Autocratization and Civil Society Response in Tunisia

A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

In July 2021, the democratically elected President Kais Saied announced a state of emergency and started a process of dismantling democratic institutions in Tunisia. The development in Tunisia can be seen in relation to a global rise in autocratization in recent years. This has led to a growing literature on autocratization, but it is limited in its understanding of the dynamics of autocratization and civil society resistance. This thesis addresses this knowledge gap through an in-depth analysis of civil society response to autocratization in Tunisia. Through a qualitative case study, this thesis seeks to explore *what characterises the process of autocratization* and *what characterises and explains civil society response to autocratization in Tunisia.*

This thesis argues for understanding of autocratization and civil society response as a relational, contentious, and open-ended process. By examining strategies of autocratization and discursive legitimisation and how these affect the strategies, frames and political space of civil society actors, this thesis highlights the contentious dynamics of civil society response to autocratization. It finds that civil society resistance has been slow, soft, and fragmented in response to a partial, gradual but swift process of autocratization. By considering elements of legitimisation, counterframing and interpretation and institutional changes and strategies of autocratization and resistance, the material and discursive aspects of these processes are emphasised. Lastly, the case study accentuates that autocratization and civil society response must be viewed in relation to the substance and quality of democracy.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AMT – Association of Tunisian Magistrates

ATFD – Association of Tunisian Democratic Women

ATFURD - Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development

CSO – Civil society organisation

IMF – International Monetary Fund

ISIE - Independent High Authority for Elections

LTDH: Tunisian League of Human Rights

NCA – National Constituent Assembly

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

ONAT - Tunisian Order of Lawyers

UGTT - The Tunisian General Labour Union

UTICA - Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts

FTDES – Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

"The end of the Tunisian model", "The day the Tunisian democracy died" and "Tunisia: Democracy in Crisis" read headlines in the summer of 2022 (Cordall, 2022; Hamid, 2022; Yerkes, 2022). This came after a new constitution was voted through in a flawed referendum on the 25th of July 2022. This granted the president almost unlimited powers and was designed by the once democratically elected president Kais Saied. Exactly a year before the referendum, Saied implemented a state of emergency and gave himself sweeping executive powers which he has used to rule the country by decree for the last year. As such, the new constitution formalised powers Saied had already had for a year and is thus the latest blow during a year of dismantlement of democratic institutions in Tunisia. Regime change is an open-ended process, but the headlines reflect that Tunisia has seen major setbacks for democracy in the last year and is indeed in crisis. The last year's developments stand in stark contrast to the scenes of jubilation, hope and expectancy in 2011, when the Tunisian people gathered in a movement for dignity and freedom, ousted their long-standing dictator and embarked on a project of democratisation.

The development in Tunisia can be seen in relation to a global rise in autocratization, which is often referred to as "the third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Autocratization is an overarching concept for regime changes toward autocracy. The political development in Tunisia, as a part of a larger global trend, raises questions of how to protect democracy and resist autocratization. The global trend of autocratization has led to a growing scholarly interest in the mechanisms, modes and causes of autocratization, but the existing literature is limited in its understanding of the actors and dynamics of resistance (Tomini et al., 2022). Civil society, as an arena for collective agency, is defined as an important mechanism of democratic defence, but there are few studies analysing how and if civil society resistance develops. The aim of this study is to contribute to fill this knowledge gap by analysing the contextual dynamics of civil society response to autocratization in Tunisia.

The thesis thus has two main research questions defined as: (1) *What characterises the autocratization process in Tunisia?* and (2) *What characteries and explains civil society's response to autocratization in Tunisia?* By viewing civil society response and autocratization

within the framework of contentious politics, I argue that autocratization must be understood as a relational, open-ended, and contentious process which involves interactions between drivers and resisters of autocratization (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Civil society response must be seen in relation to the character, strategies, and legitimisation efforts of the driver of autocratization. Further, the notion of legitimisation highlights the fact that autocratization and civil society response are both *material* and *discursive*. Autocratization is a matter of institutional changes, but it also involves efforts to discursively legitimise these changes. The would-be autocrat uses strategies of legitimisation as part of an effort to contain threats to his rule (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017). Following this, civil society resistance is also about delegitimising and countering the legitimisation claims of the driver of autocratization. Based on these theoretical assumptions, I have defined two overarching research questions and four secondary questions:

1 What characterises the autocratization process in Tunisia?

1.1 Which strategies have been used?

1.2 How has autocratization been discursively legitimised?

2 What characterises and explains civil society's response to autocratization in Tunisia?

2.1 What characterises civil society in Tunisia?

2.2. How has the politically oriented civil society responded?

2.3 What explains the character of the response?

The structuring of the research questions reflects the structure of the analysis, as civil society response is analysed in relation to the character of the autocratization process and the strategies and legitimisation efforts involved.

1.1 Contextual background

On the 17th of December in 2010, the street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the governor's office in the town of Sidi Bouzid in interior Tunisia. Bouazizi's act came after being publicly humiliated and forbid to work by local police officers. This came to be viewed as an act of resistance against the complete lack of dignity Tunisians experienced in the corrupt and inhumane regime of Ben Ali, who had ruled the country since 1987 (Ayeb, 2011). Although described as a 'good pupil' by international organisations such as IMF and the World Bank, Ben Ali's neoliberal policies combined with cronyism increased

unemployment and marginalisation, especially in the Southern and interior regions in Tunisia (Chomiak & Parks, 2020). Protests in solidarity with Bouazizi started the same day and continued during the next days and nights before it spread to neighbouring towns and regions in the interior. Through networks of activists and organisations, it reached the coastal and more affluent regions in Tunisia at the end of December. The protests thus became a national movement, which gathered Tunisians across geographical, economic, and social divides into a common demand for dignity and freedom, echoed in the iconic slogans of "Bread, freedom and social justice" and "The people want the fall of the regime". These slogans illustrate that the demands of the revolution were both economic and political(Ayeb, 2011). On the evening of the 14th of January, the protest movement gained their first victory: Ben Ali fled the country.

Importantly, the movement, albeit now more fragmented, continued to mobilise and push for deeper reforms than the remaining regime proposed. Through occupation of space, demonstrations, and the building of coalitions between new groups of revolutionary activists, civil society organisations, unions and the Islamist opposition movement and party of Ennahda, the movement was successful in pushing for transformative rather than just partial reforms (Zemni, 2015). In 2011, Tunisia held their first free election to a national constituent assembly (NCA) which was tasked with writing a new constitution. This election has been followed by five free municipal, presidential, and legislative elections. In the first election, the earlier banned Islamist party of Ennahda won most seats and formed the so-called Troika government with the two smaller 'secular' and social democratic parties of Ettakol and Congress for the Republic (CPR) (Chomiak & Parks, 2020).

The following two years of interim politics were however marked by political and social unrest. The Tunisian economy was lagging after the revolution, and a rise of radical Salafist movements and political violence contributed to a tense political and social situation. The newly established political party Nidaa Tounes, which gathered diverse actors including former regime elements, business leaders, labour representatives and leftists under a common banner of "secularism", built a platform based on criticism of the post-revolution security situation (Chomiak & Parks, 2020). A turning point came after the assassination of two influential leftists politicians and activists in February and July in 2013. Opposition forces, led by Nidaa Tounes but joined by civil society organisations, intellectuals, UGTT members and eventually also opposition parties in the NCA, formed the Errahil ('Leave') movement which

demonstrated daily against the legitimacy of the constitutional process and the Troika government's ability to govern (Antonakis-Nashif, 2016).

The pressure from the opposition movement and the shock of the military's deposition of the Islamist government in Egypt led Ennahda and the government to step down and join a national dialogue process (Wolf, 2017). The national dialogue process was initiated and led by four civil society organisations: the largest workers union (UGTT), the employers' organisation (UTICA), a legacy human rights organisation (LTDH) and the lawyers' organisation (ONAT). In the national dialogue, "secular" and "Islamist" political forces came together to bargain and find consensus for a new constitution. In January 2014, a democratic constitution was voted through, often dubbed as the region's most progressive (Grewal, 2021). It established political and civil rights and introduced a parliamentary system in which a popularly elected president and a Head of Government elected by the parliament shares the executive power. Expanded political rights also opened the space for civil society organisations, which grew in numbers after the revolution. In the 2014 election, the election winner and "secular" party of Nidaa Tounes together with the runner-up "Islamist" Ennahda and some smaller political parties formed a government in the name of "consensus" (McCarthy, 2019). Thus, the revolution in 2011 succeeded in democratising political institutions, prompting descriptions of it as the sole success of democratisation of the Arab Uprisings.

The new Tunisian democracy did, however, have multiple shortcomings and unresolved issues. Perhaps most importantly, subsequent democratic governments have not been able to reform and transform the Tunisian economy to redress inequalities and create broader prosperity. In addition, police and security reforms have been largely absent and the transitional justice process has effectively been stalled by political elites. Marks (2022a, p. 1) aptly describes Tunisia's last governments as "consensual, but dysfunctional". They have maintained a neoliberal agenda and a dependency on loans from the IMF. The lack of large-scale reforms to address the corrupt and high-entry economic system of the authoritarian era have left a large part of the Tunisian population with the same socio-economic grievances as before the revolution. As such, the key demand of dignity has not been achieved in the eyes of many Tunisians (Chomiak, 2016; Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021).

The discontentment with the performance of the government and established political parties was expressed in the 2019 election, as Tunisians elected the political outsider of Kais Saied to

president, a retired university lecturer in law without political experience or party affiliations. Saied built his political program on the discontentment with the status quo and political elite and vowed to bring the power back to the people (Lakhal, 2022; Wolf, 2019). His presidential period was characterised by conflicts with the prime minister and Ennahda-led parliament. Political bickering and conflict contributed to the ineffective handling of the growing and interconnected economic and covid-19 crises. This led to growing unrest in Tunisia and calls for political change. On the 25th of July in 2021, after a day of at times violent protests, Saied introduced state of emergency measures which suspended the parliament, dismissed the government, and transferred executive powers to the presidential office (Meshkal, 2021a; Yerkes & Alhomoud, 2022).

1.3 Research design

The research questions are approached through qualitative and explorative case study. A qualitative case study allows for the exploration of contextual dynamics, relations, interpretations, and narratives, and is as such best suited for the exploration of the material and discursive aspects of autocratization and civil society response (Baxter, 2016). The case study builds on a year-long digital fieldwork and five weeks of fieldwork in Tunis where different elements of data was collected. The empirical analysis builds on a triangulation of observational, textual, and oral data. The empirical data is analysed through athematic analysis which draws on theoretical concepts. The theoretical framework is developed through a review and discussion of the literature on autocratization and the role of civil society in different processes of regime change. Furthermore, I draw on theories from contentious politics and social movements studies to build an analytical toolkit to understand civil society response to autocratization.

1.4 Thesis Structure

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework through a discussion on approaches and theoretical concepts from the literature on autocratization, contentious politics and social movements studies. **Chapter 3** discuss the methodological choices in this research project. Here, the research design and choice of methods will be discussed before I move on to reflect on the ethical considerations and challenges of this research process. **Chapter 4** and **5** are the empirical parts. **Chapter 4** addresses the questions related to the character of the autocratization through looking at the quality and substance of the democracy, the strategies

of autocratization and the populist and ‘democratic’ legitimisation narratives and procedures of Saied. The chapter ends with an analysis of the character of the autocratization in Tunisia in relation to contemporary trends in autocratization. **Chapter 5** addresses civil society response in Tunisia through a mapping of the civil society’s development and character before it moves on to analyse the variety of responses to autocratization from civil society. I then discuss why civil society has been characterised by varied responses through a discussion of the political space and frames in civil society. In **Chapter 6**, the thesis is concluded by returning to the research aims and questions. The main conclusions are that civil society has been characterised by slow, soft, and fragmented response to a gradual and partial but swift autocratization process.

CHAPTER 2 Theoretical framework

The case is approached through the emerging literature on autocratization and civil society resistance, as well as theoretical insights and concepts from contentious politics and social movement studies. Through a review on the literature on autocratization, I argue for an understanding of autocratization as an incremental, relational, and contentious process. Further on, the focus is on civil society as one arena in which such resistance against autocratization can be formed. Firstly, I discuss civil society's different modalities and roles in processes of regime change before I move on to address how civil society's potential to resist autocratization. To build a solid analytical toolkit, I draw on theories and concepts from the contentious politics and social movements studies. By combining theories and concepts from the emerging literature on democratic resilience and the existing social movements literature, an analytical toolkit which allows for deeper understanding of the political opportunities and constraints as well as the strategies of civil society.

2.1 Processes of autocratization

This section will firstly define the concept of autocratization through a critical review of the two main perspectives on autocratization. Secondly, it will discuss the characteristics of contemporary autocratization. Lastly, it will present and expand upon Lührmann's (2021) theory on the stages of autocratization in democracies.

2.1.1 Defining autocratization: Transition vs. incrementalist approaches

Autocratization is, as democratisation, a matter of regime change. Lührmann & Lindberg (2019, p. 1009) define autocratization as the opposite of democratisation: "[…] any move away from [full] democracy." However, Tomini (2021, p. 1194) is critical to this "negative definition" and argues that such a definition is weak as it says nothing about the actual process of "building a new political regime with peculiar and original authoritarian characteristics." So, rather than defining it as a move *away* from democracy, autocratization can be conceptualised as a process *towards* autocracy:

> "[…] a process of regime changes towards autocracy that makes the exercise of political power more arbitrary and repressive and that restricts the space for

public contestation and political participation in the process of government selection.” (Cassani & Tomini, 2020a, p. 277)

This definition of autocratization highlights how it entails both the dismantling of the existing political institutions and the installation of new institutions (Cassani and Tomini, 2020a). The process of autocratization changes the formal and informal institutions that regulate how political power is exercised. This can include but is not limited to changing the formal institutions such as the constitution or prompting more repressive practices by the police. Furthermore, it entails regime change towards autocracy regardless of the initial regime type. Thus, regime change of such a nature is regarded as autocratization whether it occurs in democracies, hybrid democracies or partial autocracies. As such, it unites concepts such as *democratic recession*, *autocratic consolidation* and *democratic breakdown* into one overarching concept.

So, autocratization is defined as institutional changes towards autocracy. The question which follows is then what ‘change(s)’ entails: What are *institutional changes* towards autocracy? The literature on autocratization can be divided into two main perspectives in this respect: the transitologist and the incrementalist. The transitologist approach understands regime change as a clear transition from one regime type to another, while the incrementalist approach understands it as incremental transformations (Maerz et al., 2021).

The transitologist approach rests on two core assumptions (Maerz et.al., 2021). Firstly, it assumes that regimes can be demarcated into clear categories, as for instance the dichotomy of democracy/autocracy or the fourfold typology as shown in Figure 2.1. Secondly, it assumes

QUALITY / QUANTITY	Partial	Full
Radical	Liberal democracy → Electoral autocracy Defective democracy → Electoral autocracy	Liberal democracy → Closed autocracy Defective democracy → Closed autocracy
Moderate	Liberal democracy → Defective democracy	Electoral autocracy → Closed autocracy

Figure 2.1 Types of autocratization (Cassani & Tomini, 2020, p. 280)

that there is a distinct and observable moment of transition between the types of regimes (Maerz et.al., 2021). Cassani & Tomini's (2020a) typology of regime types and paths of autocracy is one example of the transition approach. They define four types of regimes: closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, defective democracy, and liberal democracy. Based on the onset regime type, they define six types of transitions. These types of transitions are distinguished by the partial or full nature of the transition. By creating such typologies, the transitologists can analyse the number and types of transitions and shed light on global or regional trends in autocratization in different time periods. This can give valuable insight in the global state of autocratization but has been criticised for simplifying a complex reality and for not detecting gradual processes of autocratization that fall short of a regime shift (Maerz et.al., 2021, p. 4). Furthermore, the fit and relevance of typologies of regime types based on the dichotomy of autocracy/democracy are challenged by the existence of hybrid regimes of many forms (Bogaards, 2009).

The incrementalist approach assumes, according to Maerz et.al. (2021), that autocratization consists of incremental and gradual transformations along a continuum of autocracy and democracy. The central distinction from the transitologist approach is that autocratization is defined as episodes in which the regime is *transformed* but not necessarily *transitioned* from one type of regime to another. The incrementalism approach thus opens for another empirical focus. Rather than counting regime transitions, the approach is focused on the episodes and processes that transform a regime. So, through understanding autocratization as "gradual changes along a continuum from autocracy to democracy", the perspective enables an empirical analysis of how autocratization proceeds and what autocratic actors do, and how civil society actors react and resist (Stokke & Kyaw, forthcoming, p. 5). However, to understand and analyse these processes and events, additional analytical tools are needed.

2.1.2 Contemporary autocratization: The autocratization sequence

The emerging literature on autocratization has sought to understand the character of contemporary processes of autocratization in the so-called "third wave of autocratization" (Lürhmann & Lindeberg, 2019). The scope and magnitude of a new wave of autocratization are questioned by some authors, but that the nature of contemporary autocratization is different than earlier processes of autocratization is widely agreed upon (Skaaning, 2020). Lürhmann & Lindeberg (2019) argue that contemporary autocratization has two clear characteristics: (1) it mainly affects democracies and (2) it is led by incumbents using legal

and gradual strategies. So, contemporary autocratization is characterised by a gradual regression in democracies with a legal façade, and not as a radical processes of complete breakdown. These processes of autocratization are often led by elected incumbents who use legal strategies to dismantle democratic institutions and norms step by step (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

To understand contemporary processes of autocratization in democracies, Lührmann (2021) has developed a theory of autocratization as a three-stage process. As shown in Figure 2.2, the last stage is the actual onset of autocratization. This theory thus acknowledges that there are political events and developments which can lead towards autocratization but are not autocratization in themselves. The following section will present and discuss Lürhmann's (2021) model of the autocratization sequence and expand upon this with other relevant theories in order to form an analytical explanation of the events, processes and strategies involved in autocratization. Lürhmann (2021) also focuses on entry points for democratic resilience in the autocratization sequence. This will in part be discussed in this section, but civil society's role in resisting autocratization will be discussed in the next section (2.3).

When citizens are discontent with their current democratic options, it can lead to openness to non-democratic alternatives. As this enables contemporary 'autocratisers' to come to power through popular voting, 'Mounting Citizens' Discontent' with democratic parties and institutions are defined as a first stage of autocratization (Lührmann, 2021). Citizens' dissatisfaction with democratic parties and institutions can be divided into lack of *specific* and

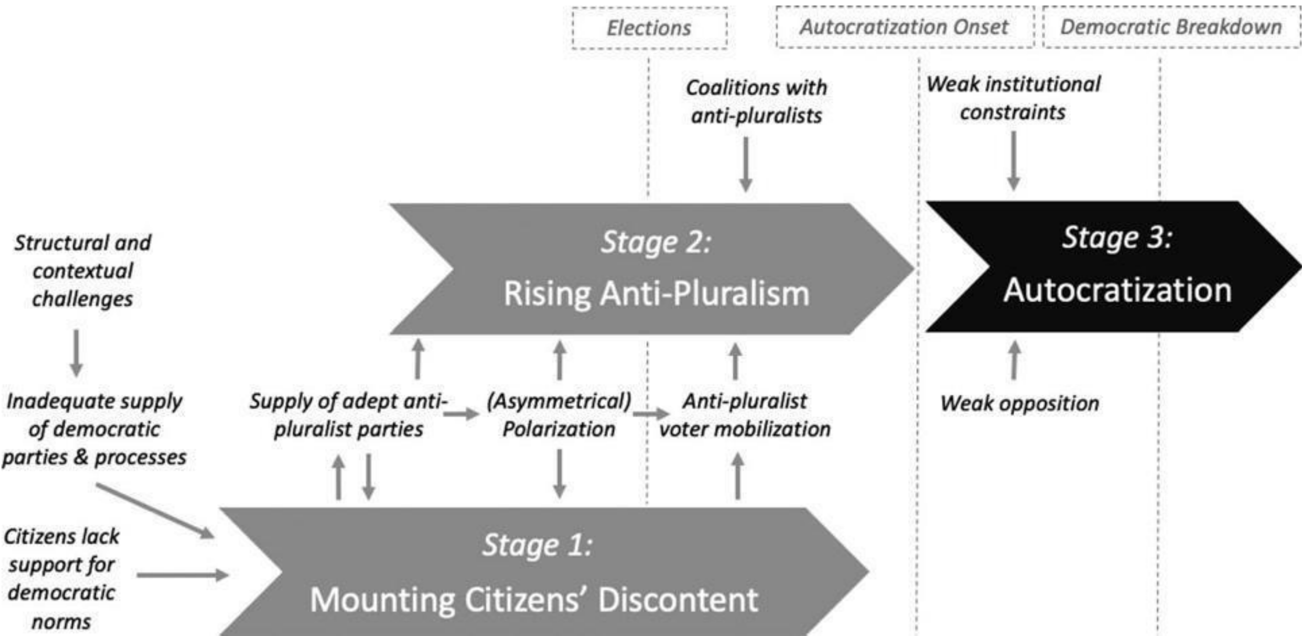

Figure 2.2 The autocratization sequence (Lührmann 2021, p. 1018)

diffuse support. Lack of diffuse support is defined as discontentment with basic rules and norms of democracy. Lack of specific support refers to dissatisfaction with how democratic governments perform, which is related to how they react to contextual and structural challenges such as economic crisis or a global pandemic. As Lührmann (2021) emphasises, citizens' discontent with democratic governments performance can be either due to governments' actual failure to respond to challenges or the perception of their failure to do so. Consequently, democratic parties and governments which can effectively channel such frustrations and respond with policies that address the grievances of the population are a source of democratic resilience (Lührmann, 2021).

The second stage of the autocratization sequence is defined as 'Anti-pluralists rising to power.' Lührmann (2021) argues that these anti-pluralists use and intensify the existing democratic discontent to win elections. As such, anti-pluralists "claim to address democratic discontent while fuelling it" and use polarising populist rhetoric to mask their ambitions and mobilise support (Lürhmann 2021, p. 1024). The core element of populism is the claim to speak, represent and act for "the people" against an elite. Populist rhetoric effectively constructs a vertical distinction between the people and the elite and a horizontal distinction between the people *inside* and the others *outside* (Brubaker, 2017). As Brubaker (2017, p. 363) points to, the vertical distinction between "the people" and "the elite" can be intertwined with the horizontal dimension of "inside" and "outside", so that the elite can be constructed as both "on top" and as an outside group with different values and way of life than the ordinary, hard-working people. So, through fuelling discontent and claiming to protect the interests of 'the people', anti-pluralists can mobilise support, win elections and establish themselves in a position to dismantle democratic institutions (Lührmann, 2021).

The third and last stage is autocratization proper, or in other words the dismantling and replacement of democratic institutions. Lührmann's (2021) model focuses mainly on the two preceding stages, whereafter it must be supplemented by other theories. Tomini et.al (2022) call for an actor-based approach to autocratization, and Stokke & Kyaw (forthcoming) similarly emphasise a focus on how autocratization work in practice. Building on Bermeo (2016), Cassani & Tomini (2020b) define five ideal-typical modes of autocratization: (1) military intervention, (2) electoral process manipulation, (3) limitation of political liberties, (4) limitation of civil liberties, (5) weakening of horizontal accountability. These are referred to as modes or ways of autocratization but can also be understood as strategies. Defining it as a strategy rather than a mode emphasises that autocratization is driven by someone, which in

contemporary cases is most often elected leaders, and opens for an actor-based approach (Lührmann, 2021; Tomini et al., 2022).

The five ideal-type strategies can be overlapping, and Cassani and Tomini (2020b) find that processes of autocratization include a combination of different strategies. The first strategy, *military interventions*, refers to the active role of the military in an autocratization process, either by their own or a civilian leader's initiative. The second strategy of *electoral process manipulation* is defined as "all actions that directly relate to the conduct of elections", namely vertical accountability (Cassani and Tomini 2020b, p. 1542). This includes election day fraud, modifications of electoral rules, and interference and undermining of electoral management institutions. *Limitation of political liberties* refers to both violent and non-violent actions that undermine political rights such as the freedom of association and expression, which restrict public contention. The *limitation of civil liberties*, which are defined as "the non-political dimension" of life of individuals, groups, and organisations, include measures that limit, for instance, equality before law and other individual and personal autonomy rights (Cassani and Tomini 2020b, p. 1542). The last category, *weakening of executive limitations*, refers to the subversion and attack on horizontal accountability mechanisms which monitor and constrain the executive power. This relates both formal and informal measures to aggrandize the executive branch at the expense of the legislative and judiciary branch, and can include measures such as constitutional reforms, misuse of state of emergency laws and the undermining of the autonomy of state agencies (Cassani & Tomini 2020b, Lührmann & Rooney, 2020).

Dukalskis & Gerschewski (2017) point out that all political regimes need to legitimise their rule in order to stay in power, including autocracies. Following this, would-be autocrats also seek to legitimise the autocratization process they lead. The legitimacy claims, symbols and narratives can be understood as the discursive dimension of the autocratization process. What these claims consist of and the effects they have are central to understanding the success of the autocratization process and the possibilities to delegitimize it. Dukalski & Gerschewski (2017) identify four mechanisms of legitimation for autocrats: *indoctrination, passivity, performance and democratic-procedural*. The aim of the mechanisms of indoctrination and passivity is to pacify the people, while the aim of the mechanisms of performance and democratic-procedural is to create a 'good governance' pretext for the rule of the autocrat.

The last two mechanisms have been the most relevant for contemporary autocratic leaders, which might also include would-be autocratic leaders (Dukalski & Gerschewski, 2017). The performance mechanism relates to leaders who assert their ability to provide stability and revive the economy, and thus claim legitimacy through performance. This can be connected to a lack of diffuse and specific support for democracy, which create possibilities to claim the effectiveness of non-democratic means to address the grievances of the population (Lürhmann, 2021). The democratic-procedural mechanism is characterised by rulers who pledge to uphold democratic procedures and norms, and that his/her rule is in line with the will of the people. In autocratic regimes, this claim has been supported both by implementing rigged elections and other 'democratic' procedures and by upholding an image of responsiveness to people's demands and grievances. Central is the claim that the "true and unfiltered will of the people is respected", which connects with anti-pluralist leaders' claims of representing the people and bringing back "true democracy" (Dukalski & Gerschewski 2017, p. 259, Lürhmann 2021). So, legitimisation of autocratization by claiming to uphold democratic norms and procedures can thus be a continuation of the populist narrative and rhetoric of the would-be autocrat at the stage of elections.

The theory of the autocratization sequence enables the study of the causes and the onset of autocratization. Lürhmann (2021) highlights that discontentment with democratic institutions and leaders, which is connected to how governments handle exogenous shocks and citizens' grievances, is a central explanation for the rise of populists leaders with an anti-democratic agenda. By combining the sequence model with other theoretical concepts and insights, we can analyse the strategies of institutional change and legitimisation involved in autocratization.

2.2 Civil society and processes of regime change

The last section discussed the causes and drivers of autocratization, but as Tomini (2021) highlights, autocratization is contested process which also involve opponents:

> "If there is someone that drives the process of autocratization (autocratic leaders and coalitions), there is also one or more opponents of the same process: those who react, those who resist." (Tomini, 2021, p. 1198)

The focus of this thesis is on the opposition or resistance from civil society, or what Tomini et.al. (2022) define as "civic resisters". Assessments from the Freedom House and the V-Dem

project find that autocratization has been met with an increase of mass mobilisation and popular protest (Freedom House, 2021; The Economist, 2018, 2019). In countries as diverse as Poland, Malawi, Zambia and Myanmar, civil society actors have mobilised against autocratization and have been partly successful in weakening or intercepting autocratization (Bernhard, 2020; Rakner, 2021; Stokke & Kyaw, forthcoming). This highlight that autocratization is a contested and relational process involving interactions between ‘drivers’ and ‘opponents’ of autocratization, and that civil society has had important roles in opposing and resisting autocratization.

To understand the potential role and function of civil society in autocratization, what civil society is and its function and relation to regime changes will be discussed. The following section will first discuss and define the concept of civil society before it moves on to discuss the functions civil society has in different processes of regime change through Bernhard’s (2020) fourfold typology of civil society’s modalities. This provides a basis for developing an analytical toolkit to explain civil society response to autocratization in section 2.3.

2.2.1 Defining civil society

Civil society is a confusing concept with a number of different definitions and understandings. It is furthermore imbued by normative ideas and ideals, making it even more difficult to define and grasp (Edwards, 2011). Grugel & Bishop (2014, p. 136) define civil society as the arena between the state, the market, and the private sphere. In this space, people come together and act collectively to pursue common goals. The civil society is thus an arena to debate, express opinions and influence the public opinion. Civil society can also affect and contest the policies and structures of the government and state. This definition of civil society focuses on the political role and engagement of civil society, and its interactions with the state and other structures of power. Other definitions highlight other functions, such as the function of NGOs or grassroot organisations in delivering services and contributing to economic development vis-a-vis or in place of the state and market (Edwards, 2011).

The actors who populate the civil society can be individuals or groups of people who can vary from formal to informal organisational forms. Actors can include but is not limited to NGOs, grassroot organisations, labour unions, professional associations, and social movements (Bernhard, 2020). This further highlight that civil society is not monolithic and homogenous. It is not composed of one unified actor with common values and goals but rather consist of a plurality of actors with different interests, goals, organisational capacities, and influence who

coexist and at times come together (Grugel & Bishop, 2014). Civil society can therefore also be a contested space, and dividing lines within the larger society will also be reflected in the civil society (Edwards, 2011). As is further discussed below, civil society in different contexts can vary in its degree of internal tension and division.

Civil society is thus an arena where a plurality of actors and functions coexist. Civil society can have a transformative potential in holding the state accountable and pushing for fundamental political, economic, and social changes, which the next section will expand upon (Edwards, 2011).

2.2.2 Civil society's modalities

Civil society has had important functions in processes of regime changes. In the so-called third wave of democratisation, civil society had a key role in driving democratisation. The role of civil society in deepening democratisation has also been in focus for both researchers and policy makers (Stokke & Törnquist, 2013, Edwards, 2011). Bernard (2020) argues that civil society has different functions within different regimes and processes of regime change. He divides civil society into four ideal-type modalities: *(1) insurgent civil society, (2) institutionalised civil society, (3) uncivil society and (4) firewall civil society.* This typology can be used to understand the relationship between civil society and regime change and the transformative potential of civil society in different processes of regime change.

Insurgent civil society is defined as a site of resistance during autocracy. It is constituted by actors, such as labour unions, associations, and student movements, who resist authoritarian rule and, if successful, drive a process of liberalisation and democratisation. This ideal-type modality of civil society is modelled on the third wave of democratisation, including Eastern Europe in 1980-90 and the Arab Uprisings in 2010-2011 (Bernard, 2020). The transition theory which put the political elite in the driver's seat was challenged, as civil society was instrumental in pressuring the regime to democratise (Bernhard, 2020; Della Porta, 2014). Through a repertoire of strikes, demonstrations, and establishment of new channels of information and discussion, civil society actors in countries such as Poland and Hungary pressured the elites to first liberalise and through further mobilisation also democratise (Bernhard, 2020). The modality of insurgent civil society thus highlights how civil society in an authoritarian context can through contentious actions spark and drive a process of regime change from autocracy to democracy. There have been different constellations of actors in different countries, but the common thread is that a set of actors have come together in the

arena of civil society in a unified demand and struggle. So, the insurgent civil society is still characterised by a diversity of actors, but some of these are temporarily unified by a common goal of democratic change.

After a successful democratic transition, another modality of civil society can emerge, namely *institutionalised civil society* (Bernhard, 2020). This modality of civil society is defined by Bernhard (2020) as “a well-institutionalised civil society which works to enhance and support democratic institutions" (Bernhard 2020, p. 345). This definition entails two important changes from the modality of insurgent civil society. Firstly, civil society is constituted of formal organisations rather than informal social movements and networks. Secondly, civil society has a different function, namely that of *enhancing* and *supporting* democratic institutions. Within the liberal approach to civil society, participation in organisations is viewed to enhancing and supporting democratic norms and institutions, as it contributes to a political culture of values which support and uphold democratic practices and rules (Mercer, 2002; Edwards, 2011). Furthermore, the theories within the liberal tradition also focus on how institutionalised civil society ensures “the transparency, accountability and legitimacy of the state and governance” through constructive cooperation and engagement (Stokke, 2018, p. 9).

More radical approaches, on the other side, maintains that civil society enhances democratic institutions through more confrontational and contentious means. These approaches understand civil society more as a site of resistance, in which actors can either challenge or uphold hegemonic authorities and agendas (Della Porter, 2015; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Enhancement of democracy is thus a matter of confrontation with the state to ensure deeper or more radical reforms. While these two approaches differ in their views on the relation between the state and civil society, civil society can contribute to the enhancement of democracy through both confrontation and cooperation. For instance, Bernhard (2020, p. 348) points out that in some post-communist democracies, civil society had an important role in mobilising against “excessive nomenklatura elite conversion of communist-era power resources into private assets and political power in the post-communist era.” This highlights that the act of countering and mobilising against state policies and authoritarian legacies is an important part of deepening democracy. Furthermore, civil society organisations can through cooperation with the state contribute to developing new policies and laws which further enhances the democracy (Stokke & Törnquist, 2013).

The third modality as defined by Bernhard (2020) is *uncivil society.* The concept of uncivil society reflects that civil society is not inherently democratic and liberal, but can also include authoritarian, illiberal and regime-loyal actors. These actors can contribute to the erosion of democracy. Bernhard (2020) focuses on how would-be autocratic leaders and parties establishment of networks and organisations to mobilise on their behalf. Uncivil actors can also be existing organisations and movements who have anti-democratic and illiberal intentions and values. The central point is that civil society is not "[…] inherently "good" or "bad," but civil society can have a function in eroding democracy, depending on the values of those who engage in it (Berman, 2003, p. 266).

The fourth modality as defined by Bernhard (2020) is *firewall civil society.* A firewall civil society is recognized by "countermobilization by actors in the civil society in defence of and in support of democratic institutions" (Bernhard, 2020, p. 353). Firewall society is thus similar to insurgent civil society, as mobilisation and contentious actions characterises its interaction with the state. As earlier discussed, democracies have built-in accountability mechanisms which sanction actors who do not follow the rules and norms of democratic rule. Vertical accountability refers to voting ("exercise of political rights") in elections, which allows voters to withdraw their support for the government. Horizontal accountability is mechanisms designed to monitor and sanction actors which abuse their power and includes legislative oversight and controls by the judiciary and other independent institutions (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021). Firewall civil society is defined as a third mechanism of accountability, as social accountability (Bernhard, 2020) or diagonal accountability (Laebens and Lührmann, 2021). Firewall civil society as a mechanism of accountability becomes increasingly important when vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms are undermined, but it can also work together with these mechanisms when they are intact (Laebens & Lührmann 2021).

Bernhard's (2020) fourfold typology of the modalities of civil society highlights the different functions civil society can have in different regimes or processes of regime change. These modalities must, however, be understood in relation to civil society as a space with a plurality of actors and functions. A single modality of civil society can be understood as a main modality rather than the *only* modality. As such, the different modalities can coexist in the same context, as diverging parts or actors in the civil society can have different functions. Firewall civil society can thus coexist with uncivil society and institutionalised civil society. Furthermore, Bernhard's (2020) modalities highlight how parts of civil society employ different strategies towards the state at different times. Bernhard (2020) and others highlight

how firewall civil society is characterised by contentious strategies and actions towards the state. The next section will further elaborate on how to understand and analyse the dynamics of civil society response.

2.3 Civil society and resistance to autocratization

Thus, the previous discussion shows that civil society's potential to be a resister, or a firewall, against autocratization has been recognized in the literature on autocratization but few studies analyse the dynamics of civil society resistance in depth. Tomini et.al. (2022, p. 3) broadly define resistance as "any activity, or combination of activities" that constitute an "attempt at slowing down, stopping or reverting the actions of the actors responsible for the process of autocratization". The existing studies on civil society highlight that civil society resistance is a matter of creating and sustaining pressure on the regime through mobilisation and protest as well as influencing public opinion (Bernhard, 2020; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Rakner, 2021). Civil society resistance is thus also discursive, as it is a matter of interpreting and confronting the narrative and legitimacy claims of the incumbent and creating alternative narratives.

How civil society responds to autocratization can be analysed through the framework of contentious politics. This framework was developed to understand the relational dynamics of contention, and "emphasises the processes and relational dynamics of contention in a dynamic political process" (Tarrow, 2015, p. 90). Autocratization and civil society response is thus seen as evolving through in a dynamic process of interactions. How and if civil society resists autocratization is thus explained in relation to the strategies of autocratization and autocratic legitimisations efforts of the driver of the autocratization process. As such, the framework of contentious politics opens for an interactive and relational analysis to explain how civil society response to autocratization develops.

This contentious process is inherently spatial. Nicholls et.al. (2013), argue that we should not select one particular spatiality, such as place, network or scale, to view contentious action through. Instead, they argue that the different forms of spatiality must be understood as relational and interrelated. These relational spatialities shape the dynamics of civil society response but are also being produced through the strategies of civil society actors as well as the incumbent's autocratization strategies (Nicholls et.al. 2013, p. 18). Following this, the spatiality of civil society response and resistance cannot be treated as "ontologically given",

but requires studies on how actors are shaped by and construct different spatial forms and practices in different contexts (Nicholls et al., 2013).

In order to understand the capacity, strategies, discursive dimension and political influence of civil society response, the framework of contentious politics must be expanded upon with other analytical tools (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Social movements studies have formed three theoretical concepts to explain what enables collective agency and shapes movements' strategies, capacities and political influence: political space or political opportunity structures, resource mobilisation and framing (Gleiss, 2017; Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015). These have been used to analyse insurgent civil societies, or in other words the contentious episodes of democratic revolutions (Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Together these three concepts have an explanatory power which encompass how (1) the political context, (2) available and mobilised resources and (3) interpretation and framing form the response in civil society to autocratization. In the following section, I will discuss each concept while especially focusing on political space and framing.

2.3.1 Political space: Institutional structures and discourses

Political space can be defined as a material arena or as a metaphorical space (Gleiss, 2017). Political space in the metaphorical sense is defined by Gleiss (2017, p. 233) as the context-specific configuration of opportunities and restrictions" for political actors. The material and metaphorical political space is thus interrelated, as the *arena* collective action is placed in These two are interrelated, as the material space the collective actors are situated in have a specific set of opportunities and restrictions (Gleiss, 2017). Political space is thus also overlapping with the concept of political opportunity structures, as both concerns the dimensions which create possibilities and restrictions on political and collective agency.

Building on McAdam (1996), McAdam & Tarrow (2019, p. 21) define five dimensions or properties of institutional opportunity structures:

1. the multiplicity of independent centers of power within the regime
2. its openness to new actors and movements
3. the instability of current political alignments
4. the availability of influential allies or supporters
5. the extent to which the regime suppresses or facilitates collective claims

These properties highlight that a political system constitutes of both institutions and power relations, which can restricts or enables collective agency and furthermore structure the repertoire of contention of civil society actors (McAdam & Tarrow, 2019; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). These institutional structures can be changing during the process of autocratization, as for instance the regime's propensity for repression can increase and the division of power becomes more centralised into the executive branch (Cassani & Tomini, 2020a).

The political space of civil society is not only affected by formal political institutions, but also by norms, culture, traditions and political taboos (Gleiss, 2017; Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015; Polletta, 1999). Some theorists understand these dimensions as separate structures from the more formal or institutional structures and refer to these as cultural or discursive structures. Polletta (1999), however, argues that it is impossible to draw a clear line between culture, or discourse in Gleiss (2017) vocabulary, on the one side and political institutions and practices on the other side. Discourse, or culture, should rather be understood as the "symbolic dimension of all structures, institutions and practices", as existing discourses guide and constrain the actions of political elites and civil society (Polletta, 1999, p. 70-71).

Understanding civil society resistance and autocratization as a contentious process entail an interactionist and dynamic perspective on political space. Following this, the actions of the civil society actors and the response of the authorities can open some possibilities and close others, or in other words form the political space of the civil society. Gleiss (2017) highlights how the actors' activities, including discursive activities, can form and open the political space in the short term and long term. Lindekilde & Olesen (2015) emphasise that the response of the regime is central in forming a specific movement's political space as well, which can both entail new restrictions or opportunities. So, the political space of the civil society resisters is formed through the situational interaction between the regime and the involved actors together with the more stable political structures and discourses.

Following this, political opportunities are not given but are interpreted and acted upon by civil society actors. Actors interpret their political space, and act accordingly to their interpretation. So, for the opportunity to act and contest to become actual collective contestation, actors must identify the opportunity to act and further choose to act (Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015). Consequently, the theoretical concept of political space must be combined with other theoretical concept of framing and resource mobilisation to explain civil society response.

2.3.2 Framing

The concept of framing calls attention to the "meaning work" of movements and other civil society actors, and thus the communicative and interpretive aspects of political protest and mobilisation (Benford & Snow, 2000). As discussed above, for mobilisation and political protest to take place, a given situation must be interpreted and potential activists must be convinced that taking political action to change this situation is both possible and necessary. A key factor for political protest and mobilisation to take place and be successful is thus the interpretative and communicative work of civil society actors, which is defined as framing. Framing refers to the communicative and political act, while the concept of frame refers to the content of specific statements developed by civil society actors (Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015).

A frame is defined by Lindekilde & Olesen (2015, p. 82, own translation) as "linguistic (oral or written) statements which accentuate certain aspects of an empirical reality in order to create resonance and sympathy with the recipients". Frames have both the function of legitimising the activities and campaigns of civil society actors and of convincing others to join. A frame is made up of three elements, according to Benford & Snow (2000). Firstly, at the centre of the frame is its *diagnosis* which identifies a situation or a problem and delimits the problem or situation characteristics and scale. Furthermore, another central part of the diagnosis is the identification of which actors to hold responsible. Secondly, a frame must consist of a *prognosis* which proposes how the situation or problem can be resolved. The last element of *motivation* refers to that a frame must convince recipients that it is both necessary to act and possible to change the given situation.

The framing activities of civil society actors does not happen in a vacuum but are in constant interaction with its surroundings. In the public space, other actors such as the government, political parties or elements of uncivil society also present frames (Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015). These can challenge and counter elements of the frames of firewall civil society. This is defined as *counterframing* but can also be understood as the "politics of significance" (Benford & Snow, 2000). Political actors, in the state, media or civil society, seek to give meaning to the reality and mobilise, countermobilize or demobilise groups of people. In a process of autocratization, firewall civil society must thus produce frames which challenges the frames or legitimation claims of the would-be autocrat and motivates people to resist the autocratization. Furthermore, it may also include presenting an alternative prognosis to the

regime's, or in other words other democratic solutions to the problems the country faces than the leader's anti-democratic solutions.

In this struggle of framing and counterframing, civil society actors must gain *resonance* in order to mobilise (Benford & Snow 2000). Johnston & Noakes (2005,) argues that there are three main factors which explain a frame's resonance: qualities of the frame's promoter, qualities of the potential constituencies, and qualities of the frame. These three categories thus include the frame itself but also the act of framing: "the ongoing process of articulating frames" (Johnston & Noakes, 2005, p. 62). In relation to the frame's promoter, credibility and trustworthiness are key factors. Civil society actors' credibility can be attacked by both state actors and elements of the uncivil society. The qualities of potential constituencies relate to how their values, experiences and beliefs affect their perception of the frame. That the frame draws on symbols and values from the culture of the potential activists and relates to their experiences and struggles is central. Lastly, it is essential that the frame itself is concise, relevant, and culturally compatible (Noakes & Johnston 2005).

2.3.3 Resource mobilisation

Collective civil society actors must have a collection of resources and organisational networks in order to organise and mobilise people to political protests and gain ground for their political agenda. In other words, organisation and resources are essential for civil society actors to become a political force (Lindekilde & Olesen 2015). Resources are defined by Edwards et.al. (2019) as the material and non-material assets which civil society actors need to promote their political agenda. The literature on social movements has identified different categories of resources, but the original and key category is socio-organisational resources, which can also be understood as a mobilising structure (Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015; Rakner, 2021). This concept refers to the social infrastructure which is needed to engage and recruit people. This can be both formal organisations, informal grassroot networks or social relations and kinship (McAdam, 1996). This brings attention to place as a *locale* for social interactions where relations of trust and solidarity can be built and drawn upon (Nicholls et.al., 2013). Rakner (2021, p. 97) draws attention to "the inherited contexts of earlier mobilizations" against autocracy as a mobilising structure. The legacy of a pro-democracy movement can enable new mobilisations against autocratization, as organisations, activists and movements have a set of resources in the form of experience with anti-regime and pro-democracy protests and established networks and relations. Rakner's (2021) theoretical argument thus emphasises that

resources created and collected by civil society in pro-democracy insurgency can be a mobilising structure in the resistance against autocratization.

2.4 Summary: A theoretical framework

Through discussion theoretical insights from especially the emerging field of autocratization, contentious politics and social movement studies, this chapter has laid out a theoretical framework for understanding and analysing autocratization and civil society response. It has argued for an actor-centred approach to autocratization and civil society response, and for an understanding of these processes as relational, dynamic, and contentious. Autocratization and civil society response is both discursive and material, shaped by and producing relational spatialities. Furthermore, a theoretical explanation of the opportunities and restrictions on and the strategies of civil society is formed by drawing on the concepts of political space, framing and resource mobilisation.

CHAPTER 3 Methods and Methodology

In this chapter, I will outline and reflect on the methodology and methods of this research project. The aim of this chapter is to present the research design and discuss the research process in a coherent and reflexive manner to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. First, I present the research design and reflect on the chosen design. I then move on to describe the process of data collection. Here, I present the different elements of data, how they were collected and discuss the quality of the data collected. Subsequently, I will present the process of analysis, and outline the analysis strategy and practices. Lastly, I reflect on the ethical considerations and challenges in the project, including issues concerning the production of knowledge in and about a turbulent political situation and positionality.

As reflected in the theoretical framework, a foundation of this research is the understanding of reality as both material and discursive. Social reality is understood as constituted by material "facts", objects, events, and structures, and actors are actively engaged in giving meaning to these through discursive practices (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 2). This often involves a discursive struggle between regime and civil society actors. Following this, the political space of civil society actors is understood as both shaped by both material facts and discourses of regime actors, civil society actors as well as other actors. As Gleiss (2017, p. 237) puts it, how civil society actors, the issues at stake, their choice of strategy and site of action are given meaning to "may either enable or constrain bottom-up action". Furthermore, the political space, shaped by material structures and discourse, is not given, but interpreted and acted upon by civil society actors. So, this research project involves a search for the material and observable and the assigning of meaning to these. The search for both the material and discursive has guided the research process and the methodological choices, from the formulation of research questions to the choice of analysis strategy.

3.1 Research design and casing

To explore both material institutions and discursive practices, the methodological approach of this project is an extensive and interpretative qualitative case study. A case study is here defined as the study of "a single instance or a small number of instances of a phenomena in order to explore in-depth nuances and the contextual influences and explanations of that phenomena" (Baxter, 2016, p. 130). Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that:

> “[...] a scientific discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one.”
> (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 242)

The existing literature on autocratization and civil society response is characterised by quantitative research and can thus be argued to lack “exemplars”. There are few studies which analyses the contentious dynamics involved in a process of autocratization and civil society response. There is therefore a need for case studies, or ‘exemplars’ to better understand processes of autocratization and civil society response in different contexts. Tunisia, with its specific set of structures, dynamics, and history of contention, is one interesting exemplar. Tunisia is a case of (1) autocratization between gradual and abrupt change in (2) a new democracy characterised by hybridity (3) established after the Arab uprisings in which a strong movement for democracy was central. As such, exploring the case of Tunisia provides an opportunity to understand autocratization and civil society response in a new democracy that came to be through mobilisation and an insurgent civil society for democracy and dignity.

The research objectives of the project are twofold but interconnected. The first is to produce in-depth contextual knowledge about the contentious process of autocratization and civil society response in Tunisia. The second is to contribute to theory development on the contentious dynamics of autocratization and civil society response. Case studies cannot be statistically generalizable, but they can be “analytically generalizable” (Baxter 2016, p. 133). By richly theorising the case study, the contextual mechanisms and relations can be used to theorise and understand other cases of autocratization and civil society response.

So, the phenomenon explored in this research project is civil society's response to autocratization, and the site of this phenomena is Tunisia. This process is ongoing and this research project only accounts for developments up until July 2022. The analysis is sequenced in two parts: (1) the process of autocratization and (2) civil society response. With this case sequence, the contentious dynamics between the regime’s and the civil society actors can be explored. More specifically, it allows for an exploration of how the strategies and discursive practices of the driver of autocratization shape the civil society’s political space and thus also their responses. Following this sequencing, the research questions is defined as:

1 What characterises the autocratization process in Tunisia?

1.1 Which strategies have been used?

1.2 How has the autocratization been discursively legitimised?

2 What characterises and explains civil society's response to autocratization?

2.1 What characterises civil society in Tunisia?

2.2. How has the politically oriented civil society responded?

2.3 What explains the character of the response?

These research questions relate to the understanding of the discursive and material constituents of the autocratization process and civil society response. Qualitative methods are best suited to answer these questions, as these enable the exploration of both material and discursive elements, including how actors' interpretations have shaped the process of civil society response.

The research process has been cyclical rather than entirely deductive or inductive (Baxter 2016). Throughout the research process, I have moved back and forth between the 'real world' of the case and theory to build a solid analysis. The foundations of the theory and methodology have been constant, while adjustments to the theoretical framework and research questions have been made as new information has been gathered and analytical ideas have developed. As this has been a study of an unfolding process, the research process has necessarily been changed and adjusted as events have unfolded.

The choice of site and case was, as Stratford & Bradshaw (2016, p. 121) describe, both an outcome of serendipity and purpose. Throughout my studies, I have developed an interest in democratisation, contentious politics, and civil society's role in democratisation and democratic deepening, especially in the region of MENA and Tunisia. As one of the region's only formal democracies in 2020, my initial plan was to explore civil society's ability to engage in transformative democratic politics to deepen democracy in Tunisia (Stokke & Törnquist, 2013). The choice of case was however changed as political events unfolded during the summer of 2021. The political developments introduced the topic of autocratization and how civil society responded to this unfolding process. So, new political developments introduced the case of autocratization and civil society's response to autocratization in a new democracy. As such, the site and case selection evolved with new developments at the chosen site.

3.2 Data collection

As Baxter (2016, p. 134) describes, a case study of a single phenomenon involves the study of “multiple sub-units of things", or in other words multiple sources of data. In this project, a triangulation of oral, textual, and observational techniques has been used to collect multiple sources of data online and during field work in Tunisia. The data categories can be summarised as interviews, observations, and documents. The categories include both primary and secondary sources of data. A triangulation of methods has allowed me to cross-check data and find themes that were emphasised across different mediums (Stratford & Bradshaw 2016). Furthermore, different categories of data have been central to different research questions and sub-questions. This will be emphasised in the following discussion on sources of data.

Due to covid-19 restrictions, the fieldwork took place at a much later stage in the research process than initially planned. The fieldwork was originally planned to take place in the autumn of 2021 but was delayed until March-April 2022. As such, the first period of research was characterised by the collection of documents, one online and one interview in Oslo and digital observation. The second stage of in-place fieldwork was a five-week period in Tunisia from March 28th to May 3rd, 2022. Although the constant delays and insecurity of whether the fieldwork would happen was tiring, the delay had overall positive consequences. The extended period of digital fieldwork allowed me to gather greater insight into the case before entering the ‘physical’ field. This most likely resulted in a more well-guided fieldwork. Furthermore, when I arrived in Tunis, the political situation had further developed. As such, the actors had had time to reflect on the seven months that had passed since the 25th of July and the strategies and framing processes had evolved. In the following section, the data categories are presented as reflecting the sequence of the data collection process.

3.2.1 Documents

Documents is a broad category and refers to all text-based sources. The category can be further parted into four main categories: (1) newspaper articles, (2) academic research, (3) reports and articles from NGOs and research institutes, and (4) official communication from civil society actors. Firstly, I have systematically followed news coverage of the political developments in Tunisia throughout the period of research, from July 2021 to October 2022. I have used Factiva to gather international newspaper articles and the digital portal Turess to follow the Tunisian news coverage. The search functions on both Factiva and Turess,

although the Turess' function is less sophisticated, have been used to find news coverage on topics of interest by search words and phrases in French and English. The second category, academic research, has first and foremost been used to understand and analyse the democratisation process and outcome including the development and functions of civil society in Tunisia before, during and after the revolution.

The third category, reports from international and local NGOs and research institutes, has had a similar function. While academic research has been used to understand the contextual background, reports have also been used to gather data for answering the sub-question regarding the autocratization process and civil society response as new reports, briefings and articles covering the situation have been produced during the last year at a quicker rate than academic articles. I have sought to balance reports and analysis from non-Tunisians NGOs, research institutes and academics with Tunisians NGOs, research institutes and academics. The point of departure, contextual knowledge and subsequent analysis is at times divergent from international and non-Tunisian based institutes and organisations and Tunisian-based research institutes. Therefore, it has been important to locate Tunisian voices and points of views in reports and articles. This category furthermore results from the four waves of surveys in Tunisia from 2010-2021 by the Arab Barometer.

Lastly, the documents collected also include official statements and documents from civil society actors in Tunisia, which were often posted on their websites or social media channels. This category of data, together with interviews, observations, and newspaper coverage, has been central to understand civil society responses to and framings of the autocratization process.

The documents collected have been critically examined and read. Reading critically involves evaluating and interpreting the content and asking questions of who has produced the document, for which reason and how it emphasises part of the social reality. A point of departure has been to understand documents as representing different discourses or frames on the political events, the issues at stake, its causes, and solutions (Asdal, 2015). As such, documents have been central to both map the events and institutional changes of the autocratization process and how these are being presented and framed by the Tunisian state actors, civil society actors and other actors in and outside Tunisia.

3.2.2 Social media and digital data

The line between social media data and documents are overlapping, but multimedia sources here refer to types of data other than documents gathered through social media. The sources include podcasts, interviews with activists and academics on Youtube or other social platforms, speeches, pictures and videos from events such as political protests shared by civil society actors and journalists on social media. This sort of "digital observation" together with news coverage has been central to following the unfolding events in Tunisia from Oslo. It has furthermore provided data on how these events and developments were interpreted and framed by political authorities and civil society actors. Social media, primarily Facebook and Twitter, is a tool some Tunisian organisations, activists, and movements as well as Tunisian authorities use to communicate, create visibility, and engage in the public debate. As such, by observing these actors on social media I could partly map key actors' official communication, including updates on political activities and responses to unfolding political events. It is important to note that social media does not give a comprehensive view into the acts and frames of civil society actors, as the use of these platforms varies with for instance age groups and resources (Winders, 2016). Furthermore, as with reading documents, the act of critically examining what was presented, what was not presented and which agenda it served was central in the digital observation.

3.2.3 Fieldwork

I conducted fieldwork in Tunisia from March 28th to May 3rd, 2022. The field work was concentrated in the capital of Tunis but included a short stay in Sousse and a nearby village. Although the period of data collection through digital means had prepared me in many ways for the field work, being in the field and navigating the role as researcher was at times overwhelming (Sæther, 2006). I did not experience any major problems or setbacks in the field, but there were some aspects that were challenging. Firstly, four of the five weeks of fieldwork coincided with the month of Ramadan, which changes everyday and working life in Tunisia as in other majority Muslim countries. The working day and office hours are shorter during Ramadan, which prompted at times longer response time and some difficulties in reaching organisations and arranging meetings. In contrast, the evenings of Ramadan were social and vibrant, and people were welcoming and inclusive. I was invited to iftar dinners and other social events, which were great arenas for conversations and discussions. Ramadan

was therefore not experienced primarily as an obstacle, but rather as a circumstance with positive impacts.

Secondly, as a foreign-looking woman I experienced unwanted attention and some intrusive interactions in public space. This affected my feeling of safety. Because of this, I did not go to certain places and events alone and needed more 'recovery time' at home than expected (Sæther, 2006). Throughout the fieldwork, I noted observations, reflections, and puzzles in a field diary. The field diary was a tool to reflect on the field work, my role and position as a researcher and engage in data analysis. This will be further discussed in section 4.1.1 on memoing.

The short but intensive field work was central to develop a deeper contextual knowledge of the site and case. Sæther (2006) description of fieldwork as being a constant learning process felt accurate, as learning about and experiencing other parts of Tunisian everyday life created a deeper understanding about political, economic, cultural and social circumstances.

3.2.4 Sampling and reaching informants

The process of sampling informants was at times challenging and frustrating, as I was starting from scratch with few contacts in the Tunisian civil society. In the autumn of 2021, I started to establish a "wish list" of interviewees consisting of both organisations, unions, and individual activists (Clark, 2018). The criterion was being active in, having experience in or knowledge about the Tunisian civil society. The list was drawn up based on the document and multimedia analysis as well as through conversations with academics and organisations with experience in the field. Through these organisations and academics, I established some contacts within the field whom I hoped and expected to be "gatekeepers" and broker access to new informants. However, I struggled to establish meaningful contact with most of these contacts by email and phone before leaving. So, I arrived in Tunis without any planned interviews, which was both intimidating and frustrating. I developed and followed a two-folded strategy informed by Clark's (2018) advice for conducting interviews in the MENA region: (1) visiting organisations' offices and (2) contacting local journalists. This proved successful. After visits to two organisations and a meeting with a freelance journalist which gave me an extensive list of contacts, I established a network of informants and could "purposefully snowball" new informants. Once I met people in person, they were interested in talking about the subject and referred me to new contacts. A pitfall of the strategy of snowballing is to end up with a limited group of informants with similar background,

experiences, and opinions. This was something I paid attention to and sought to minimise the effect of by using the criterion and the 'wishlist' I had defined as a guidance to ask about specific people, movements, or organisations as to reflect some of the diversity of the politically-oriented civil society.

3.2.5 Interviews

The interview data is based on semi-structured interviews with 14 different informants. Two of the interviews were group interviews with two informants, and I had follow-up interviews with two of the informants. All but two interviews were conducted in English, and the last two were conducted in French. The informants were situated within and around the civil society in Tunisia and can be parted into the categories of civil society organisation (CSO) professionals (4 informants), activists (3 informants), journalist (2 informant), experts (2 informants) and non- political engaged (3 informants). Two of the activists were engaged in the Citizens Against the Coup campaign, with one being a central member and front figure, and the last was as an activist in the organisation of Alert. The NGO professionals worked in the organisations of IWatch, Al Bawsala and Jamaity. One of the expert informants had worked with UGTT (the major labour union) and ATFD (Association of Tunisian Democratic Women) and one had among other things been part of a research project on the national dialogue process of 2014. One of the journalists worked in the webzine Inkyfada while the other was a freelancer. Both journalists also partly identified as activists. Due to concerns of safety, some of the informants will only be referred to by their code and category and some by their organisational affiliation as well (see Table 3.1.). This is based on the preferences of the informants.

I developed one general interview guide with broader themes and questions, but each interview also included specific questions to the informant. The questions were formed to allow the informant to (1) give information about their own or their organisations, movement or own work and activism and (2) open for reflections on the years of democracy, the autocratization process and the role of civil society in Tunisia. The semi-structured nature of the interviews gave the informants the possibility to talk about what they considered important, while also covering some predetermined themes. Some of the interviews followed a more structured form, while others were more loosely organised conversations. The interviews gave insight into the decisions and dynamics of the civil society as well as a deeper understanding about the various views and positions in the Tunisian civil society. Importantly,

Table 3.1 – Informants

Code	Category	Place
Informant 1	Non-politically engaged	Oslo
Informant 2	Expert	Online
Informant 3	CSO professional	Tunis
Informant 4	Journalist	Tunis
Informant 5	Journalist	Tunis
Informant 6	Activist	Tunis
Informant 7	Expert	Tunis
Informant 8	Non-politically engaged	Tunis
Informant 9	Non-politically engaged	Tunis
Informant 10	Activist	Tunis
Informant 11	Activist	Tunis
Informant 12	CSO professional	Tunis
Informant 13	CSO professional	Tunis
Informant 14	CSO professional	Tunis

they gave insight into *why* civil society actors responded as they did as well as the assumptions and interpretations which influenced these decisions. While documents and social media gave provides the official 'on stage' communication, interviews and observations were critical in understanding how this official communication was formed.

3.2.6 Recording and transcribing

Two of the interviews were audio-recorded with the UiO Diktafon app, while most of the interviews were recorded by notetaking only. Notetaking was a two-stage process, as I reconstructed the notes taken during the interviews into a comprehensive transcript immediately after the end of the interview (Dunn, 2016). The limited use of audio recording was due to ethical considerations. The topics addressed in the interview were sensitive given the political circumstances of autocratization, including an increase in arrests and trials against political opponents of Saied (Amnesty, 2021a). I was therefore unsure of whether to ask to record, as I was afraid that it could undermine the rapport of the relationship and restrain the informant from speaking freely. I decided on whether to ask to record based on my knowledge of the vocality of the informant, physical and verbal clues, and the experienced rapport of the relationship. The lack of audio recordings of most interviews may have led to

the loss of some pieces of information. However, it may also have opened up for a freer conversation. Furthermore, informants were responsive when I opted for calling or messaging for clarification in cases of missing or unclear information. In contrast to Dunn (2016), my experience was that the pauses which could arise from the lag of writing gave the informants some time to think, which often led to new information and insight rather than undermining the rapport and flow of the conversation.

3.2.7 Observing, doing, talking

In addition to formal interviews, the fieldwork was also filled with observing, socialising, and talking. As Kearns (2016, p. 318) notes, observation involves "strategically placing oneself in situations in which systematic understandings of place are most likely to arise". Due to concerns of my own safety, I did not participate in protests and demonstrations. I participated in one event for local and small-scale NGOs arranged by the organisation IWatch and spent time "hanging out" in offices before and after interviews. Furthermore, I had countless conversations in informal contexts such as at iftar dinners and over coffee with people both active and not active in the civil society. This contributed greatly to building contextual knowledge.

Kearns (2016) defines three purposes of observation: counting, complementing, and contextualising. In this project, the purpose of observation has been closest to that of complementing the other strategies of data collection to gain more information about the case. This does not mean, however, that observation was a lesser form of data. Engaging in conversations and observing the surroundings gave valuable insight in Tunisian politics and life. It furthermore gave insight into to the experiences and point of views of a wider set of people than just the informants I interviewed. My visible position as a foreigner often prompted people to explain and give their view on Tunisian history, culture, and politics to me. It also gave me a 'free pass' to ask simple or politically sensitive questions. The scope and depth of observing, doing, and talking were limited by my lack of fluency in Arabic, although my knowledge of French and the presence of people who spoke English helped bridge the language barrier. As reflected above, regards of safety also limited the spaces I moved and placed myself in. Observations were noted down in the field diary and treated as data.

3.3 Assessing data quality

Assessing the quality of the data is a vital step in ensuring the rigour of the research, including the transferability and validity of the analysis (Stratford & Bradshaw, 2016). In this section, I will reflect on some challenges which arose during the data collection and reflect on how that has affected the quality of the data.

3.3.1 Language barriers

The language barrier has been challenging and affected the collection of data in several ways. As earlier mentioned, I have a very basic knowledge of Arabic and a slightly more advanced knowledge of French. Because of this, Tunisian media and some of the official communication from CSOs in Arabic have been difficult to access. To bridge this gap, I have both used digital translation programs and asked acquaintances for help with translation. Furthermore, the use of French is widespread in Tunisian media and CSOs communication, which have limited the extent of the language barrier.

The language barrier was felt during the fieldwork and prompted some difficulties in contacting potential informants, conducting interviews and observing. As discussed in section 2.7, the method of observing was partly limited by the lack of fluency in Arabic and French. However, I sought to be and was often accompanied by someone who spoke English who helped with translation and bridging the language barrier. Before entering the field, I was prepared to use a translator in interviews. I ended up not using a translator, as most of the informants spoke English. The two interviews in French were planned to be conducted with a translator. Due to postponements and unforeseen events, I ended up conducting the interviews alone. My lack of fluency in French did lead to some misunderstandings and some details and nuances were lost on me, which might have been frustrating for the informants. However, it also created a sense of cooperation in the interview situation as we were both invested in developing a common understanding. By choosing to carry through with the interviews, I gained more data than if I had cancelled. This reflects a general characteristic of the fieldwork. The language barrier has limited the scope and depth of data collected during the fieldwork, but the fieldwork has overall been characterised by a mutual commitment and interest in sharing information and perspectives across the language barrier.

3.3.2 Reaching the point of saturation

The Tunisian civil society is, as all social phenomena, unlimited in its complexity and diversity. The arena of civil society includes a magnitude of different actors, and it is neither a possibility nor an aim to represent the full diversity in qualitative interviews and observations (Stratford & Bradshaw, 2016). The aim with the fieldwork was to gain insight into the opinions, experiences, and interpretations of politically engaged actors in the Tunisian civil society as to understand the responses to autocratization and how these responses have been shaped. It was therefore important to include actors who had different responses to the autocratization process, as it was clear on beforehand that civil society actors were divided in their response. The interviews and conversations cover actors who have responded differently, which is a clear strength as it enables an analysis of how the reasoning and interpretations have differed and shaped responses. Furthermore, the collected data was especially rich regarding the dynamics, strategies, and interpretations of politically engaged CSOs and the Citizens Against the Coup movement. I have therefore chosen to use these actors, politically engaged CSOs, as the vantage point in the analysis on civil society response. As such, other actors within the civil society, such as the major union UGTT and the more informally organised social movements, are analysed from the vantage point of these actors.

Due to the unlimited complexity in the Tunisian civil society and politics more broadly, deciding when the point of saturation had been reached was difficult. There were several actors on my ‘wishlist’ that I had not spoken to and complexity to unpack when I left Tunisia. This made leaving the field and entering out of the phase of data collection difficult. However, due to the time and resource constraints of a master project, I decided to work with the data I had collected, which was rich and varied. When encountering shortcomings or discrepancies in data, I opted for complementing these by inquiring documents and returning to my informants rather than conducting new interviews. This points to the strength of the triangulation of methods, as it enables complementation of data by inferring different types of sources. Furthermore, the political situation continued to evolve after I left the field. In July, the referendum on a new constitution was accompanied by a new actors and strategies of resistance from the civil society. As I was able to collect data on this development through digital observation, documents, and conversations, I opted for including this period in the analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

The analysis strategy can be described as a theoretically focused thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theoretically guided analysis strategy has been supplemented by inductive-f memoing and coding throughout the research process as new themes have emerged. As the research questions also inquire discursive struggle and interpretation, the thematic analysis strategy has parallels to discursive analysis. Following Phillips and Jørgensen (2002, p. 6), the aim with discourse analysis is "to find out how the world (or aspects of it) is ascribed meaning discursively and what social consequences this has.". The assigning of meaning and its consequences have been analysed through concepts such as 'framing', 'legitimisation claims' and 'discursive struggle'.

The thematic analysis has used the theoretical framework and concepts as a starting point for analysis. In analysing the autocratization process, the five types of autocratization strategies together with the concepts on autocratic legitimisation, including legitimation narratives and procedures, have served as broad themes or starting points. Furthermore, Lührmann's (2021) model on the autocratization sequence has guided the structuring of the analysis. The analysis of civil society response has used the theoretical concepts on contentious tactics, political space, framing and their related sub-concepts. These theoretical concepts, or themes, are flexible. Most of them can be understood as analytical tools rather than bounded themes. This has allowed for emerging themes to be explored and analysed.

Analysis has been an ongoing process throughout this research project, rather than a fixed stage following the data collection. The process of analysis can be parted into two phases. The first phase stretched from September 2021 to July 2022 and concerned data collection and initial analysis, with the most intensive phase in the spring. The second phase stretched from July to deadline in October and was centred on analysis and writing. In the two phases, I made use of two different practices to make sense and analyse the collected data.

3.4.1 Memoing: Making sense and developing themes

The practice of writing memos has been an important part of analysis throughout the data collection period, as part of the process of *making sense of the data* (Cope, 2016; Glesne, 2006). Memos is here synonymous with field notes, and it has been used to record events, observations, and conversations during the entire research process. Memoing has furthermore been "an interpretive practice", as it has been a tool to explore and find themes and patterns in

the data (Cope 2016, p. 375). In the first phase of digital data collection, memoing could for instance entail noting down an event as recorded in a newspaper and reflecting on its meaning in relation to the existing data and theoretical concepts. In the second phase of data collection, the fieldwork, memoing was an important tool to note down emerging themes in interviews and observations. This included writing an analytical log to all transcribed interviews, which was a first step to find and develop emerging themes. Through memoing, I have recorded findings and first-hand analysis which have been expanded upon in the process of writing up the analysis. As such, memoing has been an important tool to familiarise myself with the data and start to identify themes.

3.4.2 Coding and writing up

In the final stage of the research project, which was focused on analysis and writing up the research, I used coding to organise, synthesise and link the different forms of data. Coding was not primarily a way to explore the data, but rather to synthesis and link themes across the different categories of data (Cope, 2016). The codes were a combination of the theoretical concepts and the themes emerged in memos. A manual coding system was developed and deployed, where the key documents and transcripts of interviews were coded manually. Coding was not employed to the whole set of data, but rather to the interviews as well as some key documents, including academic articles and research institute and NGO reports.

Lastly, writing up and structuring the chapters is also an important practice of analysis and synthesising. Through writing, themes and the connections between theoretical concepts and contextual phenomena were explored and analytical ideas further developed. Still, writing up is also a daunting task, as is it a practice of selecting how to present the phenomena in a meaningful and representative way (Mansvelt & Berg, 2016). This will be further discussed in the following section.

3.5 Considerations on research ethics and positionality

This research project is situated in a politically sensitive field, as the evolving autocratization process seems to place activists and critical voices more at risk. My ethical responsibilities towards the informants have therefore been especially significant. In this section, I discuss how the safety of informants have been attended to through different safeguarding mechanisms. Reflecting Dowling (2016), qualitative research is a social process and thus involves questions of power and positionality. Following this, I also discuss how my

positionality as a researcher has affected the research process, the relations with the informants and reflect on the production of knowledge.

3.5.1 Researching in political turmoil: Data privacy and informants' safety

As earlier mentioned, the evolving process of autocratization in Tunisia made the safety of the informants a central concern in the research process. To secure the safety of the informants, I implemented some safeguarding mechanisms. One strategy is already discussed in section 2.7, namely safeguarding the anonymity of informants by only referring to their category and not give other information that could identify the informants. The project has been reported to and approved by NSD, and I have followed their guidelines for ethical research procedures and storage of sensitive data. All interview and observational data have been stored in Lagringshotellet, and I have used UiO's Diktafon app for recording. I have also been careful to use secure apps for communication with informants. Furthermore, I have gone over what the themes and aims of the research project are, how the information from the interviews is included into the research project, and the procedures to safeguard their anonymity to obtain an informed consent from all informants.

3.5.2 Positionality and relations in the field

The researcher's experiences, background and political views influences the research at the different stages of the research process, from choice of case and theoretical framework to fieldwork and analysis (Glesne, 2006). The notion of positionality captures this, as it refers to how research is influenced by the background of the researcher. As I had not been involved in Tunisian civil society before the start of this research project, my position can be described as an outsider (Dowling,2016). The position as an outsider brings both advantages and challenges. As earlier reflected, the outsider role gave me freedom to ask basic and politically sensitive questions which was helpful to understand the context I was navigating in. The position also posed some challenges in accessing informants, as I had little prior network to involve.

Qualitative research involves interactions between people in different positions (Dowling, 2016). These different positions also entail that power relations are part of the research process. These relations are never fixed and can change during the process or in different contexts. My position as an outsider and as a novice in the role of researcher often produced relations where the informants were in the position of power, as they had greater expertise in

the field (Sæther, 2006). The relations with the informants can nevertheless be characterised as equal overall and never uncomfortable. The only experienced effect was that interviews often lasted longer than expected as informants wanted to "talk me through the field", as Fagervold (2021, p. 22) puts it.

The outside position was more acutely felt when I moved to the stage of analysis and writing. As I had only spent limited time in the field and talked and engaged with people in a language that was neither native to myself nor the informants, I questioned my ability to analyse and represent the case and people involved. The role of being the "knowledge producer" was daunting (Dowling, 2016). Making use of check-in procedures with the research community and the participant community has been one way of navigating this insecurity. During and after the fieldwork, I discussed both themes, issues, and conflicting information with some of my informants to check my interpretations. Checking in with the research community has also been central to discuss and check both my analysis and my research practice. These check-in procedures can be understood as part of the practice of critical reflexivity. During the entire process, I have attempted to critically reflect on how my position and other factors can have affected the research process and the data collected. The practice of memoing and engaging in conversations with the informant and research community have been central practices in this regard (Dowling, 2016).

3.5.3 Practice and research: Producing knowledge

Producing knowledge about situations of political turmoil can have great consequences for the people affected. We as research must therefore be "intentional, reflective and explicit about the goals, potential impacts, and responsibilities" of our work (Beck et.al. 2022, p. 188). My research has been guided by a goal of producing knowledge that can be used to resist and revert processes of autocratization in Tunisia and elsewhere. I furthermore strongly belief that social-democratic and leftist politics are needed to redress and reform unjust political and economic systems in Tunisia and elsewhere. Being interested in a normative outcome of successful resistance and transformative democratic reforms have to me not conflicted with conducting rigorous research. It has rather been a source of motivation and a shared purpose which have given me meaningful contact and cooperation with the informant community I have engaged with.

Still, striking the balance between being a critical interrogator that represent shortcomings and contradictions while also endorsing the cause of democratic revival in Tunisia has not been

without challenges. The most difficult part of this research project has been to represent Tunisia and the civil society response in a nuanced manner; not as ‘yet another failed case of democracy in the Arab world’, but still present contradictions and fault lines in the Tunisian civil society. I have sought to describe and explain how civil society actors work and act within the restrictions imposed on them in a meaningful and representative way, which hopefully can contribute to research on resistance to autocratization in Tunisia and elsewhere.

3.6 Concluding reflections

This chapter has outlined the research design, strategies of data collection data, assessed the quality of data and discussed the conflicts and challenges the data collection and analysis are shaped by. By discussing limitations and challenges during the process of research as well reflecting on my role as a researcher, I have sought to account for the potential flaws and biases in this research project in an open and reflexive manner. The aim of this chapter has been to present the research in a rigorous manner and leave the research process open to scrutiny and discussion.

CHAPTER 4 The process of autocratization

The objective of this chapter is to understand how the autocratization process has unfolded. Drawing on Lührmann (2021), the process of autocratization is understood as sequenced, where the onset of autocratization follows from a period of political developments and events which weaken the resilience of the democratic political system. Thus, the chapter will first address the events and processes in the period after the revolution which have led to (1) diminishing popular support for democratic institutions and (2) rise of anti-pluralist political actors and sentiments. I then move on to the onset of autocratization. Here, I employ an actor-focused approach and account for the strategies of autocratization used by Saied and his accomplices to transform the political system. Arguing that autocratization is also a discursive process in which the actors leading the autocratization must legitimise their right to do so, I discuss how President Saied has sought to legitimise the autocratization process through a combination of populist rhetoric, revolutionary symbolism, and 'democratic' procedures.

As such, this chapter answers the first research question about what characterises the autocratization process, what strategies are used and how it has been discursively legitimised in Tunisia. In other words: What has happened politically and how this is legitimised by the driving actor(s)? The chapter conclude by drawing some comparative lessons about the case of autocratization in Tunisia as a new democracy and discuss how it can be described as both gradual and swift.

4.1 Discontentment with the new democracy

4.1.2 Revolutionary demands: Political and economic change

In the revolution, the demand for political change was intertwined with the demand for socio-economic change. They were unified in the key slogan of "dignity". Dignity entailed both to live in freedom without repression and to live in safety with the opportunity to provide for oneself and one's family. There was a coupling of regime change and socio-economic improvement, and the move away from autocracy to democracy was viewed as a means for improving the social and economic situation. The Tunisian understanding of democracy can thus be described as an instrumental understanding, as democracy is a means to an end. It can also be viewed as an understanding which goes beyond the minimalist procedures and institutions of an electoral democracy (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021). Although exactly how

democracy would manifest was not clearly articulated, the demands and aspirations of Tunisians went far beyond electoral democracy to also include issues of wealth (re)distribution, corruption and transitional justice (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021). This was clearly reflected in the Arab Barometer Survey conducted in 2011 in which 27% expressed that "democracy is the opportunity to change the government through elections" while 22% defined it as "providing basic items (such as food, housing and clothing) to every individual" and 21% expressed that democracy must be focused on "narrowing the gap between rich and poor". So, a central challenge for the new democratic governments were to address the socio-economic grievances of Tunisians to "create the conditions of a dignified life for all" (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021). In short, in the new democracy, political transformation had to be coupled with economic reform and redistribution (Arouri et al., 2019).

Before the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019, the socio-economic situation of Tunisians had not changed. The comparison of pre- and post-2011 indicators on social and economic matters is a difficult exercise due to the Ben Ali regime's falsifying efforts aimed at upholding an image of Tunisia as an economic miracle (Cavatore & Haugebølle, 2012). Still, indicators on matters such as unemployment, regional inequality and access to public services show that the economic and social situation in Tunisia had not improved significantly since the revolution. Unemployment was at the same levels as before the revolution, with national unemployment at 15% and close to 34% for youths in the age group of 15-24 in 2019 (Hibou et al., 2011; OECD, 2022). Thus, lack of meaningful employment, particularly for youth and university graduates, was still an unresolved issue in Tunisia's new democracy. Although poverty levels had slightly decreased since the revolution, regional inequalities were persisting and in fact growing (Meddeb, 2020). The lack of access to public services as well as other necessities such as electricity and clean water were still a major issue in the South and North-West regions in 2019.

Thus, the socio-economic grievances which were central to the revolution were unchanged in 2019. This gave rise to a growing discontent with the performance of the democratic governments and democratic institutions. The responses to the Arab Barometer in 2018 show a decrease in trust in democratic institutions such as political parties, the government, and parliament in comparison with responses in 2011 and 2015. In 2018, 72% of the Tunisians did "not at all" trust political parties, 62% expressed equal distrust of parliament and the corresponding figure for government was 58%. Furthermore, in 2018, less than one in five Tunisians thought that the government did "a good job" to create jobs, limit inflation and

reduce inequality (Arab Barometer, 2019) . These numbers highlight the growing dissatisfaction with the performance and function of democratic institutions. Tunisians at large did not perceive the elected politicians to be responsive to their grievances or engaged in the pursuit of enabling a dignified life for all (Chomiak, 2019). The dissatisfaction with the socio-economic situation and the government's efforts to improve it was also expressed through protests campaigns and movements in civil society. Protests over socio-economic grievances, in the form of demonstrations, blockages and occupations surged after 2014 to become "a constant feature of everyday life" in Tunisia, according to Vatthauer & Weipert-Fenner (2017, p. 13). Through engaging in movements and protesting, Tunisians demanded job creation, redistribution, social security, and voiced frustration over the political leadership. The survey responses and the protests show that the level of *specific* support was low before the 2019 election, as Tunisians blamed the political elite for the lack of improvement of the social and economic situation.

4.2.2 Neoliberal policies and conservative consensus

The political leadership in the new democratic system has operated in difficult conditions. The post-revolution government inherited an economic and social system characterised by neoliberal politics and cronyism which created large inequalities and "distanced the citizens from the state" (Chomiak, 2019). This legacy and the chaotic aftermath of the revolution have affected the capacity of the post-revolution governments to effectively address socio-economic grievances. Still, the lack of socio-economic progress and responsiveness of governments cannot solely be explained by external conditions. The post-revolution period has been characterised by two interrelated traits of government which have been detrimental to substantive economic and political reforms: (1) the continuation of economic governing of the Ben Ali era and (2) consensus-driven politics. The Ben Ali regime was characterised as a "good pupil" of international finance institutions due to its commitment to neoliberal structural reforms (Chomiak & Parks, 2021). The neoliberal reforms were coupled with- with crony capitalism leading to stark inequality and effectively barring the unconnected from the market. This produced the grievances which drove the revolution. The policies enacted after the revolution can be characterised as a continuation of the neoliberal "dogma" of the Ben Ali era. In 2013, the first post-revolution government, the Troika, took at a loan of 2.6 billion dollars from the IMF, which started a cycle of dept to be solved by requesting new loans from IMF, which all subsequent governments have done (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021). Between 2010 and 2019, Tunisia's external debt doubled from 49% to 85% of GDP.

Thus, instead of initiating a public debate to address the aspirations and grievances of Tunisians and pass inclusive and redistributive economic reforms, the post-revolution government have passed economic management to technocrats and international agencies. As Parks & Kahlaoui (2021) describe, the first decision to take out an IMF loan was perhaps unavoidable due to the circumstances of social and economic instability and Western countries lack of commitment to "pledges to fund the new democracy". This raises a question of the capacity of Tunisian governments to form a new social and economic agenda under the burden of debt and conditional clauses of the IMF loans. The effect of the continuation of neoliberal and technocratic management of the economy is in any case clear: Tunisian citizens' demand for dignity and a new economic agenda has not been met by post-revolution governments.

The continuation of neoliberal and technocratic management of the economy speaks to the distance between Tunisians' aspirations and priorities and political parties and elites political decisions. A central trait of the post-2014 political system has been consensus-driven politics (McCarthy, 2019; Grewal & Hamid, 2020). While the national dialogue in 2013-14 was decisive to secure social peace as well as public deliberation on a new constitution, the dialogue itself and its ramifications have also been viewed as elite-pacting hindering deeper reforms and distancing the political elite from the demands and grievances of the citizens (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021; Chomiak, 2019). Nida Tounes, the umbrella party that gathered industrialists, labour representatives, secular CSO members and former regime elements, was established on the ground of their rejection of Ennahda's position and ability to rule. The rejection of Ennahda and Islamism together with providing security were the central themes in their 2014 election campaign, and the party also vowed to not collaborate with Ennahda (McCarthy, 2019; Zemni, 2015). As Nidaa Tounes won the parliamentary and presidential election, they reneged that promise and invited the runner-up Ennahda to join their government in the name of consensus. Thus, this was a counterintuitive alliance, and the policies implemented in the legislative period strengthened the perception of political pacting to secure the interests of elites rather than ordinary Tunisians (Interviews 7, 5; Marzouki, 2015).

While in government, Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda together with smaller political parties engaged in several consensus deals which halted the economic and political reforms needed to deepen and substantiate democracy. This included introducing and renewing a state of emergency law which restricted the right to protest and lead to an increase in police brutality.

Furthermore, an economic reconciliation law passed granted amnesty to public officials and business partners who had engaged in economic corruption during the Ben Ali era. The 2017 law effectively curtailed the work of the Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD) which had gathered testimonies of state violence and corruption under the Ben Ali era to bring to court and provide transitional justice (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021; Miller 2019; Interview 3). It furthermore signalled a lack of commitment to fighting corruption, which Tunisians saw as a deepening issue which the government needed to tackle (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021). Marzouki (2015) points out that Ennahda's choice to join and support the Nidaa Tounes-led government must be viewed in relation to their history of harsh repression and the 2013 coup in Egypt. The fear of being excluded, or even repressed, yet again gave way to a tactic of "risk aversion" (Marzouki, 2015, para. 1; Mcarthy, 2019). This gave way to compromise and docility in a coalition instead of taking the role as the political opposition in parliament, which distanced the party from many of its supporters and members.

As for Nidaa Tounes, their commitment to substantiating the democracy with socio-economic and political reforms was seemingly only symbolic (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021). More than half of Nidaa Tounes legislatures, including the leader and president Essebi, had been members of the ruling party in the authoritarian era, and several figures were linked to state violence and corruption in the authoritarian era. Furthermore, Nidaa Tounes members had privileged connections with business elites, the old media configurations, and the police (Marzouki, 2015). Their slogans on 'security' and 'stability' also shows that the central concern was securing stability rather than deep-seated change. Thus, the governments led by Nidaa Tounes in this period respected and worked within a liberal democratic framework but made little to no effort to further substantiate the democracy. The 2014-2019 period was as such characterised by political parties engaged in consensus-driven politics that seemed detached from the aspirations and grievances of many Tunisians. This led to a widespread interpretation of political parties and the government as corrupted and engaged in "rotten compromises" to secure their own interests and positions (Marzouki 2015, para. 20).

Thus, the new political order, democracy, was viewed as means to satisfy the social and economic objectives that the last political order had failed to fulfil. Grugel & Bishop (2014) aptly argue that democratic governments base their legitimacy on being representative and accountable to the people they represent. This includes that they must be seen to be responsive to people's demands and to act in their interest, which in Tunisia has been centred around social and economic progress and redistribution. For a large part of the Tunisian

people, the democratic governments of the last decade have not been experienced as representative and accountable. They have instead been viewed as fostering pacts which have largely been detached from the concerns and demands that Tunisians fought for in the revolution (Meddeb, 2020; Marzouki, 2015; Parks & Kahloui, 2021). This has given rise to a rapid decrease of specific support to democratic parties and institutions which was expressed in the 2019 parliamentary and presidential elections.

4.2 The 2019 protest elections: Rise of outsiders and populists

The 2019 elections thus came at a time when a large part of the Tunisian population was discontent with its political representatives and the parties they presented. This set the stage for political outsiders with a populist and anti-democratic rhetoric and agenda.

In the parliamentary elections, the established parties lost votes and new parties and candidates were elected to parliament. Ennahda lost seats and the share of popular vote but became the largest party with 52 seats (Grewal & Hamid, 2020). As established parties lost votes, new political parties and candidates were elected. These new political parties included the Free Destourian Party (PDL) and the Karama Coalition, an Islamist and conservative party. PDL and its leader Abir Moussi promoted an anti-revolution agenda, in which nostalgia for the stability, secularism and strong state of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras was a central rallying point. The Karama Coalition was the first Islamist party to be elected to parliament other than Ennahda. The party has a more hard-line and conservative Islamist political agenda than Ennahda, who had rebranded themselves as a moderate Muslim party (Wolf, 2019). So, the parliamentary elections introduced new and anti-liberal political parties and figures who further polarized parliament.

The candidates of the established political parties were challenged and beaten by two candidates from outside of party politics in the first round of the presidential election: Nabil Karoui and Kais Saied. Nabil Karoui was not an unknown figure in Tunisia prior to the elections. He was a media mogul and owner the TV-channel Nessma TV (Meddeb, 2020). He had also been active in the establishment of the Nidaa Tounes party. By 2019 he had joined a new political party, Qalb Tunis (Heart of Tunisia), which won 38 seats in the parliament (Grewal & Hamid, 2020). He furthermore led the charity Khalil Tounes which were engaged in poverty relief in Tunisia's poorer inland regions from 2016 and onwards. His charitable actions provided him with an important base of supporters, but his campaign was haltered by

his incarceration from late August to October on charges of money laundering (Wolf, 2019; Interviews 5, 7, 13).

Kais Saied, an independent candidate without party affiliation, won over Karoui in the second round of elections with 70% of the votes and thus became Tunisia's third democratically elected president. Saied was a retired teacher on constitutional law at the University of Tunis and gained support from especially higher educated yet unemployed youth through his campaigning on youth empowerment and decentralisation (Chomiak, 2019; Meddeb, 2020). At the core of his campaign was a populist rejection of the political system and elite which he claimed did not represent the people and fulfil the demands of the revolution. He campaigned for a new, decentralised system of 'direct democracy'. In his electoral campaign, Saied successfully tapped into Tunisians' frustrations by building a narrative of a new revolutionary change which discursively challenged the recently established democracy (Interview 7; Chomiak, 2019; Wolf, 2019).

So, the 2019 elections can be characterised as a protest election in which a large percentage of Tunisians used their democratic rights to reject the status quo of the last eight years (Interview 3). The 2019 election did not, however, present a break to a new form of redistributive politics in contrast to the last period. The parliament became more fragmented and polarized, at times even degenerating to physical altercations in the chamber between the Karama Coalition and the PDL (Wolf, 2020). The state of parliament and the conduct of the elected candidates became an object of public ridicule in media and social media in Tunisia, which further cemented the view of the parliament and its members as uninterested in solving the problems of Tunisians (Interviews 5; 7). The period after the election up until July 2021 was marked by political chaos, conflict, and deadlock while the covid-19 pandemic aggravated the economic crisis and simultaneously introduced new troubles. In 2020, Tunisia's external debt rose to 86% of its GDP, the economy had a negative growth rate of 6.5% and official unemployment rose to above 19%. Furthermore, lockdowns and restrictions hindered the function of the informal sectors of the economy which many Tunisian rely on, leaving yet more people in precarious conditions (Chomiak, 2021). Tunisia had the highest number of covid-19 deaths in Africa during the spring and summer of 2021 (ILO & ERF, 2022). The great toll of covid-19 was largely due to extensive deficits in the Tunisian health system and a leadership characterised by deadlock and conflict.

Specifically, conflict had been escalating between President Saied on the one hand and prime minister Hichem Mechici and Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi, also speaker of parliament, on the other. Saied blocked a parliament reshuffle and the parliament's efforts to appoint judges on uncertain constitutional grounds (Reuters, 2021a). There were proposals of a new national dialogue to resolve the political deadlock, but the political parties and president could neither agree on the conditions nor the actors to be involved. So, with the background of these interconnected crises, social unrest and political protest grew across the country. The protests were to a large degree blaming the parliament and government and demands for the suspension of parliament gathered some momentum. The days before the 25th of July were marked by growing protests that turned violent in several cities. In light of these developments, Saied launched extensive emergency measures on the evening of the 25th (Meshkal, 2021a).

4.2 Strategies of autocratization

Autocratization is carried out by single or collective actors, and in contemporary cases of gradual autocratization the central actor is commonly the incumbent leaders or political parties (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). These actors utilize a set of strategies to transform institutions in a more autocratic direction. Building on Bermeo (2016) and Cassani & Tomini (2020b) theorising on the strategies of autocratization, the next section will analyse the strategies Saied has employed to transform democratic institutions in Tunisia since the 25th of July.

4.2.1 Executive aggrandisement through emergency measures

Over the last year, President Saied has used several measures to subvert horizontal accountability mechanisms and aggrandize the presidential branch, starting with the implementation of state of emergency measures and ending with constitutional reform. With the implementation of emergency measures in July, strengthened and extended in September, he introduced powers used to rewrite the constitution. The new constitution establishes institutions of horizontal accountability, but their actual checks on the executive power is extremely weak. In this section, I map how executive aggrandisement through state of emergency laws and constitutional reform has undermined horizontal checks on power.

The first and central attack of horizontal accountability mechanisms was on the 25th of July, Tunisia's republic day, when Saied announced on national television the introduction of new

state of emergency measures. This announcement came after days of sporadically violent protest around the country, and the growing political, economic and health crisis as described above. In any case, Tunisia had officially been in a state of emergency since a terrorist attack on the presidential guard in 2015 (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021). The measure had been renewed a number of times, most recently by President Saied at the end of 2020 (Al Jazeera, 2020). The measures in place before the 25th granted the security forces exceptional powers, including that to stop meetings and gatherings, as well as impose curfews and restrictions on media organisations to name but two (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021).

Thus, on the 25th of July, Saied issued Presidential Decree 69 which suspended the parliament for 30 days, lifted the immunity of MPs and dismissed Minister Hichem Mechchi and most of his Cabinet. In the emergency declaration he also gave himself, as President, all executive power. The Tunisian state of emergency law gives the president:

> "[…] in the event of imminent danger threatening the nation's institutions or the security and independence of the country, […]" the powers to "[…] take any measures necessitated […]" (Article 80, English translation from Constitute Project, 2014, p. 19).

The vagueness of the state of emergency law and the presence of a public health sector dysfunction, a looming economic crisis, and the partly violent protests of the day gave pretext for the introduction of emergency measures (Interview 7; Meshkal, 2021a).

The state of emergency law gives the President extraordinary powers in the event of a crisis, but it also contains some constraints and horizontal accountability mechanisms. Firstly, the parliament must be in continuous session throughout the state of emergency period. So, the temporarily suspension of parliament was illegal. Furthermore, it was set to last for 30 days, but on August 23, Saied extended the emergency measures until further notice. A second check on executive power within the state of emergency law is the role of the Constitutional Court. The members of parliament can ask a Constitutional Court to deliberate on whether circumstances justify continuation of the emergency measures. However, the Constitutional Court had never been in session as the parliament members had not assembled the majority needed to confirm members of the Court. As such, parliament members could not make use of an important judicial check on the suspension of parliament or the continuation of the emergency powers in August. Thus, the continuation of President Saied's emergency powers went unchecked as the legally defined institutional checks were absent (Yerkes & Alhomoud, 2022).

On the 22nd of September, Saied issued a new presidential decree which continued the measures taken on the 25th and introduced new, illegal emergency measures which further weakened the horizontal checks on executive power. The presidential decree extended the state of emergency and partly suspended the constitution. Only the preamble, the first and second chapters of the Constitution, which consist of general principles, human rights, and freedoms, were to be kept in their entirety while "[…] constitutional provisions which are not contrary to the provision of this presidential decree continue to be applied […]" (English translation from Yerkes & Alhomoud, 2022, p. 3). Thus, the decree established that presidential decrees would override the constitution. The legislative powers of the parliament were transferred to the head of the executive branch, and Saied bestowed upon himself the power to regulate almost all sectors and areas of the political system and society. The decree lists these areas and includes the organisation of justice and the judiciary, the press, political parties, unions and associations, public order, internal security forces, electoral law, and human rights. The decree also stipulated that a cabinet headed by a prime minister would *assist* the president in governing. As such, the cabinet would not be able to check or limit the presidential power (Inkyfada, 2021). The new cabinet, led by Najla Bouden Romdhane, was appointed by Saied on the 30th of September and consisted of technocrats and allies of Saied. In this way, the September 22 decree established a temporary system of unchecked powers of the president under the guise of a state of emergency (Lührmann & Rooney, 2020).

Through rule by decree, Saied continued to dismantle or subvert the function of horizontal accountability mechanisms throughout the winter and spring of 2022. On February 6, Saied dissolved the High Judicial Council. The judicial council is, or was, an independent institution tasked with ensuring the functioning and independence of the judiciary (Interview 7). A week later, Saied issued a new decree in which he assumed the power to establish and chose the members of a new, temporary judicial council. The decree furthermore gave the council the right to appoint judges and oversee other matters of dismissals and promotions while also giving Saied the power to object to these decisions and dismiss judges himself. The judiciary branch's function as a horizontal accountability mechanism was already weak due to the lack of a Constitutional Court. The dissolvement of the independent High Judicial Council and replacement with a new council elected and controlled by Saied further limited this function. Saied's ruling was met with protests by judges, and in response Saied fired fifty-seven of them on charges ranging from terrorism to adultery (Yerkes & Alhomoud, 2022)

Furthermore, in a reaction to the first online parliamentary session on the 30th of March, organised by the political opposition in parliament, Saied formally dissolved the until then suspended parliament. The session gathered 123 of the 217 members of parliament. In the session, 116 members voted in favour of a law which invalidates Saied's grab of power, forming a majority in favour of the law. Saied dismissed parliament the very same evening, to "[…] preserve the state and its institutions." Ironically, Saied denounced the session as an attempted "coup attempt"(Informant 5, France 24, 2022a).

Thus, over the course of less than a year, Saied had formally aggrandized the executive branch and dissolved all effective checks on executive powers through emergency decrees. Lührmann & Rooney (2020, p. 1) define state of emergency laws as "ideal tools" for autocratization, as they provide a pretext for aggrandising executive power. Still, as they highlight, state of emergencies does not necessarily lead to autocratization; the law must be used and abused by the incumbent, as Saied has done in Tunisia (Lührmann & Rooney, 2020, p. 3). Due to growing pressure and questioning of Saied's emergency powers from domestic and international actors, Saied introduced another strategy of autocratization in the winter of 2021, namely constitutional reform.

4.2.2 Constitutional reform

In December, Saied launched a "roadmap" for the political future of Tunisia, which was essentially a plan for a constitutional reform process. This was to consist of three stages of procedures which would, according to Saied, ensure a democratic and inclusive process: (1) a public consultation which would inform (2) a committee to draft the constitution which would then be voted on in (3) a national referendum on the 25th of July. Lastly, elections would be held on the 17th of December under a revised electoral law. Saied repeatedly referred both the first stage and the whole process as a 'national dialogue', but as Marks (2022b) and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ, 2022) note, this process did not have the transparency and participatory nature of the last process of constitution-making.

The process started in January with an online "national consultation process", in which every Tunisian supposedly could join to give their views on constitutional reform. However, this process was flawed in several ways. Firstly, the fact that it was online excluded at least 30% of the Tunisian population who do not have access to Internet (World Bank, 2020). The online platform also had several technical flaws. Importantly, the platform did not open for a free

and unconstrained sharing of opinions. It did not protect the anonymity of the respondents and it consisted of a questionnaire with narrowly defined and leading categories, questions, and possible answers (Interview 7). When the process ended in March, only approximately 7% of Tunisians participated in the online "consultation". Saied nevertheless announced that the consultation had been successful and provided the basis for a new era for Tunisia (ICJ, 2022, p. 2).

On the 19th of May, a "National Consultative Committee for a New Republic" was appointed by Saied to draft the new constitution. It consisted of three commissions: (1) the economic and social commission which would form proposals based on the needs and aspirations of the Tunisian people, (2) the law commission which would draft the new constitution and (3) the national dialogue commission which collect the proposals and drafts into a draft constitution. The members of the commissions were appointed seemingly by both Saied and his chosen head of the body, law professor and Sadeq Belaid (Marks, 2022b). It consisted of individuals and representatives of collective entities such as NGOs and professional associations. Several of the appointed members had not been asked or given their consent to participate in the commission before it was publicly announced, including UGTT. The four civil society members of the National Dialogue were included in the economic and social commission, and all but UGTT participated in the committee. None of the university deans accepted the placement, leaving the law commission vacant (Bessalah, 2022). The president of the National Consultative Body did, however, present a draft commission to President Saied on 20th of June. The government never announced how the law commission had functioned, including who ended up being appointed to the commission. Information about who had participated, how the commissions had functioned and how many meetings were conducted was not made public, leaving the process and work of the Consultative Committee "[…] almost entirely inaccessible to Tunisians themselves […]" in a clear contrast to the inclusiveness and transparency of the 2012-2014 constitutional process (Marks 2022b).

The commission was set to have a consultative function, but the absence of this function of the body was made apparent when Saied presented the draft constitution to the public. The president of the body, Sadeq Belaid, announced in Tunisian media that the draft Saied presented was altered from the draft he had presented to Saied on the 20th of June, foremost regarding the state's role in promoting and interpreting Islamic values (Middle East Eye, 2022). This displays that Saied ultimately decided on the content of the constitution, rendering the first two-stages of the constitutional reform process without their proposed

democratic function. The last stage of the constitutional process, the national referendum, followed the same path.

The national referendum was manipulated through several autocratization strategies. Firstly, Saied undermined ISIE, the independent High Authority for Elections. ISIE is the independent election management body in Tunisia. The establishment and function of ISIE, and the commission which organised the first elections in 2011, has been a central part of the formal Tunisian democratic system. ISIE has managed, organised, and supervised free and fair municipal, legislative and presidential elections since its establishment in 2014. During the last decade, there have been some calls for reform of the ISIE based on doubts of their political independence (Interview 7; Yerkes & Alhomoud, 2022). It has, however, fulfilled its mandate and supervised free elections. On April 22, Saied issued a presidential decree which gave the president the power to appoint the leader and members of the ISIE. He appointed a new set of members and a new leader of the ISIE a few weeks later.

The interference in ISIE in charge of elections is a form of electoral process manipulation, as the independence of election management is hampered (Cassani & Tomini, 2020b). The interference and appointment of new and loyal leaders and members of ISIE came before the referendum on the new constitution on July 25. How the interference of the ISIE has affected the referendum is not entirely clear at the time of writing, but there have been voiced concerns over the management of the referendum by ISIE. For instance, ISIE has invited and authorised both national and international observers to monitor in all previous elections. The ISIE did not, however, invite the for instance the EU's Election Observation Mission to monitor the referendum in July. Furthermore, national vote observer organisations such as Mourakiboun stated that the ISIE authorised far fewer observer accreditations for the referendum than earlier elections, citing that the number of accreditations dropped from 15.000 to 6.000 (Al Jazeera, 2022a). The limited presence of observers will at the minimum lead to incomplete records of violations during the referendum.

The result of the referendum was a landslide victory for a new constitution, as 94% voted yes. The turnout was however extremely low, as only 30% of eligible Tunisian voted, leaving 70% in either passive ignorance or active boycott (Boussen & Lakhal, 2022, p. 2). This was a lower turnout than any of the elections since the 2011 revolution, including municipal elections. There was no defined turnout threshold and Saied wrote the adoption of a new constitution into the official gazette of Tunisia, establishing the third republic. The

constitution establishes a “hyper-presidential” system, in which there are few substantial checks on presidential power (Boussen & Lakhal, 2022, p. 4). The president, not the parliament, appoints the head of government and the other ministers from candidates promoted by the head of parliament, and the president can dismiss ministers without parliamentary approval. Furthermore, the president can declare a state of emergency without any oversight or checks on power by other branches of government. The two-term limit on the presidential office is maintained, but there are no provisions to hinder the amendment of the constitution to increase the number of terms. The parliament have no effective checks on presidential power, as there are no procedures to remove the president, but it still has the power to draft and enact laws (HRW, 2022).

Furthermore, the independence of the judiciary is also significantly weakened. The High Judicial Council is mentioned, but its function and how its members are elected is unclear. The president can appoint judges proposed by the High Judicial Council. The Constitutional Court is preserved, but its independence is doubtful as the members must be senior judges who are presidentially appointed. The undermining of independence of the judiciary can in turn affect the rights of Tunisians. The section on rights is overall similar to the 2014 constitution, but the undermining of the judiciary as well as a new article which proposes state action towards the realization of Islamic values have the potential to supress Tunisians’ civil and political rights (Marks, 2022; HRW, 2022). The president furthermore gains power to change the electoral law, which can affect both the proposed elections in December and the influence and function of political parties. So, the new constitution establishes a system of a strong presidential office without substantial accountability mechanisms.

The constitutional reform can as such be defined as executive aggrandisement through formal means. Aided by a strategy of electoral process manipulation, the new constitution formalises the powers Saied have given himself through decrees over the last year. Here, two strategies of autocratization have been noted: executive aggrandisement and electoral process manipulation (Cassani & Tomini, 2020b). Importantly, the referendum on the new constitution was carried out in a context marked by increased limitations on public contestation, free media and repression of oppositional voices and politicians. The next section maps the other strategies of autocratization Saied has used, which created this context and made the constitution a product of almost unchecked presidential power (Boussen, 2022a; Marks, 2022b).

4.2.2 Military intervention: Symbolic domination of space and limitation of political rights

Military intervention, defined as the active role of the military in the autocratization process, has been another technique of autocratization. Senior military leaders stood behind Saied when he announced his measures on the 25th of July and have also been present at subsequent public announcements. On the eve of the 25th, army tanks were deployed at the gates of Bardo, the Tunisian parliament building. These troops are still in place outside parliament. Troops were also deployed at the prime minister's office and in Kasbah, where most government buildings are located (Nassif, 2022). The deployment of military troops outside of government buildings have two functions. Firstly, it functions as a physical barrier hindering MPs, and initially also the prime minister and other ministers, from accessing their offices. Secondly, the presence of troops has a symbolic function. Placing military troops outside of the physical spaces of democracy spatialize a new and undemocratic political order. I witnessed for myself the pronounced presence of the military in central Tunis during my fieldwork; driving in the streets, stationed outside public buildings and in a partial blockade of the Habib Bourguiba Avenue, where the largest protests under the revolution were situated. As such, Saied's use of military troops to block the parliament and other government buildings can be understood as a way of dominating space with a new political order.

Furthermore, military trials have been used to arrest and sentence political opponents of Saied. In Tunisia, military courts operate under an unreformed code from 1957 which gives the courts the possibility to try civilians for insulting the military and threatening national security. These two broad and vague charges can and have been used for political purposes (Nassif, 2022). For instance, in September 2021, a military court jailed two MPs from the Islamist Karama party who had publicly criticised Saied, on charges of insulting security staff and threatening a military judge (Nassif, 2022, p. 34). Another example is the arrest of the outspoken MP and activist Yassine Ayari on July 30 on a sentence given in 2018 for defamation of the army. The arrest came after Ayari criticised Saied on social media (Amnesty, 2021a). Ayari’s sentence from 2018 shows that the use of military courts to tackle political opponents has not solely been used by Saied. Former president Essebi (2014-19) and former prime minister Youssef Chaed also used military courts to target political opponents (Nassif, 2022). This underscores the hybridity of Tunisian democracy in the form of questionable commitment to democratic norms by political leaders and lack of reforms of autocratic norms and structures of repression (Interview 3, 5; Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021).

Importantly, although this strategy is not new, its use has increased since July 25 (Amnesty, 2021a). In November 2021, Amnesty (2021a) reported that the number of military trials against civilians since the 25th of July had exceeded the number of cases between 2011 and 2018. Since July 2021, 10 civilians have been sentenced in military trails in comparison to 6 civilians from 2011 to 2018.

Thus, the military has had an active role in the autocratization process, although not the principal role (Cassani & Tomini, 2020b). The military has participated at the initiative of President Saied and its involvement has filled different functions in the autocratization process. This active involvement in autocratization is a clear shift from the role it played during the revolution in 2010-2011. In the revolution, the military chose to be an ally of the democratic movement, as military leaders refused to obey orders from Ben Ali to fire on protestors and instead declared that they would protect the revolution (Nassif, 2022).

4.2.4 Limitation of political and civil rights

The limitation of political and civil rights is intertwined with the other strategies of autocratization, as the discussion on military intervention exemplifies. The lifting of parliamentary immunity on the 25th was followed by travel bans and arrests of several critical members of parliament on politically motivated charges. This has continued throughout the year, as MPs, politicians and opponents of Saied have faced travel bans, trials, arrests, and physical intimidation by security forces. After the parliamentary session on the 30th of March, the justice ministry called for a judicial investigation against all MPs on charges of "conspiring against state security" (Al Jazeera, 2022b).

Members of parliament and oppositional parties seems to be the principal target, but the circle of repression has expanded to include some opposing activists and journalists. SNJT, the main Tunisian union for journalists, and Reporters Without Borders have reported an increasingly restricted and hostile environment for journalists since the 25th of July (RSF, 2022). This has included arrests, physical attacks, and intimidation by the police forces on journalists covering sensitive topics and events. There have also been reports of arbitrary harassment on activists, especially against vocal opponents in the Citizens Against the Coup initiative (Interview 10). For instance, Tunisia's first democratically elected president Mouncef Marzouki has been a staunch critic of Saied and supported the Citizens Against the Coup initiative. In December 2021, Marzouki was sentenced to four years in absentia for "undermining the external

security of the state", making him an international symbol of the increased repression of critical voices (Reuters, 2021b). Together, these developments point towards a greater limitation on freedom of speech since the 25th of July. This is, for instance, reflected in Tunisia's drop by twenty-one places on Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedoms Index in 2022 (RSF, 2022).

In addition to the limitation of freedom of speech, security and police forces have also been heavily present and used repressive tactics on demonstrations and some organisational meetings of the opposition. The demonstrations organised against Saied and his actions over the course of the year have been met with repressive tactics such as the use of batons, water cannons, pepper spray and arrests of protestors and journalists covering the demonstrations(Al Monitor, 2022a; Reuters, 2022). As with the use of military trials, police repression of protestors is not a new development in Tunisia. The policing of demonstrations has often been violent and repressive, and as such the right to demonstrate in public space was restricted before the 25th as well. The police and security sector in Tunisia has gone unreformed since the revolution, rendering police brutality a part of protesting and everyday life for many Tunisians (Interview 3 & 4; Grewal, 2018). Whether the increase of police violence and repressive tactics towards political protesters has been a deliberate strategy of autocratization or a continuation of practices of an unreformed police force is thus not entirely clear. But the repression and pronounced presence of police forces at anti-Saied protests suggests that political directives are guiding the policing of protests.

In March, a draft for a new law which would regulate and restrict civil society organisations was leaked in Tunisian media. The draft law included requirements for government authorisation of organisations, government approval of foreign funding for organisations and other requirements which could effectively shut down any organisation opposing or annoying the government (Amnesty, 2022). This draft law has however not been introduced at the time of writing, and as such, civil society organisations' rights to assembly and speech have not been changed through formal means (Interview 3 & 4). However, although there are no legal changes to the rights of CSOs, the repression of demonstrations and critical activists suggest that the civil society organisations political and civil rights have been challenged through other informal means. How the new constitution will affect political and civil rights is yet to be seen, but it does include articles which can be used to formally limit the accountability function of civil society (HRW, 2022).

Thus, the limitation and repression of political rights have also been part of the autocratization process, but not as a radical subversion through formal means. The right to organise and speak freely have been restricted through increased repression and arrests, and this has especially targeted critical voices of politicians, journalists, and activists. However, in interviews with CSOs and journalists in April, most reported that they could still operate as usual and highlighted that repression and restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly was not new but had been part of their political space since the revolution (Interview 3, 4 & 5). The repression and limitations of political rights must furthermore also be seen in relation the restrictions the 2015 enactment of the state of emergency law introduced (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021). As such, the limitation of political and civil rights has been achieved through an intensification of the existing negative trend of police violence and limitations on the freedom of speech and assembly. The targeted arrests, military trials and travel bans of especially political opponents entails that it can still be defined as a strategy of autocratization.

4.2.5 Summary

From the onset of autocratization, President Saied and his associates have used a combination of different strategies to transform institutions towards autocracy. The central strategy has, as in other contemporary processes of autocratization, been the subversion of horizontal mechanisms of accountability to the executive power through a use of illegal emergency powers and subsequent constitutional reform (Cassani & Tomini, 2020b; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Still, the substantive institutional changes the illegal rule by decree have entailed suggests a more radical process. The strategy of limiting horizontal accountability and extending executive powers has been combined with other strategies of autocratization. Military involvement and support entail a new role and function of the military: a political one in support of autocratization. This stands in stark contrast to its role as defender of the protestors during the revolution. The constitutional reform process has furthermore included what Cassani & Tomini (2020b) define as electoral process manipulation, as president has interfered with the independence of the election management body ISIE and obstructed an independent media coverage of the process. The limitation of political and civil rights has also increased and targeted politicians as well as journalists and activists and affected the opposition during the campaigning on the referendum.

4.4 Making claims to legitimacy: Mechanisms of legitimation

At the same time as Saied has used different strategies to dismantle the existing democratic system, he has tried to legitimise his right to expand his own power and transform democratic institutions. As Dukalski & Gerschewski (2017) point out, legitimacy is cultivated, or attempted to be cultivated, through "claims, symbols, narratives, and procedures". Importantly, these efforts to claim legitimacy do not happen in a vacuum but are affected by the counterclaims and discursive work of other actors. As such, making claims of legitimacy is contentious, as other actors also struggle to give meaning to the political actions of Saied and define Tunisia's problems and the solutions to those problems.

In the next section, I use Dukalskis & Gerschewski (2017) concepts of mechanisms of legitimisation together with concepts from framing theory and Brubaker's (2017) populist rhetoric repertoire to understand President Saied's efforts to legitimise the autocratization process and the effect those efforts. In this section, I will first discuss how Saied has presented himself and his political project in the 2019 presidential campaign as well as his time in office to argue that populistic rhetoric and self-presentation is an integral part of his political branding and popularity. In the next section, I discuss how Saied has legitimised the autocratization process through a continuation of the populist self-presentation and narrative and a version of a democratic-procedural mechanism of legitimation. The analysis builds on interviews, newspaper articles, academic research but observations and conversations during fieldwork have also been central.

4.4.1 Populist rhetoric and self-presentation

At the core of Saied's presidential campaign in 2019 was the casting of himself as an alternative political figure. Through conduct and words, Saied sought to emphasise two sides of himself: (1) an uncorrupted political outsider and man of the people and (2) an enlightened and principled guardian of the law. The first was emphasised through holding public meetings and refraining from using massive funds on campaign ads (Meddeb, 2020). It further included drawing attention to his 'normal' and 'unpretentious' routines which included drinking his coffee at a rundown café in his neighbourhood in Ariana and doing his own grocery shopping at the local market (Interview 7). In this manner, Saied sought to emphasise his position as a man of the people rather than as a part of the political elite. To that end, Saied also did not join or establish a political party but ran as an independent candidate. To run as an

independent in Tunisia is not unusual but it signalled rejection of the existing order of consensus politics between parties viewed as elite pacts (Wolf, 2019).

At the same time, Saied and his supporters have emphasised his background as a professor of law. Although he never actually finished his PhD, his career as a university lecturer in constitutional law is presented as evidence of his technical expertise and competence (Interview 7; Lakhal 2022). His public appearance is stern, and he only gives public speeches in formal Arabic, *fusḥa,* and not the local Tunisian dialect (Fieldnotes 07.03.22). This other side of Saied can be seen as in conflict with the persona as a man of the people, as it seeks to elevate him from the "people" he claims to represent and differs from the typical style of self-presentation and communication of populists (Brubaker, 2017). On the other hand, these two characteristics can be seen as joined to build a figure of integrity and trustworthiness (Wolf, 2019). Still, as Lakhal (2022) argues, taking the role of the principled educator also creates a vertical distance between himself and the 'people' he claims to be a part of.

In the presidential campaign, Saied had a clear anti-institutional stance which included both the rejection of existing "mediating" institutions and the promotion of new institutions of "direct democracy" (Brubaker, 2017, p. 366). He rejected the political system established after the revolution and a central theme of his campaign was decentralisation. Saied argued that the current system of governance did not represent the people and argued for a decentralisation of the political system to move the power away from 'middlemen' and towards 'the people' (Hammami, 2021). As Wolff (2019, p. 886) describes, central to this plan was to "reduce the role of intermediaries between the people and the government - essentially that of party politics", which would be done through the introduction of local councils. Saied himself argued that this political vision is a version of direct democracy, while others compared his political vision with the earlier Libyan dictator Gaddafi's political system of popular councils (Field notes 07.04.22; Hammami, 2021). Importantly, this was never presented in a clear and comprehensive way, and it was as such not a clear program of reform but rather vague ideas or visions.

In building legitimacy around his person and program, Saied actively made use of revolutionary symbolism. Saied made use of the demands and slogans of the revolution, such as "the people want" from "the iconic and deeply symbolic the people want the fall of the regime". He argued that the revolution had been hijacked from the Tunisian youth and people by the political elite and presented himself and his project as the return to the revolutionary

path (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021). As highlighted here, Saied did not have a clear political or economic agenda of reform to address the grievances of the Tunisian population and realize the demand for economic justice and dignity, but rather built an image of himself as a moral and principled man of the people who would work against the corrupted political elites while drawing on revolutionary symbolism.

4.4.2 Legitimation of autocratization

His populist narrative of being a part of the people and acting on behalf of them against a corrupt elite has continued and been a part of his legitimation narrative of the autocratization process. Saied has continued to appeal to the people and framed the autocratization process as a process of reforming the political system to achieve the revolutionary demands of the people. A letter from Saied to the Tunisian people before the referendum vote illustrated the continuation of the discursive use of the revolution:

> *"Say yes to save the State from collapse and achieve the goals of the Revolution. There will be no misery, no terrorism, no famine, no injustice, no suffering."*
> (English translation from Boussen & Lakhal, 2022, p. 3)

In addition to claiming legitimacy through a populist rhetoric, Saied has also made use of other procedures and produced new claims of legitimacy in the same populist vein.

During the last year, Saied has grounded the democratic legitimacy of his actions through two democratic procedural arguments (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017). In the first period after the 25th of July, Saied claimed that his actions were circumscribed by the 2014 constitution and thus democratic. Saied furthermore built the legitimacy of this claim around his legal expertise, claiming that he as a constitutional lawyer understands the law perfectly and acts accordingly (New York Times, 2021). Thus, the first "democratic" claim of legitimacy used the 2014 constitution as the point of reference for democracy,

While Saied continued to maintain the legality of his emergency measures, he also introduced a new mechanism of democratic legitimacy in December with the announcement of the roadmap on the 7th of December. Dukalskis & Gerschewski (2017, p. 257) highlight that autocratic legitimisation "now increasingly sit alongside ostensibly democratic institutions" to create a pretence of democratic legitimacy. In response to continued pressures to define a roadmap for the future and end the emergency measures, Saied introduced formal "democratic" procedures. As outlined above, all stages of those procedures were critically

flawed. Importantly, whether the constitution should be reformed or not was not up for public debate but decided by Saied (Marks, 2022b). The procedures did not function as democratic channels of participation and representation and must instead be understood as a pretence of democratic legitimacy (Dukalski & Gerschewski, 2017). Furthermore, the mock-democratic procedures Saied introduced are a clear continuation of his populist rejection of the institutions of a representative democracy. The legitimacy of political parties as representatives of the people was undermined, and they were excluded from any role or participation. The online platform and public referendum reflect his claims to create a direct democratic system without 'middlemen' (Lakhal, 2022). In these ways, claiming legitimacy through democratic procedures have reflected his populist rhetoric of anti-institutionalism and direct democracy.

Legitimacy through performance can rest on claims to guarantee stability and economic performance (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017). By launching emergency measures after months of intensifying social unrest and intertwined crises, Saied was perceived as taking control over a chaotic situation. The phrase "Something had to be done" was emphasised in almost every conversation I had in Tunisia. Thus, the fact that Saied did *something* to end the chaos contributed to a perception of him as a guarantor of change towards stability. Apart from that, Saied does not have a record of performance on socio-economic reforms or corruption, nor a concrete policy agendas to address these pressing issues. The legitimation of the expanded powers is as such not rooted in a record of better performance than his counterparts in his years in office, as he does not have any track record of efforts to or results in producing a new economic agenda, addressing corruption, or cracking down on police brutality (Interview 5; 6; Marks 2022a). This has not changed after he assumed executive power. The only economic agenda thus far has been to secure a new loan with IMF, while the economic and social situation is further deteriorating (Interview 5).

Instead of claiming legitimacy through economic performance, Saied justifies the usurpation of power through placing responsibility in the hands of 'enemies of the people'. The political class, centred on the members of Parliament, is defined as a central enemy or traitor. This is a continuation of the anti-institutional stance presented in the election campaign, but there has been a shift in aggression. This representation of the political class as a threat and enemy resonates with the low trust Tunisians have had in their MPs and the widely held beliefs that the parliamentary coalitions and deals are 'secret pacts' to maintain their positions and socio-economic despotism. Saied has not presented any evidence of these beliefs (Interviews 5; 6;7.

Lakhal, 2022). Instead, he continues to use and expand on vague conspiracy theories of the transgressions and conspiracies the political class has engaged in (Parks & Kahlaoui, 2021). In a speech in Sidi Bouzid in September, he referred to that he had names and records of the corruption and crimes of undefined "enemies" which he could not reveal (Lakhal, 2022). He has repeatedly defined the political elite "traitors", "devils", "microbes" and "viruses" and claimed that political parties such as Ennahda have been conspiring with "foreign lobbying groups to harm their country" (Marks, 2022a; Reuters, 2021c). Lakhal (2022) notes that the function of this secrecy is to evade the responsibility for the lack of economic progress and claiming legitimacy through his fight against the enemies in the name of the people.

In addition to demonizing the political class, Saied has also created other enemies of the people to shift the focus away from his regime's performance. One example is the response towards the rising food and product shortage in Tunisia. The trend had been rising since the summer of 2021, but the war in Ukraine and the rising shortages of key products such as sugar and wheat in March increased focus on the problem (Interview 6). In response, Saied sought to shift the blame and focus on the role of the state. He thus created a narrative of unspecified "speculators" and "hoarders" who tried to disrupt the distribution of products to "artificially create a crisis" (France 24, 2022b). This narrative was emphasised by police raids and confiscations of small businesses, posted on the Facebook page of the Ministry of Commerce with comments on how they were stealing the nation's food. Furthermore, Saied also introduced a new law which criminalises speculation and the spreading of "false news" in relation to food shortages (Al Monitor, 2022b). Saied's handling of the food shortages is a clear example on how he seeks to claim legitimacy not through performance but rather by discursively attacking "enemies of the state" and shifting the blame away from the performance of the regime (Interview 5).

The effects of Saied's legitimation efforts are difficult to measure. Polls indicate that Saied himself and the measures he implemented were popular, but that public support is waning. A Tunisian pollster, Insight TN, finds that Saied's support had nearly halved from July 2021 to January 2022. Furthermore, in January, almost 65% of Tunisians believed that the measures taken on the 25th constituted a coup in contrast to 40% in July (Marks, 2022a). Other polls indicate that Said is still the most popular public figure in Tunisia, but his inability to mobilise people to participate in the online consultation and referendum might reflect a lack of support and growing disinterest in his project. Furthermore, the autumn of 2021 held several protests in support of Saied which gathered 1000-3000 participants at most. Support protests have

however not been a visible feature in public space in 2022 (Grewal & Hammami, 2022). Legitimizing his powers and the autocratization process through discursively attacking the alternatives rather than taking responsibility and addressing the economic situation push the grievances of Tunisians to the side line yet again. The lack of progress seems to have affected his popularity as the year has progressed as there was growing frustration over the lack of a new economic agenda to secure dignified lives of Tunisians (Grewal & Hammami, 2022; Marks, 2022a).

4.3 Characterising the autocratization process

In the last decade, autocratization in democracies has been characterised as a gradual and piecemeal process, led by a democratically elected incumbent leader. The incumbents have typically shied away from "sudden, drastic moves to autocracy", and instead use legal means to gradually erode democratic institutions and their proper functions (Lindberg & Luhrmann 2019). In 2021, however, an upsurge of successful military coups in hybrid regimes such as Myanmar, Sudan and Mali led to questions of a new trend of autocratization by emboldened leaders who conduct sudden and radical transformations of regimes (Boese et al., 2022). So, how does Tunisia compare to these trends of autocratization? Is it a part of the trend of gradual democratic dismantlement through legal means or part of a new trend of radical transformations through coups?

Lührmann (2021) argues that gradual autocratization in democracies consists of three stages (1) growing discontentment with the democratic outcome, (2) the rise and election of anti-pluralists and (3) onset autocratization. The new democracy in Tunisia was an electoral rather than a substantive democracy, and the years after the establishment of the constitution in 2014 have been characterised by growing discontentment with the political elites and their lack of efforts to substantiate the democracy through further economic and political reforms. This has manifested in rising socio-economic protests in which Tunisians voice their frustrations and in opinions polled in the Arab Survey. This can thus be understood as the first stage defined by Lührmann (2021), as the period was characterised by a rise of discontentment with democratic institutions. There are some signs that the declining specific support was coupled with declining diffuse support, but it is important to note that there have been factions in Tunisia, including in the economic elite, which never has been on board with the democratic revolution (Interview 5 & 6).

The rise of discontentment with the democratic outcome became apparent in the 2019 parliamentary and presidential elections. Several populist and partly anti-pluralist parties and candidates were elected at the expense of established political parties and figures. The anti-democratic nature of some of these were apparent, such as Abir Moussi's nostalgia for the Ben Ali period. While in the case of Saied, his populism was more apparent than his anti-democratic sentiments, hidden as they were by populist promises of decentralisation and direct democracy (Lakhal, 2022). The 2019 election can thus be characterised as a "protest election" in which new populist and partly anti-democratic politicians were elected to office and can thus be defined as a second stage of autocratization (Chomiak, 2019; Interview 3).

The 2019 election saw the rise of populist and anti-pluralist leaders, but it was not a watershed moment in which populist, anti-pluralist and anti-democratic politicians replaced a non-populist, pluralist, and democratic set of politicians. Anti-pluralist politicians were not new in 2019, as the 'old' and established parties and politicians have also taken measures that have hindered democratic deepening and used populist rhetoric to gain electoral success in the elections before 2019. The foremost example is when Nidaa Tounes, consisting of several executives and ministries from under Ben Ali, and together with Ennahda and the other ruling parties introduced the economic reconciliation law which disrupted the transitional and social justice process. So, although the 2019 election introduced new populist candidates with questionable respect for democratic principles and institutions, it did not represent a full shift from democratic actors to non-democratic actors. So, in Tunisia, as a case of a new democracy, the stage of "anti-pluralist rising to power" is perhaps not as distinct as in other cases.

The 2019 election did result in an even more fragmented parliament and government which created political chaos and a lack of effective measures to improve the economic situation. The covid-19 pandemic was an exogenous shock which worsened the existing socio-economic problems in Tunisia, and dismal performance of the government in reaction to these crisis further fuelled discontentment with the status quo (Lührmann, 2021). Against the background of a health crisis, economic crisis, and rising and heated protests against the government, President Saied announced a state of emergency and gave himself sweeping emergency powers. Although these measures taken were drastic and unconstitutional, the situation in which he based these measures on and his vows to respect the democratic constitution, gave it legitimacy in the eyes of many Tunisians.

The autocratization has been characterised by primarily executive aggrandisement, but also limitations on public contestation and increasing and targeted repression of oppositional voices. The centrality of executive aggrandisement can be seen in relation to the character of contemporary autocratization in democracies, but the pace and magnitude of Saied's dismantlement of horizontal checks on power and democratic institutions in Tunisia sets it apart from the slow pace of contemporary autocratization in democracies (Cassani & Tomini, 2020b; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Saied still tried to maintain a legal façade and framed it within the state of emergency law, but clearly abused the "extraordinary powers" that come with this law (Lührmann & Rooney, 2020, p. 20).

Thus, the autocratization process in Tunisia can be characterised as a gradual, wavering process of "setting the stage" to a swifter autocratization process from July 2021 through several strategies of executive aggrandisement, as well as military support, electoral manipulation, and repression of political opponents, resulting in a new and undemocratic constitution in July 2022. Still, the autocratization process has thus far been characterised by first and foremost radical executive aggrandisement, and not radical changes to of the space of public contestation through restrictive laws and repression. The autocratization process Saied has led in Tunisia has occurred at a faster pace, but it has been a partial rather than a radical transformation of the political system. Saied has furthermore tried to legitimise it through democratic procedures and narratives. The function of these legitimisations efforts will be further explored in relation to the civil society response in the next section.

CHAPTER 5 Civil society responses

The objective of this chapter is to understand how civil society actors have responded to autocratization and what explains this response. Based on an understanding of civil society as an arena, I will first map the development of civil society from the authoritarian era to its functions in the revolution and last decade of democracy building. Building on this, I move on to address the civil society responses to autocratization, arguing that the Tunisian civil society is characterised by soft, slow and fragmented response to autocratization. To explain the character of the response, I use the overarching concept of political space and framing to understand the opportunities and restrictions on their potential to be resistance actors and mobilise against autocratization. Understanding the process of autocratization and civil society response as a contentious and relational process, I explore how the strategies of legitimation by Saied shape the political space and response of civil society actors. How their political space and framing process is affected by outcomes and interpretations of the last decade of democracy are also explored. Political space is here understood as something that must be interpreted by potential resistance actors before becoming actual resisters, which entail a focus on the process of framing.

5. 1 Post-revolution development of Tunisian civil society after 2011

To understand civil society response to autocratization, we must understand how civil society has developed from the authoritarian era to the 2011 revolution and into the new democracy. Drawing on Bernhard’s (2020) discussion on the modalities of civil society in different regimes and processes of regime change, the next section seeks to map the development of the arena of civil society in relation to regime changes in Tunisia. This includes a discussion of the actors which have populated the arena of civil society, their organisational forms, and interactions with the state. The political function of the Tunisian civil society will be highlighted but seen in relation to its other functions. The main aim of this discussion is to develop an understanding of the actors, divisions, and functions of Tunisian civil society before the advent of autocratization. This includes introducing the different sets of actors in civil society, including workers’ movements and unions, human rights organisations, political advocacy groups and organisations, ‘watchdog’ organisations, religious movements and organisations, social movements and protest campaigns. The relation between Islamist and

religious forces and 'secular forces' is emphasised. This section draws mainly on academic research, interviews, and observations.

5.1.1 Civil society under dictatorship (1956-2011)

This section starts with a presentation of the development of political Islamism in Tunisia. The Islamist organisation of Islamic Tendency Movement (Mouvement de la Tendence Islamique – MTI), who later became Ennahda, was a prominent opposition movement in the civil society from the 1970's, as they represented an alternative vision for Tunisia than the Westernised vision of Bourguiba. After the revolution, they became a political force in the new multi-party system.

Starting out as a loosely organised religious movement named al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya in the 60s, it gathered Tunisians who opposed and felt estranged by Bourguiba's efforts to orient the Tunisians state and society to Western culture and ideals. Islamism represented as such an alternative vision in which Islam had a more prominent role and attracted many Tunisians, especially outside the richer coastal cities (Wolf 2017; Interview 5). In the late 70's, these forces became more politicised. In 1979, the underground Islamic Tendency Movement, which started as a student movement a few years before, was established. In a break from the initial focus on personal piety, the MTI called for "social and political action to counter the secularisation and state Islam of Bourguiba" in an embracement of political Islam (Wolf 2017, p. 44). The ideology, values and roots of MTI and Tunisian Islamism are impossible to describe in its full complexity in a few paragraphs. Here, I will focus on whether it can be described as a force of "uncivil society" and how the movement developed through interactions with the regime.

At the beginning of 1980's, MTI was a tightly organised underground movement with affiliations and activities across all Tunisian regions. There were tensions between different factions within the MTI regarding democracy and liberalism (Wolf 2017). While a more pragmatic wing supported multi-party politics and cooperation with secular actors, a more dogmatic and radical wing rejected multi-party politics and the concept of democracy as 'un-Islamic'. In 1981, the underground movement moved into the public space and applied to be recognised as an official political party. Although some factions within the regime wished to seek rapprochement with the Islamists, their move into public space mostly provoked repression, arrests, and torture of its members (Wolf, 2017; Interview 11). The repression heightened tensions between the two wings and strengthened the dogmatic and radical wing.

Wolf (2017) describes that the MTI had a militant wing that had concrete plans of staging a coup to grab state power through violent means in the end of the 1980s, and the student wing (UGTE) was also in violent confrontations with both the state and other student groups, especially leftists, on Tunisian campuses. Some of its radical members also left the movement and established new, more Salafist and radical groups, as for instance Islamic Jihad which committed a terrorist attack against hotels in Monastir and Sousse in August 1987.

So, there were factions within the MTI, and other Islamist groups, which can be described as an element of "uncivil society", in that they both rejected liberal and democratic values and used violence against the regime and civilian targets (Berman, 2003). Importantly, Islamists were not the only group who used violent tactics to confront the regime, as for instance leftist groups also launched violent attacks to against state properties to challenge the regime's legitimacy (Wolf, 2017). In the 80's, the Tunisian regime sought to blame the MTI for all instability and violence in Tunisia, including the attack of Islamic Jihad.

Ben Ali, the earlier Director of National Security, grabbed power in palace coup d'état in November 1987 and promised a gradualist approach towards democracy. In his first year in power, he released all MTI political prisoners, officially recognised its militant student wing, UGTE, and announced multi-party elections to take place in 1989. In 1988, the MTI changed its name to Harakat Ennahda (Renaissance Movement) as a new election law forbid forming parties on a religious ground. It application was rejected by the regime before the election, but Ennahda decided to participate as independent candidates in the election and did very well. Official numbers reported that Ennahda-backed candidates won 14.5% of the national vote, but the actual number might have been twice as high (Wolf, 2017, p. 71).

The regime did however not recognise the result, declared victory in all constituencies and started a brutal crackdown on the movement. In 1990, five Ennahda members burned down one of the ruling party's (RCD) offices in Bab Souika in central Tunis, killing one guard. The 'Bab Souika affair', and the lack of condemnation by the Ennahda leadership, was used by the regime to convince the public of the danger of Islamists in Tunisia and furthermore as a pretext for the crackdown of the movement. The crackdown almost demolished the movement, as party members and their families were sent to prison, forced into exile, and harassed on a daily basis (Interview 11). Wolf's (2017) research shows that Ennahda's exile movement continued to meet and seek influence in Tunisian society from abroad and that

some of the structures in the organisation were kept intact. However, within Tunisia, the movement practically disappeared from the civil society and the public eye.

The brutal repression of the Islamist movement by the regime shows its propensity for repression of critical forces in civil society. Hudáková (2021, p. 504) describes that the regime employed a dual strategy of *coercion* to repress, prosecute and torture critical civil society activists and members of organisations and *co-optation* to form civil society into "instruments of social control and distribution of privilege". As a result, civil society organisations' ability and their willingness to challenge and resist the regime were low during the years of dictatorship. The regime's repression of the Islamist movement is a clear example of the grave consequences participation in regime critical organisations and protests could lead to, and its repression extended into other organisations and movements as well.

The Islamist movement also served a function in Ben Ali's toolbox of civil society co-optation. The Tunisian Islamist movement was framed within the regional context, which included the civil war in Algeria that had erupted after the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) took up arms and the repressive Islamist rule in Iran after the 1979-revolution. Through this, Ben Ali amplified the fear of Islamism that already existed in especially the 'secular' and left-leaning civil society organisations in urban Tunisia to divide and conquer the political opposition and civil society and legitimise his own rule (Haugbølle & Cavatorta, 2011). Ben Ali also used other strategic and ideological differences within the civil society and political opposition to prevent coalition-building, but the Islamist-secular dividing line was especially pronounced. Haugbølle & Cavatorta (2011, p. 355) argue that this tactic of divide and rule was largely successful, as many secular- and left-leaning independent civil society organisations "thought it necessary to marginalise the Islamists" to keep and extend progressive social reforms. The progressive and feminist women's organisations the Tunisian Association of Democratic women (ATFD) is one example, as they opted to receive government funding and stay silent on the regime's brutal repression of Islamists in the 1990's (Hudáková. 2021, p. 507).

While the regime's strategy largely controlled the transformative capacity of the civil society, there were some actors and spaces of resistance in the years leading up to the revolution. These oppositional forces can be divided into two broad categories: (1) formal organisations and (2) informal actors of resistance. This formal organisations included "a handful" of human rights' and women's organisations, unions, and professional organisations (Hudáková,

2021; Weilandt, 2019). Human rights organisations, with The Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH) in front, were one important front of resistance. In the early 90's, the organisation was one of few CSOs which was vocal against the regime's crack down on Islamists (Interview 5). Lawyers, as either independent activists or with the Tunisian Bar Association (TAB), were another force of dissent in the in Tunisia. Their oppositional activities included symbolic resistance such as hunger strikes and sit-ins as well as professional strikes to protest repressive conditions and breaches on human rights. Women's organisations such as the ATFD, albeit silent on the repression of Islamists in the 90's, emerged as more critical in the 2000's as it engaged in anti-regime political protests and campaigns. These networks of organisations and activists contested the regime and pushed for pluralism and human rights, but they were "small islands of resistance in a sea of co-opted organisations" and therefore unable to bring about political change (Hudáková, 2021, p. 499).

There were other practices and acts of resistance from outside the formal civil society of organisations. Antonakis-Nashif (2016) refers to these as collective social protests, while Chomaik (2011) refers to a culture of dissent that was rendered visible in episodes of contention against the regime. During the 2000's, there were episodes of contention and resistance against the regime led by informal collectives of actors which mobilised new social groups. In the next section, two such resistance episodes will be highlighted: The Gafsa uprising of 2008 and the 'Tunisia in White' protest campaign in 2010.

The major union UGTT is an 'umbrella' which gathers almost every unions for public workers. It had been a key factor in the independence struggle from France, while after independence it moved between being a partner of the state and a resistance actor against the state's social and economic policies. During Ben Ali's rule, the central leadership lost its critical role and militant potential as it chose to engage as a partner for the state in securing social peace (Zemni 2013). As the UGTT leadership lost its ability to represent the demands and grievances of its members, union branches and local 'militants' operated more autonomously and confronted both the central UGTT leadership and the regime. This was also the case in Gafsa in January 2008. Gafsa is a South-Western region and town with a large phosphate extracting industry, but neoliberal reforms had led increasing unemployment and declining provision and quality of basic social services such as education and healthcare (Chomiak, 2011; Zemni, 2013). The protests started out as a local protest against corrupt recruitment practices but developed into a non-violent movement for economic and social justice across the region of Gafsa.

The protests were supported and joined by local UGTT branches, student activists from Tunisian Union of Students (UGET) as well as the union of unemployed graduates (UDC). New social groups also took part and mobilised, including unemployed youths, teachers, and wives of miners. The movement engaged in protests and insurgent actions for 5 months, and student activists as well as an activist 'blogosphere' outside of the region were instrumental in supporting and spreading information about the movement (Chomiak 2011; Lowrance, 2016). However, due to harsh repression and media censorship but also the lack of support and recognition by most opposition parties, UGTT's national and regional levels and other politically engaged CSOs, the movement did not scale-up and become a national protest movement. Still, the Gafsa uprising demonstrated the mobilising potential in the marginalised regions of Tunisia and was part of a trend of heightened contestation against the regime in the marginalised regions in Tunisia (Chomiak, 2011; Zemni, 2013).

The state media remained silent about the violent and fatal repression of the Gafsa movement, but Internet activists and bloggers in major cities in Tunisia played a role in circulating information and stories from Gafsa. This highlights another form and group of activists engaged in resistance against the regime, namely Internet activists and bloggers. These groups created a space of dissent and public debate in social media channels and blogs, while also sharing information and stories about the regime, including the cronyism which characterised it. This activist sphere engaged middle-class Tunisians in debates and protests against censorship and repression (Chomiak, 2011; Lowrance, 2016).

So, the civil society in the years before the revolution was characterised by a small set of pro-democracy and regime-critical CSOs and professional associations, a defunct Islamist movement and more loosely organised protest movements from especially workers and unemployed in the interior regions but also the coastal middle class. The two examples of contestation by informally organised actors illustrate that the subsequent revolution did not come out of nowhere, but was rather "a cumulative protest of learning and resistance" (Zemni, 2013, p. 128). Furthermore, as Chomiak (2011, p. 76) emphasise, the actors, spaces and repertoires of civil society contestation and resistance during the dictatorship also explains "*where* and *how* political resistance" occurred in the revolution which started on the 17th of December.

5.1.2 The 2010-2011 revolution: Insurgent civil society and mobilised masses

The event that triggered the revolutionary uprising was the self-immolation of the vegetable seller Mohammed Bouazizi, who set fire to himself after being humiliated and refused to work by local police officers. The same evening, members of his family together with union 'militants' protested and expressed their anger towards the local authorities (Ayeb, 2011). A movement was formed in the following days that focused on socioeconomic issues such as unemployment and high prices. The protests spread from Sidi Bouzid to neighbouring towns in the interior of Tunisia, with the support of local union branches (Zemni, 2013). As the movement spread, the slogans and demands also became increasingly political (Ayeb, 2011). Activist lawyers soon joined the uprisings, by arranging solidarity demonstrations and joining the protest marches in their characteristic black robes (Gobe & Salaymeh, 2016). These lawyers also pushed the bar association (TAB) to join the protests at the end of December. Members of TAB went on strike on the 6th of January and were joined by students and pupils. Internet activist and bloggers were also important in spreading information about the uprisings in the Southern regions to new groups of people (Lowrance, 2016; Weilandt, 2019).

Although local union activists participated and provided organisational resources to the protests from the beginning, the national leadership of UGTT employed a "wait and see" approach until around the 11th of January, when the central administration was pressured to recognize local sections' rights to organise peaceful demonstrations and solidarity actions (Zemni, 2013). Albeit late, the support of the central UGTT was decisive. The UGTT section in Sfax organised a demonstration the next day which more than 30.000 people joined. Demonstrations in the largest cities in Tunisia in the following days brought new social classes and groups to the streets, including middle classes and local business elites, in common demands of dignity and political change. On the 14th of January, UGTT called a general strike, and a critical mass joined the protests and successfully brought down Ben Ali, who left the country the same day (Ayeb, 2011; Zemni, 2013).

Although the organised and formal civil society organisations eventually joined in on the protests, they were not the driving forces of the revolution. Civil society organisations had the role of "facilitators" rather than "drivers" in the revolution, as they contributed their experience and organisational resources to sustained and politicised the insurgent movement (Hudáková, 2021). The spatial unevenness of the regime's economic and infrastructural investments had a clear impact on the insurgency's formation. It was started by marginalised

Tunisians, especially youths, in the underdeveloped interior regions and spread throughout the neighbouring regions before it reached the more affluent coastal regions where new groups and organisations joined (Ayeb, 2011). Through insurgent and contentious tactics, newly mobilised social groups together with activists and organisations brought down the incumbent dictator. The coming together of actors and organisations across this geographical, class and ideological divides was crucial for the outcome of the insurgency (Interview 5, 7; Zemni, 2013).

Importantly, mobilisation continued after the fall of Ben Ali to demand democratisation rather than liberalisation and partial reforms. Young and revolutionary activists, many coming with so-called 'freedom caravans' from the interior regions, organised two sit-ins in the central square in front of ministries in Tunis. These sit-ins were named Kasbah I and II after the square and was central for pressuring the old elite figures to step down and give way for a democratisation process (Interview 7; Zemni, 2015). In addition, old pro-democracy civil society organisations, UGTT, Ennahda and new movements and groups of the revolution formed a coalition to counter the power of the old elite and push for new elections (Zemni, 2015). Through organisation and mobilisation, new and old civil society actors managed to steer the revolution toward democratic elections to a constituent assembly and away from a managed transition by the remaining elite.

5.1.3 Institutionalization, divisions and contentious confrontations (2011-2022)

The revolution opened the political space for the expansion of civil society activities and actors. The institutional structures of the political system were changed towards more openness, and new rights of association and freedom of speech opened possibilities for addressing and contesting issues and topics that were sensitive under the authoritarian era. In addition to newfound rights came an influx of "democracy assistance dollars" through bilateral and multilateral partnerships (Chomiak & Parks, 2020). International organisations also established local branches and research institutes in Tunis, including Reporters Without Borders, Amnesty and different research institutes. Due to these changing circumstances, the number of civil society organisations grew exponentially in Tunisia from 2011 and onwards. In 2022, official statistics report that over 24.000 associations are registered in Tunisia, although there are questions of how many of these are active and functioning. Furthermore, most engage in civic rather than political activities (Chomiak & Parks, 2020; Inkyfada, 2022).

Civil society organisations have engaged in a variety of activities and issues, including religious charity and social service provision. The capacities and importance of the charity and development-related civil society organisations became clear during the covid-19 pandemic, as NGOs were central in providing information and social services to affected families and communities (Interview 7, 2, 12).

Albeit a small fraction of the 24 000 organisations, politically-oriented CSOs together with unions have been central in the democratization process. These include both 'legacy' CSOs such as LTDH, ATFD, TAB and UGTT who used the new space to expand their political activities and new organisations established after the revolution. Gathered under the umbrella of politically-engaged CSOs, these organisations are varied in their issue-orientation and democratic functions. Political CSOs and unions had a central role in guiding the constitution process and securing a democratic constitution. UGTT, the employers' union UTICA, LTDH and TAB formed the national dialogue quartet in 2013 and facilitated for compromise between the major political actors and progress in the democratisation process. In the process of writing the constitution, civil society was central in overseeing the process and providing input through dialogue and debate but also through street-mobilization (Antonakis-Nashif, 2016; Hudáková, 2021; Weilandt, 2019).

Adding to this, 'watchdog' and electoral observation organisations such as Al Bawsala, IWatch and Mourakboni have been central in ensuring the accountability and transparency of democratic institutions and have developed technical expertise in monitoring and informing the public about the work and transgressions of the government and state. Furthermore, political advocacy organisations focusing on issues such as women's rights, social justice, corruption, and transitional justice have informed and contested the government's work on these issues (Antonakis-Nashif, 2016; Hudáková, 2021; Weilandt, 2019). UGTT and UTICA have in many ways continued their role as a social partner to the state, but UGTT has also engaged in political protests (Zemni, 2015, Interview 2). Civil society organisations have thus built "technical expertise" in different fields relating to democracy and human rights and have used this to observe, inform and contest the state (Chomaik & Parks, 2020; Interview 14, 7)

In addition to this formal and institutionalized civil society, an "informal" civil society of loosely organised movements, groups and goal-oriented campaigns engaged in contentious actions have prevailed since the revolution (Chomiak, 2016; Vatthauer & Weipert-Fenner, 2017). There is a geographical and socio-economic divide among these forms of civil society

activism, as the formal civil society is centred in the urban regions and the capital Tunis while the informal movements are largely localised in the marginalised regions and neighbourhoods (Vatthauer & Weipert-Fenner, 2017). The claims and demands of the actors within this second sphere of civil society are manifold, but most are focused on socio-economic demands and operate on a local scale. The centrality of socio-economic demands reflects the continuities of long-standing grievances after the revolution (Chomiak 2016; 2019). Importantly, as Chomiak (2016) highlights, although these movements must be understood in relation to political disillusionment and functioning of the democratic system, they cannot be written off as disruptive social unrest, which Tunisian governments have tried to do.

Through organising and engaging in collective movements, Tunisians citizens have made specific and local demands to their local authorities and national governments. These demands are often related to social benefits and unemployment as well as regional development and a more equal distribution of revenues from extractive industries such as oil and phosphate (Cherif, 2017; Chomiak, 2016; Vatthauer & Weipert-Fenner, 2017). The movements have often employed contentious and disruptive tactics, such as blockades of sites of extractive industries or sit-ins in front of government buildings and strikes. For instance, in 2017, hundreds of protesters occupied an oil facility in Kamour, in the southern region of Tataouine. The organisers of the sit-in made specific and local demands to their government; the investment of 20% of the oil revenues in Tataouine and the employment of local citizens in the extractive industry. After almost two months of occupation, the UGTT facilitated a dialogue between the movement and government in which most of their demands were met (Cherif, 2017). This case illustrates that Tunisian citizens challenge unmet promises, contest unpopular policies, and make claims to the government by engaging in civil society as collective actors on the local scale. In addition to local social movements, there has also been national and regional waves of social unrest and disruptive protests in which youths and others have expressed their discontent with the economic and political status quo (Vatthauer & Weipert-Fenner, 2017; Chomiak, 2020, Parks & Kahloui, 2021).

These two spheres of civil society, the institutionalized, formal civil society and the 'informal' civil society of movements and protest waves have largely remained in different spheres with few points of contact and cooperation (Interview 3, Chomiak 2016). The institutionalised civil society has been criticised as depoliticised and disconnected from society, and movements and protest waves as disruptive of the fragile transition (Miller, 2021; Chomiak, 2016). One exception of the disconnect between these two spheres was the Manish M'sameh movement,

which operated from 2015-2017. The movement, which called itself Manish M'sameh - "I will not forgive", was formed in protest to the 2015 Economic Reconciliation bill by grassroot activists. The Economic Reconciliation bill, proposed by then president Essebi, was seen as a mockery of the ideals of transitional and economic justice, as it extended amnesty to "[…] those who profited most from oppression […]"(Miller, 2021, p. 210). Through a set of different tactics, including organising demonstrations and spreading caricatures of former elite figures in public space, the Manish M'sameh movement gathered civil society organisations, social movements, grassroot organisations and even parts of the political opposition demonstrations against the proposed reconciliation process of the government. Miller (2021) also highlights that they connected their fight with movements in the interior region's fight for economic rights. Although not successful in hindering the passage of the law, the case of the Manish M'sameh movement highlights the dynamics of coalition building between formal and informal actors of the civil society in defence of economic justice (Miller, 2021).

5.2 Facing autocratization: Strategies and frames in the civil society

The following section analyses civil society responses to the autocratization process in Tunisia. Here, the contentious dynamics between the regime's strategies of autocratization and civil society response is highlighted. Drawing on Rakner's (2021) theoretical argument and her analysis of civil society resistance against autocratization in Zambia and Malawi, the legacy of a pro-democracy insurgent civil society in Tunisia gives a theoretical expectation of strong civil society organisations and networks that have the organisational capacity and experience to mobilise against autocratization.

The point of departure is the politically-oriented and institutionalised civil society, which includes political advocacy organisations, 'watchdog' organisations, human rights organisations, unions, and prominent national figures. These are viewed in relation to the more informally organised social movements and protest campaigns. Non-political actors and organisations, such as humanitarian and cultural organisations, are not focused on as they have not taken an active and political role in response to autocratization. The mapping of the civil society response is based on interviews with CSO professionals and activists, observations, official communication by CSOs, unions and movements in their own channels as well as traditional media, news coverage and reports and articles from research institutes.

5.2.1 Initial reactions of compliance and soft criticism

The response from most of the politically oriented civil society to the emergency measures launched on the 25th of July was one of compliance and support. A few human rights organisations and advocates were outright against Saied and the measures he took. Mouncef Marzouki, a longstanding human rights activist under the dictatorship and the interim president of Tunisia between 2013-2014, declared on his Facebook page: “What happened tonight is a coup and a violation of the Constitution” (Andalou Agency, 2021, own translation). Other than a few human rights organisations and activists, resistance against the first event of autocratization came mostly from political parties and their supporters. In July 2021, resistance from political parties was spearheaded by Ennahda. Leading Ennahda politicians denounced Saied’s measures as a coup and called for support from international democracy promoters. Ennahda politicians and supporters also engaged in contentious acts, as they protested in central Tunis and organised a sit-in outside the parliament. These protests were met with counterprotests in the evening of and day after the 25th, as supporters of Said also took to the streets to celebrate his actions.

The majority actors in the institutionalized civil society, on the other hand, consented to the emergency measures. Leaders of politically engaged and legacy civil society organisations and unions were invited to meet with Saied, whereupon he affirmed his intention to respect human rights and democratic values. This included UGTT, SNJT, LTDH as well as other organisations. In public statements on social and traditional media and in meetings with Saied in the last week of July, politically engaged CSOs as well as UGTT and other unions gave Saied conditional support (Global Net News, 2021; Middle East Eye, 2021). The conditionality bore upon calls for the respect of civil and political rights and for a clear roadmap to be made within 30 days, as laid out in the constitution. The emergency measures and the executive aggrandisement was accepted by most civil society organisations as a necessary first step in a democratic course correction process, which is illustrated by a statement from the president of LTDH: “Through this decision [the emergency measures], there must be a revival of a new, more balanced democratic process” (Global Net News, 2021). Some organisations also drew attention to the unconstitutionality of parts of Saied’s measures, but without fully denouncing them (Interviews 3, 12, 13). So, after the first event of autocratization, most of civil society conditionally supported the executive aggrandisement as a temporary measure and thus contributed to legitimising it as a course correction for Tunisian democracy.

Saied's extension on August 23 of the emergency measures beyond the 30 days without providing a clear roadmap, along with the rise in travel bans and arrests of political opponents led to some critical responses from civil society organisations. In an official statement, the major political advocacy CSOs of FTDES (Forum for Economic and Social Rights), LTDH, the women's rights organisations ATFD and ATFURD (Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development) together with journalists union SNJT and the Association of Tunisian Magistrates (AMT) expressed concern over the series of abuses, including the travel bans, arrests, and house arrests of opponents[1]. They also called on Saied to organise a national dialogue to include civil society and "democratic" forces and build a new, post-25th political system. This represents a more critical stance toward Saied and the political developments. Still, the statement can be viewed as soft criticism rather than hard-hitting confrontation of the authoritarian nature of Saied's measures. The statement furthermore focuses on the need for a democratic, national dialogue, which they call on Saied to initiate and potentially lead. Consequently, Saied's breach of the conditions laid out by civil society organisations in July, such as the 30-day limit and respect of human rights, led to an increase in criticism but not a shift into more contentious tactics in the civil society.

5.2.2 Growth of resistance

The next event of institutional change came on the 22nd of September, when Saied partly suspended the constitution and granted himself further executive powers, again without launching a clear roadmap for a democratic future. In response to this, a new civil society group named Citizens Against the Coup was formed. Citizens Against the Coup can be described as an "innovative coalition", as it gathers people from diverse ideological backgrounds; from independent leftists, centre-right 'Destourians' and actors from other background (Marks, 2022a). All identify as pro-revolutionary democrats, and some of the leading figures have participated in anti-authoritarian and pro-democracy activism during the dictatorship of Bourguiba and Ben Ali (Interview 10). Many of the activists in the initiative have also had positions in government and politics after the revolution. This places them in a middle position between political resisters and civil society resisters (Tomini et.al. 2022).

The Citizens Against the Coup initiative has employed several different strategies in resisting the autocratization process. Through organising press conferences and actively using social

[1] Joint statement, available at: https://ftdes.net/ar/communique-4/

media, the group has fronted a clear alternative framing of Saied's measures as an authoritarian power grab. They have furthermore presented an alternative *prognosis* for the restoration of the democracy (Benford & Snow, 2000). In the autumn of 2021, their proposal was to bring back the parliament for a limited period of time to organise new parliamentary elections, oversee the implementation of a new electoral law and appoint the Constitutional Court and a new interim, technocratic government. Central to the proposal of the Citizens Against the Coup initiative is the restoration of the 2014 constitution and political system, although with a few adjustments (Interview 10, Marks, 2022a). This instalment of an interim and technocratic government is not a new idea or innovation, as it has been a well-used strategy to solve political crises and instability since the revolution, most notably in the technocratic caretaker government during the national dialogue process in 2013-2014 (Carboni, 2022; Grubman & Şaşmaz, 2021).

In addition to communicational work, the Citizens Against the Coup has also organised demonstrations in, among other places, the symbolic avenue Habib Bourguiba in the centre of Tunis. The first demonstration was organised on the 26th of September and gathered around 2000-3000 people in front of the municipal theatre at the Habib Bourguiba Avenue, where they chanted anti-Saied slogans with copies of the constitution in their hands (Meshkal, 2021b). During the autumn, subsequent demonstrations gathered similar and smaller crowds of protestors. They have also organised other demonstrations of symbolic resistance, including a hunger-strike in protest of the authoritarian turn in Tunisia. This lasted over ten days and took place at the turn of the month from December to January (Andalou Agency, 2021b).

Another core strategy of the group has been to build opposition coalitions across ideological dividing lines and between civil society and political parties (Interview 10). An informant, who was one of the de facto leaders of the group, emphasised that "The only line which matters now is that between democrats and non-democrats" (Interview 10). Building on this principle, the group has sought to build an 'innovative' coalition between diverging political and civil society actors in resistance against Saied (Marks, 2022a). The group has been successful in bridging parts of the political landscape, as both Ennahda and 'secular' political parties have joined and supported both the hunger strike and demonstrations. In May 2022, Citizens Against the Coup joined a new initiative called National Salvation Front, which was initiated by left-wing politician Ahmed Najib Chebbi. Chebbi has a long history as a pro-democracy activist and opposition politician under Ben Ali. The National Salvation front was

also joined by five political parties (Ennahda, Qalb Tounes, Karama Coalition, al-Amal, the Movement party) as well as other parliamentarians. The initiative has continued to organise demonstrations and during the referendum campaign they organised public meetings in different regions to call for a boycott of the referendum and a restoration of the 2014 constitution (Al Monitor, 2022a). The demands of the National Salvation Front have as such been consistent with the demands of the Citizens Against the Coup initiative.

While the Citizens Against the Coup have managed to form a coalition of some political parties across ideological divides, this has not extended into the formal and informal civil society. The hunger strike was joined by two human rights organisations, the Committee for the Respect of Liberties and Human Rights in Tunisia and the Tunisian Organisation Against Torture (The National, 2022). Apart from these, CSOs, unions and social movements neither joined nor publicly supported the initiative. Thus, although Citizens Against the Coup have been an important resistance actor against Saied and have managed to mobilise people into the streets, they have not become a unifying movement for the political opposition and informal and formal parts of civil society.

Within the institutionalized civil society, most actors seemed to be in limbo during the autumn of 2021. In an article for the Arab Reform Initiative, Boussen (2022, p. 2) argues that civil society organizations were "surprisingly silent" during the summer and autumn of 2021. A CSO professional referred to his organisations' strategy as a "wait and see approach" (Interview 3). The "wait and see" approach is descriptive for most actors within the institutionalized civil society. For them, the wait-and-see approach has entailed expressing concerns over the potential consequences of Saied's rule and calling for an inclusive national dialogue. In an official statement of Al Bawsala on the 30th of September, the organisation states that the unchecked powers Saied gave himself on the 22nd "can have dangerous repercussions" while it also "expresses concerns over the State of Exception turning into a permanent state"[2]. In the same statement, the organisation urges for a collaborative approach and citizen dialogue to bring forward reforms to transform the political and economic order. This statement illustrates the soft criticism and wait-and-see approach of the CSOs during the autumn of 2021. The soft criticism entails an expression of concern, rather than a full denouncement of Saied's claim of power. Furthermore, as

[2] Official statement. Available at: https://www.albawsala.com/fr/publications/20214842

Marks (2022a) notes, the criticisms also centre on the lack of an inclusive dialogue with civil society organisations.

The wait-and-see approach has furthermore entailed a continuation of ‘routine’ work, albeit with some adjustments to the new political developments. As reflected in the discussion on institutionalized civil society, this entails defining and raising awareness on social problems, engaging in political advocacy, and observing the work of the government and state. For instance, for FTDES, it has entailed continuing to document and raise awareness on issues connecting to environmental issues and economic and social rights. Furthermore, interviewed organisations also explained that they had adjusted their work and priorities because of the political developments (Interviews 3, 12, 13). In Al Bawsala, they continued to monitor the government and give access to information about politics to citizens while they also shifted the main project of monitoring from focusing on the parliament to policies of the government. So, the “wait and see” approach also implies the continued function as watchdogs, critical observers, and advocates for human right, issues of citizenship and democracy, albeit in the partly depoliticized nature of institutionalized NGOs. Rather than clear denouncement and resistance to Saied and his actions, most civil society actors adjusted, continued with their work, and waited to see what Saied’s next move would be.

While the majority of CSO and unions have employed a wait-and-see approach, some unions and professional organisations have taken clearer stances and used more contentious tactics to contest Saied’s actions and their consequences. The journalists’ union, SNJT, has been one of the most vocal in response to especially the increasing limitation and repression of freedom of speech. Their vocality builds on a diagnosis of restrictions on public contestation and free media as deteriorating since the 25th of July. The SNJT has used contentious strategies, such as strikes, demonstrations and sit-ins to resist the experienced restrictions and repression of their work and role (Meshkal, 2022). Although the SNJT’s framing can be described as sector and issue specific, their contention with Saied has still functioned to bring attention and mobilisation against his repressive practices and their consequences. In addition to SNJT, the organisation of Tunisian magistrates (AMT) has also engaged in contentious practices of hunger strikes and demonstrations against Saied’s attack on judiciary independence and firing of judges in May (France 24, 2022a).. This can be seen in relation to the activism and resistance of some professional organisations during the authoritarian era. While protesting and resisting the aspects of the regime which affected their professional practice, these activists and

organisations also fronted a broader rejection of the regime (Gobe & Salaymeh, 2016; Hudáková, 2021).

5.2.3 The constitutional reform process: Critical junctures and co-optation

An informant described the constitutional reforms process as creating some “milestones” which his organisation could work around (Interview 3). The notion of “milestones” relates to discussions on the potential backfiring effect of democratic procedures as a mechanism of legitimation. Dukalskis & Gerschewski (2017, p. 257) point out that the introduction of democratic procedures such as elections can backfire on the authoritarian regime as they can function as “critical junctures” around which the opposition can mobilize. For instance, Rakner (2021) highlights that elections functioned as critical junctures for civil society resisters to mobilise around in Malawi and Zambia. The constitutional reform process’ three stages of procedures, and especially the last stage of referendum, seems to have a similar function create some potential critical junctures for the opposition to mobilise around.

The first stage of the constitutional reform process, the online consultation, was discerned and subsequently criticised by watchdog and electoral observation CSOs. Rather than mobilising for political protests, these CSOs contested the online consultation process through ‘routine’ practices of institutionalised civil society. Al Bawsala, for instance, organised a seminar to which they invited experts to discuss the consultation’s defects and its consequences (Field notes 31.03.22). Thus, the first stage of the protest was not characterised by mobilisation and protests, but rather demobilised forms of criticism in a continuation of the political engagement of CSOs in the autumn. Still, these activities had the function of delegitimising Saied’s framing of the digital consultation as successful in representing the people’s will as they created awareness of its defects and shortcomings as a national consultation process.

In the second stage of the constitutional process, Saied invited some organisations, activists and academics to participate in the National Consultative Committee. The committee was framed as a consultative organ on the central issues in Tunisia and on drafting changes to the constitution. UGTT had up to this point been characterised by cautious support for Saied and with a focus on having impact on economic policies and the negotiations on the new IMF deal (Interview 2, 5, 7). The union declined to participate in the committee and argued that the committee was a rushed process and a “formality where the roles are already determined unilaterally”. The central administration furthermore argued that it excluded “civil forces” (France 24, 2022b). UGTT’s boycott thus seemed to be a significant shift towards resistance

against Saied and his façade democratic procedures. A few weeks later, on the 16th of June, a nation-wide strike of 3 million public sector workers in 150 public agencies was organised by UGTT. The strike was instigated to protest low wages and deteriorating purchasing power and to defend workers' economic and social rights after "the dithering of the government in the face of their legitimate demands" (UGTT official statement, translated version in France24, 2022b). This can be understood as a resistance strategy against Saied and his legitimacy, as they did in the revolution in 2011.

UGTT explicitly denounced the government's handling of the economic demands of the population. At the same time, however, the deputy leader of UGTT publicly announced that the "strike is not political" and that it was rather concerned with the negotiations between UGTT and the government on structural reforms related to the new IMF-deal (Tunisie Numérique, 2022). The strike can thus be viewed as an attack on the legitimacy of the government since it denounces its economic performance and policy agenda, but the 16th of June-strike was not connected to a large purpose of anti-autocratization and democratic defence by the central leadership. The UGTT leadership framed it as a strategy to bring forward negotiations on economic policies and thus viewed the strike within a framework of union-state relations rather than as resistance against autocratization (France 24, 2022e). UGTT has since continued to negotiate with the regime on structural reforms, and they agreed on an increase of public sector wages in September (The National, 2022b). So, rather than shifting into an absolute position of resistance against the regime through mobilising its members to strikes and demonstrations, UGTT has continued to engage with Saied and the regime on economic and social matters in a continuation of their role as a social partner to the state (Zemni, 2013; Netterstrøm, 2016).

While UGTT, together with the law professors, boycotted the Committee, the three other organisations of the dialogue quartet joined the commission. There were other activists and organisations who participated as well, but information is missing about who and how many participated in the commissions (Marks, 2022b). So, these three organisations employed a strategy of engagement with the state and Saied to exert influence. There is, however, a thin line between *engagement with* regime and *co-optation by* the regime in autocratic contexts. As earlier discussed, the committee had effectively no influence over the drafting of the constitution. In Marks' (2022b) interview with a feminist activist and playwriter who participated in the committee, it becomes clear that the members of the committee did not see Saied's final draft or the president of the committee's, Sadiq Belaid, version either. So, the

second stage of the constitutional process did not only function as a critical juncture for mobilisation and resistance, but also as an "invited space" of co-optation through which civil society organisations and activists were used to build legitimacy around the democratic procedures.

The LTDH, however, sought to minimise the legitimising function of their participation. After the constitution draft was made public, the organisation went public to argue that the constitution was not in line with the values and issues the participants in the committee had brought forward nor international human rights. LTDH called on the president to call off the referendum and return to dialogue (L'Economist Maghrebin, 2022). Eventually, the LTDH used the last stage of the constitutional reform as a critical juncture to mobilise around.

The last stage of the constitutional reform process, the referendum, was mobilized around and acted upon by civil society actors, who employed new tactics to resist not only the referendum but also Saied's claim to power. The first 'new' tactic employed was the building of a coalition of civil society organisations, named the Civic Coalition. This was initiated by FTDES, ATFD and SNJT and joined by 35 organisations including civic rather than politically engaged grassroot organisations, grassroot activists and the LTDH and other organisations that had been characterised by conditional support and soft criticism. The coalition engaged in framing activities and fronted a new understanding of the autocratization process. In their official statement, the coalition recognised "a new situation" in Tunisia, characterised by unilateral ruling by a populist president[3]. Saied's rule was furthermore coupled with the deteriorating economic and social situation and a regression of the democracy. As such, the official communication by the coalition signifies a change in the interpretation of Saied and the process he leads, as it moves from expressing concern to denouncing his rule. On the basis of this diagnosis, the coalition organised a demonstration in central Tunis on the 22nd of July. Thus, the mobilisation around the referendum signifies a shift towards new frames and tactics of resistance.

Other watchdog and election observation organisations such as IWatch and Mourakiboun responded to the referendum by using their expertise to fulfil the role as election observers.

[3] Joint statement, available at: https://ftdes.net/ar/tunisie/?fbclid=IwAR1_vWgq8X2_ty649ynsgcs8x284e-FJGeXEw2Ucc1oxFJU3k4f_5nfIPL8

Through their work, irregularities in the execution of the referendum were documented and shared with the Tunisian public.

5.2.4 Summary: Slow, soft, and fragmented

The responses of civil society actors have evolved in interaction with the autocratization strategies of Saied. The responses have varied from mobilisation and resistance through contentious tactics of demonstrations, sit-ins and hunger strikes to compliance and cooperation with Saied in 'invited' spaces. In the autumn of 2021, the response of most civil society organisations could be characterised as a "wait and see" approach to autocratization. This entailed silence, soft criticism and the continuation of routine interactions and work. Discursively, the criticism of Saied and the process was partial rather than a complete diagnosis of his strategies as subverting the democracy. So, resistance was soft and not instantiated in mobilisation and contentious actions. The institutionalised civil society was characterised by a continuation of practices rather than a shift towards more forceful contentious mobilisation.

Tomini et.al. (2022, p. 3) broad definition of resistance as "any activity, or combination of activities" that constitute an "attempt at slowing down, stopping or reverting the actions of the actors responsible for the process of autocratization". The advantage of this broad definition is that it captures manifold strategies from the "visible to overt" (Tomini et.al., 2022, p. 4). In the case of Tunisia, Tomini et.al's (2022) definition can be said to cover both the soft and partial criticism by CSOs during the autumn and the more forceful mobilisation against Saied by first the Citizens against the Coup, SNJT and later the Civic Coalition. The weakness, on the other side, is that it includes a variety of resistance strategies, including those that have little potential for reworking and reverting the process of autocratization.

In Tunisia, civil society responses have varied between more forceful and contentious responses and partial criticism through institutionalised tactics (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 62). Rather than defining these forms as simply as resistance, we can rather place some in *between* resistance and compliance. These two responses, resistance and compliance, can be understood as the extreme points on a spectrum of civil society responses to autocratization. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of civil society resistance and for understanding the variation of impact. Following this, in the case of Tunisia, we can distinguish between more transgressive forms of tactics, including demonstrations, hunger strikes and sit-ins from more institutionalized and contained forms including open letters to

the government and lobbying in "invited spaces" such as the National Dialogue Commission (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 54, Cornwall, 2004). All are attempting at slowing down the autocratization process, but they differ in the forcefulness of their resistance. Furthermore, drawing on Katz (2004, p. 251), resistance can also be understood as involving a "critical consciousness", which entails a coherent and explicit frame of the actors and conditions which create autocratization. Resistance is thus not only demarcated by the tactic employed, but also the frame. As such, we can for instance divide between SNJT's and UGTT's strikes. Figure 5.1 is a first attempt aimed at mapping the different types of responses on the spectrum of resistance and compliance in Tunisia.

The variation of responses from civil society underlines its fragmentation. In the 2010-2011 revolution, a "very broad alliance of different social classes of Tunisian society" were temporarily united in wishing the downfall of Ben Ali and the authoritarian economic and political system (Zemni, 2013, p. 132). There has not been a new broad alliance against autocratization in the last year. The forces and actors within Tunisian civil society have been divided and most actors have been somewhere between resistance and compliance. As a result, there has not been a unification of organisations and actors into a collective opposition movement. The Citizens Against the Coup initiative and later the Salvation Front have been partly successful in unifying parts of the political opposition into a coalition of anti-authoritarianism and mobilising to political protests. This has however not extended into politically-engaged institutionalised civil society, nor the more informal movements and campaigns.

Within the arena of civil society, there seems to be a growing coordination and unification of different organisations and activists and engagement in contentious tactics. However, the

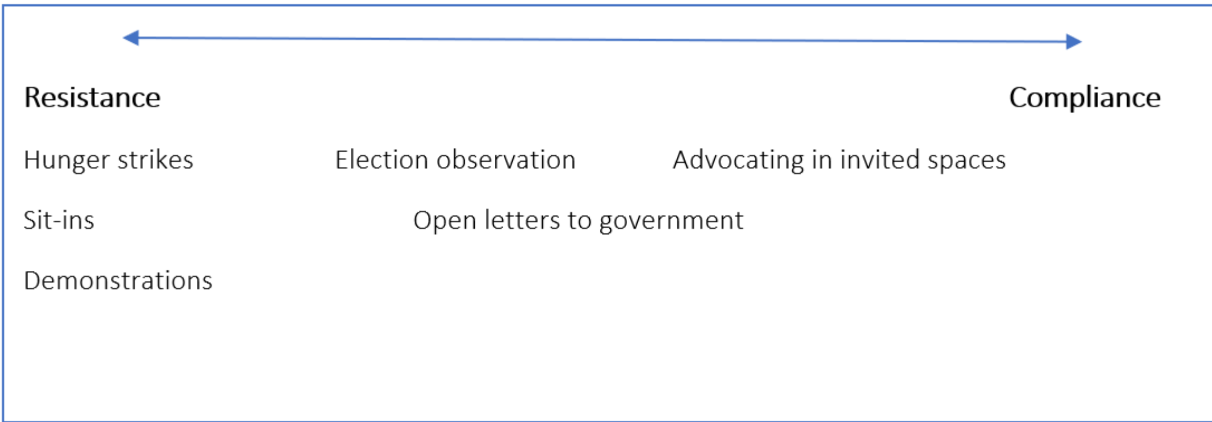

Figure 5.1 From resistance to compliance: The spectrum of civil society response

advancement of resistance frames in the institutionalized and informal civil society has not entailed unification between the political opposition, including the Citizens Against the Coup, and the rest of civil society. The fragmentation of civil and political forces was evident in the mobilisation around the referendum, as the Civic Coalition and a coalition of leftist parties organised a demonstration against the referendum on the 22 of July. The Citizens Against the Coup and the National Salvation Front organised a demonstration of their own the day after (The National, 2022a).

In 2010-2011, civil society organisations, unions and activists engaged in contentious resistance and contributed to organise and politicise a movement for democracy. The autocratization process has not triggered a similar expansion of civil society. So, in contrast to the revolution in 2010-2011, civil society actors have not come together to form a strong "firewall civil society" in response to Saied's dismantling of democratic institutions. Instead, they have been characterised by a diversity of responses, ranging from cooperation to resistance. The question which follows is why resistance in civil society has been so slow, soft, and fragmented rather than unified in an insurgent defence of democracy.

5.3 Understanding responses to autocratization

Through the theoretical concepts of political space and framing, this section seeks to explore why the civil society response have been soft, slow, and fragmented. Political space is understood as the context-specific opportunities and restrictions on civil society agency, both discursive and material (Gleiss, 2017). The concept of framing refers to the 'meaning work' of civil society actors, which is the process of identifying the situation and the actors responsible (*diagnosis*), proposing solution to the problem (*prognosis*) and convincing people to act to change the situation (*motivation*) (Benford & Snow, 2000). The concepts of framing and political space are interrelated. The framing efforts and the resonance of the frames that civil society actors promote must be seen in relation to the political space they operate in, as the political space also consists of established discourses and *counterframing* efforts by other actors.

Viewing the political space and interpretations in civil society as substantially contingent upon Saied's strategies of autocratization and legitimation, this section seeks to explore how civil society actors' institutional and discursive space, perception of their political space and framing of the autocratization process affects their responses.

5.3.1 The political space: Continuation and change

The political space of civil society has been affected by the process of autocratization, but it has also remained unaltered in important ways. The first period of the autocratization process was characterised by dismantling of horizontal checks on power and harassment and military trials of political opponents, especially MPs, politicians, and journalists. Such targeted harassment can be understood as a restrictions on public contestation, and as such restrictions on the political space for civil society resistance. Some civil society actors, however, argued that this was not a new restriction on their political space. A CSO professional reflected that:

> "Regarding oppression, oppression practices have been in place and enforced since 2011. Military trials, corruption, police brutality and infamy laws have all been in place and practiced after the revolution. So, yes, we have seen a rise in military trials against civilians but that also happened before the 25th of July. […] It is a continuation rather than a new thing. It is only new faces, not new threats." (Interview with Informant #3)

A journalist in Inkyfada mirrored this viewpoint:

> "It is not more repression or censorship [after the 25th of July]. It was repression and censorship before the 25th, so things have not really changed. Journalists are beaten up at protests, but that also happened before the 25th. So, it is not more repression or censorship, it is only a continuation of the same."

These statements reflect that the repression is not experienced as affecting the opportunities of civil society political engagement in a new way. Although there has been a rise in military trials as well as travel bans and arrests of politicians, some civil society actors do not perceive this as a new restriction. However, not all civil society actors shared this view. An activist and political prisoner under Ben Ali who has since been engaged in the transitional justice process and participated at the Citizens Against the Coup demonstrations expressed fear of a new situation reminiscent of the Ben Ali era. For him, the situation after the 25th constituted a shift in repression of political contention (Interview 11). So, actors that are differently situated in civil society have differing views on whether the regime's propensity for repression has changed (McAdam & Tarrow, 2019) . Still, the views on repression as old news highlight that civil society actors have operated in a political space restricted by police violence and repression of political dissent post-revolution and that Saied's measures are not a new development. Albeit the existence of repression, the space for civil society engagement and

contestation can be characterised as relatively open and free since the 2011 revolution (Chomiak & Parks, 2020).

Furthermore, Saied's imposed restrictions on political contestation did not chiefly target the institutionalized civil society. This was also expressed by the journalist in Inkyfada:

> "There is still freedom of speech and association, so the civil society continue with their work and have the same role as before. It is still a space to operate normally […]."

She understands the political space for civil society as relatively unchanged since the 25th of July. In the first months, the military trials, travel bans, and arrests targeted mostly politicians, and not civil society activists or professionals. Furthermore, the legal framework regarding civil society organisations' rights to association and funding have not formally changed since the onset of autocratization on the 25th of July. Plans for a new law which would hamper the access to international funding was leaked in March, but it was not carried through. This reflects that the space for the institutionalized civil society was not radically changed through repression or legal limitations, which made it possible to function and work as relatively normally.

In the first days after the 25th, Saied also invited some legacy and key civil society organisations and unions to meetings, including UGTT, LTDH, ATFD and SNJT. This can be seen as the creation of 'invited spaces' in which civil society actors could engage with and voice their concerns regarding the emergency powers, the economic and social situation, and the road ahead (Cornwall, 2004). In Tunisian newspapers, CSO and union members characterised these meetings as a space for exactly this: members of CSOs voiced concern over the measures and articulated their demands to Saied, while he reassured them of the democratic rather than authoritarian ambitions of these measures. In the interviews in March, civil society professionals reflected that the access to, engagement with and influence on governmental officials and policies had been limited since then and fewer than their interactions before the 25th (Interview 3,12,13). This indicates that the meetings were strategic in creating an image of Saied as responsive to civil society.

Saied's rhetoric on the "enemies of the state" has, as discussed earlier, targeted some specific actors. In relation to the proposed changes to the CSOs' legal framework in February, Saied claimed that civil society organisations are "extensions of foreign powers, which seek to control the Tunisian people through their money" and that they serve as "cover for the

financing of political parties" (English translation from Cole et al., 2022). So, although the law did not materialize, Saied formulated a discursive attack on the intentions and role of civil society organisations. Saied's delegitimization of the professionalised civil society built on an existing discourse on foreign-funded civil society as serving a foreign power's agenda in Tunisia, which Saied also had employed before the 25th of July (Informant 12). These statements of Saied can be viewed as attempts to delegitimise the institutionalized civil society and restrict their mobilising potential. They also stand in stark contrast to the previously mentioned attempts to frame himself as an ally of civil society, further supporting that presenting himself as an ally was merely strategic.

Altogether, the political space for institutionalized civil society has been limited by the institutional changes and discourses of the autocratization process, but it has been sufficiently open to continue to work and function largely as before the 25th. Although the harassment of political opponents and the exclusion of civil society organisations from engaging with the state after the initial opening in July posed some restrictions on their practices and influence, there was nevertheless space for the continuation of the work and forms of contention of the institutionalized civil society. Rather than being forced into a new role by an autocratization process that threatens their existence and function, civil society organisations could choose between continuing with their practices and agendas or engaging in new contentious tactics and develop new agendas. Saied endeavoured to frame the emergency measures and himself as non-threatening for the democracy, including civil society and public contestation. This can partly explain the initial conditional support and its evolution into a wait-and-see approach. Still, the slow, soft, and fragmented resistance to the autocratization process cannot solely be explained by *not* being forced into a new mode of resistance. To understand the slow and soft response, how the civil society actors' perceive of the autocratization process, their role, mobilising potential, and political space must also be considered.

5.3.2 Creating a diagnosis: Interpreting the autocratization process

The theory of framing highlights that for mobilisation and political protest to take place, civil society actors must develop a frame diagnosis which identifies the problem and who to hold responsible (Benford & Snow, 2000). To resist autocratization, civil society actors must perceive a leader's actions as subversive of democracy.

Marks (2022, p. 5) highlights that the process of diagnosing the autocratization process as such has not been straightforward in the Tunisian civil society: "[…] the question of whether Saied had undertaken a coup was the focus of intense debate among Tunisians and human rights and democracy advocates" in the months after the 25th. This is reflected in the official position on conditional support taken by the majority of CSOs to the emergency measures launched in July. There were few organisations and activists who framed it as a 'coup', and in statements during the autumn, autocratization was framed as a potential effect rather than an actual and ongoing process. In an interview with a CSO professional, he reflected that "The big national CSOs did not release clear statements on the situation, whether they supported Saied or not. They were silent." (Interview 12).

The lack of identification of the autocratization process was also evident in conversations with CSO professionals and activists. There was a strong perception that civil society had the will and power to protect democracy, but this was not coupled with the actions of Saied (Boussen, 2022b). To illustrate, the Inkyfada journalist and activist emphasised that "We will go out on the streets and defend our democracy if it is needed" (Interview 4). Another CSO professional reflected that the organisation would go into the streets as "an ultimate tool" against events or laws that threatened democracy (Interview 13). These statements reflect a strong belief in civil society as a defender of democracy, but the phrase "if it is needed" makes apparent that enacting such measures to defend democracy is not viewed as necessary *yet*.

The autocratization process Saied leads have been swift compared to other contemporary processes of autocratization, but it has still maintained a legal and democratic-procedural 'façade'. In the first period, the executive aggrandisement, military presence in democratic spaces and harassment of politicians were framed as legal emergency measures to restart the democracy. Saied framed it as temporary emergency measures to correct Tunisia's democratic path and confront vestiges of the past system. The first component, the temporary emergency measures, serves to obscure the autocratization process through framing it as a legal and necessary evil in a time of crisis. The time-limit of the measure seemed to be important for acceptance by civil society forces as initial statements emphasised that these measures should only be temporary, with resistance or at least criticism growing as they were extended.

A second component of Saied's legitimation was the claim that his actions were needed to break with the old system and build a new democracy. This claim was bolstered by his invitations to civil society organisations and claims to engage with 'uncorrupted' Tunisians to

build a ‘real’ democracy. A CSO professional stated that: “We thought we would be included in a participatory process and that it would be a clear timeframe to the measures.” (Interview 3). CSOs and unions assumed that civil society would be included in a participatory dialogue process led by Saied. This is also reflected in organisations’ official communication, where they consistently call for Saied to start a participatory process and national dialogue. This goes a way to explain the inconsistent ‘wait and see’ approach by major civil society organisations and unions. Marks (2022, p. 11) aptly describes the inconsistent position of UGTT, which can also be extended to other CSOs and unions, as being “incapacitated” by its “shifting perceptions of whether Saied will or won’t extend a hand”. Saied’s feigned engagement with the people sustained a belief of civil society's inclusion in a national dialogue. Marks (2022) reflected in January 2022 that a consequence of Saied’s unwillingness to engage with civil society actors after the last weeks of July would push them to opposition. As earlier discussed, when the constitutional process moved along without any real dialogue and meaningful participation resistance picked up steam in the Tunisian civil society.

Evidently, the character of the autocratization process has affected the interpretative work of civil society organisations, unions, and movements. Lührmann & Lindberg (2019, p. 1106) argue that more “obscure” processes of autocratization are less likely to stoke anti-autocratization mobilisation in civil society. This seems to be the case in Tunisia. Through legitimising the executive aggrandisement as an emergency measure and a point of departure for an inclusive process to build a ‘real’ democracy, Saied has “obscured” the process and been rather successful in demobilising parts of the civil society. A crucial part of Saied’s frame was that executive aggrandisement was a necessary first step to build a real democracy and return Tunisia to the revolutionary path. This suggests that the civil society response must also be viewed in relation to the post-revolutionary democratic experience.

5.3.3 The limitations and discourses of the last political system

During the autumn and spring, the Citizens Against the Coup employed a different frame than most civil society actors. Their frame diagnoses Saied’s actions on the 25th and onwards as a coup and rejects his self-presentation as a democratic saviour. Furthermore, the initiative divides the political class between anti-democrats and democrats: there is those who have respected democratic norms and rules and those who have not. This can be described as a transformative repolarisation strategy, as it seeks to shift the axis of polarization to non-democrats vs. democrats (Somer et al., 2021). Following this, the Citizens Against the Coup

called for a restoration of the 2014 Constitution and parliament for a short period of time to arrange new elections to parliament and put in place the missing horizontal checks on power. The division between anti-democrats and democrats is a transformative agenda as it seeks to confront Saied's polarising discourse (Interview 12). Still, this frame has not been too successful in gaining resonance with other organisations and forces in the civil society.

In several conversations and interviews with people engaged in the civil society, statements in line with "Maybe this was what Tunisia needed" and "We needed a change" was repeated (Fieldnotes; Interview 14, 7, 8). Thus, support for Saied, or at least openness to his project and vision, also extends into civil society. Some social movements and protest campaigns addressed at unemployment, economic rights and transitional justice actively support Saied and his vision for a new political order (Interview 3). Activists in the unemployed graduates movement, for instance, was engaged in the protests on the 25th of July and celebrated as Saied froze the parliament and dismissed the government (Meshkal, 2021a). Albeit not representative for the whole of the informal civil society oriented on issues of economic rights and justice, this highlights that Saied had a strong support base in the informal civil society, especially in the regions, which has consequences for the ability to build coalitions between social movements and formal organisations (Interview 3, 4).

Furthermore, some members in formal civil society organisations and unions have also been supportive of Saied and his measures. CSOs professionals described that their organisations as well as broader networks of organisations and activists were engaged in internal debates on how to relate to Saied, and that both positions of support and resistance were taken (Fieldnotes 31.03.22; Interview 12,13,14). This ambivalence, or balancing of different positions, within organisations can thus partly explain the 'in limbo position' and silence of many organisations in response to Saied's measures. LTDH (Tunisian League of Human Rights) was brought up as one example of an organisation in which the members were divided between supporters and sceptics (Interview 11). The LTDH's central leadership decided to participate in the National dialogue commission in the constitutional reform process. This was however met with resistance from some of its members. 20 local chapters rejected this decision in an open letter and called for boycott of the commission (Business News, 2022a). In addition to the local chapters, former leaders of the LDTH, including leaders under the authoritarian era, also released a public statement in which they criticised the LTDH's participation in the "pseudo-dialogue" (Business News, 2022b).

LDTH is just one example of internal differences in organizations during the last year. Marks (2022) argues that the UGTT leadership's lack of a clear stance on Saied during the autumn and winter connects with a strategy to avoid alienating pro-Saied members before the leadership election to its congress in February, in which the leader Noureddine Taboui was re-elected. So, support of Saied's measures, or at least an openness to it, was somewhat present in Tunisian formal and informal civil society. The question which follows is thus what can explain the existence of openness and support to Saied's project in civil society and lack of resonance of the Citizens Against the Coup's frame.

The Citizens Against the Coup's transformative dividing line between democrats and non-democrats does not resonate for some within the institutionalized civil society. This may be a consequence of their disbelief in the democratic and liberal values of the Ennahda party (Informant 5; Marks, 2022a). In a conversation with a partner to UGTT and LTDH, the informant argued that a danger after the 25th was whether 'Islamists' would take up arms against Saied, although there were no indications of their intent to do so at the time, illustrates the scepticism towards Ennahda (Interview 2). This disbelief must be seen in relation to the dynamics between these actors during the dictatorship and post-revolution events and developments. As earlier discussed, the Ben Ali regime used the threat of Islamism to the progressive Tunisian society as a tactic to divide and conquer the opposition, including the civil society (Haugbølle & Cavatore, 2012). The employment of this tactic, which was rooted in the violence performed by some Islamists, is part of the explanation to a deep-seated scepticism towards Ennahda (Interview 5).

Furthermore, the first years of democratisation in Tunisia were characterised by an aggravated security situation partly due to violence and disruptive tactics by Salafists and jihadist groups. This included political assassinations of two high profile leftist activists, Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi in 2013. Ennahda, as a major party in government, was blamed for flirting with and even supporting these extremist groups (Marks, 2022b; Interview 5). In addition, legal propositions of Ennahda parliamentarians including the phrase "women are complimentary to men" were seen as evidence of Ennahda's conservative and regressive values (Zemni, 2015). Although Ennahda has changed its relation to political Islam by naming themselves as moderate Muslims, separating their religious and political activities and engaging in compromises and consensus building within a democratic framework, all have not been convinced of their adherence to liberal and democratic values.

For the unconvinced, accepting a frame that identifies Ennahda as democrats is unthinkable. As such, some activists within the 'liberal' and 'secular' civil society view Saied, who has also pointed out Ennahda as an enemy, as a better alternative than returning to a political system dominated by Ennahda (Marks 2022a; Interview 5; Interview 11). The mistrust in Ennahda as a democratic actor from parts of the civil society is thus one factor accounting for the conditional support of Saied's political leadership during the last year and absence of alliances between the political opposition and civil society. Rather than adopting the frame of Saied as a non-democrat and the rest of the politician as democrats, this faction also frames Ennahda as "non-democrats". Yet this might be changing as Saied continues to front conservative values. After the announcement of the new constitution and later electoral law, organisations such as the women's rights organisation ATFD have become increasingly vocal against the conservative values of Saied on gender issues and religion.

For others, rejection of the Citizens Against the Coup's frame is not based on an ideological rejection of Ennahda, but rather the rejection of the last political system and political parties' lack of effort to deepen democracy through economic, social, and political reforms. Ennahda, as a major party within this system, is still denounced based on their lack of transformative politics especially in questions of socio-economic justice (Marks, 2022, Interview 5). The experience of democracy for civil society actors has, as for Tunisian people in general, been characterised by expanded freedoms but also by disappointments in the form of limitations to the transitional justice process, reforms to address socioeconomic inequality and corruption (Interview 3, 12, 13). For some, this had led to an openness to Saied's project and his self-presentation as different and 'clean' from the politics of the past (Interview 7 and 8).

For other civil society activists and organisations, the rejection of the last political order does not entail support of Saied. Still, these actors have struggled to formulate an alternative vision for Tunisia's future which counter Saied's autocratic solution. In an interview with France 24, Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights' (FTDES) head of communication Romdhane Ben Amour stated that: "The problem is that we do not want to be viewed as actors defending the old system." (France 24, 2021, own translation). Marks (2022a) defines this faction within the opposition as the 'both-ands', as they are concerned with both denouncing the last political order and Saied's rule, while mostly focused on the first objective. Their framing can thus be seen as adhering to Saied's, and many other Tunisians, framing of the failure of the last political system and class, and entails a non-adherence to the Citizens against the Coup (Interview 3, 12, 13). Citizens Against the Coup's proposed

solution of returning the parliament, as well as their coalition with political parties in parliament, is viewed as not transformative enough. By ruling out the restoration of the democratic system and players of the last decade, these civil society actors and organisations must develop an alternative and transformative democratic vision to Saied's authoritarian one, which can unite and mobilise people (Somer et al., 2021). This has yet to come, and consequently this group has been stuck in limbo.

5.4 Summary

The 2010-2011 revolution saw the coming together of social groups across geographic, socioeconomic, and ideological divides in a demand for dignity and freedom. Although not a driving force, organisations with experience with anti-authoritarian resistance and resources sustained and supported the movement. An expanding civil society after the revolution opened for new forms of political participation and contestation. An institutionalised and professionalised civil society gained an important role in engaging with, contesting, and holding the state and politicians accountable. This institutional civil society was, however, to a large degree disconnected from the movements and protest campaigns of an 'informal' civil society, which centred on socio-economic rights and justice.

The response of the civil society to autocratization is characterised as soft, slow, and fragmented. The institutionalised civil society has to a large degree deployed a "wait and see approach" which has included silence and cautious criticism, but also the continuation of 'routine' activities and strategies to hold the state accountable. There have been few alliances between the political opposition and the institutionalised civil society, and furthermore also few between the different actors within the civil society. Resistance has grown during the spring, as the three stages of the constitutional process have been used as critical junctures to voice criticism and mobilise. However, it can hardly be characterized as a shift toward a "firewall civil society" (Bernhard, 2020).

The soft and slow character of resistance can be ascribed to the nature of the autocratization process and the democracy that preceded it. The process of autocratization did not entail a radical curtailing of the political space of civil society, which created a choice between continuing or changing tactics. Furthermore, Saied's legitimisation of the autocratization process as a necessary evil to redress Tunisian democracy was initially accepted by many civil society actors. This also entailed an expectation of a new national dialogue in which they

would be included. As the ‘national dialogue’ progressed with no substantial participation or dialogue, resistance grew. So, Saied’s legitimation efforts and the moderate changes of the political space successfully obscured the autocratization process. The cautious support of Saied and lack of alliances are furthermore related to disappointment with political leaders and parties and the substance of the democracy. For some factions, Ennahda’s position and influence was seen as a threat equalling Saied. Others reject a return to the last political system and as such also cooperation with the political class of this system, but this faction lacks a transformative democratic agenda to counter Saied’s autocratic solution. As a result, civil society actors have been stuck in a position of limbo between resistance and compliance.

CHAPTER 6 Conclusion

Through diving into the case of Tunisia, this thesis has sought to contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of autocratization and civil society response. The research has been guided by the two overarching research questions:

i. What characterises the autocratization process in Tunisia?
ii. What characterises and explains civil society's response to autocratization?

The case study is built on digital and in-place fieldwork in Tunis in which visual, textual, and oral data were gathered. The research questions have been explored through a theoretical vantage point of autocratization and civil society response as a matter of contentious politics. This entails viewing these processes as contentious, relational, and open-ended. It has furthermore focused on both the material and discursive aspects of civil society response to autocratization. The analysis has explored how strategies of autocratization and autocratic legitimisation have affected the strategies, frames, and political space of civil society in Tunisia. In the next section, I account for the main findings before I move on to reflect on their implications for further research.

6.1 Main findings

The autocratization process in Tunisia shares many of its characteristics with contemporary processes of autocratization, but it also has important contextual characteristics.

The autocratization process is driven by a democratically elected and populist president. Kais Saied, together with other new and populist parties and politicians, came to power in 2019 by fuelling existing democratic discontentment with a populist rhetoric on building a true democracy by returning the power to the people and away from corrupt elites who had "hijacked" the revolution. The existing democratic discontent steamed from a disappointment with the democratic outcome of the revolution, especially regarding socio-economic progress and redistribution. This reflects the lack of ability and willingness by post-revolution politicians to substantiate formal democratic institutions with transformative political, economic, and social reforms. This highlights that the period before the 25th of July 2021 was characterised by stagnation rather than democratic deepening, and that the division between established democratic politicians and new, anti-democratic politicians is not as clear-cut in Tunisia as it is in other cases.

The autocratization process in Tunisia has been *swifter* than other contemporary processes in democracies, and it has first and foremost targeted horizontal checks on executive power. Under the guise of a state of emergency, Saied has dismantled almost all independent checks on presidential power and ruled unilaterally through decrees. This rule was largely formalised in the new constitution in July 2022. While it has been a swift process, it has still been partial and gradual. Not all sides of the political system have been radically transformed in the last year, and there has still been space for public contestation. Importantly, Saied, assisted by the military, has used repressive tactics toward especially political opponents but also journalists and activists, but it has not been a radical attack on all actors and spaces of public contention. The dismantlement of horizontal accountability institutions as well as attacks on opponents and the media have been spread out over the year rather than implemented all at once.

The case study has furthermore found that the autocratization process has been ‘obscured’ by populist rhetoric and democratic-procedural narratives and measures, which highlight the centrality of autocratic legitimisation. By building on and intensifying the populist narrative on the threat of the established political parties to the Tunisians democracy and their responsibility for the economic and health crisis Tunisia faced, Saied legitimised the emergency measures as a necessary evil to rebuild democracy. In January, he started a process of constitutional reform with proclaimed representative and participatory procedures, in an attempt to build a democratic-procedural façade to a non-representative process to formalise his powers.

The character and legitimisation of the autocratization process have had important effects on the development of civil society resistance. Civil society response to autocratization is found to be *soft, slow,* and *fragmented*. There has not been a large-scale mobilisation and coordination in defence of the democracy. The vantage point of the analysis has been the institutionalized and politically-oriented civil society, which was established after the revolution. These civil society organisations employed a ‘wait and see’ approach during the autumn of 2021 in await to be included in the national dialogue Saied promised to initiate. They used institutionalised and contained forms of contention to criticise the measures of Saied and the lack of dialogue rather challenging his claim to power through contentious tactics. Resistance has grown over the course of the spring, and the steps in the constitutional reform were used as critical junctures to work and mobilise around. Still, civil society response has been largely muted by the legitimisation narratives and procedures and the gradual and partial nature of the autocratization process.

There has not been a coming together of the political opposition and the institutionalized and informal civil society to form a counter-power to the autocratization process. One civil society group, the Citizens Against the Coup, has tried to build a coalition across dividing lines in the political opposition and between civil society and the political opposition, but its success has been limited to joining parts of the political opposition. This lack of coalitions is explained by the character and interpretations of the post-revolution democracy and its politicians. Most civil society actors agree that the democracy was flawed in important ways and are discontent with the major political parties. For some factions, this is also rooted in an ideological rejection of the Islamist party Ennahda, which has been a key figure on the political scene in Tunisia. For most, their own and the public perception of the failure of the last political system have limited their ability to mobilise against Saied and the autocratization process. While not wanting to defend the last political system, they have as of yet not been able to form and express a transformative and democratic agenda that counters Saied's claim of power. Consequently, civil society has been stuck in an *in a limbo* position between compliance and resistance.

These findings point to the need for a nuanced approach to civil society response to autocratization. Rather than viewing the variety of responses as binary categories of resistance or compliance, civil society response to autocratization should be viewed as a spectrum ranging from resistance to compliance. This enables locating and analysing different responses and their impact and force.

6.2 Looking forward

This thesis has taken the institutionalised and politically-oriented civil society as the vantage point and viewed the more informal movements and protests campaigns in relation to this. Although it finds that there has been few points of collaboration and connections between these spheres of civil society before and during the autocratization process, more research is needed on how actors in the informal civil society have responded and related to the autocratization process and to the dynamics and interactions between these two spheres of civil society. Thus, further research is needed to understand how the autocratization process have affected the informal civil society and the potentials for bridging these two spheres of civil society into a common agenda of resistance against autocratization.

The aim of this thesis has been to contribute to in-depth qualitative research on the dynamics of autocratization and resistance. The framework of contentious politics has been a valuable

theoretical vantage point for analysing these contextual dynamics. The case study of Tunisia suggests some dynamics which should be further investigated in new case studies, especially in other cases of autocratization in new democracies. This including but is not limited to 'in-between' responses to partial autocratization, the lack of cooperation between civil society and political opposition and the mobilising capacity of institutionalized and partly foreign-funded civil societies. The discursive aspects of autocratic legitimisation and resistance counter-framing should also be further investigated. Thus, this thesis is one case study on the contentious politics of autocratization and civil society response, and many more are needed to broaden and deepen our understanding of a significant and troubling contemporary phenomena.

The case of Tunisia as a new democracy has shown that processes of autocratization and civil society response must be seen in relation to the outcome and substance of democracy. In Tunisia, electoral democratic institutes were established, but democracy was not substantiated by democratic politics to enhance socio-economic redistribution and equality and popular participation and representation. As such, the Tunisian democracy has been difficult to defend for civil society actors facing autocratization. The implication is that an important step in hindering autocratization and creating democratic resilience in new democracies is to not only build democratic institutions of accountability but also to substantiate these with democratic politics (Stokke & Törnquist, 2013).

Lastly, I want to emphasise that regime change is an open-ended process. Processes of autocratization and democratization are influenced and determined by the contentious relations between state and society. The autocratic political development of the last year does not entail the failure and non-fit of democracy in Tunisia or the MENA region, and this thesis must not be read as a eulogy of the Tunisian democracy. It rather highlights that democratisation must also entail socio-economic reforms. Tunisians have and will continue to work towards dignity, freedom, and social justice in different ways and on different scales, many of which are not accounted for here. December 2022 will see another critical juncture for resistance, as parliamentary elections will take place.

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