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# Parties in an era of change: membership in the (re-)making in post-revolutionary Tunisia

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## ABSTRACT

In the current era of rapid and radical evolution in the institutions of partisan politics, one of the best-documented and most discussed changes in established and more recent democracies has been the decline of membership enrolment, and yet its resilience. By contrast, comparative research on Maghrebi political parties, and on this aspect in particular, has for a long time been rather narrow or non-existent. With the newly democratised Tunisia at the centre stage of the analysis, this contribution aims at partly filling such a gap and explores the ways in which Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes discipline their memberships. In presenting what privileges the parties grant to their members, what they expect from those who join and the differences in what individuals need to do to enrol, this article focuses on findings from personal interviews and the examination of parties' bylaws and statutes. Through the lens of inclusiveness as core dimension, it argues that the two parties vary widely in the extent of their efforts to cultivate membership structures and party-related activities, as well as for the significance they attach to them. Whereas Ennahda more heavily invests in creating and reinforcing strong bonds of identity, and gives its members more voice in internal decision-making, Nidaa is more prone to promote candidates or policies keeping the organisational membership at a minimum, not least in the attempt not to restrain leadership's autonomy.

**KEYWORDS:** Membership; party politics; Ennahda; Nidaa Tounes; Tunisia



## Introduction

Everywhere, the development of political parties remains a matter of extensive debate. Signs of apparent 'decay' of traditional political parties have been detected in the established democracies for more than forty years now. The decline in party membership, the 'centralization' of the decision making process and policy formulation at the national level while local organisation is running down, the increasing dependency from state funding, coupled with a general disenchantment in (formal) political participation, are all features that can be observed in newer democracies as well as in those of longer duration, so that 'in most contemporary democracies, whether long-established or not, the era of mass-party seems to be at an end' (Diamond and Gunther 2001).

Research on political parties in the Arab world has for a long time been rather narrow. With the exception of a few recent works (Cavatorta and Storm 2018; Storm 2014; Willis 2012; Catusse and Karam 2010; Lawson and Ibrahim 2010) there has been no systematic comparison on party politics within and across countries. Moreover, the focus has been predominantly on Islamist parties (among others McCarthy 2018; Wolf 2017; Al-Anani 2016; Masoud 2014; Wegner 2011).

In this regard, the new born democracy of Tunisia is an extremely intriguing case study as a context for the formation and adaptation of political parties from a hegemonic/authoritarian polity to a liberalised one. Hence, the paper looks at two key political parties that have largely dominated the post-2011 political arena for their electoral success and black-mail potential: the Muslim-oriented Ennahda party and its 'secular' counterpart Nidaa Tounes. In view of the transformations that characterised Tunisia's political realm, a new and highly relevant space for investigation opened up. The underlying assumption is that the critical juncture that the 2011 uprisings represented, disclosed new windows of opportunity for a more competitive and participatory political environment, for both the citizenry and political parties, and not only throughout informal channels, but also and foremost via institutional politics. The early aftermath of the 2011 uprisings witnessed the mushrooming of political parties as carriers of new interests and identities that could finally make their voice heard in an institutional setting breaking with a past of co-optation or clandestinity.<sup>1</sup> But the disillusionment with political institutions and political parties of those

who had supported the uprisings substituted the initial euphoria (Abbott 2016). When considering a series of indicators customarily measuring a party's state of health (electoral turnout, party confidence, party identification, and membership), the picture is quite gloomy in the new Tunisian democracy, but not so exceptional when compared with other Maghrebi countries as well as with more established democracies in the West. In the 2011 elections for the National Constituent Assembly, some 4.3 million Tunisians went to the polls, corresponding to almost 52 percent of the voters on the electoral register; by contrast, in 2014 the turnout was of around 68 percent out of it. But this is an illusory increase, because, despite the higher percentage, the aggregate number of voters decreased by more than 700,000, as the electoral register is considerably culled from 2011 to 2014 (from over 8 million to over 5 million). Even worse, the turnout of municipal elections in May 2018 was just 35.6 percent. Plenty of surveys find that small percentages of people have confidence in parliament and government, and political parties often rank as the least trusted institutions (SIGMA 2017, 33; IRI 2016). In such a general environment of little faith in public institutions, youth views are even more pessimistic (Yerkes 2017).

Against this backdrop, few analyses have considered the issue of membership as a lens through which exploring what idea of party is at stake. The goal of the present contribution is to address this gap by exploring the significance of party membership in the (re)construction of parties' identity in a newly democratising Arab environment. It will do so by empirically investigating the differences and changes in the approach to membership of the two most popular Tunisian political parties until 2018. Taking for granted that the basic imperative of any party is the survival of the organisation itself, it can be assumed that the provisions parties produce on the ideological, political, strategic and organisational side are deeply, though not exclusively, affected by this primary goal (Ignazi 2017, 177). Nonetheless, when stressing the relevance of the party's organisational aspect, this approach by no means implies a denial of the role of agency by members, leaders, representatives and other figures who are part, more or less formally, more or less actively, of a structure than can be loosely or highly formalised. Rather, it means to see their actions in context, as the 'agents' cannot transcend the own 'imperatives' of the party as a complex organisation. Following this conceptualisation, the paper accounts for 'the opening up or the

restriction of membership recruitment, the emphasising or discarding of members' roles, the exaltation or minimising of the representatives' functions' (Ignazi 2017, 177) as indicators of parties' aim and worldview. Hence, what image they want to promote when asserting themselves as new legitimate political and social actors.

Based on the party's bylaws and the accounts given in personal interviews carried out between 2015 and 2018, the paper will compare Ennahda's and Nidaa Tounes's approaches to membership. The following questions will be addressed: what membership policy do they have? To what extent are members given some voice? What kind of mobilisation strategies do parties opt for? In order to allow for a cross-party comparison, the dimension of inclusiveness will be taken into consideration, referred to here as 'the extent of duties and privileges attached to party membership [...] [but also] the ease or difficulty of enrolment' (Scarrow 1996, 30). Indeed, the degree of inclusiveness allows for a description of parties in terms of elements which are largely under their own control as the aspect of internal choice prevails compared to that of external circumstances, and it is therefore more indicative.

This paper first reflects on the theoretical and empirical implications of a widespread changing approach to party politics, and to membership as well. It then considers the significance of partisan membership in contemporary Tunisia and the contradictions it embodies. Finally, it empirically investigates parties' inclusiveness in terms of ease of access onto the party and members' participation in the decision-making process, mostly measured through the extent of their duties and rights. In other words, to what extent membership makes a difference in the party politics of the case studies, whether by stressing the legitimacy and relevance of their base or further centralising power and resources.

In summary, there are two broad objectives this paper intends to achieve. First, the different paragraphs provide a novel analysis of the two strongest and politically polarising Tunisian parties which combine contextual knowledge and western ideal-types in political science, by overcoming readings too closely following either transitology or post-democratisation literature. Second, the research offers a wide comparative perspective by placing these political parties within the literature on the functions, roles and challenges of contemporary parties in complex and post-ideological societies. In this sense, such approach

puts parties in context but also escapes the label of 'exceptionalism' that too often twists the reality on the ground.

### **A crisis of political parties' membership?**

As Susan Scarrow (2017) recalls, one challenge in studying party membership is that the notion itself may have different meanings. On the one hand, it is an organisational category, namely a formal status that individuals may acquire, for instance, by applying for it and paying dues. On the other hand, this notion profoundly differs from the idea of membership as identity, more in the sense of an 'early-socialized, enduring, affective, psychological identification with a specific political party' that may, or not, coincide with party voting and party loyalty (Dalton 2016). There are, of course, additional nuances somewhere on the boundary between these two notions of membership, though the first sense will be emphasised and problematised in this article also in connection to the idea of identity each party is working on.

Comparative political science literature has shown the unequivocal decline of membership-based politics in the West and the tendency of political parties to shift from 'bottom-up' to centralised 'top-down' structures (van Biezen and Poguntke 2014). Such a phenomenon affects both older established democracies and 'newer' ones. With regard to the last ones, evidence from studies on Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe – that constitute the bulk of works on transitory processes of the so-called third-wave of democratisation – generally points out that newer democracies tend to have weak partisan attachment (Dalton and Weldon 2007) and low voter turnout (Karp and Banducci 2007; Norris 2004). Additionally, their party systems appear as characterised by weak party institutionalisation (Mainwaring 1998), i.e. unstable partisan attachments, high electoral volatility, little or no trust in parties and elections, and the absence of well-resourced parties that are not dominated by a single personality (Mainwaring 1998; Mainwaring 1999). Contrary to the expectation 'that the originally low degree of political party affiliation would be a reflection of the newness of the democratic system' in new-born democracies (van Biezen 2013), evidence suggests that party membership kept declining long after the critical juncture. Indeed, although older established democracies and new democracies do not show any significant differences in terms of downward trends as for



party membership and partisan affiliation, on average, the decline in party members is even more pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe than in the older Western democracies (van Biezen 2003). In other words, the expectation that the level of affiliation would have grown after a 'learning period' and adaptation to the new democratic experience – as the social learning model of partisanship would suggest – was not met in those cases.

Nonetheless, notwithstanding diffused low levels of membership, the latter has not been dismissed tout-court. Whereas in post-communist countries parties preferred to present themselves as 'movements' according to an anti-organisational rhetoric, 'purposely distancing themselves from the membership-based and very hierarchical communist parties' (van Biezen 2013), they nonetheless benefitted from having relatively strong grassroots organisations (Tavits 2012; Gherghina 2015). In Latin American democracies formal party membership organisations are often weaker or even non-existent whereas informal grassroots networks sometimes provide them with electoral support (Freidenberg and Levitsky 2006; quoted in Scarrow 2017), though it considerably varies depending on the country. Moving to some East Asian democracies, like South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, members play only a minor role in parties' internal affairs though their statutes echo the membership-based forms of European parties (Hellmann 2011).

Yet, membership, at least in principle, proves to be quite resilient. Suffice it to think that, in tune with the mood of the times – largely dominated by a neo-liberal cultural model, a market-oriented and short-termism worldview that necessarily affects people's approach to politics and parties as well – political parties have been reinventing traditional membership by offering 'cheaper' affiliation options, and not only in terms of fees but also in terms of commitments and engagement. What some refer to as 'light' adhesion, 'liquid loyalties' (Ignazi 2017) or 'lite membership' (Scarrow 2015, 2017) that can be acquired (and dropped) more spontaneously and carries fewer obligations.

To be sure, regardless the origins and nature of political parties contesting elections in a newly democratised country, whether they express the revolutionary spirit or the authoritarian legacy among others, it sounds conceptually difficult for them all to dismiss out of hand, at least in theory, the relevance attached to membership. Multiple factors explain its resilience. The main reason is undoubtedly the legitimisation

principle it enshrines. As Ignazi (2017) recalls, those who represent the 'elite' of the party as office holders (the so-called party in public office) or in the bureaucratic machine (the party in central office) lack the 'legitimation capacity' (except for the charismatic leadership) that the grass-roots level (the party on the ground) has: 'it operates legitimately in the name of the party but the legitimacy of the party as the democratic tool par excellence, is provided by its anchorage in society through a, hopefully, large membership' (Ignazi 2017, 178). In democratic settings, substantively as well as of façade, parties pay homage to the logic of the number, and hence to the size of membership in order to boost their legitimacy. Whereas the idea that the larger the number, the stronger and healthier the party, derives from the mythology of the mass-party era, it is a concern that still informs parties' image, enough so that some parties had felt the need to compensate for their limited membership by shifting the emphasis on the large number of voters, or of militants, or to the leadership itself (Ignazi 2017, 179). Likewise, countless recent examples, for instance in Europe, demonstrate how parties have long and repeatedly inflated the number of their members to exhibit larger troops than those they could rely on (Ignazi 2017, chap. 6).

Secondly, membership (and thus party members) represents a valuable asset for the benefits it may produce (Scarrow 1996). Beyond the 'symbolic' role of legitimation in that it enhances 'political prestige' and the image of a popular organisation by improving membership statistics, it provides: (a) Direct electoral benefits, as members are assumed to vote more regularly, and more consistently. Moreover, although they represent only a small portion of the electorate, they might be crucial particularly in elections with low turn-out levels. (b) Outreach benefit, as members are 'valuable ambassadors to the community' through their everyday contacts, regardless their being opinion leaders or not. (c) Financial benefits thanks to the subscription fees, that were particularly valuable, in Duverger's (1954) view, in the case of parties without other resources than their popular base (Scarrow 1996, 40–44). Members provide the party with additional benefits as well, but, unlike the former, these require a more active approach. Indeed, active members are a resource in terms of labour, as free help both during and between election campaigns; linkage, as they provide information about public concerns and act as 'channel of communication which keeps the party in touch with "grass-roots" opinion;' (Scarrow 1996, 44) innovation,

in the form of new ideas and perspectives; and finally personnel benefit, if one looks at membership as a way for leadership recruitment (Scarrow 1996, 44–45). On the other side of the ledger, party members are a liability as well, carrying with them both programmatic and opportunity costs. The claim on the former rests on the assumption that active members tend to support vote-losing policies in that they are more uncompromising than office holders about principles and thus less inclined to a vote-seeking direction, what we may define as the ‘hardliners.’ Opportunity costs instead refer to the expenses related to the recruitment, organisation and maintenance of membership, both in terms of money and time, that could be alternatively used to reach a broader community and not only a small portion of the electorate.

The decisions parties take on membership should be framed within their organisation’s imperatives, and according to their aim. Intra-party reforms, due, among others, to the coming of a new leadership, the fights between different factions, and changes in internal rules, favour or depress recruitment, and account for an expansive or rather selective membership, as well as for the degree of inclusiveness vis-à-vis their base. Whereas it is true that the ideal-type of the mass party looked for a large membership and caucusbased parties for a more elitist affiliation, the trade-off between a quantitative and qualitative participation has to be considered. An expansive strategy is inclusive insofar it allows the access to the party to a larger audience by removing discriminatory prerequisites of any kind. Nonetheless, it may be simply aimed at attracting more supporters, not necessarily committed, thereby boosting a more distant and impersonal relationship. On the other hand, controlled membership procedures point to ‘the transposition into the party domain of the standard rules of gentlemen’s clubs’ (Ignazi 2017, 202) in elitist terms, or to a matter of selectivity out of necessity as ‘defensive’ attitude to prevent the risk of infiltration for those parties harshly confronting or confronted by the established powers. Not least, to the intention of a small core of ‘professionals’ to exercise control in highly hierarchical organisations as in the case of the Bolshevik-derived parties according to the principle of democratic centralism.

Hence, an active membership is a valuable resource, yet it comes at a cost, especially in terms of restrained autonomy for the leadership and a major responsiveness and accountability due to the base. Many aspects point to the inclusiveness of parties: to what extent members have a say

in the party's decision-making; whether parties decide to increase the size of membership or cultivate it more assiduously; the choice of opting for an electoral mobilisation aimed at attracting as many voters as possible or for a partisan mobilisation which is much more time consuming and labour-intensive but has the advantage of creating a much more permanent anchoring of the party within society (van Biezen 2003). In addition, the above mentioned features are indicative of parties' connection to the base and, ultimately, the linkage they aim to promote with citizens, whether by orienting themselves more toward a bottom-up or top-down stance.

It is evident that the organisational dimension of membership – which had been increasingly distancing from the mythicisation of the mass-party model and yet is a telling prerogative of parties' strength, though in a process of rethinking itself – is intertwined to the intrinsic nature of the party and its identitarian dimension.

### **What space for partisan membership in contemporary Tunisia?**

As the previous paragraph has illustrated, the relevance of party members as fundamental (human) resource in a political party goes well beyond whichever activities they can fulfil, according to the logic of legitimation by 'numbers', be they in terms of members, or, alternatively, of voters, or both. And Tunisian parties do not escape this logic. When it comes to membership, the unreliability and over-reporting of party data mentioned above is not an extraneous phenomenon. Parties are usually reticent in disclosing official numbers of their members, or tend to inflate them. Likewise, interviewees commonly overemphasise the key role that membership fees (cotisations) have as they would constitute the bulk of funds party relies on, though evidence shows differently.

In the case of Nidaa Tounes, a likely figure is between 50,000 and 100,000 members, and more than 100,000 for Ennahda.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, Ennahda declared it had almost one million of adherents (Dahmani 2017). This number, if confirmed, would be very impressive, as it corresponds, approximately, to 10 percent of the overall Tunisian population. Nevertheless, it seems quite unrealistic, not least as the number of voters for the party in 2014 was less than one million and it is reasonable to assume that not all of them were officially enrolled. It is not unusual that politicians, when asked about membership, are quite

evasive or are prone to include in the calculation the voters, or those participating in party's public meetings or simply sympathisers. After all, the vagueness of data about membership is a common feature shared by most of political parties (Wegner 2011), although electoral laws increasingly demand precision.

Beyond what parties self-report, one way to get around such inconsistencies due to both a deliberate overstating of figures or the alternating meaning of membership and categories included in the estimate, is to use public opinion surveys, which have, nonetheless, their own measurement problems (Scarrow 2015, 2017). According to a recent report based on the IV Wave of the Arab Barometer (Thomas 2018), a tiny minority of people in Tunisia (2 percent) reported to be a member of any political party. Such a data does not differ from the rest of the region, where party membership falls below 5 percent in Morocco (3 percent), Algeria (2 percent), Egypt (1 percent) and Jordan (<1 percent), with the only remarkable exceptions of Palestine and Lebanon, with 13 and 12 percent, respectively. Likewise, a previous World Value Survey dataset (2013) clearly shows that slightly more than 98 percent of Tunisian did not self-report any membership, and that among the remnant, 0.9 percent affirmed to be inactive members and only 0.8 active members.

Yet, numbers alone provide but a partial picture. And when comparing membership between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes in contemporary Tunisia, two general considerations should be premised.

First, enrolling in a party in the post-2011 has a different meaning in respect to the times of Bourghiba and Ben Ali. Prior to 2011, the ruling party Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) claimed membership in the millions (Hamid 2014). Indeed, it seemed to have nearly 2.5 million members out of a barely ten million inhabitants (Ayeub 2011). Whereas the reliability of these numbers has to be questioned, it is also noteworthy the instrumental relationship with the party itself and the utilitarian motivations laying behind membership. Some has highlighted how the membership of the RCD 'was useful if not indispensable, especially in marginalised regions' to have access to basic services, and to successfully issue any kind of requests (Ayeub 2011, 470). Membership also had a very different meaning in the previous decades, in late colonial times and early post-independence period, when the Neo-Destour (New Constitution) party – which later evolved into the RCD – led the independence struggle. As Braun (2006, 20) points out, 'the Neo-Destour

is indeed the first political organisation open to Tunisians from all regions and social groups,' and took the form of a mass-party recruiting from all segments of society. Compared to its predecessor, the Destour, that resembled much more what Maurice Duverger labelled as cadre party but with a very weak ideological foundation (Storm 2014, 93), the leading actor of independence had originally created a more flexible structure to share power in a quite large circle as a consequence of the repression from colonial rule and in order to survive arrests (Braun 2006). Moreover, by the time it became legally recognised in 1955 nearly after twenty years from its creation, the party accounted for a surprising membership, roughly onethird of adult Tunisians (ibid.). The ideological dimension and magnitude of the membership in such a historical moment has gradually evolved hand in hand with the absorption of the party into the regime apparatus.

The second consideration concerns the origins and time factor in explaining the differences between Ennahda and Nidaa in the post-2011. For instance, Islamists are distinguished by being a bottom-up party whose very origins date back to the 1970s to religious and social organisations outside the parliament – an aspect that undoubtedly 'diverted' them more towards society from the very beginning. Consequently, as other externally created parties, Ennahda behaves along the lines that Duverger stipulates, accordingly a slightly more popular orientation and a stronger degree of ideological commitment if compared to its counterpart. Similarly, Nidaa Tounes, like the internally created parties (the vast majority of Maghrebi parties) tends to minimise the role of membership and not to truly expand its structure. Moreover, in the case of Islamists, out of necessity, the lack of alternative resources like personal patronage networks or proximity to old political and economic elites pushes for a stronger reliance on popular support to gain legitimacy and strength, both in material and intangible assets. Without pushing it to a 'path dependent' reading, a different timing of development partly contributes to different degrees of internal coherence and complexity in the organisational structure, as well as in the approach it has with the base. Indeed, the amount of time parties had at their disposal since their creation and the context characterising their birth and existence, had an impact on those dimensions. In the case of Ennahda, the definition of its rules and bodies is the outcome of a decades-long internal debate. And it is still an ongoing process. Persistent

repression, exiles and imprisonments strongly limited the membership of Ennahda in the years before the uprisings, though the movement had tentatively attempted to recreate itself, by relying on a complex underground structure with different levels of engagement for its members and cells spread over the entire country, by also encouraging activism in workers' unions (Wolf 2017) or creating clandestine sectorial committees in several ministries and sensitive institutions (Camau and Geisser 2003). Undoubtedly Ennahda has proved to be highly adaptive to its environment navigating through repressive waves and short periods of honey-moon with the regime. Very recently, McCarthy (2018) shifted the focus to non-elite members who represent the 'intellectual and structural periphery' of the party. Their activism and individual re-imagining of the Islamist project coupled with deep informal networks, would be the sources of the movement's resilience, rather than a deep and articulated structure and grassroots social welfare activities. By contrast, Nidaa Tounes had to create a party organisation from scratch though it relies on previously RCD and some leftist networks. This has partly contributed to a weaker formal architecture.

To sum up, these two parties widely vary about how they organise their membership, and in terms of the importance attached to it compared with other organisational resources. Next section will explore these different approaches.

#### 4. Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes from within: membership in the making

As explained in the previous paragraph, membership is among the traditional indicators brought into play when it comes to assess a party's state of health. But there is much more on the table. Membership role and conceptions contribute to more clearly conceptualise political parties. Looking at Ennahda and Nidaa from the perspective of inclusiveness offers some interesting cues on the relationship that both parties aim to cultivate with their base and society more broadly, whether they are more prominently bottom-up or top-down oriented, the kind of linkages they promote and what kind of legitimacy they rely on.

In the years of repression and exile, to cope with the risk of infiltration, like agent provocateur or disguised security officers, Ennahda put in place a controlled modality of recruitment, as many other parties did

elsewhere, resorting to strategies like a period of probation or introduction by some party members. The biggest innovation in this sense in the post-2011 was the lifting of *tazkiya*, namely the process through which someone among existing members should vouch for the moral character of prospective applicants in order to let them enter the party. Interestingly, as the separation between the movement (*haraka*) and the party (*hizb*) progresses since the last General Congress in May 2016, *tazkiya* 'has been more or less transformed into a simple non-binding recommendation' (Ounissi and Marks 2016). This reduced selectivity of the party, like other 'management-type strategies' is part of a broader strategy of opening-up and 'normalization' path of the party, which bet on its modernisation and professionalisation to appeal to a broader audience.

By Ennahda's last statute, all Tunisians may become member if they are at least 16 years old, without any legal impediments. Members are expected to believe in the party's principles and aims, work to achieve its goals and be committed to its programs, statute and internal rules; they cannot belong to any other party and, more interestingly, have to be 'honest, behaviour well and conveniently, and be virtuous' (Ennahda 2016, Article 8). This kind of ethical clause, though not exclusive to Ennahda, is to be understood under different frameworks. On the one hand, the unavoidable reference to Islam-based values, thereby to the religious tradition which highly esteems moral and wise behaviour and still informs the party's essence regardless of their being 'Muslim Democrats' rather than 'Islamists' as stated in May 2016. On the other hand, the fact that there are conditions to become members of the party and there is a 'selection', though diluted, on presumed moral standards, comes as no surprise if one considers the relevance that the party gives to its image, somehow stressing how much it is interested in having committed members as calling cards of the party within the broader community.

The process of applying to the status of members begins at the local level, where the party directly works with the people in the community and, actually, if there are no impediments, it ends in that framework. The rationale behind the way the process is designed is assuring the independence of the local level in taking decisions, while maintaining the possibility for the applicant to appeal to higher levels in case of disputes or necessity. In the meantime, central bodies (National Executive Office,



Presidency, Consultative Council) retain the right to 'bypass' standard procedures by directly suggesting members. It seems there is an implicit assumption behind this provision. The process of election of central bodies bestows the legitimacy from the base upon them, hence legitimises their mandate. The modalities to acquire membership, are illustrative example of the interplay of check and balances within the pyramidal structure of the party, where the core idea is to build democracy from the bottom up and ensure that every level is built up from the lower levels. The same logic applies for the process of decision-making and election to office within the party, or the 'duplication' of bodies with similar functions but operating at different levels (see, for instance, the local and regional congresses, the executive committees and, more recently, the regional Consultative Councils). In so doing, the party on the ground communicates with the party in central office, each of them preserving prerogatives and outreaches. With regard to this, the formalisation of rules and transparency of procedures assures legitimacy, even in case of disputes, thereby providing the overall structure and functioning of the party with a sense of coherence and unity.

In recognition of the inclusiveness of nahdaouis (Ennahda members) in the internal life of the party, they are entitled to plenty of rights (Ennahda 2016, Article 12). Among them, it is important to mention here the right to elect party officials and candidate to leadership positions. In terms of duties (Article 13), it is remarkable the provision about 'guarding the party's secrets', possessing good manners, integrity and virtues, and working on the proper implementation of party programs and tasks as assigned.

From the extent of rights, and even more from that of duties the statute lists, it is evident that Ennahda requires an active commitment of party members, and expects the fulfilment of certain criteria. From personal interviews, it also emerges that the party provides a sense of community and of belonging that resembles something more than a simply partisan affiliation. In a sense, past legacies still manifest themselves. For long, Ennahda has been both a movement and a party in one. The 'comprehensive' nature of Islamist movements, meant to encompass every facet of life, affected the approach Ennahda has to membership, being, a distinctive feature that does not disappear all of a sudden. Furthermore, the need of self-preservation and solidarity during the years of repression and persecution of Islamist activists throughout

Bourghiba and Ben Ali's regimes, has bound nahdaouis together by a deeper loyalty, making party structure necessarily more impenetrable and insular at the time. So far, it is too early to assess the effects on membership, as well as on other organisational aspects, that the separation between movement and party has been producing. Now that Ennahda has been licensed, because of legal requirements governing parties, anyone can, in theory, become a member. In practice, however, membership takes on a weightier meaning. And this is particularly the case with movements or organisations inspired to the Brotherhood (Hamid 2016).

If it can take years to organise a well-structured party, and to define coherent internal procedures, and to establish roots into society, Nidaa necessarily bypassed critical steps to counter balance Islamists at elections in 2014. Furthermore, its very heterogeneous nature made the choice for a specific membership approach even more complicated. By looking at Nidaa's statute,<sup>3</sup> it generically lists among the conditions to join the party those required by law<sup>4</sup> (Nidaa Tounes 2016a, Article 6). The internal procedures additionally mention an 'integrity clause,' namely 'honesty and good manners' (Nidaa Tounes 2016b). Nonetheless, it nowhere specifies which criteria are applied to evaluate this aspect. On the side of duties entailed with membership, those of contributing to the activities of the party, paying a subscription and respecting the provisions within the statute and internal rules are generally listed (Nidaa Tounes 2016b, Articles 7 and 8). In return, all members have the right to participate in party activities, to express their opinion democratically and to assume responsibilities within it (Nidaa Tounes 2016b, Article 9). Nidaa Tounes explained that as a party it took the decision to favour membership, by introducing a symbolic sum of 10 dinars (roughly 3 euros) every two years and further envisaging a reduction for students or unemployed.<sup>5</sup> The 'mosaic' (as members like to refer to it) character of Nidaa Tounes MPs also mirrors the composite nature of members on the ground: RCDists, leftists, women activists and youth. Members of Nidaa are particularly proud to highlight the presence of these last two categories of people – women and youth – as if it were an exceptional feature of the party to compared to the Islamists. Given the impossibility to have access to the registers of members, it is not possible to validate the extent to which this presence represents something so relevant compared to other parties and Ennahda in particular. After all, in the

2014 elections both Nidaa and Ennahda were among those with the fewest number of women as heads of lists (3 out of 33 electoral districts), despite a rhetorical pledge to the cause of equality (Labidi 2014).<sup>6</sup> The selfportrait of Nidaa as herald of women's rights connects to the recovery of Bourghibian rhetoric, not less than themes like restoring state prestige (*haybat addawla*), modernity and social renaissance. It also fits in the anti-Islamism discourse which the party campaigned on in 2014, thus referring to the alleged retrograde model that Ennahda would have embodied. Indeed, it is well known that while Ennahda downplayed its ideological tenets, portraying itself as the party of national consensus and as a 'centrist' responsible actor, Nidaa Tounes played up the Islamist-secular divide. Strictly speaking of members, it is less clear the level of inclusiveness towards them. In terms of ease of access, there are no particular obstacles and rather it seems there is a tendency in expanding membership. But, if the extent of their rights is not particularly relevant, opting for an expansive approach more likely relates to a matter of increased prestige and legitimacy in the short run in tune with an intensive electoral strategy, with a much more immediate impact, but also potentially more feeble and unstable, rather than a longterm partisan mobilisation. In particular, and unlike Ennahda, the lack of any mention within the statute of the members' right to vote within the party in the section devoted to membership, is striking. Equally relevant, Nidaa Tounes pays the penalty for original sin: it was created in 2012 by the initiative of the current President of the Republic Beji Caïd Essebsi gathering deputies from different blocs within the parliament but held its first congress only in 2016, in the midst of its internal crisis regarding the issues of succession at the party's leadership. This implied that, in the absence of a founding congress and elected party organs, the Comité Constitutif has been the governing body of the party since its creation, without a 'popular' mandate from the base. The ambiguous co-existence of this original body made up of senior cadres with the newly appointed – not elected – Comité Politique (executive body) when the National Congress first took place, has deepened internal rivalries and frictions (Gobe 2016). Moreover, when Essebsi formally left the presidency of the party because of unconstitutional incompatibility after being elected as President of the Republic, the appointment of his son to the role of Executive Director of the party, a kind of *ad interim* president, raised much criticism. Similarly, in terms of decisionmaking, some of the

members of the Executive Bureau are particularly critical about its functioning and internal mechanisms of decision, affirming for instance that it does not meet up at all.<sup>7</sup>

Against this backdrop, personal power struggles took place reflecting clientelistic logics and interests, causing a haemorrhage of MPs and other members from the party. Floor crossing reached its zenith with the split of the party and the creation of the new parliamentary bloc *al Hurra* (Freedom) in November 2015 and of the new party *Tahya Tounes* (Long Live Tunisia) under the leadership of the current Prime Minister Youssef Chahed at the end of January 2019. To conclude, the delay in holding the founding congress and having a statute, implied a significant level of arbitrariness and ambivalence, exacerbated by the absence of clearly defined standard operating procedures. In the first place the composition of executive bodies and then the awarding of internal responsibilities were the battleground between the group of founding members and that of new comers. The latter complained, among others, about the procedures of vote for and within party's bodies. Indeed, it takes place by designation or recommendation, unlike the election, and by secret ballot, in the case of *Ennahda*. In addition, the rules that relate to the leader of the party, labelled as Executive Director (no mention of other roles as the president or secretary general), are completely lacking. In sum, due to much more immediate concerns (i.e. winning the next elections and counterbalance *Ennahda*), *Nidaa* showed no inclination to empower its members, for instance by genuinely including them in the decision-making process of the party or the selection to office. Quite the opposite, the process is highly centralised, and coalesces around *Essebsi*. As in Kirchheimer's description of the catch-all party (1966), *Nidaa* was characterised by the overriding concern of maximising its share of vote and of patronage backed up by a minimalist ideology. Furthermore, it strongly resembles Duverger's caucusbased party insofar it relied on influential figures in order to conquer the electoral scene, and it did not seek to expand its structure as priority.

## **Conclusion**

We moved from the assumption that the Arab uprisings offered parties new windows of opportunity in a more competitive and participatory political environment, by easing the institutional constraints that heavily

weighed on them. Tunisia embarked on a democratic transition toppling the Ben Ali's rule, with the liberalisation of the party system – formerly hegemonic – and alternation in power. Hence, parties have come to find themselves in a markedly more competitive environment and suddenly much more reliant on the electorate than how they were in the past, insofar it is the key to have access to public office and to legitimate the bargaining power in political negotiations. But, this condition by no means translates into the primary relevance tout court of the party on the ground, in a way not dissimilar from what the literature inspired by Katz and Mair (1995; 2002; Mair 2013) depicts for Western parties' development when reflecting upon their loss of ability to act as intermediaries of people's demands and grievances in parallel with their increasing closeness to state bureaucracies. In the case of Tunisia, in the absence of precise and reliable figures on membership and given the tendency of parties to generally refer to their electorate when addressing their members, both a detailed diachronic comparison (pre- and post-2011) and a current assessment about the size of membership are not feasible. But, on reflection, even looking at other contemporary democracies – where the problem of comparisons is partially mitigated thanks to the existence of more systematic datasets (see the Political Party Database) – the debate on membership is going beyond the more familiar story of its numerical decline, shifting, for instance, to the nature of party affiliation (Poguntke, Webb, and Scarrow 2017). In respect of Tunisian parties, from the perspective of inclusiveness, regarded to here as a useful analytical dimension of party organisation, the paper has shown the extent to which Ennahda and Nidaa differ. Remarkably, these differences not only relate to a time-gap which favoured the former to better organise, but also to a different worldview. Since 2011, Ennahda has first campaigned on its closeness with the Tunisian people and the 'revolutionary goals,' then on its being a responsible and moderate actor, and its internal democracy to epitomise a clear break with the ancient régime and to boost its credentials in the eyes of public opinion in tune with the political shift of the country. The inclusiveness of its members goes to this direction. On the other hand, although Nidaa had little time to institutionalise and consolidate its organisational structure and to root into society compared to Ennahda, there might not be the interest in long-term investments in a more vocal membership infrastructure to protect the position in the party of the founding leader and the small

oligarchy around him. Thus, very different choices about how to link with supporters, and about what rights to give to those who join – hence the relationship between party organisation and individuals – mirror the extent to which the two parties conceive themselves as the intermediary and representative mechanisms between the state and society, as well as their strategic priorities and the kind of legitimacy they seek for. In this sense, Ennahda shows many similarities to other Islamist parties which tend to cultivate a capillary organisation on the ground and have committed activists who are required to join a project, not simply a party. Nonetheless, the intensity of partisan engagement varies widely across the spectrum of Islamists as well. From the very militant approach and fighting attitude of Hezbollah in Lebanon which provides for a fine-tuned adherence according to the level of ideological and military training (Calabrese 2016) to the two-class membership of the Justice and Development party in Morocco and the probation period before entitling members of full rights within the organisation (Wegner 2011). Likewise, Nidaa has an approach that partly resembles that of other parties born to counterbalance the rise of Islamists out of heterogeneous political forces, such as the Moroccan Party of Authenticity and Modernity, a pro-palace party built in 2008 which displays fewer restrictions on access, while offering to its members more limited levels of influence in party's selection procedures and decision-making, highlighting a more pronounced elitist and top-down nature if compared to Islamists (Cimini 2018).

A note to conclude. To be sure, this contribution is not suggesting that parties are just organisational structures, but rather that organisation does matter and membership is indicative of the way parties are (re)constructing their identity. Of course, organisational rules vary across parties, as well as within each party over time, thereby reflecting evolving attitudes and constraints. In this sense, membership has not to be reified, but investigated in the ways in which it is continually reconstructed. Further research needs to address some major questions about the political consequences of these variations (like political participation, electoral benefits and legitimisation of the system just to name but a few examples), as well as to address a more systematic comparison within the broader literature on political parties' contemporary trends and challenges. All the more so because of the growing party de-alignment and anti-party sentiment in representative democracies. Tunisia is no

exception. Paradoxically, in a day and age where parties have been finally liberalised and empowered as they are no more part and parcel of the democratic façade of the past authoritarian regime, they look more discredited. In an extremely diversified political landscape, where a big portion of the representation of the citizens' interests is handed over social movements or campaigns (see the Manich Msamah movement against the reconciliation law since 2015, and more recently, Fech Nestannou or Winou el Petrol?), civil society organisations and labour unions (the Tunisian General Labour Union above all) or self-representation (bloggers, social media), the survival of political parties is strictly connected to their ability to empower and rethink membership and regain popular support against the common perception which frames them as elitist vehicles of self-promotion, detached from society.

## Notes

1. A wave of legalisations started immediately after the ousting of the former president Ben Ali. Among the previously outlawed political parties, the more significant were Ennahda, the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the Workers' Communist Party in Tunisia (PCOT). In 2011, over 100 political parties represented in 1500 lists contested the elections for the National Constituent Assembly, with 18 among them (15 parties and 3 lists) obtaining seats. Currently, the registered number of political parties slightly exceeds 200. But if one considers those which are represented in the Parliament and really active on a daily basis, numbers dramatically drop.
2. Author's interviews in Tunis with Ennahda MP (April 2017), Nidaa Tounes MP and Directorate (April 2017).
3. The bylaws and statute considered here are those prior to April 2019, when two parallel congresses were held with each rival factions electing a party leader.
4. 'Law' here refers to Legislative Decree no.2011-87 of 24September 2011 that is in force at the moment of writing, though a draft institutionallaw on the organisation of political parties and their funding to replace the former is currently under debate.
5. Author's interview with Nidaa Tounes Directorate, Tunis, April 2017.
6. By law, parties have to establish every list in such a way to alternate between men and women ('vertical zipper'), but no horizontal parity (i.e. the requirement to alternate genders at the heads of party lists) is demanded. Hence, the decision of a party about the heads of lists is far more indicative in terms of promotion of gender parity. Similarly, 'when women candidates do not represent many heads of lists, the vertical party system tends to see women elected from the best-performing parties' (NDI 2014, 61), which explains the higher percentages of elected women for Nidaa and Ennahda.
7. Author's interview with Nidaa Tounes MP, Tunis, April 2017.

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