cooperative experience of the 1960s demonstrated that top-down elitist strategies do not resolve structural issues of the countryside for they objectify the subject of change. Moreover, when legislative measures seem to obey popular demands, challenges arise on theoretical grounds provoking doubts on the solidity of local change without clear considerations to external pressure and threats.

Calculations of unequal exchange in a post-colonial, yet imperialist world (Abdalla, 1990; Hickel et al., 2022) showed the amount of value that is externally transferred instead of being locally channeled for development. Nevertheless, the rate of externally-extracted value is not constant every year or era. Hickel et al. (2021) showed that it sharply rose with the neoliberal invasion of the Third World imposing the withdrawal of states. This raises the question about the dialectical relation between the state and the people. In the current world, states in the periphery are a necessary barrier against imperialist aggression and encroachment (Moyo and Yeros, 2011). However, the twentieth century experiences revealed the fragility of states that rise above people which are doomed in times of crisis or infiltration (Kadri, 2016). Evenmore, developpement that is not protected by the people would eventually fail (Samara, 1990). This

dialectical melting pot pours into contemporary questions of national-popular democracy, especially that the D word is the Torjan Horse of neo-colonial submission to the international economic order.

Finally, Tunisian peasants proved that organization is a quintessential tool for local political change during the national liberation war, the 2010-2011 uprisings and in 2021. Earlier Third World conglomerates imposed bargain power on an international level. The current global crises ranging from systemic unrest in the Global South to existential climate threats, coupled with clusters of resistance and strategies of break-throughs, represent an opportunity for a new step in history.

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