

**Securing the state in post-transition Tunisia:
Reconfiguring regime legitimacy in an age of
authoritarian neoliberalism**



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Abstract

In this thesis I aim to answer the question as to how, following the fall of the Ben Ali regime, in January 2011, successive post-transition governments have sought to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy and the role security politics has played in this process. Through exploring articulations of regime legitimacy, with reference to the interlinkages between neoliberal deregulation and security politics in the post-transition context, I argue increasingly authoritarian neoliberalism, sustains and reinforces widespread socioeconomic insecurities in Tunisia. It is these everyday insecurities, inherently linked to hierarchical, racialised and authoritarian models of capitalist accumulation, which have overarchingly prevented, and continue to prevent, successive post-transition governments from the legitimisation they seek. And thus, unable to provide for security of their populations, successive post-transition governments, and now the increasingly authoritarian regime of Kais Saied, have sought to construct their claims to legitimacy upon the notion of ‘securing the state’ from certain securitised supposedly ‘existential’ threats including, but not limited to, terrorism, Islamism, instability, migration and corruption. This has led to the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state, to both respond to the aforementioned ‘threats’, and increasingly, to repress contestation and resistance of neoliberalism and the authoritarian neoliberal state. Fundamentally, I assert that because of widespread insecurities and spiralling economic crisis, caused by the failure of neoliberal deregulation and austerity in Tunisia, as well as anger at excesses of coercive state power, these articulations of ‘securing the state’, in its traditional ‘Weberian’ sense, as a source of legitimisation for the political regime, have failed. The Tunisian case is significant and worthy of study its own right, but the crisis of legitimacy seen in Tunisia is inherent to contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism. Thus, through the case of post-2011 Tunisia, where the transitional political context acts as a microcosm in which to explore the significance of such discussions, I argue that neoliberalism will continue to enrich a very select and ever smaller handful of individuals

while reinforcing everyday insecurities for an ever-growing majority. This will, of course, continue to delegitimise political regimes globally.

Thus, by exploring the case of Tunisia between January 2011 and July 2023, I aim to make both an empirical and theoretical contribution to International Relations scholarship. Firstly, I aim to push the boundaries of the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism by exploring its manifestations in a post-transition political environment where security and economic policy are negotiated between domestic political elites and the interests of international capital. Secondly, I intend to make a theoretical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism by exploring the additional conceptual tools, namely decolonial approaches, studies of racial capitalism, performativity and populism, with which it can be deployed particularly in research that brings together the academic disciplines of IPE and security studies to understand (in)security.

Dedication

To my Granddad, Bill Randall, lifelong activist and campaigner, for teaching me that we must *never* stop getting angry about social injustice.

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An Introduction to the Project: ‘Securing the State’ in Post-transition Tunisia: Reconfiguring Regime Legitimacy in an Age of Authoritarian Neoliberalism

Neoliberal democracy’s perhaps greatest victory is convincing us that state violence is an exception, while the same violence (...) is essential to non-democracy. This was on full display in Tunisia today

Jakob Plaschke – researcher and activist investigating police brutality in Tunisia¹

Introduction

In January 2011, President Ben Ali, an autocrat, who had ruled Tunisia since 1987, resigned and fled the country following a popular uprising against his regime. In the years that have followed there has been much academic, journalistic and external interest in Tunisia and its ‘transition to democracy’. For some, Tunisia is the success story of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’². Or, indeed, it was until President Kais Saied’s authoritarian power grab in July, 2021³. For others, it is a façade revolution used to disguise the preservation of the status quo in Tunisia. For an increasing number of commentators, Tunisia is a fragile post-transition state rocked by domestic and regional security threats, stuck between the neoliberal pressures of external actors and the vocal socio-economic demands of its own people, and characterised, more recently, by an apparent authoritarian drift associated with President Kais Saied. This thesis does not answer the question as to whether Tunisia, at the time of writing, July 2023, can be considered a democratic regime, nor does it seek to. Rather I aim to answer the question of how, following the fall of the Ben Ali Government, regime legitimacy is being reconfigured in contemporary Tunisia. Or rather, how successive post-transition governments have *sought* to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy. Perhaps more fundamentally, throughout this thesis I aim to explore the role security politics has played in

¹ tweeting on the 11th anniversary of the January 14 Revolution in 2022

² I chose not to use the term Arab Spring. When referring to the collection of uprisings witnessed in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, I will use the term Arab Uprisings. When referring explicitly to the Tunisian revolution of January 2011, I will use the term ‘Tunisian revolution’ or the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ as it is also known.

³ Since Kais Saied’s power grab in July 2021 many argue that such significant changes have taken place, including the writing of a new constitution and the removal of many checks and balances on Presidential power, as well as blatant human rights abuses, that we can no longer call Tunisia a democracy (Ferjani 2022). I do not enter this debate here in this introduction, but it is worth noting that even those who argued that Tunisia was the success story of the ‘Arab Spring’ would argue that it is ‘less’ democratic at the time of writing, July 2023, than it was at the point of Saied’s election in 2019.

the various articulations of legitimacy in the post-transition political environment, namely in terms of attempts by successive regimes to present themselves as ‘securing’ the state from certain ‘securitised’ threats. However, I argue we cannot understand such attempts to reconfigure the legitimacy of the post-transition regime without situating them within the context of reduced sovereignty of the Tunisian state and eroded legitimacy of the political regime – both of which are inherently linked to and shaped by authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff 2014). Engaging with questions of political economy in this thesis – a piece of Critical Security Studies research – may seem unusual. However, it is only by engaging with such questions that we can truly understand why political elites are deploying performative counterterror politics and populist securitised discourses to justify the rise of the Tunisian neoliberal security state – and why we see an intensification of these processes in particular times of contestation. Thus, through my analysis of the Tunisian case – I make a broader call for the recoupling of security studies and International Political Economy (IPE) to better understand (in)security in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and contemporary neoliberal security states. Furthermore, through my exploration of the security/neoliberalism nexus in Tunisia, I aim to contribute to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism as will be expanded below.

Despite its focus on regime legitimacy, this thesis is not an attempt to develop an overarching social contract theory for post-2011 Tunisia. Rather through exploring articulations of regime legitimacy, with reference to the interlinkages between neoliberal deregulation and security politics, I attempt to make an original empirical and theoretical contribution to the academic disciplines of security studies and IPE. Essentially, through the case of post-2011 Tunisia, I argue authoritarian neoliberalism sustains and reinforces widespread insecurity and social injustice in Tunisia. It is this insecurity, inherently linked to hierarchical, racialised and authoritarian models of capitalist accumulation, which has overarchingly prevented, and continues to prevent, successive post-transition governments from the legitimation they seek. And thus, unable to provide for security of their populations, successive post-transition governments have sought to construct their claims to regime legitimacy upon the notion of ‘securing the state’ from certain securitised, supposedly ‘existential’, threats including, but not limited to, terrorism, Islamism, migration, instability and corruption. It is not the claim of this thesis that some of these security threats are not ‘real’. Terrorism, for example, has posed a significant threat to the security of individuals and the political regime at times in the post-transition context. However, I do assert that 1/ these threats are exploited by political elites

who perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis around them to portray the level of threat as larger than it is and that 2/ this ‘crisis’ serves to justify the introduction of repressive security practices which are often exploited by elites to crack down on political opponents, popular protests and social movements. Furthermore, threats such as terrorism are often rooted in insecurities associated with socio-economic deprivation and neoliberal deregulation. Thus, repressive security practices and ‘exceptional’ policies designed to respond to said threats, actually risk creating further insecurities and even potentially causing radicalisation while distracting from these other factors. Notwithstanding their performative nature, articulations of the need to ‘secure the state’ from such discursively constructed threats have led to the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state, to both respond to the aforementioned ‘threats’, and increasingly, to repress contestation and resistance of neoliberalism and the authoritarian neoliberal state. Fundamentally, I assert the failure of neoliberal deregulation and austerity in Tunisia has produced an economic crisis, worsening insecurity, widespread social injustice and anger at excesses of coercive state power. As such, articulations of ‘securing the state’, in its traditional ‘Weberian⁴’ sense, as a source of legitimation for the political regime, have failed.

At the time of writing, July 2023, the post-Ben Ali political regime remains almost as fragile, unconsolidated and close to collapse as it did in January of 2011. As channels for traditional forms of political participation close, as a result of President Kais Saied’s authoritarian power grabs, consensus regarding neoliberal policies and neoliberalisation continues to characterise Tunisia’s policy making circles. As insecurity in Tunisia worsens, ‘street politics’ remains the only realistic avenue for contestation of the status quo. It is for this reason that we see near continuous rounds of protests and riots across Tunisia. Significantly, I argue that any future potential legitimation of the Tunisian political regime would require a radical overhaul of Tunisia’s state and economy – breaking free of dependency on external credit, imports of food, goods and energy and moving away from the inherent violence of the politics of austerity. In other words, if the legitimacy of the post-transition state is to be reconfigured, widespread insecurities and injustices in Tunisia must be tackled. Or, put more simply, dependency, neoliberalism and austerity must go.

⁴ This is a reference to Max Weber famous (1918) quote that the state is as a ‘human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’. In this definition the main function of the state is to provide security from existential physical threats in contrast to some of the additional functions often associate with the nation state such as providing a basic level of welfare

The Tunisian case is significant and worthy of study its own right, but the crisis of legitimacy seen in Tunisia is inherent to contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism. Thus, through the case of post-2011 Tunisia, where the transitional political context acts as a microcosm in which to explore the relationship between neoliberalism, declining standards of living, eroding legitimacy and the intensification of the use of coercive state power, I argue that neoliberalism will continue to enrich an ever-smaller handful of individuals while creating more insecurity and suffering for an ever-growing majority. This will, of course, continue to delegitimise political regimes globally. We are seeing this crisis of legitimacy and its consequences around the globe with the rise of the populist, often racist, far right groups in Europe and the co-optation of anti-colonial discourse by authoritarian rulers in Africa to further reinforce their own repression. However, as regime legitimacy crumbles, popular resistance emerges. From waves of industrial action in Britain protesting inequality of wealth and spiralling costs of living, to the Kamour movement in Tataouine contesting the exploitation of natural resources to enrich Tunis-based economic elites and European transnational corporations, the tide of resistance is rising. Thus, through the case of post-2011 Tunisia, I argue the answer to this global crisis of legitimacy and insecurity, from Bristol to Bizerte, is not reforming neoliberalism but rather, its abolition.

Before I explore such discussions in the following chapters, I must first situate and justify this project, its aims and its theoretical and empirical contribution in this introductory chapter. Thus, this introduction will be elaborated as follows. In the first part of the chapter, I identify the point of departure for this thesis: the increasingly widely held view that the primary cause of the fall of the Ben Ali regime was a fundamental rupture in the Tunisian social contract (I). Essentially, I argue that the rupture of the Tunisian social contract, inherently linked to failed neoliberalisation pursued in Tunisia from 1986 onwards, demanded a reconfiguration of regime legitimacy in the post-transition period. It is the role of security politics in the attempts of successive governments to reconfigure the legitimacy of the state in the post-transition period – a context defined by authoritarian neoliberalism – that is the central question at the heart of this thesis. In the second section (II), I introduce the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism, situate it with reference to broader historical processes of colonial capitalism, and outline this thesis' empirical and theoretical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. In section III, I briefly reflect on this project's research design, methodology, my own positionality and, of course, the many pandemic-induced pivots which (re)shaped this project's elaboration during its 5 years in the

making. In the final section of this introduction, section IV, I will outline the chapter structure of this thesis.

I - The point of departure: the socioeconomic motivations of the Jasmine Revolution

This thesis builds upon the argument that the Arab Uprisings experienced in Tunisia, and across the MENA, in late 2010 and early 2011 were caused by a rupture of the social contract upon which regime legitimacy had previously been constructed (Challand 2016a). Put simply, neoliberal policies and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) pursued in Tunisia since the 1980s led to declining standards of living which contributed to the fall of the Ben Ali regime (Bogaert 2013; Challand 2016a; Mossallem 2016)⁵. The centrality of socio-economic motivations for those who took to the streets in the Jasmine Revolution are not the central discussion of this thesis. Rather, the assertion of the primacy of economic motivations, including protestors' contestation of economic insecurity and social injustice, represents this thesis' point of departure for its exploration of the role of the so-called security-neoliberalism nexus in attempts to reconfigure regime legitimacy in the post-transition period. In short, this thesis starts from the claim that 'the initial phases of the revolts meant the renegotiation of a social contract' (Challand 2016a, p.16). And thus, throughout this thesis I seek to understand the reconfiguration of regime legitimacy, or rather the successive attempts of governments to reconfigure the legitimacy of the new political regime, in post-transition Tunisia. These discussions of regime legitimacy in post-transition Tunisia cannot be understood, I argue, without an account of illiberal security governance and neoliberal economics which I assert to be inherently connected and mutually reinforcing.

II. Bringing together Security Studies and International Political Economy to understand (in)security in the MENA

It is the claim of this thesis is that we can best understand (in)security in the MENA when adopting an analytical approach which brings together the academic disciplines of security studies and IPE (Elias 2015; Wynne-Hughes and Weldes 2017) to understand the interlinkages between neoliberalism and mechanisms of coercion and control. In short, repressive security policies and practices serve to sustain capitalist accumulation – from imperial to neoliberal - pre-empting or, at least seeking to pre-empt, its contestation. Thus, I

⁵ Between 1990-1998 poverty levels in the entire MENA actually increased (Bogaert 2013; Mossallem 2016). The average Real Purchasing per Parity (RPP) of the average citizen of the MENA fell from 21.3% to 13.9% between 1975-1998, whilst levels of inequality in the region rose exponentially (Ibid).

make a call, throughout this thesis, to the Critical Security Studies scholar, particularly those working on the MENA, to incorporate engagement with and analysis of structural economic forces and contemporary political economy into their research on (in)security.

II.I - Authoritarian neoliberalism

To facilitate this ‘recoupling’ of security studies and IPE in my analysis of the Tunisian case, I mobilise the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017) while also attempting to push the empirical and theoretical boundaries of the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism to new terrain.

The concept of authoritarian neoliberalism first appeared in the seminal 2014 article *The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism* by Ian Bruff (2014). The concept was later extensively expanded upon in Cemal Burak Tansel’s edited volume *States of Discipline: Authoritarian Neoliberalism and The Contested Reproduction of the Capitalist Order* (2017). Later conceptual clarifications were provided, and empirical boundaries pushed in Bruff and Tansel’s co-edited special issue *Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Philosophies, Practices and Contestations* appearing in *Globalizations* in 2019. In short, authoritarian neoliberalism is a concept that refers to the increasingly disciplinarian and authoritarian frameworks employed in so-called liberal democratic states, authoritarian contexts, post-colonial states in both the Global North (Bruff 2014; Sotiris 2017) and the Global South (De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Tansel 2018; Goonewardena 2020) to protect and reinforce neoliberal economic policies and to close the social and political spaces for their contestation. As outlined by Cemal Burak Tansel ‘contemporary neoliberalism reinforces and relies upon 1) coercive state practices that discipline, marginalize and criminalize oppositional social forces and 2) the judicial and administrative state apparatuses which limit the avenues in which neoliberal policies can be challenged’ (2017 p.2). Thus, those mobilising the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism, including myself, assert that illiberal security politics and neoliberal economics are inherently linked and mutually reinforcing, as I demonstrate here through the case of post-transition Tunisia.

In short, authoritarian neoliberalism, while not a strict model to be applied uncritically across time and space (Bruff and Tansel 2019), refers to the spectrum of ‘state strategies’ that operate to insulate its contestation (Tansel 2017 p.2). Throughout this thesis, I explore the so-called security-neoliberalism nexus to argue that post-2011 Tunisia manifests interesting and

novel particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism which are central to understanding the reconfiguration, or the attempted reconfiguration, of the legitimacy of the post-transition regime. This is not to say that regime legitimacy is necessarily ever fully achievable or possible, but that all regimes, be they democratic or authoritarian, cannot function on coercion alone and thus seek to configure their legitimate authority to govern (White 1986; Berfudi and Dushi 2015). Regardless of one's position on such legitimation, we must, as International Relations (IR) scholars, attempt to understand how political regimes seek to configure and reconfigure their articulations of regime legitimacy particularly in light of the contemporary crisis of legitimation faced by political regimes globally.

While not the central discussion of this thesis, I must underscore that authoritarian neoliberalism is not a distinct historical conjuncture entirely disconnected from previous forms of capitalist accumulation, be it in Tunisia, or globally (Bruff and Tansel 2019; Axster and Danewid 2021). The relationship between authoritarian neoliberalism and previous forms of capitalist accumulation will be expanded upon more extensively in Chapter 2, however, it is important to note that I seek to rectify the colonial unknowing (Vimalassery et al. 2016; Axster et al. 2021) which has, at times, characterised work on neoliberalism and neoliberal security states. In contrast to seeking to identify a 'starting point' at which neoliberalism became 'more' authoritarian, we must grapple with the colonial roots of neoliberal security states and extractive economic models both in the Global North and South (Tansel in Axster et al 2021). Notwithstanding the *longue durée* of Tunisia's peripheral position in the world economy as well as the continued role of the apparatuses of coercive state power in insulating capitalist accumulation from contestation, there has been a shift in terms of the illiberal propensities of the capitalist state as well as significant developments in the Tunisian security sector and, of course, a change in political regime since 2011. It is these economic, security sector and political changes since 2011 – which act to shape questions regarding regime legitimacy - that will be explored throughout this thesis.

II.II Contributing to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism

Through the mobilisation of the Tunisian case, in which the traditional sovereign functions of the state, in terms of macro-economic and security policy elaboration and implementation, are under increasing international pressure, and the legitimacy of the state is in a phase of reconfiguration following a revolution and political transition, we can reveal the significance and pertinence of authoritarian neoliberalism as an explanatory concept. In other words,

Tunisia's transitional political context acts as a microcosm in which we can home in on the interaction between neoliberalism, repression and the contemporary crises of legitimacy that we see playing out globally.

Thus, through its explorations of the empirical particularities of the Tunisian case, this thesis pushes the theoretical boundaries of the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism in four main ways. Firstly, through my exploration of authoritarian neoliberalism in a post-colonial state in Global South – characterised by its historical and continued racialised, marginalised and peripheral position within the global economy – I contribute to a more recent decolonial turn in the authoritarian neoliberalism literature (Tansel 2017; Jenss 2019; Axster et al. 2021; Laub 2021). Secondly, by situating authoritarian neoliberalism – as a 'spectrum state strategies' – with reference to broader global processes of interconnected security governance (Césaire 2000; Khalili 2010a) and global racial capitalist accumulation (Robinson 2019; Mullin 2023) and exploring the role of external actors in shaping authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia, I illuminate the global entanglements of neoliberal security states. Thirdly, while scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism have engaged with the crisis of legitimacy facing neoliberal states globally – often serving as the point of departure for their analysis of neoliberal state strategies (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017) – this thesis places discussion of the relationship between legitimation, coercion, consent and authoritarian neoliberalism at the heart of its analysis. Finally, although this thesis is not a piece of transitology research, this thesis' documentation of the role of authoritarian neoliberalism in democratic backsliding in Tunisia – particularly since 2021 – underscores the dangers of authoritarian neoliberal governance to the legitimacy of democratic regimes both 'mature' and 'nascent' (See also Tansel 2018; Sierra Deutsch 2021; Sinha 2021). These contributions will, of course, be expanded upon and interrogated more extensively in the chapters that follow.

Furthermore, throughout the individual chapters of this thesis, I make a theoretical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism exploring the additional analytical concepts and tools with which it can be deployed, particularly with reference to academic research in the field of security studies. Although those employing the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism have argued that it enables us to understand the intensification of the apparatuses of coercive state power to insulate neoliberalism from contestation and thus have emphasised the significance of security within their conceptual framework (Tansel

2017; Tansel in Axster et al. 2021), the majority of these scholars have hailed from the academic discipline of IPE. In contrast, as a Critical Security Studies scholar, I seek to explore, through the chapters of this thesis, the additional conceptual tools with which we can think both with and beyond political economy in the study of authoritarian neoliberalisms globally⁶. Of course, the empirical and theoretical contribution of the project will be explored to a far greater extent in Chapter 1, the literature review, and Chapter 2, the theory and methods chapter. However, it is worth noting that having elaborated the particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism in the Tunisian context in Chapter 3, I will explore the additional conceptual and analytical tools which, I argue, can be combined with the conceptual framework provided by authoritarian neoliberalism in Chapters 4 and 5, and 6, namely performativity, racial capitalism and populism.

The claim here is not that these additional conceptual tools are necessary to employing the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism in research which situates itself at the intersection of IPE and security studies, but that these concepts are both useful for this thesis' empirical analysis of Tunisian security-neoliberalism nexus as they allow us to better draw out the connections between neoliberal governance, security politics and regime legitimacy. Furthermore, these concepts, I argue, enable us to capitalise on the 'conceptual messiness' of authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff and Tansel 2019 p.236) in order to explore *some* of the additional conceptual tools with which the concept *can* be deployed particularly in research which goes beyond the disciplinary boundaries of IPE. Notwithstanding their individual contribution to this thesis' overall discussion of the role of security politics in successive governments' attempts to reconfigure regime legitimacy, Chapters 4-6 each attempt to make a standalone contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism both conceptually and empirically thus representing part of this thesis' contribution to knowledge.

III - A word on methodology, fieldwork and covid

In order to analyse the aforementioned phenomena, semi-structured interviews were held with a plethora of actors in the security sector as well as commentators on both Tunisian economic policy and security politics. I interviewed political commentators, journalists, security sector consultants, technocrats, NGO workers, CSO workers, diplomats and Tunisian

⁶ In October 2021, I co-organised, with Dr Elisa Wynne Hughes, and convened a panel entitled 'Thinking with and beyond political economy in the study of authoritarian neoliberalisms' at the Millennium Conference which reflected upon additional conceptual tools with which authoritarian neoliberalism can be used

politicians between July 2019 and December 2022. These interviews were conducted both in person in Tunisia prior to the onset of the Covid19 pandemic and online from March 2020 onwards. The coronavirus pandemic led to several cancelled fieldwork trips and many delays in this project. Indeed, the methodology of this project as well as the adaptations which were made to this project's research design because of the pandemic are explored more extensively in the theory and methods chapter; Chapter 2. The names of all participants have been anonymised. This is in line with the demands of the relevant ethics committee as well as for the safety of the participants. This is in recognition that these individuals are working, living and campaigning in an environment in which talking about the Tunisian state is becoming an increasingly dangerous thing to do. Rich interview data is supported by in-depth documentary analysis of official government statements, policy documents, reports, public opinion data, journalistic articles and tweets. This rich and diverse qualitative data was also supplemented by a deep analysis and review of cutting-edge academic literature to situate this thick qualitative analysis of the contemporary Tunisian case. By employing the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism, and mobilising the insights garnered in interviews as well as secondary data analysis, I analyse Tunisian security politics and its connections to Tunisian political economy between January 2011 and July 2023, while situating such discussions within their global context. In doing so, I argue 'securing the state' from certain securitised threats has become the means by which successive governments have sought to legitimise themselves in post-transition Tunisia – a context defined by authoritarian neoliberalism which simultaneously acts to challenge the legitimacy and sovereignty of the state.

IV Thesis structure

To support my claims, and explore the associated discussions, this thesis will be structured as follows. In Chapter 1, I situate this project within emerging and existing bodies of literature, particularly those working on the contemporary crisis of legitimacy faced by neoliberal states, authoritarian neoliberalism and critical approaches to (in)security. In doing so, I demonstrate how this project has been shaped by and builds on important scholarly contributions as well as emphasising its own original empirical and theoretical contribution to knowledge. In Chapter 2, I outline the analytical and theoretical approach of this thesis elaborating on *how* we can think both with and beyond political economy in the study of authoritarian neoliberalisms, expanding upon and justifying the additional conceptual tools and concepts that I use, in conjunction with authoritarian neoliberalism. In Chapter 2, I also

outline my research methods, their limitations as well as how this project had to adapt to the challenges that it met along the way.

In Chapter 3, I engage with Tunisia as a site of authoritarian neoliberalism and emphasise particularities of the post-2011 context which represent its contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism namely; 1) the reduced sovereignty of the Tunisian state associated with the huge power and influence of external actors in both economic and security policy areas, as well as 2) Tunisia's post-revolutionary political environment in which the legitimacy of the transitional political regime must be reconfigured. Chapter 3's elaboration of the particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism in the Tunisian case acts as the foundations upon which the following Chapters of this thesis will be built.

Indeed, having established that post-transition Tunisia as a site of authoritarian neoliberalism in Chapter 3, in Chapter 4, I employ the concept of performativity, associated with the work of Judith Butler (1993), Michael Lister (2019) and Cynthia Weber (1998), in conjunction with authoritarian neoliberalism to argue that 'securing the state' from certain securitised threats can be understood as an attempt by successive post-transition governments to both perform the sovereignty of the state and reconfigure successive post-transition governments' claims to legitimacy. However, I show that performative counterterror discourses and practices are aimed not only at flexing the muscles of the state, but they also seek to construct moral panic surrounding certain marginalised groups and aim to 'justify' the roll out of repressive policing of already marginalised communities, political Islamists and anti-austerity movements rather than merely suspected terrorists. As I argue in Chapter 4 this performance is designed to distract from one of the root causes of radicalisation and extremism in contemporary Tunisia: economic inequalities and dispossession linked to decades of neoliberal policies and the demands of the so called 'donor cartel'⁷.

In Chapter 5, I explore the role of external actors in post-transition Tunisia namely through analysing their provision of security assistance and its complex entanglements to other forms of financial assistance provided in the post-transition period. In doing so, I show that external actors have provided the Tunisian neoliberal security state with the means to insulate

⁷ The term donor cartel is used by Chandoul (2015) to refer to the coalition of external actors who have played such a significant role in shaping Tunisian politics since 2011 namely the IMF, the World Bank and the Deauville Partnership of the G7+

neoliberalism from contestation and clamp down on resistance that does emerge. This reinforces authoritarian neoliberalism while also playing into attempts by successive governments to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy around the notion of securing the state from certain discursively constructed security threats. Furthermore, in Chapter 5, I seek to bring the concepts of authoritarian neoliberalism and racial capitalism in conversation with one another to analyse contemporary security assistance in Tunisia. Indeed, I argue that external actors use both financial and security assistance in Tunisia to reinforce Tunisia's security and economic dependency on external, often global northern actors and thus maintain Tunisia's racialised, marginalised and peripheral position within the global economy (Rodney 1972; Robinson 2019; Jouili 2023; Mullin 2023). Such an analysis, I argue, helps understand these external interventions as part of the *longue durée* of global, interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control that insulate capitalist accumulation from contestation and emphasise the significance of racialisation in these processes.

In Chapter 6, I mobilise the concept of 'populism' to understand how authoritarian neoliberalism can be linked to a contemporary crisis of legitimation in democracies and thus, better help us conceptualise the threat posed by authoritarian neoliberalism to democracies both 'mature' and 'nascent' (Tansel 2018; Goonewardena 2020). More precisely, in Chapter 6, I acknowledge a fundamental shift that has taken place during the five-year period that I have spent researching and writing this project. This is due to the rise of President Kais Saied – who has all but deregulated the democratic institutions of the Tunisian state to cement Tunisia's return to authoritarianism. I argue that Saied has capitalised on events to perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis surrounding four discursively constructed threats or security 'crisis'; covid, corruption, Islamism and Black African migration to Tunisia. In the name of 'securing the state' from such threats, Saied's government has 1/ introduced wide ranging security measures and justified repressive use of force, 2/ consolidated neoliberalisation in Tunisia and 3/ solidified his own brand of populism and tight control on power. Thus, while in earlier chapters I argue the seeds of Kais Saied's authoritarian power grab were sown through failure of neoliberal reforms and the use of exceptional security powers, in Chapter 6 I explore the populist, and yet, no less authoritarian neoliberal, articulations of regime legitimacy present in post-July 25, 2021, Tunisia. I also show, through the discussions of this final empirical chapter, that Saied's articulation of regime legitimacy has failed to secure the legitimation it seeks and thus increasingly resorts to coercion and control. This, I argue, foreshadows further political instability to come.

Thus, throughout the various chapters of this thesis, I demonstrate that in the context of authoritarian neoliberalism in post-transition Tunisia, where the sovereignty and legitimacy of the state is challenged, successive governments seek to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy around the notion of ‘securing the state’ from certain securitised threats. However, as I show, their remedy for this perceived crisis of (in)security is the same repressive security policies, practices and neoliberal deregulation which pushed Tunisians to take to the streets in January 2011. This further compounds (in)security and political apathy and undermines the ability of the post-transition regime to achieve the legitimation it seeks. However, before exploring authoritarian neoliberalism in post-2011 Tunisia, performative security politics and the contemporary crisis of legitimacy faced by successive governments, I must first situate this project within the existing literature emphasising how it builds upon and contributes to important scholarly debates in the next chapter, Chapter 1.

Chapter 1 - The contemporary crisis of the Tunisian neoliberal security state: situating this project within important and emerging literatures

I am partisan of a political approach to security.... security is about where power lies... you cannot understand security any other way

Interview with Head of Security Sector concerned NGO, Tunis, January 2020

Introduction

In this thesis I will explore discussions of regime legitimacy, security politics and authoritarian neoliberalism in the Tunisian context. However, in this chapter, I must first situate this project within important and emergent literatures to demonstrate how it incorporates these significant scholarly interventions into its theoretical and empirical analysis. I will also outline the modest contribution this thesis seeks to make to these important scholarly debates. Accordingly, this chapter will be structured as follows.

In the first section, I explore the scholarly debates regarding how, why and on what terms we accept our domination and enter into a social contract with the state (1.1) including those perspectives that have situated such discussions within post-colonial MENA context and its prolonged experience of authoritarian governance. This section emphasises how these discussions, at the heart of our social sciences, have shaped this project and its exploration of the attempts of successive Tunisian governments in the post-transition period to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy in the context of authoritarian neoliberalism. In doing so, I explore the contribution that the Tunisian case, as well as my theoretical approach, which situates domestic political debates regarding regime legitimacy within the context of broader discussions in IR and mobilising the tools of IPE and security studies, can make to these literatures.

In the second section (1.2), I explore cutting edge debates within Critical Security Studies emphasising the analytical utility of approaches which 1/ move beyond the eurocentrism, coloniality and methodological whiteness which for far too long have characterised security studies; 2/ seek to deconstruct the idea of security as operating in some exceptional and depoliticised higher realm of politics and thus advocate for a political reading of security; 3/ tackle the state centrism and elite focus associated with traditional, and even some critical, approaches to security emphasising the significance and agency of non-state actors and

marginalised communities and; 4/ those approaches that bring together the academic disciplines of security studies and IPE to better understand (in)security beyond the West and significantly, those that situate such discussions with reference to globalised neoliberalism.

In the final section of this chapter (1.3), I explore the important and ever-growing contribution of the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. In this section, I demonstrate the centrality of this work to my project highlighting the theoretical and empirical contribution of this project to the research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism. Thus, by illuminating the important work of these scholars and their contribution to my own project throughout the three sections of this literature review, I aim to highlight the original empirical and theoretical contribution of this project.

1.1 - Interrogating the foundations of and the reconfiguration of regime legitimacy

When the Ben Ali regime fell in January of 2011 it was clear that the transition from autocratic to democratic regime would require the renegotiation of the Tunisian social contract (Challand 2016b). Accordingly, this project seeks to understand the role that security politics, which I argue is inherently connected to and shaped by neoliberalism, plays in the reconfiguration of regime legitimacy in the post-transition Tunisian context. While a theoretical approach bringing together security studies and IPE to understand the foundations of regime legitimacy is relatively novel, questions of regime legitimacy are some of the oldest and most profound questions of political theory.

Indeed, the canonical social contract theories of Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau, although differing in their conceptualisation of the configuration of the social contract, all attempt to understand to how political authority is legitimised (Berfudi and Dushi 2015). These theories, and later ones that followed, tend to refer to western so-called liberal democratic political regimes, and their infancy (Berfudi and Dushi 2015). They often offer a problematic reading to the post-colonial scholar, particularly in terms of their intrinsic colonial and racialised logics including references to ‘civility’ in contrast to the so-called ‘state of nature’ (Bhambra and Holmwood 2021). However, the centrality of these works to the key debates of political theory, and thus, key strands of IR theory⁸, demonstrate that the questions of how, why and on what terms we accept our domination and enter into a social contract with the state as well

⁸ Such as Hobbes’ influence on Realist IR theory

as how, why and under what conditions this contract breaks down are at the heart of our social sciences.

Thus, scholars have long sought to problematise the link between domination and legitimacy central to political regimes. Despite theorists such as Lagroye, Francois & Sawicki (2002), Bourdieu (1994) or LaPierre (1977), for example, conceptualising these processes extremely differently, there is a general agreement that political organisation is founded upon domination, one which must be rendered legitimate, and that this legitimation process cannot be achieved by coercion alone (White 1986 p.462). Furthermore, while legitimacy in more authoritarian or illiberal contexts may be founded upon a slightly different configuration of the social contract (Brooker 2000), all political regimes require legitimacy in order to survive.

It is the relative formula of legitimation and domination, in which securitised discourses are deployed as a means of legitimation, that I aim to analyse in the post-transition Tunisian context; one I conceptualise through the lens of authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). The significance of questions of legitimation, domination and consent to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism is something I will expand upon in the third main section of this chapter (1.3). Furthermore, questions regarding the (re)configuration of regime legitimacy are particularly pertinent in post-transition political environments such as Tunisia since 2011. This is because the political regime that emerged in Tunisia, as with all post-revolutionary regimes, was faced with the challenge of reconfiguring the foundations of regime legitimacy in wake of the break-up of the Tunisian social contract (Bozarslan 2016; Challand 2016b).

Notwithstanding the centrality of regime legitimacy to this project, I will not become engaged in a deep critical analysis of social contract theories in this literature review as this is not the body of literature to which this thesis overarchingly seeks to contribute. Rather, in this section of the chapter, I engage in a critical analysis of existing literature regarding authoritarian durability in the MENA, the Tunisian social contract, and the breakdown of Ben Ali's formula of legitimation and domination to demonstrate the analytical utility of this thesis' approach bringing together IPE and security studies to understand the reconfiguration of regime legitimacy, and its challenges, in the post-transition period. Indeed, the inability of many of these interventions to anticipate the uprisings across the MENA in 2011 (Bozarslan 2016), demonstrates the pertinence of adopting an analytical approach that engages with both

security politics and political economy to better understand (in)security in the MENA and its complex relationship with regime legitimacy as I will elaborate more extensively below. Furthermore, while many of the works with which I will engage in the following section focus on domestic political questions, I will demonstrate the importance of situating these discussions within the global context of ever more aggressive neoliberalisation.

1.1.1 Regime legitimacy in the MENA: avoiding the pitfalls of ‘Arab Exceptionalism’

Since decolonisation in the 20th century, political theorists and regional specialists alike have sought to conceptualise the particular formulation of regime legitimacy in MENA (Picard 2006; Schlumberger 2007; Bozarlsan 2016). Often, their point of departure has been the desire to understand the durability of authoritarianism in the region (Droz-Vincent 2004; Kamrava 2005) and how authoritarian rule has been able to relegitimise itself in times of contestation (Camau and Geisser 2003; Heydemann 2007).

Certain interventions on the region, thus provide a generalised conceptualisation of political legitimacy in a plethora of states characterised by different colonial histories, institutional structures and political regimes (Kamrava 2005)⁹. This is symptomatic of political science’s broader tendency to problematise the political regimes in this part of the world from the starting point of a generalised and over-simplified notion of ‘Arab exceptionalism’ (Bozarlsan 2011) thus homogenising diverse political cultures and histories. This is a charge levied against many of the generalised theories of authoritarian durability in the MENA, including more controversial scholars who seek to situate their perception of ‘Arab exceptionalism’ within a broader account of international politics such as Samuel Huntington (1991). Huntington, for example, argued the Arab World’s relative ‘resistance’ to democracy is derived from an inherent incompatibility between Islam and democracy as well as being part of a broader civilisational struggle between the ‘West and the Rest’ (1991). Such accounts often have deeply colonialist and problematic assumptions that I whole heartedly reject as both being ethically concerning and empirically unfounded (Said 2001; Mottahedeh 2003).

⁹ For example, scholars have rightly emphasised the highly significant political role of Arab militaries in authoritarian durability in the region (Marshall 2020). And yet, in Tunisia, in contrast, the military has been, since the late 1980s, relatively small and apolitical– notwithstanding the more recent politisation of the armed forces since 2011 (see Maryon 2023) as well as contributions which have shown that the army played a more pivotal role in the revolution than is often suggested (see White and Brooks 2022).

Perhaps more significantly to our theoretical discussions, many accounts of political legitimacy in the MENA, particularly those which rely upon the myth of ‘Arab Exceptionalism’ provide a *static* view of legitimacy. In other words, they are based on the notion that national and regional contexts in the Arab world have monolithic, static and durable articulations of regime legitimacy which do not change and evolve in response to domestic political developments nor by interactions with the international political context. In contrast, I take the position that political legitimacy is subject to constant renegotiation, reconfiguration and contestation while recognising the significance of political histories and cultures. Indeed, uniformed and static conceptualisations of regime legitimacy would seem unable to explain the massive and far-reaching reforms that swept across much of the MENA region in the 1990s and 2000s (Heydemann 2007; Bozarslan 2011) as well as the even more significant period of political crisis and change in the wake of the so-called Arab Uprisings (Hibou 2011b).

In contrast to this static view of legitimacy, scholars such as Steve Heydemann have argued that authoritarian regimes across the region adopted ‘reorganising governance strategies to adjust to new global, regional and domestic circumstances’ during the 1990s and 2000s (2007 p.IX). These circumstance, he argues, were the globalisation of neoliberal market economics as well as the ‘good governance’ agenda championed by international community at this time. Rather than resorting to repression alone, many regimes in the Arab world pursued certain, very controlled, economic and political reforms ‘designed to stabilise and preserve authoritarian rule in the context of ongoing demands for political change’ in a process he described as ‘authoritarian upgrading’¹⁰ (2007 p.XI). This strategy of authoritarian upgrading runs in stark contrast to the static reading of regime legitimacy that the aforementioned notion of authoritarian durability would suggest. Indeed, such a reading furthers our understanding of how political regimes, including that of Ben Ali, were able to maintain and reconfigure their legitimacy during this period.

¹⁰ Heydemann identified 5 features of authoritarian upgrading he believed to be present in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Yemen, and Tunisia. These included 1/containment of civil societies; 2/ management of political contestation (p.10); 3/ the ability to capture and portray the benefits (limited they may have been) of selective economic reforms (Ibid, p.13); 4/ the attempt to control the new media and telecommunications communications technologies (Ibid, p.19) and 5/ the diversification of international links (Ibid, p.23)

Interestingly, Heydemann argued that economic liberalisation in the MENA was coupled with political repression disguised behind ‘reforms’ that only existed on paper (2007)¹¹. This formula of economic liberalisation coupled with political fermeture is particularly pertinent to this thesis’ analysis of the illiberal manifestations of neoliberalism. Of course, for certain scholars, the role of economic liberalisation and the international community in the reconfiguration of authoritarian governance in the region can be ‘explained away’ by the idea that the authoritarian regimes across the region ‘fooled’ the international community with deceptive statistics (Hibou 2011b) and implemented a *bastardised* version of kleptocratic neoliberalisation¹² (Bogaert 2013; Tsourapas 2013; De Smet and Bogaert 2017). Essentially, for many liberal scholars and members of the international community the roots of political fermeture in this period was not neoliberalisation itself but the way in which it had been poorly implemented by these autocrats (IMF 2012; De Smet and Bogaert 2017).

In contrast, theorists who underscore the inherently illiberal, and increasingly authoritarian nature of neoliberalism, particularly in the post-2007 context, argue that contemporary neoliberalism relies upon the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state to quell dissent, pre-empt contestation (Tansel 2017) and manage the edge populations created by capitalist extraction in its most deregulated and aggressive forms (Bhattacharyya 2018). In other words, rather than neoliberalisation being a step on the path to political liberalisation, as per the vision of the so-called Washington Consensus, it is, in fact, characterised by increasing political repression and use of repressive security practices in both democratic and authoritarian contexts as well as in the Global North (Bruff 2014; Bruff 2017; Sotiris 2017; Laub 2021) and Global South (De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Ozden et al. 2017). While recognising the significant contribution of those engaging with reforms experienced in the MENA and Tunisia in the 1990s and 2000s (Heydemann 2007), they are overarchingly approaching the question of neoliberalisation from a significantly different stance to that which I am adopting here in this thesis through its mobilisation of the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism. Indeed, as I argue throughout this thesis, neoliberalism – or the

¹¹ ‘Authoritarian upgrading consists, in other words, not in shutting down and closing off Arab societies from globalization and other forces of political, economic, and social change. Nor is it based simply on the willingness of Arab governments to repress their opponents. Instead, authoritarian upgrading involves reconfiguring authoritarian governance to accommodate and manage changing political, economic, and social conditions’ (Heydemann 2007 p.1).

incredibly aggressive form of neoliberalisation that we have seen in the wake of the 2007 crash globally, and in post-2011 Tunisia more specifically, must be understood as one side of the same coin as the expansion of state strategies of repression and coercion as I explore in Section 1.1.2 of this literature review.

1.1.2 Le syndrome autoritaire: Tunisia before 2011

In contrast to some of the more generalised accounts of authoritarian upgrading or durability across the region and their limitations explored above, certain authors have attempted to provide a far more specialised account of authoritarian durability in Tunisia prior to the 2011 uprising (Camau and Geisser 2003; Hibou 2006). While these scholars acknowledge that Tunisia under Ben Ali was a police state which even had totalitarian aspects, they also reject the notion that the stability of authoritarianism emanates from violence and coercion alone (Camau and Geisser 2003; Hibou 2006). Rather, they explore the ensemble of varied transactional relations between the people and the ruling classes that served to legitimise the regime (Camau and Geisser 2003; Hibou 2006). For Camau & Geisser (2003), for example, the authoritarian regime's articulation of legitimacy can be traced back to French colonial era through the notion of 'Tunisianité' based on ideas of reformism, secularism and appealing to the international community and its economic interests. They argue that there is a double interest in this legitimising discourse; producing national consensus to guarantee the political adhesion of the people and portraying a legitimising image on the international stage in order to reap the benefits of engaging with international organisations such as financial aid (Camau & Geisser 2003). Once again, such discussions speak to this thesis' attempt to bring together the academic disciplines of security studies and IPE to understand not only domestic Tunisian politics but how it is shaped by and interacts with global dynamics and processes in world politics.

Similarly, for Beatrice Hibou (2006), who provides a detailed account of the mechanisms by which society became integrated into the political order, it is vital to grapple with the interpersonal aspects of power in Tunisia under Ben Ali. She argues state benefits and social aid programs functioned as both mechanisms of mutual dependence between those in power and society as well as levers of domination (2006). The National Solidarity Fund, for example, which was removed automatically from people's salaries was designed to help those most vulnerable in society (Hibou and John Hulsey 2006 p.199). While it was possible to 'opt out' of the contribution, doing so was perceived as an act of political dissidence and

those businesses that opted out were often subjected to unusual levels of administrative controls or financial audits and banned from competing for government contracts (Hibou and John Hulsey 2006 p.199). This is evidence, she argues, of the way in which regime legitimacy was guaranteed through a range of mechanisms that make domination seem normal and unquestionable (Hibou 2006; Hibou and John Hulsey 2006). Hibou's micro sociological analysis of what she called the 'political economy of repression' (2006) takes a vastly different methodological, empirical and theoretical stance to this project. However, her argument that economic mechanisms of legitimation (such as social redistributive programmes) and domination (such as of mechanisms of surveillance and control), were at the heart of Ben Ali's formulation of political power speaks to this thesis' desire to understand how increasingly authoritarian manifestations of neoliberalism shape, constrain and, at times, undermine the contemporary political regime's attempt to reconfigure its legitimacy.

Interestingly, although Hibou places the state as the provider of economic security at the heart of her analysis, she also argues that the legitimacy of Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia was founded upon a 'security pact' (Hibou 2006 p.219-251). This is a form of discursively constructed social contract in which certain threats such as economic instability and political Islam were painted as so potentially dangerous that Tunisians were told they needed to submit to an authoritarian regime that would secure the state from such threats (Hibou 2006). Thus, political freedom was presented as the price to pay for both economic and physical security (Hibou 2006). With a similar focus on security, Hamit Bozarslan (2011 p.46) argues that three discursive articulations repeated constantly via various apparatuses of the regime – the fight against extremism, Tunisian patriotism and the fight for progress – were at the heart of the Ben Ali regime's formula of legitimation. Significantly, all three discursive articulations emphasise the significance of 'security'. For example, Bozarslan argues that at the heart of the discursive articulation of 'the fight for progress' lay secularist modernising discourses which sought to present traditional political Islamist policies, such as social justice-oriented policies, as backward and a threat to economic progress and modernisation (2011, p.46-7). Thus, for these authors, 'security' and its discursive articulations were at the heart of the formula of regime legitimacy in Ben Ali's Tunisia (Hibou 2006; Bozarslan 2011). This conclusion is significant for this thesis which seeks to analyse the role that security politics, and particularly discursive notions of securing the state, plays in reconfiguring regime legitimacy in post-transition Tunisia. It is also significant for our

understanding of how regime legitimacy, in the lead up to January 2011, became increasingly contested as I explore in Section 1.1.3.

Despite the aforementioned scholars' very brief engagement with anti-terror laws used by the Ben Ali regime to strengthen its 'security pact' and justify some of the more illiberal aspects of its manifestations (Camau and Geisser 2003; Hibou 2006), they did not really situate their discussions of Tunisia's authoritarian 'syndrome' with reference to the international. For me, it is impossible to separate the current and previous regimes' instrumentalisation of 'security' and 'stability', particularly from the threat of political Islam, from international securitisation discourses associated with the Global War on Terror (GWOT) (Mansour-Ille 2022). In a similar fashion, given the sheer multitude of domestic and international actors involved in the elaboration and implementation of security policy and economic governance in contemporary Tunisia (Santini 2018; Maryon 2023), any thesis that discusses these questions must situate itself within this international context.

Moreover, while theorists such as Hibou (2006) underscore the significance of domestic political economy in understanding repression, I link discussions of Tunisian political economy and security politics in the renegotiation of the Tunisian social contract to *global* processes of neoliberalisation and global *interconnected* mechanisms of coercion and control such as colonial boomerangs (Khalili 2010a; Khalili 2013) and feedback loops in security governance (Axster et al. 2021). In other words, I seek to understand the global entanglements of the contemporary Tunisian neoliberal security state to better conceptualise the successive attempts of post-transition governments to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy in the post-transition period.

1.1.3 The fall of the regime

Notwithstanding their enormous empirical and conceptual contributions, the aforementioned scholars' (Camau and Geisser 2003; Hibou 2006; Bozarslan 2016) attempts to theorise the durability of authoritarianism in Tunisia, were significantly challenged by the Arab Uprisings of 2011 (Bozarslan 2016). Indeed, if the ability of authoritarian regimes in the MENA to 'upgrade' themselves was the corner stone of these regimes' capacity to maintain their legitimacy (Heydemann 2007), then the outbreak of mass popular protests would suggest that there had been an erosion of these regime's legitimacy or even the utter breakdown of their social contracts (Hinnebusch 2012). In a similar vein, the events of January 2011

undermined Hibou's claim that the vast share of Tunisian society bought into and legitimised mechanisms of redistribution and the so-called security pact (Hibou 2006). The aforementioned authors underestimated the extent to which obedience of a political regime does not necessarily mean acceptance or consent (Bozarslan 2015). Equally, their analysis failed to engage with acts of dissidence and rejection of the Ben Ali regime (Kienle and Sika 2015). For me, they under theorised the rising levels of contestation and over-estimated the extent to which all sections of society were integrated into transactional mechanisms that guaranteed regime legitimacy in Tunisia - thus underestimating the extent to which it was becoming eroded.

Interestingly, in her research following the 2011 uprisings, Hibou revisits her arguments to understand how she failed to account for the potential for contestation on the level seen in January 2011 (Hibou 2011a; Hibou 2011b). Consequently, she argues that certain redistributive mechanisms, supposedly central to the formula of regime legitimacy in Ben Ali's Tunisia, failed to encompass all sections of Tunisian society, leaving behind certain social groups and creating exclusions and inequalities (2011a; 2011b). These increasing inequalities lead to contestation which was, however, predominately expressed in the private sphere which is why she claims it was under-theorised in her previous research (2011a; 2011b). In short, rising levels of inequality, poverty and economic dispossession undermined the security pact upon which regime legitimacy was founded (2011a; 2011b). Or in other words, if freedom was the price to pay for 'security' – both in its economic and physical senses (Hibou 2006) – then the regime's growing inability or unwillingness to deliver economic security to vast segments of the population, meant that individuals were no longer willing to put up with constraints on their freedom.

Hibou's analysis situates itself with the academic discipline of political sociology (2006). However, her argument that economic dispossession led to the breakdown of the former authoritarian regime's legitimacy (2011) clearly speaks to those IR scholars who seek to understand the contemporary crisis of legitimacy experienced by neoliberal states globally (Bonanno 2017; Caylan 2021) and their propensity to rely upon the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state to navigate this crisis (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). It is, of course, these scholars to whom this thesis really seeks to speak by bringing the insights of the post-2011 Tunisian case to their important theoretical conversations as I elaborate more extensively below. Furthermore, while her later analysis of economic dispossession in eroding the

foundations of Ben Ali's legitimacy did not really develop into a significant critique of neoliberalisation, it did enable the start of a conversation about the role of neoliberalisation in eroding the Tunisian social contract (Hinnebusch 2012), and thus, contributing to the January 2011 Jasmine Revolution as I explore below.

1.1.4 The role of neoliberalisation in eroding the social contract

In the wake of the so-called Arab Uprisings, analysis focused on how seemingly stable regimes which had existed *relatively* unchallenged since decolonisation, became contested, increasingly illegitimate and even fell, almost overnight. While initial scholarly focus over-emphasised the role of social media in the Arab Uprisings (Brown et al. 2012; Smidi and Shahin 2017), it has become increasingly accepted that neoliberalisation, from the 1980s onwards gradually eroded the redistributive social contracts upon which many of these regimes founded their claims to legitimacy (Bogaert 2013; Cox 2014; Dalig 2014; Joya 2017; Sadiki 2017).

Thus, interventions increasingly emphasise the role of economic concerns of protestors and declining standards of living in the erosion of the legitimacy of the Ben Ali regime (Bogaert 2013; Cox 2014; Dalig 2014; Joya 2017; Sadiki 2017) arguing the fall of these governments was due, at least in part, to the break-down of the social contracts (Challand 2016b) upon which they were founded (Hibou 2006; Heydemann 2007). In other words, neoliberalisation undermined the ability of the state to provide for the economic security of its people, undermining the social contract upon which the Ben Ali's formula of legitimation and domination was founded (Tsourapas 2013). Thus, extensive scholarship has suggested that neoliberalisation, kleptocracy and the reforms suggested or imposed by external funding bodies were significant causes of the uprisings against the Ben Ali regime¹³ (Bogaert 2013; Murphy 2014; Mossallem 2016; Zemni 2017).

The aforementioned interventions which underscore the significance of neoliberalisation in contributing to the fall of the Ben Ali regime are really significant for this thesis (Bogaert 2013; Murphy 2014; Mossallem 2016; Zemni 2017). If the inability of the former regime to provide for the economic security of its people was one of the key

¹³ See Zemni, S. 2017. The Tunisian Revolution: Neoliberalism, Urban Contentious Politics and the Right to the City. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. Vol 41 (1) as well as Bogaert, K. 2013 and Murphy 2013

contributing factors in its downfall (Bogaert 2013; Tsourapas 2013; De Smet and Bogaert 2017), then it follows that radical economic reform would be an important factor in the reconfiguration of the legitimacy of the post-transition regime. However, we have not seen radical reforms. Rather, the post-transition period has seen a continuation and intensification of neoliberalisation and austerity politics (Mossallem 2016; Aliriza 2020; Ben Gahda 2022) as I argue extensively throughout this thesis. Consequently, standards of living, unemployment, inflation, poverty rates and inequality are worse today (July 2023) than they were in January 2011 (Republique Tunisienne Presidence du Gouvernement 2021; Ben Gahda 2022)¹⁴. And thus, in this thesis, I seek to understand how the post-transition Tunisian state rearticulates its claims to legitimacy in the context of increasingly authoritarian neoliberalism. Unable to provide for the economic security of its citizens, I argue that the post-transition regime attempts to present itself as the provider of physical security in the face of certain securitised threats.

In this section, I have noted the centrality of discursively constructed threats within this (attempted) formula of political legitimacy in the post-transition period, as well as this thesis' inherent commitment to recoupling the academic disciplines of IPE and security studies to better understand (in)security in the MENA. Accordingly, this literature review must now shift its focus to underscoring the contribution of Critical Security Studies literature to this project's theoretical and empirical approach as well as underscoring the attempted theoretical and empirical contribution of this project to Critical Security Studies.

1.2 (In)Security Beyond the West

At its heart, this thesis is a piece of Critical Security Studies research which seeks to, through its analysis of the Tunisian case, make the call for an analytical approach bringing together IPE and security studies to better understand the way in which economic policy, economic governance and economic insecurity shape and interact with (in)security, security politics and security governance. Traditional security studies has been shaped by the disciplinary characteristics of its umbrella discipline: IR. In other words, it has historically been state centric, elite focused, Eurocentric, constrained by disciplinary boundaries and portrayed security as part of higher depoliticised sphere separate from normal 'lower' politics which

¹⁴ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia/overview>

does not concern security matters (Buzan and Hansen 2009). In this section, I will show why we must free ourselves of these disciplinary tropes and boundaries if we are to fully conceptualise (in)security (Aradau 2004) both in Tunisia and beyond. Accordingly, I explore the four main discussions in the literature which are significant for situating this thesis both within Critical Security Studies debates as well as its contribution to such debates.

Firstly, in Section 1.2.1, I will emphasise the significance of those interventions which reject the notion of security as depoliticised and instead encourage us to engage with security *politics*. In the second sub-section, I reflect upon the significance of moving beyond a purely elite and state centric focus in order to illuminate sites of resistance and contestation of the security state, while continuing to engage with the importance of state actors (1.2.2). In the third sub-section (1.2.3), I emphasise the work of those schools breaking down the disciplinary boundaries that exist between IPE and security studies to better understand (in)security – a body of literature which is central to this thesis’ theoretical framework and empirical analysis. Throughout sections 1.2.1-1.2.3, I will emphasise the contribution of interventions which attempt to reflect upon and rectify the inherent coloniality and methodological whiteness of much of the traditional, and some of the more ‘critical’, security studies literature (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019; Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020; Coleman 2021). The commitment of many of these scholars to decolonising security studies (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bilgin 2010; Adamson 2020), is one that I have sought to integrate throughout this project.

1.2.1 Political nature of security

This thesis intends to contribute to an ever-growing body of security studies literature that rejects the dichotomous conceptualisation of security politics, seen as exceptional or higher politics, and ‘normal’ politics seen as domestic or lower politics (Neal 2012; Lister 2019). Building upon the work of these scholars, I will explore the grounds upon which we should reject this dichotomous view of security politics and rather grapple with the politics of security.

Critical Security Studies scholars, particularly those associated with the Copenhagen school, have conceptualised the *process* by which issues become discursively constructed as security threats. For scholars of Securitisation Theory, for example, this process entails a particular political issue being ‘lifted’ from the realm of normal politics, characterised by normal

legislative and policy processes, to the realm of higher security politics, characterised by exceptionalism and urgency (Buzan et al. 1998). Therefore, certain critical approaches have reproduced the notion that security is something exceptional and depoliticised, thus neglecting the political nature of security¹⁵ (Aradau 2004; Bertrand 2018).

For Buzan and Hansen (2009) the analytical exclusion of *politics* from security studies is related to its historical status as a sub-discipline of IR, traditionally concerned with ‘higher politics’ between Nation States, as opposed to political debates being irrelevant to security studies. However, for many, the analytical exclusion of politics from security studies goes far beyond security studies’ status as a sub-discipline of IR. Indeed, for scholars such as Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit (2020), the binary distinction between normal politics and so-called exceptional politics is in fact linked to the inherent methodological whiteness of the Copenhagen school and other so-called ‘critical’ approaches¹⁶. Thus, we must reject the notion that security is depoliticised based on its colonialist logic, and arguably racist analytical assumptions (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019; Coleman 2021), as well as the way in which such a notion of security obscures the inherently political nature of security (Aradau 2004; Neal 2012). Security is political (Neal 2012). Security mobilises intense political debate (Lister 2019). Security discourses mobilise political resources and thus, security politics has political impacts (Browning and McDonald 2013).

There is an emerging group of IR scholars that seek to deconstruct this exceptional/normal dichotomy underscoring the iterative political aspects of security policy and especially counterterror policies (Neocleous 2006; Neal 2012; Lister 2019). For these scholars, security policy, particularly in the post 9/11 context, encompasses the judicial, executive and legislative branches of government as well as the societal sphere in which these policies are implemented as opposed to operating in some supposed separate realm of higher politics and this is testament to its inherently political nature (Hay 2002; Huysmans 2006). Accordingly,

¹⁵ Claudia Aradau demonstrates this dichotomy through an analysis of securitisation theory’s conceptualisation of the process of de-securitisation (2004). She claims that securitisation scholars advocate for ‘de-securitising issues’ – bringing them back down the realm of normal politics – means that they are no longer perceived as existential threats worthy of urgent and exceptional policy responses that subvert normal democratic frameworks (2004).

¹⁶ For them, ‘classic securitization theory advances a conceptualization of “normal politics” as reasoned, civilized dialogue, and securitization as a potential regression into a racially coded uncivilized “state of nature” ...antiblackness is a crucial building-block in this conceptual edifice: securitization theory finds “primal anarchy” especially in “Africa”, casting it as an irrationally over securitized foil to “civilized politics”’ (2020, p.1).

Hay advises ‘the political should be defined in such a way as to encompass the *entire* sphere of the social . . . All events, process and practices which occur within the social sphere have the *potential* to be political’ (2002 p.3 emphasis added). Similarly, Michael Lister illuminates the sheer scale of political discord surrounding UK counterterrorism measures despite the broad levels of societal and parliamentary acceptance of the existence of the existential threat (2019). This underscores the political nature of security. In short, Lister (2019) demonstrates that societal acceptance of the ‘reality’ of an existential threat, need not translate into the ‘lifting of this issue’ into the realm of higher politics beyond political contestation as would be theorised through a securitisation approach. Another exceptionally interesting contribution made by Lister’s 2019 article is its mobilisation of the concept of performativity to argue that counterterror politics is a performance of statehood in an age of neoliberal governance¹⁷. Lister’s claim that security policy, within the constraints of globalised neoliberal economics, emerges as a performativity of sovereign statehood further reinforces the case for a political reading of security (2019) in the sense that security is serving a political purpose and this political purpose is inherently shaped by the political and economic context of the day.

Interestingly, the aforementioned discussion of the various legislative and policy spheres in which security policy operates and has impacts (Hay 2002; Neocleous 2006; Neal 2012; Lister 2019), speaks to this thesis’ mobilisation of the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism. Scholars mobilising authoritarian neoliberalism detail the way in which legal and judicial frameworks have been modified in the post-2007 crisis context to insulate neoliberalism from contestation, as well as the intensified use of coercive state power to repress contestation that does emerge (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017) thus underscoring the politics of security that operates within these ‘political’ spheres. Given the convincing nature of the call of these scholars, I aim to contribute to this inclusion of security politics within security studies research. This is because, security policy in Tunisia emerges as the ‘terrain’ of contestation for political power struggles in the fight to define and reconfigure regime legitimacy in a context of authoritarian neoliberalism. In other words, security politics in Tunisia is inherently political.

1.2.2 Engaging with the state without marginalising the already marginalised

¹⁷ Lister’s mobilisation of performativity to analyse counterterror politics of the British neoliberal state has been of great inspiration for Chapter 4’s mobilisation of performativity to analyse the security politics of the Tunisia authoritarian neoliberal state

Secondly, many critical approaches to security studies, particularly discourse focused approaches, have been criticised for recreating the emphasis on sovereignty and the executive as the main actor in security politics associated with more traditional security studies scholarship (Neal 2012; Bertrand 2018; Lister 2019). Thus, despite its supposedly critical nature, certain Critical Security Studies scholarship recreates this elite focus associated with non-progressive literatures (Bertrand 2018). Sarah Bertrand (2018), for example, criticises Securitisation Theory as an inherently elite-centric and discourse focused approach which risks recreating colonial relationships as certain voices are heard and others are silenced because they are ‘structurally excluded from the concept of security’ (p.281). Similarly, Lene Hansen, (2000) through her critique of the lack of attention paid to gender in the Copenhagen School argues that Securitisation Theory’s discourse approach has contributed to a focus on dominant and elite voices, ignoring those already marginalised from political debates, such as women. Not only is the silencing of already marginalised communities inherently problematic, but equally, it leaves little room for change – which, for many, is the fundamental purpose of Critical Security Studies (Browning and McDonald 2013).

In a similar fashion, this project aims to go beyond a mere focus on executive power, whilst engaging with and recognising the significance of the executive, the state and its political elites. Accordingly, I aim to illuminate the importance of a plurality of actors involved in the entire process of elaboration, implementation and contestation of security policies by emphasising the role of social movements and international actors throughout this thesis (Santini 2018; Maryon 2023). Equally, I aim to avoid recreating Eurocentric perspectives that have so often silenced individuals and communities in the Global South (see Bilgin 2010). Instead, I attempt to illuminate the agency of an array of domestic actors in security politics and their interactions with each other, and external actors, within the context of authoritarian neoliberalism. However, before I discuss the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism, I must first recognise the significant work of certain scholars making the case for the recoupling of IPE and security studies to better understand (in)security and the politics of security.

1.2.3 Recoupling Security Studies and International Political Economy

The field of IR has often been divided into sub-schools such as security studies and IPE as though they are mutually exclusive and unrelated (Caporaso 1995 p.177). Although this division between security studies and IPE is one that has endured, there have been attempts to

bring the fields together throughout the history of the discipline (Gowa 1994; Mansfield 1994). In 1994, for example, Joanne Gowa published *Allies, Adversaries and International Trade* which explores the links between trade and the security concerns of states, developing her own theory based on the security externalities of economic exchanges (1994). Essentially, she argues that wealth is a component of power, and that trade is a component of national wealth (1994)¹⁸. While this early work clearly paved the way for scholars to deconstruct these disciplinary disassociations, analysis often centred around traditional, state centric and realist approaches to the discipline (Caporaso 1995 p.117).

Although this thesis seeks to continue the important work of such scholars in deconstructing the barriers between security studies and IPE, it wishes to go beyond traditional realist, and I would argue, flawed approaches to security studies. Indeed, political economy is inherently linked to security politics in ways far beyond the simple connections between trade and power within international system. This thesis intends to look not only at the way in which the nation state interacts with global economic phenomena but, also, places the analysis of international and non-state actors as central to its broader contribution to knowledge: the discussion of the role of security politics and economic questions in the attempts of successive governments to reconfigure the legitimacy of the state¹⁹. Engaging with international and non-state actors in a research project concerned with questions of regime legitimacy may somewhat seem incongruous. However, it is, in fact, vital. This is because in an age of globalised neoliberal economics and the rise of transnational nonstate actors, nation states are under massive constraints in their elaboration of policies (Sotiris 2017), particularly in terms of macroeconomic, budgetary (Aliriza 2020; Ben Gahda 2022) and security policy (Santini 2018; Maryon 2023). Therefore, the terrain of contestation in the struggles to reconfigure regime legitimacy is one fundamentally influenced by international and non-state actors as well as the global economic and security context.

More recently, critical scholars have underscored the importance of breaking down the boundaries between security studies and IPE. In 2015, for example, the journal 'Politics and Gender' published a series of articles that discuss the need to incorporate Global Political

¹⁸ See also *Power Trade and War* by Edward Mansfield, (1994)

¹⁹ For example, in Chapter 5, I explore the connections between external security assistance provided to Tunisia since 2011, the economic motivations of provider states and Tunisian political economy – situating all discussions with reference to broader global trends of authoritarian neoliberalism (see Maryon, 2023).

Economy and Global Security Studies in critical feminist research (Elias 2015). Despite the diversity of the theoretical frameworks, empirical focuses and methodological approaches within the special issue (Allison 2015; Elias 2015; Elias and Rai 2015; Enloe 2015; Hudson 2015; Sjoberg 2015; True 2015) there is clearly ‘a degree of consensus reached in terms of the need to return²⁰ to a more integrated feminist IR’ (Elias 2015 p.406) and very specifically one which builds bridges between Feminist Security Studies and Feminist IPE.

Significantly, these scholars are not calling simply for the mere addition of IPE to security studies or vice versa (Chisholm and Stachowitsch 2017). Their starting point is recognition of the fact that security and economy are inherently interlinked rather than distinct phenomena (Merger 2017). In short, if security studies fails to engage with economic questions, it risks ‘side-lining issues of economic inequalities or economic determinants of (in)security’ (Merger 2017). Thus, reintegrating IPE and security studies is about challenging ‘the conventional gendered dichotomies that dominate mainstream economic and security analysis’ including illusionary ‘separations between public and private, “high politics” and the everyday, and individual, national, and international “levels of analysis” (Chisholm and Stachowitsch 2017 p.711). In other words, analysis of security issues and political economic phenomena as though they are completely separate contradicts the ‘messy empirical realities of women’s’ (Kunz 2017 p.736) - and I would suggest, peoples’ – lives. Therefore, we must engage with economic questions if we are to understand the everyday (in)securities people face - particularly those individuals or groups who have often been marginalised by the elite focus of much of traditional, and even some Critical Security Studies, scholarship.

While this thesis does not incorporate gender-based analysis into its theoretical framework, it does subscribe to the claim that analysis of the international can be furthered through the recoupling of IPE and security studies. Most importantly, I argue that an account of (in)security – particularly on the individual and societal level – must include an account of political economy – both at the national and international level. This is particularly the case for those non-elite groups that traditional security studies has so often omitted from its analysis including, vitally for this thesis, marginalised communities in the Global South

²⁰ According to many of the feminist scholars recalling for the reintegration of these IR subdisciplines, much of the early feminist IR scholarship recognised the inherent connections between political economy and feminist security. However, increasing levels of specialisation of researchers and intricate field work led to a widening gap and ever-growing silence between these academic communities (Sjoberg, 2015).

(Bertrand 2018). We cannot, for example, understand why so many people died in the 2023 Earthquake in Syria and Turkey without an account of how Turkey's economic 'miracle' in the 1990s and 2000s was partially formed on the watering down of regulations including building regulations²¹ (Beaumont 2023). However, as noted above, the significance of these connections between (in)security and political economy must be placed within the context of the international. Indeed, while those that perished in Grenfell lost their lives in completely different circumstances to those that died under the rubble in Hatay, they too were the victims of an economic system which encouraged deregulation over potentially lifesaving regulations framed as so-called 'red tape'. Or in other words, a system that systematically places profit over people. Once again, this highlights the saliency of reflecting upon the *global* entanglements of contemporary (neoliberal) security states.

1.2.4 Neoliberalism and Security Politics

And thus, as the above examples of everyday (in)security suggests, it is in this context of the proliferation of globalised, increasingly authoritarian neoliberalism that the benefits of adopting an analytical approach bringing together the insights of security studies and IPE really comes to the fore. Indeed, many of those scholars advocating for the reintegration of IPE and security studies (Elias 2015; Best 2017; Merger 2017), have been attempting to understand the interconnections between neoliberalism and (in)security more specifically.

Interestingly, scholars have long argued that classical liberalism is, in fact, characterised by both domination and freedom (Dean 2002; Sigley 2006). Central to liberalism we find the notion of the autonomous individual and right to private ownership which are guaranteed via coercive legal and administrative structures such as the traditional example of the 'liberal police' (Dean 2002; Sigley 2006). 'The liberal police', however, is not just a reference to the police force, but rather the 'knowledges and technologies concerned with securing the conditions conducive to government' (Sigley 2006, p.492). Indeed, for the modern nation state, the security apparatuses of the state emerge as the guarantor of individual liberty and private property from violation by others, however, in order to police both liberty and private property they are able to mobilise coercive power that arbitrarily limits both (Dean 2002; Gonzales 2016). Dean's discussion of the 'liberal police', thus, clearly speaks to this thesis'

²¹ As early as 2005, Penny Green published an article 'Disaster by Design: Corruption, Construction and Catastrophe' in which she argued that recent earthquakes in Turkey had suggested the dangers of such issues

analysis of the way in which security policy and practices emerge as a fundamental aspect of authoritarian neoliberalism (see Tansel 2017, p2-3).

Indeed, work on the liberal state has contributed to our understanding that disciplinarian, authoritarian and coercive security policies are not something unique to authoritarian or illiberal government but have been ever present in liberal regimes (Dean 2002; Sigley 2006; Gonzales 2016). While discussions of the coercive and authoritarian manifestations of classical liberalism are exceptionally insightful and interesting, this research project aims to understand the illiberal and authoritarian manifestations of globalised *neoliberalism*²² – as opposed to merely the discussion of the liberal state. Undoubtedly, the proliferation of security studies scholarship that engages with questions of political economy is associated with the ever-growing omnipresence of neoliberal economic rationalities, as reflected in the literature (Gonzales 2016; Dean 2002; Sigley 2006; Tansel 2017). Extensive scholarship, thus, has sought to conceptualise the seemingly increasingly illiberal and disciplinarian nature of liberal states within the context of neoliberalism, which, is so often thought of as involving the retreat of the state (Dean 2002; Sigley 2006; De Smet and Bogaert 2017; De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Joya 2017; Ozden et al. 2017).

And thus, it seems necessary, from the discussions furthered above, to suggest that any account of security politics, especially in the contemporary era, cannot exclude an analysis of IPE. This is because the strategic aims, objectives, resources and policy options of multilateral, bilateral, national and local security actors are inherently linked to global economic dynamics as well as more localised political economic debates. Accordingly, I argue in order to understand the political debates and power struggles at play in security politics, one must engage with the political and economic context in which they play out, the ever increasingly authoritarian or disciplinarian manifestations of neoliberalism (Bruff 2014).

1.3 Authoritarian neoliberalism

²² The nature of the difference between classical liberalism and neoliberalism is not the focus of this project and has been extensively discussed by scholars (Kendall 2003; Mirowski et al. 2009). However, I will briefly state that neoliberalism is traditionally thought of as differing from liberalism in the sense that it advocates for the interventionism of the state in order to enact its economic vision, in contrast to liberalism's supposed *laissez-faire* ideals. For those associated with the Mon Pelerin Society, seen as the birthplace of neoliberalism, this was about pathing a way between socialism and fascism as well as responding to the growing calls for decolonisation.

Thus, as alluded to above, this project builds on the work of those scholars calling for a recoupling of the academic disciplines of IPE and security studies to theorise the connections between neoliberalism and coercive state power (Elias 2015; Best 2017; Wynne-Hughes and Weldes 2017). Scholars have long noted how the roll back of the state in certain areas associated with neoliberalism has been coupled with a roll out of the state in other areas (Hall et al 1978; Wacquant 2010) – namely in terms of mass incarceration (Gilmore 2007), policing (Crosby & Monaghan 2018) and (reinforced) border regimes (El-Enany 2019). Although researchers have been analysing this ‘penal fist’ of neoliberalism since the 1970s (Foucault 1978; Hall et al 1978; Poulantzas 1978; Hall 1979; Wacquant 2010), those mobilising the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism argue that there has, since 2008, been a shift in neoliberal governance (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017; Bruff and Tansel 2019). For these scholars, authoritarian neoliberalism refers to the ever more authoritarian manifestations of neoliberalism which relies on ‘(1) coercive state practices that discipline, marginalise and criminalise oppositional social forces and (2) the judicial and administrative structures which limit the avenues in which neoliberal policies can be challenged’ (Tansel 2017 p.3).

This literature review will not go into deep discussions of the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism as this will be provided in Chapter 2. Instead, it will focus its analysis on how authoritarian neoliberalism literature has shaped scholarly debates, including my project, as well as the contribution my project seeks makes to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. Regardless of the recent explosion of academic literature mobilising authoritarian neoliberalism, including that which is focused on the MENA (De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Ozden et al. 2017; Tansel 2018), this thesis attempts to make an empirical contribution to knowledge by exploring its manifestations, fissures and contestations in Tunisia’s post-transition political context. Furthermore, this thesis aims to make a theoretical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism by deploying the concept, which has been predominately used in IPE research, in a project which adopts an analytical lens bringing together IPE and security studies to better understand (in)security in the MENA as well as exploring the additional conceptual tools with which authoritarian neoliberalism can be deployed in research which goes beyond the disciplinary focus of IPE. Of course, both these discussions will be expanded upon in the following chapter.

Since 2014, the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism has *exploded* – furthering our understanding of the links between neoliberal policies, declining standards of living, eroding regime legitimacy, and the rise of increasingly repressive neoliberal security states (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017; Axster et al. 2021). Indeed, the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism has since been used by scholars to explore a plethora of different cases around the world (Bruff 2017; De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Fan Lim 2017; Tansel 2018; Jenss 2019), in a variety of different academic disciplines or interdisciplinary work (Laub 2021; Sierra Deutsch 2021; Gallo 2022), in conjunction with a multitude of different concepts and conceptual tools (De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Harcourt 2017; Axster et al. 2021), and at various different scales (Sotiris 2017; Jenss 2019; Maryon 2023). Thus, it would be impossible, and not necessarily helpful in terms of situating this project, to give a thorough account of the entire authoritarian neoliberalism research agenda. Rather, I will briefly grapple with several strands of discussion within the authoritarian neoliberalism literature that are significant for situating this project and its contribution.

1.3.1 Using the concept in the MENA

Firstly, while the concept was first elaborated to engage with the European context (see Bruff 2014), it has subsequently been deployed to engage with political regimes and non-state actors across the MENA region (De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Ozden et al. 2017; Tansel 2018; Kreitmeyr 2019; Tansel 2019). It has been argued that the concept lends itself well to the MENA region because ‘the conceptual tools we use to analyse the rise of *authoritarianism* fall short of satisfactorily explaining the shifts, cracks and conflicts emerging during the integration of peripheral or semi-peripheral countries into globalisation’ (Ozden et al. 2017 p.189 emphasis added). In other words, the process of ‘democratic backsliding’ or ‘authoritarian drift’ that we have seen across the MENA since the 2000s, particularly in states such as Turkey, for example (Tansel 2018), cannot be understood merely through the conceptual tools that we have developed to grapple with authoritarianism. This is because analysis has far too long centred on oversimplified, homogenising accounts of ‘Arab exceptionalism’ as though the region has some form of ‘*predisposition*’ to authoritarianism (Bozarslan 2011) rather than situating such trends with reference to global processes such as neoliberalisation.

Indeed, Ozden, Akça, and Bekman (2017) argue that in order to understand the neoliberal transformations, and their contestations that took place in this period, we must grapple with

connections between domestic political dynamics and IPE (See also Tansel 2018) as well as their roots in the SAPs which started the process of reshaping economies across the region during 1970s and 1980s (De Smet and Bogaert 2017). Such interventions, for example, underscore how the AKP party in Turkey pursued a neoliberalisation of the Turkish economy and how this was fundamentally linked to Turkey's EU access process (Ozden et al 2017). Authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey under the AKP is clearly very different to certain dynamics seen in contemporary Tunisia. However, interventions on Turkey have underscored certain important aspects of authoritarian neoliberalism which speak more broadly to the region including the co-option of neoliberal ideals and rationalities by Islamist political parties, the presentation of class cleavages as something foreign and imported to the region to delegitimise their articulation and the significance of securitised threats in the attempt to legitimise the more authoritarian manifestations of neoliberalism (see Ozden et al 2017; Tansel 2018).

Furthermore, scholars such as De Smet & Bogaert (2017) have used a comparative analysis of authoritarian neoliberalisms across the region, to argue that divergences in terms of the speed and extent of reforms as well as particular regimes' capacity to maintain hegemonic power despite the challenges of neoliberalisation impact the nature and scale of contestation and resistance of the neoliberal project. Thus, we can see that the concept has enabled us to explore the significant trends in neoliberalisation across the region, particularly in terms of the social, cultural and post-colonial context, while being flexible enough to allow us to underscore important divergences (De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Tansel 2017). Furthermore, we can see that the research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism has been as shaped as much, if not more, by scholarship on the MENA region as it has by scholarship on Europe, for example. This allows us to explore significant cultural and societal nuances that alternative concepts, such as governmentality²³, particularly those with historical roots in Eurocentrism, coloniality and methodological whiteness, may obscure.

1.3.2 Authoritarian neoliberalism in decolonial research & the so-called problem of periodisation

²³ See debates regarding coloniality in Foucauldian theory in (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019) as well as attempting to overcome some of these critiques (Teo and Wynne-Hughes 2020)

Indeed, discussions regarding the use of authoritarian neoliberalism in the MENA context, such as its use here in this thesis, also emphasise the significance of engaging with questions of decoloniality when studying authoritarian neoliberalism. Notwithstanding the huge empirical and theoretical contribution of the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism, it has been argued that authoritarian neoliberalism is characterised by a conjunctural reading of contemporary neoliberalism as being discontinuous from other forms of capitalist accumulation and security governance (Ryan 2019; Axster et al. 2021). DJ Ryan (2019), for example, suggests that it is reductive and empirically unsound to suggest that post-2007 neoliberalism is somehow fundamentally ‘more authoritarian’ than the experiences of authoritarian populism or statism as theorised by Hall (et al 1978; 1985) or Poulantzas (1978) respectively.

Firstly, I am not convinced by Ryan’s (2019) argument. Scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism have always claimed that the concept ‘should not be read to the effect that the deployment of coercive state apparatuses for the protection of the circuits of capital accumulation is a new phenomenon, nor should it lead to the assumption that the pre-crisis trajectories of neoliberalisation have been *exclusively consensual*’ (Tansel 2017, p2). Accordingly, they have emphasised that neoliberal reforms have long been coupled with political repression (Mitchell 1999 cited in Tansel, 2017, p.3). Furthermore, I am convinced by Bruff (2014) and Tansel’s (2017) argument that certain *pre-emptive*, and I would argue transnational and interconnected, mechanisms of neoliberalism have escalated in significant and noteworthy ways in the post crisis context²⁴. Such tendencies entrench neoliberalism seemingly beyond the realms of (democratic) decision making. Moreover, the intensification of the authoritarian manifestations of neoliberalism following the 2007/8 crisis took place in the context of the pre-existing indefinite national security emergency associated with GWOT which has served as a legitimatising discourse for governments to expand their surveillance of their populations, limit freedoms and repress contestation (Lister 2019; Brouard 2021). While authoritarian regimes have long placed curtailments on civil liberties, I argue these processes have become far more routinised, normalised and globally interconnected to neoliberal governance since 2008 in both democratic and authoritarian regimes as I show through the post-transition Tunisian case.

²⁴ such as the EU Fiscal Compact signed in March 2012.

Furthermore, while for Ryan (2019), Hall and his graduate students' (1978) work seems to undermine the contribution of authoritarian neoliberalism as a concept, I do, in contrast, think that there are noteworthy synergies in Hall's work(s) on the neoliberal state (et al, 1978; 1979) and Bruff (2014) and Tansel's (2017) work perhaps demonstrated most clearly the discussions of both Hall's (et al 1978; 1979; 1985) and Poulantzas' (1978) work in Bruff's 2014 article and Bruff and Tansel's (2019) co-authored introduction to the Globalizations special issue. These synergies, in fact, render the concept all the more useful for those seeking to incorporate it into security studies research. As demonstrated above, I see authoritarian neoliberalism as the contemporary manifestation of the increasingly illiberal aspects of neoliberalism in ways inherently linked to the neoliberal states of the 1970s and the SAPs of the 1980s, as well as in ways that are *qualitatively* different. However, it is Hall's discussion of the significance of both 'crisis' and 'legitimacy' and their links to the intensification of the recourse to coercive state power (Hall et al 1978; Hall 1979) that make his work so important to this project and its attempt to understand the *intensification* of the (performative) use of security at the heart of Tunisia's post-2011 configuration of regime legitimacy in the context of authoritarian neoliberalism as I expand extensively in Chapter 4.

Notwithstanding the limitations of his argument, I do agree with Ryan's (2019) claim that the analytical utility of the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism lies not in 'a conceptual separation of the past, but rather a consideration of the durability of authoritarian state forms' (p.116) – although perhaps not in the same sense that he intended. For Ryan this may be about engaging with the early era of neoliberalism and its illiberal fallouts in so-called liberal democracies such as the UK. For me, in contrast, it's about acknowledging that capitalist accumulation, particularly that built on a history of colonial extraction, has long been violent and coercive (Robinson 2019). This is the case in Tunisia from French colonial rule (Thomas 2012), to the early years of independence and continued *dependence*, to the 1986 neoliberal turn and the IMFs structural adjustment programmes, to capitalism à la Ben Ali and finally and, significantly for this project, in the post-2011 context of authoritarian neoliberalism.

Thus, in contrast to seeking to identify a 'starting point' at which neoliberalism became 'more' authoritarian, we must grapple with the colonial roots of neoliberal security states and extractive economic models both in the Global North and South (Tansel in Axster et al 2021). Accordingly, scholars have called time on this 'colonial unknowing' in much of the neoliberalism literature arguing that capitalism has always been, and continues to be, violent

and coercive to marginalised, often racialised, communities (Vimalassery et al. 2016; Howell 2018). They argue that, in global northern and southern contexts, the violent history of capitalism has often been overlooked as it was traditionally levied against marginalised groups (Bhattacharyya 2018; Danewid 2022). Fortunately, scholars of racial capitalism are illuminating these important experiences so often neglected (Gilmore 2007; Goldstein 2017; Bhattacharyya 2018; Danewid 2020). Accordingly, interventions such as Chapter 5 of this thesis, are situating analysis of repressive state practices and discussions of their connection to contemporary neoliberalism within the *longue durée* of global racial capitalism (See also Axster et al 2021). The relationship between global racial capitalism and authoritarian neoliberalism literature is one I expand further in Chapter 2's discussion of this thesis' decolonial approach to authoritarian neoliberalism. In short, I aim to contribute to a decolonial turn in the authoritarian neoliberalism literature (See Bruff and Tansel 2019; Jenss 2019; Axster et al. 2021; Maryon 2023) which recognises that authoritarian neoliberal state strategies do not merely reinforce pre-existing local and global inequalities and socially constructed hierarchies (Tansel 2017) – often aggravating gendered and racialised inequalities (Bruff and Wöhl 2016; Harcourt 2017) – but that capitalism writ large is dependent on the use of such social categorisations to justify the inequality it needs to function (Robinson 2019).

1.3.3 Global Entanglements of the Neoliberal Security State

Furthermore, while the research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism has overwhelmingly focused on state strategies by which neoliberalism is insulated from contestation, I maintain this focus on state strategies but simultaneously explore their entanglements with global actors and processes. Thus, I build on the work of scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism who have shown that technocrats and non-state actors have become increasingly powerful agents of neoliberalisation in problematic and anti-democratic ways since 2007 (Bruff 2014; Bruff 2017; Sotiris 2017; Gallo 2022). For example, Bruff (2014; 2017) and Sotiris (2017) have shown that EU technocrats emphasised the necessity to impose stabilisation mechanisms including fiscal discipline and austerity as well as empowering the role of the ECB in scrutinising, harmonising and arguably shaping the budgetary policy choices of member states. In a similar vein, Sotiris' (2017) work on the debt crisis and Troika in Greece demonstrates how the democratically elected government in Greece, which at the time wanted to deviate from the neoliberal status quo and pursue state led growth, was systematically monitored, undermined, and ultimately removed by powerful technocratic

interests of Troika who were stationed within all government departments to oversee Greece's compliance with the 'terms' of its Eurozone bailout. Thus, we can see not only does the role of non state actors in neoliberal expansion pose questions to the democratic processes of the state (Bruff 2014; Sotiris 2017), but it also acts to insulate neoliberalism from contestation in the sense that it prevents meaningful conversation – supposedly the corner stone of deliberative democracy – about how to respond to the challenges of the day.

Furthermore, such work speaks to interesting theoretical debates such as how authoritarian neoliberalism can constrain the sovereignty of the state (see Sotiris 2017). While many scholars have explored the impacts of neoliberalism on the sovereignty of the state (Davies 2016), authoritarian neoliberalism, as a concept, seems to imply the capacity of policy makers to flex their state-like muscles. However, scholars have shown that the neoliberal project, in certain contexts, has been one which is negotiated between domestic and external actors through mechanisms of discipline and surveillance which constrain the decisions of domestic policy makers; thus, creating conditions of reduced sovereignty (Sotiris 2017). This is not to say that neoliberalism is a project that is entirely implemented from above and thus obscure the agency of domestic political elites in maintaining extractive and exploitative models of capitalist accumulation. This is particularly important in Global Southern contexts (Tansel 2017; Khurana and Narayan 2021). But it is to say that domestic governments, in certain contexts, face such significant decision-making constraints and pressure to implement the neoliberal agenda in particular externally determined ways that we cannot fully conceptualise them as having full sovereign decision-making power in these areas.

Significantly, throughout this thesis, I argue that non-state actors in the shape of representatives of International Financial Institutions (IFIs), International Organisations and bilateral partner states have sought to heavily influence and constrain the macroeconomic and budgetary policy choices of successive post-transition governments in Tunisia (Santini 2018; Maryon 2023). If scholars have argued that technocratic forms of authoritarian neoliberalism (Gallo, 2022) and powerful external actors (Sotiris, 2017) can undermine the sovereignty, democratic processes and legitimacy of democratic states such as Greece (Sotiris 2017), for example, it clearly poses far greater challenges in Tunisia as it seeks to consolidate its 'nascent democracy' after a century of colonial rule and over 60 years of authoritarianism. Thus, I focus on the spectrum of state strategies which have been deployed in Tunisia since 2011, I also seek to explore their complex entanglements with global

mechanisms of neoliberal governance (see Sotiris, 2017) and the architecture of global security governance conceptualised here as interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control (Césaire 2000; Khalili 2013; Axster et al. 2021).

1.3.4 Questions of legitimation and consent

One of the most significant contributions of this project to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism is the way in which I centre discussions of legitimacy, coercion and consent. Of course, scholars of neoliberalism have long engaged with questions of legitimation and consent (See Hall 1985; Poulantzas 1978). Similarly, the research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism emerged as an attempt to interrogate the crisis of legitimacy faced by capitalist states in the post-2007 era (Bruff 2014) as well as to better understand how contestation has shaped the development of authoritarian neoliberal state strategies (De Smet & Bogaert 2017). Those scholars mobilising authoritarian neoliberalism to engage with sites of populism, for example, demonstrate the way in which populist actors often mobilise nationalist and racialised discourses to create scapegoats as a means to detract from the contemporary crisis of legitimacy facing many capitalist states (Goonewardena 2020; Sierra Deutsch 2021; Akgemci 2022). However, I would argue that the majority of authoritarian neoliberalism scholarship thus far has placed engagement with questions of legitimation and consent as part of their broader account of the deployment of strategies of authoritarian neoliberalism. In contrast, as has been discussed extensively, and will continue to be shown, the question of regime legitimacy has been placed at the *heart* of this thesis and its particular mobilisation of the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism to explore the crisis of legitimacy experienced by the post-transition authoritarian neoliberal state. The theoretical contribution of such discussions will be expanded in the following chapter.

1.3.5 The role of authoritarian neoliberalism in democratic backsliding

Finally, as alluded to in my examination of authoritarian neoliberalism literature which explores democratic backsliding in the MENA, an important body of work is that which mobilises the concept to shed light on democratic backsliding or authoritarian drift (Tansel 2018). For these scholars it is not just about the increasingly authoritarian manifestations of neoliberalism but in certain contexts, it is argued, neoliberalisation is actually contributing to increasingly authoritarian nature of government to such an extent that their democratic nature is increasingly questionable (Gallo 2022). One example of this is Glasius' work (2018) on Brazil under Bolsonaro or India under Modi (Sinha 2021) – both states in which we have

seen intensified neoliberal reforms coupled with significant authoritarian measures. Indeed, we have seen various scholars mobilise the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism to understand authoritarian drift in the Middle East and North Africa since 2008 (Dalacoura 2016) including a significant and important body of work on Turkey (Ozden et al. 2017; Tansel 2018). In a similar vein, throughout this thesis, I argue that neoliberalisation in Tunisia has undermined Tunisia's democratic transition through undercutting standards of living and undermining Tunisians' faith in the democratic system (See also Maryon 2023), thus necessitating the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state, as per authoritarian neoliberalisms globally, to quell dissent and shore up the legitimacy of policy makers as protecting Tunisians from certain securitised threats.

Therefore, the Tunisian context, a so-called 'nascent democracy' when I started this PhD project in October 2018, which at the time of writing is firmly on the path to authoritarianism, allows us to explore important scholarly discussions about the role of neoliberalism, and particularly its more authoritarian manifestations, in authoritarian drift. Such discussions are important in the international context given the global decline of democracy and erosion of democratic freedoms. However, they are particularly urgent in a country that hosted its first democratic elections in 2011, ratified its first truly democratic constitution in 2014 and was in the process of developing a flourishing civil society and free press – all of which have now been overhauled or are under great threat from the authoritarian regime of Kais Saied.

Conclusion: Securing the State in Post-Transition Tunisia: Reconfiguring Regime Legitimacy in an Age of Authoritarian Neoliberalism

Throughout this chapter I have sought to engage with, analyse and synthesise the important work of scholars in three main areas; (1) those seeking to understand and problematise the conditions under which we accept our domination and thus, enter into a social contract with the state including in the Tunisian context; (2) those who aim to understand and explore (in)security beyond the West notably those scholars calling for an analytical approach bringing together security studies and IPE to explore (in)security and finally, (3) those scholars contributing to the relatively novel, exciting and important research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism. In doing so, I have attempted to pay homage to these important scholarly innovations and interventions and underscore how I aim to incorporate their

discussions into my own work, while indicating the areas in which this thesis aims to build upon and contribute to their work.

In mobilising relatively novel conceptual frameworks, including authoritarian neoliberalism, to engage with and analyse the process of reconfiguration of regime legitimacy in the post-2011 Tunisian case, I aim to make a theoretical contribution to important scholarly debates, predominately in the Tunisian political science and sociology community. *This contribution is in terms of exploring the role the (in)security plays in this formula of legitimation and domination and its relative failure to give successive post-transition governments the legitimacy they seek. While some scholars have engaged with the role of security in the Tunisian social contract (Camau and Geisser 2003; Hibou 2006; Bozarslan 2016) both before and after the revolution as well as with reference to the connections between these discussions of (in)security and neoliberalism, few have placed such discussions within broader IR debates regarding globalised, increasingly authoritarian neoliberalism as I do here in this thesis.*

More significantly, this thesis aims to contribute to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. While the concept has been used to explore a plethora of different case studies, I am yet to stumble across any scholarship other than my own (Maryon 2023) which uses the concept to analyse contemporary Tunisia. The post-2011 Tunisian case allows us to push the boundaries of the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism in three important ways: 1/ in terms of exploring the global entanglements of the neoliberal security state 2/ by centring questions of coercion, consent and legitimation at the heart of its analysis and 3/ by allowing us to explore the impacts of authoritarian neoliberal state strategies in case of democratic erosion.

Finally, this thesis seeks to make a theoretical contribution to the research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism by exploring the additional conceptual tools with which the concept can be deployed particularly in research which incorporates IPE in its analysis but goes beyond the boundaries of IPE. In this case, by engaging with discussion of (in)security traditionally associated with security studies. Thus, in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I explore some of the additional conceptual tools with which the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism can be deployed in research that thinks both with and beyond political economy namely performativity, racial capitalism and populism. In the following chapter, I explore how each

of these concepts can be deployed in conjunction with authoritarian neoliberalism, how they further our understanding of the Tunisian case and most significantly how such concepts and conceptual tools contribute to the already illuminating potential of the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. Perhaps more significantly, in terms of the theoretical contribution of the project to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism, throughout this thesis, I attempt to argue that contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism, rather than being entirely distinct, is deeply connected to previous forms of capitalist accumulation and its inherently coercive, violent, and often racialised characteristics contributing to a decolonial turn in the authoritarian neoliberalism literature.

Having situated this thesis with the existing literature and outlined its contribution to knowledge in this chapter, I shall now move onto elaborating the theoretical framework and methodology of this project in the chapter that follows.

Chapter 2 – Exploring the security/neoliberalism nexus in post-2011 Tunisia: mobilising authoritarian neoliberalism in critical research on (in)security beyond the West

Neoliberal globalization does not unfold in an empty vacuum but is mapped onto previous racial and colonial (imperial) discourses and practices

Axster et al, 2021, p.417

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I outlined the contribution this project seeks to make to several bodies of IR literature; namely those scholars attempting to recouple the academic disciplines of IPE and security studies to better understand (in)security and, more precisely, to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. In this chapter I will outline the analytical and theoretical approach of this thesis, elaborating on *how* we can think both with and beyond political economy in the study of authoritarian neoliberalisms.

To do this, this chapter will be structured as follows. In the first section (2.1), I outline the important normative commitments of this project; namely to redress the Eurocentric nature of security studies as well as making the case for an analytical approach bringing together IPE and security studies. In the second section (2.2), I outline how I intend to mobilise the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism and develop the theoretical contribution this project aims to make to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism by exploring the additional concepts with which the concept can be deployed in research which goes beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries of IPE. In the third section (2.3), I outline the research methods of this project and their limitations. I explore the adaptations I made to my research design along the way primarily to respond to the pandemic as well as political developments in Tunisia. Finally, I reflect upon my complex and, at times, uncomfortable relationship to my research as a white British researcher researching (in)security in present day Tunisia.

2.1 The important normative commitments of this project

As scholars of social science, we are not dispassionate or neutral observers (Hunt 1993; Payne 2004 p.17). Rather, we seek to interpret the empirical evidence that we gather. This is shaped by our methodological tools, our theoretical frameworks and our epistemological positions (Kuhn 1970 p.15, 23, 42–5). Rather than attempting to feign objectivity, we should recognise the inherent normative underpinnings and commitments of our research as well as acknowledging our own positionality while, of course, seeking to maintain a certain academic rigour (Brown N.d).

2.1.1 Studying (in)security beyond the West without recreating problematic colonialist and Eurocentric positions

At the heart of this project, there is an inherent normative commitment to avoid the coloniality, eurocentrism and methodological whiteness that have long characterised academia including the discipline of IR (Tucker 2018). More precisely, this project aims to analyse (in)security beyond the West without recreating orientalist tropes which have, unfortunately, been so often reproduced by Eurocentric security studies as a sub-discipline of IR (Bilgin 2004; Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Adamson 2020), including more critical approaches to security studies (Bertrand 2018; Coleman 2021). This post-colonial critique of security studies goes beyond a simple problem of historical absence (Bilgin 2010 p.617). It also contends that scholarship which does exist on the Global South often reproduces dangerous western-centric perspectives and orientalist tropes (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bilgin 2010). Accordingly, post-colonial scholars have called for the ‘decolonisation’ of security studies (Adamson 2020).

The post-colonial commitment to ‘decolonising’ security studies, becomes all the more important when engaging with a case in the MENA. For far too long, western security studies scholars ‘studying’ the MENA region have reflected upon how to ‘secure’ what are presented as ‘unstable’ countries in a ‘volatile’ region of the world to prevent the overspill of insecurities to the West (Bilgin 2004). This notion of the inherent instability and volatility of the region is based on orientalist logics (Said 1978; Bilgin 2004), and I reject this understanding wholeheartedly. Rather, I seek to understand how states such as Tunisia, and communities within these states, have been, and continue to be, rendered more vulnerable to certain insecurities. I argue these insecurities are inherently linked to Tunisia’s unequal economic interactions with external actors which serve to maintain Tunisia’s perpetual peripheral status (Aliriza 2020) within the global economy, as well as its security cooperation

with external partners (Maryon 2023) – understood here as forming part of global, interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control (Axster and Danewid 2021).

By centring the global structures which operate to sustain logics of coloniality and carcerality, we move beyond limited perspectives which *exceptionalise* or even *exoticise* certain contexts (Destin and Justin 2021), particularly those in the Global South. While the manifestations of insecurity are defined by geographic and temporal particularities, they are inherently linked to and shaped by global interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control central to sustaining exploitative and extractive models of capitalist accumulation including its contemporary authoritarian neoliberal iteration (Jenss 2019; Danewid 2020; Laub 2021).

2.1.2 Recoupling security studies and IPE

The aforementioned centrality of engaging with contemporary neoliberalism and its colonial roots within this thesis – a piece of Critical Security Studies scholarship – lends itself well to our next discussion; the analytical utility of an approach bringing together IPE and security studies to theorise (in)security beyond the West. Globally, the so-called roll back of the state in certain areas such as monetary and budgetary policy, has been, and continues to be, accompanied by the roll out of the state in other areas (Wacquant 2010) namely in terms of the state's propensity to use coercive power to quell dissent and repress contestation (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). Moreover, the roll back of welfare states globally, coupled with rising unemployment and underemployment as economies have opened up to global 'competition' has left individuals – particularly more marginalised, precarious, and often racialised groups – more vulnerable to a plethora of insecurities (Clua-Losada and Ribera-Almandoz 2017). For example, it is clear that Tunisia's growing economic and political crisis, which I argue is inherently linked to neoliberal deregulation and austerity, has led to a dramatic increase in the number of Tunisians, and migrants living in Tunisia, attempting dangerous and illegal sea crossings to Europe in unseaworthy vessels (ArabBarometer 2022; Maryon 2022).

It is for these reasons that I have remained committed to recoupling the academic disciplines of security studies and IPE to better understand the everyday insecurities faced by individuals and societies, and their entanglements with global structures throughout this thesis project. Such discussions, I argue, can be furthered by the mobilisation of the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism. Indeed, this thesis will argue that it is within these interactions between

security politics and political economy that a plethora of different actors jostle in the fight to reconfigure the legitimacy of the post-transition regime.

However, if this project seeks to recouple security studies and IPE without recreating problematic and colonialist assumptions then it must not only grapple with questions of coloniality and decolonisation within security studies but also within the academic discipline of IPE. In the previous chapter, it was shown that initial attempts to integrate security studies and IPE were seen as Eurocentric or problematic from a post-colonial perspective. This is because of the way in which these academic disciplines, their theoretical frameworks and key concepts have their roots in European colonial histories, imperialist capitalist expansion and European political thought (Kayatekin 2009; Grosfoguel 2011). Despite the fact post-colonial approaches are defined by a critique of imperialist capitalist expansion and the ‘ongoing material and ideological legacies of colonialism’, ‘there have been very few efforts to do postcolonial analysis within an explicitly political economy focus’ (Kayatekin 2009 p.1115) notwithstanding more recent scholarly focus on such debates (Bhambra 2021). Similarly, critical IPE approaches, such as feminist, post-Keynesian institutionalist and neo-Marxist approaches, have, at times, unwittingly recreated the conditions of coloniality through their innate modernism²⁵ (Kayatekin 2009; Grosfoguel 2011; Shields et al. 2011). Given the ontological modernism of many classical and critical approaches to IPE, post-colonial scholars are increasingly calling for the elaboration of post-colonial IPE theory and scholarship (Venn 2006). Interestingly many post-colonial scholars, including Said himself, draw on neo-Marxist and Marxist thought while recognising, and attempting to overcome some of the critiques such works face from a post-colonial perspective (Parry 2013). Whilst this chapter will not go into great discussion of the intricacies of the theoretical frameworks proposed by post-colonial IPE, my attempt to incorporate IPE and security studies is built on a post-colonial critique of way in which the neoliberal revolution has reinforced pre-existing economic and social disparities both within and between the global northern and global southern regions (Kayatekin 2009; Grosfoguel 2011; Shields et al. 2011) and has consistently reified the marginalisation of already marginalised, dispossessed, often racialised, communities (Bhattacharyya 2018; Robinson 2019).

²⁵ The post-colonial critique of modernism centers on the notion that it juxtaposes modernity, rationality and civility – associated with European enlightenment – with the supposed backwardness, irrationality and barbarism of non-Europeans

In short, if we are to recouple IPE and security studies, we must do so without recreating the racialised hierarchies, colonialist tropes and methodological whiteness that has historically characterised *both* disciplines. This is something I aim to do through my own particular mobilisation of authoritarian neoliberalism. Writing in 2019, Bruff and Tansel emphasise that the concept has evolved since its initial articulation in 2014, with the help of feminist and decolonial scholarship (Bruff and Wöhl 2016; Harcourt 2017; Tansel 2017; Axster et al. 2021) to place greater emphasis on ‘the gendered, racialized and localized effects of authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Tansel 2017 cited in Bruff and Tansel 2019 p.237).

Inspired by this important work, I aim to contribute to this decolonial turn within the research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism. In this vein, I situate contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism within its historical and colonial context, emphasising the interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control that have long operated to marginalise the ‘edge’ populations of capitalism both in the Global North and South (Bhattacharyya 2018; Kundnani 2021) as well as reflecting on the manifestations and intensification, of such trends in the contemporary Tunisian context. In doing so, I aim to overcome the eurocentrism, colonial unknowing (Vimalassery et al. 2016) and erasure of race (Kundnani 2021) that has at times characterised the literature on neoliberal security states. In the following section of this chapter, it will be shown that authoritarian neoliberalism is not only an exceptionally pertinent tool to understand the way in which security politics emerges as the terrain of contestation in the battle to reconfigure regime legitimacy in post-Ben Ali Tunisia, but I will also demonstrate how the concept enables me to understand Tunisia as a site in which contemporary coercive dynamics within the international political economy play out.

2.2 Authoritarian neoliberalism

Throughout this thesis, I mobilise the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism to analyse the so-called security/neoliberalism nexus in post-transition Tunisia. In this section of this chapter, I elaborate and interrogate the conceptual framework provided by authoritarian neoliberalism as well as showing how I, through my exploration of the contemporary Tunisian case, seek to contribute to the research agenda while pushing the contours of the concept to new theoretical and empirical terrain.

2.2.1 The conceptual framework (and messiness) of authoritarian neoliberalism

Authoritarian neoliberalism refers to the array of strategies through which the state aims to insulate and limit the space for political and social contestation of neoliberalism (Bruff, 2014). Building on the work of Hall (1979; 1985) and Poulantzas (1978; 1979), Bruff demonstrates that such strategies are deployed as a response to the periods of intensified contestation of neoliberal policies and ideals. If for Hall (1979; 1985) and Poulantzas (1978; 1979) these reconfigurations of the state occurred as a response to contestation of and conjunctures caused by neoliberal deregulation and the rolling back of welfare states in the 1970s and 1980s, for Bruff (2014) the ‘rise of authoritarian neoliberalism’ has occurred in similar, and yet qualitatively *different*, ways as a response to the contestation of neoliberalism in the post-2007 context. For Bruff (2014), the qualitative difference between previously illiberal manifestations of neoliberalism, analysed by Hall (1979; 1985), Poulantzas (1978; 1979), and authoritarian neoliberalism in the post-2007 context is that ‘neoliberalism’s authoritarian tendencies – such as the increasingly punitive nature of penal and criminal policy (LeBaron 2008; Wacquant 2009) – have come to the fore through the shift toward constitutional and legal mechanisms and the move away from seeking consent for hegemonic projects (i.e., away from neoliberalism as “socially desirable” as well as “economically efficient”) (p.116).

Thus, Bruff underscores that strategies associated with authoritarian neoliberalism need not be *merely* about violent and repressive articulations of coercive state power emphasising the significance of reconfigurations of ‘state and institutional power in an attempt to insulate certain policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent’ (2014, p.115). Bruff’s call to engage with reconfigurations of state and institutional power *as well as* the violent and punitive aspects of contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism is convincing, especially in the context of a growing number of novel *pre-emptive mechanisms* of neoliberal discipline which have emerged in the post-2007 context (2014; 2017)²⁶. However, for the security studies researcher such as myself, particularly one that is seeking to make the case for engaging with questions of political economy in the study of (in)security in the MENA, it is the *interplay* between these two aspects of contemporary neoliberal governance which is particularly illuminating.

²⁶ Furthermore, these pre-emptive strategies, which do not necessarily fall into the traditional remit of coercive state power, are starker in the context of European Union: Bruff’s empirical terrain

Indeed, in the introduction to *States of Discipline*, Cemal Burak Tansel (2017), argues that authoritarian neoliberalisms ‘1. Operate through pre-emptive discipline which simultaneously insulate neoliberal policies through a set of administrative, legal and coercive mechanisms and limit the space for popular resistance against neoliberalism and 2. Are marked by a significant escalation in the state’s propensity to employ coercion and legal/extra-legal intimidation, which is complimented by intensified state control over every other sphere of social life and the draconian and multiform curtailment of so-called formal civil liberties’ (p.3). Throughout this thesis, I will argue that post-2011 Tunisia has been defined by these two contested and at times contradictory processes while also expanding beyond this pre-existing framework through the incorporation of additional theoretical concepts which I argue are illuminating in the Tunisian context and useful in research bringing together the academic disciplines of IPE and security studies.

Significantly, authoritarian neoliberalism should not simply be used as a template for conceptualisation and ‘uncritically applied across the world or across time...’ nor used ‘to formulate strict typologies and models’ (Bruff and Tansel 2019 p.237). Rather the concept seeks to track global trends in the disciplinarian manifestations of neoliberalism whilst acknowledging the particularities of different cases as significant and embracing a certain ‘conceptual messiness’ (Bruff and Tansel 2019 p.236). Indeed, authoritarian neoliberalism can be used to engage with the authoritarian manifestations of neoliberalism in a plethora of political regimes²⁷. It is not about attempting to prescribe a label such as authoritarian or democratic to any particular political regime. Similarly, this thesis is not a piece of transitology research that attempts to quantify the extent to which Tunisia has ‘democratised’ since 2011²⁸. Rather my aim, in mobilising the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism, is to identify, understand and problematise the particular mechanisms of contemporary neoliberal governance within a given context (Tansel 2017; Bruff & Tansel 2019).

²⁷ as opposed to exclusively describing neoliberalism in authoritarian regimes which would in fact be neoliberal authoritarianism (Görmüş and Akçalı 2021).

²⁸ Transitology as field of study is concerned with degrees to democracy and has been criticised by many post-colonial scholars for far too often providing a road map towards ‘democratic consolidation’. This road map is seen as both developmentalist and as presenting the Western experience of the path to democratisation as the only path. This thesis both rejects these understandings of regime change (based on the researcher’s commitment to avoid recreating modernising and developmentalist discourses associated with the reproduction of conditions of coloniality) but also does not engage itself in these debates.

Despite a certain level of ‘conceptual messiness’ discussed above (Bruff & Tansel 2019), ‘contemporary neoliberalism reinforces and increasingly relies upon 1) coercive state practices that discipline, marginalise and criminalise oppositional social forces and 2) the judicial and administrative states apparatuses which limit the avenues in which neoliberal policies can be challenged’ (Tansel 2017, p.2). Tansel (2017) outlines two conditions he claims are necessary for a particular context to be described as characterised by authoritarian neoliberalism (p.3). The first of which is a situation in which the technologies of governance demonstrate a reconfiguration of the normal functioning of the capitalist state (Poulantzas 1978 p.80; Tansel 2017 p.3). The second condition is a ‘qualitative shift from the intrinsic illiberal propensities of neoliberalism’ (Tansel 2017, p.3). In other words, authoritarian neoliberalism refers to a context in which neoliberal economic policies are insulated from popular resistance via legal, administrative and coercive mechanisms that curtail formal liberties and control all aspects of social life (Tansel 2017 p.3). Accordingly, I use the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism to analyse the interconnected nature of both security politics and political economy in contemporary Tunisian context as well as situating such discussions within the broader context of the global entanglements between capitalist accumulation and mechanisms of coercion and control.

It is this focus on the global entanglements of the Tunisian neoliberal security state which represents one of the contributions this project attempts to make to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. As mentioned, authoritarian neoliberalism as concept has focussed on *state* strategies which insulate neoliberalism from contestation (See Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017; Bruff and Tansel 2019). Therefore, research has overarchingly focused on the state as the main actor in disciplining contemporary neoliberal governance while not suggesting that the state is the only force advocating for the adoption and continued implementation of neoliberal policies (see Bruff and Tansel 2019, p.238) nor, in contrast, that neoliberalism is something imposed on the state by external forces (Tansel 2017). However, it is the state whose legitimacy is most challenged by the fallouts of neoliberalism and the contestations they provoke. Thus, it is the state which must deploy this novel spectrum of strategies to respond to said contestation particularly if policy makers are going to maintain, as they overarchingly have done, that they are unable to deviate from the neoliberal status quo (Sotiris 2017). While I focus on this spectrum of state strategies which have been deployed in Tunisia since 2011, I also seek to explore their complex entanglements with global mechanisms of neoliberal governance (see Sotiris 2017) and the architecture of global

security governance conceptualised here as interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control (Césaire 2000; Khalili 2013; Axster et al. 2021). Such forces are at play globally, but they are all the more significant in Tunisia's post-revolutionary context (see Hanau Santini 2018; Maryon 2023). In short, we cannot understand some of the novel legal, judicial and administrative frameworks introduced in Tunisia since 2011 as well as the intensification of coercive state practices we have witnessed in this period, without grappling with the significant role that external actors have played in the post-transition political environment notably in terms of influencing security and economic policy (Maryon 2023).

Thus, the empirical focus of this thesis illuminates the local and global entanglements of contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism. Simultaneously, by engaging with the interactions between external actors and Tunisian domestic political elites, this thesis avoids reductionist analytical approaches, such as the 'Structural Adjustment Programme analytical prism' (see Bruff & Tansel 2019, p.235), that fail to engage with the agency of domestic political elites in the Global South. Tunisian political elites' cooperation with external actors, including contemporary cooperation on economic, security and migration matters, has long been and continues to be connected to maintaining models of capitalist accumulation from - imperial to neoliberal - and punishing dissent that does emerge (Thomas 2007; Thomas 2012).

Second, this project, which explores the role of security politics plays in the reconfiguration of regime legitimacy in the post-2011 context, placing analysis of processes of legitimation, consent and coercion at the heart of its analysis. As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, while discussions of declining legitimacy of capitalist states have been central to the emergence of the authoritarian neoliberalism literature (Bruff 2014), most interventions have engaged with questions of legitimation and consent as either the prerequisite of their work or part of their broader analysis. In contrast, I contribute to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism here in this thesis by centring discussions of legitimation, coercion and consent – something I expand in my discussions of both performativity and populism below.

2.2.2 Exploring additional concepts that can be used in conjunction with authoritarian neoliberalism

Throughout this thesis, I employ the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism in conjunction with additional concepts to further my empirical analysis of the Tunisian case as well as to contribute to theoretical debates regarding the additional conceptual tools with which

authoritarian neoliberalism can be deployed (see Bruff & Tansel 2019, p.241). Those working on authoritarian neoliberalism thus far focus heavily on questions of IPE (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017; Bruff and Tansel 2019). This is shifting as researchers have emphasised the importance of security theories, governmentality, embodied thinking and the context of racialised/colonial accumulation by dispossession to further understand how authoritarian neoliberalism functions globally (Bruff and Wöhl 2016; Harcourt 2017; Axster et al. 2021)²⁹. Inspired by these interventions this thesis continues to explore some of the additional conceptual tools with which the concept can be deployed, namely performativity, racial capitalism and populism, as I elaborate here in this section.

Performativity

In Chapter 4 of this thesis, I make the case for using the concept of performativity (Butler 1993; Weber 1998; Lister 2019) in conjunction with authoritarian neoliberalism to show how the Tunisian authoritarian neoliberal state uses performative security discourses and practices to perform its sovereignty, reassert its legitimacy and repress contestation. Intricate empirical discussions of the Tunisian case will be elaborated in Chapter 4, but here in this chapter I will first reflect upon the theoretical considerations and contributions of employing the concepts of performativity and authoritarian neoliberalism in conjunction with one another.

Performativity as a concept is based on the notion that reality is socially constructed through reiterative and citational practices (Butler 1993 p.234). Let us take the example of Butler's work on gender and performativity. Butler is not saying that because gender is socially constructed through reiterative and citational practices (performativity), that it is not real. Butler is suggesting that gender is something which is shaped by social and cultural norms and that the social construction of gender has real impacts on people's lives³⁰ (1993). In a similar vein, it is not the claim of Chapter 4, nor this thesis, that the Tunisian state does not exist. Rather that the state is constructed and sustained through reiterative and citational practices (Weber 1998). Thus, the *idea* of the state - established through performative discourse and practices – has led to the proliferation of a multitude of policies, institutions

²⁹ In October 2021, myself and Dr Elisa Wynne Hughes co-organised a panel at the Millennium conference, with interventions from Nadine Kreitmeyer, Alke Jenss, Sabrina Axster and myself, which explored the additional conceptual tools with which we can think with and beyond political economy in the study of authoritarian neoliberalisms.

³⁰ such as what people are called, how people are treated, what society expects people to wear and what forms of discrimination they face

and frameworks all of which have very real impacts on people's lives (Weber, 1998). Indeed, today the notion Westphalian state is so cemented in our collective consciousness and the contemporary international system that it has become seen as *the only* model of organising a political community despite the existence of alternate polities particularly prior to European colonial expansion.

So, if states performatively enact their sovereignty, 'what must a state "do" in order to be sovereign?' (Weber, 1998, p.92). According to Weber, it is particularly illuminating to study 'foreign policy speeches, cables and press conferences to see how states, through performative discourses, insist on their sovereignty'³¹ (1998). Building on Weber (1998) and Butler's (1993) focus on discourse, I incorporate the work of scholars such as Krahnmann (2017) and Higate and Henry (2009; 2010) who argue that performativity can be analysed best through analysis of discourse *and* security practice. In doing so, I engage in a more systematic analysis of discursive constructions surrounding security policies and practices and elaborate on how understanding these processes can further our understanding of security discourses and practices as performativity of statehood. Significantly, I focus on analysing these performative discourses and practice in the realm of internal security as a means to further my analytical approach bringing together IPE and security studies to better understand authoritarian neoliberal state strategies.

While work on performative states has often focused on its gendered construction (Weber, 1998), I contend that work on performative states can further our understanding of the relationship between neoliberal deregulation and the intensification of coercive state power (see also Lister 2019). In short, performativity is illuminating for those wanting to understand the implications of neoliberalism on security policy because 'performativity (of sovereignty) often takes strongest form when the state appears to be at their least sovereign; taking place when "states traumatically confront the impossibility of 'being sovereign' and thus insist upon their sovereign subjectivity all the more"' (Weber 1998 p.92 cited in Lister 2019, p.14). Thus, performativity of the neoliberal state is aimed at 1/ demonstrating that the state is real, concrete doing something in a time of limited economic governance and 2/ reconfiguring regime legitimacy when it is being challenged (Lister 2019). Therefore, by mobilising the

³¹ For example, when announcing a military intervention in another state, a state is both performing their sovereignty through intervening in another state's domestic affairs while illuminating the impossibility of being sovereign in the sense that the other state's sovereignty is mere idea to be violated

concept of performativity to analyse the security politics of the Tunisian authoritarian neoliberal state, as I do here in this thesis, we can better understand security discourse and practice as a performance of statehood which takes place in the context reduced 1/ sovereignty linked to neoliberal deregulation and 2/ growing contestation associated with the legitimisation crisis of capitalist state.

The Tunisian case is an extremely pertinent context in which to reflect on the incorporation of performativity within the framework provided by authoritarian neoliberalism. This is because the neoliberal state, already deprived of its sovereignty in certain areas, faces far more constraints to its sovereignty because of the influence of external actors (Sotiris 2017; Santini 2018). Furthermore, the post-revolutionary context which requires a reconfiguration of the foundations of regime legitimacy, makes for a fruitful terrain in which to explore the connections between security politics, neoliberalism, and regime legitimacy.

In the above discussions I have elaborated the concept of performativity and how it can be used in conjunction with authoritarian neoliberalism to analyse security politics as performativity of the authoritarian neoliberal state. I will now expand on why I think that the incorporation of performativity in research using authoritarian neoliberalism pushes the already illuminating theoretical framework of authoritarian neoliberalism to new realms of analysis. Firstly, I must make it clear that I do not suggest that performativity should or could be used in all research which mobilises the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism. Rather, I argue that in certain contexts its incorporation *can* be analytically useful. For me, the concept is particularly useful in research which focuses on the *intensification* of the authoritarian neoliberal state's propensity to resort to coercion and violence. While authoritarian neoliberalism has been used to grapple with this intensification and the role it plays in insulating neoliberalism from contestation and quelling dissent that does emerge (Tansel 2017). Through incorporating the concept of performativity, we can better understand *how*, *why* and *when* such an intensification takes places as well as how the state seeks to mobilise consent, albeit it to varying degrees of success, for this intensified recourse to coercive state power. Throughout Chapter 4, I mobilise the concept of performativity, as well as the work of Michael Lister (2019) and Stuart Hall and his graduate students (1978) to show how and why the authoritarian neoliberal state has used performative security discourses and practices to justify this intensification of the propensity of the capitalist state to resort to coercive state power in particular periods of contestation – in this

case, the so-called ‘security crisis’ experienced in post-transition Tunisia (See Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019; Maryon 2023).

Furthermore, the incorporation of performativity into the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism helps us understand the cultural and historical significance of the registers that the authoritarian neoliberal state employs through performative security discourses and practices to mobilise consent for the intensification of coercive state practices. In short, we can only fully understand performative security discourses and practices by situating them in their historical, cultural and political context because ‘audiences interpret certain practices as providing security only if they conform to pre-existing sociocultural ideas of “suitable” security activities and capabilities’ (Zaiotti 2011 p.543). Performative security discourses and practices which seek to construct moral panic surrounding political Islam become all the more significant when situated in their historical context in which political Islam has long been presented as a ‘bogeyman’ figure in Tunisian political discourse mobilising racialised notions of backwardness, instability and incivility (Hibou 2006; Haleh Davis 2022). In a similar vein we cannot understand Kais Saied’s more recent mobilisation of moral panic surrounding Sub-Saharan African migration both to and through Tunisia without an understanding of Tunisia’s long history of anti-black racism and rejection of African identity (Maryon 2022). Of course, these cultural and historical particularities which shape performative security discourses and practices must also be situated within the context of contemporary international politics characterised by the demonisation of political Islam associated with the War on Terror (Abu-Bakare 2020) and racialised hierarchies that continue to operate within migration and security governance (Danewid 2022). Mobilising the concept of performativity in Chapter 4, thus reveals the historical and cultural significance of such discourses and practices in ways which may be obscured without its inclusion.

Therefore, Chapter 4, with its discussion of how performativity can be used in research in conjunction with authoritarian neoliberalism represents one of this thesis’ novel theoretical contributions to knowledge and the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism.

Racial Capitalism

In Chapter 5, I seek to bring authoritarian neoliberalism in conversation with the concept of racial capitalism to analyse the role of external interventions, including the reordering

impacts of security interventions, in reinforcing authoritarian neoliberalism. I show that through their provision of security assistance (SA), which I argue is connected to their financial assistance since 2011, external actors have contributed to the rise of the Tunisian neoliberal security state in the post-transition context – reinforcing authoritarian neoliberalism and its increasingly violent and coercive manifestations (Maryon 2023).

Cedric Robinson (1983) famously coined the concept of racial capitalism to describe the extent to which the ‘development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions’ (p.3). Racial capitalism, thus, refers to the notion that the capitalism and racism developed along one axis of coincidence (Bhattacharyya 2018). Fundamentally, contemporary capitalism remains racialised. In other words, racism and social categorisations continue to sustain capitalist accumulation and the inevitable inequality that it produces (Bright et al. 2022). Many of the initial interventions on racial capitalism, while furthering our understanding of the coercive, violent and racialised nature of contemporary capitalism, have understandably focused on the US context (Gilmore 2007; Burden-Stelly 2020), and thus have been defined, it is argued, by a certain amount of methodological nationalism. It is important to understand that racial capitalism does not merely exist in the West where capitalist accumulation is dependent on racialised hierarchies to sustain and justify inequalities created through capitalism, but that racial capitalism also exists in the Global South (Haleh Davis 2022; Levenson and Paret 2022) and characterises the *global* economy (Khalili 2022; Levenson and Paret 2022).

Scholars of global racial capitalism argue the continued existence of global racial capitalism is dependent upon racialised hierarchies both domestically and within the global economy to create peripheral and core states, as well as marginalised, edge populations domestically within states ripe for exploitation (Bhattacharyya 2018). Vitality in order to control edge populations, global racial capitalism requires the roll out of mechanisms of coercion and control (Axster et al. 2021). Those mobilising the colonial boomerang thesis (Césaire 2000), for example, argue that repressive practices and technologies circulate from colony to metropole to police marginalised communities and consolidate models of racialised capitalist accumulation (Khalili 2010a; Barder 2015a). However, in Chapter 5, I argue that security practices and governance, associated with security cooperation between different states, can be thought of as feedback loops which circulate across space and time and form a ‘global

carceral empire of control’(Axster and Danewid 2021) operating as ‘interconnected and integral elements of global racial capitalism’ (Axster et al. 2021 p.3).

By theorising the connections between SA and authoritarian neoliberalism as I do in Chapter 5, I argue that SA must be understood as part of global, interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control designed to insulate capitalist accumulation – from imperial to neoliberal – from contestation. In other words, if authoritarian neoliberalism is understood as an intensification of the illiberal propensities of the capitalist state (Tansel 2017), then by exploring SA as part of the *longue durée* of entanglements between external actors and domestic political elites in creating and maintaining mechanisms of coercion and control which operate to sustain capitalist accumulation, we can theorise authoritarian neoliberalism as a contemporary iteration and fundamental aspect of global racial capitalism. The notion of authoritarian neoliberalism as a contemporary iteration of global racial capitalism is not the main emphasis of this project and a detailed elaboration of the argument is beyond the scope of this project. However, it is one of the important theoretical contributions of Chapter 5 and one that I aim to expand and build upon in research following this project.

So how does the incorporation of racial capitalism into the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism help develop the research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism, and vice versa?

Firstly, through the incorporation of racial capitalism into the framework of authoritarian neoliberalism we are able to rectify the colonial unknowing and erasure of race which has, at times, unintentionally characterised work on authoritarian neoliberalism (see Bruff and Tansel 2019; Axster et al 2021). Authoritarian neoliberalism should not be read as something entirely disconnected from previous iterations of capitalist accumulation. We must reflect upon the colonial and racist roots of contemporary neoliberalism (Slobodian 2018; Tansel in Axster et al. 2021 p.2) as well as emphasising the ways in which authoritarian neoliberalism has negatively impacted already marginalised groups such as aggravating gendered and racialised inequalities (Bruff & Wohl 2016; Tansel 2017; Laub 2021). However, racial capitalism as a conceptual tool enables us to understand the way in which the aggravation of such inequalities is not merely the unfortunate consequence of neoliberal restructuring and its violent impacts which fall in disproportionate and unequal ways (Bhattacharyya 2018). Rather the continued existence of social categorisations, such as race, and the inequalities that

such categorisations seek to justify are indicative and, in fact, necessary to maintaining contemporary racial capitalism (Bright et al. 2022) and its authoritarian neoliberal iteration. Also, while authoritarian neoliberalism allows us to understand the array of state strategies through which the authoritarian neoliberal state insulates neoliberalism from contestation, the incorporation of racial capitalism enables us to explore these strategies and their entanglements with global interconnected mechanisms of coercion of control which seek to insulate racialised, hierarchical and extractive capitalist accumulation from contestation (Césaire 2000; Danewid 2020; Khalili 2022).

Secondly, by bringing the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism into discussion with racial capitalism literatures, we can seek to understand how and why we see an intensification of coercive state power in particular periods, for example, when capitalist accumulation is coming under greatest societal contestation such as after the crash of 2008 (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). While racial capitalism has endured for a prolonged period, it has changed and evolved (Bhattacharyya 2018) and authoritarian neoliberalism as a concept enables us to better understand the intensification or evolution of coercive state practices in the post-2007 context. In other words, racial capitalism, according to Gargi Bhattacharyya³², is an ‘ever-evolving beast’ and I argue that the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism can help us understand the particularities and significance of its contemporary authoritarian neoliberal iteration.

Populism

In Chapter 6, I employ the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism to analyse the rise of populism under Tunisia’s president, Kais Saied. There is much debate as to whether populism is a concept (Postel 2019), a phenomenon (Urbinati 2013) or something which is so-widely applied and misinterpreted that it has lost all analytical utility (Eklundh and Tavares Furtado 2022). The intricacies of such discussions are beyond the scope of this thesis. However, in Chapter 6 I mobilise the concept of populism in conjunction with authoritarian neoliberalism to better understand the changes that have taken place since Kais Saied’s rise to power.

³² Quote from keynote speech at Critical Theory in Hard Times workshop in Manchester in May, 2023

I adopt a practice-based approach to populism³³ arguing it is used in conjunction with Kais Saied's *ad hoc* mode of governance – shaped more by his reactionary response to events than his own firm ideological positions on particular issues (Volkman 2022). In this practice-based approach populism is seen a 'set of performative repertoires' (Moffit 2016 cited in Ostiguy et al. 2020 p.6) often revolving around the construction of the 'people' vs a supposed 'establishment' portrayed as distant, corrupt and failing to deliver on the demands of the people (Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020). In this sense, the 'people' is something of an empty signifier, vaguely referring to those outside the circles of elite power while also constructing exclusionary, and often racialised, notions of who does and does not comprise the 'people' (Ostiguy et al. 2020). For example, in the contemporary Tunisian context, I argue the 'people' is constructed to exclude the sub-Saharan African migrant, the political Islamist, the ex-ISIS member and in opposition to 'the French colonial ruler', 'the western creditor' and the 'foreign collaborator'. Having elaborated the practice-based approach to populism that will be used in conjunction with authoritarian neoliberalism above, I now reflect upon some of the theoretical questions that are raised when we bring these concepts in conversation with one another.

While it is clear that authoritarian neoliberalisms *can* operate through populist praxis (Sierra Deutsch 2021; Gallo 2022), not all authoritarian neoliberalisms do. This raises questions regarding how and in what contexts it is analytically useful for us to incorporate discussion of populism into research on authoritarian neoliberalism. For me, discussion of the notion of crisis helps us navigate such questions. Populists, no matter where they appear, do not emerge in a vacuum but rather play into unsatisfied societal wants (Moffit 2016 cited in Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020). Profound economic or social conjuncture is necessary but not sufficient for the emergence and ultimate success of populist discourse. In actuality, 'populist actors actively perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis rather than simply reacting to it' (Moffitt 2016 cited in Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020, p.27). Similarly, Stuart Hall argued that the rise of so-called authoritarian populism, inherently connected to the theoretical as well as historical roots of authoritarian neoliberalism (See Bruff 2014; Bruff and Tansel 2019), is not a reflection of a crisis but rather a response to it (Hall 1979). For Hall, writing on 1970s Britain, this crisis was inherently linked to neoliberal deregulation and its social and

³³ Even if we accept that populism is a concept, there is still much debate as to whether populism is a 'thin ideology' as per the often-cited definition of Cas Mudde (2004) or whether it can be theorised as a way of doing politics (a praxis) (Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020).

economic impacts (Hall 1979). However, the response to this ‘crisis’ was not to move away from neoliberalisation, but rather a reactionary response to growing diversity in Britain as well as a performed and perpetuated moral panic surrounding ‘mugging’ constructed as a crime imported to Britain through immigration from the Caribbean (Hall 1979). Clearly, the contributions of Stuart Hall, and others such as Nicos Poulantzas (1978), such as have been foundational for those seeking to understand the relationship between the emergence of populists and neoliberalism. Indeed, scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism, the majority of whom do not write on populism explicitly, recognise the inherent contribution of the work of Hall in theorising the authoritarian characteristics of the neoliberal state and the interlinkages between said characteristics and the emergence of populist and reactionary responses which so often justify the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017 p.21; Bruff and Tansel 2019). However, they would also maintain that there has been a qualitative shift in the illiberal propensities of the neoliberal state since 2008 – as was discussed extensively in the previous chapter.

Thus, this discussion of crisis enables us to understand that the social and economic dislocations experienced in post-transition Tunisia were not the only cause contributing to the success of Saied’s populist discourse. Saied, as with all populists, performed and perpetuated a sense of crisis to create fertile territory for the success of his populist discourse as I show in Chapter 6. Vitaly, populist actors seek to identify and articulate narratives of causation or blame for these social and economic conjunctures (Hall 1979). This blame is often then attributed to particular social groups – most often, the political establishment, but also, immigrants, economic elites, or racialised communities (Ostiguy et al. 2020; Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020; Eklundh and Tavares Furtado 2022). Populist actors attempt to articulate a solution to the crisis – kicking out the corrupt political establishment presented as responsible for it and advocating their own rise to power as the voice of the ‘people’ (Hall 1979; Ostiguy et al. 2020). As per populist praxis, the ‘people’ are a single monolithic group whose interests can be articulated best by the populist leader or movement and those who do not fit into this single definition of the ‘will of the people’ are so-often marginalised and in authoritarian settings, silenced (Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020). Indeed, in the Tunisian context, Saied’s performance of a crisis of corruption, covid and Islamism, identifies the political establishment, African migrants (Maryon 2022) and terrorists, a label increasingly given anyone who disagrees with his vision for Tunisia, as to blame for the ills Tunisia faces. And

as, I argue in Chapter 6, Saied's solution to these 'crises' is the consolidation of his own political power and neoliberal deregulation.

So, how can populism and authoritarian neoliberalism be mobilised together? Essentially, the argument of those scholars bringing authoritarian neoliberalism and populism together (Goonewardena 2020; Sinha 2021; Gallo 2022), is that neoliberal deregulation and the 2008 global financial crisis have had deep socio-economic impacts which undermine the legitimacy of policy makers (Gallo 2022) and capitalist states. In order to deflect from the root causes of socio-economic turmoil, the process of neoliberal deregulation and the roll back of the welfare state, political elites in populist nationalist cases of authoritarian neoliberalism seek to whip up moral panic surrounding a supposed 'law and order' (Hall et al 1978) or 'security' crisis (Wacquant 2010; Lister 2019). The response to such crises is intensified use of coercive state power to police a particular group portrayed as responsible for the 'law and order' or 'security' crisis (Hall et al 1978; Lister 2019). For Stuart Hall and his graduate students in 1978 this group was Jamaicans and black Britons, and the law-and-order crisis was 'muggings'. For Michael Lister in 2019 this group was British Muslims, and the 'security' crisis is radicalisation and terrorism. For me, as I argue in Chapter 4 and Chapter 6, the targeted group in Tunisia is political Islamists, social movements and increasingly, sub-Saharan African migrants and the security crises are terrorism, radicalisation and migration.

Significantly for our discussions of authoritarian neoliberalism, the anti-globalism rhetoric of populist nationalists does not translate into anti-neoliberalism (Caylan 2021; Gallo 2022) as I show in the case of Kais Saied's complex and contradictory relationship with neoliberalisation in Chapter 6. Experience has taught us that populist nationalists embrace neoliberal ideals and fail to deviate from neoliberal policies (Caylan 2021). Rather than overhauling the neoliberal system which is arguably the cause of damaging social consequences particularly for working class communities through policies such as the roll back of the welfare state, neoliberal populist nationalists often articulate a narrative of welfare chauvinism, blaming the cultural 'other' for overburdening the resources of the state and advocating their exclusion from the provision of such services (Gallo 2022). Given the concept's focus upon the aggressive neoliberalisation since 2008, the scale of the crisis of legitimacy of the contemporary neoliberal state and the associated roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state to police contestation and resistance of neoliberalism, it is

not surprising that we have seen the proliferation of authoritarian neoliberalism literature exploring sites of populist nationalism (Goonewardena 2020; Sierra Deutsch 2021).

But if we think of populism as a reactionary response to the ‘crisis’ faced by the authoritarian neoliberal state, how does the incorporation of populism into the conceptual framework provided by Bruff (2014) differ from Hall’s theorisation of authoritarian populism (1979)? In the *Great Moving Right Show*, Hall (1979) maintains that authoritarian populism can be defined as an ‘exceptional form of capitalist state – which, unlike classical fascism, has retained most (though not all) of the formal representative institutions in place, and which at the same time has been able to construct itself around an active popular consent’ (1979 p.15). In this sense, authoritarian populism, whilst demonstrating authoritarian characteristics in certain areas, overarchingly continues within the pre-existing institutional structures of representative democracies (1979). It is important to note that Hall’s writings, although serving as great theoretical inspiration for critical approaches to neoliberalism around the world, were particularly grounded in the historical and geographic context of 1970s and 1980s Britain (Hall et al 1978; Hall 1979). In contrast, authoritarian neoliberalism, which should not be conceptualised as a strict typology or model (Bruff and Tansel 2019 p.238) but rather as a spectrum of strategies through which the neoliberal state insulates neoliberalism from contestation and pre-empt potential contestation from arising (Tansel 2017 p.2), can be used in a plethora of contexts – be they authoritarian, democratic or the various hyphenated terms that have emerged to describe those regimes which sit somewhere along that continuum. Furthermore, while Hall argues that authoritarian populists continue to operate within the institutional structures of the state (1979, p.15), Bruff (2014) has shown that the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism in the post crisis era is characterised by reconfigurations of state and institutional structures to insulate neoliberalism from contestation (2014, p.115). This is significant for this thesis’ exploration of Kais Saied’s unique brand of populism – one that is qualitatively different to Hall’s theorisation of Britain in the 1970s, for example. I argue that Saied’s populist adhococracy has not only served to consolidate his own power in increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic ways but also reinforce authoritarian neoliberalism through massive changes in state and institutional power particularly since July 2021.

Thus, the incorporation of populism into the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism can help us understand how and why, and in what contexts, populist actors

whip up moral panic surrounding certain ‘law and order crises’ or ‘security threats’ and how these processes are inherently linked to and shaped by authoritarian neoliberalism. While successive post-transition governments, which I analyse through the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism, have whipped moral panic surrounding terrorism and radicalisation to justify the repressive policing of Islamists as well as anti-austerity movements, it was not until the emergence of Kais Saied’s populist and increasingly authoritarian government that we see the ramping up of nationalist and racialised discourse as per populist nationalisms globally. The incorporation of the concept of populism in Chapter 6 thus enables us to understand how authoritarian neoliberalism can interact with, and contribute to, significant domestic political changes over time while failing to deviate from the intrinsic characteristics that define the authoritarian neoliberal state. In this sense, we can understand the durability of authoritarian neoliberal state forms and the ability of policy makers, including those in Tunisia, to mobilise consent for intensified use of coercive state power as a reactionary response to the crisis of legitimacy facing the capitalist state and to repress contestation of neoliberalism that does emerge by shifting ‘blame’ onto a cultural other and whipping up moral panic surrounding certain ‘crises’. This populist praxis of authoritarian neoliberalism is growing globally in Hungary, Britain and India, for example, but its role in Tunisia’s democratic erosion and the rise of xenophobia which has justified racialised policing of Tunisia’s African migrant population is particularly stark as I show in Chapter 6.

2.3 Securing the State in Post-2011 Tunisia: Research Design and Methodology of this project

Having outlined the theoretical framework of this thesis, I now expand upon and justify my research design and methods. In this section, I highlight the adaptations I made to this project’s research design and methods in order to grapple with, and I would argue overcome, the challenges I faced throughout the duration of the project. Finally, I reflect upon my reflexive and, at times, uncomfortable relationship with my research and how I have attempted to navigate, but not overcome, this issue.

2.3.1 Avoiding the traps of a single case study research design in IR

This thesis is a single case study research design, focusing on security politics, neoliberalism and questions of regime legitimacy in Tunisia between the fall of the Ben Ali government in January 2011 and July 1, 2023. As a research design, the single case study lends itself to exploring the particularities of a given case (Yin 2003 p.1) and rich thick qualitative analysis. However, case studies are sometimes criticised for their predominately descriptive nature (Yin 2003 p.6). Similarly, there have been questions regarding whether such a research design lends itself more to Area Studies as opposed to IR research as it is claimed they allow deep and multifaceted generation of on the ground knowledge but that they do not allow the creation of universally applicable theory (Costantini and Hanau Santini 2022). However, I do not seek to establish universal laws and generalisations concerning the so-called Arab world or post-revolutionary political orders but rather aim ‘to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics’ of the Tunisian case (Yin 2003 p.2).

Notwithstanding the significance of the Tunisian case, I do, however, attempt to make both a theoretical and empirical contribution to IR literature beyond a mere focus on Tunisian politics. That being said, IR has long moved beyond a discipline which is merely interested in developing universally generalisable theories of the International. Today, security studies is more concerned with an understanding of the everyday insecurities faced by individuals and societies and their global entanglements whilst maintaining the significance of local, societal and cultural particularities. Thus, for critical IPE and Critical Security Studies scholars such as myself, reflecting upon the relationship between the local and the global has long been significant. Accordingly, scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism have explored a plethora of local sites and different scales in which these global structures operate to sustain coercive, violent and racialised capitalist accumulation (Jenss 2019; Danewid 2020; Laub 2021).

2.3.2 Research methods

This thesis is built on qualitative data collection and analysis. Between July 2019 and January 2023³⁴ I conducted semi-structured interviews with key actors and commentators including Tunisian journalists, political analysts, individuals working for international organisations and other nation states in Tunisia, securocrats, Tunisian scholars and researchers, Tunisian political elites and local activists. For a full (anonymised) list of the participants and their

³⁴ In July 2019, the Cardiff University School of Law and Politics ethics committee approved my fieldwork – namely to conduct interviews in Tunisia.

roles see Appendix 1. Balance had to be struck between interviewing those I was able to access and who were willing to participate on the one hand and creating a balanced sample of opinions and perspectives on the other hand (Collier and Mahoney 1996). I initially used my own connections within Tunisia to reach out to potential participants. I then sent emails from my Cardiff University email address to other relevant stakeholders I did not know. Many of those that responded and that I interviewed subsequently introduced me to other individuals they felt it may be useful for me to talk to in a practice known as ‘snowball sampling’ (Tenzek 2017).

Due to the researcher’s, the ESRC’s and Cardiff University’s commitments to ethical and responsible research as well as the potentially sensitive content of my research, the decision was made to fully anonymise the interview data to protect participants – many of whom are operating in a situation in which speaking about Tunisian politics or Tunisia’s security sector is an increasingly dangerous thing to do. Given the return of increasingly authoritarian practices in Tunisia, particularly since July 2021, such as the arbitrary arrests of journalists, activists, politicians and researchers, the overarching priority to protect the safety of individuals has been reinforced. At times, certain pieces of interesting and compelling information have been omitted from the quotes included in the final thesis to avoid the potential threat of jigsaw identification. Furthermore, there were occasions when participants requested to be named but I have not been able to do so due to the demands of my ethics committee. This risks exploiting knowledge and insights from Tunisians without accrediting them (Godfrey-Faussett 2022), thus reinforcing already significant issues surrounding coloniality and knowledge extraction in the social sciences (Brown N.d). Such debates are not the purpose of this chapter, however, my compliance with the demands of the relevant ethics committee were not without reflection upon their potential adverse impacts.

As per traditional approaches to semi-structured interviews (Adams 2015), I did not have a strict list of set questions that the participants were obliged to answer. Rather, several more central and general questions were asked to all participants. The other questions in each interview depended on the answers provided to the initial questions, where the participant’s answers took the conversation or the particular individual role of the participant in Tunisian (security) politics (see Adams 2015). For example, a journalist investigating stories on police violence in Tunisia would be asked some of the same and some different questions to a high-

ranking member of the Tunisian civil service. Furthermore, given that I conducted interviews over a period of four years, sometimes interviewing the same individual more than once, interview questions often varied because of significant events such as the pandemic or Kais Saied's 25 July power grab. Interviews were conducted in person, in Tunis, and online after the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. While it is regrettable that I was unable to travel to other parts of Tunisia to conduct face-to-face interviews, and thus risk recreating the marginalisation of already marginalised regions of Tunisia (Jrad and Ghanem 2021), the decision to only conduct interviews with individuals based in Tunis was due to the budgetary constraints of the research project, the agreed travel arrangements of the relevant ethics committee and the travel restrictions which have been put in place by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office which prevent me from travelling to certain parts of Tunisia such as its borderlands³⁵. However, one of the benefits of having to move to online interviews from March 2020 onwards was that I was able to interview individuals in parts of Tunisia that I would not otherwise have been able to travel to. Thus, the pivot to online interviews, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, redressed some of the concerns of being overly focused on Tunis at the expense of more marginalised regions (Howlett 2022), something I discuss more below.

Interviews were conducted in both French and English but for the purposes of the thesis all interview quotes have been translated into English³⁶. It is important here to acknowledge that translation can sometimes risk a slight loss of meaning or the need to change the participants 'voice'³⁷ (van Nes et al. 2010; Pellerin 2012). While I recognise the potential pitfalls of translation, care has been taken in the translation process throughout to ensure cultural meanings are maintained whilst minimising the changes made to the voice of the participant. This stems from my own commitment to honour the voice of my participants during the translation process (Denzin and Lincoln 2002) as well as my desire to amplify the voices of those in the Global South within research on the Global South - something which is so often neglected (Spivak 1998; Maggio 2007).

³⁵ See map at <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/tunisia>

³⁶ I translated and transcribed all interviews manually. The decision to translate the interview data used in the thesis into English was based purely on the fact the thesis itself is written in English, rather than the fact English is the dominant language in cross-European projects and publications (Kushner 2003).

³⁷ For example when it is necessary to use several words in one language to reflect the meaning of one word in another language

Secondly, the use of French to conduct the majority of interview demands reflexivity in the research process given that Tunisia is a former French protectorate. For post-colonial theorists, language is one of the key questions in social science because European languages were one of the key mechanisms of the exercise colonial power through knowledge production (Mule 2019; Zeiny 2019). Language in much of the world, such as North Africa, is one of the defining traces of colonial history acting as a cultural bomb that continues a process of erasing memories of pre-colonial cultures and history and installs the dominance of new, more insidious forms of colonialism (Thiong'o 1992/1986). Furthermore, academia and the social sciences have internalised this colonialist relation with language in so that social science research continues to recreate and reinforce the dominance of colonial languages such as French and English (Thiong'o 1992/1986). While I am unable to conduct my interviews nor write my thesis in Tunisian Arabic, it is important to reflect on the risks that conducting my interviews in French, the language of the former colonial power, can create (Marzouki 2007). It increases the potential of giving voice to Tunisian political and business elites who are more likely to have completed the schooling in French or to have studied in France, at the expense of other less privileged sections of the Tunisian population who are statistically more likely to only speak Tunisian Arabic (Marzouki 2007). This, once again, risks recreating dangerous conditions of coloniality and elitism that further acts to rob already marginalised individuals of their voice by excluding them from the research process (Vaditya 2018).

Ultimately, given the limitations of the project, the best way to be a responsible and reflexive researcher is to acknowledge some of the potentially problematic aspects of the research design and reiterate that I have taken all possible steps to avoid any potential impact on the research and its findings (Mruck and Breuer 2003). For example, I have purposefully engaged with researchers, journalists and practitioners working with marginalised communities in marginalised regions of Tunisia and whose work demonstrates a commit to social justice and amplifying such voices. As this project progressed, I became increasingly known and trusted within these circles helping to give me access to insights into the impacts of neoliberalism and repressive security policies and practices as well as accounts of resistance and contestation that I may otherwise not have had access to. Furthermore, as Tunisia's political landscape closed and Tunisian ministries became less transparent and willing to engage with researchers, it has become less possible and useful to engage with political elites and representatives of the state (TransparencyInternational 2022). This meant

that my project has overarchingly engaged with people working with or from marginalised groups in Tunisia as opposed to security practitioners and political elites – notwithstanding some level of engagement with these individuals particularly in the earlier stages of this project. This aforementioned issue regarding language is, however, indicative of broader debates regarding coloniality in the social sciences and my increasingly uncomfortable position and relationship with my research as I explore in Section 2.3.5.

2.3.4 Reflecting on the journey of this thesis project

In this part of the chapter, I will briefly reflect upon the process of researching and writing this thesis. This has become particularly significant in the (post) pandemic context in which so many research projects were initially impeded and subsequently adapted as well as a more precisely with reference to the Tunisian case which has experienced significant political changes in the last 2 years of this 4 and a half year long³⁸ research project.

PhDing in the Pandemic – constraints and pivots

In March 2020, I was preparing to go on a two-week research trip to Tunis³⁹. However, on March 15, 2020, the UK government announced it was no longer safe for those in the third trimester of pregnancy, such as me at the time, to leave the house and advised that we begin ‘shielding’. The UK went into full covid lockdown the following week. This was to be the beginning of over two years of significant disruptions to the research process. Between March 2020 and March 2022 all foreign travel was advised against by the Cardiff School of Law and Politics. This meant that the two research trips I had planned in March and December 2020 did not happen and that I did not rearrange them. Thus, PhDing in a pandemic came with its challenges for me and for many others. However, for me, the greatest limitation of the pandemic has been the impact on my travel arrangements and fieldwork which reinforces some of the pre-existing issues regarding the so-called *ivory tower* and coloniality in the social sciences (Mitchell 2021). I never intended to write a PhD on contemporary Tunisian security politics that was predominately written and researched from a desk in Cardiff, be it one in my makeshift home office or in the PGR office of the School of Law and Politics.

³⁸ For 6 months of this period 4.5-year period, I was on maternity leave

³⁹ This trip was booked for the first two weeks of April just before I was too pregnant to fly

However, the pandemic also inspired innovation in social science research (Taylor and Knipe 2022) demanding that researchers adapt to the new context (Christia and Lawson 2020). This meant that there were aspects of the research design which changed. The use of online interviews was not something that I had considered prior to March 2020. However, the move to online interviews gave me opportunities to increase the scope of my participant pool (Howlett 2022) – particularly in terms of engaging with individuals both outside of the UK and Tunisia, such as expats or Tunisian researchers working in other states, as well as enabling me to engage with stakeholders working in regions of Tunisia that I have not previously been able to travel in person due to travel restrictions or budgetary constraints (Taylor and Knipe 2022). As aforementioned, the move to online interviews helped me tackle one of the key concerns I originally had with my project; the unintentional hyper-focus on participants with a perspective based on living or working in Tunis. Given that Tunis is wealthier and more international than many parts of Tunisia, the pivot to online interviews helped me mitigate these potential biases and enriched my data collection. For example, I had the opportunity to reach out and collaborate with journalists, activists and scholars working in Tunisia’s borderlands. Of course, there were some concerns about discrepancies in internet access between different regions of Tunisia (James and Busher 2016) but given that it was illegal to travel to Tunisia throughout 2020, 2021 and for some periods of 2022, I had to do my best to try and ensure that I did not marginalise already marginalised voices whilst working under the prevailing legal and practical constraints. Furthermore, the move to online interviews enabled me to interview many more people than would have been possible in the original face-to-face interview research design as I was intending to do several short fieldwork trips due to financial, teaching and parental commitments which made prolonged research trips impossible. Thus, I am firmly of the belief that the use of online interviews has significantly helped strengthen the quality and scope of my data collection.

Another significant impact of the pandemic for me was my growing use of Twitter to engage with the academic community, keep up to date with Tunisian current affairs and eventually engage with participant and collaborators in the research process (AcademicPositions 2018; Jester 2022). Since the revolution, social media has enabled the growth of non-traditional online media outlets such as Meshkal, Nawaat and Inkyfada who provide excellent analysis often illuminating the stories of marginalised communities⁴⁰ and all of whom I have been

⁴⁰ For example, in December 2019 Meshkal published an extensive report on antiblack racism in Tunisia

luckily enough to collaborate with. The reader will notice that there are tweets which have been referenced throughout this thesis. Often these tweets are real-time reflections or analysis of fast-moving on the ground events provided by prominent Tunisian political commentators, analysts or journalists that help capture people's view and attitudes *in situ* rather than retrospectively potentially months later in a more formal interview setting (Howlett 2022). Furthermore, I have used Twitter to engage with and develop connections with journalists, activists and NGO workers (Mollet et al. 2011). Indeed, many of the individuals interviewed were first contacted after twitter interactions. Overall, I feel that using twitter in the research process has helped positively develop me as a researcher as well as strengthening the project.

Finally, this project has had to adapt to significant changes in Tunisia's political landscape. Since the first lockdown in March 2020, Kais Saied has used 'exceptional security powers' to amass his own personal power. This coupled with Tunisia's worsening economic situation has been one of the contributing factors in Tunisia's decline back to authoritarianism. Detailed discussion of these developments will be saved for the main body of this thesis, but it is worth noting that focusing on a single case study which is changing quite rapidly and significantly has demanded reflection, adaptations and, where relevant, chapter revisions. For example, Chapter 4 initially detailed vague and implicit delegitimising discourses against political Islamist actors. However, since Saied dissolved Parliament in July 2021, such discourses have become very clear and have been coupled by harassment and detention of key political Islamists. Such developments have been integrated in Chapter 4's discussions and similar adaptations have taken place to all chapters considering significant political developments. Furthermore, Chapter 6, which details the rise of Kais Saied's unique brand of populism and how this acts to reinforce authoritarian neoliberalism while contributing to authoritarian drift, is a chapter that I did not intend to write when I started this journey in October of 2018. However, it became clear by September 2022, when I decided to start writing Chapter 6, that such significant changes had taken place in Tunisia since Saied's suspension of Parliament in July 2021 that I could not fail to grapple with them here in this thesis.

It is worth noting, however, that the adaptability of my project to changes in contemporary Tunisian politics has been, unfortunately, helped by the nature of these changes. I hypothesised that the continued pursuit of neoliberal reforms as per the demands of the *bailleurs des fonds* would lead to rising social inequalities and deprivation, leading to greater

disenchantment with the democratic system. This is something that has continued and accelerated since 2020 contributing to the rise of Saied's brand of populism and the return to authoritarianism in Tunisia. I hypothesised that the use of counterterror measures to push through policies in ways that circumvent normal democratic channels and empower the executive would lead to executive over-reach in security matters in anti-democratic and problematic ways as well as encouraging the return of a culture of impunity in the security forces. Since March 2020, the government has used exceptional security measures in the ways I hypothesised to empower the executive and repress social movements through violent policing. However, the President then took the problematic use of security powers to realms well beyond those I, and others, had envisaged in July 2021 when he used Article 80 of the 2014 Constitution, designed for national emergencies, to stage a constitutional coup. Therefore, the adaptations I have made to this project as a result of political developments in Tunisia have been changes such as including new data, new studies, new examples, writing a new chapter and reinterviewing people in light of developments as opposed to fundamentally overhauling my theoretical approach and central argument as they have been, sadly, in keeping with developments that have taken place.

2.3.5 Reconciling problematic positionality: the importance of reflexivity in the research process

Throughout the almost five years I have spent researching and writing this thesis, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with my role as a white British female researching (in)security in contemporary Tunisia and have wondered if I am the right person to do this research. This is a dilemma that I have not fully reconciled but have reflected upon extensively. This, at times, uncomfortable relationship to my research thus requires I discuss and grapple with my own positionality and reflexivity in the research process. In the first section of this chapter, I recognised the normative commitments of this project and how these are shaped by my own ontological, epistemological and theoretical perspectives; or in other words, my positionality⁴¹. However, here in this section of the chapter, I attempt to reflexively engage with my own relationship to my research. 'Simply stated, reflexivity is the concept that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in their research,

⁴¹ Positionality in research refers to an individual's world view and the position they take to their research. It is inherently shaped by 'where the researcher is coming from, concerns, ontological assumptions (an individual's beliefs about the nature of social reality and what is knowable about the world), epistemological assumptions (an individual's beliefs about the nature of knowledge) and assumptions about human nature and agency (individual's assumptions about the way we interact with our environment and relate to it' (Holmes 2020 p.2).

seeking to understand their part in it, or influence on it. Reflexivity informs positionality’ (Holmes 2020 p.3).

I have already noted the way in which academic research has historically recreated racialised and colonial hierarchies (Tucker 2018). As contemporary social scientists we must reflect upon how we can avoid creating the conditions of coloniality through our own research process even if unintentionally (Brown N.d). Throughout this chapter, I have reflected upon my attempts to overcome the potential challenges of using French in the research process, for example. I have highlighted how I attempted to widen the scope of my participant recruitment to avoid an overemphasis on Tunis based elites. All these reflections have stemmed from a broader reflexive commitment to avoid recreating problematic and colonialist traditions of knowledge production and extraction (Datta 2018). There have been, of course, moments when the privilege afforded to me as white British researcher have been clear such as when travelling through Tunis airport with relative ease or when travelling to Europe or North America for conferences to present my work. Both of which are significantly more difficult for racialised researchers and those from the Global South (Minai 2021) including Tunisia.

However, there are certain ways in which I have attempted to reconcile, but not fully overcome, my increasingly uncomfortable relationship to my research. Firstly, I have attempted, throughout this project, to adopt a theoretical approach which avoids eurocentrism, coloniality and methodological whiteness. Secondly, I have recognised that I am not an expert in domestic Tunisian politics but have emphasised that I am an IR researcher seeking to track and understand the localised manifestations of global trends in terms of security politics and neoliberal governance through the contemporary Tunisian case. I have made a conscious effort to reflect upon when to speak and when to amplify the voice of Tunisians⁴² with far greater expert knowledge and lived experience than myself particularly in terms of recent developments in Tunisian politics. I see my role as highlighting the significance of the contemporary Tunisian case to IR scholars in terms of informing our understanding of the role of neoliberalism, IFIs, counter politics and security assistance in

⁴² Such as in cases when I have been approached to give media interviews regarding developments in Tunisian politics

contributing to the rise of neoliberal security states, populism and democratic backsliding globally than to provide analysis of Tunisian domestic politics.

Furthermore, I am not of the belief that we can only study those areas which we are from. Such a notion risks stifling much needed diversity of perspectives which is required in the social sciences. If we were to only research those areas where we live or are from, it would, perhaps be much more difficult to see the global connections between localised phenomena blinding us to the powerful structures which sustain insecurity and inequality globally. Malte Laub, for example, recently published an excellent study on authoritarian neoliberalism in my birthplace: *Elephant and Castle in South London* (2021). It was a well-researched and excellent contribution to knowledge which was illuminating for me despite the fact my family have lived in that part of South London for over a hundred years. Furthermore, Ida Danewid's (2020) article on Grenfell in which she explored the relationship between the local and global in racial capitalism not only offers an important contribution knowledge regarding my hometown but has informed my theoretical approach in my own work on contemporary Tunisia. Neither author is from London, but their work is sensitive to questions of knowledge extraction and exposes important localised trends in broader global dynamics of dispossession and coercion while illuminating the significant experiences of London's dispossessed, excluded, and often racialised, communities. I hope that my work, here in this thesis, has been able to similarly track localised trends of dispossession, coercion and control in contemporary Tunisia honouring and amplifying the voices of the marginalised and the excluded while situating such discussions within the broader context of global, increasingly authoritarian, neoliberal governance and the *longue durée* of global racial capitalism. Indeed, one day in the final stages of my PhD, as I sat in the Job Centre in Cardiff waiting to go over my childcare expenses *again* for my universal credit claim noting that there were as many G4S agents 'policing the space' as there were claim handlers, I reflected upon the irony in that I have spent the last five years researching authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia while navigating the authoritarian neoliberal state and academy here in the UK. However, this speaks to the fact that authoritarian neoliberalism is a global phenomenon which rears its ugly head against globally economically disposed and precarious populations – reinforcing pre-existing class based, gendered and racialised inequalities globally (Tansel 2017).

In short, it is vital, if we are engaging in research in with marginalised communities or in Global Southern contexts, that we reflect upon how we, as relatively privileged academic

researchers, avoid engaging in extractive and exploitative research practices which merely further our careers but do nothing for those communities that we are ‘researching’ (Haelewaters and Et al 2019). I hope that through these reflexive discussions here in this chapter as well as the consistent normative commitments to avoid Eurocentrism and coloniality embedded throughout the entirety of this project, I have been able to avoid such risks. In other words, while I have become increasingly uncomfortable with my relationship to my research that uncomfortableness is important and necessary because it demands I reflect on my research process and thus, I hope, improve it.

Conclusion

In this Chapter, I have outlined my epistemological and theoretical approach to my project. I have demonstrated how this positionality has shaped my research design as well as my entire research journey while noting its potential pitfalls and limitations. I have elaborated and interrogated the theoretical framework of this thesis as well as emphasising the theoretical contribution I seek to make to the research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism. I have discussed my research methods and their limitations and reflected upon how I adapted these methods to unexpected developments such as the pandemic. Finally, I have taken the reader on journey exploring my own reflexive, at times, uncomfortable relationship to my research in the hope of demonstrating the constant thought and consideration that has gone into to minimising potentially problematic elements of this research. In doing so, I hope that I have provided the reader with a solid understanding of how and why I chose to pursue a single case study research design; namely the so-called security/neoliberalism nexus in Tunisia since 2011 to explore the global interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control as a reactionary response to the contemporary crisis of increasingly authoritarian neoliberalism. In the following chapter, I shall elaborate the particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism in the post-2011 Tunisian context emphasising the significance of constraints on the sovereignty and legitimacy of policy makers in shaping the Tunisian political landscape and competing claims to reconfigure the legitimacy of the post-transition regime.

Chapter 3 – Authoritarian neoliberalism, reduced sovereignty and legitimacy in post-2011 Tunisia

Externally dictated ‘reforms’ contradict the mantras of Tunisia’s revolution: freedom, dignity, employment, social justice

Labri Sadiki, prominent Tunisian writer and political scientist, 2021.

Introduction: Interrogating Authoritarian Neoliberalism in the post-transition context

Contemporary Tunisia is defined by increasingly illiberal and authoritarian manifestations of neoliberalism; understood here as authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). In short, authoritarian neoliberalism refers to the ‘spectrum of disciplinary strategies’ through which contemporary neoliberalism is insulated from contestation (Tansel 2017, p.6) as was interrogated and elaborated extensively in the previous chapter. Given the constraints of this chapter, it would be impossible to outline every single mechanism, framework or measure which acts to insulate neoliberalism from contestation in post-transition Tunisia.

Accordingly, this chapter engages with and analyses the *particularities* of authoritarian neoliberalism in post-transition Tunisia where successive governments have sought to consolidate its democratic transition and reconfigure the legitimacy of the state in the context of prolonged economic stagnation, political instability, regional insecurity, a global pandemic and, more recently, significant political and economic turmoil. These particularities, as I argue in this chapter; are the 1/ *reduced sovereignty*⁴³ of the Tunisian state associated with the huge power and influence of external actors in both economic and security policy areas, as well as 2/ Tunisia’s *post-revolutionary* political environment in which the legitimacy of the transitional political regime *must* be reconfigured.

Although there is extensive scholarship on neoliberalism and state sovereignty (Davies 2016), the connection between authoritarian neoliberalism and reduced sovereignty is one of the less well researched areas of the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism (see Sotiris 2017). This is arguably because, at first take, the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism – through its focus on state strategies of neoliberal governance - seems to imply the capacity of

⁴³ When using the term ‘reduced sovereignty’, I am referring to the notion that the sovereignty of the state is partially impeded because aspects of its internal domestic policy are being determined or influenced to such an extent by external forces that we can no longer determine the state to be fully sovereign (see Sotiris 2017).

the state to flex its sovereign-state like muscles both in terms of macroeconomic and budgetary policies as well as security policy (Lister 2019). In contemporary Tunisia, however, the state faces such significant constraints on its sovereignty, particularly in economic, budgetary and monetary policy areas, due to the power and omnipresence of external actions (Hamouchene 2018; Santini 2018; Jouili 2023; Maryon 2023; Mullin 2023) that we can characterise Tunisia as a site of reduced sovereignty. It is in this context of reduced sovereignty that we can understand illiberal security practices and policy as not just insulating neoliberalism from contestation, as per the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017), but also serving as a means for the Tunisian state to both perform its sovereignty (See Lister 2019) and to reconfigure its claims to legitimacy as the provider of security in its traditional Weberian sense.

While scholars such as Sotiris (2017) have explored questions of authoritarian neoliberalism and reduced sovereignty with reference to external economic interventions, I, in this thesis, engage with external actors' interventions in both economic *and* security domains (see also Maryon 2023). The second aspect of this discussion will be expanded extensively in Chapter 5. Thus, this novel context and its particularities represent not only this thesis' contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism, but also, speaks to this thesis' assertion that we can best understand (in)security in the MENA when adopting an analytical approach bringing together the academic disciplines of security studies and IPE (See also Mullin 2023). Furthermore, while discussions of reduced sovereignty and the power of external actors are necessary for this chapter's empirical analysis, it also speaks to this thesis' broader theoretical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. This is in terms of exploring the *global* entanglements of neoliberal security states as was outlined extensively in the previous chapter.

Secondly, Tunisia's transitional political context, in which the legitimacy of the new regime must be reconfigured following a popular uprising against the former regime (Challand 2016b), allows us to explore questions regarding the relationship between contemporary neoliberalism and the challenges it poses to the ability of governments to maintain their legitimacy in light of rising inequalities and intensified state violence. Such discussions are already relevant to scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism in so called consolidated liberal democratic and Global Northern contexts (Bruff 2014; Bruff and Wöhl 2016; Sotiris 2017; Laub 2021), but they become all the more significant in Tunisia's post-revolutionary political

context and its subsequent ‘transition’ to democracy (Challand 2016b). Furthermore, while discussions of regime legitimacy are important to our empirical analysis of the Tunisian case, they also represent one of the theoretical contributions of this thesis to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism was outlined in the previous chapter.

Significantly, this chapter’s discussions of authoritarian neoliberalism, reduced sovereignty and questions surrounding the legitimacy of the post-transition regime represent the foundations upon which the following chapters of this thesis will be built. For example, it is only through elaborating the particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism in the Tunisian context, as I do in this chapter, that we can understand security politics as a performative enactment of statehood and attempt to reconfigure regime legitimacy as I explore in Chapter 4. Nonetheless, prior to my analysis of the so-called security/neoliberalism nexus in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, this chapter must first demonstrate why the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism is both applicable and revelatory to the Tunisian case. Furthermore, in this chapter, I demonstrate how the particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism in the Tunisian context, both in terms of reduced sovereignty and the transitional political environment plays into competing attempts by political elites to reconfigure the legitimacy of the post-transition state through security politics, and more precisely, through articulations of ‘securing the state’ in its traditional ‘Weberian’ sense.

Therefore, this chapter will structure its analysis of authoritarian neoliberalism in post-2011 Tunisia as follows. In the first section, I outline the transformation of the Tunisian capitalist state associated with the former regime of Ben Ali, to authoritarian neoliberalism in the post-2011 context (3.1). This is because, as I argue throughout this thesis, contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism, whilst representing a qualitative shift in terms of the illiberal propensities of the capitalist state (See Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017; Bruff and Tansel 2019), is not entirely disconnected to previous forms of capitalist accumulation. In section 3.2, I explore the significant role of external actors in authoritarian neoliberalism in post-2011 Tunisia and the interrelated mechanisms of discipline and surveillance that act to constrain the agency of Tunisian policy makers. Notwithstanding section 3.2’s discussion of external actors and reduced sovereignty, in section 3.3, I explore the agency of Tunisian domestic elites in constructing a consensus surrounding the neoliberal agenda as well as exploring sites of contestation and resistance of this consensus. Such sites are significant for our analysis in of themselves. However, they can also be, almost counterintuitively, productive of

authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017) in the sense that they are met with harsh security crackdowns in which already disciplinary security frameworks and practices are further intensified to quell dissent. In section 3.4, I engage with the case of the controversial Finance Law of January 2018 which, I argue, demonstrates the dynamics of authoritarian neoliberalism in contemporary Tunisia as explored in sections 3.1-3.3. Through this micro case study, I demonstrate that the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism is both applicable to and illuminating of the contemporary Tunisian context. In the final section of this chapter, section 3.5, I show that the context of authoritarian neoliberalism, associated reduced sovereignty as well as the negative social, political, and economic consequences of the continued neoliberal consensus are posing huge challenges to the ability of the post-transition regime to reconfigure its legitimacy. It is only through this chapter's contextualisation of authoritarian neoliberalism, reduced sovereignty, and associated challenges to regime legitimacy, all of which I bring together in section 3.5, that we can conceptualise the discussions of security politics as the terrain of contestation in the fight to reconfigure regime legitimacy in the chapters that follow.

3.1 From colonial capitalism to neoliberal authoritarianism to authoritarian neoliberalism

Notwithstanding the significant history of colonial (Bennoune 1979; Alzubairi 2019b), and post-colonial capitalist extraction and exploitation in Tunisia (Ajl et al. 2020; Aliriza 2020; Ajl 2022) I argue there have been, since 2011, fundamental shifts in terms of the capitalist state and political regime in Tunisia (See also Jouili 2023; Maryon 2023; Mullin 2023). Fundamentally, I argue this shift is particularly stark with reference to the various pre-emptive and disciplinarian mechanisms that serve to insulate neoliberalism from contestation in the post-transition political context (Bruff 2014). And thus, in this section, I analyse the transformations of the Tunisian capitalist state in this period which I argue means that post-transition Tunisia can be theorised as a site of authoritarian neoliberalism.

3.1.1 Capitalism à la Ben Ali: neoliberal authoritarianism

Prior to our analysis of contemporary Tunisia, it is necessary to understand the capitalist transformation of the state and the economy under the Ben Ali regime. Collapsing oil revenues and remittances coupled with the spiralling cost of commodity subsidies throughout

the 1970s, led Tunisia to enter into a Structural Adjustment Package agreement with the IMF by 1986 (Bogaert 2013; Hanieh 2015). This was designed to ‘open up’ the economy, increase competitiveness and reduce government spending (Bogaert 2013). However, it acted to expose Tunisia’s vulnerabilities to external market forces and deepened its dependency on exports of low value goods (Jouili 2023). A year after its agreement, then President Habib Bourguiba would lose power to Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, under whom the neoliberalisation of the Tunisian economy, often in line with the conditions dictated by the IMF, would really take off (Chemingui and Sanchez 2011; Görmüş and Akçalı 2021). Although deep analysis of economic policy under the Ben Ali regime is not the purpose of this chapter, neoliberalisation under the former authoritarian regime(s) is fundamentally connected to, and yet different from, contemporary manifestations of (authoritarian) neoliberalism in Tunisia (Bogaert 2013; Beissinger et al. 2016; Mossallem 2016). In short, the former regime used a corrupt and oligarchic form of neoliberalism to enrich Ben Ali’s inner circle⁴⁴ whilst pursuing his ultimate objective; his own survival, rather than an inherent commitment to the neoliberal project (Rijkers et al. 2014; Görmüş and Akçalı 2021).

Thus, Ben Ali’s Tunisia was, in fact, defined by *neoliberal authoritarianism* (Görmüş and Akçalı 2021), rather than by *authoritarian neoliberalism*. Neoliberal authoritarianism refers to states in which ‘the social tools of neoliberalisation have been used in the most subtle and successful way to eventually serve and sustain authoritarianism’ (Görmüş and Akçalı 2021, p.408). This is in contrast to authoritarian neoliberalism which can be used to analyse both democratic and authoritarian regimes as attested to by the plethora of concepts in which the concept has been deployed⁴⁵. Furthermore, I argue authoritarian neoliberalism differs from neoliberal authoritarianism in the sense that it is an analytical tool that seeks to shed light on the spectrum of state strategies through which neoliberalism as a political and economic model (Bruff and Tansel 2019), rather than the rule of a particular individual, is insulated from contestation. Indeed, while ‘neoliberalising’ in certain areas, the Ben Ali regime also maintained elements of social redistribution programmes which were seen as fundamental to

⁴⁴ By end of President Ben Ali’s rule in January 2011, the World Bank estimates his family’s wealth at 13B USD which represented more than a quarter of Tunisia’s annual GDP at that time (Rijkers et al. 2014)

⁴⁵ This chapter does not seek to ‘measure’ democratisation in contemporary Tunisia as this is not a piece of transitology research. Nonetheless, it is clear today that Tunisia, between 2014-2021 fulfilled the criteria of at least a partially consolidated democratic regime such as regular free and fair elections without contestation nor violence, several peaceful transitions of power and certain enshrined civil liberties

guaranteeing a certain level of societal support for the harsher aspects of his authoritarian governance (Hibou 2006; Heydemann 2007; Aliriza 2020).

Notwithstanding the inconsistencies in Ben Ali's economic policy, the mantra was that neoliberal reforms would stimulate economic growth boosting employment and incomes and therefore, improving standards of living (Chemingui and Sanchez 2011 p.6). Furthermore, many associated with the so-called Washington Consensus argued that economic liberalisation would be the first step on the path towards democratisation (Williamson 2003; Heydemann 2007). However, standards of living did not improve. While official government figures placed the unemployment rate at 14% at the end of 2010 (Hibou 2011b), reports suggest unemployment was nearer 20% of working age adults and approximately 36% of Tunisians between 15-24 were unemployed (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 2014 p.1). Similarly, although a 2009 report published by The Tunisian Institute of National Statistics (INS) claimed that the rate of poverty in Tunisia was 3% (Hibou 2011a p.130), the newly appointment Minister of Social Affairs in the weeks following the revolution suggested the poverty rate was much near to 25% (Hibou 2011a p.130). Furthermore, in contrast to the path outlined by the Washington Consensus, economic 'liberalisation' was not followed by political liberalisation (Heydemann 2007; Görmüş and Akçalı 2021). In contrast, this economic 'opening' served as an operative window dressing for authoritarian regimes across the MENA, including Tunisia, to intensify their use of political violence to guarantee societal compliance with authoritarian governance while appeasing the demands of the international community (Heydemann 2007).

It is hotly debated whether the Tunisian government hid the negative social consequences of neoliberalisation behind manipulated statistics (Hibou 2011b), or whether it was simply politically expedient for the international community to 'turn a blind eye' as long as neoliberal reforms were implemented, and loan payments were met (Bogaert 2013). However, it is clear that rather than being a vector for democratisation, a cocktail of selective neoliberalisation, which acted to reinforce Ben Ali's economic control (Hibou 2006), and repressive security practices were at the heart of his tight control on power (Heydemann 2007; Aliriza 2020). In contrast, I argue that post-transition Tunisia is characterised by certain novel legal and administrative structures, including increasingly pre-emptive ones, as well as repressive security practices, which seek to limit the space for contestation, not of a

particular individual or political regime, but of neoliberalism itself⁴⁶. Therefore, I argue, we can conceptualise contemporary Tunisia as a site of authoritarian neoliberalism as I explore in the next section.

3.1.2 Authoritarian neoliberalism in contemporary Tunisia

In this section, I will demonstrate that the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism is both relevant and revelatory in the post-transition context in Tunisia. Following the fall of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011, much emphasis was placed on political reforms such as writing a new constitution. Economic reforms, although perhaps not seen as the most important part of Tunisia's transition, were highlighted by both domestic and external actors as a significant aspect of reform agendas (IMF 2012). However, rather than representing a radical overhaul of economic policy in Tunisia, the Tunisian transition led to a continuation and consolidation of the process of neoliberalisation (Mossallem 2016; Jouili 2023). Despite recognition that neoliberal reforms pursued from 1986 onwards, in line with Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), had eroded the standards of living of many Tunisians (Bogaert 2013; Mossallem 2016), the claim emanating from IFIs, external actors and the majority of Tunisian political elites was that neoliberalism itself was not the problem. Rather it was suggested that it was Ben Ali's corrupt and oligarchic implementation of neoliberal policies which was the issue (Rijkers et al. 2014). Thus, the medicine prescribed for the 'ills' of neoliberalisation, was 'more and better neoliberalisation'⁴⁷ rather than radical and progressive overhaul of Tunisia's deeply European dependent economy (Ajl 2022; Jouili 2023) and its perpetual peripheral position within the global economic order (Aliriza 2020; Mullin 2023).

Scholars have argued that we can divide neoliberal reforms pursued in post-transition Tunisia into two main phases (Aliriza 2020; Ben Gahda 2022). The first phase, between 2012-2016, focused on 'liberalising the investment framework' and 'overhauling the financial and monetary sector' (Ben Gahda 2022, p.9). This included measures such as the devaluation of the dinar and the Central Bank Independence Act which significantly curtailed the Central Bank's powers removing its ability to finance government deficit⁴⁸. Furthermore, the act reduced policy makers' ability to use expansive monetary policy designating these powers to

⁴⁶ This is notwithstanding clear attempts by Kais Saied to present to construct the contemporary security state around his own claim to legitimacy as will be engaged with in the final chapter of this thesis

⁴⁷ Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2022

⁴⁸ Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2022

the feigned ‘independence’ of the Central Bank (Ben Gahda 2022; Mullin 2023). In reality, ‘the central bank is not independent from the demands of Western creditors nor the financial markets but is now less responsive to the population and the Tunisian government’⁴⁹.

Measures such as the Central Bank Independence Act, integrate neoliberalism into legal frameworks and thus act pre-empt its contestation (Bruff 2014; Bruff 2017). In other words, pursuing monetary and budgetary policy along neoliberal lines ceases to be a potential policy choice among many but rather becomes *the* single economic model which is merely implemented by supposedly impartial and independent technocrats (See Sotiris 2017; Fazi 2022). The significance of these changes is something I will expand upon when I discuss the devaluation of the dinar, debt and the role of external actors in section 3.2.

The second phase of reforms from 2016 onwards focused on austerity policies and fiscal ‘discipline’ (Aliriza 2020; Ben Gahda 2022). For example, as part of the Finance Law of 2018⁵⁰, the government introduced legislated limits on budget deficit (Gallien 2018) thus integrating austerity into Tunisia’s domestic legal frameworks as per authoritarian neoliberalisms globally (Tansel 2017, p.3) Legislated debt ceilings also act to pre-empt future contestation of neoliberal logic – thus solidifying austerity politics as de-facto semi-permanent elements of domestic legislation (Nahtigal and Bugaric 2012; Bruff 2014). In other words, because austerity has been enshrined into domestic law, future policies which deviate from it would require amending or repealing these laws. This, in turn, makes it harder for policy makers, both now and in the future, to pursue alternative policy frameworks. Between 2016 and 2020 other major reforms included the reduction of government spending on social services, including health and education, public sector redundancies and wage freezes, cuts to subsidies on staple goods and tax reforms which created a regressive tax burden on poorer families and small businesses (Mossallem 2016; Aliriza 2020; Ben Gahda 2022). All measures were taken in the name of creating a more attractive and competitive economy to foreign investors and reducing supposedly ‘unsustainable levels of government spending’⁵¹. Ironically, as I explore below, Tunisia’s public debt, which was only 42.45% of GDP in 2011, has increased massively, to between 91-99% of GDP⁵² in January 2023. This huge increase is because of the numerous and significant loan packages that the Tunisian

⁴⁹ Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2022

⁵⁰ as I explore further in section 3.4

⁵¹ Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2022

⁵² Estimates vary

government has taken out in this period as well as the failure of the associated neoliberal reforms to deliver jobs or growth⁵³.

In a similar fashion to the continuation and consolidation of neoliberalisation after 2011, although many attempts were made to drastically reform the security sector in the early years following the Tunisian transition (Santini 2018), repressive security practices and policies have either failed to disappear or even reemerged under the guise of the ‘state of emergency’, in place since 2015 (AmnestyInternational 2017b). The state of emergency and other supposedly ‘exceptional’ security measures were intended, as per the Constitution of 2014, to respond to major threats to national security (Tunisian Republic 2014). However, since 2015, we have seen the routine use of force and repressive security frameworks against social movements many of which have been overtly rejecting austerity measures, inequalities associated with neoliberalisation (Gallien 2018; Hamouchene 2018; Mbarek 2021; Siyada 2021) and extractive economic relations - something I explore throughout this thesis. The repression of such movements is significant to our analysis both in terms of understanding challenges to regime legitimacy in Tunisia as well as locating Tunisia as a site of contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism (see Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017; Bruff and Tansel 2019).

Furthermore, as per authoritarian neoliberalisms globally, the post-transition context has been defined by the roll back of the state in certain areas, such as monetary policy, coupled with the roll out of the state in other areas, such as counterterrorism and border control (Axster et al. 2021; Jouili 2023; Mullin 2023). For example, the security forces, so often relied upon to quell dissent of austerity and neoliberal reforms, have not faced the redundancies or budget cuts that we have seen in other areas of the public sector such as health and education (Republique Tunisienne Presidence du Gouvernement 2021). Indeed, government spending on both the armed forces and the ISF *skyrocketed* in this period⁵⁴ (Republique Tunisienne Presidence du Gouvernement 2021; Ben Gahda 2022). Indeed, by 2019, the Tunisian state spent 15% of its total budget on counterterrorism⁵⁵ (Blaise et al. 2019). Moreover, the Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent waves of protests that have swept across Tunisia since

⁵³ Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2022

⁵⁴ In 2010, Tunisia spent 1.4 per cent of its GDP on the military (Brooks and White 2022 p.135). However, by 2016, this had risen to 2.32 per cent (Bonhomme 2018).

⁵⁵ across both the MoI and the MoD

March 2020, have led to the introduction of even more expansive security policies and further reversion to the illiberal practices of the former regime (Jrad 2020b; Maryon 2021).

Furthermore, as I explore extensively in Chapter 6, since 2021, President Kais Saied has pursued incredibly authoritarian policies and power grabs while failing to deviate from the neoliberal consensus that has defined the post-2011 era. Consequently, one could argue that in contemporary Tunisia, authoritarian neoliberalism is becoming increasingly disciplinary and at times, violent.

In short, in the post-transition context, certain legal and administrative structures act to insulate neoliberalism from contestation, while more explicit coercive state practices clamp down on sites of resistance and contestation of neoliberalism that do emerge. It is for this reason that I characterise post-2011 Tunisia as a site of authoritarian neoliberalism as opposed to neoliberal authoritarianism associated with the former regime. One of the most significant particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism in post-2011 Tunisia is the significant influence of external actors in pursuing the neoliberal agenda in macroeconomic and budgetary policy areas (Jouili 2023; Mullin 2023) as well as their role in ensuring, through mechanisms of discipline and surveillance (Sotiris 2017), Tunisia's compliance with their reform agenda. Indeed, I argue that the sheer scale of their power and influence, although not depriving Tunisian actors entirely of their agency, means that we can theorise post-2011 Tunisia as a site of 'reduced sovereignty' (Sotiris 2017).

3.2 Reduced sovereignty and the omnipotence of the post-2011 '*bailleurs des fonds*'

The influence of external actors in pursuing, and arguably, imposing their neoliberal agenda upon Tunisian policy makers, is one of the key particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism in contemporary Tunisia. While extensive scholarship has suggested that the negative social consequences of neoliberal conditions attached to the SAPs contributed to the fall of the Ben Ali regime (Bogaert 2013), counter-intuitively, the post-transition environment did not see a radical overhaul of economic policy nor the role of external actors in shaping it (Mossallem 2016; Jouili 2023). Rather, since January 2011, the role and influence of external actors and international funding bodies in shaping domestic politics in Tunisia has only continued to increase (Mossallem 2016; Santini 2018).

This chapter seeks to avoid recreating perspectives which focus on the role of external actors in neoliberalisation and neglects the agency of domestic political actors. Indeed, if we are to understand contemporary neoliberalism in the Global South, we must go beyond the prism of analysing SAPs of the 1980s (Bruff and Tansel 2019). Across the Global South, including in Tunisia, domestic political and economic elites have long worked in collusion with, rather than in opposition to, external forces of capitalist accumulation (Thomas 2012; Ajl et al. 2020). Nonetheless conditional loan agreements remain fundamental to understanding the increasingly illiberal manifestations of neoliberalism globally (Hecan 2016; Sotiris 2017; Aliriza 2020) as well as in the contemporary Tunisian case (Santini 2018; Aliriza 2020; Jouili 2023; Maryon 2023; Mullin 2023). Indeed, in the Tunisian case, such mechanisms are particularly stark and thus significant to our understanding of authoritarian neoliberalism both empirically and conceptually. In the words of Max Gallien ‘it’s really hard to think of a country where government economic policy as a bargaining act between labour and (international) capital is as explicit and visible as in Tunisia’ (2022). Thus, we must engage with external actors in contemporary Tunisia because of they speak to the empirical particularities of the Tunisian case as well contributing to important theoretical discussions surrounding authoritarian neoliberalism.

3.2.1 Post-transition assistance packages and the demands of the donor cartel

As alluded to in Max Gallien’s quote above, one of the most significant aspects of external intervention in post-transition Tunisia has been a plethora of very large financial assistance packages provided by IFIs, International Organisations and bilateral partners. Tunisia agreed its first post-revolution finance package with the IMF in June 2013 (Hecan 2016, p.766; Mossallem 2016). This ‘Standby Package’ was worth over worth 1.74B USD and would be the first of several rounds of relief packages from the IMF (Hecan 2016, p.766). The official story goes that loans were provided to help Tunisia navigate initial instability associated with revolution, regional insecurity connected to the ‘failure of the Arab Spring’ in neighbouring states and to finance reforms needed to ‘transition’ from autocracy to democracy (IMF 2013).

The financial assistance packages provided by the international community, such as the IMF’s Standby Package, came with ‘conditionality in all but name’⁵⁶. Indeed, despite the subtle differences in these loan agreements to that of the 1980s and the IMF’s attempts to

⁵⁶ Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2022

move away from the negative connotations of the SAPs (Hanieh 2015, p.14)⁵⁷, they were made on the understanding that Tunisia would implement the ‘same neoliberal agenda and macro-stabilisation measures pursued under the Ben Ali regime’ (Dalacoura 2016, p.78). Significantly, the Standby package mandated and routinely reviewed the progress of Tunisia in line with certain ‘recommended’ reforms. Therefore, disbursements of the next ‘*tranche*’ of finance or agreement to deliver another entirely separate financial assistance package on top of those already agreed, has systematically been conditional on Tunisia meeting the reform agenda outlined by external actors since 2011 (Chandoul 2015). By September 2015, 1.41B of the 1.74B USD had been disbursed in several releases following periodic reviews by the IMF to ensure reforms and progress was being made (Hecan 2016, p.775). Running parallel to this, Tunisia and the IMF signed another package, known as an Extended Fund Facility (EFF) in May 2016. This package was worth over 2.9B USD over a 4-year period (Hecan 2016, p.775). The disbursements of these waves of finance suggest that Tunisia was deemed to have overarchingly complied with the demands of the *bailleurs des fonds* in this period. Indeed, according to the IMF, between 2016-2020, Tunisia ‘made important gains in reducing macroeconomic vulnerabilities such as reducing the fiscal deficit to about 6% of GDP in 2016-17 to 3.9% of GDP in 2019, mostly on the back of tax policy and administration measures’ (IMF 2020). Thus, it is clear that the demands of external actors have acted to shape and constrain the macroeconomic and budgetary policies of successive governments in Tunisia who have overarchingly complied and implemented neoliberal reforms demanded by external actors since 2011.

Vitaly, many of the other external actors with whom Tunisia negotiated financial assistance packages in the initial years following the revolution explicitly integrated the IMF’s reform agenda into their own post-transition assistance packages. For example, according to the European Commission, each instalment of the EU’s Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) program to Tunisia, worth over 1B EUR by June 2019, ‘is also conditional on the existence of a non-precautionary credit arrangement with the IMF and a satisfactory track-record of implementing IMF programme reforms’ (EU Commission 2019). In other words, the disbursement of each ‘*tranche*’ of the EU financial assistance to Tunisia is conditional upon the implementation of the IMF’s reform agenda. Even more recently, the BRICs Contingent

⁵⁷ ‘IFIs have attempted to utilize the post-2011 moment to maintain the essential characteristics of past practice, while employing a language that professes a new course and sympathy with the social justice goals of the uprisings’ (Hanieh, 2016, p.14)

Reserve Arrangement, which presents itself as an alternate to Bretton Woods institutions and is being actively explored as an option by Tunisian policy makers, makes it clear that 70% ‘of the allowable quota for each country is contingent upon reforms negotiated with the IMF’ (Nafti 2023).

Thus, I argue, the coordination of various financial assistance packages around the reform agenda of the IMF increased the pressure to implement the mandated reforms, as failing to do so would delay or prevent the disbursement of not only the next tranche of IMF funding, but also other financial assistance agreed with partners such as the EU. The coordination of financial assistance, and reform agendas, through explicit aspects of financial assistance packages as well as the G7+ Deauville Partnership⁵⁸ has earned them the nickname of the ‘donor cartel’ in Tunisia. This ‘donor cartel’ it is argued ‘has been the corner stone of economic policies adopted in the transition period’ (Chandoul 2015). Therefore, terms imposed by financial assistance packages, namely austerity policies and neoliberal reforms, have translated into de-facto permanent policies that make alternative economic models virtually impossible (Hecan 2016; Mossallem 2016).

Fundamentally, there have been occasions when Tunisian policy makers have been compelled to pursue policies they did not wish to do, or to abandon policies they had sought to implement because they did not comply with the demands of external actors or the terms of these agreements. For example, in June 2021, the Tunisian government increased the price of sugar from 1150 to 1400 millimes per kilo (Azaiez 2021). This increase in the price of sugar ran in direct opposition to the government’s previous commitment, as per the January 2021 budget, to maintain the price of sugar (Azaiez 2021). Sources suggest the government’s abandonment of its commitment to freeze the price of sugar was a response to the IMF’s demands more concrete action after being initially unimpressed by Tunisian policy makers’ proposed reforms in secret negotiations for further financial assistance in the summer of 2021 (Azaiez 2021). This is just one example among many when Tunisian macroeconomic and budgetary policy has been fundamentally shaped by the demands of external funding bodies since 2011. Such implicit and explicit constraints on the ability of elected officials to elaborate macroeconomic and budgetary policy of their choice is one of the current

⁵⁸ For more on the Deauville Partnership see Chandoul, J. (2015).

manifestations of ‘reduced sovereignty’ (Sotiris 2017) that characterises authoritarian neoliberalism in post-2011 Tunisia.

3.2.2 Mechanisms of discipline, surveillance & reduced sovereignty

Furthermore, loan agreements between Tunisia, IFIs and other external actors come with regular monitoring, reports and rounds of disbursements that, I argue, act as mechanisms of surveillance and discipline associated with authoritarian neoliberalism. Sotiris (2017) asserts, with reference to the Greek Debt Crisis, that such mechanisms serve to monitor that neoliberal macroeconomic and budgetary policy is being implemented in the way in which these external actors demand. In the Tunisian case, these same mechanisms allow external actors to refuse or delay the release of funds in instances where Tunisian officials are deemed to have not implemented the mandated reforms. For example, in December 2019, the IMF withheld disbursement of 1.2B USD to Tunisia because it claimed the government had not yet complete certain required reforms (ArabWeekly 2020). The Governor of the Tunisian Central Bank lamented that Tunisia had already ‘accomplished many of the reforms agreed upon and other reforms are being completed’ (ArabWeekly 2020). In various interviews conducted in Tunis in January of 2020, it was suggested that this particularly harsh stance was, at least partially, a message of intent to the newly elected President at the time that he should not contest the neoliberal agenda of the *bailleurs des fonds* and the political consensus, at least at elite levels, that had been constructed around it thus far.

Further evidence of rounds of disbursements and reports acting as mechanisms of discipline and surveillance came in February of 2019, when the IMF delayed a timetabled disbursement of funding after the government raised public sector salaries, violating the conditions of the IMF Standby Package agreement (Aliriza 2020). The government was eventually forced to abandon its decision to raise public sector salaries. Shortly after the U-turn was announced, the next tranche of finance was disbursed (Aliriza 2020). The fact that Tunisian policy makers have faced ‘consequences’ and have even had to reverse policy decisions because of the demands of external actors, which are enforced through mechanisms of discipline and surveillance, as shown here, demonstrates the sheer scale and influence of such bodies. It is for this reason that I argue that we can qualify Tunisia as being characterised by reduced sovereignty in such areas. However, it is also an example of the way in which Tunisia’s entrapment in a circle of debt further plays into the demands of external actors in the sense

that Tunisia can only access the further credit it requires to meet its obligations if it is deemed to have delivered on the reforms demanded by external actors.

3.2.3 Tunisia's debt trap and reduced sovereignty

As alluded to above, skyrocketing levels of sovereign debt are themselves a key factor in the power and influence of external actors and associated discussions of reduced sovereignty in contemporary Tunisia. Initially, following the revolution in early 2011, many called for the cancelling of Tunisia's debts which had been amassed during the rule of Ben Ali (Aliriza 2020)⁵⁹. However, this did not happen (Aliriza 2020). In contrast, post-transition loan agreements, coupled with economic stagnation, have seen Tunisia's sovereign debt skyrocket (Aliriza 2020). Indeed, the Finance Law of January 2021 projected that public debt as a percentage of GDP would reach over 90% by the end of 2021 (Republique Tunisienne Presidence du Gouvernement 2021), having risen from approximately 40% of GDP in 2010 (Aliriza 2020). Some unofficial figures placed that debt nearer 99% of GDP in December 2022⁶⁰. Furthermore, in January 2023, it was suggested by economists that Tunisia was the second most likely country globally, after Columbia, to default on its debts⁶¹.

Significantly, debt further adds to the inability of Tunisian policy makers to pursue alternative economic models in Tunisia as it conditions, through dependency on external credit, their compliance with neoliberal reform agendas. Chandoul (2015) writes 'successive governments have increasingly lost their ability to manoeuvre (e.g. policy space) on political and economic decisions because of this spiralling debt' (p.2). Monetary policy and the devaluation of the Tunisian dinar is an example of the constraints under which Tunisian political elites are operating, not only due to the conditions of loan agreements but, also, the vicious circle of debt in which these loan agreements have captured Tunisia⁶². If the government 'wants to use monetary policy to reduce unemployment and create jobs, then it needs the approval of the central bank and these institutions... because of that Tunisia is now completely dependent on loans from these institutions...'⁶³. This quote demonstrates the

⁵⁹ Aliriza (2020) writes 'In March 2011, the European civil society network Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM) coordinated a letter calling for the 'immediate suspension of EU debt repayment by Tunisia (with frozen interests) and an auditing of the debt'. 70 Tunisian CSOs and EU MEPs signed this letter calling for the end of Tunisia's debt repayments, but it was rejected.

⁶⁰ Interview with Tunisian investigative journalist, December 2021

⁶¹ Interview with Tunisian economist, December 2022

⁶² For more on Tunisian monetary policy and the devaluation of the dinar see Aliriza (2020)

⁶³ Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2021

influence of external actors, such as IFIs, in constraining the ability of Tunisian policy makers to elaborate their own macroeconomic and budgetary policy.

Faced with pre-existing economic woes, the stark economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and spiralling levels of debt, by mid-2021 the Tunisian government was entering into negotiations with IFIs for even more loans⁶⁴. In several interviews conducted for this thesis, it was suggested that the purpose of these loans was primarily, if not exclusively, to service the payments on Tunisia's existing debts as opposed to fund social programmes or development policies. One participant stated 'Tunisia is now completely dependent on loans from these institutions... Tunisia is in... you could say a debt spiral...'⁶⁵. The level of sovereign debt placed further constraints on the ability of Tunisian policy makers to manoeuvre in terms of elaborating economic and budgetary policies of their choice to prevent defaulting on their debts, or the devastating consequences of having their debts downgraded by ratings agencies⁶⁶. Consequently, Tunisian elites are almost compelled to enter into new loan agreements and to put in place the reforms mandated by these all-powerful external actors. Thus, be it through donor demands, mechanisms of discipline and surveillance or spiralling debt, all of which can be understood as comprising the spectrum of strategies that insulate neoliberalism from contestation (Tansel 2017), successive Tunisian governments have experienced limitations on their sovereignty.

Existing research in terms of the research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism has outlined problematic trends in terms of external actors pursuing, and arguably mandating, neoliberalisation in the post crisis context (Bruff 2014; Sotiris 2017). However, in Tunisia, a global southern state and former colonised nation, the significance of global market forces in constraining the actions of a supposedly sovereign post-colonial state becomes all the more significant. Indeed, it has been argued that the post uprising 'neoliberal redeployment', explored in this chapter, is merely a contemporary re-actualisation of Tunisia's subordination within the system of US-led imperialism – presently implemented through the Bretton Woods institutions (Jouili 2023 p.195). Such discussions go beyond the scope of this chapter's

⁶⁴ Interview with Tunisian investigative journalist, June 2021

⁶⁵ Interview with Tunisian journalist, July 2021

⁶⁶ In July 2021, Fitch's downgraded Tunisia debt to 'B', in October Moody's also downgraded Tunisia to Caa1 citing the main reasoning as 'weakening governance increases uncertainty regarding the government's capacity to implement fiscal and economic reforms'. See: https://www.moody.com/research/Moodys-downgrades-Tunisias-ratings-to-Caa1-maintains-negative-outlook--PR_456360

analysis' of the particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia since 2011. However, it is clear that we cannot untangle contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism and the role of external actors in shaping it from Tunisia's history of (post)colonial capitalist exploitation (Jouili 2023; Mullin 2023) as well as its historical and continued perpetually peripheral position within the system of global (racial) capitalism (Aliriza 2019; Robinson 2019).

In this section, I have demonstrated that authoritarian neoliberalism in post-transition Tunisia is characterised by unprecedented levels of influence of external actors. Indeed, I have argued that external actors are so powerful in Tunisia, particularly in terms of pursuing their economic objectives, that we can understand Tunisia as a context of reduced sovereignty. In the following section, however, I will explore the agency of Tunisian domestic political elites, who despite having to operate under significant external constraints, have a complex and, at times, contradictory relationship with neoliberalisation.

3.3 Agents of neoliberalisation or stuck between a rock and a hard place?

Despite the aforementioned discussions of reduced sovereignty and the constraints on Tunisian policy makers, particularly in terms of macroeconomic and budgetary policy, it would be wrong to suggest that domestic political elites are entirely devoid of agency. Indeed, Mustapha Jouili argues that it is only through the 'complicity of the ruling classes' that neoliberal forces were able to 'hijack' and 'tame' Tunisia's revolutionary movement (2023 p.5). Accordingly, I engage with the consensus constructed at elite levels surrounding neoliberalisation and seek to understand the role of Tunisian domestic political elites, in partnership with external forces, in sustaining authoritarian neoliberalism – thus speaking to this thesis' broader discussions regarding the *global* entanglements of neoliberal security states.

3.3.1 The 'neoliberal consensus'

Post-transition Tunisia has been defined by a constructed 'consensus', at least at elite levels, surrounding many aspects of government policy; including an acceptance of the neoliberal agenda of the *bailleurs des fonds*. Between January 2011 and July 2023, Tunisia has witnessed the creation and disintegration of many different governments, the reign of ten Prime Ministers, the election or appointment of five different Presidents and the creation, rise and often disappearance of a *huge* number of political parties. However, none of these experiences have led to a significant challenge of the neoliberal status quo in Tunisia

(Dalacoura 2016; Rousselin 2016), nor contestation of the influence of external actors in shaping Tunisian macroeconomic and budgetary policy⁶⁷. Scholarly perspectives differ on whether Tunisian political elites are complicit agents of neoliberalism (Dalacoura 2016; Rousselin 2016) or whether they are simply stuck between a rock and hard place; disliking the terms of the loan agreements with external partners but fundamentally dependent on these loans (Yerkes and Ben Yahmed 2019).

Nonetheless, it is notable that two of the main political parties that initially dominated politics during post-transition period, Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, are perceived to have, at least partially, incorporated neoliberalism into their partisan ideologies (Dalacoura 2016; Rousselin 2016). Nidaa Tounes is heavily tied to the former party of Ben Ali, the RDC (Rassemblement Démocratique Constitutionnelle), whose officials benefitted greatly from the kleptocratic neoliberalisation under the Ben Ali regime (Goldberg 2014). In a similar fashion, Ennahda also advocated the economic status quo, albeit within the discourse of the need for a political consensus to navigate potential economic crisis (Merone 2015; Dalacoura 2016; Rousselin 2016). Although political Islamism has historically been associated with notions of social justice, the ideological path of Ennahda has been increasingly characterised by scholars as one of ‘pious neoliberalism’ (Dalacoura 2016). During its time in exile, Ennahda was fundamentally transformed into a more conservative middle class political force (Merone 2015; Dalacoura 2016; Rousselin 2016). Furthermore, while President Kais Saied’s dissolution of the Tunisian Parliament in September 2021 acted to undercut the role of political parties, his appointment of a technocratic government in October 2021, spearheaded by Prime Minister Najla Bouden Romdhane, who previously worked on a World Bank project deemed to pursue the neoliberalisation of the Tunisian higher education sector, is perceived to maintain the status quo. In Chapter 6, I will elaborate Kais Saied’s complex and contradictory relationship with neoliberalism to a greater extent. Fundamentally, despite his undercutting of political parties and populist rhetoric, he has not deviated, at least in terms of economic policy, from the so-called Tunisian consensus.

Regardless of their intrinsic ideological positions on economic policy, successive Tunisian policy makers in the post-transition context have been willing, or compelled, to pursue neoliberalisation (Mossallem 2016). Arguably, one of the ways in which political elites in

⁶⁷ Interview with journalist, May 2021

Tunisia were able to insulate themselves from the negative political consequences of unpopular economic policies was because of the power sharing nature of Tunisian governments since 2011 (Hecan 2016, p.776; Rousselin 2016)⁶⁸ meaning such policies were shared decisions between several political forces. As one international diplomat once noted with reference to post-transition Tunisia, ‘if every decision is made by consensus, it allows political leaders to avoid responsibility for taking decisions’ (Yerkes and Ben Yahmed 2019, p.5)⁶⁹.

Furthermore, Tunisian political elites, at times, further ‘insulated themselves from the consequences of their unpopular neoliberal policies and austerity measures by leaning on the notion that they had been imposed by external funding bodies rather than being policy choices of domestic political elites’⁷⁰. Of course, the picture differs between different parties and different political figures. For example, there have been vocal critics of the neoliberal reform agenda including significant Parliamentary resistance during the rounds of talks with the IMF in April 2021 (Sadiki 2021). Nonetheless, post-transition economic policy, as well as formal party politics has been characterised by a neoliberal consensus and status quo. Indeed, even the UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail), the largest and most influential trade union in Tunisia, is ‘seen as having been co-opted in many different ways by the regime... most notably it is seen as being co-opted by neoliberal framework’⁷¹. This quote demonstrates the depth of the perception of neoliberal consensus in contemporary Tunisia because even the largest trade union is perceived to operate within the neoliberal paradigm. While the UGTT has voiced its opposition to certain reform measures, particularly in terms of public sector redundancies as well as reducing food subsidies in recent months (Bessaleh 2023), they are deemed to generally accept, rather than contest, that neoliberal reforms are both necessary and desirable in Tunisia⁷². This demonstrates that current political elites both in power, in opposition, and within the third sector operate, to a lesser or greater extent, within the existing neoliberal consensus (Jouili 2023).

⁶⁸ In July 2022, a new constitution was approved via referendum changing these electoral laws and consolidating the position of the executive

⁶⁹ Given to the electoral system in Tunisia between 2011 and July 2022, it was always unlikely that a majority one-party government could be formed

⁷⁰ Interview with Tunisian politician, May 2020

⁷¹ Interview with prominent political commentator, July 2021

⁷² Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2022

It is worth noting here that consensus, itself, is something which takes on a particular meaning in the Tunisian context. Various scholars, international organisations and key stakeholders in Tunisia emphasise the significance of the consensus in post-transition party politics in Tunisia (Grewal and Hamid 2020). The ‘success’ of the Tunisian transition is often lauded for its consensus and compromise or was before Saied’s rise to power. However, the ‘myth of consensus’ has ignored the presence of very real class cleavages and socio-economic grievances of Tunisians. Thus, I argue the post-transition context in Tunisia was marked by a neoliberal consensus between the major political forces but not amongst the people. This political consensus insulated, or at least has aimed to insulate, the reform agenda and the neoliberal economic status quo from contestation.

3.3.2 Contesting neoliberal consensus

Given the constructed neoliberal consensus, at least among political and economic elites, contestation of neoliberalism has taken place mostly outside of formal politics (Jouili 2023). Based upon interviews conducted for this thesis, I argue that there are several separate and yet intertwined dynamics of political contestation of authoritarian neoliberalism in contemporary Tunisia. It is not the purposes of this chapter to discuss sites of political contestation, all of which merit further research, in great depth. However, it is important to recognise, as part of our analysis of authoritarian neoliberalism in contemporary Tunisia, that there are sites of contestation of the neoliberal political consensus. Indeed, as Tansel (2017) argues, ‘we have to explore at which sites and areas neoliberalism is most fraught with contradictions, cracks and fissures’ (p.2). Furthermore, given this thesis’ focus on security politics and its relation to authoritarian neoliberalism, we must analyse heavy handed security ‘crackdowns’ on sites of contestation. This is because contestation and resistance can be productive of authoritarian neoliberalism in the sense that the state intensifies its use of coercive power to quash sites of resistance that emerge and thus guarantee societal compliance with the neoliberal project. In short, the more resistance the neoliberal project faces, the more it relies upon coercive state power to quell that resistance.

One of the clearest sites of contestation that has emerged in post-transition era is what some scholars have labelled ‘street politics’. Street politics refers to non-traditional forms of political participation such as protests and civil unrest. Of course, in the initial post-revolution context – in which sovereignty was temporarily seized by the people – street politics is the central articulation of popular sovereignty. However, with the establishment of

a new political regime and its attempts to articulate a narrative of legitimacy, you would expect ‘street politics’ to be channelled into more traditional forms of political participation. However, this has not been the case. Over a decade later, post-transition Tunisia remains characterised by near constant protests⁷³, clashes with the forces of state security and frequent riots. The perpetual significance of ‘street politics’, can be attributed to party politics’ failure to engage with and articulate political discourses that speak to class cleavages in Tunisia (Merone 2015). Political Islamism, for example, has adopted a conservative middle class political identity grounded in neoliberal ideals whilst simultaneously stating that class divides are something foreign and irrelevant to the Arab World and imported from Europe in efforts to delegitimise them⁷⁴ (Merone 2015). One of the consequences of the political parties’ inability to articulate and develop class-based political identity, is that street politics has become one of the only forms of political participation for those that want to contest the neoliberal consensus that operates within formal party politics⁷⁵ (Rousselin 2016). Thus, in the post-transition political environment, protests, riots, and mass gatherings have become the so-called street politics through which marginalised social groups, such as those from disadvantaged urban areas and economically marginalised regions, express class identity and contest neoliberal consensus (Merone 2015; Gallien 2018). ‘If you push reforms to the point where people are so destitute, they believe the only way to engage is to protest, then your reforms are not sustainable. [...] Blaming protestors for prolonging the crisis is the same as blaming the “canary in the coalmine”’ (Gallien 2018). This demonstrates the way in which many Tunisians, particularly in deprived areas, feel that protesting and street politics are the only way in which they can contest austerity and what they deem as neoliberal imperial forces (Jouili 2023).

Furthermore, protest of regional disparities and rejection of neoliberal policies which do not benefit certain marginalised regions as much as urban developed areas, have become another site of political contestation in post-transition Tunisia. The so-called ‘neoliberal consensus’ is associated with the middle-class Tunis-based elite across the political spectrum (Dalacoura 2016). Tunisia’s marginalised regions have not benefited from neoliberalisation under Ben Ali nor the neoliberal consensus of the post-transition period. For example, in 2015, rates of

⁷³ A report by the Tunisian Social Observatory found that there were over 6000 protests in the first half of 2021 (cited in Jouili 2023, p.205)

⁷⁴ Interview with Tunisian journalist in January 2020

⁷⁵ Interview with Tunisian journalist in January 2020

poverty in regions of central western Tunisia were twice as high as the national average (Meddeb 2021). By 2017, unemployment in certain marginalised regions was almost double the national average (Waszkewitz 2018). Protest movements and civil disobedience in marginalised regions of Tunisia, I argue, are one of the most significant sites of contestation of authoritarian neoliberalism, and the neoliberal consensus in Tunisia.

One example of this is the Kamour movement in Tataouine which occupied and blockaded an oil and gas facility in the region in 2017 in protest at the way in which the resource rich region was often left out of development policies and did not see the benefits of its extracted resources (Meddeb 2021). This unrest and direct action culminated in the government backing down and agreeing a specific regional development programme to resolve the impasse in 2017 (Meddeb 2021). However, this plan has been heavily criticised for its failings. Indeed, activists associated with the Kamour movement assert that despite the region's resources, which continue to enrich economic Tunis-based elites and European transnational corporations, it remains chronically underdeveloped⁷⁶. Furthermore, following the aforementioned clashes with the ISF in 2017, security services in this area have been reinforced under the guise of counterterrorism and border management⁷⁷. Activists I spoke to suggested that reinforced patrols and equipment of security forces in this area were, in fact, far more about preventing further disruption to precious energy resources than about these security aims - demonstrating the complex entanglements between extractive capitalist accumulation and mechanisms of discipline and control. In December 2022, Tarek Haddad, leading figure of Kamour movement, was arrested for 'disruption of the peace' leading to further rioting demonstrating the persistence of this movement and its contestation of the neoliberal consensus (MiddleEastMonitor 2022b). Although intricate details of the Kamour movement are not the focus of this chapter, it is vital to demonstrate that these non-traditional forms of political participation have become the main avenue for contestation of neoliberalism in contemporary Tunisia. In short, 'these massive protest movements rejecting partisan politics reflect the incapacity of the country's post-2011 political elites to effectively address regional socioeconomic grievances or even put them on the top of the agenda' (Meddeb 2021).

⁷⁶ Interview with researcher specialising in regional inequalities in Tunisia, December 2022

⁷⁷ Interview with researcher specialising in regional inequalities in Tunisia, December 2022

While I cannot engage in extensive discussions and analysis of these sites of political contestation of neoliberalism, it has been important to demonstrate that such sites exist. Notwithstanding such contestation, the reality is that the contemporary Tunisian political economy is defined by neoliberalisation and austerity integrated in illiberal and disciplinarian frameworks which pre-empt and punish contestation. Nowhere is this clearer than in the increasingly repressive response to sites of contestation which do emerge. Indeed, those associated with the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism have noted the way in which resistance and contestation of neoliberalism can, in fact, be productive of intensified mechanisms of discipline and control of neoliberalism (Bruff 2014; De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Tansel 2017).

3.3.3 Repressing contestation of neoliberalism

The significance of the relationship between contestation and intensified mechanisms of control and discipline, as noted above, means that we must analyse the use of coercive state power to repress contestation if we are to fully understand authoritarian neoliberalism in contemporary Tunisia. This is because whilst economic policy as well as legal and administrative structures act to insulate neoliberalism and pre-empt its contestation, repressive security practices seek to marginalise and discipline those that do contest and resist (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). Indeed, one cannot understand neoliberalism's truly disciplinarian nature and durability without engaging with direct forms of repression (Tansel 2017; Axster et al. 2021).

Furthermore, this thesis' detailed discussion of the security policies and practices which act to limit neoliberalism from contestation forms part of its contribution to existing theoretical discussions surrounding authoritarian neoliberalism. Those working on authoritarian neoliberalism tend to come from the IPE subdisciplines of IR and, nonetheless have emphasised the role repressive security practices play in insulating neoliberalism from contestation (Axster et al. 2021). Regrettably, I do not think that Critical Security Studies scholars have capitalised on this illuminating concept to the same extent. Indeed, this chapter in which I highlight the links between neoliberal deregulation, rising everyday insecurities experienced by Tunisians in the post-transition period and the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state, emphasises the salience of grappling with political economy in security studies research. Furthermore, through this thesis' discussions of authoritarian neoliberalism, security politics and regime legitimacy, I seek to make both a theoretical and

empirical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. This is because illiberal and repressive security practices emerge as a way in which policy makers attempt to assert Tunisia's statehood, in its traditional Weberian sense, in the context of reduced sovereignty in areas such as macroeconomic and budgetary policy (Lister 2019). This will be elaborated as greater length in the following chapter.

Thus, the recourse to coercive state power is a means through which the authoritarian neoliberal security state seeks to insulate itself from contestation. While counterterrorism policies and emergency coronavirus legislation, adopted since 2015, were elaborated to respond to a particular threat(s), my research suggests that these supposedly exceptional policy frameworks and illicit security practices have come to define security politics more broadly. This includes the policing of social movements, unrest and popular protests in the post-transition context. Tunisian security services have been increasingly heavy-handed with those protesting neoliberal economic reforms and economic hardship. For example, in January 2021, Tunisian security services were criticised for their exceptionally heavy-handed response to a wave of protests at worsening economic conditions, including the arrest of over 600 people (BBCNews 2021). Critics were particularly vocal about the extra-judicial detention, abuse and even alleged torture of minors, the vast majority of whom were aged between 14-15 years old (AmnestyInternational 2021). Many of those protesting come from deprived urban suburbs of cities such as Tunis and were protesting lack of opportunities, rising costs of living and their constant harassment by state security forces. This is just one example of many occasions when security services have responded to social movements and unrest aimed at contesting the neoliberal policy agenda in an extremely repressive way something which I explore again in the case study below and throughout Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this thesis.

3.4 Case study: The Finance Law of January 2018

In the previous three sections of this chapter, I have explored the particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism in post-2011 Tunisia. Throughout, I have shown that legal and administrative frameworks function hand in hand with more coercive mechanisms such as repressive security practices to limit contestation of neoliberalism. In other words, this refers to the mechanisms which comprise the spectrum of strategies that seek to insulate neoliberalism from contestation (Tansel 2017, p.6). An example this spectrum of strategies functioning in unison to enforce and insulate neoliberalism, as well as to quash any societal

resistance of it, is the period surrounding the Finance Law of January 2018. This law aimed to bring the budget deficit down to below 5% of GDP⁷⁸. It was announced alongside another round of austerity as well as VAT increases and a new additional social security contribution. Max Gallien, writing at the time, argued ‘the new law is shaped by the accumulation of economic policies that have characterised post-revolutionary Tunisia – mainly shaped by the demands of the IMF’ (2018). This illuminates further how external actors have shaped and conditioned the Tunisian government’s economic policy as explored in section 3.2 representing tangible constraints on the sovereignty of the state, and even future governments, in certain areas. Furthermore, it is arguable that the cap on budget deficit as a percentage of GDP represents a legal framework that seeks to legislate austerity in permanent aspects of legal frameworks as associated with authoritarian neoliberalisms globally⁷⁹ (Nahtigal and Bugaric 2012; Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017).

Tunisians, already faced with a cost-of-living crisis in January 2018, were particularly critical of this law believing yet another round of austerity would only worsen the situation⁸⁰. Because of this, there were peaceful political demonstrations with some pockets of violence (Gallien 2018). These protests were notable for their geographic spread taking place in 16 of the 24 governorates of Tunisia (Hamouchene 2018). Protests rejecting the Finance Law in January 2018 became significant sites of contestation of the growing neoliberal consensus in Tunisia and anger at the level of influence of external actors⁸¹. Indeed, ‘social unrest has expressed itself most directly against the austerity conditions that have come with the IMF loan in January 2018, when a new budget law with VAT increases and subsidy cuts sparked protests across the country’ (Aliriza 2020, p.p.40). In a similar vein, Hamza Hamouchene, claimed the protests ‘demonstrate that Tunisia is a cauldron of popular resistance against neo-colonial attacks on the country’s sovereignty (Hamouchene 2018). The security services were especially quick to crackdown on these demonstrations. By January 11 over 200 people had been arrested (Gallien 2018) with the security forces deploying water cannons and tear gas. These episodes of violence followed unrest seen the previous

⁷⁸ Significantly, the 5% ceiling enshrined in the Finance Law of January 2018 was part of a trend of progressive reduction which would see the legislated debt ceiling later reduced to 3% as part of an agreement between Chahed government and the IMF in 2019 (Ben Gahda 2022, p.9)

⁷⁹ Scholars have noted the way in which legal structures, such as these, are often used to codify neoliberal economy policies into domestic legal framework and thus pre-empt future contestation of neoliberalism (Nahtigal and Bugaric 2012; Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017)

⁸⁰ Interview with Tunisian academic, May 2020

⁸¹ Various interviews conducted in January of 2020, Tunis

week over price and tax rises in the 2018 budget which sought to meet international donors' demands (Burke and Cordall 2018) which had resulted in some 800 arrests throughout the country and in one demonstrator's death (France24 2018). Essentially, the government and security services used repressive security practices to crackdown on these protests which sought to challenge austerity and neoliberal policies enshrined in the Finance Law of 2018⁸².

Thus, the case study of the Finance Law of 2018 is demonstrative of our discussions of authoritarian neoliberalism in post-2011 Tunisia in terms of; the influence of external actors in shaping Tunisian economic policy, reduced sovereignty, street politics as a site of contestation and finally, the role of illiberal security practices in repressing sites of resistance that do emerge, as explored in sections 3.1-3.3 of this Chapter. However, it is also an example of the way in which socioeconomic challenges faced by Tunisians since 2011, often associated with the fallout of neoliberal reforms, has undermined successive post-transition governments' attempts to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy in the post-transition period – the significance of which I explore below in the final section of this chapter.

3.5 Reconfiguring legitimacy in an age of authoritarian neoliberalism

In this chapter, I have established that contemporary Tunisia is defined by authoritarian neoliberalism. I have also established that authoritarian neoliberalism, associated with external actors, undermines the sovereignty of the state in several policy areas namely in terms of macroeconomic and budgetary policy. I have shown that the Tunisian neoliberal security state is increasingly reliant on the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state to repress contestation of neoliberalism as Tunisians, deprived of formal political channels with which to contest the 'neoliberal consensus', articulate their frustrations through 'street politics'. Having established this, I argue that we must explore the questions that the negative social consequences of authoritarian neoliberalism pose to the legitimacy of successive post-transition governments. It is only within the context of both reduced sovereignty and eroding regime legitimacy that we can fully conceptualise competing discourses surrounding 'securing the state' as an attempt to reconfigure claims to legitimacy in the post-transition period - the central discussion of this thesis. In short, in this section, I argue that faced with the inability to provide for the basic needs and security of its citizens, due to aggressive and

⁸² Interviews conducted in Tunis, January 2020

failing neoliberalisation, the Tunisian neoliberal security state relies upon the articulation of ‘securing the state’, in its traditional ‘Weberian’ sense, to articulate its claims to legitimacy.

Scholars have long argued that the legitimacy and durability of post-colonial authoritarian regimes in Tunisia were based on an implicit social contract in which the population accepted certain levels of repression in return for the guarantee of social protection and a basic standard of living (Camau and Geisser 2003; Hibou 2006). This often manifested itself in high levels of public sector employment, generous social programmes, and state subsidies of basic goods (Camau and Geisser 2003; Hibou 2006). The deregulation of these programmes, in line with the global neoliberal consensus and conditional loan programmes pursued in Tunisia from 1986, made it increasingly difficult to guarantee the economic security of vast segments of the population as previously (Bogaert 2013; Mossallem 2016). The inability to provide economic security to most of the population, while Ben Ali’s inner circle amassed vast quantities of wealth, was one of the major contributing factors for the fall of the Ben Ali regime (Bogaert 2013)⁸³. Indeed, the slogan of the revolution ‘Work, Freedom, National Dignity’, it is argued, demonstrates the economic motivations of the revolutionaries (Aliriza 2020).

It is therefore, within this politico-historical context that we must understand the attempts, and I would argue failures, of successive the post-transition governments to reconfigure the foundations of regime legitimacy in Tunisia. Of course, the revolution of 2011 and the political transition that followed it demanded the reconfiguration of the legitimacy upon which the regime was founded. If the inability for the former regime to guarantee a basic level of economic security was one of the keys causes of its downfall, then reconfiguring the legitimacy of the new regime would require tackling these economic and social concerns. But rather, economic issues in Tunisia coupled with societal displeasure at the neoliberal consensus has translated into a growing mistrust of the political elite since 2011. For example, when I asked a prominent Tunisian journalist and political commentator why post-transition governments have struggled to reconfigure regime legitimacy in the eyes of the population he replied:

⁸³ In his 2013 article, Koenraad Bogaert argues that we must engage with three decades of neoliberalism and neoliberalisation in North Africa to contextualise the Arab Revolts.

*'I think a large part of it is because of neoliberal policies and economics policies... There are other reasons also... I would say that primarily it has been economic issues which led to the failure of the revolution and that's what people talk about.... ...Unemployment has not got better, if anything, it's gotten worse. Inflation has got much worse – because one of the conditions of this loan was the devaluation of the dinar...'*⁸⁴.

This extended quote demonstrates the challenges that economic issues and the continued influence of external actor poses to the legitimacy of the post-transition regime in Tunisia.

Successive governments' desire to reconfigure their legitimacy has been hampered by not only by economic stagnation and societal discontent surrounding the neoliberal agenda of external actors but also by political instability and successive terrorist attacks. It has long been argued that the nation-states' primary role, in its most basic form, is to guarantee the security of its population from existential threats. In the post-transition context, a series of terrorist attacks, which intensified in frequency and severity from 2014/2015 onwards, posed significant questions to the state's ability to guarantee the physical security of its citizens⁸⁵. In a poll conducted in November 2015, 47% of respondents stated that terrorism was the single biggest problem facing Tunisia (Andersen and Brym 2017). By 2015, public opinion was increasingly accepting the idea, be it true or not, that the radical overhaul of the security services following the revolution had left Tunisia vulnerable to terrorist attacks⁸⁶. Following several terrorist attacks in 2015, Tunisian policy makers made it clear that Tunisia was faced with serious security threats, such as terrorism and radicalisation, and that these threats demanded a certain response. Despite attacks having taken place in the previous years since the revolution, Tunisian specialists, included many interviewed for this thesis, identify 2015 as a shifting point in security politics, at which point priorities seemed to shift from transparency and security sector reform (SSR) to security assistance and capacity building (Santini 2018; Cimini and Santini 2021). This shift in political priorities was reflected in a change in elite security focused discourse as well as the focus of policies going through the legislative process and practices of the security services themselves⁸⁷. Arguably, the new post-transition regime, unable to provide economic security due to over a decade of

⁸⁴ Interview conducted July 2021

⁸⁵ Interview with head of Tunisian security focused NGO, Tunis, January 2020

⁸⁶ Interviews with security practitioner, January 2021

⁸⁷ Interview with head of security focused NGO, Tunis, January 2020

stagnation and worsening standards of living, has sought to reconfigure a similar implicit security pact based on providing security from the threat of terrorism and thus implicitly, political Islamism.

The above discussion of Tunisian regime legitimacy may seem out of a place in a piece of IR research. Nonetheless, it is impossible to separate the current and previous regimes instrumentalisation of notions of ‘security’ and ‘stability’, particularly from the ‘threat of Islamism’, from international discourses associated with the GWOT. Furthermore, an understanding of the centrality of economic security and the instrumentalisation of the threat of political Islam to Tunisian regime legitimacy can best help us conceptualise the performativity of illiberal security practice in the post-transition context in the following chapter. While the exact configurations of authoritarian neoliberalism and associated repressive security practices may be unique Tunisian context, this case furthers our understanding of the so-called security-neoliberalism nexus globally. Furthermore, it paves the way of the discussions in the following chapter. Indeed, Chapter 4 I explore how political elites in post-2011 Tunisia, deprived of sovereignty in certain areas and faced with challenges to their legitimacy due to overlapping social, political and economic upheaval associated with neoliberal deregulation, use security politics as a vessel with which to both reassert Tunisia’s statehood and attempt to reconfigure the legitimacy of the post-transition political regime.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism is both pertinent and illuminating to the Tunisian case study. Indeed, the concept acts as an excellent analytical lens with which to understand contemporary dynamics in Tunisia as well as how they relate to global developments. I have shown that the Tunisian case contributes to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism particularly in terms of questions surrounding reduced sovereignty and authoritarian neoliberalism in contexts where external and non-state actors, in partnership with domestic political elites, play such major roles in pursuing the neoliberal agenda. Moreover, the post-transition context represents another novel contribution of the Tunisian case to the research agenda of authoritarian neoliberalism and its complex relationship with the legitimization of political regimes.

However, the primary reason for the chapter’s discussion of the particularities of authoritarian neoliberalism in contemporary Tunisia is that these discussions are the

foundations upon which the later chapters of this thesis are built. The manifestations of authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia, namely the associated constraints placed on the macroeconomic and budgetary decisions of Tunisian elites as well as the emergence illiberal legal, administrative and security frameworks are the building blocks upon which this thesis goes on to build the rest of its analysis. The following chapter's discussion of security politics as performativity of statehood, will demonstrate the link between the manifestation of authoritarian neoliberalism in the post-transition context and the role of security politics in the reconfiguration of regime legitimacy. Whilst authoritarian neoliberalism raises questions regarding reduced sovereignty in several areas, in the next chapter I will argue that the performativity of statehood through security politics emerges as the terrain of contestation in the in the fight to reconfigure regime legitimacy.

Chapter 4 - Securing the state in post-transition Tunisia: performativity of the (authoritarian) neoliberal state

I think some people in the security forces or some people in the state were very happy to talk about the problem of jihadism to really lay the blame on Ennahda... to really distract from socio-economic issues and say the challenge right now is terrorism and not necessarily focus on trying to meet the demands of the revolution... and the need for a fairer and more equitable Tunisia

Interview with Tunisian journalist, May 2021

Introduction

On July 1, 2022, Rached Ghannouchi, the democratically elected Speaker of the Tunisian Parliament⁸⁸ (ARP), was charged with terrorism. This charge was brought upon the orders of the increasingly authoritarian President Kais Saied and was widely condemned as based on fictitious claims. While a significant step on the path to authoritarianism, this example forms part of a broader pattern of the political instrumentalisation of anti-terrorism laws and accusations of terrorism to discredit and repress political opponents since President Saied's authoritarian power grab in July 2021. However, Saied's political use and abuse of the 'threat of terrorism' is not novel. The post-transition period has seen successive governments using the threat of terrorism to justify illiberal security polices, repressive security practices and marginalisation of political opponents. Similarly, political elites, both following independence and during colonial rule, used 'Islamism' and associated 'threats' to justify repression of political movements and heavy-handed security governance (Hibou 2006; Thomas 2007; Thomas 2012).

Despite recognising the historical significance of the political instrumentalisation of Islamism as a threat as well as the implications of current trends of authoritarian drift to the empirical and theoretical discussions furthered in this chapter, I focus its analysis on Tunisian security politics from the promulgation of the January 2014 constitution until Saied's authoritarian power grab in July 2021. This is because the period following the promulgation of the 2014 constitution – despite supposedly heralding in a democratic institutional landscape – has been

⁸⁸ It is important to note that by the time of Ghannouchi's arrest, July 2022, the ARP had not sat for almost 12 months after being 'suspended' and subsequently dissolved by Presidential decree

characterised by an intensification of performative security discourse and repressive security politics and practices which I situate in the context of several overlapping political and economic ‘crises’⁸⁹ and a wave of significant terrorist attacks in. Furthermore, I have chosen to focus on the period before the supposed coup of July 25, 2021, as the period following it will be analysed extensively in Chapter 6 and its discussions of Saied’s unique brand of populism. However, I must underscore that this chapter’s discussions of the political instrumentalisation of the terrorist threat to undercut security sector reforms and justify repression have only been proven all the more pertinent since Saied’s use of exceptional security powers to ‘suspend’ the Tunisian parliament and sack his government in July of 2021. Indeed, such developments emphasise the threat of performative counterterror politics to democracies both ‘mature’⁹⁰ and ‘nascent’⁹¹.

Essentially, here in this chapter, I adopt the theoretical lens of authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017) coupled with the concept of performativity (Butler 1993; Weber 1998; Higate and Henry 2010; Lister 2019) to argue that the post-transition regime in Tunisia uses performative security discourses, policies and practices, depicted as ‘securing the state’ from certain securitised threats in order to justify ‘extraordinary’⁹² security measures and repressive security practices in the name of the so called GWOT. While supposedly about preventing terrorism, the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the power, in fact serves as a means for policy makers to; 1/ insist on the sovereignty of the state in an era of neoliberal governance which undermines the state in many areas (Lister 2019), 2/ reconfigure their claims to legitimacy as the providers of ‘security’ in a traditional physical sense whilst ignoring the insecurities facing many Tunisians which are partially caused by neoliberal deregulation and coercive state practices (Hall et al 1978; Wacquant 2010) and, 3/ repress

⁸⁹ While I acknowledge that Tunisia has faced significant economic, political and security challenges in the period following the fall of the Ben Ali government, the word crisis here is being used in inverted commas as political actors both perform and perpetuate a sense

⁹⁰ In the article, ‘Explaining counter terrorism in the UK: normal politics, securitised politics or performativity of the neo-liberal state?’, Michael Lister (2019) explores impact of performative counterterror politics on UK parliamentary debates for example

⁹¹ Tunisia is often, or was prior to July 25, 2021, referred to as a nascent democracy because following the revolution of January 2011 we witnessed constitutional changes, several rounds of free and fair elections involving peaceful transitions of power, the enshrining of democratic freedoms, the development of an independent press and a vibrant civil society movement. However, in the period following July 2021 there has been a gradual erosion of many aspects which characterised Tunisia’s democracy – as will be explored in Chapter six – which many would argue cements Tunisia’s return to authoritarianism (Abouaoun et al. 2022).

⁹² I argue that this notion of exception is somewhat illusionary. Supposedly exceptional policy responses, such as the state of emergency and are being de-facto permanent elements of security landscape see Bigo (2012) for theoretical discussions of the de facto permanent ‘exceptional’ security state

contestation of neoliberalism and austerity (Tansel 2017). Or, in other words, ‘securing the state’ from the threat of terrorism has, in fact, served as a means to policy makers to attempt to reinforce authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia. However, as I show throughout this chapter, this is a contested and contradictory process.

This chapter makes a standalone contribution to this thesis’ analysis of competing articulations of regime legitimacy in the post-transition period through its exploration of the interlinkages between neoliberal policies, their constraints on the government’s sovereignty (Lister 2019), the erosion of the regime’s legitimacy (Hall et al 1978) and use of performative security politics to justify the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state (Wacquant 2014). Furthermore, this chapter also makes a standalone theoretical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism by exploring the additional analytical tools, in this case, performativity, with which it can be deployed. In short, the incorporation of performativity into the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism enables me to better understand the link between contemporary neoliberalism and performative counterterror politics. Essentially, through employing these concepts we can see that the purpose of this roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state in the post-crisis context is to ‘mop up’ and police the dislocated populations ‘left behind’ neoliberal restructuring (Wacquant 2010) - in this case the urban poor and those living in Tunisia’s marginalised regions. It also serves to performatively distract from government’s growing inability to assert its statehood in a multitude of areas and provide for a basic level of economic and social security (Wacquant 2008). Finally, by mobilising the work of Stuart Hall et al (1978) within this framework, we can see *how* policy makers mobilise consent for the repressive policing of these marginalised groups: whipping up moral panic surrounding certain ‘law and order crises’ or ‘security threats’ – in this case radicalisation, terrorism and the broader instability they are perceived to engender.

Notwithstanding the standalone contributions of this chapter, through its analysis I seek to further underscore the analytical utility of adopting an approach which brings together the academic disciplines of IPE and security studies to theorise (in)security in the Middle East and North Africa as I have done throughout this thesis. Traditional ‘siloe’d’ approaches to security studies can help us understand *how* policy makers performatively securitise certain

threats and the political implications of these measures⁹³. However, in this chapter I also explore of the constraints the Tunisian state faces on its sovereignty because of neoliberal deregulation (Sotiris 2017; Jouili 2023; Maryon 2023), and the everyday insecurities neoliberal reforms have created for many Tunisians. This enables us to understand *why* Tunisian policy makers seek to use performative discourses, policies and practices to both perform their sovereignty and reassert their claims to legitimacy as the providers of security in its traditional Weberian sense (Wacquant 2010; Lister 2019).

In order to explore ‘securing the state’ as performativity of the authoritarian neoliberal state, this chapter will be elaborated as follows. Firstly, I outline this chapter’s use of the concept of performativity within the theoretical framework of with authoritarian neoliberalism (4.1). In section 4.2 using the concept of performativity, I analyse examples of contemporary security discourse, policies and practice which I argue can be theorised as a performative enactment of sovereignty and reassertion of statehood. The examples analysed for the purposes of this chapter are the articulation of the need to secure the state (4.2.1), declaring war on terror (4.2.2) and declaring and redeclaring the state of emergency (4.2.3). I also briefly reflect upon the way in which performative discourse and practices explored here in this chapter helped pave the way for Saied’s use and abuse of security-oriented discourse and practices to pursue his authoritarian power grabs (4.2.4). In section 4.3, I argue that performative discourses construct moral panic regarding Islamists and marginalised communities rather than merely proven terrorists. This, in turn, acts to ‘justify’ the roll out of repressive policing of such communities as well as social movements. Furthermore, as I argue in the final section of the chapter (4.4), it also serves to distract from one of the root causes of radicalisation and extremism in contemporary Tunisia: economic inequalities and dispossession linked to decades of failed neoliberal policies and the demands of the so called ‘donor cartel’⁹⁴.

4.1 The case for performativity when thinking with and beyond political economy in the study of authoritarian neoliberalisms

The connections between neoliberalism, performative security discourses, repressive security policies and practices and regime legitimacy in the post-transition Tunisian context may seem

⁹³ See Eya Jrad’s work on securitisation of terrorism and covid in Tunisia (Jrad 2020b; Jrad 2020a)

⁹⁴ The phrase donor cartel was used by Chandoul (2015) to refer to the various IFIs, bilateral partners and international organisations involved in pursuing and enforcing neoliberal agenda in post-transition Tunisia

somewhat tenuous at first glance. However, as I have argued throughout this thesis, neoliberalism so often conceptualised as involving the retreat of the state, is somewhat paradoxically, conducive to ‘greater emphasis on coercive control and repertoires of domination’ (Hall 1978 et al, p.217 cited in Lister 2019 p.19). In other words, the roll back of the state in certain areas, including macroeconomic and budgetary policy, is coupled with the roll out of the state in other areas such as policing, incarceration, border regimes (Axster et al. 2021) and as scholars have increasingly argued, counterterrorism (Brouard 2021; Mullin 2023). However, in this chapter, I focus predominately on the roll out of the state – and more precisely; security policies and practices in the period from 2014 to 2021. I focus on this period for several reasons that I expand below.

4.1.1 The 2015 crisis and the intensification of the recourse to coercive state power

Firstly, in January of 2014, the Tunisian Parliament approved its new constitution, hailed as the most democratic in the ‘Arab World’ (Murphy 2014). This ushered in a new institutional environment and enshrined human rights provisions impacting the overall structure and oversight of the security sector (Santini 2018). This was deemed to be a significant ‘step’ on Tunisia’s path towards so-called democratic transition (Hanlon 2012). While this is not a piece of transitology research, it is important for our analysis of the impact of performative security discourse, policies and practices to demarcate the legal and constitutional order within which said policies and practices *should* operate. This changed in January 2014, with the promulgation of the new Constitution, in certain key areas. As we will see, despite the novelty of the 2014 Constitutional order, the ‘security crisis’ of 2015 would provide impetus for the expansion of the executive’s role, the empowerment of the forces of state security and the reversion to many illiberal and extra-legal security force practices associated with the former regime (Maryon 2023).

Demarcating the legal order in which security policies *should* function is also important because scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism have underscored the way in which neoliberal governance in the post-2007 period has been characterised by;

1/ reconfigurations of ‘state and institutional power in an attempt to insulate certain policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent’ (Bruff 2014, p.115);

as well as 2/ ‘a significant escalation in the state’s propensity to employ coercion and legal/extra-legal intimidation which is complemented by “intensified state control over every

sphere of social life...(and) draconian and multiform curtailment of so-called formal liberties” (Poulantzas 1978, p.203-204 cited in Tansel 2017 p3).

Therefore, throughout this chapter I analyse some of these reconfigurations of state and institutional power both in economic and security domains which have characterised the Tunisian authoritarian neoliberal state. I also analyse some of the unofficial and extra-legal practices which have (re)emerged under the guise of the GWOT particularly since the 2015 security crisis despite the newly heralded Constitutional order of 2014.

Secondly, despite terrorist attacks and serious episodes of political violence having taken place in the initial years following the revolution, Tunisian specialists, including many interviewed for this thesis, identify 2015 as a shifting point in security politics. Scholars argue that successive terrorist attacks in Tunisia in 2015 were an ‘exogenous shock’⁹⁵ which caused a shift in political priorities leading to the introduction of wide-ranging security powers, new legislation and the reversion to certain illiberal practices (Cimini and Santini 2021). Thus, it is for this reason as well as the reasons elaborated above that I focus on the period from 2014 onwards. Furthermore, while I agree with their analysis that 2015 represented a significant moment in Tunisian security politics, I have demonstrated in the previous chapter of this thesis that we can better conceptualise this ‘crisis’ through the lens of authoritarian neoliberalism rather than merely being the product of supposedly existential security threats. This is because the concept enables us to grapple with both political economy and security politics, and the connections between them, to better understand the causes, manifestations and consequences of insecurity in Tunisia which I argue are linked to neoliberal deregulation. In other words, neoliberal policies in post-transition Tunisia have contributed to and reinforced economic, social, and political insecurity which have characterised the post-transition period. In fact, neoliberal deregulation – which has intensified since 2011 (Jouili 2023; Mullin 2023) - contributed to the supposed ‘security’ crisis of 2015 in three ways.

Firstly, economic and social insecurities reinforced through neoliberal deregulation, coupled with the feelings of marginalisation and exclusion such insecurities create, are at least some of factors that can push individuals to radicalisation (Meddeb 2015; Aliaga and O’Farrell

⁹⁵ A shock beyond the control of political actors – external shock in other words – which places significant pressures on the security sector (Santini 2018 p.94).

2017) – something I expand upon in this chapter⁹⁶. Secondly, while a worsening security environment from 2013 onwards, characterised by political assassinations and a wave of terrorist attacks (Santini 2018), created a sense of physical insecurity, this was compounded by a growing climate of social, political and economic insecurity created by the failure of the neoliberal reform agenda to deliver on the economic demands of the revolution. Finally, in 2015, a wave of high profile and deadly terrorist attacks posed significant questions to the legitimacy and sovereignty of the state and its ability to protect its citizens further compounding this climate of insecurity. Therefore, by 2015, these social, political and economic dislocations combined with a wave of high-profile terrorist attacks became fertile territory for the construction of moral panic surrounding the so-called ‘security crisis’ of 2015. As so often, moral panic surrounding a given ‘crisis’ is used to justify the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state (Hall et al 1978) rather than providing impetus for a radical overhaul of economic policy despite such policies themselves being contributing factors to the so-called crisis. This is what, I argue, is taking place in the Tunisian context where threats such as radicalisation are used to justify heavy handed security service responses which become ‘normalised’ security practices used to respond to security ‘threats’ beyond those to which they were originally intended. This moral panic and the associated roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state also serves to distract from meaningful debate about the role of economic and social insecurities, created by the fall out of neoliberalisation, in contributing to the original threat of radicalisation in the first place.

However, it is important to emphasise, as I have throughout this thesis, that this current ‘crisis’ of authoritarian neoliberalism in contemporary Tunisia, in which the penal fist of neoliberalism seems to reign down and intensify (Hall 1979), is not entirely disconnected from previous forms of capitalist accumulation and the coercive mechanisms that acted to insulate its contestation. In other words, authoritarian neoliberalism, both in Tunisia and beyond, is not a historically distinct conjuncture entirely disconnected from previous forms of capitalist accumulation (Tansel in Axster et al. 2021 p.6), nor is the performative discourse

⁹⁶ Interestingly in Lister’s 2019 article on counterterrorism as performativity of the authoritarian neoliberal state he argues this is the point at which applying Wacquant’s ideas on the neoliberal security state (2008; 2010; 2014) to counterterrorism fall short. While Lister agrees with Wacquant’s first argument that security politics is garish law and order spectacle to distract from economic insecurities, Lister feels it is a stretch to suggest that counterterror politics is being used by UK policymakers to ‘mop up’ the left behind groups created by neoliberalism in the UK context (p.430). In contrast, I would argue, that you could quite reasonably make this argument as evidence suggests that economic dispossession and marginalisation, reinforced through neoliberal restructuring and austerity, can be linked to radicalisation and terrorism in the Tunisian context.

surrounding the threat of terrorism, Islamism and instability entirely new to Tunisian politics (Hibou 2006; Thomas 2012). Rather, we have seen an *intensification* of both these processes in the period which I am analysing here in this chapter. So how can we understand these periods in which pre-existing trends of neoliberal deregulation and coercive state practices seem to intensify in response to a discursively constructed crisis or threat?

In short, as Lister⁹⁷ (2019) and Hall et al (1978) argue, in periods of social upheaval and economic crisis, in which the legitimacy of a particular political regime is contested, the neoliberal state resorts to an intensification of state repression to quell dissent and reconfigure its legitimacy. However, the intensification of coercive state power, as so often seen in the context of ‘crisis’, requires a formula of justification if it is to be deemed legitimate in the eyes of the people (Hall et al 1978; Hibou 2006; Heydemann 2007). And thus, the neoliberal state insists on the presence of, or constructs moral panic surrounding, an existential threat to the security of the state and its citizens to justify the roll out of its coercive apparatuses which are, in fact, designed to quell dissent in the face of its declining legitimacy (Wacquant 2008; Lister 2019). In Tunisia, the existential threat identified and around which moral panic has been constructed was the so-called 2015 security crisis. This served to justify the intensified use the coercive state power to police the threat of terrorists, suspected Islamists and increasingly those groups ‘left behind’ by neoliberalisation (Wacquant 2014) as well as those that seek to contest it (Tansel 2017).

4.1.2 Performativity and the politics of security

Thus, in this chapter I mobilise the concept of performativity in conjunction with authoritarian neoliberalism to analyse security discourses, policies and practices in Tunisia between 2014-2021. The analytical utility of such an approach, and its contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism was discussed extensively in Chapter 2. In short, I argue that the concept of performativity is exceptionally revelatory in analysing the intensification of apparatuses of coercive state power in Tunisia particularly since 2015. It is only through engaging with performative security discourse and practice (Butler 1993; Weber

⁹⁷ ‘There are periods where a rough equilibrium exists between crime and law-and-order policy, which Hall et al. (1978, 186) refer to as the “normalised repression” of the state. This is contrasted with periods where such balance is absent. For Hall et al., such periods, where state repression is heightened, frequently coincide with a wider context of social upheaval and economic crisis. These upheavals, Hall et al. (1978, 217) go on to explain, are when hegemony breaks down, when “the whole basis of political leadership and cultural authority becomes exposed and contested”. When this takes place, processes of assuring rule through consent give way to greater emphasis on coercive control or “repertoires of domination’ (Lister, 2019, p.432).

1998; Higate and Henry 2009)⁹⁸ – as I do here in this chapter – that we can understand *how* the Tunisian state was able to seemingly justify such repressive and wide-ranging security measures particularly in the context of a democratic transition which was intended to include significant security sector reform.

In a similar vein, it is only through the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism, and the insights it provides in terms of illuminating the constraints neoliberalism places Tunisia's sovereignty in economic policy (Sotiris 2017) areas as well as its erosion of the legitimacy of the Tunisian post-transition regime, that we can understand the *why* policy makers are using discourses around 'securing the state' to both perform their sovereignty and thus, reconfigure their claims to legitimacy as the providers of state security. In other words, the (authoritarian) neoliberal state is reliant on coercive state power to repress contestation as well as being reliant on performative discourses of 'securing the state' for legitimation. This is indicative of how authoritarian neoliberalism inherently acts to both provoke contestation and undermine regime legitimacy through the widespread insecurities it creates, while also seeking to provide the state with the tools to repress contestation. And thus, it is in the context of this 'crisis of neoliberalism', that policy makers have sought to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy through the discourse of securing the state and performative security practices aimed at flexing the sovereign state like muscles.

Indeed, regardless of the performative nature of these discourses and practices, they have real political significance and impacts. By mobilising performativity to analyse the post-2014 Tunisian case, we can better understand the political motivations and power battles behind security discourses and practices. Rather than adopting an approach, as we see so often in security studies, which depicts security – and particularly counterterrorism - as something exceptional and depoliticised (Neal 2012; Lister 2019). In the words of one participant interviewed for this thesis 'I am partisan of a political approach to security.... security is about where power lies... you cannot understand security any other way'⁹⁹. Thus, through the use of the concept of performativity, I can better grapple with the political nature of security as well as what it is that political elites are seeking to achieve politically through

⁹⁸ While scholars of performativity have often focused exclusively on discourse (Butler 1993; Weber 1998), I mobilise the work of scholars such as Higate and Henry (2008; 2010) to engage with performative security discourses and practices. The debate regarding the discourse approaches vs practice-based approaches was outlined in Chapter 2

⁹⁹ Interview conducted with head of security focused NGO in Tunisia, Tunis, January 2020

performative security discourse and practice (Lister 2019). Political elites are, I argue, using performative security politics to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy of the post-transition regime as securing the state from several threats including terrorism and instability. Secondly, performative security is political in the sense that policy makers use it to delegitimise certain groups and actors, including political Islamists, and mobilise consent for the repressive policing of these groups and other marginalised communities (Hall et al 1978; Baker-Beall 2011; Lister 2019). In other words, securing the state and the associated moral panic surrounding Islamism is a tool through which elites seek to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy. The significance of this ‘tool’ can only be understood in the context of Tunisia’s political history (Hibou 2006) as well as the international discourse and practice associated with the ‘GWOT’.

Having established the analytical utility of using the concept of performativity, which has been used extensively in both feminist IR and security studies, in research beyond political economy in the study of authoritarian neoliberalisms, I will, in the next section, mobilise the concept of performativity to analyse elite security discourse and practice.

4.2 Securing the state: performing sovereignty and reasserting statehood

In this section, I analyse, security and predominately counterterror discourse, policy and practices between 2015 - July 2021. Using the concept of performativity, I argue that these examples demonstrate the attempt of policy makers both to reassert their sovereignty and reconfigure their claims to legitimacy through ‘securing the state’. While there are many other examples of this, I have limited the analysis of this chapter to three aspects of contemporary security politics: articulating the need to secure the state (4.2.1), declaring war on terror (4.2.2) and the repeated declaration of the state of emergency (4.2.3). I also briefly, towards the end of this section, reflect upon the way in which performative discourse and practices explored here helped pave the way for Saied’s use and abuse of security-oriented discourse and practices to pursue his authoritarian power grabs (4.2.4). While the early drafts of this chapter were written long before President Saied’s dissolution of Parliament on the July 25, 2021, his use of security powers to enact authoritarian power grabs only underscores the significance of the discussions explored in this chapter.

4.2.1 Articulating the need to secure the state

From 2015 onwards there are many examples of elite discourse which underscore the scale and significance of the threat of terrorism and the need to secure the state from this threat. So how can we understand this ‘garish law and order spectacle’ (Wacquant 2014, p.1695), through the lens of performativity? Weber asserts that in order to study the performativity of states it is particularly illuminating to study foreign policy speeches, cables and press conferences (Weber 1998 p.92). She argues that such examples enable us to see how states insist on their sovereignty when faced with the impossibility of being sovereign¹⁰⁰ (Weber 1998 p.92). Here in this thesis, I engage with speeches and press conference as well as performative practices situated within the realm of ‘internal’ security - to understand how policy makers perform the role of the state in terms of the monopoly of legitimate violence within their territory (Weber 1919) and thus insist of their sovereignty through their *internal* security politics.

For example, on July 4, 2015, just eight days after ISIS claimed responsibility for a terrorist attack which targeted tourists at the Sousse beach resort, former President Beji Caid Essebsi (BCE) declared a state of emergency stating ‘these difficult conditions can be described as exceptional conditions which therefore require exceptional measures’ (Bryne 2015). Through the lens of performativity, we can think of these sorts of speeches as moments in which the state (and its policy makers) is insisting on its sovereignty when it is being most challenged (Weber 1998). Indeed, the Tunisian security forces were deeply criticised for their failings during this attack particularly in terms of how long it took the security forces to ‘take control’ of the situation¹⁰¹ (Reuters 2017) – thus undermining both internal security and sovereignty. Furthermore, feminist scholars have shown us how, particularly in the context of the GWOT, figures such as President BCE seek to present themselves as the hypermasculine warrior-like decision makers through their performative security discourses and thus insist on the sovereignty of the state and their ability to mobilise the force of state security accordingly (Weber 1998; Athanassiou 2014).

President BCE, now deceased, was one of the most significant figures in security politics in the post-transition period. This is because under the Tunisian Constitution of 2014, the

¹⁰⁰ For example, when announcing a military intervention in another state, a state is both performing their sovereignty through intervening in another state’s domestic affairs while illuminating the impossibility of being sovereign in the sense that the other state’s sovereignty is mere idea to be violated (1998)

¹⁰¹ The gunman was able to walk over 2 miles along Sousse beach killing 38 people before being ‘neutralised’. 13 security agents were charged with negligence or cowardice in the weeks following the attacks.

President has responsibility for national security, defence, and foreign policy (Tunisian Republic 2014). Given both his constitutional powers, and his popular mandate as the first democratically elected President of Tunisia, BCE made several security focused official statements, speeches and tweets following high profile terrorist attacks in 2015 which fall into the notion of this ‘garish’ national security ‘spectacle’ (Wacquant 2014, p.1695). Significantly, as with the example above, many of these discourses which articulated the scale of the threat posed by terrorism also emphasised the need to introduce certain exceptional policy responses to ‘secure the state’. The notion of ‘securing the state’ is - in itself - a performance, as policy makers are unable to ever eliminate risk fully in a given society (Durodié 2007). However, as I argue, the notion of the need to secure the state is used to justify the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state supposedly to respond to this security ‘crisis’ (Hall et al 1978; Wacquant 2009). In the context of the crisis of the contemporary neoliberal state, it is also used to shore up the legitimacy of the state as the provider of security from such threats to police the left behind groups or edge populations of contemporary neoliberalism and ‘serves as a bait and switch for the (deeper?) socio-economic forms of inequality (and resultant insecurity)’ (Lister 2019 p.428).

4.2.2 Declaring ‘war’ on terror

At 8.17pm on the night of the Bardo museum attack former President BCE made a televised public announcement in which he promised to engage in a ‘war against terror without mercy’ (Bobin 2015) – one of his many references to being a war with terrorism during this period. Then Prime Minister, Habib Essid, reiterated the President’s sentiment when he stated, ‘we are engaged in a ferocious war against terrorism to protect lives and property, defend the republican regime ... the civil state and its institutions... We would not have felt obliged to decree the state of emergency if we were not convinced that our country was facing numerous terrorist plans to destabilise the country’ (Bryne 2015). I argue that declaring ‘war’ on terror can be understood as a performance of statehood in the context of reduced sovereignty and the challenges to regime legitimacy being posed to post-transition governments by the overlapping security, economic and political crises. In such a context, this hyper masculinised-militarised performance of statehood seeks to reassert the sovereignty of the state in Weberian sense as well as reconfiguring the legitimacy of the executive and its policy makers are ‘warrior like decision makers’ (Weber 1998; Athanassiou 2014; Lister 2019).

Those employing the concept of performativity have noted the significance of both declaring of war on terror and likening a particular security threat to being at war (Baker-Beall 2011). Baker-Beall (2011) and Jackson (2005) have argued that the expression ‘war on terror’ is used to justify more coercive security and military minded policy responses than may be used to deal with other domestic security issues (Butler 1993). Theoretically, the act of declaring war – the ultimate display of a state’s sovereignty (Weber 1998) - is one of the unique functions of a sovereign state¹⁰². However, vitally for our analysis’ the declaration of ‘war’ on terror is a performative enactment of the sovereignty of the state (Baker-Beall 2011; Jackson 2005). It is also one that mobilises masculinised-militarised notions of power and urgency associated with performative states (Weber 1998). Of course, a state cannot truly ‘declare’ war on terror, for example, in terms of international law, such as the UN Charter, it does not fulfil the conditions under which a state can declare war. Attempting to tackle and dismantle terrorist organisations does not fit within traditional understandings of being at war (Baker-Beall 2011). This is because terrorist organisations are non-state actors and terrorism has existed for hundreds of years in various forms. While declaring war on terrorism may enable policy makers to mobilise consent for a certain set of ‘exceptionalised’ policy responses, it is virtually impossible to ever declare a victory, defeat, or announce the end to the war on terrorism. This means that supposedly exceptional measures, associated with the GWOT, become long term and increasingly ‘normalised’ aspects of policy frameworks (Butler 2004; Payé 2004; Bigo 2006; Kilpatrick 2020).

The performative nature of ‘declaring war’ on a security threat that does not fall into the remit of traditional military security threats was further underscored in March 2020 when the Prime Minister declared war on the coronavirus (Jrad 2020a)¹⁰³. Significantly, the security-oriented discourse surrounding the pandemic was used to justify the expansion of emergency security frameworks, many of which were initially enacted in the name of counterterrorism, to respond to the threat of the pandemic and even repress social movements (Jrad 2020a; Jrad 2020b). For example, on January 13, 2022, the President used emergency security powers to ban protests citing the threat of coronavirus which had first reached Tunisia almost two years previously (Mohamed 2022). For many, the decision to ban protests was, in fact an

¹⁰² An opposition party, for example, cannot officially nor legitimately declare a country to be at war because they are not deemed to have the legitimacy authority to do so

¹⁰³ On March 25, 2020, the then Tunisian Prime Minister, Elyes Fakhfakh, announced live on television that Tunisia was facing a ‘war against an invisible enemy’ and that restrictions would shortly be introduced (See Watania Reply (2020)

instrumentalisation of the threat of the virus, to prevent the annual protests on the anniversary of the 2011 revolution, January 14, which have become an annual platform to denounce economic hardship and the failure of successive governments to deliver on the demands of the revolution (Mohamed 2022). This is indicative of the way in which performative security discourses and practices serve to both clamp down on contestation of neoliberalism (Tansel 2017) as well as serving to distract from the ‘real’ causes of instability and security; neoliberal deregulation and austerity (Wacquant 2010; Wacquant 2014; Lister 2019).

Significantly, in the Tunisian context, the notion of ‘being at war’ with terrorism would suggest policy responses which would fall into the remit of the executive branch of government as opposed to requiring a greater level of Parliamentary scrutiny as would be necessary under a criminal justice approach. As per the Tunisian Constitution of 2014, matters of national security and defence, such as wars and external security threats, were the ‘*domain réservé*’ of the President (Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019). By performatively ‘declaring war’ on terrorism, policy makers are seeking to Presidentialise policy responses to terrorism taking such policy areas from legislative and Prime Ministerial areas of competence (Abbes 2017). The attempt to circumnavigate Parliamentary scrutiny and deliberation of counterterror and security policy through the Presidentialisation of competency areas is a phenomenon witnessed globally in the post 9/11 including in non-Presidential systems (Abbes 2017). Often this performance rests on a binary distinction between the hyper-masculinised militarised executive able to take swift and decisive action and weak effeminate Parliamentary procedures which impede and slow down necessary actions (Athanassiou 2014). Nonetheless it is clear that in Tunisia, the attempt to circumnavigate Parliament is not just about Presidential power but also about seeking to take such powers away from Parliament and the political Islamists who have dominated Parliament since the revolution. Indeed, scholars such as Hanau Santini (2018) have argued that there was an attempt by government officials, political elites, and security elites to keep Ennahda away from security politics based on the idea that they were ‘illegitimate political force that was allegedly operating against the interests of the state and pursuing partisan Islamic security agenda’ (p.88).

Thus, it clear that declaring war on terror is a performance, it is about insisting on the sovereignty of the state in those moments when the sovereignty of the state is most

challenged¹⁰⁴. Vitaly, for this thesis' broader discussion of authoritarian neoliberalism, it is neoliberalism itself, which constrains the ability of policy makers to performatively enact their sovereignty in other areas.

4.2.3 Declaring and redeclaring state of emergency

On July 4, 2015, former President BCE declared a state of emergency following a high-profile terrorist attack targeting tourists on a beach in Sousse (Bobin 2015). The declaration and repeated renewal of the state of emergency is an element of counterterror policy in nations in both the Global North and Global South which has garnered much academic interest in the post 9/11 era (Butler 1993; Payé 2004; Agamben 2005). It provides governments with a framework with which to monitor, police and repress their populations (Greene 2020; Kilpatrick 2020). In many cases, such frameworks have been used to target particular marginalised communities beyond just terror suspects (Greene 2020; Kilpatrick 2020). The state of emergency, first declared in July 2015, has been renewed several times and is still in place at the time of writing – July 2023. I argue that the very 'garish' spectacle (Wacquant 2014, p.1695) of publicly declaring and repeatedly renewing the state of emergency can be understood as performativity of the hyper-masculine militarised state (Butler 2004; Athanassiou 2014). This is all the more significant as the state of emergency also empowers the executive branch of government¹⁰⁵ (Butler 2004; Agamben 2005) enabling it to circumnavigate normal Parliamentary procedures (Constitution of The Tunisian Republic, 2014). The argument in favour of the state of emergency is that when the state is faced with an immediate and pressing threat, it needs to act swiftly and unilaterally to respond to that threat. Thus, Parliamentary deliberations surrounding counterterror policy are discursively constructed as weak, slow, and effeminate (Athanassiou 2014; Lister 2019). Whereas the bold, swift, and relatively unaccountable action by the executive, enabled by the state of emergency, can be understood as a masculinised performative enactment of militarised statehood (Athanassiou 2014; Lister 2019).

¹⁰⁴ While for some scholars and commentators, performative security and discussions of limited sovereignty revolve predominately on the notion of limited statehood in the security sector (Santini, 2018), I have already shown, through my mobilisation of authoritarian neoliberalism to analyse post-2011 Tunisia, that the Tunisian state's sovereignty is significantly challenged and constrained in macroeconomic and budgetary policy areas

¹⁰⁵ Under the provisions of the 2014 Constitution, the President and executive have overarching competency on security matters and Parliament plays a somewhat minimal role on security matters (Tunisian Republic 2014). However, the state of emergency further emboldens the executive's supremacy in this area (Tunisian Republic 2014).

The declaration of the state of emergency also enables certain supposedly ‘exceptional’ security practices that would not be considered legal nor legitimate outside of the state of emergency¹⁰⁶ (see Article 80 of the Constitution of The Tunisian Republic 2014). For example, the state of emergency gives the police exceptional powers, such as the ability to impose curfews, special powers to guard important buildings and gives the armed forces the power to carry out certain police duties (to reinforce police numbers) (Bryne 2015). It has provided Tunisian security services with the tools to target and monitor political Islamist groups, or individuals perceived to belong to them, with little evidence and in a manner which circumvents civil liberties and rule of law provisions outlined in the 2014 Constitution¹⁰⁷ (AmnestyInternational 2017a). It has also been exploited by policy makers to crack down on resistance of neoliberal policies and austerity measures. For example, when declaring the state of emergency in July 2015 Essebsi acknowledged that one of its main purposes was ‘to limit strikes and protests’ (cited in Han 2021, p.163).

As alluded to above, further evidence of the declaration of the state of emergency as evidence of the performativity of the authoritarian neoliberal state came in with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. Tunisian policy makers pursued a ‘national security’ response to the pandemic using the framework of the state of emergency, already in place since 2015, to rush through a public health response, crack down on any resistance to the curfews and restrictions imposed to respond to the pandemic and to push through neoliberal reforms (Cherif 2020; Jrad 2020b; Jrad 2020a). Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic enabled the President, with his competence in national security and his role as head of the National Security Council (Abbes 2017), to consolidate power within his hands and at the expense the legislature (Cherif 2020; Jrad 2020b) as I explore further in the section below.

4.2.4 July 2021: exceptional powers or constitutional coup?

In the sections above, I demonstrated how policy makers, including President Saied, in the period between 2014-2021, used performative security discourses and practices coupled with an expansive interpretation of ‘security’ to justify expansive security powers and repressive security practices to expand their own competency areas and legitimise themselves as the providers of state security. However, Saied’s elastic interpretation of national security and

¹⁰⁶ Here I refer to the constitutional frameworks between January 2014-July 2022 prior to the constitutional referendum which cemented Kais Saied’s authoritarian rule

¹⁰⁷ Interview conducted with security focused NGO, Tunis, January 2020

instrumentalisation of the state of emergency, was taken to new realms when the President used a particularly creative reading of Article 80 of the 2014 Constitution, the same article which outlines the procedures for the state of emergency, to suspend Parliament in July, 2021 (Reuters 2021b). It is argued this was a reactionary response to critique of the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and mounting socio-economic grievances¹⁰⁸ which were leading to successive anti-austerity and anti-government protests¹⁰⁹.

However, this 'exceptional' closure of Parliament in July 2021 remained in place until January of 2023. Indeed, President Saied added to this 'suspension' of Parliament, by pushing through neoliberal reforms (Hammami 2020) which would have normally had to go through Parliament had it not been closed, suspending the Constitution, dissolving the supreme judicial council (RFI 2022) and finally holding a highly problematic referendum on a new Constitution (Abouaoun et al. 2022). In fact, Saied only reopened Parliament in January 2023, following widely contested elections in which many candidates were banned from standing, and after its role and structure has been radically redesigned as part of his new Constitution (Abouaoun et al. 2022). The role of exceptional security measures in Tunisia's authoritarian drift is not the focus of this chapter but it merits further research. Saied's use of performative discourses and exceptional measures to enact measures such as the closure of Parliament demonstrate that performative security discourses, policies and practices have real political impacts. The President here is using a constitutional article designed to deal with existential threats to national security to navigate a political crisis and ultimately empower his own office at the expense of the Tunisian Parliament, the institution in which his political opponents of Ennahda were strongest.

The performative use and abuse of supposedly exceptional security measures is not unique to Tunisia. Indeed, this forms part of a larger trend of normalisation of exceptionalism and urgency (Bigo 2006; Bigo 2012) which means that supposedly 'exceptional' measures become de-facto permanent aspects of security and legislative frameworks (Payé 2004; Kilpatrick 2020). However, questions surrounding the normalisation of repressive and illiberal security policies and practices pose are particularly pertinent in the post-transition Tunisian context. This is because the former regime used counterterrorism frameworks to

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, October 2021

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, October 2021

provide quasi-legal justification for the repression of political opponents and activists to maintain Ben Ali's personal grip on power (Willis 2012). In a similar vein, counterterror measures enacted since 2015 have been used for political purposes such as the repression of social movements and protests (HumanRightsWatch 2021). In the following section, I analyse moral panic constructed around the terrorist threat. This is used to portray Islamism, as well as social movements and sites of protest, as synonymous with terrorism which acts to 'justify' a set of policy responses which target particular groups rather than just those directly responsible for terrorism.

4.3 Policing the 'Islamists'

Before analysing the significance of moral panic surrounding political Islamism in the period between 2014-2021 and resulting security policies and practices it seeks to justify, we must first explore the historical significance of such discourses in Tunisia. Performative security cannot be fully understood without grappling with cultural and historical contexts because 'audiences interpret certain practices as providing security only if they conform to pre-existing sociocultural ideas of "suitable" security activities and capabilities' (Zaiotti 2011 p.543 cited in Krahan, 2017, p.547)

4.3.1 Tunisia's historical *méfiance* of Political Islam

During French colonial rule, Islamism was constructed as a threat to modernity, civilised society as well as to French rule because of Islamist movements' perceived ability to mobilise the Tunisian population (Willis 2012). Consequently, such groups were closely monitored and disproportionately targeted by security and intelligence services (Thomas 2007; Thomas 2012). Although Islamism served effectively as mobilising force in the fight against colonialism (Willis 2012), Tunisia's first post-independence government did not break radically with the discourse of the need to protect the state from the threat of political Islamism. This is because Tunisia's experience of French colonial rule was instrumental in (re)shaping police and surveillance practices as well as the instrumentalisation of the Islamist threat within the implicit security pact upon which regime legitimacy is often conceptualised to have been constructed (Hibou 2006; Thomas 2007; Alzubairi 2019a). Indeed, Fatemah Alzubairi argues 'after independence... Tunisia selected the most arbitrary aspects of the French system and combined them with local regulations that served the indigenous authoritarian ambition' (2019, p.177).

In post-independence context, Tunisian policy makers, who were often highly Westernised and French university-educated political elites, pursued state led secularisation and modernisation whilst seeking to mobilise the symbolism of Islam for legitimation (Willis 2012; McCarthy 2014). On the one hand, Bourguiba perceived Islamism as a threat to Tunisia's modernisation and economic development as per dominant modernisation theory approaches to development at the time (See Lerner 1958). Simultaneously, he knew that political Islamism was the one of the greatest political threats to his personal grip on power (Willis 2012). Consequently, his government pursued a harsh security surveillance and crackdown on political Islamist groups (Boulby 1988; Thomas 2007). For example, in 1981, 61 members of *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MTI), which would later become Ennahda, were arrested, sentenced, and imprisoned for between 2-10 years for belonging to an illegal organisation and defaming the state (Boulby 1988, p.609). Thus, Bourguiba's *méfiance* of political Islam to both his modernising project and his own political power is fundamental to understanding contemporary discourses that seek to securitise political Islamism as both a threat to Tunisia's national and economic security.

Arguably, Ben Ali's regime which instrumentalised the GWOT (Bras 2016) to repress opponents including Ennahda, represented an even tougher stance on political Islamism (Hibou 2006). During the Ben Ali government, authoritarian measures, including measures of political repression were presented as the 'prix à payer' (the price to pay) for protection from what Hibou calls the 'bogeyman' of Islamism (Hibou 2006, p.220). Political opponents were often labelled as extremist Islamists or terrorists in order to justify very harsh oppressive measures (Bras 2016). Ben Ali instrumentalised the terrorist threat and the international context of the GWOT to justify legal frameworks which de-facto legislated repression (Bras 2016). For example, using the framework of UN resolutions, the Ben Ali government passed the Anti-Terror Law of September 2003 placing serious limits on civil liberties whilst claiming to be tackling money laundering and international terrorism (Hibou 2006; Bras 2016). With this legislation Ben Ali was simply exploiting anti-terror discourse and the GWOT to provide a legal framework to the harsh oppressive and illiberal measures they had been using for decades against political opponents (Hibou 2006; Heydemann 2007; Bras 2016). Thus, throughout French colonial rule and Tunisian independence Islamism was presented as a both an economic threat to the stability of the state and an existential security threat. Significantly, successive regimes attempted to construct their claims to legitimacy

upon the notion that they were protecting the state from this threat (Camau and Geisser 2003; Hibou 2006)¹¹⁰.

This brief but relatively in-depth discussion of the politisation and the subsequent securitisation of political Islamism since the end of the 19th century through to the fall of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011 may seem somewhat out of place in contemporary IR research. However, I argue that an understanding the historical significance of ‘securing the state’ and its links to articulations of regime legitimacy in Tunisia is fundamental to understanding the contemporary security environment.

4.3.2 Policing the Islamists or delegitimising Ennahda and political protest?

Thus, ‘securing the state’ from the threat of political Islamism is not entirely novel in Tunisian political history or political discourse. Indeed, nor is the use of performative security discourse surrounding terrorism to create moral panic to delegitimise particular social groups unique to the contemporary Tunisian context. Baker-Beall argues that vague wording of security discourse in EU counterterror policy has acted to construct the ‘Muslim other’ as a security threat associated with terrorism (2011). In a similar vein, Lister’s (2019) work on UK counterterror policy suggests that if you replace the words ‘mugging’ with ‘terrorism’ and the words ‘1970s’ with ‘2000s’ in Stuart Hall et al’s 1978 classic ‘Policing the Crisis’, we can understand how UK counterterror policy has disproportionately targeted and discriminated against British Muslims in ways not dissimilar to racialised policing of Black British communities in the 1970s (Lister 2019 p.431). Significantly, both authors argue coercive policing of marginalised groups, be they British Muslims since 9/11 or Black Britons in the 1970s, is a reactionary response to discursively constructed security threats to distract from ‘crises’ of neoliberalism (Hall et al 1978; Lister 2019). In Tunisia, moral panic is similarly constructed to mobilise consent for the ‘policing’ of particular marginalised groups. However, rather than placing the ‘blame’ for terrorist attacks solely at the door of the terrorists, elite discourse depicts political Islamism as synonymous with, or at least partially, responsible for Islamic extremism to delegitimise it and justify measures which disproportionately target such groups.

¹¹⁰ ‘In Tunisia, danger is the magic word that guides the modes of governance; Islamist danger, of course, but also the danger of poverty, inequality, vectors of Islamism: danger of a too strong process of westernisation that feeds Islamism, dangers of economic crisis that favours unemployment and de-socialisation, factors of Islamisation’ (Hibou 2006 pp.220)

Delegitimising Ennahda

One of the clear political purposes of this is to delegitimise Ennahda, a political Islamist party, as a political force. Ennahda, who were banned under the Ben Ali regime, have consistently been one of the most dominant political forces in post-revolutionary Tunisia¹¹¹. Since 2015, there have been many subtle, and less subtle, attempts to delegitimise Ennahda through discourse that presents them as synonymous with terrorism. For example, when asked if there had been negligence in the initial years following the revolution regarding radical Islamists, former President BCE replied *'the government, aware of the dangers, allowed it to happen. Could you say 'encourage' The heads of political Islamism were lenient with the terrorists and extremist groups'* (cited in Chabot and Essebsi 2016, p.70).

Given that Ennahda led the government in this two-year period, as well as the former President's clear references to 'political Islam', the former President of the Republic is suggesting that their leniency with the extremists in their movement enabled these attacks to take place. Regardless of the reality of Ennahda's security policies in these initial years, this quote is demonstrative of the widely accepted view among Tunisians that this initial government led to weak and ineffective security policy (Santini 2018). In the words of one prominent political commentator speaking to me in January of 2020, 'Ennahda did not take young Salafis in their movement seriously, they thought they could control them... they thought they could contain them...but these are young angry men who have few options and opportunities... this failure of judgement risked Tunisia's security'¹¹².

In a similar vein, since his accession to Presidency in late 2019 until his authoritarian power grab in July 2021, President Kais Saied used vague references to Ennahda as a security threat when making official Presidential speeches and discourses (Mannai 2020). Many of which referred to Ennahda as being 'traitors' or 'conspiring with external forces' as well as vague references to 'plots' being hatched abroad (Guesmi 2020; Mannai 2020). Participants suggested that these statements were deliberate, and yet intentionally vague, references to Ennahda, who allegedly have international connections to Islamist parties across the Gulf and

¹¹¹ They were the single biggest party in National Constituent Assembly elections in 2011 and Parliamentary elections in 2019 as well as being the second biggest party in Parliamentary elections in 2014

¹¹² Interview with prominent political commentator, January 2020

Middle East¹¹³. However, other politicians were far less subtle in their attempts to portray Islamism as synonymous with terrorism. The head of the Free Destourian Party, which has significant links to the former party of Ben Ali, MP Abir Moussi, suggested that Ennahda, who she labelled as the ‘Brothers’ in a clear reference to the more radical Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, were aiming to destabilise the legitimacy and sovereignty of the government in a similar fashion to that witnessed in Libya (Guesmi 2020). Furthermore, Moussi claimed that under Ghannouchi’s reign, the Tunisian Parliament had become ‘an incubator of terrorism and violence and serves as the operations control room (for the Islamists) from which relations with terrorists and those returning from hotbeds of tension are managed’ (Guesmi 2020).

Attempts to delegitimise political Islam through performative security discourse and practices had political motivations given that Ennahda has been one of the most dominant political forces in the post-transition period. However, discourses delegitimising Ennahda, and political Islam have taken a more sinister form since Saied’s authoritarian power grab in July 2021. It is unsurprising that this rhetoric has intensified since his ‘coup’ in July 2021, given that Ennahda were the dominant political force within the Tunisian Parliament prior to its dissolution and that they have been vocally critical of Saied’s attempts to seize authoritarian control of Tunisia. However, since his authoritarian power grab, Saied has used accusations of terrorism to not only delegitimise Islamists but also to arrest, charge, harass and detain political opponents, including Ennahda figures, in far more problematic ways (The New Arab Staff 2022). For example, Ghannouchi, Speaker of the ARP prior to its dissolution, has been arrested, questioned and accused of terrorism – accusations which have been almost universally condemned as baseless and politically motivated (The New Arab Staff 2022).

Delegitimising the unemployed and policing protest

As I have shown through the concept of performativity, political elites in the period between 2014-2021 constructed moral panic around Islamism as an attempt to ‘flex their state-like muscles’ and present themselves as the providers of security from certain ‘existential threats’. However, these very same discourses also acted to demonise young men from poor urban and economically marginalised regions of Tunisia, who have been statistically shown to be more

¹¹³ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, May 2021; Interview with security concerned NGO worker, January 2020

vulnerable to radicalisation (Han 2021) but are also the individuals most likely to be involved in ‘street politics’ contesting the neoliberal consensus¹¹⁴.

In fact, Han (2021) writes ‘Tunisia’s ruling elite attempted to marginalise the unemployment issue and regulate the protests of the unemployment, partly, and significantly, through their (ab)use of the threat of terrorism’ (p.157). In other words, protestors, including those protesting unemployment, lack of economic opportunities and austerity, were presented by policy makers as both intentionally and unintentionally ‘helping’ terrorists infiltrate Tunisia (Han 2021, p.161). For example, on February 9, 2018, President BCE said, when referring to anti-austerity protests, ‘there are who tried to hijack this protest and spread terrorism’ (Han 2021, p162). This comment came just six days after another leading Nidaa Tounes figure, Farid El-Baji, stated ‘it is the terrorists in Tunisia who enjoy these acts of subversion and chaos, because acts are the only way they can overthrow the state... the security forces were overwhelmed by domestic protests. It makes it easier for terrorist to cross the borders with weapons’ (2018 cited in Han 2021, p.162). Thus, the purpose of such discourses was to both delegitimise these protests as well as justifying their harsh repression as necessary from a national security perspective. Furthermore, this acts to distract from the way in which the suppression of such protests runs counter to Tunisian human rights law as well as detracting from the validity of the economic concerns of the protestors.

Interestingly, poor urban neighbourhoods and marginalised regions, particularly those in the South, have been the backbone of much of Ennahda’s electoral support (Merone 2015; McCarthy 2018). Studies, such as Rory McCarthy’s ethnographic study of Islamists in Sousse (2018), have shown the local support of Ennahda in these areas tends to be in a more socially conservative and less neoliberal vision than the brand of political Islam articulated by the centralised (and often westernised) Ennahda elite. Therefore, attempts to portray certain marginalised groups as synonymous with the threat of Islamism and terrorism clearly have political motivations. For example, former President Essebsi, accused voters of Moncef Marzouki, his Ennahda opponent in the Presidential election of 2014 and who comes from the South, of being terrorists since being Islamists (ArabNews 2014)¹¹⁵.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Tunisian academic specialising in CVE in marginalised regions of Tunisia, May 2021

¹¹⁵ Interview with Tunisian journalist, Tunis, January 2020

It is true that certain southern regions have been characterised by higher-than-average rates of terrorist activity and radicalisation in the period since 2011 (Jrad and Ghanem 2021) – for both geographic reasons as well as being linked to a long history of socio-economic injustice and inequality. Nonetheless, these very real threats have been capitalised upon to further delegitimise and police these communities. ‘The narrative construction of a backward and threatening south has remained and has received new force’ (Mejri 2014 cited in Santini 2018, p.69). Therefore, the political expediency of ‘securitising’ such communities combined with terrorist activity in some of these areas has made already marginalised communities easy targets for delegitimising discourses (Han 2021). Significantly, these discourses also seek to mobilise consent for a particular course of action. According to Hall et al (1978), mobilising consent is about constructing a consensus that the subversive group identified is a threat and vitally, that certain measures must be taken to deal with the threat. Thus, in the section below I analyse the measures that such discourses seek to justify.

4.3.3 Policing the subversive minority

From 2015 onwards, Tunisian security policies and practices became increasingly repressive and illiberal. The state of emergency provided Tunisian security services with the tools to target and monitor political Islamist groups, or individuals perceived to belong to them, with little evidence and in a manner which circumvents civil liberties and rule of law.

Furthermore, on July 25, 2015, the Anti-Terrorism and Money Laundering law was approved by the Tunisian Parliament by a landslide majority (Bras 2016, pp.309–323). The law created several exceptional powers that would have not have been legal prior to its adoption including; the re-establishment of the death penalty for terrorist activities or the murder of people protected under international law, granting the authorities the right to detain people suspected of terrorist activities for up to fifteen days without access to a lawyer or being brought before a judge, allowing authorities to increase controls on the media and ban strike action or social mobilisation deemed dangerous to public order (AfricaResearchBulletin 2015).

One of the most worrying aspects of the 2015 Anti-Terror Law is that it recreates many of the structures of the 2003 Anti-Terror Law, enacted during the Ben Ali regime (Bras 2016).

This was one of the key institutional frameworks exploited by the former regime to impose harsh authoritarian oppression of political opponents including Ennahda (Hibou 2006; Heydemann 2007; Bras 2016).

Significantly, NGOs and journalist have argued that the Anti-Terror Law of 2015 is being misused to target those believed to sympathise with political Islamism often without evidence or trial¹¹⁶ (HumanRightsWatch 2016; AmnestyInternational 2017a). The misuse of house arrests against individuals accused, somewhat vaguely and without any evidence, of being ‘Salafists’ is one of the most worrying examples of the re-emergence practices during the former regime (AmnestyInternational 2017). There are reports of individuals being detained because the length of their beards (AmnestyInternational 2017a, p.25) or the fact they had travelled to Turkey meant that security officers believed they may be Salafists (HumanRightsWatch 2016; AmnestyInternational 2017a; Guesmi 2018). Moreover, torture against those accused of, not convicted of, terrorist offences is a widespread phenomenon (HumanRightsWatch 2016; AmnestyInternational 2017a; Guesmi 2018). Tunisian Human Rights lawyer, Radya Nasrawi, claims ‘They use electric shocks...and prisoners are being raped... (..) We thought such methods had disappeared with the fall of President Ben Ali’s dictatorship. But these savage methods are still being used in Tunisia’ (Torture in Tunisia. 2015). Although many of the those tortured are accused of minor crimes, there is a clear emphasis on those individuals believed to be associated with Islamism (Torture in Tunisia. 2015; HumanRightsWatch 2016; AmnestyInternational 2017a).

Thus, performative security discourses which present political Islamism and terrorism as synonymous with one another have been used to ‘justify’ increasingly illiberal policies and repressive security practices levied against both accused terrorists and those suspected of being political Islamists. However, they have also been used, at points, to stifle protests and social movements.

4.3.4 Counterterrorism as a means to repress contestation of neoliberalism

¹¹⁶ Individuals accused under the 2015 Anti-Terror act are likely to be detained for prolonged periods of time awaiting trial (AmnestyInternational 2017). In February 2017, for example, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of human rights and protecting fundamental freedoms while combatting terrorism lamented that only 10% of those currently being detained in Tunisian prison for suspected terrorist offenses had been charged (UNHRC cited in USStateDepartment 2017).

Significantly, particularly for scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism, heavy handed and illiberal security policy responses do not just serve to perform statehood, nor to police the subversive minority, they are also about cracking down on sites of contestation and resistance of neoliberalism that do emerge (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). Indeed, the Head of a security concerned NGO in Tunis argued that ‘declaring the state of emergency and the war on terror was linked to an attempt to criminalise social protests’¹¹⁷. This criminalisation of protest was enabled, for example, by the 2015 Anti-Terror Law’s notably broad definition of terrorism which ‘leaves the door open to political interpretation of who is a terrorist or belongs to a terrorist organisation or is involved in a terrorist activity’ (Alzubairi 2019a, p.190). The law was also used stifle popular movements as it does not distinguish between acts of social mobilisation or terrorist act (Alzubairi 2019, p.1). Evidence of this came in September 2015 when, using the exceptional powers created by both the state of emergency and the 2015 Anti-Terror law, the government banned organised protests (Salem 2015, p.14). This is indicative of how the neoliberal security state relies upon an intensification of the coercive apparatuses of the state to insulate neoliberalism from contestation (Tansel 2017).

Furthermore, the use of counterterrorism laws and the state of emergency to ban protests, including those contesting neoliberalism, austerity and extractive economic relations, can be thought of as an example of pre-emptive mechanisms of authoritarian neoliberal governance (Bruff 2014). Further evidence of the pre-emptive use of emergency security powers to insulate neoliberalism from contestation came in January of 2022, when Saied used counter terror and anti-coronavirus measures to ban political protests. This move came just the night before the 11th anniversary of January 14 Revolution and was seen by many as an attempt to prevent the annual large-scale protests which have taken place on the anniversary of the 2011 revolution. In recent years, these protests have become significant sites of contestation of the neoliberal consensus where Tunisians have voiced their dismay at the lack of economic reform since 2011 (Gallien 2018; Hamouchene 2018; Aliriza 2020). The anniversary protests took place despite the ban and were met with some of the most overt police brutality seen since the revolution of 2011¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Head of security concerned NGO, March 2020

¹¹⁸ Interview with freelance journalist, May 2022

Furthermore, we can think of the use of repressive policing under the guise of counterterrorism as a means to clamp down on sites of resistance that do emerge (Tansel 2017). In January 2018, protests erupted surrounding the Finance Law which sought to put in place debt ceilings and cement austerity measures (Hamouchene 2018; Gallien 2022). I argue these protests represented a contestation of neoliberal consensus in Tunisia and anger at the level of influence of external actors, including IFIs, in shaping Tunisian economic policy (See also Aliriza 2020, p.40). These protests, in which hundreds were arrested and many were beaten, are just one example of the many occasions when anti-austerity protests have been very harshly repressed. Although many of these repressive practices are criminalised under Tunisian law, there is a growing disparity between Tunisia's legal frameworks and the practices of the security services¹¹⁹. This is indicative of the way in which we have seen the re-emergence of repressive security practices, associated with the former regime, particularly in terms of the policing of protests and police brutality levied against deprived communities and those contesting austerity under the guise of counterterror frameworks.

Similarly in the previous section, I argued that Tunisia's marginalised regions – such as the so-called 'backward South' – have been discursively constructed as hotbeds of radicalisation in part due to their electoral support of Ennahda and more socially conservative views. Significantly, many of these marginalised regions have also become significant sites of contestation of the economic status quo – in other words, contestation of neoliberalisation, austerity, economic inequalities and dispossession (Han 2021; Jouili 2023; Maryon 2023; Mullin 2023). For example, the Kamour movement in Tataouine has occupied and blockaded an oil and gas facility in the region several times since 2017 in protest at the way in which the resource rich region was often left out of development policies and did not see the benefits of its extracted resources (Meddeb 2021). In such regions, particularly in Tunisia's borderlands, we have seen an intensification of security personnel and presence in this same period. While such personnel are theoretically there to police Tunisia's borders from the threats of smuggling and terrorism (Maryon 2023), there have been many occasions where these security forces have been sent in to repress sites of resistance by marginalised communities in Tunisia's borderlands who are contesting their economic conditions (Mullin 2023)¹²⁰. For example, November 2021, one man died in Agareb after security forces struck him with tear

¹¹⁹ Interview with worker at Security Sector Reform NGO, Tunis, January 2020

¹²⁰ In Chapter 5, I look at the role of external security assistance in militarizing Tunisia's borderlands and thus, providing the Tunisian state with the tools to repress contestation

gas and another died from inhaling massive amounts of the same tear gas during a mass protest against the lack of economic development and at the environmental impacts of a massive landfill site (Al Jazeera 2021). This incident took place less than two years after Agareb had been visited by President Saied who had promised significant investment and development in the region during this visit. One protester summarised people's frustration in stating 'Thank you Mr President, for the tear gas you use to attack us instead of offering the development you promised us when you visited Agareb' (Hammami 2021).

And thus, the threat of terrorism has been used to justify the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state in ways that act to repress contestation of the economic status quo as well as to ensure the continuation of economically lucrative resource extraction from these resource rich but impoverished areas (Mullin 2023). While not the discussion of this chapter, we must also note that it is external actors who are providing the Tunisian security forces with the tools to protect and police these sites of resource extraction. These are very often the same actors who benefit so greatly from these resources due to their extractive economic relations and preferential trade agreements (Maryon 2023; Mullin 2023) – as I elaborate more extensively in the following chapter when I grapple with the role of external actors.

4.4 'The bait and switch': distracting from dispossession and inequalities

While repressive security practices and exceptional security measures 'clamp' down on contestation of the neoliberal consensus (Tansel 2017), constructed moral panic surrounding Islamism aims to distract from some of the genuine contributing factors in radicalisation and insecurity in Tunisia. These include, I argue, the negative social consequences of neoliberal reforms. In the words of one CSO worker, 'marginalisation and underdevelopment are among the main reasons why people have turned to violence and are easy prey for violent groups'¹²¹. In other words, the moral panic surrounding political Islam and radicalisation is used to distract from the clear evidence that radicalisation and thus terrorism in Tunisia is linked to dispossession, inequalities, and lack of opportunities – all of which are fundamentally connected to and reinforced by the negative social consequences neoliberal policy (Moos 2017; Süß and Aakhunzzada 2019). Lister refers to this process as 'bait and switch' (2019 p.428). Indeed, a prominent political commentator interviewed for this thesis stated:

¹²¹ Interview with CSO worker in Tunis, January 2020

I think in the case of Tunisia and the jihadi threat has been blown up by elements of the state itself to distract from questions of social economic justice. Because of neoliberal policies there are people in Tunisia that are suffering from poverty and are desperate.... I think some people in the security forces or some people in the state were very happy to talk about the problem of jihadism to really lay the blame on Ennahda. For me, this was about trying to distract from socio-economic issues and say the challenge right now is terrorism and not necessarily focus on trying to meet the demands of the revolution... and the need for a fairer and more equitable Tunisia¹²²

In a similar vein, Fadhel Kaboub, a prominent Tunisian economist, wrote ‘it is insane how quickly the media & political class narrative of the crisis of #Tunisia has shifted to security, terrorism and parties blaming each other. The fundamental problem is the #neoliberal economic model that is designed to punish Tunisia’ (2018).

It is true that various studies suggest that those living in deprived urban areas as well as economically marginalised regions of Tunisia are more likely to turn to violence and radicalisation because of lack of economic opportunities and the disillusionment this causes (Aliaga and O’Farrell 2017; Jrad and Ghanem 2021; Meddeb 2021)¹²³. These studies are not about making predictions nor suggesting that there is a definitive causal link between economic deprivation and radicalisation. Nonetheless, economic insecurity and marginalisation are contributing factors in the insecurity which can lead to radicalisation (Aliaga and O’Farrell 2017; Moos 2017; Süß and Aakhunzzada 2019; Jrad and Ghanem 2021). Perhaps more importantly, moral panic surrounding terrorism and repressive security practices and the construction of the subversive minority act to distract from open discussion about the impact of neoliberal policies and their negative social consequences including radicalisation among marginalised groups.

Therefore, the analysis of this chapter suggests that insecurity in Tunisia is fundamentally linked to neoliberalism and its increasingly authoritarian manifestations in post-2011 Tunisia. Speaking to me in October 2021, prominent Tunisian academic and political commentator suggested ‘what truly threatens Tunisia today is not the relatively well contained threat of

¹²² Interview with prominent Tunisian political commentator, May 2021

¹²³ For example, a report authored by Aliaga and O’Farrell (2017) found that those living marginalised regions and urban areas characterised by lack of economic opportunities were more likely to turn to extremism.

radicalisation, but the ever-present danger of despair caused by the devastating social and economic effects of neoliberal policies and austerity politics'. One cannot theorise the attempts by contemporary policy makers to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy without an understanding of the way in which performing statehood through 'securing the state' acts to distract from some of socioeconomic concerns. Significantly, these socioeconomic concerns, caused by the fallout of decades of failed neoliberal policies, are linked to both the contemporary crisis in which Tunisia finds itself as well as the context of insecurity in the MENA more broadly.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that counterterrorism discourse and security policies and practices in contemporary Tunisia can be understood as performativity of the authoritarian neoliberal state. This is because the state, deprived of its sovereignty in certain areas associated with neoliberalism and faced with challenges to its legitimacy due to the failure of neoliberal policies, uses performative security practices to reassert its sovereignty and attempt to reconfigure its legitimacy. Performative security politics is aimed at delegitimising political Islamism and any societal opposition to the neoliberal consensus constructed at elite levels. Moral panic constructed around marginalised groups and broadly defined 'Islamists' is about justifying the roll out of repressive policing of such communities. Furthermore, by delegitimising societal contestation of the so-called Tunisian consensus, political elites are seeking to distract from poverty, dispossession and the failure of neoliberalism as very real contributing factors in the insecurity that pushes individuals to radicalisation.

Thus, through its exploration of the Tunisian case, this chapter makes a standalone empirical contribution regarding 'securing the state' as performativity of the authoritarian neoliberal state building upon the theoretical discussions furthered in Lister's 2019. While Lister's theoretical arguments explored counterterror politics as performativity of the British neoliberal state (2019), I have provided deeper empirical analysis of performative security discourse and practice of the Tunisian *authoritarian* neoliberal state. Furthermore, by mobilising the concept of performativity to analyse the authoritarian neoliberal state, I seek to make a theoretical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism – reflecting upon the additional conceptual tools with which we can think beyond political economy in study of authoritarian neoliberalisms. Thus, with its empirical focus on the

Tunisian case between 2014-2021, this chapter has reinforced the claim that I have made throughout this thesis; that the Critical Security Studies scholar can best conceptualise in(security) in MENA when thinking both with and beyond political economy. Therefore, making the call for the breaking down of the illusionary interdisciplinary disassociations between security studies and international political economy in research about repressive state practices in the context of contemporary and increasingly authoritarian neoliberalism.

In this chapter, I have focused my analysis of the claims to legitimacy, through performative security politics, of political elites in post-transition Tunisia. At times, this has been an almost monolithic depiction of the state which has somewhat obscured the agency of other actors. Despite this, I attempted to demonstrate that the security discourses, policies, and practices of political elites are not exceptionalised and depolitised and that are not without contestation. In reality, the discourse of ‘securing the state’ and the associated performative security policies and practices are inherently political and come into conflict with, or are at least shaped by, the counterclaims of other significant actors. Indeed, in the following chapter, Chapter 5, I explore the role of external actors, their security and economic interventions, in both playing into competing attempts to reconfigure the legitimacy of the post-2011 regime and reinforcing authoritarian neoliberalism.

Chapter 5 - SA, the ‘donor cartel’ and the rise of the Tunisian security state: The role of external actors in the reconfiguration regime legitimacy

A huge thank you to the funding bodies who have provided so many resources to the Ministry of the Interior since 2011 that the police were able to lockdown central Tunis in 25 minutes.

Tunisian academic, January 14, 2022 – the 11th Anniversary of the Tunisian Revolution

Introduction

Since 2011, Tunisia has experienced unprecedented levels of external intervention in its domestic affairs including, but not limited to, an array of financial assistance packages as well as significant financing, training and equipping of its security forces by external actors – commonly known as Security Assistance (SA). Indeed, foreign intervention in post-transition Tunisia has been so significant that it would be impossible to grapple with the question of the reconfiguration of regime legitimacy in this period, the central discussion of this thesis, without engaging with the role of external actors.

Accordingly, in this chapter, I will argue that external actors are contributing to attempts by domestic political elites to reconfigure regime legitimacy around ‘securing the state’, as explored in the previous chapter, in a way that simultaneously reinforces authoritarian neoliberalism. SA acts to insulate neoliberalism from contestation through providing the Tunisian state with the tools to repress social movements and popular uprisings against austerity measures and neoliberal economic policies (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017).

Significantly, it is the same actors providing the Tunisian state with the tools to repress contestation of neoliberalism that are simultaneously seeking to impose neoliberalisation of the Tunisian economy through financial assistance packages¹²⁴ (Santini 2018; Ben Gahda 2022; Maryon 2023). Therefore, by employing the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism, I demonstrate the connections between neoliberal reform agendas of external actors and the SA these very same partners provide – thus, illuminating the global entanglements of neoliberal security states.

¹²⁴ For example, the US, the EU, the French and the other members of the Deauville Partnership of the G7+, also known as the ‘donor cartel’ (Chandoul 2015)

While the connections between SA and contemporary neoliberal security states are the main focus of this chapter, I shed light on the interconnected histories of coercive state practices (Khalili 2010a) and their links to racialised and hierarchical capitalist accumulation (Rodney 1972; Robinson 2019). Indeed, by exploring the interlinkages between SA and authoritarian neoliberalism through the conceptual lens of racial capitalism (See Bhattacharyya 2018; Robinson 2019), I argue that SA must be understood as part of global, interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control designed to insulate capitalist accumulation - from imperial to neoliberal - from contestation. Race making – in other words rendering Tunisia non-white and thus, justifying security and economic interventions in order to ‘secure’ and ‘stabilise’ what are presented as ‘uncivilised’ and ‘volatile’ parts of the world - plays a vital role in this process (Singh 2017; Mullin 2023). In short, the 2015 security ‘crisis’, was exploited by Tunisian political elites to both reconfigure their claims to legitimacy as well as reinforce authoritarian neoliberal governance of Tunisia (Maryon 2023). However, it also served as a means to ‘further Tunisia’s imbrications within imperialist security architecture’ (Mullin 2023, p.167) and deepen Tunisia’s dependent and peripheral position within the global economy.

To explore these discussions this chapter will be elaborated as follows. In section 5.1, I show how the concepts of authoritarian neoliberalism and racial capitalism can be used to analyse external actors’ interventions in post-2011 Tunisia. In section 5.2, I examine the colonial genealogy of Tunisia’s security cooperation with external actors demonstrating this has long been, and continues to be, a means to insulate capitalist models of extraction from contestation and repressing sites of contestation that do emerge. In section 5.3, I map and analyse the links between the security and financial assistance provided to Tunisia since 2011– demonstrating that provider states use these interventions to pursue neoliberalisation of the Tunisian economy and deepen Tunisia’s security and financial dependency on global northern states. In section 5.4, I explore the way in which SA has provided the increasingly (authoritarian) neoliberal security state with the tools to repress social movements thus insulating neoliberalism from contestation. I also demonstrate how the roll out of the Tunisian authoritarian neoliberal state also serves the economic objectives of provider states. Finally, in section 5.5, I explore the border management aspects of SA which have drastically ‘scaled up’ in post-2015 Tunisia. I use this extended example to demonstrate the interlinkages between SA, its (mis)use to insulate the neoliberal security state from contestation as well as

situating such analyses within broader discussions of racial capitalism, bordering and race making in external interventions.

5.1 Thinking with authoritarian neoliberalism and racial capitalism through the case of SA

This chapter explores the role external actors, through their provision of both financial and SA, have played in the attempts of successive post-transition regimes in Tunisia to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy and how such interventions have shaped authoritarian neoliberal governance in this period. However, this chapter makes a broader theoretical argument in terms of bringing authoritarian neoliberalism, as a concept, into conversation with the conceptual lens of racial capitalism (See Robinson 2019). In other words, I argue the post-transition Tunisian case enables us to understand authoritarian neoliberalism as a fundamental contemporary aspect of the broader system and *longue durée* of *global* racial capitalism. Thus, in this section of the chapter, I show how the case of external intervention in post-2011 Tunisia enables us to bring these concepts into conversation with one another.

5.1.1 History and beyond

Scholars have argued the analytical utility of authoritarian neoliberalism lies not in a ‘conceptual separation of the past, but rather a consideration of the durability of authoritarian state forms’ (Ryan 2019, p.116). Capitalist accumulation, particularly that built on a history of colonial extraction, has long been violent and coercive (Robinson 2019) – and this is the case in Tunisia¹²⁵. Thus, we must grapple with the colonial and racist roots of neoliberal security states and extractive economic models both in the Global North and South (Tansel in Axster et al 2021). Furthermore, I seek to shed light on the *interconnected* histories of coercive state practices and their links to racialised and hierarchical capitalist accumulation. For example, in section 5.2 of this chapter, I explore the long *durée* of security cooperation between Tunisian political elites and external actors emphasising the way in which this security cooperation served to maintain societal cooperation within the system of the (post)colonial capitalism.

¹²⁵ This is the case in Tunisia from French colonial rule (Thomas 2012), to the early years of independence and continued dependence (Ajl et al. 2020), to the 1986 neoliberal turn and the IMF's structural adjustment programmes (Mullin 2023), to capitalism à la Ben Ali (Görmüş and Akçalı 2021) and finally and, significantly for this project, in the post-2011 context of authoritarian neoliberalism.

However, the ‘link’ between authoritarian neoliberalism and racial capitalism is more than a mere historical connection. In other words, the purpose of incorporating these two concepts is not *just* about situating contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism within its violent, colonial and racist history. It’s also about enabling us to get a better understanding of contemporary authoritarian neoliberal state strategies, their impacts and their global entanglements by situating them within global, interconnected, hierarchical and racialised models of capitalist accumulation. For example, a mere historical reading of the relationship between authoritarian neoliberalism and racial capitalism – through the case of security cooperation - might lead us to reflect upon the colonial afterlives in the contemporary security governance of neoliberal security states (Khalili 2010a; Axster et al. 2021). In Tunisia, such a perspective would enable us to see the legacies of French colonial security governance in the contemporary security architecture – such as Tunisia’s highly French inspired militarised National Guard (De Bruin and Karabatak 2022; Maryon 2023) and the role it has played a role in quelling dissent since the 2007 crash¹²⁶.

However, by adopting a more holistic exploration of the relationship between authoritarian neoliberalism and racial capitalism we can conceptualise contemporary practices of security cooperation as feedback loops which circulate and evolve across space and time and form a ‘global carceral empire of control’ (Axster and Danewid 2021) essential to sustaining global racial capitalism. Indeed, colonial security governance (Koshy et al. 2022), border regimes (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Danewid 2022), policing (McMichael 2017; Ramirez 2021), mass incarceration (Gilmore 2007) and more recently, counterterrorism (Mullin 2023), ‘rather than being purely “domestic” forms of control – have historically been, and continue to operate as, interconnected and integral elements of global racial capitalism’ (Axster et al 2021, p.3). Indeed, these strategies have long served as a way to control the ‘surplus populations’ created by global racial capitalism thus protecting the interests of capital regardless of where they are deployed (Bhattacharyya 2018; Axster and Danewid 2021). More precisely, by studying the case of Tunisia through lens of racial capitalism and authoritarian neoliberalism, we can see the way in which financial and material resources provided by external actors since 2011 have been negotiated and co-opted in a way that aims to ‘sure up’ Tunisia elites’ legitimacy and control as well as their privileged economic position within Tunisia. Simultaneously, we can better understand how external actors’

¹²⁶ Such as its use to quell border resistance in Kesserine in 2021

engagement in Tunisia since January 2011 has served a means for them to maintain Tunisia's marginalised, racialised and peripheral position with the system of global racial capitalism (Aliriza 2020; Jouili 2023; Mullin 2023).

Furthermore, while racial capitalism can help us understand the *longue durée* of Tunisia's marginalised position within the global economy, authoritarian neoliberalism can help us interrogate the *intensified* recourse to coercive state power seen in response to the contestation faced by capitalist states in the post-2007 period (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). It can also shed light on some of the reconfigurations of state and institutional power – namely in terms of novel frameworks and pre-emptive mechanisms – which have developed in the post-2007 period in an attempt to insulate neoliberalism from future contestation (Bruff 2014). In other words, the techniques of authoritarian neoliberal governance that have emerged since 2007 were a response to the intense period of contestation which followed the crash (Tansel 2017). However, as I have emphasised throughout this thesis, we cannot isolate these state strategies of authoritarian neoliberalism from global dynamics of racialised and hierarchical capitalist accumulation and the security feedback loops which have historically, and continue to, insulate it from contestation (Axster et al. 2021). This is what I argue is taking place in Tunisia. The 2015 'security crisis' has been capitalised upon by domestic political elites to shore up their claims to legitimacy and their own economic interests (Maryon 2023). It also serves means for external actors to deepen Tunisia's dependency in several domains and its subordination in the global economy (Hamouchene 2018; Aliriza 2020; Ben Gahda 2022) while quelling the radicalism of Tunisia's initial popular uprising and its anti-neoliberal and anti-colonial inspirations (Jouili 2023).

Moreover, scholars have emphasised the way in which the authoritarian neoliberal state has whipped up moral panic surrounding 'security crises' to roll out the coercive apparatuses of the state - be it social welfare reforms or border regimes - in ways that often disproportionately impact, police and inflict harm on already marginalised groups (De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Lister 2019; Laub 2021). So, while racial capitalism enables us to understand why social categorisations exist and the purpose of 'race making' within the system of global racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018; Bright et al. 2022), the conceptual lens of authoritarian neoliberalism means we can understand why and when we see an intensification of the state strategies which act to (re)shape, sustain and justify these social categorisations (race, class, gender etc) in times of contestation and 'crisis'. In the post-2015

security environment, such a perspective enables us to see how recent security interventions, particularly in terms of counterterrorism and border management - are achieved and justified through practices of race making (Singh 2017). In other words, the means by which ‘securitized difference is (re)produced, exploited and managed over time both within and across the borders of empire, traversing the domestic and global colour line to, in W.E.B Du Bois’ words “degraded colored labor the world over” (Du Bois 1925 cited in Mullin 2023 p.168). Scholarly perspectives have, quite rightly, focused on anti-Black racism in Tunisian society and its border regime (Maryon 2022; Parikh 2023). However, it is vital to study the ‘the multiple and intersecting forms of race making required by core-capital accumulation’ (Mullin 2023, p.168). In the Tunisian context, this means engaging with the racialised hierarchies which operate both within Tunisia to justify inequalities and the repressive policing of certain communities, as well as the complex array of intersecting racialised hierarchies that operate globally to sustain global interconnected mechanisms of coercion, control and capitalist accumulation.

Thus, the incorporation of these two concepts enables us to understand that contemporary authoritarian neoliberal state strategies are deeply connected to global, hierarchical and racialised models of capitalist accumulation and carceral archipelago¹²⁷ which serves to insulate racial capitalism from contestation. Authoritarian neoliberal state strategies and global mechanisms of racial capitalist accumulation do not exist separately of one another. Rather, today they operate in conjunction with one another in order for the system of post-colonial global racial capitalism to continue to function as we know it. In Tunisia, the entanglements between state strategies of authoritarian neoliberalism and global mechanisms of coercion and control led to the agreement of various vast conditional loan programmes with the IMF (Jouili 2023), huge increases in the SA provided to Tunisia’s security forces (Maryon 2023; Mullin 2023) as well as the intensification of deadly border management programmes between Tunisia and external actors (Maryon 2022). However, these particularities of the Tunisian case are indicative of the way in which austerity and pre-emptive strategies of authoritarian neoliberalism, the GWOT (Mullin 2023) and bordering (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018) have been used to maintain the integrity of the system of global

¹²⁷ See Axster et al (2021). While originally developed by Foucault to refer to development of European disciplinary mechanisms, I use the term to refer to ‘interconnected carceral spaces’ within the system of global racial capitalism.

racial capitalism when its contemporary neoliberal iteration was facing such significant contestation in the wake of the 2007 crisis.

5.2 The long durée of security cooperation and (post)colonial capitalism

Before we can understand contemporary Tunisian security cooperation with external actors and its links to extractive economic relations, we must reflect upon the colonial genealogy of security cooperation and (post)colonial capitalism in Tunisia. Indeed, while SA is an emerging practice which has gained much traction globally in the last decade¹²⁸, security cooperation between Tunisian and external actors is far from a new phenomenon.

5.2.1 Colonial security governance and colonial capitalism

During Tunisia's time as a French protectorate¹²⁹, it experienced a certain 'hybridity' of security governance. Compared to its neighbours in the Maghreb, the Beylical authorities in Tunisia had far greater involvement in the security services and security policy (Thomas 2007; Thomas 2012). Nonetheless, the Beylical authorities did not have total sovereign control of their security forces. Competencies were divided between the colonial administrators and the Bey authorities¹³⁰. In other words, colonial security governance rested upon the complicity of the Beylical authorities within these complex and yet deeply hierarchical mechanisms of security cooperation. Thus, Tunisia's security forces have been marked by external influence as well as interactions between external actors and Tunisian political elites decades prior to inpouring of external actors in the wake of the 2011 Jasmine revolution.

Similarly, the economy has long been subject to interference from global northern actors seeking to sustain their extractive economic relations with Tunisia (Thomas 2007; Thomas 2012; Ajl et al. 2020). Although colonial security arrangements may have initially been designed to guarantee the socio-political order, Tunisia's security forces became essential to gathering intelligence on and controlling growing workers and industrial movements

¹²⁸ Following the perceived failure of the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan in which providers states seek to avoid direct 'boots on the ground' interventions due to their high costs and domestic political unpopularity. Scholars have argued that they instead prefer to pursue 'at arm's length' security interventions by training and equipping the tools of coercive state power (Tholens and Al-Jabassini 2023)

¹²⁹ between 1881 and 1956

¹³⁰ Martin Thomas describes this as 'dual sovereignty' which was 'more than a façade' (Thomas 2012, p.114)

(Thomas 2012, p.112). Thus, from the interwar period onwards, we can understand external engagement with Tunisia and its security forces as an attempt to guarantee the continuation of, and societal cooperation with, the imperialist model of capitalist extraction in Tunisia (Thomas 2012, p.112). In 1921, for example, The Maritime Prefect of Bizerte called on the authorities to crack down on workers movements in ports who were allegedly smuggling communist literature (Thomas 2012, p.117). Thus, Tunisian domestic political elites colluded with the colonial authorities to repress contestation of capitalist extraction. Their priority was to maintain their own dominance, and economic benefits within the system of colonial capitalism and they were happy to instrumentalise the apparatuses of colonial security governance to do this (Thomas 2007; Thomas 2012; Lewis 2013). This clearly echoes post-colonial political elites' desire to pursue kleptocratic neoliberalisation (Bogaert 2013; Tsourapas 2013) while also lobbying external actors for SA to police social movements and political opponents both before and after January 2011. Thus, we can observe the afterlives of this French model of colonial rule in contemporary Tunisia particularly through studying the interactions between domestic political elites and international partners in matters of security.

It is important to note the significance of race making within these colonial security interventions. Under colonial rule, racialisation - rendering Tunisia 'non-white' and thus, 'volatile' and 'unstable' - was a vital tool with which to justify the violence needed to integrate Tunisia into the system of extractive capitalist accumulation (Koshy et al. 2022; Mullin 2023). Furthermore, the racialisation of Islam as something dangerous, non-white and a threat to 'modernity' served to justify French imposed secularisation of Tunisia as well as security surveillance and oppression of Islamist movements who rejected not only French colonial rule but also Western models of capitalist accumulation (Thomas 2007; Haleh Davis 2022). Tunisian political elites thus played into this process of race making - essential to capitalist-colonial violence - by rejecting Islamism, imposing state-led secularisation and by attempting to become more French than the French (Challand 2020). Simultaneously, they recreated racialised discourses levied against those that resisted colonial capitalist extraction such as insurrection movements emanating from so-called '*Tunisie inutile*' - a term used to refer to Tunisia's 'savage' southern regions left marginalised from capitalist expansion (Challand 2020).

5.2.3 Colonial afterlives and dependency in an age of 'independence'

Despite Tunisia being declared an independent nation state in 1956, external engagement with Tunisia's security forces did not end. Tunisia enjoyed some autonomy over its security policy making but it was not free from the influence of its former coloniser nor other global northern states. Indeed, between 1956 to 1966, Tunisian military officers received all their schooling abroad, primarily in France (Grewal 2022). Furthermore, the first President following Tunisian independence, Bourguiba, himself once stated that French policy makers *should* have a high level of influence in the elaboration of Tunisian foreign policy (Brooks and White 2022). Foreign intervention in security politics, despite decolonisation, was not just about maintaining geopolitical influence but also insulating extractive economic relations, such as France's interests in Tunisia's valuable phosphate industry (Ajl et al. 2020), as well as countering 'subversive' ideologies of counterinsurgent movements in the Global South in the wake of decolonisation (Peterson 2022). French military training of foreign elite security forces throughout the Cold War, in the *École Supérieure de Guerre*, for example, not only diffused counterinsurgency security practices to Tunisian security forces but also acted to reinforce anti-Communist doctrine (Peterson 2022).

Notwithstanding the continued influence of external actors, the modality of external engagement with Tunisia and its security forces changed significantly. From the 1990s onwards, Global Northern states, empowered by the broadening and widening of the security agenda, sought to engage with Tunisia on matters such as terrorism, 'underdevelopment', and migration (Mako and Moghadam 2021). Through linking economic development and reform, framed in the neoliberal paradigm, to security, global northern actors and international organisations maintained their influence in Tunisia to pursue their strategic and economic objectives (Mullin 2023). Vivaly, scholars have noted the significance of the racist vernaculars of development (Pierre 2020). In other words, interventions in the name of 'the security-development nexus', often reproduce colonial 'lexicons' of racialised difference, albeit in sometimes more subtle ways than during the colonial period, to justify the subordination of global southern sovereignty (Pierre 2020). Furthermore, the security-development nexus at the heart of external interventions in the post-cold war context acted to reinforce the 'security pact'¹³¹ (Hibou 2006) - including the racialised securitisation of Islam

¹³¹ This is the notion that 'securing the state', often through heavy handed articulations of coercive state power, was a necessary evil to safeguard Tunisia from economic insecurity and the associated 'folk devil' of Tunisian politics in political Islam (Hibou 2006).

(Challand 2020; Haleh Davis 2022) - around which regime legitimacy was constructed prior to 2011.

The purpose of this chapter is not to delve into the inner workings of security governance in Tunisia during the 19th and 20th of century, however, scholars have long argued, ‘current security governance as it unfolds in the Maghreb and the Levant is both the product of and reproducing of past generations of security interventionism’ (Santini and Tholens 2018, p.494). Moreover, a deeper historical analysis has often been omitted from work on authoritarian neoliberalism or coercive state practices (Axster et al. 2021, p.6) with neoliberalism presented as a major conjuncture disconnected from imperial histories. In contrast, we must grapple with ‘the colonial roots to contemporary security practices and the racialised and colonial origins of neoliberal ideas and policies’ (Tansel in Axster et al. 2021, p.3). Similarly, it is vital to situate the role of coercive state practices in sustaining economic models of capitalist (and colonialist) accumulation within their historical context to demonstrate that they have long served as fundamental aspects of global racial capitalism.

5.3 Coordinating security and financial assistance

In the previous section, I demonstrated Tunisian security cooperation with external actors has long been, and continues to be, connected to maintaining societal cooperation for, or at least compliance with, the capitalist model economic production - from imperial to neoliberal - and punishing dissent that does emerge. I emphasised the vital role of racialisation in these processes. In this section, however, I demonstrate that in the post-2011, and particularly the post-2015 ‘security crisis’, period, external and domestic actors negotiate this control in the interests of maintaining security for regime legitimacy and in a way that reinforces contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism firstly by examining the case of the G7+ plus mechanism otherwise known as the ‘donor cartel’ (Chandoul 2015). Through my analysis of the G7+ mechanism, I also show that imperialist powers used the format to coordinate financial and SA in order tame the radicalism of the Jasmine Revolution (Jouili 2023) and assure that Tunisia’s transition did not contest the system of global racial capitalism and Tunisia’s subordinated and racialised position within it (Mullin 2023). However, first, it is important to understand the context in which the G7+ format was extended to coordinate SA in 2015 and the significance that the post-2015 ‘security imperative’ had on Tunisian politics.

5.3.1 From SSR to SA

When the Ben Ali regime fell in January 2011, it was clear the establishment of a democratic regime would require a radical overhaul of Tunisia's security sector¹³². External actors, fearing further 'instability' in the Mediterranean region and the radicalism of Tunisia's popular uprising, were quick to offer assistance to the 'Tunisian transition' (OECD 2022)¹³³. A proportion of this was aimed at reforming and increasing the capacities of Tunisia's security forces (securityassistance.org nd)¹³⁴. However, since 2011, reform agendas have slid down the political agenda both domestically and in external interventions¹³⁵. In contrast, SA has become the focus of security partnerships in Tunisia – particularly since a wave of high-profile terrorist attacks in 2015¹³⁶. In SA programmes, reform agendas are paid lip service while training and equipping security services becomes the ultimate political priority. This change in priorities was reflected in the changing nature of SA offered by providers. For example, in 2015, the United States tripled its military spending to Tunisia (Faleg 2017). Also in 2015, the G7+ decided to launch a mechanism designed to facilitate and coordinate bilateral SA partnerships through an executive committee and working groups (Santini 2018). This was not dissimilar to the G7+ mechanism that had already been coordinating financial assistance to Tunisia by 2011. The extension of the G7+ format to SA has been accredited by many security experts and scholars with the relative success of SA to Tunisia since 2015, particularly in terms of increasing the effectiveness, professionalism, equipment, and capacities of the ISF and the Tunisian military forces (Santini 2018; Cimini and Santini 2021).

The working group system enabled certain provider states to 'specialise' in a particular area (Santini 2018; Cimini and Santini 2021). For example, Germany and the US took the lead on

¹³² 'Ben Ali's autocratic regime had drawn its legitimacy and durability from a social contract based on providing a basic level of economic and physical security and an exceptionally heavy-handed police state for those that resisted (Hibou 2006). The police were key to maintaining his power while the Tunisian armed forces had been left purposefully underfunded and politically marginalised for fear of military coups. Thus, the Tunisian transition demanded significant reform of the repressive Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) responsible for them. It also posed questions about the role of the armed forces moving forward' (Maryon 2023, p1-2)

¹³³ Full data set available at: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?datasetcode=TABLE2A>

¹³⁴ See <https://securityassistance.org/security-sector-assistance/> to see SA to Tunisia since the turn of the millennium

¹³⁵ The United Nations defines SSR as aiming 'at improving safety through enhancing the effectiveness and accountability of security institutions controlled by civilians and operating according to human rights and the rule of law' (United Nations n.d).

¹³⁶ Indeed, as I showed in Chapter 4, 2015 represented a turning point in Tunisian security politics

border management, whereas the French, in partnership with the British and the EU, took the lead on counterterrorism (Santini 2018). This allowed for a concentration of resources and ‘expertise’ and limited ineffective fragmentation and duplication of projects. For the post-colonial scholar, the neocolonial and racialised connotations of ‘expertise’ are hard to ignore (Langan 2018). However, from the technocratic perspective - from which SA has often been studied - the idea was that coordination would lead to better delivery on the counterterrorism and migration control objectives of provider states. According to many security sector experts, Tunisia’s ISF and armed forces are far more competent in matters of counterterrorism than they were prior to 2015¹³⁷. For example, ‘since 2015, the military’s operations have curtailed and even dismantled militant networks across the country, utilizing intelligence from U.S. and European partners’ (Shah & Dalton 2020, p.3). Indeed, some EU officials claim the G7+ coordination of SA is the main reason ISIS, when at the height of its operations, was unable to gain a foothold in Tunisia (Dworkin and El-Malki 2018, p.10). However, as was demonstrated in the last chapter, the use of repressive practices by the security forces against civilian populations in deprived urban neighbours and historically marginalised regions, undermines counter-radicalisation objectives in the long term. Furthermore, political instability and societal insecurity in Tunisia, which I argue has been worsened by external actors’ interventions, risk contributing to the social exclusions which fuel radicalism.

Notwithstanding this critique, the supposed rise in the performance and legitimacy of Tunisia’s security forces, particularly in counterterrorism, has been evidenced through various opinion polls. A poll conducted by the International Republican Institute found that in 2019 only 1% of Tunisians believed terrorism was the main threat to Tunisia having fallen drastically from 47% in 2015¹³⁸. Interestingly, studies have found that that perceptions of increased performance are not necessarily caused by actual improved performance but rather a sense of increased presence and material capacities (De Bruin and Karabatak 2022, p.103). Thus, the roll out of (racialised) securitised discourses and policy frameworks, such as the state of emergency, coupled with the massive increase in the levels of SA being provided to

¹³⁷ The individuals interviewed for this thesis had differing views on SA from a moral or ethical stance. However, all of participants agreed that the training and equipment provided to Tunisia’s security services since 2015 had played a key role in increasing the security services’ capacities and performance in matters of counterterrorism

¹³⁸ See https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/wysiwyg/final - 012019_iri_tunisia_poll.pdf for full data set

Tunisian security forces in the post-2015 period created the perception, in off itself, that the state was ‘doing something’ about terrorism and other ‘threats’.

The perceived increased performance of the security services has contributed to their improved legitimacy among Tunisian population (Cimini and Santini 2021). While perceptions of trust in many government institutions such as the Judiciary and Parliament have been falling since 2014, trust in the police and armed forces has remained comparatively high¹³⁹ (ArabBarometer 2019, p.7). It has long been argued that security has played a significant role in the Tunisian social contract (Camau and Geisser 2003; Hibou 2006). However, is clear that the contemporary trends regarding lack of trust in political parties and democratic institutions coupled with comparatively high levels of trust among the security services, has led political elites to seek to construct their claims to legitimacy, in partnership with the security services, around the notion of ‘securing the state’ from certain securitised threats. In this way, external actors have fed into Tunisian political elites’ attempts to reconfigure the legitimacy of the current political regime.

5.3.2 G7 plus aka the donor cartel

However, in this chapter, I seek to go beyond analysis of SA which has focused on the technocratic aspects of its organisation or the supposed ‘success’ of its implementation (Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019; Shah and Dalton 2020; Cimini and Santini 2021). Rather, I explore the interlinkages between the SA provided and the economic interests of provider states arguing that SA comprises part of global interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control that insulate capitalist accumulation from contestation. In the Tunisian case, the 2015 wave of terrorist attacks were used to reinforce Tunisia ‘imbrications within imperialist “security” spending and neocolonial “expertise”, debt and racialized financialization. In doing so, the 2015 security conjuncture reinforced Tunisia’s peripheral status in the international system and enabled further surplus value drain’ (Mullin 2023, p.167).

More precisely, the extension of the G7+ format to security cooperation in 2015, discussed above, is significant for our understanding of the connections between SA and other forms of external intervention. This is because the Deauville Partnership of the G7+, often labelled the ‘donor cartel’ (Chandoul 2015), was also the mechanism of coordination of financial

¹³⁹ Although it has recently fallen due to the security forces complicity in Saied’s authoritarian power grabs

assistance packages to Tunisia following the January 2011 revolution. These packages placed significant constraints on the ability of Tunisian policy makers to make their own macroeconomic and budgetary policy. The Deauville Partnership actively pursued, in problematic manners, their neoliberal reform agenda as discussed extensively in Chapter 3 (Ben Gahda 2022). Many of these loan agreements associated with the ‘donor cartel’ came with regular monitoring, reports and rounds of disbursements that act as mechanisms of surveillance and discipline of neoliberalism¹⁴⁰ (Sotiris 2017). In the Tunisian case, these same mechanisms allow external actors to refuse or delay the release of funds in instances where Tunisian officials are deemed to have not implemented the mandated reforms as was elaborated in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Significantly, scholars have argued that successive, large-scale financial assistance packages were used by external actors, with the complicity of post-revolutionary political elites keen to quell the radicalism of the initial revolutionary movement, to deepen Tunisia’s dependent, racialised and peripheral position within the global economy (Riahi and Hamouchene 2020; Jouili 2023; Mullin 2023). Indeed, rather cancelling Tunisia’s sovereign debt, as was suggested in the initial period following the Jasmine Revolution (Aliriza 2020), financial assistance packages such as those provided by the IMF have caused Tunisia’s debt as a percentage of GDP to skyrocket from approximately 40% at the time of the revolution to well over 90% in 2023 (Maryon 2023). Sovereign debt plays a central role in maintaining a country’s dependent, peripheral and racialised position within the global economy (Mullin 2023 p.183).

Running parallel to the neoliberal reform agendas of the Deauville Partnership, external actors also used the 2015 security crisis to deepen Tunisia’s imbrication into the Global North’s imperialist security architecture. While for external actors the motivations for this were multiform and will be expanded below, for Tunisian political elites the security conjuncture of 2015 was an opportunity to leverage resources to quell resistance and reconfigure their claims to legitimacy as the providers of security in its Weberian sense. In this vein, scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism have shown that the roll back of the state in certain areas, such as the welfare state, requires the roll out of the state in other areas such as

¹⁴⁰ Sotiris argues that mechanisms, such as regular audits and reports, serve to monitor that neoliberal macroeconomic and budgetary policy is being implemented in the way in which these external actors demand (Sotiris 2017)

policing, bordering and incarceration (Tansel 2017). In such cases, security ‘crackdowns’ are used to insulate neoliberalism from contestation and repress sites of contestation that do emerge (Tansel 2017). Indeed, Tunisia is increasingly reliant on the roll out of the forces of state security - equipped, trained, funded by G7+ states, to push through the macroeconomic and financial reforms demanded by the G7+ Deauville Partnership as part of macro financial adjustment programmes. We can see numerous examples of this in the violent repression of anti-austerity protests in post-transition Tunisia (Gallien 2018). For example, in January of each year the Tunisian government presents its Finance Law to Parliament – always containing measures which have been directly demanded by Tunisia’s creditors. Each year, the publishing of the Finance Law is met with mass protests rejecting not only these economic policies but their imposition by external actors (Hamouchene 2018).

However, it is vital to note the external actors providing Tunisian political elites with the tools to repress contestation, are often the same actors seeking to impose the neoliberal reform agenda upon Tunisian policy makers. This can be seen once again, through the case of the G7+ format. Therefore, I argue that these external actors are seeking to use the coordination provided through the G7+ format to limit Tunisian policy makers’ leverage in negotiations (Santini 2018), both regarding SA and financial assistance with the reform agendas it comes with. In other words, provider states are not merely seeking to pursue their security objectives in Tunisia but also to push their economic agenda – the neoliberalisation of the Tunisian economy in a way that benefits global northern financial markets (Aliriza 2020) and maintains Tunisia’s dependent, racialised and subordinated position in the global economy. The entanglements between SA and the economic objectives of provider states are important and must be considered to fully understand the impact of SA on Tunisia as well as the question of regime legitimacy in the context of authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia.

Indeed, the role of such actors in financing the apparatuses of coercive state power becomes even more problematic when considering their role in seeking to impose budgetary cuts in other areas. In the post-transition period, we have seen extensive neoliberal reforms and austerity measures designed to roll back the state in areas such as food subsidies, public sector employment and state-owned industries most often pursued as conditional aspects of loan packages provided by ‘donor cartel’ (Republique Tunisienne Presidence du

Gouvernement 2021; Ben Gahda 2022)¹⁴¹. However, the apparatuses of coercive state power are seldom faced with the same budgetary pressures – as per authoritarian neoliberalisms globally (Tansel 2017). Indeed, in 2022, the MoI had its budget increased while other government departments, including healthcare, were facing significant budget cuts in line with the demands of the *bailleurs des fonds* (Republique Tunisienne Presidence du Gouvernement 2021).

Furthermore, the security forces are the one area of public sector employment which has continued to grow despite large scale redundancies in other areas (Ben Gahda 2022)¹⁴². Recent reports such as those published by the World Bank (2022) highlight the reduction of public sector employment as a key area of reform for Tunisia to undertake as part of the IMF’s most recently negotiated financial assistance package. However, these reports are referring to education, health and bureaucratic civil servants when speaking of public sector redundancies, rather than police officers and soldiers. Thus, through their interventions, provider states are facilitating the roll back of the state in certain areas such as education, health and social security, while simultaneously contributing to the roll out of the apparatuses coercive state power.

Vitally, as per neoliberal security states globally, the apparatuses of coercive state power are used to sustain and police the ‘global colour line’ (Du Bois 1925)– thus disciplining racialised labour and resistance of racialised capitalist accumulation globally (Bhattacharyya 2018; Robinson 2019). In other words, race making is ‘central to how hierarchy and class domination are established, maintained and obfuscated within and between states’ (Mullin 2023 p.168). Thus, in order to grapple with the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of the state to quell the resistance of certain groups – namely the (often young male) urban poor and Tunisia’s southern historically ‘underdeveloped’ regions – we must engage with processes of racialisation and the way in which such processes intensified in the post-2015 security environment. In short, as scholars such as Challand (2020), Mullin (2023) and Parihk (2023) have argued we can see these logics of racialisation from the way in which they have been deployed historically against Tunisia’s Muslim community, to more recently with reference

¹⁴¹ For example, two IMF programmes have already been delayed because the Tunisian state’s reduction of its public sector employment bill was deemed to have not gone far enough quick enough (Republique Tunisienne Presidence du Gouvernement 2021).

¹⁴² Other than the health sector in 2020 and 2021 to respond to the COVID pandemic, however, its wage bill shrunk again in 2022 (Ben Gahda 2022).

to the securitisation of Tunisia's southern regions and borderlands as well as in the dehumanisation of its Black African migrant community. In the domestic context, such discourses serve to justify the roll out of repressive policing of certain communities and 'surplus' populations (Wacquant 2014; Tansel 2017). While for external actors, they serve as a means to deepen Tunisia's security dependency upon Global Northern partners and the associated economic dependency this entails (Mullin 2023).

In this section, I have explored the interlinkages between the SA provided by partner states and the financial assistance many of these same states provide. However, in the following section, I examine how the training and equipment provided through SA programmes, enables the Tunisian neoliberal security state to repress sites of contestation that do emerge.

5.4 Providing the Tunisian neoliberal security state with the tools to repress contestation of neoliberalism

Here I explore the role of SA in reinforcing the authoritarian neoliberal state in Tunisia by providing security forces with the tools to repress contestation. While emboldening coercive state practices has often been understood as an unfortunate consequence of SA (See Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019), I contend that it is inherent to SA as an international practice based on maintaining and strengthening mechanisms of coercion and control. Thus, it has served to reinforce authoritarian neoliberalism and, in part, facilitate the rise of the Tunisian neoliberal security state (Maryon 2023). Indeed, SA programmes, and the material support they provide, have reinforced the coercive capacities of the state to repress popular protests, closed the space for contestation of neoliberalism (Tansel 2017) and provided the state with the tools police the edge populations created by the fall out of neoliberalism (Bhattacharyya 2018). Nowhere is the (mis)use of training and equipment provided by external actors more evident than in the policing of popular protests and social movements.

5.4.1 Repressing social movements and popular protests

On January 14, 2022, police were able to shut down Central Tunis within 25 minutes with tear gas, water cannons and riot control gear being deployed against protesting citizens¹⁴³. An investigative journalist present told me it was the most blatant use of equipment provided by

¹⁴³ Interview with investigative journalist, February 2022. Also, widespread reports of journalists being targeted

external partners, such as drones and tear gas, being used against civilians he had witnessed in the post-transition period¹⁴⁴. This example demonstrates the material resources supplied by external actors are being used in the everyday policing of civilian populations. Significantly, for our understanding of authoritarian neoliberalism, many of the protests which are suppressed by the tools provided by external actors, are protests and social movements overtly rejecting neoliberal policies and the legitimacy of those seeking to impose them. For example, in January 2021, a large protest outside Tunisia's central bank calling for the restoration of 'sovereignty', alluding to the reforms imposed by IFIs and external actors, was violently repressed by Tunisia's police force¹⁴⁵ (Reuters 2021a).

Similarly, in February 2021 protests outside the Ministry of Agriculture calling for food sovereignty, a reference to the increasingly widely held view that longstanding trading agreements with the EU undermine Tunisia's food sovereignty (Ajl 2022), agricultural sector and thus food security, were also violently repressed (Siyada 2021). Those present were also protesting the mistreatment of farmers in town of Ouled Jaballah in the Mahdia governorate who had been sprayed with teargas¹⁴⁶ and shot with rubber bullets by police forces during localised protests denouncing the government for 'importing red meat and not adequately enforcing price controls for cattle feed' (Siyada 2021). These examples demonstrate that the Tunisian security forces are using the tools provided through SA programmes to repress contestation of authoritarian neoliberalism. Furthermore, the repression of sites of resistance, such as these, is also indicative of the complicity between the Tunisian neoliberal security state and the imperial interests of the provider states who train, equip and finance the apparatuses of coercive state power while benefiting from the security, food, energy and economic 'dependency' against which these protestors are mobilising (Hamouchene 2018; Ajl 2022).

Not only have provider states provided Tunisia's security services with the financial and material resources to repress contestation, but they have also trained Tunisia's security forces how to use such resources against civilians. Between 2009-2019, the US trained more than 5000 Tunisian security personnel, including the ISF¹⁴⁷, on so called 'proper crowd control

¹⁴⁴ Interview with freelance journalist, February 2022

¹⁴⁵ Interview with freelance journalist, February 2022

¹⁴⁶ Images on social media suggest this was tear gas produced in the US

¹⁴⁷ Interview with US diplomat, January 2022

techniques’, in addition to certifying 28 Tunisian trainers who have gone on to train over 700 additional officers to ‘provide professional civilian security’ (INL nd)¹⁴⁸. Current SA training programmes with the Tunisian ISF cover a broad array of security concerns including ‘counterinsurgency, rapid response training, riot control techniques, border surveillance and counter-terrorism’¹⁴⁹. I argue the increased use of repressive tactics by the Tunisian police forces is a result of knowledge sharing practices between providers and recipients at the heart of SA programmes. Cases of police brutality and the violent consequences of the ‘militarisation’ of the American police, as well as other provider states such as France, are numerous and well researched (Karim 2021; Metheven 2021). This is particularly the case for racialised communities (Ramirez 2021). Moreover, research suggests US international policing training programmes can lead to the diffusion of racist ideals and racialised discrimination in the policing practices of receipt states (De Bruin 2021).

In interviews conducted for this chapter it was suggested the tactics of the Tunisian police in dealing with the more recent rounds of near-continuous protests were not dissimilar to those seen in provider states, such as the response to the Black Lives Matter movement in the US or the *gilet jaune* in France. These tactics, several respondents claimed, are the *result* of police training in SA programmes rather than the mere unintended consequences of them. In such training programmes, it is claimed, Tunisian security personnel have been, at times, genuinely shocked with the practices advised by their foreign trainers when dealing with protests and social unrest¹⁵⁰. These individuals suggested that their ‘trainers’ had, at times, advised them to use certain technologies and repressive practices in situations that they personally would not consider justifying such measures¹⁵¹. It is, nonetheless, hard to verify such claims given that SA programmes, including those with the police, operate behind closed doors and are shrouded in secrecy. Official US documents do, however, recognise that SA programmes with police forces globally have focused on what they call ‘crowd control techniques’ and ‘technologies’ (INL nd). Furthermore, US led bilateral training programmes as well as those provided through the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership have focused on community policing (Maryon 2023). Not only does such as focus ignore the

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-international-narcotics-and-law-enforcement-affairs-work-by-country/tunisia-summary/>

¹⁴⁹ Interview with US diplomat, January 2022

¹⁵⁰ Interview conducted with security sector reform expert, February 2022

¹⁵¹ Interview with Tunisian journalist, February 2022

realities of the Tunisian context – where community policing was used as a form of hyperlocalised authoritarian surveillance (Kartas 2014)– but evidence suggests that community policing practices tend to recreate and reinforce class-based and racialised differences and thus lead to repressive racialised policing of these communities (Kienscherf 2019).

Such debates demonstrate the incongruence at the heart of contemporary ‘at arm’s length’ interventions in the Mediterranean - training and equipping the apparatuses of coercive state power to achieve peace. Indeed, the impacts of knowledge sharing practices, which are at the heart of SA programmes, on contemporary policing in Tunisia highlights the way in which security practices not only ‘boomerang’ between colony and metropole to police (post)colonial capitalism (Khalili 2010a; Barder 2015b), but rather bounce around across time and space forming feedback loops. These ‘loops’ act as mechanisms of coercion and control to police the edge populations created by the fallout of global racial capitalism and, more recently, authoritarian neoliberalism (Axster and Danewid 2021). This is something, I explore to greater extent below.

5.4.2 Militarisation or colonial feedback loops?

It is claimed SA programmes through training and equipping Tunisia’s ISF, often alongside Tunisia’s armed forces, have contributed to a certain ‘militarisation’ of Tunisia’s police force. Research conducted with police forces globally suggests that this ‘cross-training homogenises both tactics and forces, and therefore encourages police to think and act more militaristically by emphasising the use of force or perceiving civilians—particularly protesters—as threats’ (Karim 2021). Since 2015, Tunisian ISF working to ‘secure Tunisia’s borderlands’ often train and carry out missions in conjunction with the armed forces¹⁵². Tunisian forces have even conducted highly secretive joint exercises with US military personnel (Mekhennet and Ryan 2016; Blaise et al. 2019). Following one such joint mission in Gafsa in March 2015, when several ‘combatants’ were killed, the MoI proudly published photos of deceased individuals (Mekhennet and Ryan 2016). Officials stated (off record) that the intention had never been to take these individuals in alive (Mekhennet and Ryan 2016). Such practices clearly go beyond the scope of ‘civilian policing’.

¹⁵² Interview with researcher specialising in Tunisia’s borderlands, May 2021

Nonetheless, the notion of ‘militarisation’ is somewhat contested (McMichael 2017). The concept of militarisation has most often been deployed with reference to the North American context and used to examine the impact of military grade equipment, used in counterinsurgencies in the Middle East, ‘coming home’ to be used against domestic – often racialised - populations by the American police (ACLU 2014). Those that reject the notion of militarisation argue that it rests upon the notion of the so-called liberal police implying that there has been a shift from consensual policing to more militarised policing (McMichael 2017). However, the development of the police in both the Global North and South has always been about repressing the edge populations of capitalism – from its imperial to its more contemporary neoliberal iterations (Howell 2018). In Tunisia, as I have shown, security forces long functioned as a mechanism to maintain societal compliance with colonial governance and colonial capitalist accumulation – a long cry from traditional understandings of the so-called ‘liberal police’.

Notwithstanding this critique of the concept of militarisation, the provision of military grade equipment and training of Tunisia’s ISF has had significant impacts on the contemporary practices of Tunisia’s security forces. Teaching police forces to ‘think like soldiers’ when dealing with civilians in peace time as well as providing them with military grade equipment is shown to lead to more violent police practices and a greater tendency to escalate to use of force both in context such as the US, as well as in the police training they export (De Bruin 2021, p.p.104; De Bruin and Karabatak 2022; Maryon 2023). This is a clear example of the way in which SA programmes have contributed to the intensified recourse to coercive state power – something which characterises authoritarian neoliberalisms (Tansel 2017, p.3).

Furthermore, scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism have never subscribed to the notion of the so-called ‘liberal police’ nor that of the ‘liberal state’. They have simply argued that there has been a qualitative shift in the illiberal propensities of the capitalist state which has involved, among other things, an intensification of the coercive tendencies of the apparatuses of coercive state power (Tansel 2017 p.3). In Tunisia, this aspect of authoritarian neoliberalism, has been facilitated, in no small part, by the impacts of SA provided by external actors. Through the Tunisian case, I have demonstrated the interlinkages between repressive state practices and capitalist accumulation on the global level of analysis rather than merely on a state-by-state basis – thus avoiding the methodical nationalism that has, at times, characterised scholarly work in this area. Moreover, whereas many scholars of

authoritarian neoliberalism have focused on the spectrum of strategies through which the *state* insulates neoliberalism from contestation, I argue we must explore the *global entanglements* of neoliberal security states.

Thus, it is clear that the ‘militarisation’ of the Tunisian police force has provided the Tunisian neoliberal security state with the tools to quell resistance (Maryon 2023). However, this question of militarisation extends beyond the police forces. The 2015 security conjuncture served as a context with which to introduce militarised zones in Tunisia. These militarised zones include Tunisia’s borderlands with Libya – defined by racialised policing of both North African ‘Islamists’ and West African migrants, Tunisia’s ‘ungovernable’ Saharan desert areas and, since 2017, sites of natural resource extraction including Gafsa and Tataouine (Mullin 2023). Throughout this thesis’ I have explored both towns as sites of contestation of neoliberalism and resource extraction due to the activism of workers movements which have blocked and occupied these sites of resource extraction (Rouabah 2018). Thus, the Tunisian neoliberal security state exploited the post-2015 security environment to clamp down on these sites of resistance and contestation. Through the use of official militarised zones, policy makers justified (both discursively and legally) the use of the Tunisian military – trained, equipped and bank rolled by Global North partners – to suppress these popular uprisings and workers movements. Those arrested in militarised zones are subject to a different section of the penal code, and thus, are tried in military tribunals rather than civilian court (DCAF Tunisie 2014). This ‘clamps down’ what are essentially labour movements in extreme and stark ways. Furthermore, framing individuals as ‘enemy combatants’ and trying them through the military court system rests upon racialisation and dehumanisation of these individuals (Butler 2004; Richter-Montpetit 2014).

For Tunisian policy makers, the establishment militarised zones and the deployment of the tools of Tunisian neoliberal security state in these areas has served to suppress contestation in these racialised and ‘ungovernable’ spaces. However, I argue external actors’ security and economic interests have contributed to the militarisation of Tunisia’s resource rich but economically marginalised regions. The creation of the militarised zones and heavy-handed security force repression – fuelled by foreign SA - has intensified pre-existing trends of mass incarceration and high arrest rates in these areas in ways that has benefits external actors (Rouabah 2018). For example, the US has been the single largest provider to the Tunisian military thus contributing to the militarisation of these resource rich areas (Binder 2022).

Furthermore, the US, infamous for its ‘prison fix’ for the problem of ‘surplus populations’ domestically (Gilmore 2007), has also worked closely with Tunisian authorities on ‘prison reform’¹⁵³. High rates of incarceration and arrests mean that for many of individuals living in militarised zones, the informal sector often becomes the only feasible employment opportunity. This drives down labour costs for the multi nationals that benefit so richly from these spaces as well as state owned industries such as Gafsa phosphate company (Rouabah 2018; Mullin 2023). Furthermore, the creation of militarised zones acts as ‘buffer zones to protect the foreign (largely western) corporations engaging in ecologically degrading forms of extraction, including fracking, from protestors. For example, the 2017 establishment of the military zone around the oil and gas sites in Kebili enabled the Franco-British company Perenco to engage in environmentally hazardous extractive activities in the El Fraing concession’ (Mullin 2023 p181).

5.4.3 SA and the rise of the neoliberal security state of Kais Saied

Notwithstanding the economic and security objectives of provider states, I have already demonstrated that SA played into the attempts of political elites to reconfigure regime legitimacy around the notion of ‘securing the state’. In doing so, it contributed to the reconfiguration of political power in the security sector in the post-2015 context. Indeed, since 2015, SA has interacted with political developments in Tunisia to further shift the balance of power in security matters towards the executive and the MoI and the MoD at the expense of parliamentary oversight, decentralisation and civil society actors (See Maryon 2023). However, the role of SA in reinforcing the coercive capacities of the state has become increasingly problematic since the more recent so-called authoritarian turn associated with President Saied.

In the post-2015 environment, security politics became yet another area of domestic politics that was characterised by the so-called Tunisian consensus¹⁵⁴. Consequently, there was very little contestation of the security imperative nor the need for supposedly extraordinary measures. The President’s constitutionally defined powers, along with exceptional powers granted through the state of emergency, enabled him to centralise decision-making (Abbes 2017). In contrast, parliamentary oversight of the security sector was further impeded by

¹⁵³ Interview with Head of Security Sector NGO, January 2020

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Head of Security Sector NGO, January 2020

chronic lack of funding for the select committee system (Yerkes and Ben Yahmed 2019). Additionally, both Essebsi and Saied used an expansive definition of ‘national security’ to enlarge the scope of their decision-making powers¹⁵⁵ (Abbes 2017). For example, in July 2021, Saied used exceptional security powers to suspend Parliament (Al-Dahni 2021). The consolidation of resources and power in the MoI and the MoD, coupled with the centralisation of political decision-making power in matters of national security in the hands of the executive was facilitated, in part, by SA programmes and their attempts to gain access by any means necessary (Maryon 2023).

Such tendencies have become more problematic since the election of Saied. Political commentators have noted how Saied, a political independent who has marginalised civil society actors, demonised political parties, dissolved the legislature, suspended the constitution and replaced aspects of the judiciary, is increasingly seeking to construct his legitimacy upon his self-proclaimed role as the head of the security state (Cordall 2021a). In the following chapter, I explore Saied’s populist discourses and their complex relationship with authoritarian neoliberalism in post-transition Tunisia. However, given this thesis’ central discussion of the reconfiguration legitimacy around the notion of securing the state and this chapter’s focus on the role external actors in contributing to this process as well as reinforcing authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia, we must recognise the role that SA has played in the rise of the neoliberal security state under Saied (See Maryon 2023). For example, Saied has used the armed forces to carry out some of the more problematic aspects of his authoritarian power grabs such as closing Parliament with tanks (Reuters 2021b) and even prosecuting individuals through military court system (AmnestyInternational 2021). SA has played a fundamental role in transforming the armed forces in Tunisia from a small, underfunded, relatively apolitical force, into a large, well equipped and increasingly politicised force it is today. In 2010, the Tunisian military received 20.8m USD of SA. By, 2017, this had risen to 141m USD (securityassistance.org¹⁵⁶) with thousands of Tunisian military personnel being trained in the US (Grewal 2022). Given this, it poses significant questions to provider states when such forces are complicit in the authoritarian power grabs of the President (Maryon 2023).

¹⁵⁵ Interview with journalist, May 2021

¹⁵⁶ <https://securityassistance.org/security-sector-assistance/>

The question remains as to how provider states respond to Saied's instrumentalisation of the forces of state security to do his authoritarian bidding. Developments thus far teach us that it is highly unlikely that foreign actors in Tunisia will withdraw their support, including SA programmes. 'As long as Tunisia does not stop security co-operation or make geopolitical or economic alignment away from Western dependence, it's unlikely there will be serious changes in these relations' (Aliriza cited in RFI 2022). Evidence of this was shown when the US AFRICOM spokesperson said 'our military commitments have not changed... The United States is committed to our military and security co-operation' in September 2021 (Volkman 2021). This was just months after the US had announced a 10-year SA package to Tunisia's security forces. Thus, it seems that the external actors are willing to do business with Tunisia, be it in terms of economic reforms, counterterrorism or migration control, despite the rise of the so-called Tunisian security state and the reversion to authoritarianism.

However, as I have shown the notion that provides states are 'willing to turn a blind eye to' the excesses of the neoliberal Tunisian security state somewhat underplays the economic and security objectives of provider states. Furthermore, scholars of racial capitalism have warned us against assigning too much agency to a single actor in the face of centuries of racist and colonial capitalist accumulation which has contributed to Tunisia's peripheral position in the global economy. Indeed, they emphasise the relatively small margin of manoeuvre Tunisian policy makers have in their negotiations with external partners (Rouabah 2018; Mullin 2023). Thus, while SA may have contributed to the rise of the Tunisian neoliberal security state, we can better theorise such discussions when grappling with Tunisia as a site of authoritarian neoliberalism situated with the 'global carceral empire of control' (Axster and Danewid 2021) aimed at insulating capitalist accumulation from resistance and societal contestation.

In the following chapter, I will demonstrate that Saied has, quite purposefully, reproduced racialised discourses and encouraged the racialised policing of Tunisia's Black African migrant population. This has led to a stark increase in discrimination, violence and ultimately, premature death for these groups. Thus, we cannot obscure his role in the rise of Tunisia's neoliberal security state. It is clear, however, that Saied's neoliberal security state has faced intensified critique due to the way in which its repressive tools have been increasingly deployed not only against the marginalised, racialised 'edge' populations and surplus groups historically targeted (Bhattacharyya 2018; Robinson 2019), but also, more recently, against

Tunisian political elites and journalists in ways that render it more problematic for both Tunisian domestic elites and external actors.

5.5 The case of border management and migration

In the final section of this chapter, I explore the border management dimension of SA since 2015. This extended example demonstrates the interlinkages between SA, the domestic political objectives of Tunisian actors as well as the significance of situating our analysis of the contemporary Tunisian case within broader discussions of racial capitalism and the so-called carceral archipelago. Furthermore, the case of border management demonstrates the malleable nature of securitised racialised discourses deployed by both domestic and external actors to justify the fortification of Tunisia's borderlands. SA in these areas is portrayed as pursuing both counterterrorism and migration control objectives (Hanau Santini and Cimini 2019; Shah and Dalton 2020). Indeed, the fortification of Tunisia's borderlands, particularly with Libya, is presented domestically as protecting Tunisia from 'dangerous Islamic terrorists' and 'West African migrants' (Rouabah 2018). Meanwhile, external partners' complicity in Tunisia's deadly border regime is framed as protecting Europe and the Global North from racialised North African migrants seeking to leave Tunisia and the threats of terrorism, criminality and sexual violence they are deemed to represent to the so-called 'garden of Europe'¹⁵⁷ (Danewid 2022; Mullin 2023; Parikh 2023).

SA, it is claimed, has improved the ability of Tunisian security forces to control and manage their borders (Shah and Dalton 2020)¹⁵⁸. Indeed, border management was one of the key areas for improvement identified by the G7+ working group system (Santini 2018). Tunisia, utilising the significant 'expertise' and resources provided by its American and German partners, has constructed 125-mile perimeter fence on its border with Libya¹⁵⁹. Provider states have also supplied military-grade equipment to Tunisia's armed forces and ISF stationed along both the Algerian and Libya border¹⁶⁰. SA has arguably reduced terrorist and

¹⁵⁷ The term garden of Europe is a reference to a speech by EU highest diplomat, Josep Borrell, in October 2021 in which he referred to the rest of the world as a jungle which was trying to invade the garden of Europe

¹⁵⁸ Interview with EU official, October 2021

¹⁵⁹ Interview with researcher specialising in Tunisia's borderlands, May 2021

¹⁶⁰ Investigative journalists have argued there are 'signs of Washington's increasing security cooperation with Tunisia... (such as) ... body armour, rifles, and night-vision goggles; reconnaissance aircraft and fast patrol boats; radios and devices to counter improvised explosives' (Blaise et al. 2019)

criminal activities in these areas. For example, Tunisian authorities have stopped 2.5 billion contraband articles – mainly drugs, weapons and people - being smuggled into Tunisia (Shah and Dalton 2020, p.4). However, this has disrupted informal cross border economic activity which is incredibly damaging for these already deprived borderland communities (Boukhars 2018) and thus risks worsening insecurity in these regions¹⁶¹. However, the illiberal consequences of SA border management programmes are not the mere unintended consequences of otherwise well-meaning provider states but are indicative to SA as an international practice. Indeed, one cannot understand the huge quantities of SA provided to Tunisia’s security services to pursue border management and migration control without engaging with broader discussions regarding global northern states’ increasing externalisation of migration and its links to contemporary neoliberalism (Maryon 2022).

5.4.1 European externalisation and back door neoliberalisation of the Tunisian economy

A desire to control migration and benefit from neoliberalisation of the Tunisian economy has driven EU-Tunisia relations both before 2011 and since. Since 2011, the EU has consistently conditioned disbursement of the tranches of its MFA package upon the reform agenda outlined by the IMF, and delayed disbursement when sufficient reforms in terms of subsidies and redundancies are deemed to have not been made¹⁶². In contrast, it has not delayed large scale border management training programmes, nor the significant financing of Tunisia’s border regime as per its externalisation objectives¹⁶³. In 2015, for example, the EU invested 26m EUR to strengthen the Tunisian borders against terrorist infiltration (Kaunert et al. 2020). Similarly, EU member states have continued to engage bilaterally providing huge quantities of military aid, equipment and training to the Tunisian security forces (securityassistance.org)¹⁶⁴. In the post-2015 security environment in Tunisia and the post ‘migrant crisis’ context in Europe, EU-Tunisia relations only went further down a logic of externalisation and neoliberalisation. In September 2020, the EU and Tunisia signed the new pact on Migration and Asylum – described as ‘merely an extension of a coercive approach for promoting externalised and de-territorialised policies on migration and asylum in third countries’ (Rouland 2021). The securitised approach to migration allows both the EU and

¹⁶¹ Interview with researcher specialising in Tunisia’s borderlands, May 2021

¹⁶² Interview with EU official, May 2021

¹⁶³ Interview with EU official, May 2021

¹⁶⁴ For example, Germany have contributed millions of dollars’ worth of investment into border management on the Libyan border which is the main state from which Sub-Saharan African migrants enter Tunisia including the construction the perimeter fence (Stahl and Treffler 2019).

Tunisia to avoid regularising migration, but rather focus on less controversial security objectives such as ‘tackling people smugglers’, ‘fortifying porous borders’ and ‘training and equipping Tunisia’s security services’ (El-Ghali 2022, p.150).

Fundamentally, the fortification of Tunisia’s borderlands and the aim of EU-Tunisia cooperation on migration is not to prevent migration entirely, but to limit, control and exploit it by pushing individuals to irregularity and precarity (Maryon 2022). It serves to maintain a pool of easily exploitable labour both for global northern partners and Tunisian elites in the context of Tunisia as a county of both transit and departure for migrants (Maryon 2022). There are categories of individuals who can access the EU with relative ease – namely those who are highly qualified (Jung 2023). This is currently fuelling a much-debated ‘brain drain’ in Tunisia (Labidi 2020) such as in the health care sector. Furthermore, there are an increasingly number of individuals that, devoid of safe and legal routes, make dangerous journeys to Europe. The individuals who survive become racialised, precarious and often undocumented members of the informal labour market in Europe (EUFRA 2019).

On the one hand, the EU aims to reduce migration because of moral panic surrounding North African migration (Danewid, 2021) and the political consequences of being seen to be weak on immigration – particularly since the so-called migrant crisis of 2015. On the other hand, European postcolonial societies demand cheap, easily exploitable, racialised labour¹⁶⁵. Thus, preventing migrant communities from regularisation can be understood as an attempt to maintain so-called ‘racial hegemony’ (Hall et al, 1978) while also serving to suspend racialised migrants in a position of readily exploitable precarity. Simultaneously, preferential trade agreements between the EU and Tunisia, negotiated over decades, mean that European investors and businesses still profit from cheap, exploitable labour in low value industries in Tunisia (EUFRA 2019). This includes the ‘irregular labour’ of Black African migrants in Tunisia, as well as low wage Tunisian labour¹⁶⁶. Thus, European markets benefit from an easily exploitable racialised labour both ‘here’ and ‘there’ created and sustained through EU-

¹⁶⁵ A 2019 report by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights found evidence of ‘illegal practices’ and ‘severe exploitation’ of North African migrants in ‘agriculture, construction, domestic work, hospitality, manufacturing and transport’ in France

¹⁶⁶ For example, the Tunisian olive oil industry – which has been shown to rely heavily on precarious seasonal labour - is a source of large quantities of low value Tunisia exports to the EU governed by preferential trade agreements that protect European producers. Tunisian olive oil is often harvested by poorly paid, precariously employed seasonal workers and sold at very low rates to Italian suppliers. Often once in Italy, it is mixed, bottled, and branded with a ‘made in Italy’ sticker and sold at much higher value

Tunisia relations. In this sense, we can understand EU externalisation and its increasingly violent border regime through the lens of racial capitalism.

Similarly, the neoliberal Tunisian security state uses the EU's externalisation of migration to exploit Black African migrant workers suspending them in a policy of 'non-hosting'. Essentially, stuck between the highly monetarily incentivised demands of their European partners to prevent migration to the EU through Tunisia, and the domestic political unpopularity of 'regularising' Black African migrants in Tunisia, the government has opted to suspend migrants in a precarious limbo – stuck in Tunisia with nowhere to go but with no path to regularisation and formal employment (Bisiaux et al. 2020). This means that the vast majority of racialised migrants living within Tunisia work in the informal sector, with well evidenced accusations of human trafficking and modern-day slavery in Tunisia's resource extraction, heavy industry and sex work sectors – thus cheapening and disciplining racialised and precarious labour within Tunisia (Raynal 2020).

While providers such as the EU have criticised the racialised policing of migrants as well as the policy of non-hosting¹⁶⁷, they continue to finance the Tunisian border regime through SA to Tunisia's security forces on its borderlands, financial assistance to various ministries and through official EU-Tunisia migration cooperation agreements. The EU's own border regime is characterised by violence and racism, and this extends to its relations with its North African partners upon whom it relies to police the walls of so-called fortress Europe. Once again, the EU is happy to turn a blind eye to the repressive practices of the Tunisian state, and its violent and racist border regime, in return for cooperation on migration control and backdoor neoliberalisation of the Tunisian economy (Langan and Price 2020; Maryon 2022) as well as continued cooperation with the neoliberal reform agenda as part of its MFA package worth billions of euros.

5.4.2 Repressing contestation in Tunisia's historically marginalised border lands

Thus, the EU is using border management SA programmes to pursue its own economic and strategic interests. However, SA is used by the Tunisian state to insulate it, and its increasingly unpopular neoliberal policies, from contestation in marginalised regions of Tunisia along its borderlands - infamous for resistance. Indeed, there is evidence of the armed

¹⁶⁷ Interview with EU official, May 2022

forces using the military grade equipment provided to Tunisian ISF stationed in Tunisia's borderlands being used to control and harass local populations in economically deprived and historically marginalised regions such as Tataouine on the Libyan border and Kesserine on the Algerian border (Rouabah 2018)¹⁶⁸.

For example, in 2021, huge protests broke out in Kesserine¹⁶⁹. The protestors were denouncing poverty and condemning Saied who had promised development and opportunities during his election¹⁷⁰. Unimpressed with the armed forces initial response, the MoI sent in Tunisia's National Guard – a paramilitary policing unit used mainly for border control purposes in the militarised border zone between Algeria and Tunisia (Mullin 2023). The National Guard have received significant training, equipment and financing from external actors since 2015 (Santini 2018). Using teargas and rubber bullets against civilians, the protests were violently repressed by the National Guard¹⁷¹ leading to the deaths of two people (Cordall 2021b). This example demonstrates the SA provided to 'shore up' Tunisia's borderlands is being used against civilians living in those border territories. As per authoritarian neoliberalisms globally, we are seeing an intensification the recourse to coercive state power to repress contestation of neoliberalism and its social impacts. Vitaly, provider states are playing a significant part in this process through SA.

5.4.3 EU priorities and question of Saied

More recently, EU-Tunisia relations have been under strain with the authoritarian drift associated with President Saied. Saied continues to pursue austerity policies and cooperate on migration and counterterrorism matters – the EU's strategic aims in its relations with Tunisia¹⁷². However, Saied's authoritarian power grab subverts the EU's normative agenda that EU policy makers claim drives its engagement in Tunisia. EU officials have made statements about the need for Tunisia to return to its democratic path (MiddleEastMonitor 2022b) but EU policy makers' ultimate priority is a 'stable government that is able to deliver on European strategic objectives and control its own borders'¹⁷³. Indeed, in May 2022, EU

¹⁶⁸ Interview with researcher specialising in Tunisia's borderlands, May 2021

¹⁶⁹ Interview with independent journalist, May 2021

¹⁷⁰ Interview with independent journalist, May 2021

¹⁷¹ Interview with independent journalist, May 2021; Interview with researcher specialising in Tunisia's borderlands, May 2021

¹⁷² Interview with Tunisian journalist, February 2022

¹⁷³ Interview with political commentator, February 2022

Commission disbursed 300m EUR to Tunisia as part of a broader Macro Financial Assistance programme (EUPressRoom 2022). This tranche of further finance was disbursed despite Saied's dissolution of Parliament, the constitution, and the Supreme Judicial Council in the months prior. This loan package was disbursed on the agreement of Tunisia's continued cooperation on migration and that certain neoliberal reforms and austerity policies would be pursued¹⁷⁴. Furthermore, in June 2023, EU Commissioner, Ursula von de Leyen pledged further material and financial support to Tunisia's border regime despite the President's racist rhetoric and the stark intensification of the violence and racialised policing inflicted against Tunisia's migrant population (Nielsen 2023). As such, contemporary neoliberalism and a desire to control migration will continue to drive EU-Tunisia cooperation regardless of the fate of Tunisia's flailing democracy.

In this section, I have used the case of border management to demonstrate that SA is fundamentally linked to the security and economic objectives of provider states. I have also used the case of border management to demonstrate how SA has reinforced the authoritarian neoliberal state in Tunisia – providing security forces with the 'tools' to repress contestation. However, as I have demonstrated the link between SA and authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia goes far beyond the co-option of resources by domestic political elites to pursue their own political objectives. Rather SA, as an international practice, is part of broader interconnected, mechanisms of coercion and control by which the political and economic elites both 'here' and 'there' maintain and police the edge populations created by the fallout of contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism and insulate capitalist accumulation from contestation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed the significant role of external actors in the renegotiation of Tunisia's social contract through the SA and financial assistance they have provided in the post-transition context. Since 2015, SA has interacted with political developments to reinforce the coercive capacities of the increasingly repressive state and recalibrate the balance of power in the Tunisian security sector towards the executive and the security forces at the expense of oversight, transparency and respect for human rights. Equally, it has,

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Tunisian journalist, June 2022

through increasing the (coercive) capacities and resources of the security services, contributed to the attempts by policy makers to reconfigure regime legitimacy around the notion of securing the state from certain securitised threats. This trend has only become more pronounced since the authoritarian power grabs of Saied. SA providers in Tunisia, pursuing their own counterterrorism and migration control objectives, as well as back door neoliberalisation of the Tunisian economy, reinforced the capacities of the Tunisian security sector. However, they have, as I have shown, acted to facilitate the rise of a Tunisian security state that increasingly serves the personal political agenda of the President.

By providing the Tunisian security services with the resources and training to crack down on popular protests and social movements that reject austerity and neoliberalisation, SA has also reinforced authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia. This chapter's discussion of the interlinkage of SA and authoritarian neoliberalism in (re)shaping the Tunisian security sector and political developments, has contributed to this thesis' overall discussion of the role of 'securing the state' in the reconfiguration of regime legitimacy in the post-transition context. Significantly, this is a context that can be characterised as a site of authoritarian neoliberalism, thus making the case for an analytical approach which seeks to recouple security studies and international political economy to analyse the rise of the neoliberal security state in Tunisia and beyond. In the chapter which follows, I will demonstrate how Saied, elected in late 2019, has adopted populist discourses and practices to capitalise upon covid, corruption and economic challenges to perpetuate and perform a sense of crisis to pursue authoritarian power grabs while reinforcing complex, at times, contradicted processes of authoritarian neoliberalism albeit in an increasingly repressive and authoritarian way.

Notwithstanding this chapter's discussions of regime legitimacy, this chapter also provides broader theoretical reflections regarding SA as an international practice as well as making the case for bringing together the concept authoritarian neoliberalism and studies of racial capitalism. By theorising SA as an international practice inherently connected to broader and global trends of border externalisation, authoritarian neoliberalism and global mechanisms of coercion and control, we can understand the inherent incoherence of training and equipping the apparatuses of coercive power to achieve peace. SA, in contrast, should be understood as a means of sustaining mechanisms of coercion and control central to the contemporary

neoliberal security state. In this context, global northern actors¹⁷⁵ use SA coupled with financial assistance packages to facilitate the rise of neoliberal security states to maintain the broader system of global racial capitalism which they benefit from so greatly. This system is founded upon economic and racialised hierarchies in which global southern post-colonial states such as Tunisia are maintained in a cycle of dependence (economically, militarily, in terms of food and energy sovereignty), insecurity and relative poverty to maintain the economic dominance of global northern actors. Fundamentally, the aim of such a system is to maintain not only economic power dynamics between global northern and southern partners but also to preserve racialised hierarchies in global governance and political economy.

Furthermore, by theorising the connections between security interventions and authoritarian neoliberalism through the lens global racial capitalism we can go beyond the analysis provided by dependency theory (Rodney 1972). Rather such a perspective enables us to understand the way in which security cooperation and economic relations between external actors and Tunisian domestic political elites has been about sustaining (neo)coloniality as well as being a means for certain Tunisian elites to maintain the privileges colonialism and its afterlives have afforded them – often at the expense of so called ‘edge populations’. This is indicative of how coercive state practices, and security cooperation between states – comprising the so-called colonial carceral archipelago, have historically, and continue ‘to operate as, interconnected and integral elements of global racial capitalism’ (Axster et al. 2021, p.3). And thus, through exploring SA to Tunisia since 2015, and its links to external economic intervention in Tunisia’s transition and situating this as part of the *longue durée* of entanglements between external actors and domestic political elites in creating and maintaining mechanism of coercion and control that sustain capitalist accumulation, I have demonstrated that we can understand authoritarian neoliberalism as a contemporary iteration of, and fundamental aspect of global racial capitalism.

¹⁷⁵ and increasingly other newer global poles of power such as the Gulf states

Chapter 6: Covid, coups, and Kais Saied: populist articulations of regime legitimacy in the context of authoritarian neoliberalism

The state has been ravaged by corruption – but the Tunisian people will cleanse its institutions of the cancer that has spread through the country. I will be the chemical that kills that cancer

President Kais Saied, February 7, 2023

Introduction

On October 23, 2019, Kais Saied, a political independent and retired professor of constitutional law, became President of the Tunisian Republic after being democratically elected. Between his election and the time of writing¹⁷⁶, Saied's Presidency has been defined by populist discourse, a global pandemic, a contested 'coup', increasingly repressive security force practices, and the deregulation of almost every democratic institution of the Tunisian state. Consequently, Tunisia is well on the path to a reversion to authoritarianism with those that dare to criticise Saied being victims of arrests, prosecutions and worse (Volkman 2022). Thus, the story of Saied is a cautionary tale of the connections between populism and neoliberalism and the dangers both can present to democracies be they 'mature' or 'nascent'. And, yet most scholars of populism would be hard pushed to know his name. So, what can Saied's journey from ageing professor turned political independent to increasingly authoritarian leader of a neoliberal security state teach us about populism in sites of authoritarian neoliberalism? How can we understand Saied's populist articulation of claims to legitimacy in the context of increasingly authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia? How does Saied's unique brand of populism speak to this thesis' commitment to 'recouple' the disciplines of security studies and IPE to better understand and problematise (in)security in post-2011 Tunisia? These questions, I seek to answer in this chapter.

In doing so, I argue that the rise of Saied demonstrates the challenges and contestation that successive governments have faced in their attempts to reconfigure the legitimacy of the post-transition regime around the notion of 'securing the state' – explored throughout the previous chapters of this thesis. This is because, aggressive neoliberalisation compounded pre-existing

¹⁷⁶ For the purposes of this thesis, I am limiting the scope of this project from the period between January 2011 and the beginning of July 2023. Any events after July 1, 2023, will not be included in this project's analysis.

insecurities faced by many Tunisians - thus, undermining faith in Tunisia's nascent democratic system and its political elite. Saied capitalised upon insecurity and discontent at neoliberal reforms and austerity measures pursued by successive transition governments as well as the perception of their imposition by external actors to construct his anti-party, anti-establishment and anti-elite populist discourse. At times, Saied has performatively co-opted anti colonial populist discourse to justify his authoritarian power grabs and to denounce neo-colonial 'Western meddling' in Tunisia's domestic affairs (Mbarek 2022). Despite this discourse, there has been very little change in Tunisia's economic and budgetary policy, nor the role of external actors in shaping it since his election. Similarly, Saied has used exceptional security powers under the guise of the war on terror, the pandemic and his self-proclaimed war on corruption to ram through unpopular economic reforms.

Significantly, since July 25, 2021, there has been an intensification of these processes with Saied suspending the Tunisian Parliament and sacking his government. Not content with deregulating the democratic institutions of the Tunisian state as per the 2014 Constitution, Saied wrote his own constitution. This was approved by 94% of the vote in a referendum marked by significant discrepancies and in which only 30% of Tunisians voted in August of 2022 (Abouaoun et al. 2022)¹⁷⁷. As per the new constitution, Parliament is divided into two chambers and its powers reduced (Abouaoun et al. 2022). Furthermore, the Prime Minister and cabinet are appointed by and are directly responsible to the President (Abouaoun et al. 2022), thus 'cementing the kind of one man rule Tunisians thought ended with the revolution' (Jebnoun 2022). Saied's consolidation of power, enabled by his (mis)use of, and alliance with, the forces of state security has led to a significant escalation in the propensities of Tunisia's security forces to use coercive state power to repress social movements and insulate neoliberalism, and increasingly Saied's authoritarian rule, from contestation. In other words, Saied has sought to reconfigure the legitimacy of his increasingly authoritarian regime around populist notions of 'securing the state' from certain threats while simultaneously reinforcing authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia. Ultimately, because of the constraints under which he is operating, namely an inability and lack of desire to pursue alternative economic models, his own political ineptitudes and his lack of political support, I argue that his attempt to reconfigure the legitimacy of the Tunisian political regime around populist articulations of

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, July 2022; Interview with Tunisian political analyst, July 2022

‘securing the state’ from certain threats will ultimately fail. This because many of these supposed ‘threats’, identified by Saied, are increasingly detached from the insecurities that Tunisians face daily. Of course, the arguable failure of his populist articulations of regime legitimacy foreshadows further instability to come.

In order to reflect upon Saied’s attempt to reconfigure regime legitimacy around populist articulations of the notion of securing the state, this chapter will be elaborated as follows. In the first part of the chapter (6.1), I argue that successive post-transition governments’ attempts to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy have been impeded by the relative failure of neoliberalisation in Tunisia, coupled with the negative social and political consequences of associated austerity measures. It was the disenchantment with politics, parties, and the failure of democracy to illicit better standards of living – inherently linked to neoliberal deregulation explored in previous chapters - which sowed the seeds, at least partially, for the rise of populist Saied. In the second section (6.2), I argue that Saied has capitalised on events to perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis surrounding four discursively constructed threats or security ‘crisis’; covid, corruption, Islamism and African migration to Tunisia. In the name of ‘securing the state’ from such threats, Saied’s government has 1/ introduced wide ranging security measures and justified repressive use of force, 2/ consolidated neoliberalisation in Tunisia and 3/ solidified his own brand of populism and tight control on power. In the third section (6.3), I focus my analysis on the intensification of use of repressive and coercive state power to insulate both Saied’s rule and neoliberalism from contestation. In the fourth section (6.4), I reflect upon Saied’s unique brand of populism and its complex relationship with neoliberalism arguing that this can better help us theorise Global Southern populists and populism in sites of authoritarian neoliberalism. In the fifth section (6.5), I argue that Saied’s attempt to reconfigure the legitimacy of his regime is facing significant challenges as his war on his political opponents takes him further away from the realities of the economic insecurities experienced by the Tunisian people. Given that Saied has sought to construct the legitimacy of his rule around a personalised vision of himself as the provider of state security, the inability of his government to provide for the economic security of ‘the people’ foreshadows further political instability to come.

6.1 The failure to deliver on the demands of the revolution and the rise and rise of Kais Saied

In this section, I will demonstrate that the failure of successive governments to deliver on the demands of the revolution, inherently linked to neoliberal deregulation which worsened insecurities, created the conditions upon which Saied's populist discourse fell on sympathetic ears. Equally, in this section, I briefly reiterate the theoretical connections between authoritarian neoliberalism and populism, elaborated extensively in Chapter 2.

6.1.1 A quick word on neoliberalism, crisis and populism

In Chapter 2, I outlined the way in which work on populism, particularly the work of Hall (et al 1978; 1979) on authoritarian populism, and 'crisis' can help us understand the analytical utility of bringing together populism and authoritarian neoliberalism. However, I also highlighted the way in which post-2007 experiences of populism in sites of authoritarian neoliberalism are qualitatively different from, and yet inherently connected to, previous forms of authoritarian populism/statism (See Bruff 2014). Therefore, I will not re-elaborate these theoretical discussions here in this chapter but rather maintain my focus on their application in the Tunisian case. I will, however, briefly state that through this chapter, and its discussion of Saied's populist discourses which seek to justify the roll out of coercive apparatuses of the state against certain groups presented as 'threat' as well as its analysis of Saied's complex and contradictory relationship with neoliberalism, I demonstrate the addition that populism can make to conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism. By bringing populism into discussions of authoritarian neoliberalism, in certain relevant contexts, we can understand the way in which populist actors whip up moral panic surrounding discursively constructed security 'crises' to detract from the socioeconomic fallouts of neoliberal deregulation (Hall et al 1978; Wacquant 2009) and to justify the repression of certain 'edge populations' (Bhattacharyya 2018). The repression of such groups is necessary to sustain the inherent inequalities upon which continued capitalist accumulation is dependent (Bhattacharyya 2018) as well as being a means to suppress contestation of neoliberal state strategies (Tansel 2017). Furthermore, the incorporation of these two concepts helps us how and why we see an intensification of such discourse in particular periods of contestation and crisis of the authoritarian neoliberal state. While the Tunisian case is a particularly stark reminder of the links between neoliberalisation, legitimation, populism, and coercion, such questions are illuminating for our understanding of the contemporary crisis of legitimacy experienced by capitalist states globally and interrelated phenomena of democratic erosion, far right movements, racism and state violence, for example.

6.1.2 The election of 2019

By the time of the death of President BCE in July 2019, Tunisia's nascent party system was becoming increasingly erratic with parties, emerging, merging, breaking up and disappearing at impressive rate (Yerkes and Ben Yahmed 2019). The two main parties that had dominated since the revolution, Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, were being blamed by voters for political instability and economic stagnation and were suffering for it at the polls (Grewal 2019). Perceptions of corruption in institutions including Parliament had increased by 21 points between 2011 and 2019 (ArabBarometer 2019). By 2018, 72% of Tunisians surveyed said they had no trust in political parties, having risen from 38% in 2011 (Arab Barometer cited Albrecht et al. 2021). One of the growing trends in this period was the rise in the number of independent candidates, not affiliated to a political party, who were running and being elected at various levels of government¹⁷⁸ (Amara 2018). This was linked to the perception among certain voters that parties were part of the problem rather than the solution: something underscored by independents in their campaigning¹⁷⁹.

Into this context, emerged the Presidential election campaign of political independent Saied who had never previously run for office. A prominent professor of constitutional law, he was famous for being one the first figures of the Tunisian establishment to show public support for sit ins in the early days of the revolution (Yee 2021). After being left out of the constitutional writing process, Saied had spent much of the period surrounding it touring Tunisian TV networks openly critiquing the Constitution's empowerment of Parliament claiming it would lead to polarisation and paralysis (Yee 2021). These positions granted Saied notoriety while simultaneously positioning himself as external to the political establishment increasingly seen as corrupt, elitist and to blame for the failure of the demands of the revolution by the population¹⁸⁰ (Albrecht et al. 2021). Furthermore, his early critique of the constitution coupled with his perceived constitutional expertise provided a certain sense of legitimacy to his claims that the 'system' was in part to blame for the problems and instability that Tunisia was experiencing¹⁸¹ and his assertion that he could provide a more effective system.

¹⁷⁸ In the municipal elections of May 2018 independent candidates received more votes than both Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes (Amara, 2018).

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, January 2020

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, January 2020

¹⁸¹ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, January 2020

As I have shown above, political turmoil and an unstable party system created an environment in which Saïed's political independent campaign and populist rhetoric fed into societal frustrations with politics and parties and growing anti-establishment attitudes. It is vital, however, to understand the significance of economic frustration in sowing the seeds for the rise of Saïed. Indeed, 'populism is not inevitable phenomenon generated by modernity; it is more fundamentally the consequence of demographic and sociological transformations which are themselves the consequences of underlying economic dynamics' (Caylan 2021, p.10). Throughout this thesis, I have shown that the post-revolution environment has been one defined by economic stagnation, rising levels of unemployment¹⁸² and falling purchasing power per capita¹⁸³. Between 2011-2019 various subsidies on goods were cut through austerity measures demanded by IFIs and mandated through multilateral loan agreements (Ben Gahda 2022). Thus, by 2019, the cost of living for the average Tunisian family was spiraling while incomes were falling relative to inflation. Not only were people struggling, but they felt that democracy and politicians had 'failed to deliver on their economic promises'¹⁸⁴. In 2019, 51% of Tunisians surveyed said democracy is 'is indecisive, 42 percent say it leads to instability, and 39 percent that it leads to weak economic outcomes' (ArabBarometer 2019, p.12), up from approximately a 1/5 of respondents expressing such attitudes in 2011. This is despite, or as I argue because of, the fact successive post-transition governments had pursued, overarchingly, the neoliberal reforms and austerity measures outlined by external actors (Mahroug 2022). However, these measures, which were already politically unpopular, because of their social consequences, had only compounded Tunisia's economic issues (Ben Gahda 2022). Thus, the consensus constructed, at least at elite levels, surrounding the neoliberal reform agenda, was becoming contested, through regular large-scale protests against austerity measures (Gallien 2018; Hamouchene 2018), and the rise of anti-system populist rhetoric in political discourse particularly from independent candidates such as Saïed¹⁸⁵.

¹⁸² Between 2010 to 2019, unemployment had risen from 13.05% to 15.13% despite the 'flexisation' of Tunisian labour offering up sacrifices in working standards in the hope of creating jobs (Statista 2022) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/524516/unemployment-rate-in-tunisia/>

¹⁸³ Between 2010-2019, GDP per capita fell from 4140 USD to 3547.05 USD (Statista 2022) while inflation rose significantly because of the devaluation of the Tunisian dinar – something imposed by the 'independent central' bank and the neoliberal interests of the *bailleurs des fonds* <https://www.statista.com/statistics/524487/gross-domestic-product-gdp-per-capita-in-tunisia/>

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, January 2022

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Tunisian journalist, January 2020

These factors combined demonstrate the connections between neoliberalisation, its social and economic failings in Tunisia, and the societal conditions which meant that Saied's populist discourse fell on sympathetic areas. This is not to say that these neoliberal reforms single handedly caused Saied's rise to power. Rather, neoliberalisation, and particularly the aggressive and authoritarian articulations of neoliberalisation present in post-transition Tunisia, as well as the unwillingness or inability for Tunisia's political system to articulate alternative economic models or paths to economic growth, created the conditions under which populist rhetoric responded to the unsatisfied demands of many Tunisians (Hall 1979; Ostiguy et al. 2020; Panizza et al. 2020). Of course, the 'paradox' in this relationship between neoliberalism and populism, as I will show in this chapter, is that despite the failure of neoliberalisation contributing to the conditions under which populists rise to favour, 'populist movements have nothing against markets, quite the contrary' (Caylan 2021, pp.48–49) they often pursue the same neoliberal policies.

So how can we understand populists' seemingly contradictory and incoherent ideological positions - particularly when it comes to economic policy? While the praxis of populism can be 'layered' upon particular ideologies (Ostiguy et al. 2020), I understand populism as a way of doing politics as an opposed to an ideology however 'thin'¹⁸⁶. Indeed, in the case of Saied, commentators have described Saied's regime as an 'ad hoc' regime¹⁸⁷ suggesting his position on a particular matter is a reactive response to domestic political factors and external pressures rather than being built upon his own personal ideological commitments. This has resulted in 'flip-flopping', 'u-turns', very flagrant contradictions between his words and actions creating an 'incoherent and chaotic form of governance'¹⁸⁸.

Fundamentally, for this thesis, neoliberalism and the spectrum of strategies that act to insulate it from contestation and discipline sites of contestation that do emerge - as associated with

¹⁸⁶ There is a lot of debate as to whether populism is a 'thin ideology' as per the often-cited definition of Cas Mudde (2004) or whether it can be theorised as a way of doing politics (a praxis) comprised of 'set of performative repertoires' (Moffitt, 2016 cited in Ostiguy et al. 2020 p.6)

¹⁸⁷ Interview with political commentator, May 2022

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, February 2022. For example, during his election campaign, Saied was a vocal critique of normalisation of relations Israel claiming pursuing such a policy would be akin to 'high treason' (Lahyani 2022). However, during his presidency there have been credible reports, on several occasions, that Tunisia is on the path to normalising relations with Israel (Lahyani 2022) coupled clear indications of growing diplomatic and economic ties between Tunisia and Israel.

authoritarian neoliberalisms (Tansel 2017) – cannot be omitted from analysis of the rise of Saied and developments since he assumed office. In short, we cannot theorise populism in contemporary Tunisia without an understanding of the intensification of the illiberal propensities of the capitalist state (Poulantzas 1978) seen in post-2011 Tunisia. It is for this reason, as well as Saied’s complex and often contradictory relationship with neoliberal policies and actors, as I explore in later stages of this chapter, that I situate Saied’s brand of populism in Tunisia with reference to authoritarian neoliberalism.

In this section I have outlined the conditions under which Saied’s populist rhetoric fell on sympathetic ears. In the following section, I demonstrate how since his democratic election to power, Saied has used populist discourses of ‘securing the state’ from certain securitised threats to justify an increasingly authoritarian centralisation of power in his hands in a way that simultaneously reinforces authoritarian neoliberalism.

6.2 Saied’s adhococracy: Performing and perpetuating the crisis and the opportunistic instrumentalisation of ‘threats’

Saied’s ad hoc and opportunistic brand of populism has capitalised on political developments, namely, the pandemic (section 6.2.1), corruption (section 6.2.2) Islamism (section 6.2.3) and black African migration (section 6.2.4), to perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis surrounding certain ‘threats’. Saied performed and perpetuated a sense of crisis surrounding these threats to 1/ introduce wide ranging security measures and justify repressive use of force, 2/ further consolidate neoliberalisation in Tunisia and 3/ solidify his own brand of populism and tight control on power. In other words, through populist articulations of securing the state from certain threats, often in opportunist and ad hoc ways, Saied has reinforced authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia while also dismantling Tunisia’s democratic checks and balances to increase his own personal power.

6.2.1 Covid: from exceptional to unprecedented times

The COVID-19 crisis demanded that governments across the world take unprecedented action in constraining the everyday lives of their populations in the name of protecting public health. In Tunisia, policy makers used a plethora of existing emergency security powers to pass further wide-ranging security measures to enforce coronavirus restrictions (Jrad 2020c;

Yerkes 2020). The opportunity to amass power proved all too tempting for Saied's government who actively performed and perpetuated this crisis to rollout the security apparatuses of the state and secure their grip on power. Simultaneously, the state of exception was used as a smoke screen with which to ram neoliberal economic reforms through parliament and further consolidate authoritarian neoliberalism.

In Tunisia, the pandemic necessitated an extremely temporary roll out of the state in an economic sense. The government deferred taxes for small businesses, delayed social contributions, and announced cash transfers for certain households (Abouzzohour and Mimoune 2020, pp.12–13). These measures were financed by IFI loans such as one provided through the IMF's Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI), approved in April 2020, worth almost 750M USD (IMF 2020). However, the RFI was disbursed upon the promise of post pandemic austerity reforms to ensure there was no allusion that 'economic intervention would be anything but temporary'¹⁸⁹. Furthermore, it added to the already huge debt that Tunisia had amassed since its transition¹⁹⁰(Amara 2021) further trapping Tunisia in a vicious circle of debt¹⁹¹. While the roll out of the economic apparatuses of the neoliberal state was only temporary, the roll out of the security apparatuses of the state in the name of the fight against the virus, would prove far less temporary.

As in many countries, existing security frameworks, such as the state of emergency and the 2015 Anti-Terror Law, were the legal basis upon which the Tunisian government constructed further exceptional powers to respond to this public health crisis (Abouzzohour and Mimoune 2020; Bourekba 2020; Jrad 2020c; Noah 2020; Yerkes 2020; Maryon 2021). Policy responses, thus, were conceptualised through a security rather than a public health paradigm (Jrad 2020b; Jrad 2020a). For example, in March 2020, the then Prime Minister, Elyes Fakhfakh, stated 'Our country is experiencing an exceptional situation by all standards.... We are at war... We can't afford nihilism and indifference' (Ghanmi 2020). The security-oriented approach to the pandemic enabled the government to pursue exceptional policy responses that may not have otherwise been legal¹⁹² or legitimate in the eyes of the population (Jrad 2020c;

¹⁸⁹ Quotes from Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2021

¹⁹⁰ By May of 2021, national debt was 91% of GDP

¹⁹¹ Leading to the government taking out debt 'to service the debt repayments on existing debts' rather than to fund development projects or public services' Quote from Tunisian economist interview in February 2022

¹⁹² under the terms of Article 80 and Article 70 of the 2014 Constitution

Jrad 2020a) such as enforcement powers granted to the security services to patrol the streets and confine individuals to their homes (Abouzzohour and Mimoune 2020).

In a similar logic of exception, Fakhfakh sought to not only increase the power of this office but circumnavigate the normal passage of legislation including economic and budgetary policy to reduce the role of Parliament (Cherif 2020; Jrad 2020c; Jrad 2020b; Yerkes 2020). On April 4 2020, Parliament passed a law, activating Clause 2 of Article 70 of the 2014 Constitution thus (The New Arab Staff 2020)¹⁹³ enabling the Prime Minister to issue decree-laws of legislative character¹⁹⁴. Once again, the justification for these exceptional measures was the ‘exceptional nature of this health emergency’ (Fakhfakh cited in LaPresseTunisie 2020). As part of law, the government could pursue macroeconomic policies without parliamentary consultation and scrutiny¹⁹⁵. Furthermore, the then Minister of Finance attempted to convince Parliament, ultimately successfully, to include economic reforms among the areas that the executive could issue ‘decrees law of a legislative character’ (Hammami 2020). This caused one Tunisian political commentator to claim that the government wanted to ‘use these emergency powers to pass structural neoliberal economic reforms in line with IMF conditions’¹⁹⁶. Thus, the pandemic was used to pursue further neoliberalisation in Tunisia as well as unprecedented security measures. However, many of these measures, excluding neoliberalism economic ‘reforms’, were temporary and some were subsequently lifted as Tunisia coped relatively well with the first wave of the pandemic (Abouzzohour and Mimoune 2020).

Yet, as the pandemic continued, many noted that the virus had been used to increase the power of the Prime Minister and the President at the expense of Parliamentary oversight and constitutional checks and balances (Yerkes 2020, p.1). This was enabled, for example, through the expansive definition of ‘security’ used to widen the scope of matters determined by the National Security Council thus circumnavigating Parliament¹⁹⁷. Furthermore, concern was expressed at the readiness of security services to crack down on social movements using new powers associated with the pandemic as well as their use of repressive practices¹⁹⁸. Such

¹⁹³ It is vital here to remember that the Head of Government in Tunisia, under the terms of 2014 constitution, was the Prime Minister. The President, in contrast, was the Head of State.

¹⁹⁴ Official Translation of the Constitution of the Tunisian Republic 2014, p.18

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Tunisian journalist, May 2020

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, May 2020

¹⁹⁷ Interview with security sector expert, May 2022

¹⁹⁸ Interview conducted with Tunisian security focused NGO, May 2021

abuses fed into a broader pattern of the return of illiberal security policies and practices associated with the former authoritarian regime (Cherif 2020; Jrad 2020a; Yerkes 2020) which had appeared in the post 2015 security crisis environment (Maryon 2023). For example, in January of 2021, the Tunisian police force arrested, detained, and allegedly beat hundreds of minors who had poured onto the streets in protest at economic conditions (BBCNews 2021).

The second wave and the contested ‘coup’

While Tunisia dealt relatively well with the first wave of the pandemic, the second wave would prove a greater challenge to Saied’s government. As infection rates, hospitalisations and deaths started to rise in summer of 2021 (AlJazeera 2021a), it was clear that the level economic intervention seen during the first wave was not possible due to record levels of government debt, an economy which was still reeling from the consequences of lockdown one (Grewal 2021) and a lack of political will. Although there was little societal demand for another lockdown, Tunisians were shocked to find their healthcare system, which had been badly damaged by austerity in the decade since the revolution¹⁹⁹, ‘overwhelmed²⁰⁰’ according to the Tunisian Ministry of Health (AlJazeera 2021a). As images of Tunisians dying in underequipped and overstretched hospitals emerged on social media, images of then Prime Minister Mechichi and his cabinet relaxing by the pool in a luxury hotel also emerged²⁰¹. Simultaneously, there was chaos at one of the country’s mass vaccination centres (Grewal 2021) leading to accusations of chronic mismanagement. The government’s position became untenable. Large scale protests broke out with some calling for the government and Parliament to be dismissed. (AlJazeera 2021c). On July 25, 2021, using an exceptionally creative interpretation of Article 80 of the Constitution of 2014, designed for national emergencies, Saied sacked his government and Prime Minister Mechichi and ‘suspended’ the Tunisian parliament.

For some, including the speaker of Tunisian Parliament, President Saied staged ‘a coup against the revolution and constitution’ (AlJazeera 2021c) on July 25. For others, he embodied, albeit in a very different way to traditional understandings of democracy, the

¹⁹⁹ Interview with Tunisian journalist, January 2022

²⁰⁰ ‘Health ministry spokeswoman Nissaf Ben Alya said on July 8 the health situation was "catastrophic", telling a local radio station that "unfortunately, the health system has collapsed"' (France 24).

²⁰¹ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, May 2022

popular will of the people who ‘had enough of parliament, parties and politics’²⁰². Saied himself, interviewed on the streets of Tunis that evening surrounded by supporters stated, ‘.... *there are some that are calling this a coup. Article 80 allows, in fact allows the President to take exceptional measures...if there is imminent danger...whoever is talking about a coup should carefully re-read the constitution or go back to grade 1 of primary school to know what I have done is fully constitutional....*’. (Kais Saied July 25th 2021 Street speech with English Subs 2021).

Saied is seeking to assert that he, a former professor of constitutional law, is best placed to know how to interpret Article 80. In contrast, all constitutional experts I have spoken to suggest Saied’s reading of Article 80 is, at best, expansive beyond how it was envisaged to be used, and, at worst, represents a false attempt to legitimatise an illegal coup. Regardless, by sacking his Prime Minister and the cabinet, as well as suspending the Tunisian Parliament, Saied effectively got rid of the most powerful checks on his political power. Or in other words, Tunisia’s ‘three president system’²⁰³, became a Presidential system overnight with the new technocrat Prime Minister, Najla Bouden, eventually being appointed in October 2021 with the intention of being a ‘rubber stamp for Saied’s policies and vision’²⁰⁴. This is a very different power dynamic to the semi-Presidential system outlined in the 2014 Constitution and which defined Tunisian politics before July 25 2021²⁰⁵.

Thus, Saied performed and perpetuated a sense of crisis surrounding the pandemic to increase the role of the forces of state security, to ram through unpopular neoliberal reforms and to justify his authoritarian power grabs. Or in other words, Tunisia’s pandemic response – characterised here as ‘securing the state’ from the pandemic, acted to reinforce Saied’s regime and authoritarian neoliberalism.

6.2.3 Corruption

Having elaborated above Saied’s opportunistic instrumentalisation of the threat of covid to intensify the use of coercive state power, ram through neoliberal reforms and solidify his own

²⁰² Interview with Tunisian political commentator, May 2022

²⁰³ This refers to the semi-Presidential nature of Tunisia’s 2014 political system in which power was balanced between the Head of State (President), Head of Parliament (majority leader) and Head of Government (Prime Minister)

²⁰⁴ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, May 2022

²⁰⁵ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, May 2022

personal grip on power; I will now demonstrate how Saied performed and perpetuated a sense of crisis surrounding corruption to do the very same thing.

Indeed, we can see Saied's use of the threat of corruption to justify his authoritarian power grab in the aforementioned speech on the eve of July 25, 2021.

Money that has been stolen from the Tunisian people must be returned to the Tunisian people ...and I promised the return of their stolen money... and the looting has continued hidden behind law

(Kais Saied July 25th 2021 Street speech with English Subs 2021).

Saied is suggesting that part of his reasoning for suspending parliament is due to 'ever-present' danger of corruption. Significantly, Saied's suspension of Parliament was also accompanied by the suspension of Parliamentary immunity.

Immunity is meant to let the parliament members practice their functions without pressures from any parties, but not to escape criminal prosecutions... I will not leave Tunisia a chewed leftover eaten by those that have played with this country for many years...

(Kais Saied July 25th 2021 Street speech with English Subs 2021).

While there is clear evidence of corruption in the period preceding the revolution and since 2011 (TransparencyInternational 2022), Saied's use of accusations of rampant corruption to justify his measures is significant to our analysis. Saied had been in power for almost two years by the time of the July 25 coup. Thus, blaming a corrupt elite served as a good excuse for his government's failure to deliver on his economic promises. Furthermore, accusations of corruption and the removal of immunity from many elected officials, has enabled Saied to accuse those who criticise his actions as being corrupt. Since July 25, there have been many high-profile accusations of corruption, mostly considered baseless attacks on political opponents, which have resulted in arrests and even imprisonment (VonTrapp 2021). For example, in November 2021, the governors of Sidi Bouzid and Kebili, who had been critical of his power grabs, were arrested on suspicion of 'financial corruption and abuse of official authority' (Reuters 2021). Similarly, in June 2022 Saied dismissed 57 judges, perceived to be blocking his politically motivated prosecutions of opponents, accusing them of corruption and protecting terrorists (Reuters 2022a).

Despite the constant accusations of corruption against his opponents, Saied's government has done relatively little to deliver on its anti-corruption promises. For example, the millions of

dollars' worth of stolen assets which Saied claimed his anti-corruption purge would reclaim for the Tunisian people have failed to appear (VonTrapp 2021). Furthermore, Saied has failed to establish institutions like the Financial Judiciary Pole which is responsible for investigating financial crime and has consistently undermined the work of the constitutionally mandated²⁰⁶ National Anti-Corruption Authority (INLUCC) (VonTrapp 2021). These factors combined 'raise a strong suspicion that Saied is less interested in a genuine anticorruption agenda than in suppressing his political opponents, buoying his popularity, and deterring criticism of his regime' (VonTrapp 2021). In a similar vein a prominent Tunisian academic, speaking of the arrest of the Mayor of Tabarka in August 2022 noted that 'accusations of corruption or laundering have become the new way to play dirty politics' and that 'conspiracy theory and paranoia against the enemy' had become 'official state discourse' (MyriamAt 2022).

Further example of Saied's selective commitment to fighting corruption was shown in February 2022 when Saied 'dissolved' the Supreme Judicial Council (CSM) which was the highest court in the land at the time²⁰⁷ (France24 2022). Saied's accusations against the CSM are significant for our understanding of his populist discourses surrounding securing the state from both corruption and Islamism. Saied claimed the CSM was complicit in a 'cover up' of the assassinations of prominent left-wing activists Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Bramhi by ISIS in 2013 (France24 2022). This is a reference to the accusation that Ennahda, who were in power in 2013, purposefully derailed the investigation into these assassinations because of Ennahda's implied links to Islamic extremism²⁰⁸. This is, of course, vehemently denied by Ennahda. Thus, Saied is implying that the judiciary are not only implicit in covering up these murders but are also agents of Ennahda's political interests²⁰⁹. In the Facebook video, in which Saied announced the dissolution of the CSM, he stated 'in this council, positions and appointments are sold and made according to affiliations.... you cannot imagine the money that certain judges have been able to receive, billions and billions' (Saied 2022 cited in France24 2022). Saied's security-oriented discourse surrounding this move was reinforced by the performative staging of the video – in which he was surrounded by high-ranking officials

²⁰⁶ Referring to the 2014 constitution. This body is not included in Saied's constitution of July 2022

²⁰⁷ Although the 2014 Constitution provided for a 'Constitutional Court', this body was never established (Grewal 2018)

²⁰⁸ Interview with security sector expert, February 2022

²⁰⁹ Interview with political commentator, May 2022

from the security forces. In doing so, Saied is seeking to portray himself as a commander and chief type figure securing Tunisia from a whole plethora of threats²¹⁰. Thus, Saied has used the threat of corruption to justify his authoritarian power grabs including a wave of politically motivated arrests of his opponents. Furthermore, this performance of a crisis of corruption as the source of Tunisia's economic ills has also served as a distraction from his government's failure to deliver on its economic promises or deviate from the politically unpopular reform agenda of the *bailleurs des fonds*.

6.2.4 Islamism

Saied has used the threat of Islamism to further justify expansive security powers, often against his political opponents rather than terrorist organisations, as well as to justify his deregulation of the democratic institutions of the Tunisian state. Interestingly, despite targeting political Islamists, Saied's unique brand of populism has been characterised by a performative and contradictory use of Islam. While seemingly paradoxical, this complex relationship with Islam is not new and has been associated with Tunisian leaders from Bourguiba²¹¹ (McCarthy 2014) to Saied. Under Bourguiba and Ben Ali the symbolism of Islam was co-opted to justify the personal power of the President, while political Islamist movements were criminalised, and their members persecuted. Both also pursued state-led secularisation while affirming their own faith (Willis 2012; McCarthy 2014).

So how can we understand this complex use of Islam by Tunisia's rulers? While scholars have been preoccupied with European populism's complex relationship with the right-left political spectrum, those who have explored similar debates in the MENA context often reduce this to the Islamist/secularist cleavage (Baykan 2020 p.200). However, the Islamist/secularist cleavage is an oversimplification of the performative use of Islam by leaders in the MENA from Nasser's pan Arabism (Dorraj 2017; Baykan 2020) to Saied's contemporary adhococracy. Saied is not an Islamist. During his academic career, Saied was deemed to be more aligned with the French secularist tradition than Islamist approaches to constitutional law (Yee 2021). Yet, he is, as most Tunisians are, a practicing Muslim. He has selectively and performatively, co-opted the symbolism and language of Islam to serve his own agenda. This is demonstrated in his discourse surrounding normalisation of relations

²¹⁰ Interview with security sector reform expert, March 2022

²¹¹ As I have explored in previous chapters

with Israel and his self-positioning as a defender of Palestinian rights (Ghanmi 2019) or his complex and contradictory position on gender equality (Amsili 2021). During his election campaign, he adopted socially conservative positions on issues such as homosexuality, the death penalty and women's rights (Acharaa al-Mgharabi 2019 cited in Aliriza 2019). These issues appealed to Islamist voters and parties (Aliriza 2019). Indeed, after their candidate for Presidency was knocked out of the race, Ennahda threw their support behind Saied (Aliriza 2019). Thus, Ghanmi writes 'Saied's rapid rise... was bolstered by an unconventional network of support that included Islamists, leftists and young Tunisians' (2019).

However, rather than merely being about capturing 'the Islamist' vote, we can better understand the performative use of Islam, traditionalism and arguably socially conservative values as a populist praxis of performative, transgressive, so-called 'low politics' (Baykan 2020). Practices of 'low politics' are about seeking to represent the 'people' and constructing oneself in opposition to the modernised, westernised and corrupt elite (Baykan 2020). While in Turkey, as Baykan (2020) describes, this links back to a historic tension between an urban westernised elite and rural traditional peasantry, in the Tunisian context I argue, we can better understand this with relation to the historical *méfiance* to the Francophone-secularist city based elite and an attempt to embody the traditional Tunisian Muslim, and yet not Islamist, 'people'.

Despite his performative use of Islam to win popular support, Saied has targeted, harassed and arrested political Islamists and increasingly uses the accusation of Islamic terrorism against anyone who publicly criticises his authoritarian power grabs. Ennahda, who have dominated Tunisian politics since 2011 and won the largest proportion of Parliamentary seats in 2019 (Grewal 2021), are Saied's single biggest political opposition. Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahda's leading figure and head of the Tunisian Parliament at the time of its dissolution, was arguably the political figure with the greatest ability to check the President's power²¹². Prior to the 'coup' of July 25, Saied, Ghannouchi and the ever-changing PM were sometimes known as Tunisia's 'three presidents' representing the power and significance of Ghannouchi's role²¹³. Given this, it is hard to know whether Saied's disdain for political Islamism is an ideological one or is driven by his desire to maintain his personal power. What

²¹² excluding the Prime Minister who is, of course, selected by the President

²¹³ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, May 2022

is clear is that political Islamist movements, who have long faced vaguely worded accusations of complicity in foreign espionage or links to Salafism in the post-transition period, as explored in Chapter 4, have seen an escalation in the surveillance, accusations and repression they face in the post-July 25 period²¹⁴. Several high-profile political Islamists have been accused of corruption or terrorism and subsequently arrested and charged including Ennahda's former Prime minister Hamadi Jebali (Amara and Perry 2022). Furthermore, Ghannouchi has been arrested and is, at the time of writing, in prison accused of terrorism (The New Arab Staff 2022)²¹⁵. Ordering the arrest and imprisonment of the President of the Tunisian Parliament, after having closed the very same institution with tanks, is a concerning and significant step on the path to authoritarianism.

Furthermore, while not the focus of this chapter, Saied's performance of the threat of Islamism plays into the counterterrorism objectives of his external partners, many of whom continue to bankroll and equip his regime and security forces despite criticising his recent power grabs (Maryon 2023). Corinna Mullin (2023) argues Tunisia's post 2015 security crisis was 'mobilized to further Tunisia's imbrications within imperialist security architecture through legal interventions, border violence, peripheral militarization, increased 'security' spending and neocolonial 'expertise', debt and racialized financialization' (p.1). While I agree with her analysis, as demonstrated in the discussions of Chapter 5, I have also shown how Tunisian political elites, including Saied, performed and perpetuated this sense of a crisis of Islamic extremism to garner funding and security assistance from external partners as well as to consolidate their own domestic political legitimacy and power as the providers of regime security.

6.2.5 Black African Migration

In a recent very sinister turn of events we have seen the escalation of racist anti-migrant sentiment in Tunisia. Anti-Black racism and rejection of African identity is something which has long characterised North African, including Tunisian, political history and culture (Scaglioni 2018; Gross-Wyrtzen 2020). Similarly, Tunisia's Black African migrant population has long suffered discrimination, both informal and administrative, and racialised

²¹⁴ Interview with political commentator, May 2022

²¹⁵ Despite having interviewed individuals from a diverse range of political allegiances, many of whom were highly critical of Ghannouchi as an individual and politician, there was not a single interviewee that believed these accusations to be anything but fictitious and politically motivated fabrications

policing at the hands of the forces of state security as I have argued extensively in previous research (Maryon 2022). However, this discrimination and racialised state violence was taken to whole new realms in February of 2023 when President Kais Saied spouted ‘Great Replacement Theory’ conspiracy theories and suggested that ‘hordes of irregular migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa’ had caused ‘violence, crime, and unacceptable practices’ in Tunisia in a publicly broadcasted speech surrounded by his National Security Council (NSC) (AmnestyInternational 2023; Parikh 2023). It is clear that Saied was attempting to whip up moral panic surrounding the ‘law and order’ threat of Black African migration by linking it to notions of criminality, sexual violence and demographic replacement of Arab or Muslim identity (Scaglioni 2018; Parikh 2023). As with the previous examples of covid, corruption and Islamism, Saied performed and perpetuated a sense of crisis surrounding Black African migration to 1/ justify repressive use of force, 2/ further consolidate neoliberalisation in Tunisia and to 3/ solidify his own brand of populism and tight control on power. The fact this speech was delivered by the President and that he did so surrounded the highest-ranking security personnel in the country meant that certain members of the Tunisian population subsequently felt emboldened to verbally and physically abuse Black African migrants and Black Tunisians in the street, evict them from their homes and even eject black children from schools (Cordall 2023). Furthermore, there have been widespread cases of the security forces arbitrarily detaining Black people regardless their legal status in the country, stealing their documentation, subjecting them to violence either during police checks or during their stay in police custody and even forcibly returning some individuals to their home nations (AmnestyInternational 2023; Mzalouat and Terradot 2023). This has led to certain African nations airlifting their citizens to safety as well as a drastic increase in the number of Black African migrants seeking to cross the Mediterranean illegally in small boats - many of whom, sadly, do not survive the journey (Mzalouat and Terradot 2023). There have been reports of the Tunisian coastguard refusing to rescue boats of Black African migrants in distress and even actively sabotaging vessels and leaving them adrift at sea (Alarm Phone 2023)²¹⁶. In May 2023 reports came in from cemeteries and morgues around Tunisia’s Mediterranean coast that they were at full capacity because of the drastic increase in the number of dead, often unidentified, migrants washing up on their beaches (Cordall 2023). While it is clear that Saied’s racist discourse has led to a significant escalation in the racialised policing of Tunisia’s migrant communities as well as the deadliness of Tunisia’s

²¹⁶ From scoping interview with journalists currently working on stories regarding such matters

border regime, we cannot untangle such events from economic and political questions. Firstly, I argue this recent escalation in racist discourse is a politically motivated attempt by Saied to shore up his support base in the face of declining popularity and deepening economic crisis. By February 2023, Saied was becoming increasingly politically isolated with even his most staunch supporters starting to question his priorities because of his obsession with fighting political opponents while most Tunisians suffered food and petrol shortages (Mbarek 2023) and crippling rates of inflation (Tunis Afrique Press 2023a). By targeting Black African migrants, portraying them as simultaneously unemployed criminals, a drain on the stretched resources of the state and, of course, stealing Tunisian jobs, Saied not only identified a scape goat for people's economic woes, as per populists globally, but one that plays into historic racist attitudes and stereotypes in Tunisia (Scaglioni 2018; Parikh 2023). Furthermore, his racist ideas – linked to conspiracy theories which had been circulating online – echoed the online content that his dwindling support base, comprised of young often economically marginalised men as well as more traditional social conservatives, were being bombarded with through twitterbots and echo-chamber algorithms (Brown 2023). Of course, this targeting of migrant groups plays into his support bases' political and economic discontent, whipping up moral panic and support for his repressive measures, but does nothing to ease the economic hardships Tunisians are facing.

Furthermore, despite Saied's racist discourses partially causing a rise in the number of individuals trying to leave Tunisia and travel to Europe, it has also presented him with unexpected opportunities to leverage European leaders, obsessed with reducing migration, to illicit further economic and security cooperation and assistance (Poletti 2023). Italy, whose externalised and violent border regime as well as their willingness to work with external partners regardless the nature of their practices has been well documented²¹⁷ (Alarm Phone 2023), have been particularly vocal in calling for external funding bodies to provide Tunisia with the loans needed to prevent economic collapse and thus risk 'another migrant crisis' to Europe (Winfield 2023). In a similar vein, the US, the EU and France have been applying pressuring for the IMF to continue its negotiations with the Tunisian government and even disburse a tranche of funding based on the mere promise of reforms (Poletti 2023) with the same motivations. Furthermore, since February 2023 European nations have deepened their security and migration cooperation with Tunisia emphasising the need to 'work with trusted

²¹⁷ Both trends which have escalated since the election of Italy's far-right government

partners' to 'secure Europe's borders' rather than highlighting the role of Saied's government in fuelling this crisis of death the Mediterranean²¹⁸ (Poletti 2023). Thus, it seems that Saied's racist discourse, while fuelling a mini migration crisis on the shores of Europe, has provided Saied with opportunities to 1/ tap into his support base, 2/ deepen Tunisia's dependency on external credit further trapping Tunisia in the associated neoliberal reform agenda and 3/ lobby for further external security assistance needed to both police Europe's deadly borders and maintain Tunisia's growing security state apparatuses.

In this section, I have shown that Kais Saied has performed and perpetuated a sense of crisis surrounding threats such as the pandemic, corruption, Islamism and Black African migration. At all stages his populist performance of the need to 'secure the state' from said threats has reinforced personal political power at the expense of constitutionally defined checks on his power, as the solution to the various 'crises' Tunisia faces. In the following section, I focus in on the complex and significant relationship between the authoritarian rule of Saied and the forces of state security to demonstrate that his populist discourse and praxis has been characterised by a 'significant escalation in the state's propensity to employ coercion and legal/extra-legal intimidation' as per authoritarian neoliberalisms globally (Tansel 2017 p.3)

6.3 The rise of the post-July 25 Tunisian neoliberal security state

I argue, in this section, that Saied has sought to construct an 'unholy marriage of convenience with the security forces' (Cordall 2021) who are themselves increasingly implicit in repressive practices (AmnestyInternational 2021a; HumanRightsWatch 2021). This acts to insulate both neoliberalism and authoritarianism from contestation.

Since the contested coup of July 25, 2021, Tunisia has witnessed a stark intensification of the repressive nature of its security forces who increasingly serve the personal political agenda of the President. When Saied announced the closure of the CSM, it was armed police that prevented civil servants from entering the building (France24 2022). When Saied announced the dissolution of Parliament in July 2021, it was the armed forces that closed it with tanks

²¹⁸ In more recent research (Maryon 2022) I show how EU externalization and EU-Tunisia relations have interacted with and reinforced anti-black racism in Tunisia's border regime. In short, the EU has played a significant role in fueling this epidemic of racism and death in the Mediterranean but Tunisian policy makers have also played their part.

while soldiers prevented elected representatives from entering. The following day, plain clothes officers raided the Al-Jazeera office in central Tunis (AlJazeera 2021b). This attack on journalists represented a stark contrast to the freedom of press that has defined the post-2011 period. Indeed, The Committee for the Protection of Journalists claims that harassment and assault of journalists and activists by police is becoming more frequent and overt (Crouch 2021).

Nowhere is this recourse to repressive practices more evident than in the policing of political protests and social movements with media outlets documenting widespread police brutality and, sometimes, deaths at the hands of the security services (Boussen 2021; Mbarek 2022). On January 13, 2022, the eve of the 11th anniversary of the revolution, Saied outlawed popular protests using coronavirus measures (Mohamed 2022). This ban on protests was taken even though the anniversary of the fall of Ben Ali has been commemorated each year since 2011 by mass protests at the lack of progress in terms of the socio-economic demands of the revolution. Saied's instrumentalisation of the coronavirus pandemic to outlaw protest was perceived almost universally as an attempt to prevent this annual commemoration which serves as a symbolic call to embrace freedom, reject repression, and deliver on the socio-economic needs of the population. Despite this ban on protests, thousands of Tunisians took to the streets. These protests were met with some of the most overt and widespread cases of police brutality seen on the streets of Tunisia since 2011 including that used against journalists documenting the protests (Mohamed 2022). Indeed, Tunisian security services, using heavy-handed tactics and militarised police equipment such as water cannons and rubber bullets, were able to lockdown central Tunis²¹⁹. Thus, experts are warning that we are witnessing the rise of a security state in Tunisia (Ferjani 2022) which currently serves the personal political agenda of the President.

While there are several underlying reasons for the increasing use of repressive practices by the Tunisian security forces, Saied's 'marriage of convenience' with the forces of state security has fed into a culture of impunity within them. In the rare cases when police were prosecuted for such brutality, police unions have stormed courtrooms intimidating judges until the accused officers were allowed to go free (Kimball 2016; Grewal 2018). The impunity with which the Tunisian police feel they can act was reinforced in 2017 with the

²¹⁹ Interview with journalist present, February 2022

passage of the Prosecution of the Abuses Against the Armed Forces Law (AmnestyInternational 2017) and then again, in 2020, with the passage of a law providing security forces with immunity if they use lethal and non-lethal force ‘protecting’ public buildings (AmnestyInternational 2020). Some claim this has given the ISF a carte blanche to use lethal force²²⁰. The new Constitution, approved in August 2022, fundamentally shifts power relations in the security sector – removing civilian oversight of the ISF and the army and reinforces the Presidents supreme role in matters pertaining to security²²¹. Furthermore, Saied has performatively presented himself as a commander in chief style figure by constantly surrounding himself with MoI and MoD officials in official state broadcasts and visits²²².

While Tunisia’s historically more problematic ISF have a reverted to tactics of repression and impunity associated with Ben Ali’s rule, we have also seen worrying practices emerging within the armed forces. In contrast to the armed forces’ historically apolitical and marginalised position²²³, scholars point to the growing complicity of the armed forces in Saied’s rise to power since July 25 (Masmoudi 2021). Regardless of the position one takes on the armed forces carrying out Saied’s suspension of Parliament²²⁴, in the period following the July 25 announcement, military leaders have been visibly present at Saied’s various press conferences many of which have announced authoritarian power grabs as discussed above in the dissolution of the CSM. Furthermore, many of Saied’s politically motivated trials against opponents have taken place in military courts (AmnestyInternational 2021b). The politisation of the armed forces, given their history of relatively apolitical existence compared to the historically problematic ISF, is thus significant. Importantly, for our understanding of authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia, both the armed forces and the military have been used to suppress anti-austerity movements in urban centres like Tunis as well as small towns and

²²⁰ Interview with security sector specialist, December 2021

²²¹ Interview with Tunisian security studies scholar, July 2022

²²² For example, in 2021 Saied arrived at the annual Tunisian book fair surrounded by military officers and armed police – one prominent Tunisian political commentator who has attended the book fair every year since they were a child noted that Ben Ali never felt the need to bring such a police presence with him when he used to attend (Interview with Tunisian political commentator, July 2022)

²²³ Of course, there is a debate about the extent to such militaries are ever apolitical, however, in comparison to other militaries in the region the Tunisian armed forces have historically kept out of political debates and had limited economic interests (Mako and Moghadam 2021).

²²⁴ Masmoudi (2021) describes these actions as a violation of Article 18 of the Tunisian Constitution which demands the political neutrality of the armed forces. However, (Guerfali, 2022 cited in Bajec 2022) suggest that the armed forces carrying out the orders of the commander and chief is not a political act but an attempt to withdraw from embroiling themselves as deciding actors in political disputes

villages in Tunisia's marginalised, often resource rich, regions, as explored extensively in the previous chapter. Such tendencies have only increased under Saied's post-July 25 regime.

In the section above I have shown that Saied's populist regime has led to an intensification of the use of the forces of state security to insulate his government and neoliberalism from contestation in Tunisia – as per authoritarian neoliberalisms globally. In the following section, I seek to theorise Saied's unique brand of populism, its contradictions and conflicts, and its complex relationship with neoliberalism.

6.4 Kais Saied's unique brand of populism and its complex and contradictory relationship with neoliberalism

Significantly, for this thesis' discussion of authoritarian neoliberalism in post-2011 Tunisia, further evidence of Saied's lack of ideological commitment and populist adhocery can be found in his contradictory and incoherent position on economic policy. In his election campaign, Saied underscored his commitment to alternative economic models, winning popular support from leftists and young people who did not like his socially conservative views but saw him as an economic alternative (Aliriza 2019). However, his economic policy since becoming President has overwhelmingly maintained the neoliberal status quo. I have already shown how Saied used exceptional security powers, such as those enacted in the name of the pandemic, to push through neoliberal reforms. Having rid himself of the oversight of Parliament and an empowered Prime Minister, he has been able to take key economic policy decisions with little scrutiny such as the secret sale of a large proportion of Tunisian BH Bank (Reuters 2022c)²²⁵ and the negotiation of a new deal with the IMF agreed in October 2022 which was not presented to Parliament due to its dissolution at the time. Although Saied has sought to performatively speak to his support base through certain economic measures, such as through 'banning illegal speculative behaviour in a desperate attempt to curb runaway inflation' and his war on corruption, his government has implemented the agenda demanded by external creditors such as increasing the price levies on staple goods such as oil, sugar and electricity (Ben Gahda 2022 pp.12-13). Furthermore, the Finance Law of 2023 'follows IMF recommendations to end fuel subsidies before the end of the year, and to reduce food subsidies by one-third' (Nafti 2023). Indeed, even his selection

²²⁵ This sale did not follow the proper legal channels (Interview with Tunisian journalist, November 2022)

of Prime Minister Bouden²²⁶ – associated with overseeing the neoliberalisation of the Tunisian higher education sector in her previous job²²⁷ – represented an early contradiction of his initial anti-neoliberal discourse.

In short, Saied does not seem particularly ideologically committed to any economic model or to have any particular interest in or understanding of macroeconomic and budgetary policy. His overarching tendency to comply with the neoliberal reform agenda, notwithstanding the occasional speech critiquing ‘IMF diktaks’ and measures that cause ‘social suffering’ (AfricaNews 2023), stems from Tunisia’s deep dependency on external credit as well as his need to keep some level of support amongst Tunisia’s economic and political elites and its security forces – many of whom have internalised the reform agenda of Tunisia’s all powerful external funders.

6.4.1 Co-opting of anti-colonial discourse while deepening Tunisia’s dependency on external credit

Another aspect of Saied’s unique brand of populism which is significant for this chapter’s reflections on authoritarian neoliberalism, is his articulation and co-option of anti-colonial discourse to serve his own political agenda. Saied’s criticism of ‘foreign meddling’ has often been based around 1/ avoiding criticism for unpopular economic decisions by portraying them as being imposed by external actors such as the IMF and Global Northern partners as well as 2/ deflecting foreign critique of his authoritarian power grabs as western interference in Tunisia’s domestic politics. For example, in August 2022, following condemnation of his power grabs by some US politicians, Saied denounced ‘US meddling in Tunisia’s internal affairs’, stating that ‘the recent remarks by some (US) officials are unacceptable as Tunisia is free and sovereign, and sovereignty rests in the hands of its people’ (Rabat 2022). Similarly, Saied has also often claimed that Ennahda, his biggest political opposition, is being funded by foreign forces ‘who wish to destabilise Tunisia’²²⁸. These are just some examples of how, Saied co-opts anticolonial discourse to insulate himself from the political consequences of unpopular decisions and justify his oppression of political opponents.

²²⁶ Simultaneously in selecting Tunisia’s first female prime minister he seemed to undermine his initial socially conservative rhetoric surrounding women’s rights, and continued a long history of led-state secularised top-down approaches to gender equality in Tunisia (Amsili 2021)

²²⁷ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, May 2022

²²⁸ interview with Tunisian political commentator, May 2022

Such discourses are also significant to our theoretical understanding of populism in Global Southern contexts and its links to both contemporary neoliberalism and the legacies of colonial capitalism. Anti-colonial and nationalist discourse in MENA populisms has often been associated with authoritarian post-colonial regimes in Egypt and Libya as well as the Iranian revolution (Dorraj 2017). However, post-colonial regimes in Tunisia have historically maintained firm ties with their former colonial ruler and its Western allies with anti-colonial discourse being associated with Islamist parties and social movements rather than regimes. In contrast, I argue the more recent articulation of anti-Western and anti-colonial populist discourse by political regimes in Tunisia must be understood as a contemporary articulation of previous nationalist anti-imperial discourse which does not merely reject European and French influence but also critiques the hierarchical system of global (racial) capitalism that maintains Tunisia's dependency on global northern states and IFI credit (Hamouchene 2018; Aliriza 2020; Mullin 2023).

In short, we can think of Saied's populist discourse as a reactualisation of historical nationalist independence discourses to condemn contemporary global market capitalism and its subjugation of Tunisia. This is not dissimilar to Global Northern populist movements criticism of the global economic elite and their subjugation of the interests of the 'people' in favour of global financial markets and the profit margins of the 1% (Caylan 2021). Such discourses have proved successful in the context of global financial crises and widening income inequality in the Global North (Tansel 2017; Caylan 2021). Similarly, I argue, global southern populist movements in the post-2007 era, including that of Saied, have been able to capitalise, perhaps even more successfully, on such discourses. The success of such discourses in the Global South can be attributed to the significance of continued legacies of economic marginalisation and dispossession associated with colonial capitalism (Dorraj 2017) as well as the impacts of authoritarian neoliberal governance seen in post-2007 era in the global south (Tansel 2017). This means that discourses rejecting the interests of foreign capital feed into historical grievances, distrust of external actors and nationalist anti-colonial independence sentiment. Furthermore, we can better understand the relative success of the contemporary co-optation of anti-colonial discourse by Global Southern populist movements if we recognise that the austerity agenda associated with neoliberalism was first tested out on the Global South in the 1970s and 1980s, through IMF structural adjustment programmes, before being 'bought' home to the Global North (Tansel 2017; Khurana and Narayan 2021). Therefore, the *méfiance* of external capital and global markets, as articulated by

contemporary populist movements in the Global South, takes on a deeper historical and societal significance in such contexts (Dorraj 2017). It is for this reason, as well as the Global North and international community's vocal support for Tunisia's democratic transition and critique of Saied's authoritarian power grabs, that Saied has attempted to co-opt and instrumentalise anti-colonial populist discourse to articulate his own political project and insulate it from critique.

Of course, as with many aspects of Kais Saied's populist adhococracy, his rejection of foreign interests is entirely incoherent with his government's policies. As I showed in the previous chapter, the vast majority of Tunisia's security sector is currently bank rolled, trained, and equipped by Global Northern actors. Saied's critique of 'US meddling in Tunisia's internal affairs' (Mbarek 2022) in August 2022 does not seem to extend to his rejection of the 197.2M USD worth of bilateral assistance allocated to Tunisia by US congress that very same year (Binder 2022). Similarly, in October 2022, it was announced that the Tunisian government and the IMF had reached a staff-level agreement for a 1.9B USD which necessitated various austerity measures and reforms along neoliberal lines (Claes 2022). This followed on from an agreement between the EU and Tunisia in May 2022, which led to the disbursement of 300M EUR – the latest tranche of the EU's MFA programme with Tunisia which came with similar neoliberal strings attached (EUPressRoom 2022). This agreement came just 3 months after Saied's high-profile comments at the Africa-EU summit in February 2022 when Saied demanded that 'money and assets stolen from Africa must be returned' and criticised European nation's that 'dare to interfere in the affairs of others and speak about fair justice and independence of the judiciary while they cover up the crimes and looting of people's assets' (ANSAMed 2022). Thus, we can see that there is disconnect between Saied's discourse rejecting Western interventionism and his continued dependency on external actors. This is part of the broader incoherence that defines Saied's complex and contradictory relationship with neoliberalism outlined above.

Notwithstanding the above discussions, I would argue that since rising international condemnation of his racist rants and authoritarian policing of opponents throughout 2023, Saied has seemingly sought to adopt a more vocal anti-IMF, anti-external intervention and anti-neoliberal agenda once more (Nafti 2023). For example, having initially agreed a staff-level agreement with the IMF in October 2022, the IMF bailout has failed to appear due to disagreements regarding the previously accepted terms of the agreement with Saied publicly condemning IMF 'diktats'. At the time of writing (July 2023) these talks remain at an

impasse. For Nafti (2023) this is down to Saied's tepid interest in the economy, his wishful economic thinking based on reclaiming assets stolen through corruption and his disdain for external meddling in what he sees as his domestic affairs rather than him having a radical progressive economic project. Indeed, Tunisia continues to enact many of the measures required to receive IMF funds as can be seen in the aforementioned discussion of the Finance Law of January 2023. Furthermore, calls from inside Saied's camp to explore alternate sources of funding beyond the West, such as from the BRICs or the Gulf States, do not fundamentally contest the IMF reform agenda in any way. For example, 'under the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA, a mechanism which presents itself as an alternative to the Bretton-Wood system), 70% of the allowable quota for each country is contingent upon reforms negotiated with the IMF' (Nafti 2023). In June 2023, Tunisia entered into a short-term loan agreement with the African Export-Import Bank which will provide 500M USD worth of assistance to be prepaid over 4-year period with 10% interest rate. The government acknowledged that the reason for this loan was to cover loan payments on other loans that needed to be paid later that month (Tunis Afrique Press 2023b) to avoid debt default.

Thus, regardless the uncertainty pertaining to the most recent IMF loan at the time of writing, it seems that Saied's government will continue to vocally condemn Western meddling in Tunisia's affairs – particularly economic affairs – while continuing to pursue the austerity measure necessary to secure external funding and failing to elaborate a radical progressive economic vision for Tunisia.

6.5 Le retour du social: Saied's failed socio-economic vision

In the previous sections of this chapter, I argued that Saied's populist discourse and policies have reinforced dynamics of authoritarian neoliberalism already present in Tunisia albeit in a far more authoritarian way than that which we have previously seen in post-transition period. In this final section, I argue that Saied's brand of populism, his authoritarian neoliberal regime and his discourse of 'securing the state' will ultimately fail to achieve the legitimization it seeks. This failure, coupled with worsening socio-economic conditions in Tunisia, foreshadows further instability to come.

Indeed, 'the economy is the one wild card in Tunisia's fraught political landscape that might upend Saied's authoritarian project' (Brumberg 2022). Leaders around the globe, including

Saied, have been keen to emphasise the economic impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine to shift blame for domestic economic underperformance. However, Saied's economic 'project' – or lack thereof - faced significant challenges long before the Ukraine conflict commenced²²⁹. The coronavirus pandemic caused significant loss of life in Tunisia and beyond. It also decimated economies globally. During 2020, lockdowns, global economic slowdown and collapsing industries such as tourism meant Tunisia's GDP fell by over 8%, poverty rose from 16% to 20% and public debt rose by 15 percentage points (Kopper 2021). Even when lockdowns were lifted, the pandemic had instigated a long-term global slowdown, skyrocketing inflation rates and shortages of staple goods due to supply chain issues. Given Tunisia's pre-existing vulnerabilities, including a weak dinar, a high trade deficit and lack of fuel and food sovereignty, it was more exposed to these global economic pressures (WorldBank 2022).

Since Saied's July 25 power grab in 2021, despite some initial optimism from many Tunisians that having a 'strong man' rule would increase efficiency²³⁰, Tunisia's economic situation has only continued to deteriorate. Significantly, Saied's authoritarian actions have cost Tunisia some of the margin of maneuver it benefitted from with its external creditors as the poster child of the 'Arab Spring'²³¹. Political instability and frequent large-scale protests and riots have further spooked foreign investors²³². Saied's ineffective governance, 'more concerned with arresting political opponents than improving people's standards of living'²³³, has failed to articulate an alternate economic path for Tunisia, let alone a successful one. Of course, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is the source of the vast majority of Tunisia's wheat imports²³⁴, and the subsequent global rise in energy costs, has only worsened already dangerously high levels of inflation and aggravated pre-existing issues with food shortages (WorldBank 2022). In October 2022, inflation stood at over 9% (WorldBank 2022) while poverty levels were at their highest levels since the revolution²³⁵. Furthermore, in the first 10 months of 2022, Tunisia's balance of trade deficit widened by 60% compared to the same period the previous year (Alsaidani 2022) and its net exchange reserve rates were at their

²²⁹ Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2022

²³⁰ Interview with Tunisian journalist, February 2022

²³¹ Interview with US diplomat, August 2022

²³² Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2022

²³³ Interview with Tunisian political commentator, May 2022

²³⁴ Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2022

²³⁵ Interview with Tunisian economist, October 2022

lowest since 2019 (Alsaidani 2022). By mid-2022, American Bank Morgan Stanley claimed that Tunisia was the African state the most likely to default on its sovereign debt demonstrating the significance of Tunisia's economic challenges (EcofinNews 2022). To respond to the growing problem of shortages and queues, the government attempted to impose rationing of goods, but this has been chaotic, ineffective and highly unpopular (Brumberg 2022). Thus, the economy, it is argued, represents a huge potentially destabilising factor to the political regime which has burned its political bridges and isolated its support bases. Indeed, Tunisia is 'faced with a looming economic catastrophe. He (Saied) doesn't have the support or the governance noose to build a new political system, and when the economy collapses, you won't have a political system that can salvage it' (Magresi cited in Amara and Perry 2022).

Rather than external actors recognising the economic, social and political challenges facing Tunisia and reducing their expectations, they continue to underscore the necessity of further reforms such as reduction of subsidies of staple goods including food and petrol and the public sector wage bill (WorldBank 2022). In order to deliver on these highly controversial demands, Saied, for the first time, in October 2022, circumvented the all-powerful UGTT, Tunisia's largest trade union, from dialogue surrounding these reforms (Brumberg 2022). Given that the UGTT are one of the most credible and popular political actors in Tunisia (Gallien 2022), and are able to mobilise their vast membership, this is a political risky move for Saied (Brumberg 2022). Significantly, societal discontent at economic conditions, shortages and the IMF package negotiated in October 2022 led to widespread protests, strikes and riots across Tunisia causing the government to get cold feet – stalling the disbursement of funds. At the time of writing, debt default, economic collapse, large scale uprisings and the collapse of Saied's government all appear very realistic potential scenarios that could arise in the next few months in Tunisia. Presently, Saied continues to rely on the forces of state security to repress civil disobedience against unpopular policies and to arrest political opponents. But there have been rumours of growing discontent within both the armed forces and the ISF (Brumberg 2022; Volkmann 2022). Credible reports suggest military commanders will intervene politically should they feel that the government's position has become untenable²³⁶ (Brumberg 2022; Volkmann 2022).

²³⁶ Indeed, a recent study suggests that those exhibiting anti-system and anti-establishment attitudes in Tunisia look favourably on both a potential military takeover of Tunisia, a greater political role for Tunisia's super powerful trade union the UGTT and even a coalition of power between the two (Albrecht et al. 2021).

However, predicting the fate of Saied's regime is not the emphasis of this chapter. Rather I have sought to demonstrate how Saied's populist articulations of 'securing the state' from certain threats have contributed to authoritarian drift in Tunisia while further reinforcing authoritarian neoliberalism. This notwithstanding, Saied's populist articulation of 'securing the state' from certain securitised threats as a means to legitimise his regime is facing significant challenges as I have argued in this final section of this chapter.

Conclusion: a populist moment without a movement

In this chapter, I have explored Kais Saied's brand of populism and instrumentalisation of security, from the pandemic to the 'fight against corruption' to the ever-present bogey man of Islamism to the Black African migrant, to demonstrate how Saied has been able to consolidate his authoritarian power grab. Saied has sought to legitimise his actions, and thus, his increasingly authoritarian government, through the notion of 'securing the state' from these security threats and by constructing an alliance with the forces of state security. However, he has relied upon the roll out of the coercive apparatuses of state security in their most violent and repressive forms seen since January 2011 to insulate his rule from contestation and detract from his inability to respond to the socio-economic concerns that contributed his rise to power. Ultimately, despite initial support from many Tunisians, who expressed a willingness 'to try something new', to 'give Saied a chance' or the 'benefit of the doubt' due to their frustrations with the post-2011 political elite and system, I argue Saied's attempt to reconfigure the legitimacy of his populist authoritarian neoliberal regime is failing²³⁷.

At the time of writing, Saied's regime looks increasingly isolated and precarious, a 'populist moment without a movement' in the words of one interviewee²³⁸. Despite their initial ability to play into the unsatisfied wants of the 'people', 'populist leaders become detached from the people's needs and their antagonistic appeals fail to register in the lived experiences of people particularly in times of hardship' (Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020, p.39). Tunisians are struggling to find food to eat, to keep energy in their homes and the majority of young people

²³⁷ Justifications that have been given to me in informal conversations with Tunisian voters since 2019

²³⁸ Interview with Tunisian journalist, May 2022

have suggested leaving Tunisia by any means necessary is their greatest wish (ArabBarometer 2022). In this context, Saied's accusations of corruption against political opponents and coupled with his inconsistent policy positions and inability to pursue the alternative economic models he promised is causing disillusionment with his regime. For Tunisians, elections, Parliament and parties, despite their previous failings, were all avenues to express political grievances with those in charge. Civil society organisations, blogs and a free press were significant channels through which officials were held to account and citizens could coordinate political action and lobby interests. Such avenues are closing. Once again, 'street politics', albeit it a dangerous strategy due to the threat of police brutality and arrest, has become the avenue through which Tunisians are able to express their grievance with Saied's regime and the socio-economic challenges they face. However, the threat of repression does not seem to be deterring Tunisians. In October 2022, the normally tranquil seaside town of Zarzis experienced days of rioting and protests after Tunisian security forces secretly buried the bodies' of 18 residents who had drowned attempting to travel to Europe in an unseaworthy vessel in an unmarked grave without informing their families (Belhadj 2022). For me, this tragic example demonstrates all too clearly the toxic cocktail of insecurities that Tunisia faces associated with the failure of Saied's populist brand of authoritarian neoliberalism; socio-economic turmoil that pushes individuals to desperation, increasingly opaque and repressive practices of the security forces, and their role in closing the ever smaller political and civil society spaces in which Tunisians were previously able to express their grievances in post-2011 Tunisia. It seems, therefore, that further political instability is inevitable. While Saied's populist discourse, was for a short period, able to feed into the unsatisfied wants of so many Tunisians and temporarily legitimise him as the 'securing the state' from certain 'threats', his inability deliver on the promises made, coupled with his increasingly erratic and authoritarian behaviour, means his authority and legitimacy is running thin.

In this chapter, I accounted for the drastic changes in Tunisia's political landscape associated with Saied's rise to power and the subsequent intensification of Tunisia's neoliberal security state. I have also made the case for the analytical utility of bringing the concept populism into research on authoritarian neoliberalism in certain relevant contexts (Goonewardena 2020; Sierra Deutsch 2021; Gallo 2022). Indeed, I have argued that the incorporation of populism into the conceptual framework of authoritarian neoliberalism can help us understand how and why, and in what contexts, populist actors whip up moral panic surrounding certain 'law and

order crises' or 'security threats' (Hall et al 1978; Wacquant 2009) and how these processes are inherently linked to, and shaped by, authoritarian neoliberalism. It can also enable us to understand the durability of authoritarian neoliberal state forms linked to the ability of policy makers to mobilise consent for intensified use of coercive state power by shifting 'blame' onto a cultural other and whipping up moral panic surrounding certain 'crises'.

Conclusion: Securing the state in post-transition Tunisia: reconfiguring regime legitimacy in an age of authoritarian neoliberalism

The crisis is permanent, the government only provisional

Karl Marx, 1855

I - The role of security politics in the reconfiguration of regime legitimacy in post-transition Tunisia

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to answer the question: what role does security politics play in the reconfiguration of regime legitimacy in post-transition Tunisia? Rather than discussing this question through a mere focus on domestic Tunisian (security) politics, I have situated such discussions within the context of the ever-growing crisis of neoliberalism which shapes and constrains the sovereignty and legitimacy of states globally – something even more significant in the post-transition Tunisian context. More precisely, by mobilising the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism to explore the interlinkages between neoliberalism and repressive security policies and practices (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017), I have shown that the Tunisian neoliberal security state, deprived of sovereignty in certain areas, and facing significant challenges to its legitimacy, relies upon the notion of ‘securing the state’ from certain discursively constructed security threats such as terrorism, Islamism and Black African migration. I argue that this notion of securing the state is a performance of statehood and an attempt to reassert the legitimacy of the state as the provider of security in the context of widespread insecurities linked to neoliberal deregulation and austerity. However, this attempt to reconfigure the legitimacy of the state is failing to achieve the legitimation it seeks as the socioeconomic conditions of, everyday insecurities faced by, the majority of Tunisians continue to worsen. This undermines the legitimacy of the political regime, Tunisia’s democratic system and neoliberalism as an economic model thus foreshadowing further political instability to come.

Discussions of regime legitimacy, authoritarian neoliberalism and security politics in post-transition Tunisia are the overarching empirical focus of this PhD project. However, I have sought, throughout this project, to make both a theoretical and empirical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. Before I outline the contribution of this thesis to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism, I must first demonstrate how the

chapters of this thesis have enabled me to reach my overarching argument: that deprived of their sovereignty and legitimacy, due to the fallouts of authoritarian neoliberal governance, policy makers are seeking to construct their claims to legitimacy upon the notion of ‘securing the state’ in its traditional Weberian sense.

In Chapter 3, I demonstrated that the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism is both pertinent and revelatory to the post-transition Tunisian context, in which several novel administrative, legal and judicial mechanisms function hand-in-hand with coercive state practices to increasingly pre-empt and limit the space for contestation of neoliberalism while clamping down on resistance that does emerge (Tansel 2017). While I showed that Tunisian political elites have by no means resisted this neoliberal consensus (Dalacoura 2016; Gallien 2022), I emphasised the constraints external actors, such as bilateral partners, IFIs and International Organisations, have placed on the sovereignty of the Tunisian state in the form of several huge financial assistance packages characterised by neoliberal conditionality. Indeed, I analysed the mechanisms of discipline and surveillance that operate within these frameworks (Sotiris 2017) and act to ensure Tunisia’s compliance with neoliberal reform agendas elaborating the consequences which have occurred in those cases when policy makers, faced with the socio-economic demands of their own population, have deviated from the neoliberal reform agenda (Gallien 2018; Hamouchene 2018; Ben Gahda 2022). I also engaged with sites of so-called street politics; protests, social unrest and riots, which remain ever present in Tunisia arguing that such sites represent forms of resistance and contestation of neoliberalism and austerity in the context of the neoliberal consensus that has, on the most part, pervaded elite level intellectual debates and formal partisan politics in the post-transition period. I analysed cases of harsh repression of sites of street politics (Burke and Cordall 2018; Gallien 2018; BBCNews 2021; Siyada 2021), including those openly contesting austerity and the influence of external actors, to demonstrate not only how the authoritarian neoliberal state cracks down on resistance but also how resistance, in itself, can be productive of authoritarian neoliberalism. Finally, I demonstrated that the Tunisian state, faced with constraints on its sovereignty and unable to deviate from the neoliberal reform agenda of the *bailleurs des fonds*, is increasingly struggling to reconfigure its claims to legitimacy as a political regime because of the worsening socio-economic situation faced by the majority of the Tunisian population.

In Chapter 4, I mobilised the concept of performativity to show that, faced with such constraints on their sovereignty and legitimacy linked to neoliberalism and its fall outs, Tunisian policy makers have consistently used performative discourse and practices framed as ‘securing the state’ from certain securitised threats such as terrorism, Islamism, Black African migration and instability more broadly. This, I argued, must be understood as an attempt by policy makers to both perform the sovereignty of the state and reconfigure their claims to legitimacy as the providers of security in a traditional Weberian sense. However, I demonstrated that performative counterterror discourses and practices are aimed not only at flexing the muscles of the state, but they also seek to construct moral panic surrounding certain marginalised groups and aim to ‘justify’ the roll out of repressive policing of already marginalised communities, political Islamists and anti-austerity movements rather than merely suspected terrorists. As I showed in the later stages of Chapter 4, this performance is designed to distract from some of the root causes of radicalisation and extremism in contemporary Tunisia namely: economic inequalities and dispossession linked to decades of neoliberal policies and the demands of the so called ‘donor cartel’.

In Chapter 5, I explored the role of external actors in both shaping and, I argue, reinforcing the attempts of successive governments to reconfigure their claims to legitimacy whilst also reinforcing authoritarian neoliberalism in post-2011 Tunisia. I analysed and exposed the connections between large amounts of security assistance provided to Tunisia since 2011 and the financial assistance with neoliberal strings attached that many of these very same actors have provided to Tunisia since 2011. In doing so, I showed that external actors play a fundamental role in shaping authoritarian neoliberalism in contemporary Tunisia both in terms of pursuing the aggressive neoliberalisation of the Tunisian economy and providing the state with the tools to repress contestation and police the edge populations of contemporary capitalism. In Chapter 5, I exposed how the security assistance provided by external actors, in negotiation with the Tunisian state, has acted to reconfigure regime legitimacy in a way that simultaneously reinforces authoritarian neoliberalism. Furthermore, in Chapter 5, I brought the concepts of authoritarian neoliberalism and racial capitalism in conversation with one another to analyse contemporary security assistance in Tunisia. Indeed, I argued that external actors use both financial and security assistance in Tunisia to reinforce Tunisia’s security and economic dependency on external, often global northern, actors and thus maintain Tunisia’s racialised, marginalised and peripheral position within the global economy (Rodney 1972; Robinson 2019; Jouili 2023; Mullin 2023). Such an analysis, I argued, helps understand these

external interventions as part of the *longue durée* of global, interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control that insulate capitalist accumulation from contestation and illuminates the significance of racialisation in these processes.

In Chapter 6, I explored the rise and rise of populist, and increasingly authoritarian, President Kais Saied arguing the rise of Saied demonstrates the challenges and contestation successive governments have faced in their attempts to reconfigure the legitimacy of the post-transition regime around the notion of ‘securing the state’ as explored throughout Chapters 3-5. Indeed, I argued that Saied capitalised upon insecurity and discontent at neoliberal reforms and austerity measures pursued by successive post-transition governments as well as the perception of their imposition by external actors to construct his anti-party, anti-establishment and anti-elite populist discourse. I showed that despite this discourse, there has been very little change in Tunisia’s economic and budgetary policy, nor the role of external actors in shaping it since his election. I emphasised Saied’s use of exceptional security powers under the guise of the War on Terror, the pandemic and his self-proclaimed war on corruption to ram through unpopular economic reforms as per the demands of the *bailleurs des fonds*. Significantly, I elaborated how, since July 25, 2021, there has been an intensification of these processes with Saied suspending the Tunisian Parliament, sacking his government and deregulating almost every democratic institution of the Tunisian state. This, I argued, has been coupled with the significant escalation in the propensities of Tunisia’s security forces to use coercive state power to repress social movements and insulate neoliberalism, and increasingly Saied’s authoritarian rule, from contestation. In other words, I asserted that Saied has sought to reconfigure the legitimacy of his increasingly authoritarian regime around populist notions of ‘securing the state’ from certain threats while simultaneously reinforcing authoritarian neoliberal governance in Tunisia. However, Saied is operating under significant constraints, namely an inability and lack of desire to pursue alternative economic models, his own political ineptitudes and his lack of political support. Such constraints mean that his attempt to reconfigure the legitimacy of the Tunisian political regime around populist articulations of ‘securing the state’ from certain threats, many of which seem increasingly detached from the insecurities that Tunisians face daily, will ultimately fail; thus, foreshadowing further political instability in Tunisia.

While such questions are exceptionally significant in post-transition Tunisia, where the state faces huge challenges to its sovereignty due to the external interventions of provider states

and where the post-revolutionary context demanded the reconfiguration of the legitimacy of the political regime, they inform our understanding of the contemporary crisis of legitimacy faced by neoliberal states globally. Indeed, the crisis of legitimacy seen in Tunisia is inherent to global racial capitalism and its contemporary, authoritarian neoliberal iteration. Thus, through the case of post-2011 Tunisia, where the transitional political context acts as a microcosm in which to explore the significance of such discussions, I argue that neoliberalism will continue to enrich a very select and ever smaller handful of individuals while creating more and more human insecurity and suffering. This will, inevitably, continue to delegitimise political regimes globally posing particularly difficult questions to so-called liberal democratic regimes.

II - The empirical and theoretical contribution of this project

Having outlined the overarching argument of this thesis in the first section, I must now elaborate upon the original empirical and theoretical contributions of this project. Firstly, this thesis makes an original empirical contribution to knowledge. By exploring post-transition Tunisia as a site of authoritarian neoliberalism, I have analysed and elaborated upon the connections between neoliberal deregulation and coercive state power in the post-transition context in a way that is often overlooked in security studies scholarship on Tunisia because of traditional disciplinary boundaries and blind spots between IPE and security studies (Wynne-Hughes and Weldes 2017). Thus, this forms part of this thesis' call for a recoupling of security studies and IPE to better understand (in)security in the MENA as well as contemporary neoliberal security states.

Furthermore, I argue that the Tunisian case represents a novel empirical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism which acts to inform theoretical discussions within the existing authoritarian neoliberalism literature. While a very small number of scholars have discussed neoliberal authoritarianism under Ben Ali (Görmüş and Akçalı 2021), I am yet to find another researcher using the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism to engage with the contemporary Tunisian case. For me, the exploration of the post-2011 Tunisian case represents a significant and interesting research terrain which furthers our understanding of authoritarian neoliberalism(s) in four ways.

Firstly, by situating the contemporary Tunisian case within its historical context as well as expanding upon the global interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control which sustain capitalist accumulation throughout this project, I have attempted to argue that contemporary authoritarian neoliberalism, rather than being entirely distinct, is deeply connected to previous forms of capitalist accumulation and its inherently coercive, violent and often racialised characteristics (Tansel in Axster et al. 2021 p.3). While not the central discussion of this thesis, and one I cannot expand upon in greater depth, it is clear this represents one of the clear contributions of this project to scholarly debates on authoritarian neoliberalism; particularly those seeking to bring the concept in conversation with decolonial approaches and studies of racial capitalism.

Secondly, I aimed to place discussions of coercion, consent and legitimacy at the heart of this project. Scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism have long employed the concept to explore discussions of the contemporary crisis of legitimacy faced by neoliberal states (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017; Bruff and Tansel 2019). The discussion of regime legitimacy, already exceptionally pertinent in the authoritarian neoliberalism scholarship, becomes even more important when engaging with a post-revolutionary state such as Tunisia in which legitimacy of the post-transition regime must be reconfigured. Such discussions are particularly stark given the role that neoliberal deregulation played in undermining the previous regime's articulation of legitimacy and the social redistributive mechanisms that were so central to Ben Ali's control on power.

Thirdly, Tunisia's post-revolutionary context represents an empirical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism because of the level of constraints on their sovereignty that Tunisian policy makers have faced due of the power and influence of external actors in post-transition Tunisia (Santini 2018; Aliriza 2020; Maryon 2023). While scholars have reflected upon reduced sovereignty in economic policy areas (Davies 2016; Bruff 2017; Sotiris 2017; Lister 2019), few research terrains have experienced such significant external interventions in both security and economic policy spheres (Santini 2018; Maryon 2023) in the post-2007 authoritarian neoliberal era (Bruff 2014). Thus, throughout this thesis I have explored the way in which authoritarian neoliberal state strategies have been (re)shaped by external actors' interventions as well as broader global processes of security governance and capitalist accumulation. Thus, the empirical particularities of the Tunisian

case in this regard has enabled me to underscore the theoretical significance of exploring the global entanglements of neoliberal security states.

Furthermore, Tunisia's post-transition political landscape has provided a final, unexpected²³⁹, interesting empirical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. This in the sense that strategies of authoritarian neoliberal governance – through reinforcing societal insecurities and relying upon coercive state power to repress contestation - have played a significant role in undermining the legitimacy of the post-transition regime and Tunisia's democratic transition. Indeed, this has paved the way, I would argue, for the rise of populist and increasingly authoritarian President Kais Saied. While not originally an intended contribution of this project when I started this journey in October 2018, the speed and extent to which Tunisia has reverted to authoritarianism between July 2021 and July 2023, which I argue is inherently linked to the negative socioeconomic fallouts of neoliberal deregulation, is a striking reminder of the dangers of authoritarian neoliberalism to democracies both mature and nascent (see also Tansel 2018; Baykan 2020).

Running parallel to its original empirical contributions, this project also aims to make two original theoretical contribution to knowledge. Firstly, I hope to have shown those interested in Tunisian politics that situating discussions of regime legitimacy within the broader context of global, increasingly authoritarian, neoliberalism and interconnected mechanisms of coercion and control that operate to sustain capitalist accumulation furthers our understanding of contemporary Tunisian politics. Through such a perspective we can better conceptualise the attempt, and I would argue failure, of successive regimes to consolidate their claims to legitimacy in ways that exploring the local as an 'exceptional' site disconnected to global trends does not fully enable. Indeed, as I have argued throughout this thesis, it is only by adopting an approach which brings together security studies and IPE to explore and better understand the everyday (in)securities faced by many Tunisians that we can fully understand the attempt of successive governments to reconfigure the legitimacy of the post-transition regime and obstacles such attempts have faced.

Secondly, this thesis makes a theoretical contribution to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism. As aforementioned, the majority of scholars mobilising the concept of

²³⁹ in terms of my own research plan

authoritarian neoliberalism have hailed from the IPE subdiscipline of IR, notwithstanding their acknowledgement of the potential fruitful contribution of the concept in security studies research (Tansel 2017; Axster et al. 2021). As a Critical Security Studies researcher, I aim to reflect upon how and why the use of the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism in security studies research, albeit in a project that attempts to draw the connections between IPE security studies, is so potentially illuminating. Indeed, as part of this broader attempt to make the case for the use of the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism in security studies research, I, throughout this project, explore the additional concepts and conceptual tools with which the concept can be employed in research which continues to think with, but simultaneously goes beyond, the disciplinary boundaries of IPE. It is this exploration of these additional conceptual tools, such as performativity, racial capitalism and populism, which represents one of the unique theoretical contributions of this project to the research agenda on authoritarian neoliberalism.

III - Limitations of the project

In the previous section, I highlighted the original empirical and theoretical contributions of this project. While these are ambitious and, I would argue, robust claims which are grounded in my analysis of the empirical evidence that I have gathered since 2018, I must also acknowledge the limitations of this project. This project, like all projects, faces limitations which have shaped its discussions and its empirical focus without, I would claim, distorting its findings.

The most significant limitation of this project has been inability to conduct extensive in-depth in-person fieldwork. While the reasons behind this are understandable: compliance with ethics committee decisions, legal restrictions due the coronavirus pandemic, budgetary constraints, and caring responsibilities, I must recognise that being ‘far’ from the research terrain for a prolonged period is a limitation of this project. This is particularly significant with reference to discussions around amplifying the voices of marginalised groups (Vaditya 2018) as well as avoiding recreating problematic power relations in social science research in which researchers from the Global North ‘parachute’ into states in the Global South, swiftly conduct their ‘research’ and depart thus extracting knowledge to further their careers while having relatively little understanding of the lives of those they claim to be researching (Haelewaters and Et al 2019). Ultimately, I hope that my prior experience travelling and

researching in Tunisia, my personal ties to the country, my constant reflection upon my positionality and its potentially problematic nature as well as my commitment to engaging with and amplifying important voices in Tunisia, particularly those resisting the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism and the neoliberal security state of Kais Saied, overcomes some of the issues posed by my inability to conduct extensive fieldwork.

Another limitation of this project has been the need to impose a 'cut off point' in terms of the temporal scope of my analysis both prior to the revolution and in terms of submitting this thesis. As with every PhD project, there are a great number of interesting discussions discovered during the nearly 5 years of researching and writing this thesis that were omitted from the final version of this thesis. But on balance, I believe decisions regarding what to omit and what to include were taken appropriately. Indeed, the final few months of this thesis have seen some of the most significant developments in Tunisian politics have occurred in the last five years. As I write this conclusion in July 2023, Tunisia stands at the brink of economic collapse faced with an impending debt default should it fail to conclude the bailout it has been negotiating with the IMF since June 2022. Given this thesis' discussions, it would have been entirely possible to continue researching and writing way beyond this thesis' hard deadline but that is simply not viable. Therefore, I made the decision that July 1, 2023, would be the cut off point for this thesis' discussions as this was the point at which I submitted this thesis. Even between this thesis being handed in and the viva, Saied could be removed from office, or Tunisia could default on its debts - both of which would fundamentally shape and change the discussions regarding Tunisia's potential political trajectory. However, seeking to guess the next development in Tunisian politics is not the focus of this project, rather through exploring the Tunisian case I seek to make a broader contribution to IR scholarship as already elaborated. Thus, I chose to demarcate the limitations of the empirical scope of this project, from January 2011-July 2023, thus risking omitting potentially interesting developments in Tunisian politics, in order to focus my energy on clarifying, improving and cementing this thesis' theoretical discussions and contribution to knowledge and ultimately, finishing this PhD.

Another limitation of this project is that I have not had the space to engage with and really delve into social movements and sites of resistance. I have illuminated sites of resistance throughout Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6. However, given this thesis' commitment to attempting to redress the elite focus of security studies (Bertrand 2018; Adamson 2020), I would have

really enjoyed the opportunity to expand upon groups such as the Kamour movement (MiddleEastMonitor 2022a), Tunisia's food sovereignty movement (Siyada 2021; Ajl 2022) and anti-racism activists (Maryon 2022) in Tunisia. Such discussions are significant, and something I intend to expand in future research. However, this thesis' narrower focus on regime legitimacy, analysed through the conceptual lens of authoritarian neoliberalism, as opposed to a broader focus on authoritarian neoliberalism writ large, meant that it simply was not as pertinent to delve into such discussions in great depth and thus risk omitting potentially more significant discussions. The same applies for the UGTT – Tunisia's largest trade union – and probably the single most influential force in Tunisian politics who have a deeply complex, contested and at times contradictory relationship with neoliberalism and neoliberal ideology (Gallien 2022; Reuters 2022). Indeed, the UGTT relationship with neoliberal ideology could be an entire thesis project in its own right. In future research, I intend to explore the resistance, or lack of, posed by social movements and trade unions to the authoritarian neoliberal project more deeply.

The final limitation of this project – and another related to the scope of the project and the need to create a coherent discussion regarding regime legitimacy in post-2011 Tunisia – has been my inability to expand upon the relationship between racial capitalism and authoritarian neoliberalism to a greater extent. I have highlighted throughout this project, and particularly in the analysis of Chapter 5, that I aim to bring authoritarian neoliberalism in conversation with decolonial approaches and studies of racial capitalism (Tansel in Axster et al. 2021). However, I have not, beyond discussions of security assistance and the broader implications of this project for IR scholarship, had the scope to really elaborate on my relatively brief discussions of the relationship between authoritarian neoliberalism and racial capitalism. This is, however, something I intend to expand upon to a greater extent in future research as I expand upon in the next section.

IV Potential future avenues for further research and how they build upon this project

In the previous section of this chapter, I grappled with the limitations of this project. Inspired by, or perhaps more frustrated by, such limitations I will now outline how I intend to build upon this project in future research.

Firstly, I intend to use data that I have already collected regarding social movements and their resistance of both authoritarian neoliberalism in Tunisia and broader mechanisms of racial capitalism. This is something I intend to expand upon in potential future research. For example, I am currently in the process of writing a chapter for an edited volume which explores food sovereignty and environmental justice movements in Tunisia. In this chapter, I argue that such movements represent a contestation of the Eurocentric neoliberal paradigm through which environmental justice has often been conceptualised. I also demonstrate, through the conceptual lens of racial capitalism, how such movements have contested EU funded renewable energy projects being put in place across North Africa as ‘green colonialism’ because of the way in which most of the energy produced will be exported back to Europe.

Furthermore, bringing authoritarian neoliberalism and racial capitalism literatures in conversation with one another and reflecting upon the way in which they can inform and build upon one another is an aspect of this thesis which I intend to expand upon in future research. Indeed, between July 12-15, 2023, I will co-convene a European Workshop in International Studies in Amsterdam with Dr Cemal Burak Tansel, and this is one of the central discussions we seek to explore throughout the workshop and any potential research collaborations that follow. Our inspiration for the workshop came from our shared interest in further exploring decolonial approaches to authoritarian neoliberalism as well as thinking about the relationship between authoritarian neoliberalism and global racial capitalism. As part of this workshop, I will present a paper which builds upon Chapter 5’s discussions of security assistance as well as my own recently published research on security assistance, to start this conversation (Maryon 2023). This paper has been workshopped at the BISA Colonial Post-Colonial and Decolonial Working Group (CPD) refusing carcerality workshop in September 2022 as well as the BISA joint CPD and BISA IPE working group Racial Capitalism workshop in May 2023. Furthermore, throughout the last 12 months of this PhD journey, I have been working on a paper which explores EU-Tunisia cooperation on migration as a form of racial capitalism which, I argue, interacts with, and reinforces, anti-Black racism in Tunisia and its border regime. This paper has been submitted as part of a special issue proposal exploring racialisation in EU policy. Thus, while I was unable to expand upon such discussions to a greater degree in this project, these discussions, inherently shaped by this PhD journey, will only continue to develop in my post PhD career.

Finally, of course, I would like to turn this thesis into a monograph. I think the empirical and theoretical contributions furthered in this project would make for an interesting book project which would speak to those researching or mobilising in Tunisia, Middle East Studies communities, as well as Critical IPE and Critical Security Studies scholars.

V Conclusion to the conclusion

In this project I have argued that security politics plays a significant role in the reconfiguration of regime legitimacy in post-transition Tunisia. Mobilising the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism, I have shown that, deprived of its sovereignty in certain areas associated with neoliberal governance and facing challenges to its legitimacy due to the negative socioeconomic fallouts of neoliberal deregulation and austerity, the Tunisian post-transition state, or rather its successive governments have sought to use performative counterterrorism and security politics as a means to both perform the sovereignty of the state and reconfigure the legitimacy of the post-transition regime as the provider of security. I have argued that these performative discourses and practices lead to the very real ‘ramping up’ of violence, namely security services violence, against certain communities, particularly those marginalised, dispossessed and often racialised, as means to be *seen* to respond to these discursively constructed threats. I have shown that rather than merely ‘policing’ the discursively constructed threats, performative security discourses, ‘exceptional’ security measures and increasingly coercive practices operate to crack down on those sites of resistance and contestation which do emerge. This distracts from the reality that austerity and neoliberal deregulation are contributing to the human and societal insecurity that can push individuals to radicalisation or illegal migration to Europe.

Similarly, I have explored the role of external actors in providing the Tunisian neoliberal security state with the tools to repress contestation of neoliberalisation as well as simultaneously pursuing ever faster and more aggressive forms of neoliberal deregulation. While such trends were pertinent and deeply troubling throughout this research journey, it is since Kais Saied’s constitutional coup in July 2021 that their deeply problematic and authoritarian character has become even more apparent. Indeed, I have shown how Kais Saied has capitalised upon rising discontent in Tunisia to construct his anti-establishment and anti-democratic populist discourse. The rise of Saied demonstrated successive government’s attempt to reconfigure their legitimacy around the notion of securing the state was failing –

because of rising economic insecurity faced by the majority of Tunisia. However, he too has sought to construct his populist political discourse upon the notion of securing the state from certain securitised threats namely: terrorism, the pandemic, corruption and more recently Tunisia's Black and Black African migrant population, while failing to deviate from the neoliberal consensus at elite levels. Ultimately, I argue that Saied's authoritarian neoliberal populist discourse and regime will fail to secure the legitimisation it seeks as his erratic articulations of 'threats' become increasingly detached from the harsh socio-economic realities and everyday insecurities faced by most Tunisians.

Indeed, by adopting an analytical approach which brings together IPE and security studies to analyse the case of post-2011 Tunisia, I argue that reconfiguring the legitimacy of the post-transition democratic political regime would require a significant and radical overhaul of the neoliberal consensus to tackle the everyday insecurities faced by Tunisians. While the Tunisian case is important and worthy of study in its own right, I argue that it can inform our understanding, as IR scholars, of the contemporary crisis of legitimacy experienced by neoliberal states globally. In short, the Tunisian case teaches us that the remedy for the ills of austerity and neoliberal deregulation is not 'more' austerity and 'better' neoliberal deregulation but a radical overhaul of our models of racialised, hierarchical and extractive capitalist accumulation. Finally, through the Tunisian case, I have shown neoliberal governance and security policies are negotiated between Tunisian economic and political elites and external partners consistently to maintain Tunisia's perpetual peripheral position in the global economy as well as sustaining class-based, gendered and racialised hierarchies within Tunisia which ensure that the ever-smaller circle of elites benefit from such cooperation. In other words, through the case of post-2011 Tunisia we can see the way in which contemporary authoritarian neoliberal governance continues to serve and protect the system of global (racial) capitalism.

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Appendix 1: Anonymised list of participants

For the purposes of this list, I have only included those participants who have been referenced or cited in the body of this thesis. There were other participants whose insights were incredibly helpful but who have not been explicitly cited in the body of this thesis.

This list has been organised in chronological order – in terms of when the participants were interviewed.

I have included a brief description for each participant, but I have been keen to not reveal any information which risks jigsaw identification as per the demands of my ethical approval and for the safety of my participants.

1. **Interview with Tunisian journalist, Tunis, January 2020.** Participant 1 is a journalist and founder of new media company. Their work specialises on questions of socio-economic justice and police brutality.
2. **Interview with Head of Tunisian security focused NGO, Tunis, January 2020.** Participant 2 was the Head of a prominent NGO working on security sector reform, oversight and transparency.
3. **Interview with prominent political commentator, Tunis, January 2020.** Participant 3 is a prominent political commentator in Tunisia who provided expert domestic political analysis.
4. **Interview with CSO worker, Tunis, January 2020.** Participant 4 is a worker for a large NGO in Tunisia, mainly operating in the security sector. Their work focuses mainly on questions of oversight and transparency.
5. **Interview with Tunisian academic, May 2020.** Participant 5 is a Tunisian academic specialising in domestic Tunisian politics. Their insights were mainly regarding the unfolding coronavirus pandemic
6. **Interview with Tunisian politician, May 2020.** Participant 6 is a frontline Tunisian politician who held significant influence in several post-transition governments. I was able to gain informal and anonymous interview with them through personal connections.
7. **Interviews with security practitioner, January 2021.** Participant 7 is a Tunisian security practitioner now doing a lot of consultancy work for external partners.

- 8. Interview with journalist present, February 2022.** Participant 8 is foreign journalist who has lived and worked in Tunisia for many years. They were interviewed about the protest on the anniversary of the revolution in January of 2022.
- 9. Interview with Tunisian academic specialising in CVE in marginalised regions of Tunisia, May 2021.** Participant 9 is a Tunisian academic who specialises in researching radicalisation and counter-violent extremism programmes which operate in Tunisia. They have a particular emphasis on looking at marginalised regions in their work.
- 10. Interview with Tunisian journalist, May 2021.** Participant 10 is the same person as participant 1. They were reinterviewed in light of developments in Tunisian politics – namely the pandemic
- 11. Interview with prominent Tunisian political commentator, May 2021.** Participant 11 is a prominent political commentator who lives between Tunis and the US. They are often featured in journalistic articles and news segments about Tunisian politics
- 12. Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2021.** Participant 12 is a prominent Tunisian economist – famous for their non-heterogenous approach to questions of political economy. They were interviewed for their insights in terms of monetary policy, the Tunisian Central Bank and the significance of Tunisia’s sovereign debt crisis
- 13. Interview with researcher specialising in Tunisia’s borderlands, May 2021.** Participant 13 is a researcher whose work focuses on Tunisia’s borderlands and particularly the economic and political lives of Tunisia’s borderland communities.
- 14. Interview conducted with Tunisian security focused NGO worker, May 2021.** Participant 14 is an employee working under participant 2.
- 15. Interview with Tunisian investigative journalist, June 2021.** Participant 15 is a freelance investigative journalist working mainly on questions of security force violence, economics and migration.
- 16. Interview with Tunisian journalist, July 2021.** Participant 16 is the same person as participant 1. They were re-interviewed following Kais Saied’s coup of July 2021.
- 17. Interview with Tunisian political commentator, July 2021.** Participant 17 is the same person as participant 11. They were re-interviewed following Kais Saied’s coup of July 2021.

- 18. Interview with Tunisian political commentator, October 2021.** Participant 18 is a Tunisian political commentator interviewed for their insights into domestic political questions and the security sector
- 19. Interview with EU official, October 2021.** Participant 19 is an employee of the EU delegation in Tunisia working in areas of security and border management. They were interviewed ‘off the record’ in a personal rather than official capacity.
- 20. Interview with Tunisian investigative journalist, December 2021.** Participant 20 is the same person as participant 1. They were reinterviewed in light of political developments in Tunisia
- 21. Interview with US diplomat, January 2022.** Participant 21 is a US diplomat working on questions of bilateral security cooperation. They were interviewed ‘off the record’ in a personal rather than official capacity.
- 22. Interview with Tunisian political commentator, January 2022.** Participant 22 is the same person as participant 3. They were reinterviewed in light of political developments.
- 23. Interview with investigative journalist, February 2022.** Participant 23 is an investigative journalist who does a lot of on the ground coverage of protest movements for various major news outlets.
- 24. Interview with political commentator, February 2022.** Participant 24 is a prominent Tunisian political commentator
- 25. Interview conducted with security sector reform expert, February 2022.** Participant 25 is a Tunisian security sector reform expert. They do consultancy work for various foreign actors. They are particularly interested in train and equip programmes as well as some reform-agendas.
- 26. Interview with Tunisian economist, May 2022.** Participant 26 is a Tunisian economist particularly interested in question of dependency and sovereignty in terms of security, economic, monetary, food, energy etc).
- 27. Interview with EU official, May 2022.** Participant 27 is the same person as participant 19. They were re-interviewed in light of political developments in Tunisia
- 28. Interview with freelance journalist, May 2022.** Participant 28 is a freelance journalist who has been living and working in Tunisia for many years their work focuses on questions of socio-justice, police brutality, drugs policy and migration

- 29. Interview with security sector expert, May 2022.** Participant 29 is a securocrat in Tunisia. They have significant expertise in various areas including counterterrorism and migration. They were speaking to me off the record and in a personal capacity.
- 30. Interview with Tunisian journalist, June 2022.** Participant 30 is a Tunisian journalist. Their work is often featured in media outlets and newspapers around the world.
- 31. Interview with Tunisian political commentator, July 2022.** Participant 31 is a prominent Tunisian political commentator. They were interviewed in light of the upcoming referendum and constitutional changes at this time.
- 32. Interview with Tunisian political analyst, July 2022.** Participant 32 is a Tunisian political analyst now working at a US institution. Their work is often featured
- 33. Interview with Tunisian security studies scholar, July 2022.** Participant 33 is a security studies scholar and IR lecturer working at a university in Tunis. Their research specialises in questions of counterterrorism, CVE, border management etc. and they have empirical expertise on Tunisia's borderlands.
- 34. Interview with US diplomat, August 2022.** Participant 34 is the same person as Participant 21. They were reinterviewed in light of political developments.
- 35. Interview with Tunisian economist, October 2022.** Participant 35 is the same person as participant 12. They were re-interviewed in October 2022 in light of political developments including the recently negotiated staff level agreement between the IMF and Tunisia
- 36. Interview with Tunisian economist, December 2022.** Participant 36 is the same person as participant 26. They were re-interviewed in October 2022 in light of political developments including the recently negotiated staff level agreement between the IMF and Tunisia as well as the failure of it to be implemented.
- 37. Interview with researcher specialising in regional inequalities in Tunisia, December 2022.** Participant 37 is a Tunisian academic specialising in regional inequalities in Tunisia a subject on which they have published extensively.

I would like to thank my participants for their participation in this research.