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## **Reshaping state / local communities relations in Tunisia: The socio-cultural and institutional challenges of the decentralization project**

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### **Abstract**

International development agencies believe that by adopting institutional reforms based on the best practices that have proved effective elsewhere, so-called « developing countries » could take their places in the globalised economy. Based on a case study carried out on the implementation challenges of a decentralization project in Tunisia, I will argue by using an interpretive approach that this thesis is not sustained. This article shows that institutions cannot be reduced to their technical functions but that they are based on particular collective imaginaries that ground what is legitimate or not and structure the relationship of individuals to power and the meaning given to their actions. It encourages the consideration of cultural framework of meaning; these local cultural references structure the governance modalities of a society, understood in terms of the modalities of exercise of power in a given group (state, company, local authority, etc.). It advocates the necessity to move from a technic- prone approach in the implementation of institutional changes towards a socio-cultural approach that integrates the local expectations of what "good governance" should be and on which depends the legitimacy of institutions and their appropriation by local populations.

**Key words:** decentralization, governance, public management, institutional change, national cultures, Tunisia

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**Abstract:** International development agencies believe that by adopting institutional reforms based on the best practices that have proved effective elsewhere, so-called « developing countries » could take their places in the globalized economy. Based on a case study carried out on the implementation challenges of a decentralization project in Tunisia, I will argue by using an interpretive approach that this thesis is not sustained. This article shows that institutions cannot be reduced to their technical functions but that they are based on particular collective imaginaries that ground what is legitimate or not and structure the relationship of individuals to power and the meaning given to their actions. It encourages the consideration of cultural framework of meaning; these local cultural references structure the governance modalities of a society, understood in terms of the modalities of exercise of power in a given group (state, company, local authority, etc.). It advocates the necessity to move from a technic- prone approach in the implementation of institutional changes toward a socio-cultural approach that integrates the local expectations of what “good governance” should be and on which depends the legitimacy of institutions and their appropriation by local populations.

### **1 Introduction**

Since the early 1990s, the context of international cooperation in development has imposed “good governance” as a key challenge for development policies. The challenge for the so-called “developing” countries has been to set up “good institutions,” which are often inspired

by the model of Western liberal states, to ensure economic progress. A toolbox designed to ensure both economic efficiency (privatization, reduction of the state's scope of intervention, market orientation, etc.) and formal democracy (transparency, decentralization, free elections, etc.) has therefore been widespread. The institutional reforms that beneficiary countries were required to adopt, even if only formally, have been reduced to their technical and managerial dimensions. The main aim was to ensure the proper functioning of organizations and institutions by setting out clear rules and technical procedures, ensuring principles of good governance: transparency, responsibility, fairness, and accountability. The implicit assumption was that only the formalization of institutions (rules) and their universal application (detached from people) is able to free individuals from the traditional personal ties that are supposed to “hamper development.” Thus, governance was first defined as a technique for the production of rules, norms, and procedures, and, in a second step, as a means of responding to diverse interests (Duchastel, 2004).

These “good governance” recommendations ignore the influence of social relations, culture, history, and power relations on the regulation of relations between citizens and the state. These recommendations are derived from the tradition/modernity dichotomy established by the theory of modernization. This vision certainly continues to influence how development challenges are formulated and sheds light on the persistence of the postulate that only the pursuit of a linear and univocal process of the formalization of universal rules is capable of freeing individuals from the arbitrariness of traditional links and achieving the coveted modernization. It is not surprising, then, to see that these reforms are met by resistance from local populations everywhere (Yousfi, 2010). As a result, states find it difficult to reconcile two divergent and sometimes contradictory requirements: international legitimacy involving the adoption of the

standards imposed by donors and which condition development aid and national legitimacy vis-à-vis local populations.

Mainly inspired by the contributions of political science and economic history, several studies now question the hegemony of the discourse of best institutional practices. As an example, Rodrik (2005) emphasizes the importance of experimentation processes and of taking into account the political context in the evolution of institutions. Chang (2007) suggests that institutional change is first and foremost a “political act” that determines the definition of rights and obligations, in turn determining the institutional arrangements put in place. A commonality between these critics is that taking into account the local context is mainly focused on the dynamics of local power games. However, little attention is paid to the common cultural references shared by the actors that, beyond the diversity of interests and power relationships, condition the expectations of what a “well-ordered” society should be and shape the local reception of the so-called best practices (d'Iribarne, 2003).

By taking a more complex and contextualized view of the process by which the Western hegemony (mainly American) of “good governance” model is effectively challenged in the context of the decentralization reform in Tunisia, this paper aims to make contributions at two levels. On a theoretical level, I will argue, by using d'Iribarne's (1989, 2009) conceptualization of culture, which we can break away from the so-called best practices prevalent in the mainstream discourse only if we understand the complexity of the relationship between individual agency and cultural continuity in institutional change. I will highlight how national cultures produce their own forms of transgression and resistance to the imposed Western standards. On an empirical level, I will detail the relationship between the decentralization requirements imposed by aid donors, their perception by the local actors, and the cultural

expectations of what good governance should be. My aim is to show that resistance to the American model of “good governance” is a multilayered process in which the dynamics of local power relationships and the local cultural framework of meaning jointly shape the backdrop against which Tunisians reinterpreted and resisted the imposed institutional reform of decentralization.

In what follows, I will begin by describing the way that culture has been integrated into the institutional economics framework to explain governance reform challenges. Then, after introducing the context of the study and the research methodology adopted, I will point out how decentralization, highlighted in the Tunisian constitution and consensually accepted by the political class, is perceived by the administration, by civil society actors and by municipal councils. Moreover, I will identify the cultural references that structure the local expectations of what good governance should be and that condition the appropriation of the institutional reform in progress. I will highlight the fact that, beyond a discourse that might seem at first sight universal, the meaning given to this reform is rooted in a local historical and cultural context. In conclusion, I will try to draw general recommendations concerning the influence of cultural context on the establishment of effective institutions through the lessons of this case study.

## **2 Does culture matter to governance reform?**

There is increasing recognition in this literature (new institutional economics) that high-quality institutions can take a multitude of forms and that economic convergence does not necessarily entail convergence in institutional forms (Freeman, 2000; Meisel, 2004; North, 1981, 1987). There is no “one best way” to secure economic success. As an illustration, Japan, the United States, and Europe have managed to generate roughly similar levels of wealth for their

citizens, but the prevailing rules of the game are very different in Japanese-style and American-style capitalism (Rodrik, 2005). The implication is that transferring the formal political and economic rules of successful Western market economies to “developing countries” is not a sufficient condition for good economic performance or good governance (North, 1994). In spite of increasing recognition in the economic literature that there are different high-quality institutional models, this literature does not clearly tell us whether diversity merely reflects efficient solutions to different problems derived from different starting points or whether there are many equally efficient institutions that can be applied to solve the same problem.

North (1994) argues that, while formal rules can be changed overnight, informal rules change only gradually. Hence, the evolution of the norms of behavior that will support and legitimize new rules is a lengthy process, and it is by the development of the rule of law and the protection of civil and political freedoms that “developing countries” can achieve long-term economic growth. Thus, the attempt of the “new institutional economics” to integrate culture within economic analysis arrives at the same old-fashioned view as the other approaches. This perspective assumes that traditional culture is a dead hand that blocks development; it ends up reproducing the tradition/modernity dichotomy and, as a consequence, has confined the role of culture to being a constraint on development (Douglas, 1987, 2004; Yousfi, 2010).

Similarly, in the world of development agencies, it is argued that, because many developing and transitional economies lack a clearly defined and secure private property rights system, “good” policies based on “correct” theories recommended by development economists have failed to work. In other words, the institutional argument is being coined to suggest that the development policies and theories were never wrong. These policies failed to work only because the countries implementing them did not have the right institutions for the “right” policies to

work. In addition, the empirical research on national institutions has generally only focused on the protection of property rights and the rule of law, narrowing the spectrum of the comparison and hindering an explanation of what is happening in the real world (Storper, 2005).

In this regard, d'Iribarne (2003) emphasizes that the importance given to the “enforcement of property rights” as a critical ingredient for building good governance that is able to achieve economic development does not reflect a “universal” criterion. The author shows that this framework is rooted in the specific American conception of a “well-ordered society,” which links the idea of freedom to property. He suggests that there are different ways to resolve collective action problems. Each society develops its own methods of collective problem solving that both build its governing institutions and affect individual incentives. However, the power games are everywhere, and the actors mobilize according to their own interests and according to the different sources of power legitimacy. In this regard, the pursuit of individual interests or the construction of a “common” interest is interpreted according to a local framework of meaning that will be different from one country to another (d'Iribarne ,1989).

These references will give shape to the pursued strategies, determine the expectations in relation to “good governance,” and condition the appropriation of institutional changes. These ideas constitute points of reference around which compromises between the different social and political forces are possible and that may allow for the pacification of social relations and the construction of an effective institutional system guaranteeing economic and political stability. Such cultural references must be taken into account not as constraints that mechanically determine behaviors but as indispensable language to be mastered to guarantee the local appropriation of the institutional change.

In the so-called “developed” countries, the modernization movement has been largely



endogenous, and the rules that guarantee effective cooperation between the public authorities and local populations are far from identical. The historical analysis of what differentiates the institutional systems that have been put in place shows that the evolution of institutions remains strongly marked over time by the sociocultural context specific to each of the countries concerned (d'Iribarne & Henry, 2016). An analysis also shows that institutions cannot be reduced to their official functions but are based on particular collective images that ground what is or is not legitimate and structure the relationships between individuals and authorities and the meaning given to their actions. This observation shows that the challenges of institutional change cannot be reduced solely to the nature of the political and socioeconomic challenges facing a society in each era of its history. This perspective encourages the consideration of cultural norms; these norms structure the governance modalities of a society, which are understood in terms of the modalities of the exercise of power in a given group (state, company, local authority, etc.). It is, therefore, necessary to move from a technical approach to the implementation of institutional changes toward a sociocultural approach that integrates the local expectations of what "good governance" should be and on which the legitimacy of institutions and their appropriation by local people depend (d'Iribarne, 2003).

Such an analysis helps us to understand the historical processes that have produced the combination of continuity and change, resistance and innovation, marking the evolution of institutions. To better grasp the issues conditioning the implementation of stable institutional reform in the so-called developing countries, I will provide an interpretive cultural perspective on the nature of the dynamics triggered by institutional change. To carry out this analysis, I will rely on a case study carried out in Tunisia in May and June 2016 dealing with the project of setting up a new code of local authorities, which fits into a more global framework of a

decentralization project.

In this paper, I will focus on how culture provides benchmarks for elected officials, civil society actors, and municipal officials and agents to both interpret current changes and assess the actions of policy makers. While keeping in mind the classical difficulties faced by all countries experiencing a revolutionary process in the establishment of a stable new political and social order, this paper intends to study, through the example of the reform of the code of local authorities, how the specific political culture governing the organization of social relations in Tunisia can be taken into account in the new institutional architecture. Indeed, this reform that reshapes the relationship between the state and local authorities as well as relations between citizens and local communities summarizes the tensions marking the process of the reinvention of the relationship with power, supposedly breaking with the old regime after the December 17th popular uprisings. The case study therefore offers a particularly rich laboratory in which to explore the conditions for the establishment of viable, legitimate, and universally accepted institutions.

### **3 Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Context of the study: decentralization, a revolutionary claim?***

The new independent Tunisian state (1956) inherited the mode of military bureaucratic government used by the French administration, which aimed to control the rebel regions of the interior, fight against an ancient tribal system, and subject them to a highly centralized government. Regional planning as well as economic development were, under both presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the object of a centralizing conception of the

state and a unitary vision of the nation that was dominated by the alliance between the Sahelian and Tunisois elites, which has largely accentuated regional inequalities (Ayeb, 2011; Hibou, Bono, Meddeb, & Tozy, 2015).

During the Ben Ali era, the choice of economic liberalization adopted in 1986 under pressure from international donors was associated with a discourse on decentralization that included the importance of regional development and the urgency of the fight against regional disparities. However, the few legal and administrative changes made did not make it possible to triumph over a very centralist and clientelist conception of power (Hibou et al., 2015). A technocratic approach to development combined with authoritarian power helped turn wishful thinking about decentralization into a redeployment of a centralizing mode of government that serves the interests of the political and economic elites. The various economic reforms supported by donors that reinforce selective development trends through a growing metropolization have maintained both the dysfunctions of the Tunisian economy and the marginal status of inland regions, reducing them to a mere reservoir of labor and natural resources (Dhaher, 2010; Mouhoud, 2012; Salman, 2017). These structural political and economic dynamics in the formation of the Tunisian state have not only shaped the relationships among individuals, groups, and public authorities but also regulated the relations between the territories and the center.

The popular uprising launched on December 17, 2011, following the Bouazizi self-immolation, brought to light the territorial inequalities and the feeling of injustice experienced by the populations of the interior regions, which were generated by fifty years of asymmetric development. In addition, the revolution also revealed the fragility of the municipalities. The Tunisian municipalities are unable to assume their classical functions because of a lack of

financial resources and inadequate equipment and infrastructure. It is responsibility of the central government to find a solution to this difficulty. Thus, the decentralization and regionalization that must end this social and territorial injustice are among the reforms that are undeniably the subject of a national consensus.

Considered by many to be “revolutionary” and described as “the most successful chapter of the constitution” by various experts and civil society actors, the chapter dedicated to “local authority” in the new constitution of 2014 includes a redefinition of the territorial division (introducing districts as superior regional councils). In addition, this chapter establishes a set of principles for the functioning of local authorities, including the autonomy and free administration of municipalities, the principle of subsidiarity in the distribution of competences among the different territorial levels, and a redefinition of resources (the local authority’s and those transferred from the state).

The public authorities have decided, with the financial and technical assistance of the World Bank, to develop a medium-term urban development program that aims at helping local authorities meet the needs of the community’s local population while also prioritizing development and social justice. The World Bank's two main objectives for this project are to improve the performance of local governments by strengthening administrative and financial capacity while encouraging citizen participation in decision making, especially for women and youth. Improving the performance of local authorities should encourage them to meet quality standards for the services offered to the population and should actively push them to involve citizens in the management of the affairs of their municipality.

However, and despite the general consensus around the importance of the “decentralization” project, it is important to stress that the different actors involved in the project

attribute different meanings to the notion of “decentralization.” In the institutional documents of the World Bank, decentralization must first respond to a liberal investment logic. This approach would transform local communities into financial and administrative autonomous centers, allowing them to emancipate from state supervision, to open the public domain to private operators, and to enter into direct competition to attract resources. For regional councils and representatives of the regional administration, decentralization does not disturb the centralizing role of the state, but it is understood as the preferred way to make municipal work more efficient by reducing bureaucracy. For the representatives of social movements, decentralization is synonymous with participatory democracy that would offer local populations the opportunity to propose their conceptions of local development (Salman, 2017). In this perspective, it is not so much autonomy vis-à-vis the state that is sought; rather, it is the methods state intervention in the management of local authorities that are to be rethought. The aim is to build a welfare state capable of listening to local populations, that is free of its authoritarian and clientelist reflexes, and that is able to equitably redistribute national wealth and to repair the impact of several decades of regional disparities.

The central question that arises is the following: How do we move from the general discourse on the virtues of decentralization to a new social contract among the central state, local authorities, and citizens that is accepted and shared by all?

### ***3.2 Data collection and analysis***

In the conduct of the fieldwork, I carried out classic interpretive case study research that provides a new analytical angle for the understanding of the process of decentralization at play. Understanding the nature and impact of the ongoing institutional change on the functioning of

local authorities and the relations between state and local communities requires a reminder of the perceptions of those who are the vectors, namely, public authorities, civil society<sup>1</sup>, local governments, and municipal councils. This approach consisted of going to the field and conducting interviews to understand the degree of the appropriation of the institutional changes underway by local actors. This approach offers the opportunity to pay attention both to what is happening and to the way in which our interviewees live this reform. I thus try to highlight the cultural references that actors working in local communities use to give “meaning” to their relations with the government and, more generally, to the ways of organizing collective action. I will use the concept of culture in the particular sense of a *framework of meaning* (see Box 1). I do not refer to culture in the sense of customs and values or community identities but in the sense of implicit representations that give meaning to the practices and words of people in matters of organization and cooperation. The merit of this approach is the ability to highlight the local expectations of what a legitimate mode of government should be in the Tunisian context and how it affects institutional changes in local communities.

Discourse analysis was used to understand how the interviewees interpreted the new reform (Yousfi, 2014). What references, what foundational images, do people use to formulate criticisms and express judgments on the various changes underway? To do this, approximately fifty interviews in Tunisian Arabic and French were conducted in May and June 2016<sup>2</sup>. A total of

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<sup>1</sup> I focused exclusively on Tunisian NGOs working in collaboration with local communities.

<sup>2</sup> Two missions have been carried on in Tunisia. The first series of interviews were conducted with political stakeholders, representatives of public authorities and civil society actors, along with Alain Henry in May 2016. The second series was carried out with municipal officials and members of municipal councils in June 2016.

35 interviews were conducted in six municipalities (Sayada, Marsa, Kef, Sfax, Sidi Bouzid, and Bizerte), representing different regions of Tunisia and selected according to the diversity of their size and economic context. I interviewed municipal officials as well as agents and members of municipal councils. Approximately 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with political decision makers, representatives of central and regional administrations and civil society actors.<sup>3</sup>

The topics covered in the interviews were as follows:

- a) The services delivered by the municipalities: waste management and cleaning, collection of local taxation, land management, etc.
- b) The organization and management of municipalities: distribution of responsibilities and coordination mechanisms, decision-making process and conflict management, control and monitoring mechanisms, new practices such as the participatory budget.
- c) Management of institutional relations: relationship with citizens, supervisory authorities, and civil society actors.
- d) Perception of decentralization and more particularly the draft of the new code of local authorities: management issues around the new municipal elections,

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<sup>3</sup>To respect anonymity, I have also modified or deleted the terms, references, situations, and names used to recognize the persons interviewed. In the presentation of the verbatim quotes, I specify the status of the interviewee (municipal officer, member of the municipal council, civil society actor, etc.). I maintain the spoken style despite the redundancies and incongruities of the language to reproduce, as much as possible, the vivacity of the interviews.

challenges of implementing the code, conditions for a stable reform accepted by everyone.

These interviews were supplemented by the analysis of official documents (guidance notes, internal procedures, memos, legislative texts, expert work, etc.) and direct observations (meetings organized within the framework of the participatory budget).

Two concerns guided the implementation of the interviews and the analysis:

The first concern was to report in this article not opinions themselves but the representations that nourish these opinions and, more specifically, the cultural dimensions of these representations. Therefore, it is not a question of diagnosing the functionality of the local authorities in Tunisia or of knowing whether the interviewed people have a positive or negative opinion about the subject or if they tell the truth. The focus is instead the identification, beyond the divergence of opinions, of the common cultural criteria that my Tunisian interlocutors use to express an opinion. By describing the relations between the central authorities and the municipalities or the relations between citizens and the municipalities, each of our interlocutors implicitly testified to the more general conception of what “good governance” should entail for Tunisians, which underpins the vision of a viable and acceptable institutional reform.

The second concern was to identify the conditions for and the process of translating the universal discourse on “decentralization” into local rules that are in line with Tunisians' expectations for a legitimate, just, and equitable government. However, the analysis presented in this paper is not intended to exhaustively establish all the references that determine the Tunisian framework of meaning. Rather, the analysis aims to show how specific cultural representations can interfere with the construction of successful institutional reforms.



### **Box 1**

#### **Culture as a “framework of meaning”**

d'Iribarne (1989) defines culture as a framework of meaning that allows actors to give meaning to both the world in which they live and to their own actions. Culture is a set of common references that form a specific way of conceiving of the insertion of the individual into society. These common frames of meaning influence the right way to pressure, direct, decide, control, etc. In an attempt to explain what characterizes the ways of giving meaning that one encounters in a given country, d'Iribarne (2009) distinguishes two categories of phenomena. The first category corresponds to the existence of images (typical ideal characteristics) of ways of living and working together to which one aspires or which one rejects. These images, and the affects attached to them, refer to a second relative category. The existence, within each society, of a specific type of anxiety and fear associated with anxiety-provoking situations that evoke a danger, a threat that it is essential to avert and be protected from. These ideal images, associated with the fears they can create, shape the conceptions of authority, freedom, dignity, and duty, which prevail in every society, and provide frames of meaning for actors to compare everyday reality with the ideal vision. These images shape a more or less favorable reading of a situation, depending on whether it evokes either the object of fear or, on the contrary, that which makes it possible to approach the ideal image. These conceptions, which are largely implicit, constitute the foundations of the image of a “well-ordered society” but also serve as points of reference as a framework of meaning for the actors and their actions. In each society, a specific network of real or mythical figures and narratives highlights the principles of classification by which society treats the irreducible tensions between individual liberty and collective order and at the same time evokes the fundamental threats that it fears. Specific words are associated with these

classifications, such as “purity” in India, “witchcraft” in Cameroon, “loss of freedom” in the United States, and “unity” in Lebanon.

## **4 Findings**

To obtain a better idea of the challenges of the institutional reform described above, we will now analyze both the way in which the interviewees commented on the reforms in place and the way they interpreted the conditions for effective decentralization. This analysis of the way in which local actors interpret the reforms within a particular framework of meaning allows for a greater understanding of the conditions needed for effective institutional change.

### ***4.1 Perception of decentralization and its challenges: a reading of the local government code project***

At the time of the research, the local government code was still in draft form, and most laws and decrees were far from ready. While all the interviewees are unanimous about the importance of speeding up the decentralization process, three main concerns remain about the new institutional architecture and how it will be implemented.

First, several of my interlocutors criticize the fact that the draft code of local authorities was prepared exclusively by lawyers under the general direction of the local authorities, without prior consultation with agents and local municipal officials. The interviewees support the idea that an institutional change of this kind, which will structure relations between the state and local communities, deserves the work of a multidisciplinary team of urban planners, sociologists, economists, etc. Uncertainty around the date of the municipal elections, the vagueness in the division of responsibilities between municipalities, districts, and regions, and the lack of

visibility around the decentralization implementation timetable are all factors justifying the doubts of interlocutors as to the reliability of the process.

Second, while all the interviewees agree that the decentralization project is essential, some questions concerning the content of the project recur regularly in the interviews. One of the recurring themes is the adequacy of the skills transferred to municipalities and the financial and human resources made available. Other interlocutors raise the question of the legal means that will be offered to municipalities to autonomously accomplish their new prerogatives. A number of interviewees raised the question of what criteria should be used to manage resource inequalities between rich and poor municipalities.

Third, one of the major innovations of the new code, which is widely appreciated by my respondents, whether they are part of the administration or the municipal council, is the transition from a priori control to posterior control according to the principle of “free administration.” The interviewees say that this new provision will neutralize the excesses of the bureaucracy by reducing interference from supervisory authorities and will also allow for more autonomy and flexibility in management. However, fears persist concerning the mechanisms to be put in place to limit the risk of fraud and to pinpoint accountability in cases of mismanagement. The same concerns are also expressed about future relations between local authorities and line ministries. Finally, the main concern in most of the interviews regards the role and powers of the state in this new configuration in which municipalities are given significant autonomy.

Despite the favorable and unanimous support shown by management and administrative staff for the autonomy included in the decentralization project, concerns are raised about the nature of the relationship between the municipal administration and the elected council in the draft code of local authorities. For mayors, the administration must be satisfied with the sole role

of executing the decisions of the municipal council. Some mayors go further and reduce the role of the administration to the role of legal control whose purpose is to implement the decisions of the municipal council in accordance with the legal framework. The point of view of most general secretaries is radically different. They explain that their mission goes beyond mere legal control and that their role is to ensure the continuity of the state, protect the public interest, preserve the impartiality of the administration, and neutralize political excesses. Having suffered under Ben Ali due to pressures from the municipal councils dominated by the party-state, general secretaries fear the resurgence of the same forces with the new code of local authorities. The growing power given to the mayor and the city council, which diminishes the role of guardianship, and the possibility of dismissing them by a vote of the council are all factors that increase the fears of the general secretaries. Finally, the law on municipal and local elections has been central to the political debate. The law is of crucial importance because it will redraw the local authorities in a decentralized context in which the municipalities will enjoy new local privileges. The main criticism is that the electoral bill is likely to serve the interests of only the major parties.

In conclusion, my interlocutors have all wondered about the way the text will be implemented and about the mechanisms that will be put in place to enforce it, especially as the text of the current draft is open to interpretation. Uncertainties also concern the ability of different actors to accept a new mode of governance.

The question is as follows: what are Tunisians' expectations of a good government and how concretely can they be translated into viable institutions?

These comments revealed an ongoing tension between two logics of power making: on the one hand, there is the decentralization project that aims to allow more autonomy to local

authorities and to involve citizens in the management of local affairs, and on the other hand, there is the logic inherited from decades of a centralized political-administrative system with one authority that controls the functioning of the whole system. The weakening of the state by the revolutionary context has further complicated the establishment of a new social contract and a new mode of governance accepted by everyone. Negotiations to find an acceptable institutional reform are still underway, and the concrete responses of the interlocutors to the management of municipalities in times of crisis offer particularly rich material through which to explore the cultural references that condition the implementation of viable change.

#### ***4.2 The conditions for effective institutional change: the enduring tension between relationships and laws***

The revolutionary period was marked by a crisis of authority affecting all state institutions. Two discourses emerged the day after January 14. The first discourse claims full power for the people and calls for citizen appropriation of the public space and the management of local affairs, which had long been confiscated by the party-state. The second discourse condemns anarchy and calls for the return of the authority of the state “Haybat Eddawla”<sup>4</sup> to ensure the stability of the country. This oscillation between the two ends of the spectrum is omnipresent in the interviews conducted with the interviewees and structures the ongoing debate on the institutional regulatory mechanisms put in place to manage the new relationship between the central authority and the local authorities. Regular movement between the old mode of governance and the autonomy experienced at the time of the revolutionary episode offers a

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of “Haybat” is hardly translatable into a single word. The term refers to the authority and prestige of the state that is met with both respect and fear.

particularly rich laboratory in which to explore the references that structure the relationship with power in Tunisia. In the following section, I distinguish among three cultural references from the discourse of the interlocutors and the different underlying institutional experiments that prevailed after the departure of Ben Ali: the importance of “good/benevolent authority” to ensure the functioning of the entire system, the consensual art of reconciling particular interests to meet the general interest, and finally, the importance of a standard language to neutralize the excesses of the relationship.

#### *4.2.1 "Haybat Eldawla" versus anarchy*

The revolutionary context saw the emergence of new practices within local communities that have emancipated themselves from the supervision of the central state; however, these experiences were brief because of the lack of resources and skills necessary to anchor them for the long term. However, it have been the difficulties encountered as a result of the weakening of the state, such as the recurrent problems of waste management, anarchic construction, and the development of contraband, which have occupied the public debate. At the same time, the weakening of the administration, the economic and political crisis, and finally, the inefficiency of the various transitional governments have contributed to weakening the Tunisian state. In addition, different social movements have regularly challenged state authority. These issues have led to a unanimous call for the return of the strong state that enforces the law and ends anarchy (see Box 2).

Thus, a part of the population fed on the imaginary of the paternalistic, benevolent, and interventionist state voted in October 2014 for Beji Caid Essebsi who, at age 88, without moderation, has mimicked Habib Bourguiba, the father of independence and the founder of the

Tunisian Republic. Beji Caid Essebsi is supposed to embody the reassuring figure of the authority of the state and the “modernist” vision of the society that Bourguiba implemented in the 1950s. As soon as he was elected, the new president made a solemn promise to restore the authority and prestige of the state that were supposed to have been damaged by his predecessors. Essebsi promised to deliver a respected and strong state, imposing its policy without flinching and showing authority in its management of the economic and social crisis. From this perspective, for Beji Caid Essebsi, and for Bourguiba before him, the state and the person who embodies it are not dissociable. Beji Caid Essebsi says in his book, published in 2009, “the state imposes itself by its institutions and the quality and culture of the men chosen to serve it.”

In this respect, it is worth noting that the reference to the benevolent tutelage of the state is not only found in the discourse of the elites but also in the representatives of the social movements. While denouncing the authoritarian aspect with which the old regime treated the regions of the interior, social movements mourn the absence of the state and suspect the political class of “letting the situation rot” or “of abandoning regions of the interior considered rebellious.” Social movement representatives also ask for the return of a strong but inclusive state that is capable of redistributing wealth and responding to the demands for social justice and regional development (Hmed, 2012). A few months after the election of Beji Caid Essebsi, several voices were raised to express their disappointment in seeing the president and the head of the government unable to restore the state’s authority and redress the economic and political situation. The fear of anarchy is also reflected in the debate around decentralization. Indeed, many of the interlocutors express a fear of seeing anarchy spreading by marginalizing the control exercised by the state over local authorities:

*“Local communities are not all equipped to be autonomous, even those who have the means. The mayor of Tunis at the time said,” I prefer that it is the ARRU (Public Agency for renovation and urban rehabilitation) who deals with the implementation of projects because internally it drags, and it takes time and we do not have the means.” Municipalities are generally unable to be efficient. In addition, mayors must make their clientele work especially with elections, and requests for favoritism will multiply at the expense of the citizen. To fight this, we need more transparency, we must preserve the role of the state because, if we leave it in the hands of the municipality, we might lose,”* says a municipal officer.

Some claim that the presence of a strong state corresponds to the benevolent tutelage of the state to neutralize the risk of anarchy; the interviewees point out that the good functioning of communities is also dependent on the presence of “good leaders.” Whether they comment on the management of the revolutionary situation or their perception of the future role of mayors in the new local government code, they all insist on the ability of leaders to establish respect as a prerequisite for the proper functioning of local authorities and municipalities:

“Success and failure depend on the number 1 pick, and that becomes a very important element. Local community A was lucky to have a respected man as mayor... it depends also on the general secretary who is as important as the mayor. If you face difficulties, sometimes all you need is to change the secretary general and everything will start working normally, there are secretaries general who are requested by everyone because they are honest and they work well,” says a senior staff member of the central administration.



## **Box 2**

### **Is it possible to decentralize with a fragile state?**

“We accept decentralization and re distribution in times of prosperity, but when you have nothing to redistribute, it is useless; you will arouse jealousies: this is the first report. The second observation is that there is a risk at a time when the state is fragile and when we talk about decentralization and the transfer of power, and there is even a risk of a challenge to the central power. It can even be interpreted as an attempt to split, and these are things to be borne in mind, with the manipulations of both right and left. Additionally, when we talk about decentralization, we are going to legitimize local authorities, and at that moment, these people will feel the legitimacy to decide what they want, and at that moment, they can say the phosphate of Gafsa will not leave Gafsa; we will say the northern water will not go to Sousse and Sfax. How are we going to deal with these people? Especially when one is in a situation of important imbalance and nobody can dispute it. So, we can engage in decentralization when the state is strong enough and has enough means to pay compensation. (...). Today, when we review the development indicators and compare the regions from the interior to the coast, we see the difference, and we see the gap. If we want to be transparent and display these indicators, the population will be ruthless and will ask for compensation. If the state does not have the means, it will become more discredited. Here, the risk is that, first, today, the context is difficult both economically and institutionally, so when we talk about decentralization, we have to go along first. It’s a process and it won’t be done overnight. It will last 9 years but let us not forget that a transfer of a means of control must also accompany any process of decentralization; otherwise, there will be risks of diversion, including the risk of decentralizing corruption. In addition, during Ben Ali's time, we had just a handful of people who were plundering, now it’s widespread, it’s out in the open, and

everyone goes out on their own. Besides, [there are] examples throughout the world of countries where corruption has made a huge leap with decentralization, so we have to be careful,” says a senior official from the central administration.

However, two questions are brought to the surface: First, what are the local expectations of a “good leader”? Second, how do we guarantee sustainable reform if an effective change is often linked to whoever is leading it?

#### 4.2.2 *The consensual art of reconciling particular interests*

The principle of “*tadbir horr*” (free administration) is at the center of the debate about the implementation of decentralization. The interviewees unanimously defend this principle, but they do not hide their fear of the explosion of particular interests:

“The central government is preparing a document on decentralization and it's very difficult for them. You simply cannot imagine how many directorates in reading the first draft of the bill have expressed their dissatisfaction with selfish calculations. They ask themselves many questions: What are we going to do? Are we going to Sidi Bouzid? Are we going to Kasserine to work? Because they are in the central administration that deals with local communities, and as there are some powers that will be transferred, their positions as civil servants are no longer mandatory, so we had to place them somewhere, and it literally scared them. They started to resist behind the scenes, and their lobbying worked to change most of the code,” says a civil society actor.

In the opinion of the interlocutors who have implemented “participatory budgeting” in their municipalities, the competition of particular interests is the first hardship that the actors

have to face to communicate the spirit of the approach. This competition is all the stronger as the general interest has long been synonymous with the interest of the ruling clans:

“It was complicated at first with the participatory budget. We had comments such as ‘why his neighborhood and not mine?’ The only way for citizens to compete in the city is on election day, but competition should not be introduced as a *modus operandi* (...). In the city, if every time we have a project, the X clan is opposed to the Y, then we will end up destroying the social peace of the city. We must not fall into this trap. Moreover, I remain convinced that the decentralization project intends to divide the country for political purposes, of course. I am afraid that decentralization that is understood in the sense of defending special interests destroys the social bond and the notion of the general interest in the country,” explains a mayor.

The question is how to reconcile particular interests?

The process by which the conciliation of particular interests, as expressed in the interviews and in the various practices and institutional experiments described by my respondents, is related to a particular form of intelligence that comprises tricks and stratagems to manage the fragile balance between particular diverging interests (see Box 3). It is not a matter of elaborating on a model or designing a transcendent referent that would be like a lens through which the actors could evaluate the situation and design the actions to be undertaken. The actors must gradually reveal their interests to each other to control them and to be flexible in finding concrete solutions to particular situations. In this context, one must continually define what to do and how to do it. In this process, it is important to uncover the constraints of reality and to cope with existing means. Therefore, a member of a municipal council discusses the importance of

explaining to citizens the existing constraints to find “concrete” solutions that can satisfy everyone but in a progressive way:

“At first, it was difficult to convince citizens of the relevance of engaging in the participatory budget. They all managed to put aside their political affiliation to work in the community and the city, an alchemy that went by that is exceptional. At first they fought each other, and then they learned how to decide together... Five years ago, I was not part of the municipality, when I walked on a street I could not find lighting. I used to say the municipality is doing nothing; it’s dark at night. Now that I am inside, and I know that I only have 1 million dinars as an annual budget and that this million can only allow me to make 600 light points, and with 600 light points, if you share them over the communal territory, you cannot do more than four streets, I am less severe. The citizens live exactly what we lived before; they knew what 400,000 dinars for the electricity budget is, how much it pays, so they gave up on fighting and got involved by looking for suppliers who can find cheaper equipment,” explains a municipal officer.

Thus, one of the interlocutors from the central administration recalls the myth of Dido by explaining that the effectiveness of a solution depends on how it is anchored in the constraints of reality:

“When we talk about human resources, there are problems and there are solutions... To answer your question, I might tell you that we have beautiful things, but deep inside, I know that I have to stop somewhere and ‘lay my feet only to the height of the blanket’. (...) Remember Dido, she obtained settlement lands through an ingenious agreement with the local inhabitants by pronouncing

her famous words: 'as much as it could to hold in the skin of an ox.' With that skin, she made miracles. Carthage was a skin of beef and became the first city with a municipal code, a municipal statute and a municipal charter."

Indeed, in the absence of a representative general interest body that can decide between particular interests, consensus is the tool used to address the realities on the ground and to find "concrete solutions." The progressive integration of the elements of reality that need to be taken into account to reach a decision is seen as being accomplished through a process in which each, by exposing his or her point of view, makes manifest what he or she is sensitive to and reveals his or her interests and trading margins.

"The borough delegates meet with each other to arbitrate projects chosen by the boroughs because the project is communal and not a borough project. For the whole municipality, the delegates choose among the projects voted on in the districts and prioritize the projects at the level of the municipality within the limits of the budget. Even though everyone will have an interest in advocating for their own projects, a consensus has to be reached. We put them in a room, and we tell them 'get the most out of your projects,' and we manage to achieve very good consensus."

In such a perspective, the avoidance of conflict is essential to reach consensus, but the cost is a long and continuous dialog that must take into account everyone's perspectives. This type of approach makes it possible to integrate the diversity of interests and points of view that arise, on a case-by-case basis, with compromises that are acceptable to everyone. The process of adjustment through dialog to find consensual solutions is all the more important because there are no transcendent conceptions of what is good and what is bad or of stable institutional points

of reference in the discourse of the interlocutors. If the “ideal city” is a reference in the discourse, the fact remains that the focus is on the difficulties that can be encountered in achieving this utopia. It is wise, according to the interlocutors, to progress gradually in the implementation of decentralization. “Doing things step-by-step” is a recurring theme in the discourse that insists less on the result to be achieved than on the actual process by which the project is to be implemented. The effectiveness of this process depends on the ability of stakeholders to intelligently manage competing interests within the limits of available resources.<sup>5</sup>

### **Box 3**

#### **The consensual art of managing interests**

“According to Chapter 7 of the constitution, we talk about the municipality and we talk about local power. But municipal work has never been a power. With the new constitution, it has become a power. Municipal councils have benefited, thanks to the constitution, from new prerogatives. Municipalities and municipal councils are working under the principle of “tadbir horr” (free administration), and municipal councils adopt the principle of “tadbir horr,” meaning “I will do only what I like, and if I do not like it, I will not do it.” There is definitely a problem with municipalities working without prior control. Today, if you have a doubt you still have an expenditure controller attached to the first Ministry, and then, you have a municipal inspector who controls a second time. Soon, the new councils will be made of people who have the mentality of the old councils, that is to say, people with a rotten mentality. [...] Even the simple project of making a road will suffer the competition of interests, and everyone will want to make it pass in front of his house. It is true that there is today something called governance and

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<sup>5</sup> These words are reminiscent of l’esprit de *la mètis des Grecs*. See (Detienne & Vernant, 1993).

something called civil society. It is also true that there are citizens who will eventually speak out. But, I still hope that honest people who value municipal work will join the new councils because, with this project of decentralization, they can sell out the country, and they can do so in total compliance with the law because the law gave them great autonomy (...). From what I understand, the process of decentralization will spread over nine years; the state will not give everything at once. It will give up the skills gradually. I like this idea; we must not let go all of a sudden.

“My question is this: can we adopt the right path in this decentralization project, just as we might take the risk of selling out the country? The new elected councils can sell the country; we can also see the former regime’s figures re-elected to these councils. It is necessary that decentralization be progressive; it is necessary to study the launching of this project very well. The transfer of competences must be progressive. It has to be a gradual process. In fact, you have to take advantage of the opportunity to make a good project; otherwise, you risk reproducing the same system of corruption, or it could be even worse. Tunisian society has good resources; it comes each time to the edge of the cliff and still manages to avoid the downfall. In 2012 and 2013, we thought to ourselves, “tomorrow we will have a bombing. Tomorrow there will be a civil war, and the country will be on fire.” By a miracle and through the workings of a mysterious force, we managed to save the day. Our secret is the art of conciliation; for me, the challenge is how can we reach an agreement with everyone for the good of the country?,” explains a mayor.

The analysis of what the interviewees say shows that they insist on the implementation of a progressive decentralization due to the virtues it offers in terms of adapting to the constraints of reality. Indeed, such decentralization brings fluidity to the system put in place by connecting the

management of the divergent interests to the management of the recasting of the relations between the central authority and local authorities. First, dialog, an essential ingredient in the art of conciliation that was extolled by my interviewees, is what makes it possible to reduce both the pressure of submission to the new formal rules and the tension linked to the questioning of reports. Second, in the absence of transcendent referents in the regulation of relations between people, a process of progressive decentralization is what makes it possible to develop intelligently given the different constraints of reality and the conciliation of divergent interests. It is the establishment of a progressive process of decentralization, which was progressively developed among the various actors, which would allow for adaptation in a pragmatic and intelligent way to the circumstances and for the mastering of difficult situations while neutralizing the damaging aspect of conflicting interests. Finally, the management of the uncertainty related to the implementation of decentralization is not as much regulated by transcendent referents as by the capacity of the actors to establish a permanent dialog, ensuring the necessary compromises. The general interest presents itself less as a referent transcending the individual calculations than as the result of a continuous consensual negotiation among particular interests.

From this perspective, the condition that guarantees consensus is to have a leader who shows that he is “independent” and able to make impartial and fair decisions. This independence is all the more important since the problems of the Tunisian administration at the time of Ben Ali come essentially from the collusion maintained by the authoritarian system between family clan interests, the ruling party’s interests, and the general interest. Therefore, the only way to be respected is to provide evidence that one is able to resist the games among the various interest groups. This logic underpinned the different bodies set up in Tunisia to manage the political



transition. It is striking to note that all the bodies had the adjective “independent” in their name and consisted exclusively of people who deemed independent because they have no connection with the old regime. This same framework structures the institutional solutions proposed by the interviewees to manage the implementation of decentralization. Several actors propose the creation of independent bodies of the central administration to manage the ongoing institutional change:

“I would take the central administration out of this job. That’s my point of view, and we will set up a body, but not a commission though, when we find the person to whom we could entrust the thing and who is working on this subject, and afterwards, it makes its conclusions in full independence from the executive power, not the central administration but the executive power. Then, it will be up to this specific body to defend and to say publicly. ‘Here are our resolutions.’ Because once it comes to power, of course, there will be political tension, and each one will try to take the most advantage of the situation... At a certain point, you have to know how to deal with the decision makers; you need to moderate certain things, and you need to improve others, but you keep the essentials, the spirit, the guiding thread so that we know where we’re going and how the process could evolve on these different aspects.”

This example shows that, despite the claim of local autonomy, the proper functioning of the local community remains dependent according to the representations of the respondents regarding the characteristics of the central authority. The independent bodies would thus embody the ideal of the figure of “good authority,” which, because of its independence, would guarantee the consensus necessary for the proper functioning of the collective and would replace the

centralizing and authoritarian central tutelage of the state, which is rejected by everyone.

However, the question that remains is how do we guarantee the impartiality of these bodies and the representation of everyone?

#### *4.2.3 The standard language of the law: a tool for supervision or for protection?*

While consensual solutions are presented as the only way to stabilize the institutional architecture of decentralization, the fact remains that the relational logic that underlies the construction of these consensuses can be a source of “drift.” At the same time, while a number of interlocutors talk about the role of leaders in ensuring compromises on interests, they all stress that good leadership alone cannot guarantee stable cooperation. The respondents emphasize the importance of the standard language of the law or procedures, “a system,” to neutralize the “excesses” of relational negotiations:

“It reminds me of the history of the ‘*Medina fadhela*’ (ideal city); the citizen counts on the honesty of the leaders. No, it is a problem of the system; if you have an effective management system and rules of management and these rules are respected, even if you put Al Capone at the head of the municipality, he won’t be able to do anything. When things are vague, everyone is going to work as best he can, and he’s to try to help himself, so it’s a structural problem; it’s not a problem of honesty (...). We need an internal control system like in companies and places of work after there is a posteriori control, and if someone diverts power, there is a judicial system,” notes a member of a municipal committee.

The “safeguards” that are supposed to “monitor” and “accompany” the implementation of decentralization are multiple, and the interviewees evoke both the role of the judicial system and

that of civil society or the media (see Box 4). These safeguards, as represented by the interlocutors, are aimed both at the control of the elected officials and the protection of the administrative staff working under their orders. From high officials to municipal employees, the law has always been the means of “covering up” the arbitrariness of some leaders. The invocation of the law is all the more important as it presents itself as the only means of neutralizing the vagueness of the interpretation associated with the relational logic, which is itself associated with the negotiation of interests.

In this respect, it is important to underline that, even during the time of Ben Ali, references to the respect for the law were omnipresent in the regulation of the relations between individuals. The texts that regulate public procurement and investments required that all procedures be controlled by the ministries to avoid all forms of malfeasance and patronage, local and national. However, despite these measures for “transparency” and “good governance,” the rules were circumvented by the authority of Carthage and its intermediaries within the government and the administration. The predation of the clans in power was carried out legally and in total compliance with the legal framework. The recurrent call for respect for the rules was aimed less at encouraging the good functioning of the local authorities than at punishing those who showed a lack of loyalty to the governors:

“The presidents of the municipal councils were the masters of the place, so they were not beholden, although the administration sometimes made remarks. There was a so-called inspection at the level of the Ministry of the Interior, which was sometimes responsible for similar cases, but it was more for political reasons than anything systematic. If we wanted to hurt or break someone, we would inspect him and did everything to chase him away. It was much more in the sense of

sanction than control. We do not need him anymore, so he'll disappear; we'll go through his files," comments a municipal executive.

To answer the question "Is the law alone sufficient to eradicate wrongdoing?," interviewees explain that the involvement of citizens through civil society in decision making and the obligation to be "transparent" are two factors that can help support the fight against corruption. Civil society thus embodies the positive figure of the "cop" or "controller" who puts pressure on elected officials and the administration through their observation work. Civil society is supposed to identify abuses, disseminate information, and bring the responsible parties to justice in case of problems:

"I think that if the decision is open to civil society, it's the best guarantee. When, today, a bill is submitted to civil society, it is well scrutinized, and civil society cannot be sacked or ignored. AlBawsla or Atide, these NGOs are exposing many twisted practices, even at the assembly of the representatives of the people; they are provoking the animosity of elected officials, and when one sees their reaction of anger against AlBawsla, one understands that this association is doing a good job. They have quite interesting transparency tools: tracking members of Parliament's assiduity, what they voted on in relation to their parties, and so on. They made a lot of noise," says a municipal executive.

From this perspective, the discourse on transparency takes on another dimension. The transparency fostered by the new political context and the emergence of a civil society that controls the procedures allows both municipal officials and elected officials to "protect themselves" against the demands of favoritism, "I don't have anything to hide," and to empower

the various actors involved in municipal work. Transparency becomes a sort of positive self-control that replaces the control of the supervisory authorities:

“The relationship between the administration and the council is important. The council does not want the administration to hide records... For my part, my policy is as follows: I show everything to the council, and I push the commissions to work; it is necessary that council members feel involved. It’s true I’m preparing everything, but I have to involve council members; they must feel they have a say in the budget, for example,” comments a municipal executive.

However, it is worth noting that while my respondents insist on the importance of the role of civil society actors, many doubts and questions persist around the delimitation of their perimeter of power and the place they should occupy in setting up and monitoring the decentralization. In the context of the fragilization of state institutions and the growing power of civil society’s organizations with regard to important financial resources, the interviewees emphasize that the distribution of roles among elected representatives, the municipal administration, the supervisory authorities, and the representatives of civil society actors need to be clarified. The main concern is that civil society actors may pursue different political agendas and make decisions instead of elected bodies.

#### **Box 4**

##### **Safeguards against wrongdoings**

“With the new decentralization law, the city council will enjoy much greater autonomy, but it must know that this freedom is a responsibility and that it has limits, for example, concerning the accounts to be rendered to the voters. As I told you, the judicial system will interfere, civil

society will intervene; there are many safeguards, and there is also an administration that can stop the problematic decisions (...) It is true that control will disappear, but we can reach out to the judicial system in just 24 hours; we can ask for the suspension of decisions. We are not going to withdraw the decision; we suspend the decision, and then, we ask the judiciary to cancel the decision (...) For example, the city councils, given the specificity of their city, can set up taxes or fees royalties; one can imagine a council that is not well supervised or a somewhat “mad” council that decides to put in place taxes on the circulation of tourists to the Marsa, a tax set up to promote the revenues of the municipality; this type of tax is unconstitutional. In this case, when the council’s decision is issued, the governor or minister of finance or the minister of local affairs or anyone who wants to block the decision will do so at the nearest administrative court. We talk about emergency administrative justice, and we can block or suspend the municipal decision,” notes a municipal executive.

## **5 Discussion**

It is widely acknowledged in international cooperation debates that “good governance” is a determining factor in creating the conditions for sustainable economic development. So-called developing countries are enjoined to change obsolete governance models to ensure economic progress. The influence of society (social relations, culture, and political institutions) on the conditions of appropriation of such institutional reforms seems as difficult to challenge as to identify. If the objective is to achieve an environment in which the rights of individuals are protected, civil society is involved in the construction of public policies, and governments accomplish their mission in a transparent and effective fashion, and the institutional mechanisms imposed by aid donors, which are often of American inspiration, have difficulty being accepted

by the local populations. The effectiveness of such reforms is, therefore, regularly questioned. This study confirms the fact that, despite financial and intellectual pressure to standardize “governance” according to US criteria, this hegemonic process is being met with varying levels of resistance (Alcadipani, Khan, Gantman, & Nkomo, 2012; Gantman, Yousfi, & Alacadipani, 2015; Yousfi, 2008, 2014). Thus, all the narratives collected show a clear discrepancy between the liberal vision of “decentralization” promoted by the World Bank, which pushes for the disengagement of the state, on the one hand, and the aspiration shared by the interviewees for a strong but inclusive state that is able to redistribute wealth and respond to demands for social justice and regional development, on the other hand. The challenge then becomes the construction of an alternative mode of governance that emancipates local communities from the excessive centralization they have suffered in the past while counterbalancing the excesses of the total autonomy of local authorities.

However, while the political, historical, social, and economic dimensions of governance are increasingly integrated into the reflection on the challenges of institutional change (North, 1994), little attention is given to the symbolic dimension of power and the collective images that are the basis of both institutional and actors’ actions. The decentralization case study aims at bridging this gap by focusing on the influence of culture as a “framework of meaning” in the implementation of sustainable and popular institutional reforms (d’Iribarne & Henry, 2016). This case study reveals local representations of what constitutes a legitimate “way of governing” and in what way these could condition the role of the state and the appropriation of a new institutional architecture in Tunisia.

The Tunisian example shows that a first reading of the issues regarding the implementation of the decentralization project as reported by the interviewees could confirm the

thesis that successful decentralization requires solving obstacles such as a lack of resources and training, difficulties in recovery, the vagueness around the distribution of responsibilities, the stakes of administrative bureaucracy, etc. However, as soon as we abandon the abstract discourse and listen to the way local actors perceive the conditions of the establishment of successful decentralization, their responses implicitly reflect a particular conception of good governance and local conditions, allowing actors to guarantee a minimum trust relationship. Thus, it is the role of the state and the process of reform that becomes the focus of the debate. In this respect, two aspects deserve emphasis:

At first glance, the interview narratives demonstrate a paradox. On the one hand, the interviewees extol the importance of autonomy in the management of local affairs: the growing power of local civil society or the success of new practices such as the participatory budget are all examples suggesting a radical change in the relationship between citizens and the state. On the other hand, while criticizing the patronage of the authoritarian state, the reference to the importance of a benevolent authority is regularly mobilized to describe the conditions for establishing good relations for cooperation, whether with regard to the local functioning of municipalities or the relationship between the state and local authorities. We can conclude that this paradox testifies to the tension between the centralizing heritage of the state and the requirements of a participative democracy. However, a closer examination of the metaphors, the images, and the recurrent references in the discourse of the interviewed actors shows that what appears at first glance to be ambivalent and paradoxical is rather the expression of a particular local conception of what good governance is and a legitimate structuring of what the role of the state should be.



Everywhere, it can be said that, to optimize the management of local affairs, necessary skills must be transferred to local authorities, transparency must be promoted, and civil society must be involved in the decision to ensure citizens' trust in the rulers. The foundations of this trust, however, vary across cultures and lead to different institutional structures prevailing in each country (d'Iribarne, 2009). In this respect, it is enlightening to see the diversity that exists among countries in Europe in terms of institutions that regulate relations between the state and local authorities. In the Tunisian case, it is by showing oneself to be sensitive to particular interests, able to "dialog" and able to take into account the constraints of partners that one is worthy of confidence and that one is able to develop the consensus needed for "good cooperation." Therefore, the interviewees, with their more or less critical points of view on the new code of the local authorities, rely on the good cooperation between the state and the local authorities to set up discussion mechanisms to ensure that particular interests are taken into account and that the necessary concessions are made for consensus among the various stakeholders. The "ideal city" is a reference in the discourse, but the fact remains that the focus is on the difficulties inherent to this utopia.

The effectiveness of the reform seems to depend less on the targeted result than on the concrete process by which actors can intelligently manage divergent interests within the limits of the available resources. Indeed, in the absence of a representative general interest body that can decide between particular interests, consensus is the tool used to address the realities on the ground and to find "concrete solutions." The idea of consensus built on the art of the Greek *Métis* or the art of the navigator corresponds here to a practice that seeks less to obtain a slow normative agreement than the construction of practical compromises between particular interests while avoiding offending the different actors involved in the process. The avoidance of conflict

is essential to reaching a consensus, and the cost is a long, progressive, and continuous dialog that must take into account everybody's opinions. This type of approach makes it possible to integrate the diverse interests and points of view to reach acceptable compromises on a case-by-case basis.

At the same time, while the institutionalization of consensus is presented as the only way to conceive of a good way of governing, the relational logic that underlies the construction of consensus can be a source of "drift." To neutralize the "drifts," the figure of the good independent authority that is able to withstand the pressures of particular interests and able to be an example is regularly cited as a necessary condition for the proper functioning of the local community. On the other hand, the existence of clear formal rules and "dialog-consultation" mechanisms could guarantee a good consensus-based decision process.

Viewed from this perspective, the autonomy sought by local authorities is not antithetical to the benevolence of a central authority, which, while breaking with the authoritarian heritage of the state, must be able to include all the stakeholders and ensure the stabilization of a consensus guaranteeing the "collective interest." The system is supplemented by "safeguards," such as the standard language of the law or the control of civil society that are supposed to "frame," "accompany," and "protect" against the excesses of relational logic. The law and the procedures or the control of civil society are "safeguards," not because they embody higher principles (transcendent) but because they embody technical constraints, practical imperatives, which one has to address. Thus, we are witnessing an original hybridization process in which words such as "transparency" or "civil society," which are omnipresent in Tunisian discourse, are less reflective of the American conceptions of governance than of the local expectations of what a well-ordered society should be.

## 6 Conclusion

This article highlights the fact that the challenge for so-called developing countries is not to exchange particular relationship with formal universal rules to establish “good governance” and achieve economic progress but to be in a position to find institutional arrangements that are consistent with local visions of good governance (Berkowitz, Pistor, & Richard, 2003; d’Iribarne & Henry, 2016; Yousfi, 2008). In this regard, the proposals formulated by Tunisian actors to ensure the success of the decentralization project, such as the creation of independent regulatory bodies or the establishment of coordination agencies, are examples that show that the condition of the appropriation of long-term institutional reform depends on its ability to resonate with local cultural representations. As a result, there is no cultural determinism; practices and institutions can evolve and change but only if they take into account the local representations that define what is legitimate and what is not. These cultural references are not to be considered constraints with which one must wrestle but cultural grammar, which is permanent because it is sacred and without which we cannot give meaning to institutional change.

It turns out that the binary opposition between interpersonal relations detrimental to “good governance,” on the one hand, and institutional trust based on a legal-rational apparatus as an indispensable ingredient for a proper economic and political functioning, on the other hand, does not seem able to uncover the challenges of institutional innovations under way in so-called “developing” countries. Given the differences in the conceptions of what good governance should be given historical, political, and cultural trajectories, the intentions as well as the expectations that shape trust and the institutions that can embody it are different from one country to another. As a result, the Tunisian example shows that particular attention should be

paid to the local understandings underlying the successes and failures of ongoing institutional innovations in the so-called developing countries to reveal the conditions for the effective improvement of institutions in these countries.

The proposals and implications of this study could be further elaborated through comparative studies of institutional reforms within the same country or between multiple countries to explore how, why, and to what extent so-called “good governance” is seen as desirable, as well as the broader social and political impact of this discourse on institutional change in the Global South.

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