How Can We Agree on Anything in This Environment? Tunisian Media, Transition and Elite Compromises: A View From Parliament

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Abstract

The literature on the role of the media during processes of transitions to democracy is divided over the positive or negative influence media outlets have. Both theoretically and empirically cases can be substantiated. In the case of the 2011 Arab revolts, however, there is a scholarly consensus that the media—traditional and social—have negatively affected the processes of transitions. While the criticism of the role of the media is empirically borne out, it does not explain how Tunisia was able to consolidate its democracy despite a polarizing media environment. Based on participant observation and interviews, the article argues that the inner workings of the Constituent Assembly and the role of individual deputies were crucial in overcoming a hostile atmosphere. This suggests that the role of political actors in negotiating the new rules of the game is more important than other factors shaping a transition.

Keywords

Tunisia, constituent assembly, transition to democracy, media, deputies

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Introduction

In January 2014, the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly (ANC) approved a new constitution, sealing the end of the Tunisian democratic transition and inaugurating the beginning of its consolidation (Stepan 2018). The ANC had begun working since February 2012 following the first free and fair elections—held on October 23, 2011—in the country’s history. It empowered 217 elected representatives to draft a new constitution, which would underpin a new political system and spell out individual rights and freedoms.

The constitution-making process was the epicenter of all the political and ideological struggles of the Tunisian transition (Parolin 2015). Processes of regime change are inherently volatile because they crystallize the different ideological currents present in society, with each political grouping attempting to impose its vision (O’Donnell et al. 1986). Although the main Tunisian political parties had long agreed that a democratic system should be put in place in the event of the end of the dictatorship, they nevertheless had to reconcile profound ideological differences and opposing policy preferences. Similar dynamics affected a number of other Arab countries, which had seen the fall of authoritarianism, but the Tunisian transition has been the only successful one across the region.

There are countless studies outlining the potential explanatory factors for the 2011 uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa and for the diverging national outcomes (Heydemann 2016; King and Maghraoui 2019). One aspect that has not been examined in great detail has to do with the media environment surrounding the processes of transition and how it might have influenced individual ANC-elected representatives charged with designing a new political system. This is puzzling for two reasons.

First, the uprisings were in part the product of the ability of activists and protesters to bypass the mediatic strictures authoritarianism had imposed on society to provide an alternative narrative of what was occurring in the country to both national and international audiences (Cottle 2011; Rane and Salem 2012). In this context, the use of social media and mobile phones to organize, communicate, and disseminate was particularly important to generate and maintain revolutionary momentum (Breuer et al. 2015). Just as important were international Arab TV channels, which, since the mid-2000s, had contributed to shaping a distinctive Arab public opinion (Lynch 2006). Coverage of the protests was beamed across the region and influenced ordinary citizens. One would have expected that such attention to how new and traditional media operated during the uprisings would have continued during the actual transition, but this did not occur systematically.

Second, the opening up of society following the fall of a dictatorship allowed for the emergence of a plethora of new actors, including within the media environment, which contributed to shape and influence political actors, and notably political parties involved in negotiating the new rules of the game. This should have led to greater discussions about how traditional media might have contributed to the failure or success of a transition given that there is a large literature on how media and elected representatives interact during transitional processes.
Acknowledging the need to fill this gap about the relationship between media and politics in transitional times in the Arab world, this article looks at how such a relationship affected the Tunisian transition, arguing that the latter was a success despite a media landscape that was seemingly set, however unwittingly, to see it fail. In short, despite both reflecting and increasing polarization, the media did not seem to affect the ultimate outcome, democratization. Given the highly partisan and ideological nature of Tunisian media coverage during the transition, this article seeks to explain how elected representatives to the ANC were able to collaborate so closely and eventually agree on a constitutional text. There has been a considerable amount on the success of the Tunisian transition, ranging from the attitude of the elites toward compromise (Boubekeur 2016) to the supportive role of security forces (Brooks 2013), from the influence of civil society activism (Deane 2013) to the moderation of the Islamist party (Cavatorta and Merone 2013) and from the broader historical culture of compromise centered around the concept of Tunisianité (Zemni 2016) to the support of international actors (Marzo 2020). While these explanations all have a degree of validity, particularly the ones focusing on the ability of elites to compromise, it is important to underline, as some scholars have attempted to do (Jermanova 2020; Perez 2016), the role of the individuals at the center of political negotiations within the ANC, whose work, ingenuity, and personal relationships were forged in a highly polarized ideological environment. The media contributed to polarization and it is worth investigating “how” ANC members were able to write a foundational document in such difficult circumstances. This is, even more, the case if one wants to tease out the circumstances under which media polarization leads to unsuccessful transitions or, conversely, when such polarization does not undermine a successful outcome. The Tunisian experience sheds light on how positive relationships generated in an institutional setting can offset the negative environment surrounding such institutions, reaffirming the importance of personal ties forged through a shared purpose (Stepan 2012).

Transitions to Democracy and the Media

There is a vast literature on processes of regime change and democratization, dating back to the mid-1980s and early 1990s to explain the growing phenomenon of countries abandoning authoritarian rule to construct democratic political systems (Huntington 1991; O’Donnell et al. 1986). Works on transitions from authoritarianism focus on a number of different aspects, but it is within the literature outlining the reasons for success or failure that the role of media is analyzed. There is widespread recognition that the media are an important actor during the different phases of a transition (Voltmer 2013), influencing its development and outcome (Voltmer and Sorensen 2019). As a country progressively moves away from authoritarianism, the media acquire a new role and previous constraints disappear, with media outlets and journalists having to adapt to changing circumstances. As the media operating during the authoritarian period go through a process of transformation, new media outlets also appear to compete with them. In “older” transitions, these changes were
largely confined to radio, television, and the printed press, but more recent ones have also seen the emergence of social media as protagonists of regime change. Irrespective of the type of media, there is a widespread consensus that the media environment plays an important role in transitions because it influences public debate and it puts pressure on or, conversely, releases pressure from those groups and individuals negotiating the new rules of the game.

There is much less consensus though over whether a newly freed media environment contributes to the success or failure of the transition to democracy. From a theoretical point of view, there are two sets of assumptions that have been tested. On the one hand, it is hypothesized that the media are a potent support for a successful transition because they are now free to inform on the political, social, and economic situation of the country and therefore provide genuine information to political actors. Professional standards improve because the fear factor disappears. The public has greater access to sources of information and can be more involved in and knowledgeable of the political process. The elites can now be questioned and disagreements, even profound ones, are openly broadcast. On the other hand, the media can be a considerable impediment to a successful transition. One could hypothesize that after years of operating under authoritarian constraints, the media do not have the professionalism necessary to deal with a democratizing environment and journalists find it difficult to acquire professional standards in a short time. In addition, they might not have much credibility because of their past record during authoritarianism. All this means that journalists and the outlets covering political, social, and economic affairs can be extremely partisan, play on the polarizing tendencies that already exist in society and are therefore unable to provide information and analyses that the public and parties need in very volatile times. This applies to new media outlets as well. The media then become a conflictual terrain where personal and ideological positions are used to undermine political adversaries, promote divisions, and speculate over intentions. Furthermore, media in a transitional country can become more easily instrumentalized (Voltmer 2004) and significant commercial imperatives appear, putting a tremendous amount of pressure on media outlets to come up with scoops and sensationalism, further undermining reasoned discussions and coverage around the transition process.

The theoretical divergence that exists in understanding the role of media in processes of transitions to democracy is borne out empirically. Voltmer and Sorensen (2019) summarize the contradictory nature of empirical findings: “extensive case study research in South Africa, Kenya, Egypt and Serbia highlights the ambivalent role of the media as force for democratic change, citizen empowerment, and accountability, as well as driver of polarization, radicalization and manipulation.” Years earlier, Schmitt-Beck and Voltmer (2007) had already emphasized that the media can be either “gravediggers or seedsmen” of democracy. From Nigeria (Ojo 2003) to Portugal (Santana-Pereira 2016) and from Ukraine (Goldstein 2007) to Chile (Bresnahan 2003) to Ghana (Arthur 2010), studies on the relationship between the media and democratization have provided empirical findings that substantiate both theoretical frameworks and expectations.
This means that when the Arab uprisings came around in 2011 there was little consensus on how the media might help or undermine processes of regime change. The transitions—whether failed or successful—occurred at a time when the media environment was polarized on multiple levels. Domestically, traditional media remained under the control of the authoritarian regime. However, citizens and political activists had been able to access—on and off—a much freer media environment internationally given the reach of television stations such as Al Jazeera (Lynch 2006), pan-Arab newspapers, and European and American channels. In addition, social media, despite the numerous attempts regimes made to control them, did have a significant impact on how citizens gathered and distributed information (Schaery-Eisenlohr and Cavatorta 2012). The uprisings freed the domestic media environment and it was hoped initially that the multiplication of sources of information, the “liberation” of journalists from the strictures of censorship and the full opening up of the Internet would contribute to support democratization. The reality has been very different.

**Transitions and the Media in the Arab World**

Much of the scholarship on the relationship between Arab transitions and the media has focused on the role of social media, notably Facebook and Twitter (Hostrup Haugbølle 2013), with many writing enthusiastically about “Twitter” revolutions (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011). More sober analyses followed, and it became clear that social media were not necessarily a causal factor in the revolts (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013), but simply one of the means that facilitated activists. The role of television and real-life networks was far greater (Aouragh and Alexander 2011). As Kahlaoui (2013) makes clear, “the role of the internet and social media, in particular, in the Tunisian revolution has been exaggerated by Western media.” Following this, it became important to analyze how traditional media operated at the time of the revolts and in their aftermath because easy access to internet was not widespread and because many citizens still get their news from radio, television, and newspapers or magazines (El-Issawi 2016).

A number of scholars (CIRS 2016; El-Issawi 2016) have underlined the divisive role of the media in the Arab world, and in his 2015 seminal article Lynch best summed up the scholarly consensus: “rather than constituting new public spheres for the negotiation of new identities and institutions, or acting as watchdogs on the emergent regimes, the media in most Arab states contributed to social polarization, popular discontent, and the resurgence of old regimes.” Lynch continued his analysis by outlining the way in which the media played a destructive polarizing role that fundamentally undermined the chances of success of the processes of regime change in countries that had rid themselves of a dictator. He argued convincingly that “transnational television bec(ame) a weapon for proxy wars by regional powers, national media (were) captured by old elites and private interests, and social media encoura(ged) polarization and informational clustering.”

The retrenchment of authoritarian rule in Egypt, Bahrain, and Morocco and the explosion of civil conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen are testimony to the broad failure of democratization. Although the media are not the only actor responsible for
this state of affairs, most analyses of countries where a transitional process was initiated converge on the finding that their role has contributed to such failures (El-Issawi 2013 on Libya; Alazzany and Sharp 2014 on Yemen; Lynch et al. 2017 on Egypt). The findings from the other post-uprisings transitional cases lead to the issue of the “paradoxical” success of the Tunisian transition. Although the country still suffers from significant problems (Brumberg and Ben Salem 2020) and its institutions enjoy very low levels of citizens’ trust (Teti et al. 2018), there is no doubt that from an institutional perspective the country is a resounding democratic success. A new liberal constitution was passed in 2014, there have been three rounds of free and fair legislative and presidential elections, individual freedoms are protected and parties and parliament function autonomously, while the separation of powers ensures both balance and democratic accountability. We thus have a paradox to solve. Although the Tunisian transition to democracy was successful, Lynch (2015) is broadly correct in his analysis of how the Arab media operated in the aftermath of the uprisings in transitional countries. A divisive, polarized, and partisan media environment also affected the process of regime change in Tunisia but did not have an effect on the final outcome. In addition to traditional media, it should be noted that digital media also broadly failed to be a positive force in the process of democratization. Although not to the same level as Egypt and with a certainly greater positive pro-democratization constructive engagement, Tunisian digital media also deepened polarization. As Karolak (2020: 33) also recognizes in her study, “the reasons behind the success of the democratic transition in Tunisia are broader than the use of social media.”

The next section analyses the Tunisian media landscape after the uprising, setting the stage for the explanation of how the ANC still managed to finish its work and deliver a liberal-democratic constitutional text.

**Tunisian Traditional Media and Regime Change**

After the revolution, and in particular, after the October 2011 elections for the ANC, the media landscape became considerably polarized. This polarization was the outcome of the near-total and sudden freedom of expression after the fall of Ben Ali. As El Bour (2016) states “the fall of the Ben Ali regime led quickly to the disappearance of the instruments of control over the media.” Such freedom provided the opportunity for a multiplicity of voices to enter and influence political debates. In other Arab countries (Yemen, Egypt, and Libya), such freedom exposed and played on the cleavages that existed prior to the fall of the regime ranging from sectarian and tribal differences to linguistic and ethnic ones. In Tunisia, a number of significant cleavages also existed, ranging from social divisions (Ayari 2016) to racial ones (Mrad Dali 2015) to regional ones, but they were not central to widespread and sustained political mobilization, unlike the sectarian divisions in Syria, Egypt, and Bahrain or the tribal ones in Libya and Yemen or the cultural and ethnic ones in Algeria. However, there was, and to a large extent there still is, a deep ideological fracture in Tunisian society, which has been the “resource” mobilized in political struggles: secularists versus Islamists. The secularist project is associated with Bourguibism and
its legacy and is based on the rejection and marginalization of religious traditions in public policymaking. Religious precepts are perceived to be an obstacle to economic and social development and the Bourguibist tradition argues that the state should be “civil,” republican, and secular. The argument is not necessarily that religion is irrelevant, but that it should be relegated entirely to the private sphere. Islamists of all stripes reject the notion that economic and social modernization comes to the exclusion of religion from the public sphere and are far more attentive to preserve a role for religious precepts in the formulation of policies. This does not mean that all Islamists are in favor of the construction of an Islamic theocratic state, but policies should be formulated with religious precepts in mind to provide cohesiveness to society. This cleavage has been present in Tunisia since independence and despite some scholars (Gorman 2018) arguing that it is no longer as relevant to explain Tunisian politics, it is nevertheless a significant one for political, economic, and cultural elites as well as voters, particularly when it comes to the degree liberal freedoms individuals should be able to enjoy, the macroeconomic framework the country should adopt (Ben Salem 2020) and the foreign policy to be pursued (Adraoui 2017). These profound differences were set aside during the revolution but reemerged strongly soon after the fall of the regime.

While there was a broad agreement among citizens and political parties—that Tunisia should become a democracy, there were significant tensions about the role of Islamists, and the Islamist party Ennahda in particular, in it. In short, what did democracy mean to political parties and to individual citizens? As the transitional process continued, the issue of political Islam and its role in a democratic country became both crucial and controversial. The tensions between secularists and Islamists were reflected and heightened in the newly freed traditional media. There are multiple reasons that led the media to feed this ideological cleavage, ranging from genuine belief in one or the other political position to financial benefits to the necessity of increasing circulation or attracting listeners and viewers. This deontological slippage on the part of many journalists and media outlets contributed to polarize further the Tunisian transitional environment. As mentioned, the watering down of professional standards due to the way in which journalists were selected, controlled, and trained during the authoritarian period (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012) is a primary reason for the slippage, but one should also add that many of them were attracted by the notion of “making history.” This meant that there was a sort of transformation of their role, as they became political actors in their own right rather than witnesses of history being made (Ben Letaief 2016). In addition, the media landscape itself was in the midst of profound changes. The audio–visual sector had been changing before the fall of the regime (Chouikha 2007), but this quickly accelerated after the uprisings, as public service media had to rethink their role and significant market pressures affected the media scene, leaving it wide open to sensationalism and propaganda.

Whatever the reason for the media to deepen the cleavage, and in line with Lynch’s insight (2015) about the polarizing role of the media in Arab transitions, Tunisian media became the battlefield between two very strong ideological currents that had
opposing view of what the future of Tunisia should look like despite both claiming to want it to be democratic.

The two camps battled on the airwaves, on television, and on the print media almost incessantly. The intensity of the ideological debate, the plurality of voices present across the media, and the partisan role of journalists and show hosts is not problematic *per se* because they are all contributing factors to a genuine and open democratic debate. In fact the traditional Anglo-Saxon model, where the “objectivity” of the media is believed to be one of the centerpieces of democracy, is no longer applicable even in established democracies, if it ever was. And yet, the line between genuine democratic debate and opinionating without basis in facts or slandering is a fine one. Although domestic ideological conflicts in Tunisia needed to be aired, it could have been done without resorting to personal attacks, untruths, and overly partisan sensationalism.

Politicians involved in the transition quite naturally sought out the media to present their vision and engage with each other and the public in decisions that would shape the future of the country, as the new political and legal institutions had still to be fully designed. For their part, the media were involved in two intertwined processes. First, seizing quite quickly on the existence of two distinct ideological camps, they allowed both views on the air. In this they reflected a genuine cleavage, doing, therefore, a service to the democratic debate and to the transition. Second, and more problematically, the hosts of political shows and most journalists—and the outlets they worked for by extension—clearly took sides. As mentioned, taking sides is far from being detrimental to the democratic debate, but the manner in which such partisanship emerged and was offered to the public did not necessarily reflect the reality of the ANC and the negotiations among political actors. Extreme partisanship in the media tends in fact to reinforce ideological extremes rather than being conducive to dialogue at times when dialogue was needed to secure the success of the transition. This dialogue was actually taking place in the assembly. This was particularly the case for TV shows, although it should be underlined that this is far from being a Tunisian peculiarity.

A sort of “classic” occurred on Tunisian TV channels, whereby the journalist hosting the debate clearly takes the side of one of the two politicians on the show and actively participates in an “attack” against the other guest—a kind of media lynching with *ad hominem* sleights—rather than moderating the exchanges or expressing mild partisanship. The “discussion” soon becomes a shouting context with little to no information provided and where substantive issues are not dealt with. For instance, during the popular show *Klem Enness* on January 8, 2014, while the ANC was in session, on *Attounissiya* TV station, the host, Maya Ksouri, abandoned her role of journalist to shout invectives, rather than asking questions or criticizing, at Yassine Ayari, a popular blogger, who was defending how the revolutionary parties, which, according to him, were Ennahda, CPR, and Wafa, were conducting the transition. Ayari retorted to the invectives with violent and sexist remarks, telling the host she was old, ignorant, and petulant and suggesting that the deputies of what he called counter-revolutionary parties should be lynched and calling them dogs for good measure. The role of the media in further polarizing the debate can...
be seen working even before the sitting of the ANC. In another case, during a 2011 debate on Nessma TV, Samir Dilou, member of Ennahda, was clearly personally targeted not only by the other politicians, but, more worryingly, by the journalists participating in the debate. The debate actually resembled an inquisition, with Dilou by himself defending the party’s positions against the attacks of journalists and politicians ganging up against him. This is not surprising because Nessma offered precisely this confrontational format to its viewers during the duration of the ANC, with journalists systematically espousing profoundly anti-Ennahda positions. Digital media were not exempt from fostering polarization, although it should be noted that some scholars contend that online media did contribute positively to democratic consolidation (Breuer and Groshek 2014). However, this finding should be tempered, as the causal link between online media and democratization is mediated by political mobilization, which in itself is not necessarily pro-democracy.

This carry-on provoked the reaction of the High Independent Authority for Audio–Visual Communication (HAICA), which was created after the revolution to ensure the freedom and the pluralism of audio–visual communications (Gobe 2012). Despite its political and financial autonomy, HAICA had a difficult time sanctioning the media in the early post-revolutionary years, but on October 23, 2013, it officially called on private TV and radio stations to respect the principle of plurality of opinions and to refrain from propaganda, reminding all concerned that ethical professional standards should not be breached. HAICA felt compelled to intervene because the two examples mentioned above were far from isolated and represent well how the media treated political debates.

While this might be a fixture of many political shows across the world, raising serious questions about how the public is informed, it is particularly problematic in transitional countries where the need for citizens to be fully informed in much greater detail is fundamental, as new institutions are being built after decades of authoritarianism and whose success is based on dialogue among political actors. When it comes to the print media, it was also very clear from the beginning of the transition where different newspapers and magazines stood ideologically. While this might not necessarily undermine a transitional process, the nature of the coverage of politics was particularly partisan and vitriolic.

Thus, from the very early days of the transition, the Tunisian media landscape became polarized. Quite quickly a number of media that had been operating under authoritarian control felt invested in what can be called a “rescue mission,” namely an intense effort to save Tunisia from the Islamist danger. These media, with the channel Nessma TV at their helm, followed a very strong editorial hardline against the representatives of Political Islam. This tendency to criticize Ennahda systematically from a purely ideological perspective led to a number of factual errors regarding the party’s activities and choices. While journalists at times apologized subsequently for their mistakes, the reality is that many media outlets had an ideological approach to politics that clearly intended to undermine a key actor in the transition. In short, undermining Ennahda was the ultimate objective (El-Issawi 2012). The Islamists responded to this mediatic attack by setting up of favorable media outlets—the TV
channels Al Kalam, Al Zaitouna, and Al Moutawasset—or by attempting to gain influence in existing media such as Hannibal TV. This attempt was problematic because some of these outlets operated without a license. In terms of content, they were very clearly partisan. Al Mutawasset for instance invited Rachid Ghannouchi for an incredibly long interview with a very indulgent journalist who let him ramble on without contradicting him or asking him tough questions. The same channel gave an extravagant amount of time on air to Ridha Belhadj, the leader of the fringe radical Islamist party Hizb Attahrir. Belhadj spent most of his time spouting very hardline views against democracy, constitutionalism, and secular sectors of society.

The struggle between the two camps was particularly intense for dominance on TV, which both considered crucial. There is no doubt that the secularist camp won the mediatic battle, which led Islamists to shy away from Tunisian established traditional media (radio, TV, and newspapers), preferring instead to rely on social media and international outlets. The rupture between the two camps in the media environment was clear and deep, with each relying on its own partisan journalists and shows to convey their political messages to the broader public. This further deepened the cleavage though, as each camp simply addressed its own supporters reinforcing the echo chamber effect. It should be in fact noted that each camp contributed of course to this polarization; the media did not simply create it. Politicians fed it because it allowed them to have a firm grip on “their” public. Nevertheless, it is worth reiterating that the role newly freed media should have during a transition was deformed. Rather than simply providing an outlet for a plurality of voices and opinions—no matter how biased—propaganda and conspiracy theories became the currency many journalists traded-in.

It is worth mentioning that radio stations, unlike TV channels and newspapers, were much more balanced in their coverage and less opinionated. Private radio stations such as Shems FM and Mosaique FM remained more professional when compared to TV stations throughout the transition period and attempted to maintain a degree of objectivity, professionalism, and independence, but were broadly unable to compete with the popularity of TV channels and the sensationalist coverage they promoted.

In short, what Lynch (2015) argued about the negative and unhelpful role of the Arab media during and following the 2011 uprisings applies to Tunisia as well. The revolution allowed for the emergence of a free media landscape, which reflected and deepened the ideological cleavage dominant in politics and society. However, this unrestrained freedom often veered into partisan sensationalism and produced a type of coverage detrimental to the broader public’s understanding about the workings of the ANC in particular. Whether for commercial imperatives, a distorted sense of their place in history or absence of professional standards, the Tunisian media further poisoned a volatile environment, which had seen the murder of two prominent politicians (Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi) and numerous violent clashes with the potential to spill over in much greater violence. As mentioned, politicians should not be absolved for this, as they also contributed to the poisonous climate, but they ultimately succeeded in securing the transition and the democratic consolidation of the country.
**Working in a Tumultuous Atmosphere: The Necessity of Consensus**

The cleavage between secularists and Islamists was very much a reality the ANC had to contend with between 2012 and 2014. As shown above, the media environment further deepened the cleavage, seizing on a number of issues where political discord existed to further demonize the ideological opponent. At some stage of the transition, notably in 2013, there was open talk of the possibility of a civil conflict breaking out. Although the media were not responsible for this, they had nurtured divisions that seemed for a time to have doomed the Tunisian democratic experiment. Despite all this, and with the crucial help of the actors involved in the national dialogue and civil society more broadly (Hudakova 2019), the ANC managed to continue working and its members were eventually able to agree on a new constitutional text.

Although some have noted that the 2014 constitution contains a number of ambiguous articles, there is no doubt that it represents the starting point of a successful democratic consolidation. How was this impressive result achieved? How could the elected representatives collaborate so closely after having for instance just left a TV show or given an interview when they had just accused their colleagues of violence, corruption or treason? Although there was an element of showmanship on the part of politicians, as they played to their own audience and actively sought out confrontations with ideological rivals on TV to establish their ideological purity, the atmosphere in the country was particularly heavy and had a negative impact on the process of constitution-making process. In the following sections, the article describes how consensus was reached from a technical point of view and then explains the conditions leading to it. Participant observation in the workings of the ANC, primary media sources, and interviews with elected representatives of all ideological persuasions provide the empirical data. The interviews were semi-structured and we relied on personal contacts to set them up.

**Technical Consensus**

In preparation for the 2011 ANC elections, Yadh Ben Achour, head of the High Authority for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution, had already emphasized the need for consensus to move the transition forward and appealed to political parties to ensure that such consensus would indeed guide their work in the ANC. Following this recommendation, Article 3 of the Provisional Regulations of Public Authority, which the ANC adopted, provided for a two-third majority for the adoption of constitutional text within the Assembly. It follows that such majority could only be attained through a broad consensus among the many ideological persuasions represented in the assembly. Failing this, the text would have been submitted to a popular referendum, which all parties wanted to avoid because it might have led to a genuinely problematic political and legal impasse.

The novelty of the enterprise, the ideological differences, the political inexperience of many elected representatives, and the media influence coming from outside the
chamber, weighing heavily on deputies, contributed to stall the constitution-making process. The *bloquage* of the ANC workings came quite quickly after it had been elected, when the six committees charged to deal with different institutional and legal aspects of the new text stopped functioning because of the inflexibility of the positions both Islamists and secularists espoused (Bsili 2016; Mekki 2018), in addition to divisions within both camps. The disagreements were numerous: the relationship between state and religion, the role of religion in regulating individual behavior, the form of government (Islamists preferred a parliamentary system while others wanted a presidential one or a semi-presidential one at the very least), the electoral system for presidential elections, the minimum voting age, and many others. All these issues had a profound political dimension and the media contributed to stalling the ANC by making wild accusations and claims. Islamists were accused of wanting to set up a theocratic Islamic State and secularists were accused of wanting to erase the Arab-Muslim identity of the country. Both claims were equally inaccurate as they both dismissed the considerable ideological moderation and the pragmatism of the Islamist party and the religiosity and attachment to the Arab identity of the secularists. This did not matter however and the environment within the ANC was not conducive to find a compromise. A former member of the ANC (a *nahdawi*) remembers thinking at the time: “how can we agree on anything in this environment?” Once the six committees stopped functioning, the ANC decided to create a “consensus committee” (Mahjoub 2016) charged with resolving the most divisive issues. This committee, unlike the other ones, was given a wide berth and, crucially, the possibility to validate within the ANC the accords that political parties made outside of it. This committee provided an avenue to discuss divisive matters in a more structured and somewhat less public manner because party leaders and elected members worked outside the ANC and then brought their agreed position into the committee to be approved rather than endlessly and confrontationally discussed. In addition, the committee was able to work as if it was insulated from the surrounding media environment, in the knowledge that the failure of the committee would have had the most serious repercussions on the transitional process.

A further element contributing to the successful work of the committee and the ANC more broadly had to do with the ambiguity and vagueness of the most contentious constitutional articles. This was done purposefully to present a consensual position to the country, including the media. Showing consensus meant that a number of ideological diatribes were deemed no longer relevant. This technical device was eventually “discovered” once the final text was approved, but by then the political parties had achieved the objective of approving a constitutional text, leaving eventually to the Constitutional Court—yet to be set up—to decide on what the “right” interpretation of vague and at times contradictory articles was going to be (Mahjoub 2016). The clearest example of “the strategy of vagueness” is Article 1 of the constitution. While both camps wanted to change it from the previous version to affirm more clearly the secular or the religious nature of the state and therefore the relationship between state and religion, it was decided to leave it as it was in the 1959 constitution. Both the secularists and the traditionalists believed that its formulation would allow the
Constitutional Court to privilege an interpretation close to either preference (Mahjoub 2016). As mentioned, the vagueness and contradictions of specific articles, particularly the ones that have to do with individual freedoms, are indeed a problematic aspect of the constitution-making process in Tunisia, but the political importance of presenting a consensual text prevailed. Privileging the political importance of consensus saved the transition, although this was not easily accomplished because members of the ANC still attempted to use the media to have their preferred position appear in the text. Mahjoub for instance stated that the more liberal members of the ANC attempted to employ “public opinion” to offset their minority position in the ANC where conservative voices prevailed. This worked to a certain extent.

Although party institutionalization in Tunisia was weak to nonexistent the leaders of the different political parties were invested in the success of the committee (Stepan 2012) and many deputies therefore were more willing to find a compromise. The technical solution—the consensus committee within the ANC—worked because deputies and party leaders were able, among other factors, to block out the negative media environment. What led to this?

**Political Consensus**

There is of course no single explanation for this change and different authors have emphasized a number of reasons for such a success ranging from the pressure and advice coming from the international community to the leadership and coordinating role Mustapha Ben Jaafar, President of the ANC, exercised to ensure the assembly would not fail Tunisians to the pressure coming from a broad range of civil society organizations intent on protecting the revolution. However, the individual role of deputies, as some authors have noted (Gobe 2012; Perez 2016), is quite important precisely because of the absence of party institutionalization and relative political inexperience within the ANC. Many political parties were very recently established, others were simply personalistic and others still had just reemerged after decades operating in exile or underground. This meant that individual members had a greater role to play and they were eventually able to overcome their initial mistrust and the negative influence of the media. There are a number of points that emerge from the interviews, pointing to different reasons for the success and while no single one prevails over the others, when put together they become significant.

First, the negative coverage that deputies received from the media was paradoxically helpful in eventually closing ranks despite ideological differences. While the polarizing coverage was “welcome to an extent because it seemed to help one side over the other and deputies did indeed use the media to brandish their ideological purity and uncompromising attitude in public” (Interview with author—Ettakatol deputy 1, 2019), the broader negative coverage of the workings of the assembly was not appreciated. As one deputy (*Ennahda*) states: “the media had a very negative impact on public opinion during the period 2011–2014 because they contributed to the disgust of ordinary Tunisians for democracy … they argued that 80% of what we did in the assembly did not work … in addition they magnified disagreements
among deputies and privileged (in their coverage) speeches that were violent, but always neglected to mention what we did well and what we achieved” (Interview with author, 2019). As the deputy suggests, the sentiment that the media were so negative in their coverage had an impact on them insofar as some deputies wanted to highlight the many instances of collaboration and the hard work that they put in. As another deputy (Interview with author—Ettakatol deputy 2, 2019), stated, “the environment within the ANC was much more open than it was reported in Tunisia.” This indicates that collaborative relationships did exist, but could not be translated immediately into agreements within the six initial committees and some of the violent exchanges on social media between deputies of different parties did not help their cause in receiving better media coverage. It took the creation of the consensus committee to ensure that such collaborative and open working environment would lead to an actual written commitment, but this should not diminish the work deputies had done since their election. There is a recognition that ideological differences did exist and it was never going to be an easy task overcoming them, but the overwhelmingly negative focus and the polarizing attitude of the media seemed to encourage overtime many deputies to keep working together.

Second, the low levels of trust in journalists and the media eventually led many deputies to question the contribution of the media to the transition, particularly when it came to local Tunisian media outlets. It should be noted though that one deputy argued that the media played a positive role insofar as they kept “battering” Ennahda and, according to him, forced the party to climb down from some of its authoritarian positions (Interview with author—deputy of the Mouvement des patriotes democratiques, 2019). The majority of those interviewed though have a rather negative view of the way in which local journalists behave and how political news is reported. The main arguments are that journalists only seek scoops, dabble into character assassination, are unable to understand the complexity of politics, and are hostages to financial and/or ideological interests. Whatever the reason, it became clear over time to many deputies that there was the need to “distance” themselves from a poisonous media environment, within which they felt targeted. This translated into greater and more collaborative engagement in the assembly. It is not a coincidence that a number of deputies mentioned that during the workings of the ANC they placed greater trust in foreign media to cover the Tunisian transitional process more fairly and objectively. The BBC and English outlets were specifically mentioned.

Finally, the pressure from other sources “paid off,” with deputies increasingly realizing that the alternative to their failure would have been either a civil conflict or the return of authoritarian rule. The Egyptian military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood might not have caused the compromising attitude of the Islamist party Ennahda, but it did signal what one of the potential consequences for failing to reach an agreement on the constitution would be. For their part, the secularists also realized that their support in society, despite the media bias in their favor, was not as wide as they believed, particularly for left-wing forces, and that a peaceful transition without the Islamists on board would not have been possible. Tunisian
civil society also played a prominent role in pressurizing deputies to agree on a constitutional text.

**Conclusion**

The success of ANC stands in sharp contrast with the debates and coverage the media provide during the transition, which were built on sensationalism, ideological confrontation, and a certain disdain for the work of elected deputies. It can be stated that the media neglected to shed light on the many positive developments that occurred with the ANC and focused their attention instead on the conflicts and divisions. The latter did exist and were significant because they reflected a genuine fissure in broader society and among political parties. The media did cover such an ideological divide, providing a platform for varied public and diverging strong opinions to be heard. Many deputies have readily recognized this, but felt that the negative coverage of the workings of the ANC was the sole focus of many Tunisian media outlets (Interview with author—Interview with Groupe Democratique deputy, 2019). This polarized further the parties and made public opinion “disgusted” with politics, as many deputies lamented (Interview with author—Ennahda deputy 2, 2019). Although media across different political systems can no longer be seen as a watchdog of the political process and it might be unrealistic to expect an idealistic type of objectivity, many Tunisian media outlets and journalists preferred to become an actor within the transition through their propaganda and sensationalistic coverage, contributing therefore to generate confusion and misunderstandings. As many deputies recognize, the failings of the media during the 2011–2014 period have not been really addressed. While there is the recognition that there are very professional journalists, the disdain with which politicians hold Tunisian media institutions is palpable. This explains in turn the move away from them and toward other sources of information and outlets to engage the public with. From social to international media, many Tunisian deputies have distanced themselves from traditional local media.

Despite all of this, the Tunisian transition has been an institutional success and this article suggests that more kudos should be given to individual deputies who, in a context of weak party institutionalization, were able, admittedly with outside help, to overcome their profound differences and write a genuinely liberal-democratic constitution. Looking at the way in which deputies dealt with and reacted to the media coverage sheds some light on the internal dynamics of the assembly and while it is not the sole explanation for success, it is an important part of the story, which, thus far, has not been fully explored. In what is a severe indictment of Tunisian transition, one Ennahda deputy strongly suggested that without such a negative media environment a political agreement what have been found much earlier. While this might be overcritical of the media, the Tunisian case demonstrates that the success or failure of transitions can rest on the bargaining individual deputies, finding ways to collaborate in difficult circumstances. Shedding light on some of the circumstances under which the transition was successful despite the media environment contributes to specify better when and how the media environment actually matters in transitional processes.
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Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MM8w9L3G8O1&t=73s.
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRGI81ZeUz8. In this instance, the journalist, who is hosting one of the most watched shows on TV, built her accusations against Ennahda and its supposedly illegal methods to finance party’s activities by referring to the word on the street and the Internet as sources and clearly stating “word on the street and on the Internet” when prefacing her questions.
3. The texts are available in Arabic on the HAICA website: http://haica.tn/2013/10/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%87%d9%8a%d8%a6%d8%a9-%d8%aa%d8%ad%d8%b0%d8%b1-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%b8%d9%8a%d9%81-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a5%d8%b9%d9%84%d8%a7%d9%85-%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b9%d8%a8%d8%a6%d8%aa-%d8%a7/.
4. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GZS75Ih1qY. For the clip with the apology, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03maCj5NLCE.
5. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OD9BPtafgg8.
6. Al Zaitouna invited prominent Islamists Mohamed Goumani and Ahmed Labiadh to speak without interruption on the air. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EG27gRM_P4.
7. The former host later admitted to this https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipcnfdB80T0.
8. Both are available, respectively, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yig6UtD7OII and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWlaHrM0408.

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