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Imagining Structures, Negotiating Transitions: Body, State, and Meaning in a Shifting World

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Nostalgia for the Strong State: Representations of the Former Regime in the Tunisian Social Imagination in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

More than a decade after the Tunisian revolution, amid deepening crises and disillusionment with democracy, a significant social phenomenon has emerged: nostalgia for a "strong state." This sentiment does not reflect an objective reassessment of the authoritarian past, but rather a symbolic and emotional reconstruction shaped by present-day failures. As the state's ability to ensure stability and dignity declines, many citizens increasingly view the former regime not as a dictatorship, but as an efficient and orderly authority.

Based on 30 in-depth interviews, this study examines how the former regime is reconstituted in the collective imagination. Respondents express a pragmatic conception of the state, where legitimacy is measured not by democratic participation or individual rights, but by the ability to deliver essential services, maintain order, and meet basic needs. Within this framework, authoritarianism is tolerated—along with corruption and repression—so long as it guarantees security and subsistence.

Drawing on the theories of social representations (Moscovici and Abric) and political nostalgia, the analysis reveals a shift in the meaning of citizenship: from a participatory, rights-based model to a clientelist relationship in which freedoms are exchanged for survival. This symbolic return to authoritarianism is not a call for dictatorship, but an expression of profound disappointment with the democratic project and a collective yearning for a functional state. It ultimately reflects a broader crisis of confidence in the future.

Keywords: Political Nostalgia, Strong State, Social Representations, Post-Revolution, Democratic Transition

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1. Introduction

More than a decade after the launch of Tunisia's democratic transition, amid the accumulation of political, economic, and social crises, a striking phenomenon has emerged in the Tunisian collective imagination—what can be described as nostalgia for the strong state. This nostalgia is not understood as an objective evaluation of the former authoritarian regime, but rather as a symbolic and emotional stance, where the personal intersects with the collective, the present with the past, and reality with imagination. As the gains of the revolution erode, trust in the new political class declines, and the state's ability to enforce the law and provide basic services weakens, large segments of society begin to recall the former regime—not as a repressive system overthrown by protest, but as a lost symbol of stability, authority, and efficiency.

This representation of the former regime does not simply reflect a political or ideological stance. Rather, it expresses a deeper crisis in the relationship between Tunisians and the state itself—as the guarantor of continuity, meaning, and belonging. The authoritarian past is not recalled as it actually was, but is reconfigured according to the needs and anxieties of the present, shaped through popular narratives fed by fear of the future, accumulated frustration, and the ambiguities of the transitional period. Thus, authoritarianism in the social imagination shifts from a condemned reality to a latent dream, from a painful experience to a lost model—one that symbolically compensates for the fragility of the current state and the political and economic disorder dominating the public sphere.

Studying this phenomenon requires moving beyond direct political analysis and embracing sociological and anthropological tools to understand how collective representations are produced, and how nostalgia forms as both a social and psychological position in times of crisis. Nostalgia here is not merely an emotional expression—it is a symbolic act that reorganizes the relationship with the past, mobilizes memory to serve the present, and reflects a profound imbalance in confidence toward the future. Moreover, this nostalgia, while seemingly a return to the past, also reveals the absence of what ought to be: the failure of the current system to build a legitimate alternative capable of ensuring even the minimum of stability and dignity.

Exploring representations of the former regime within Tunisia's social imagination during times of crisis thus offers a window into the deep transformations affecting the citizen-state relationship. It also raises a fundamental question: is this symbolic return to authoritarianism a desire to restore it, or rather a yearning for a just and effective state that has yet to be realized?

1.1. Problem Statement

What explains the emergence of nostalgic representations of the strong state in the Tunisian social imagination during times of crisis? And how is the image of the former regime reformulated within these representations?

2. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative approach aimed at understanding individuals' representations of the former regime in Tunisia. It is based on content analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with participants from diverse age groups, geographic regions, and professional backgrounds. The sample was purposefully selected to ensure socio-demographic diversity and to capture the broad spectrum of meanings and connotations that citizens associate with the authoritarian past—especially in a context marked by the collapse of hope and a growing sense of collective disillusionment.

To ensure broader representativeness of the sample and a distribution that reflects this diversity, one governorate was selected from each region, with each governorate represented by five individuals. The

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geographic distribution included: Tunis for the Northeast, Jendouba for the Northwest, Sousse for the East-Central region, Sidi Bouzid for the West-Central region, Gafsa for the Southwest, and Medenine for the Southeast.

In terms of gender, the sample was evenly divided into 15 males and 15 females. Regarding age composition, a tripartite division was adopted: 10 individuals aged between 18 and 40, 10 individuals between 41 and 60, and 10 individuals over 60 years old. The sample also included 20 participants from urban areas and 10 from rural areas.

The interview guide was carefully designed to uncover the deep structure of these representations through open-ended questions addressing themes such as the state, everyday life before the revolution, security, justice, the economy, national belonging, as well as views on freedom of expression and shifting values.

The qualitative interviews in this study were conducted in accordance with the highest standards of research ethics. Prior to each interview, the objectives of the study were clearly explained to the participants, who were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews began. To protect participants' privacy, their data were treated with strict confidentiality. Identities were anonymized using only the initials of their first and last names at all stages of analysis and presentation. The data were securely stored and used solely for scientific research purposes. These procedures were designed to ensure the protection of participants' rights and the confidentiality of their information throughout the study.

These interviews were treated as qualitative tools capable of capturing the meaning embedded in both individual and collective memory—not as a mere recollection of an objective past, but as a symbolic reconstruction of a lost condition, wherein the former regime is summoned as a symbol of order, discipline, and stability in contrast to a present marked by fragility and uncertainty.

Theoretically, the analysis draws on the sociology of social representations as developed by Serge Moscovici to understand how collective images of political phenomena take shape and how they are stabilized and circulated within the group. It also makes complementary use of Jean-Claude Abric's approach, which distinguishes between the core and the peripheral elements of social representations. This allows for the identification of the deep structures that give these representations their enduring character, as well as the contextual elements shaped by ongoing socio-economic hardship.

Additionally, the concept of political nostalgia is used as an analytical lens to describe this emotionally charged longing for an imagined ideal past—a past that is reconstructed in the present not as historical fact, but as a symbolic response to lived frustration and existential and political dissatisfaction.

The diversity of theoretical frameworks deepens the analysis by enabling an integrated and complementary approach. Moscovici's model provides a foundation for understanding how political representations take shape within collective consciousness. Abric's structural model allows for the decomposition of these representations into a stable core and flexible peripheral elements, revealing both their deep structure and contextual adaptability. The concept of political nostalgia adds an affective dimension, explaining how representations are emotionally charged—especially in times of collective frustration—giving them symbolic and mobilizing power. The integration of these frameworks not only enhances theoretical coherence but also enables a multi-layered reading of representations as cognitive, emotional, and structural systems. This theoretical richness serves the research by allowing a deeper grasp of the dynamic processes through which

political meaning is produced and transformed within the collective imagination of individuals.

3. Efficiency, Order, and Clientelism in Individuals' Representations of the Former Regime

Nostalgia for the former regime in Tunisia reflects a complex representation of the state situated at the intersection of three dimensions: psycho-social, material-economic, and symbolic-political. Amidst the turbulent political transformations following the revolutionary rupture, a series of social representations have emerged, expressing a reactive yearning for the authoritarian past—not as a repressive regime, but as a system that ensured a minimum threshold of existential stability and dignified living.

Field interviews reveal pragmatic representations of the state that distance themselves from legalistic or constitutional conceptions celebrating participation, accountability, and transparency. Instead, the state is reduced to a mere functional entity—an instrument guaranteeing material stability and public order. This shift in the conception of the state is not based on legal or symbolic legitimacy of a democratic nature but rather on tangible—or imagined—efficiency in fulfilling basic needs. As such, legitimacy becomes instrumental, grounded in utility rather than value. This perspective even extends to a denial of authoritarian practices and a utilitarian justification of corruption, where bread and security are prioritized over freedom and justice.

This pragmatic stance is exemplified in commonly repeated statements by interviewees such as (S.A.): “Yes, there was corruption, but people lived in comfort, and the country was heading in the right direction,” (Interview with S.A., Sousse, March 29, 2019).or (S.B.): “If only he [Ben Ali] could return, even if he stole—he never touched the poor man’s bread, and people were comfortable and secure during his time. Not like today’s rulers, who’ve plundered everything like wild beasts.” (Interview with S.B., Sidi Bouzid, March 20, 2019).

These expressions reveal a perception of corruption not as a moral deviation but as a functional flaw measured by its impact on daily life. The implicit acceptance of the previous authoritarian regime does not stem from value-based legitimacy but from performance-based legitimacy: power is accepted as long as it delivers tangible achievements that preserve order and provide the means of subsistence. These attitudes can be understood as a form of nostalgia for “state efficiency,” where the past is re-evaluated not due to ideological agreement with authoritarianism but as a result of a harsh comparison with a present marked by chaos and inefficiency. It is a selective memory that glorifies achievement and sidelines the nature of the political system that enabled it, in a context of widespread disillusionment with current realities.

This representation aligns with what Béatrice Hibou termed "performance-based obedience," where utility replaces legitimacy, and coexistence with authoritarianism becomes a form of daily negotiation with the state grounded in mutual benefit. As Hibou argues, obedience was not the result of ideological alignment or conviction in the regime’s promoted values, but rather a pragmatic response to the state's ability to manage daily life and ensure a minimum level

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of stability and services. In this framework, repression and corruption are not viewed as delegitimizing forces but as acceptable costs within a utilitarian balance of harm and benefit. Hibou notes: "Acceptance of power does not arise from ideological adherence but from perceived effectiveness in managing daily life, where the state's performance is judged by its ability to deliver services and maintain order—not by its political or moral legitimacy" (Hibou, 2006, p. 17).

In the same vein, a symbolic trade-off between liberty and security is observed, exemplified in the statement of interviewee (K.M.): "They call Ben Ali a dictator who suppressed freedoms—nonsense! Back then, we were safe on every level." (Interview with K.M., Sidi Bouzid, March 20, 2019).

This highlights a pragmatic conception of authority rooted in an exchange logic that legitimizes the voluntary abandonment of certain individual and public freedoms in return for existential stability. Here, security is not understood in its narrow sense but refers to a comprehensive set of living conditions: regular public services, availability of essential resources, and a general sense of social peace. This reflects a functional vision of the state, where legitimacy is reduced to its capacity to secure the minimum conditions of safe living—even at the cost of political and civil rights and participatory governance.

What emerges, then, is a radical shift in the meaning of citizenship—from a politically active and rights-based status to a clientelist and functional relationship based on an unwritten contract between state and citizen. The latter relinquishes public freedom in exchange for partial protection in the private realm and tolerates corruption as long as it does not threaten their livelihood.

In light of respondents' representations of the Ben Ali era as one of comprehensive "security" and efficiency, this perception can be framed within the political sociology concept of clientelism—defined as "a phenomenon based on the principle of exchange of privileges between two unequal parties: the patron (or 'muʿarrib') who holds resources and the client (or 'zalim') who seeks them in return for a service (interest) he can offer." (Abderrahim, 2008, p. 15).

Thus, the citizen–state relationship is reshaped not on the basis of a modern social contract built upon rights, duties, and political participation, but on the basis of an unequal exchange. The state is embodied in the figure of the ruler or his representatives—the patrons monopolizing resources and services—while the citizen plays the role of a client offering loyalty, silence, or tolerance of corruption in exchange for material or symbolic benefits that ensure daily survival. In this sense, the state becomes a functional apparatus not founded on democratic legitimacy or the rule of law, but on clientelist mechanisms that hollow out citizenship of its political content, replacing it with a vertical, informal relationship that institutionalizes inequality and perpetuates dependency. This helps explain how an authoritarian regime can retain popular support by justifying repression in the name of "security," striking a fragile balance between obedience and dignified living.

More significantly, the state is reduced to its distributive function, as reflected in frequent references to the "food basket," "comfort," and "prices." The state is no longer perceived as a legitimate institution or a space for rights, but merely as a source of daily sustenance. The citizen thus shifts from being a political actor to a biological being who demands survival from the state—not political participation. At this level, we witness what Agamben terms the stripping of citizenship, where democracy collapses in the face of the demand for material life. Sovereignty, according to Agamben, produces "bare life" by excluding the individual from the legal and political order, leaving them to exist solely as a biological entity—not a rights-bearing citizen (Agamben, 1998, pp. 6–7).

These representations reveal an instrumental and utilitarian conception of the state, driven by a logic of exchange between repression and the fulfillment of basic needs. When the state guarantees "bread," authoritarianism is tolerated; when democracy fails to deliver efficiency, authoritarianism is recalled as a rational and realistic alternative.

This shift is particularly evident among vulnerable social groups, where the normative value of democracy is increasingly displaced by direct pragmatic reasoning. In this view, the state is merely a functional entity responsible for providing minimal food security and social stability.

We are thus witnessing a significant sociological transformation that reactivates the authoritarian state model as a realistic possibility—not necessarily as the preferred model, but because the democratic alternative, in the eyes of many, has failed to provide practical solutions to daily and existential challenges.

Within this framework, Mohamed Abed al-Jabri's observation becomes especially relevant: "Democracy appears to marginalized classes as a useless luxury, even a burden that has increased their daily suffering without providing real solutions" (Al-Jabri, 1994, p. 95). This highlights the failure of democratic experiments to reshape the citizen–state relationship based on rights and active citizenship. For these segments, democracy is not a promise of deliverance or a horizon of transformation, but a disappointing experience that deepened inequality and maintained precarity—thus rendering the evocation of the authoritarian model a legitimate representation in their collective consciousness.

4. Personalization and the Invocation of Political Fatherhood

Among the discourses collected from interviewees, it becomes clear that the former regime is not recalled as a system of policies or institutional structures, but rather as a personalized entity—with traits, intentions, and emotions—as if it were "a person we knew" rather than "a system that governed us." It is not depicted as a bureaucratic structure or a neutral legal apparatus, but is reduced to the image of the individual ruler, who symbolically embodied all that the regime represented: stability, deterrence, protection—even affection.

Respondents do not refer to the former regime as an institutional framework; they evoke Ben Ali as a living,

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central figure in their memory. They do not mention laws, but rather "how he governed." They do not speak of institutions, but remember "how he closed the doors to chaos." The regime, in this representation, is not recalled as a structure to be rationally evaluated based on governance or economic indicators, but as an emotional experience condensed into the figure of "the man who ruled."

As one interviewee put it:

"He closed the doors of calamity on us, like a father protecting his children. He made many mistakes, yes—but he loved the country more than anyone else." (Interview with T.H., Sidi Bouzid, March 20, 2019).

Thus, the former regime becomes less a political system and more a sentimental relationship, infused with feelings of fear, longing, and the need for protection. It is a representation that strips politics of its rational-institutional dimension and fills it with familial and emotional symbols. The relationship between citizen and state is reimagined not in terms of rights and responsibilities, but through a paternal lens: the ruler as father, and the citizen as a child who—despite everything—needs someone to "shut the doors" for protection.

This representation is a revealing symptom of a structural crisis facing the post-revolutionary state, which has struggled to establish its legitimacy and to build a functional relationship with citizens. Although it emerged under the promise of a new social contract, the state has failed to articulate a unifying political narrative that rebuilds public trust and collective sentiment. Instead of embodying hope and fulfilling social and economic demands, the state is reduced to narrow partisan conflicts and ideological polarization, deepening fragmentation and division.

In this context, the past is not recalled as a bygone era, but as a symbol of order, discipline, and state capacity—even if it was associated with repression and the restriction of freedoms. Nostalgia for Ben Ali's rule does not arise from identification with his political project, but from the image he projected in the popular imagination: that of a strict "political father," who exercised power with a firm hand, yet provided security, ensured the continuity of the state, and oversaw an organized distribution of resources and services. In the absence of the current state's effective performance and charismatic leadership, individuals reconstruct the image of the former ruler as the protective father—even if he was authoritarian—in contrast to a present where political actors appear fragmented, irresponsible, and incapable of unity.

It is important to note that the invocation of political fatherhood is deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and psychological sediments that have embedded in the collective imagination an image of authority as a familiar paternal structure—one that is spontaneously recalled in moments of political void and social uncertainty.

This has been confirmed by studies in social psychology (Klicperová et al., 1997), which show that societies emerging from totalitarian rule often develop a specific psychological pattern during their transition to democracy. This pattern manifests in three interrelated phenomena:

Collective helplessness and avoidance of responsibility: Individuals feel powerless, prefer to depend on strong authority rather than assume personal responsibility, and are overwhelmed by a constant fear of change and a longing for collective stability.

Weak adherence to values and norms: Respect for laws and ethical principles declines, and corruption and aggressive behavior become normalized in the absence of a strong punitive authority.

Lack of civic spirit and rise of nationalist insularity: Political participation decreases, alienation from public affairs increases, and extremist nationalist tendencies grow in place of pluralistic engagement.

Accordingly, the invocation of the paternal image of the ruler does not merely reflect a rejection of the current political crisis, but rather expresses the collective imagination's difficulty in detaching itself from traditional models of authority—models that promise protection and stability, even at the expense of democratic values and active citizenship. In the absence of the state from its fundamental roles and its failure to produce charismatic leadership figures, nostalgia for the past becomes a form of psychological resistance to the symbolic void left by the state's failure to reconstruct a unifying national narrative.

In this very context, one interviewee stated: "Come back to us—they have ruined the country. By God, people miss you and have realized who truly loved Tunisia." (Interview with A.M., Gafsa, March 29, 2019). This statement does not merely address an absent political figure; it addresses Ben Ali as a symbolic equivalent of stability and a state imbued with dignity. Nostalgia here functions as a compensatory mechanism for accumulated frustrations. The call seems directed not at a specific person, but at an idealized image of power embodied in the figure of the commanding leader.

This personalization of the regime reflects a disruption in the transition from an authoritarian state to a democratic one. When society no longer finds in current institutions the capacity for decision-making, symbolism, or authority, it regresses toward earlier models, invoking them as idealized templates to interpret the present and search for meaning. In this regard, Eric Hobsbawm's observation is especially pertinent: "When the state or its institutions are weak, national identity often seeks embodiment in a single leader, whose symbolic weight far exceeds his actual political roles" (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 143).

Thus, Ben Ali is not merely recalled as a former ruler, but as an alternative symbol of the state—one that embodies feelings of security, authority, and decisiveness that are absent in the present. In this context, the authoritarian regime is no longer perceived solely as a negative political experience; instead, it becomes an emotional refuge, invested with all the qualities that the new power structure has failed to provide: the capacity for action, clarity of decision-making, and the presence of the "person" as opposed to the vagueness of the institution. Here, the personal representation of the regime becomes a form of internalizing political fatherhood.

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The presence of the former leader in public discourse cannot be explained solely as a nostalgic reaction to the past; it is also an emotional response to the symbolic void experienced under the current authority. When the democratic state fails to produce unifying symbols or create a shared emotional meaning, society—especially the segments that feel abandoned or excluded—recalls the political father as a symbolic substitute for the nurturing state.

In this context, political fatherhood emerges as a symbolic defense mechanism that reconstructs the relationship between citizen and regime in emotional, irrational terms—yet it is remarkably effective. The leader, seen as a father, is the one who scolds and punishes, but also promises and protects. In this way, political authority becomes an extension of the familial imaginary, not of a civic culture. This explains why the leader is often forgiven for his harshness, as long as he is believed to have "loved the country" or "knew how to rule"—just as a strict father is forgiven if he is perceived to have a kind heart.

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of this representation is that it transforms politics from a contractual space open to criticism and negotiation into a closed emotional realm, where the leader is judged not by his decisions, but by his intentions. Critical memory is thus erased and replaced by emotional memory, which empties the political experience of its historical content and recasts it as a tale of loss.

Political fatherhood, in this sense, is not merely a remnant of a bygone authoritarian era, but a deep emotional structure that reveals the fragility of the democratic transition and points to the failure of new institutions to occupy the symbolic space of power. When authority can no longer represent, absence itself becomes a symbol, and the one who is absent is summoned not as history, but as a possible future.

5. The State's Lost Prestige as a Vanished Symbol

Phrases commonly found in popular discourse—such as “prestige left with Ben Ali,” “the glorious days,” “Tunisia used to command and dominate,” and “the state’s prestige is lost”—reveal a semantic structure saturated with a collective sense of the state's collapse. This collapse is not merely seen in its function as a governing apparatus but as the disintegration of a central sovereign symbol. At its core, such discourse signals the unraveling of the symbolic representation of the state in the collective imaginary—an unraveling that expresses not just criticism of the present but also an incapacity to reimagine the state as a transcendent and foundational entity.

What this discourse unveils is not merely a decline in political performance or the weakening of the executive authority, but rather a collapse of what Pierre Nora termed “lieux de mémoire” (sites of political memory)—those symbolic spaces internalized by the community as markers of sovereignty and unity. The state no longer holds merely an organizational function; it has lost its position as a metaphysical entity—a unifying idea that commands obedience even before it

exerts coercion, as Max Weber's theory of charismatic and traditional legitimacy suggests.

From this perspective, the lament over "prestige" is an expression of the collapse of the strong state model—one that dominated public space and controlled the daily details of life—into the model of a fragile state: a state without aura, without performance, without force, and devoid of reverence or sanctity. Before the revolution, the strong state asserted its presence not only through administrative and security mechanisms, but through its ability to generate rituals and symbols that instilled awe and respect in individuals, transforming authority into something beyond mere administration—into a quasi-sacred structure. The president's speech, the national flag, the anthem, and the state's institutions all held ritualistic weight, making people feel they stood before something far greater than mere public management—a power that organized the world and endowed it with meaning. But after the revolution, this symbolic dimension eroded. Authority is no longer perceived as a supreme reference point but as an ordinary actor in a fragmented political scene dominated by conflict, opportunism, and a loss of cohesion.

The notion of the "loss of the state's prestige," in this light, is not a superficial political diagnosis but a symptom of a deeper crisis in the very fabric of political society. It reflects a breakdown of the social contract linking authority to individuals, thus opening the door to counter-identities or alternative representations—tribal, sectarian, anarchic, or even new forms of authoritarianism—that draw from a nostalgia for violence as a source of order, rather than from the social contract or the notion of citizenship.

Such dynamics may reproduce authoritarianism in the name of nostalgia or spawn chaos in the name of liberation. The call for the return of a figure from the security or military establishment—as reflected in the statement by (R.L): "If only a man from the military or security institution would rise and restore the state's former glory. (Interview with R.L., Medenine, April 5, 2019). is not merely a rejection of the political class but a yearning for a lost model.

Here, post-revolutionary consciousness intersects with what Michel Dobry refers to as "fluid moments" or "critical junctures," where the boundaries between social and political spheres dissolve, and institutions lose their organizing capacity, giving rise to a state of general fluidity, symbolic uncertainty, and political instability. In such contexts, individuals are compelled to reconstruct meaning, often returning to previous symbols and reference points that appear more stable and reassuring than the volatile present. (Dobry, 1986, p. 75).

Thus, in the collective imaginary, the state ceases to be a merely political entity and becomes a psycho-social imaginary—a symbolic moral resource more than a political system.

The loss of state authority does not merely reflect institutional weakness or declining performance; it reveals a deep symbolic and emotional void caused by democracy's failure to take root in people's affective consciousness. Although a new system was established after the revolution, it failed to produce shared symbols

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or a unifying national narrative capable of fostering trust and belonging. Democracy did not become an emotionally resonant reference grounded in rights and participation; instead, it remained, for many, an abstract and alien concept detached from daily experience. In this sense, democracy in Tunisia never reached what Linz and Stepan call affective consolidation, a condition in which "a majority of the people, even in the face of serious political and economic crises, believe that any further political change must occur within the parameters of democratic procedures." That is, democracy has yet to become part of the collective emotional attachment and shared sense of legitimacy. As a result of this absence, collective memory has resurrected images of the authoritarian past as a symbolic substitute—not out of desire for authoritarianism itself, but for what it once represented: clarity, order, and emotional stability that the nascent democratic experience has failed to provide (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 5).

6. The Revolution as Ordeal, Not Liberation: Representations of Rupture as Loss Rather Than Transformation

Within the collected narratives, the Tunisian revolution is not portrayed as a liberatory moment, but rather as a collective ordeal laden with loss, uncertainty, and betrayal. The term "revolution" is rarely used in a positive sense; instead, it is often replaced by expressions of negativity such as "ruin," "misery," "setback," or "theft." As respondent (S.K.) lamented: "They drove the country into a wall and made us hate it. Since 2011, I haven't set foot in Tunisia—I grew to loathe it because of what happened." (Interview with S.K., Sidi Bouzid, April 7, 2019) Another (K.K.) added: "Since the revolution, I no longer visit Tunisia. I can't stand it anymore; it's no longer the country I knew. The revolution brought only chaos and sorrow."(Interview with K.K., Sidi Bouzid, March 21, 2019).

These testimonies reveal a deep-seated representation of the revolution as a moment of rupture—not as the reclamation of popular sovereignty, but as the loss of meaning and stability. It is experienced not as a hopeful turning point, but as a tragic interruption of daily life. Time itself is reconfigured: the past is idealized as a sort of "lost paradise," while the post-revolutionary present is cast as a space of collapse and disintegration. In this symbolic reversal, the former authoritarian regime is no longer subject to criticism or moral judgment; instead, it becomes a reference point for lost stability, while the revolution is perceived as an alien event that uprooted citizens from their sense of self and nation.

This rupture is not understood as a break with authoritarianism as a repressive system, but rather as a departure from what is now remembered as a "time of reassurance" and "livable normality." Daily life under authoritarianism is reimagined as predictable and bearable—even if undemocratic—while the present is dominated by anxiety and insecurity. In this narrative, "freedom" is blamed for the collapse, while "authoritarianism" is silently exonerated for its repressive nature.

Such representations illustrate what Jean-Claude Abric terms "the defensive function of social representations"—a mechanism whereby peripheral elements of the representation system protect the central core from symbolic disruption in times of crisis (Abric, 1994, p. 31). Rather than interpreting major transformations through the lens of political projects or ideals, individuals reinterpret them according to their emotional and psychological disruptions. The revolution is not judged based on its values, but on its perceived consequences: the collapse of the dinar, rising living costs, the breakdown of public education, the erosion of state symbolism, soaring unemployment, and existential uncertainty. In this sense, the revolution becomes associated with a regressive logic: not an opening to freedom, but a descent into disorder and alienation.

This type of representation radically undermines the classical meaning of democracy. Democracy is no longer seen as a framework for political participation or the realization of the general will; instead, it is held responsible for collapse and reduced to a perceived absolute evil that opened the gates of chaos and left the state vulnerable to fragmentation. As respondent (F.B.) stated: "Fear used to run through our veins—no one dared speak. Now look where we are: the country is on the brink of collapse." (Interview with F.B., Sousse, April 20, 2019).

Thus, the former authoritarian regime is not recalled as one option among others, but as a mode of life—one that guaranteed survival, albeit at the cost of repression. The revolutionary rupture is not understood as historical progress, but as an existential disturbance that dislodged the community from its imagined sense of order. The symbolic equation is reversed: freedom becomes peril, and order becomes refuge; the future, once idealized, is now feared, while the past, once condemned, becomes a safe haven.

In this light, the revolution has not taken root in the collective consciousness as a liberatory event. Rather, it is experienced as a symbolic trauma that gave rise to counter-narratives in which the past is nostalgically reclaimed—not because it was just, but because it was predictable. This illustrates one of the deepest paradoxes of democratic transition: while elites work to instill a culture of citizenship, large segments of the population reproduce representations that undermine this project by embracing a longing for an authoritarian past—one that, though restrictive, was orderly and intelligible.

7. Discussion

This study revealed the emergence of increasingly widespread collective representations reflecting a "nostalgia for the strong state" in the Tunisian social imagination during times of crisis. This nostalgia was not merely a recall of the past but rather a symbolic reconstruction of a selective memory in which the image of the former authoritarian regime resurfaces not as a repressive system but as a source of security, stability, and effectiveness. Five key findings emerged:

The Authoritarian State as a Symbol of Efficiency and Control:

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Participants reimagined the former regime through narratives centered on performance and efficacy rather than democratic values. The authoritarian state was portrayed as a guarantor of dignified living, even when marked by corruption or repression—so long as it did not affect the citizen's daily bread. These representations reflect a shift from the idea of the state as a protector of rights to that of a provider of needs, signaling a form of popular pragmatism that prioritizes stability over freedoms.

Personalization and the Charismatic Leader:

The state was reduced to the figure of the strong leader, revealing the prevalence of the "state-as-person" representation. The former president was reconstructed as a decisive figure who maintained order, in contrast with the current political elites seen as weak, fragmented, and lacking legitimacy. This personalization points to a symbolic need for a strong reference amidst institutional collapse and political disarray.

Nostalgia as a Defensive Mechanism in the Face of Present Fragility:

Nostalgia for the authoritarian past was not simply emotional but acted as a collective psychological defense to give meaning in a chaotic present. Participants exhibited defensive representations that simplified and idealized the past to manage the anxiety of the present and future. This underscores a profound crisis of confidence in the current state and the absence of a compelling collective alternative to the authoritarian model.

This pattern of nostalgic reimagining of authoritarianism in times of post-revolutionary crisis is not unique to Tunisia. Comparative cases reveal similar dynamics in other transitional societies. In post-Soviet Russia, the 1990s economic collapse and democratic disillusionment fueled longing for the "strong hand" of past leaders, paving the way for Vladimir Putin's rise as a symbol of state revival. Likewise, in East Germany, the phenomenon of Ostalgie expressed a yearning for the stability and social guarantees of the former GDR, despite its repressive nature. In post-2003 Iraq, some citizens expressed nostalgia for Saddam Hussein's regime amid the chaos, sectarian violence, and symbolic fragmentation of the new political order. Similarly, in post-Mubarak Egypt, segments of society recalled the Mubarak era with ambivalence but also as a time of order, in contrast to the perceived disorder of the democratic transition. These examples suggest that when new regimes fail to generate symbolic legitimacy, performance credibility, or collective meaning, society may revert to affective and idealized representations of past authoritarian orders—not out of ideological alignment, but as a response to emotional and institutional voids.

Tolerated vs. Destructive Corruption:

Citizens distinguished between two types of corruption:

The "tolerable" corruption of the former regime, which did not infringe on daily subsistence and security.

The "destructive" corruption of the current democratic period, seen as random and unchecked.

Retreat of the State from the Political to the Everyday:

The state was no longer perceived as a legitimate democratic institution but as a distributor of daily necessities (e.g., food baskets, prices, food security). Citizens no longer demanded political participation but only the means of subsistence—reflecting a regression in political awareness and the rise of a biological survival imperative.

Absence of a Legitimate and Convincing Alternative:

The new political elite failed to establish a credible alternative legitimacy or an effective democratic model. This failure led to the reactivation of old representations of the strong state—not out of nostalgia for authoritarianism itself, but because the current alternative failed to ensure dignity and effectiveness.

General Result

Nostalgia for authoritarianism in Tunisia during crises is not a yearning for tyranny per se, but a response to the collapse of present trust, the loss of hope in the future, and the lack of a viable collective alternative. It is a symbolic invocation of the past as compensation for the failure of the present—a profound expression of the citizen's structural disconnection from both the state and democracy. These representations reflect not only a political stance but also a deeper dysfunction in the state-citizen relationship, and the inability of new elites to construct an alternative legitimacy. The danger of rationalizing authoritarianism in the face of democratic failure underscores the need to build a democratic state that ensures both justice and security.

8. Conclusion

This study revealed a deep transformation in the Tunisian social imagination, whereby large segments of the population are reconstructing the image of the authoritarian state not as a repressive apparatus but as a symbolic refuge in times of political disillusionment and institutional breakdown. The nostalgia for the "strong state" reflects not only a loss of faith in the present but also a crisis in the citizen-state relationship, in which the democratic state has failed to fulfill its symbolic and institutional functions.

The study shows how collective memory, shaped through social representations, has reframed the past regime through selective narratives that emphasize the figure of the charismatic leader while marginalizing the memory of repression. This trend signals the failure of the post-revolutionary democratic system to produce alternative symbolic narratives and legitimate relationships between state and society.

The theory of social representations reveals how collective memory adapts political symbols to present anxieties, reconstructing the authoritarian regime as a functional model judged by its ability to provide security and subsistence, rather than its respect for rights or institutions. This widens the gap between the state as a space for participation and accountability and its perception as a provider of order and welfare.

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Thus, the symbolic return to the former regime is not a traditional political stance but a cry for stability and efficacy. It highlights the need to rebuild the citizen-state relationship on the basis of participation and symbolic-institutional effectiveness if the logic and risks of nostalgic authoritarianism are to be overcome.

Legal frameworks alone—constitutions, elections, separation of powers—are insufficient to establish stable legitimacy. This legitimacy remains fragile and vulnerable unless supported by new national symbols and values that reflect democracy and embed it in collective consciousness, alongside tangible improvements in daily life. As Mény and Surel note, "constitutions do not generate legitimacy by themselves; they require social carriers to bring them from text to lived experience" (Mény& Surel, 2002).

Revolution often inflates expectations: citizens anticipate immediate and fundamental change, especially after experiencing authoritarian deprivation. If the new democratic regime fails to meet these expectations, it may not consolidate legitimacy and could open the door to authoritarian nostalgia—not out of ideological conviction, but due to democratic disappointment.

Therefore, the central recommendation is to adopt a dual transitional strategy that focuses on both symbolic and material legitimacy:

(1) Promote a “constitutional national culture” that replaces pre-modern loyalties, embedding democratic values—equality, freedom, and human rights—into the cultural and social fabric. This involves activating political socialization tools such as education, public media, arts, and drama so that democracy becomes not only an institutional ideal but a lived and emotional experience that restores dignity and justice.

(2) Launch equitable and rapid developmental policies that significantly improve material living conditions, especially for marginalized classes that often form the base of populist authoritarian trends. Democracy cannot survive on freedoms alone; these freedoms must be embedded in a context of economic and social viability.

Generally, when addressing the phenomenon of nostalgia for the former regime in Tunisia, it becomes essential to adopt political strategies that combine both symbolic and material legitimacy. Recognizing the stability and security once provided by the previous regime does not imply an acceptance of its authoritarianism; rather, it necessitates the construction of an alternative model that balances security with the safeguarding of rights and freedoms. To ensure the effectiveness of this transition, concrete initiatives must be introduced that directly resonate with people's lived realities and help rebuild trust in the future. In the field of education, there is a pressing need to reform curricula in a way that fosters critical thinking, political awareness, and strengthens the values of citizenship and democracy. This would enable younger generations to deconstruct and understand the roots of nostalgia within its historical and political context. Culturally, promoting civic awareness through public campaigns and participatory workshops is crucial to encouraging active engagement and reinforcing transparency, thus helping to reduce feelings of

exclusion and disillusionment. At the local governance level, empowering municipal councils and activating mechanisms for direct citizen participation enhances the public's sense of agency and belonging, which in turn diminishes the appeal of the past as a symbol of stability. Through such integrated approaches, nostalgia for the former regime can be addressed as a symptom of present deficiencies and transformed into a motivation for rebuilding a more balanced and sustainable democratic project.

The central paradox—what might be called the "libertarian paradox"—is that the democratic space, while open to critique and protest, may become a platform for nostalgic authoritarian discourse if not paired with compelling symbolic appeal and visible social justice. Thus, building democracy is not merely about institutional reform but also about repairing the emotional and political bond between citizen and state—reshaping political belonging beyond fear and obedience toward agency, justice, and active citizenship.

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