A 'Clean' President

Political Metaphors of Waste and Clean-Up

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> Apart from the dirtiness/garbage [*wasakh*] in the street, there is the dirtiness/garbage in the administration. In addition to cleaning up the country we need to clean up—the administrations, how can I put it? They are so dirty! So many terrible things happen to us. The same way you clean up outside, you have to clean up inside.
> (A woman in her 30s)

> The first thing we need is a clean mind. That's first. Next are the bribes. We need to stop giving them, in order to clean up the apparatus of the state. […] Who could govern this country apart from Kais Saied? Everyone is talking about how clean his hands are, about how sincere and cultivated he is.
> (A man in his 50s)

> This successful clean-up campaign, if it expresses something, it expresses something about the Tunisian consciousness, it is the truth about Tunisians. About the things that need to be cleaned in this country, inshallah, if there is corruption it will be cleaned up along with the garbage and all that. About the presidential elections, they were transparent and impartial, and in that respect, we are an example for the rest of the Arab world, and even beyond it.
> (A man in his 30s)

> Interviews on: *Réalité Tunisienne,* a show known for its vox-pop street interviews. YouTube (18 October 2019)

For over a decade, garbage and the cleanliness of public space have had a major role in the politics of several Arabic-speaking countries in the Mediterranean, in two distinct but related ways. First, the accumulation or presence of waste due to interruptions in removal and landfilling, as well as its importation from abroad, has provoked major political crises in the region. Most famously, the closure of Beirut's municipal dump in 2015 sparked a movement that, for a brief moment, seemed like it might transform the country's political landscape (see Abu-Rish 2015; Geha 2019; Atwood 2019). The importation of

7,900 tons of waste from Italy to Tunisia in 2020 is arguably the country's most prominent recent corruption scandal (Delpueh 2021), and certainly the one where the culprits received the harshest treatment: a three year prison term for the Minister of the Environment and up to 15 years for some other involved figures (Le Monde 2023). The 2016 attempted import of 2,500 tons of waste from Italy to Morocco (Chalfaouat 2016) also resulted in a significant political backlash and criticism from Moroccans.

The second way that garbage and cleanliness have influenced the politics of the region is in moments of political transition. In particular, post-revolutionary transitions have frequently been marked by campaigns to clean and beautify public space in a highly visible and theatrical manner. For instance, the protesters who occupied Kasbah Square in Tunis organised a great garbage pickup as they vacated the space on March 7th, 2011 (Loukil-Tlili 2013: 120). In Tahrir Square and elsewhere in Cairo there were numerous movements to pick up garbage, paint sidewalks, and spruce up public parks in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution (Furniss 2012; Winegar 2016), and again in the years following (see Arefin 2019).

This chapter's goal is to explore how waste operates as a political signifier, with its removal conveying people's aspirations, and its accumulation materialising and galvanising their sense of what is wrong. Our aim is to show both how garbage acts as a way of taking the country's political pulse, metaphorically speaking, and is an instrument of expression and contention through which it is possible to intervene politically. Making public spaces orderly, literally keeping them free of waste, represents – we argue – an important dimension of governmentality. The struggles for social and political order in the public link symbolic, material, and social scapes, and reveal the political capabilities in post-revolutionary Tunisia. In order to develop our argument, we examine two case studies. The first example is a political campaign known as *hâlit wa'î* (Awakening), essentially a spontaneous and ephemeral celebration of the electoral win of Kais Saied in Tunisia's October 2019 presidential elections. It consisted of a series of initiatives to pick up garbage, paint sidewalks and murals, and tidy up parks and public gardens around the country. The second, known as the 'Sfax garbage crisis', began almost exactly two years later, and has been much more protracted, continuing at least until the time of this writing. The crisis started with the closure of the city of Sfax's controlled landfill in October 2021. This led to the cessation of waste collection and removal activities, violent clashes between police and residents who live near the dump, threats of a general strike by the country's largest union (the UGTT), a presidential order sending in the armed forces, and ultimately a genuine political crisis on a national scale.

Through the analysis of these contrasting events, we suggest that they are two sides of the same coin, two symmetrical and complementary instances of how waste became a political signifier in Tunisia, in particular with respect to Kais Saied, whose status as the 'clean' candidate (*naẓīf*, meaning mainly uncorrupt in this context) has been central to his legitimacy and success. Thus, this chapter is more about waste as a political touchstone for sentiments, including patriotic nationalism and the desire for change, rather than viewing waste as an 'environmental hazard', even if the relatively novel register of 'environmental justice' is discernible in the movement leading to the dump closure in Sfax, and some participants in *ḥālit waʿī* participated in their capacity as environmental activists rather than Kais Saied supporters. The role of garbage in political parables

of uplift and decline, its use to express critiques and aspirations, and to stage allegories of corruption and renewal, may contain a deeper point about the sphere of party politics. Our argument here is not only that trash has been politicised (cf. Bouhlel 2020), but that Tunisian politics have been 'trashed'. Voter turn-out, the rhetoric and actions of Kais Saied, and the very sentiment that carried him to the helm of the country certainly seem to confirm that the rituals, institutions, and key figures of the political sphere are perceived as trash, and either completely thrown out or in desperate need of being cleaned up. If politicisation means understanding the significance and nature of waste in political terms (rather than technical, economic, or environmental ones, and therefore as a realm of de-politicisation), what we also want to show is how trash and cleanup provide some of the most utilised and cogent vehicles through which people understand and express their feelings and thoughts about politics. If images of disease and moral offense—ulcers, cankers, mildew, drunkenness, murder, adultery, etc. —convey the rottenness of the state of Denmark in Hamlet, then this paper is about a similar role played by waste in Tunisia, and perhaps the southern and eastern Mediterranean more broadly.

A word on methods: The initial inspiration for this paper came from the visibility of the *hâlit wa'î* campaign in traditional media, social media, and public places. We began by collecting and transcribing television reports and social media material, while also interacting directly with the creators of the Facebook group *Hâlit wa'î*. We subsequently conducted two group interviews with youth from the poor and ill-famed northwest suburbs of Tunis, Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher, who were active in the campaign. It was also a theme in some broader focus group and interview work we did with approximately 30 young people who were active in civil society organisations in Bizerte, Tunis, and Utica. Our research on the Sfax waste crisis proceeded similarly with respect to media, and later involved field visits to conduct targeted interviews with key institutional actors in Sfax (National Agency for Environmental Protection, National Agency for Waste Management, Municipality of Sfax), and a group interview with activists and residents in Agareb (Sfax landfill site). While we both resided in Tunis for the entire period of the study (2019 until writing), Maha is from Sfax and her regular return trips for personal reasons provided opportunities for direct observation and more interviewing. Maha was also granted observer status as a researcher in the 'Crisis Committee' that was established in 2022 to attempt to aid in resolving the problematic situation and regularly attended its meetings, held via Zoom. Jamie also attended a conference on environmental law in Sfax in autumn 2020, with different figures from both the political and research communities. Although the event had been planned before the crisis began and was about a variety of topics, the fact that the crisis was unfolding literally outside of the conference venue coloured the discussions and provided a valuable opportunity for participant observation.

Hâlit wa'î (Awakening): Celebrating the Election of the 'Clean' President

On 13 October 2019, shortly after Kais Saied's win in the second round of the Tunisian presidential elections with more than 70 percent of the vote, groups of people began cleaning and 'beautifying' their neighbourhoods around Tunis and in towns across the

country (cf. Pepicelli 2021: 51, where the moment is briefly mentioned as a 'spectacular and mediatised' campaign sparked by the 'widespread feeling of civic pride' after Kais Saied's election win). The main activities undertaken consisted of picking up trash, gardening, and painting sidewalks and walls. These actions took place during successive weekends after the elections for about three to four weeks. Despite calls to institutionalise the phenomenon and make it like the 'Umuganda' community cleanup held on the last Saturday of every month in Rwanda, the movement petered out after a few weeks. For the time it lasted, observers remarked that it reminded them of the spirit or atmosphere that prevailed shortly after the 2011 revolution. While the 'environmental' dimension and the desire to eliminate waste in the literal sense of the term was not absent, it would be a figure-ground perception error, so to speak, to foreground that element: this was not an environmental social movement of the kinds in Tunisia as studied by Loschi (2019), Robert (2021), or Pepicelli (2021).[1] The material waste and the act of cleaning were more like the plot and props for the *mise en scène* of a political and nationalistic allegory. While the 2015 waste-inspired political movement 'You stink' (*tili't rîhitkum*) in Lebanon had essentially the opposite causality (waste accumulation sparked a political movement, as opposed to a political movement sparking waste elimination), their semiotic worlds were quite similar. 'We had to make it clear that this was not an environmental issue' (Geha 2019: 84), one activist in Beirut said. Another participant in the Lebanese movement, speaking at a public meeting, noted that 'the problem was not an environmental one, but a problem of the state. […] We are in a *political* crisis' (Arsan 2018: 400; emphasis added).

The Awakening movement is located firmly in a genealogy of regional deployments of the same idiom that transcends borders and political lines, which is not limited to the post-revolutionary clean-ups in Tunisia and Egypt as mentioned in the introduction. Indeed, the idiom was redeployed in Egypt by the regimes of the two diametrically opposed figures, Mohammed Mursi, the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood president of Egypt, and Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, the head of the armed forces who would oust Mursi. In 2012 Mursi launched a programme called *watan nazîf* (clean nation or homeland) which invited 'citizens' (the term is significant) to pick up waste on a volunteer basis as a fulfilment of civic duty and a pro-national demonstration of their aspirations for a clean and beautiful country (Arefin 2019: 1065–1070; Karagiannis 2015: 188). Arefin's interpretation of these events is that through garbage pickup, people 'were also participating in a symbolic act: cleansing the nation of all types of corruption and negligence embodied in the waste that littered the streets' (2019: 1068). Some of the campaign's proponents described it as a way of cleansing the country of 'all manifestations of backwardness' (Arefin 2019: 1069). During this period in Egypt, political rhetoric (slogans, speech, caricatures) of all sorts drew heavily on words such as purification, clean, garbage, and remnants (*fuloul*, referring to those who belonged to the *ancien regime*) to express and categorise people and practices.

1 The work of the authors cited here has focused largely on developing sociological typologies of the movements, discursively analysing the terms in which they present their claims (e.g. in terms of a sentiment of injustice or of regional disparity, recasting the terminology of the revolution, rather than 'environmental' terms *stricto sensu*), and in analysing the types of social networks and connections around which the movements coalesce.

Arefin (2019) correctly observes the ongoing role of cleanliness and waste pickup in Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi's dictatorial project. To provide another example of this, in 2016 a major campaign very similar to *watan nazîf,* called *helwa ya baladî* (my beautiful country), incited the citizens of Egypt to volunteer to pick up trash, plant gardens, and paint murals and sidewalks (sidewalk curbs are painted in alternate striped colours – black and white, red and white, etc. – in Egypt and elsewhere in the region). Newspaper archives from that time, especially of Al-Akhbâr al Yûm[2] – a semi-governmental and pro-regime daily that was a sort of sponsor of the campaign – overflow with propagandistic texts posing as news stories, reporting triumph after glorious triumph of broom, wheelbarrow, and paint brush, and encouraging people everywhere to join in the orgiastic adulation of their beautiful nation.

The *hirak* movement in Algeria has also seen this metaphor employed. The *awlâd al-hûma* (residents, with a connotation of authenticity and lower social class) of neighbourhoods through which the protest marches move often organised clean ups. Similarly, some protesters, especially older women, marched with brooms as though to say that what the country needed was a good cleaning, and the country's politicians were a pack of brats who never grew out of needing their mums to pick up after them. As Safar Zitoun (2021) underscores, this was not about protecting the environment, but using the streets to stage demands for the removal of the 'pollution' and 'dirtiness' that afflict the political system. Safar Zitoun adds that lower social classes in particular have utilised this language precisely because it contests and inverts discourses about 'negative behaviours' and 'dirtiness' through which they are often stigmatised and condescended to by elites (ibid.).

Based on our observations in Tunisia at the time, participant analysis of video reportages, and as confirmed in interviews which we conducted later on, the majority of the participants were youth under 20 years of age, and for those who were above 20, the majority were students. The movement's geography was the electoral geography of Kais Saied, and skewed toward lower income neighbourhoods and peripheral areas. The campaigns were organised in a highly spontaneous fashion, without central coordination: they were not a response to a call from the leadership of any political party or established civil society actor, and they came about through a snowball effect between friends, relatives, and over social media. Some feeble attempts by established political actors to claim some part in the movement were rejected by participants, whose opinion was that classic political divisions, actors, and institutions were at the origin of the country's institutional impasse and dysfunction. This 'anti-system and anti-politicians' positioning was a shared feature with the Lebanese *tili't rîhitkum* movement, who used slogans like 'everyone means everyone', meaning that all politicians were equally responsible, and that as far as the protesters were concerned, they wanted nothing to do with any of them (see Kraidy 2016: 22; Khalil 2017: 708; Geha 2019: 85). In Tunisia, several municipalities, NGOs, and private companies supported the movement by purchasing and donating supplies such as wheelbarrows, brooms, garbage bags, or paint. According to one news report, the Ministry of Environment and Local Affairs issued a call to municipalities to support the

2 Author Furniss conducted fieldwork in Egypt from March to September 2016.

movement by making masks, gloves, and garbage trucks available for the effort (Brésillon 2019).

Clean (*nazîf*): no single word better crystallises the foundation of Kais Saied's electoral success, or the ongoing support he has enjoyed after his anti-democratic streak reared itself. In late 2021 and into 2022 it was common – in those superficial three or four sentence exchanges you have with not-so-close work colleagues, taxi drivers, neighbourhood vegetable sellers, etc. – for people to say there was nothing to worry about because Kais Saied was 'clean', or if they were concerned, to say something like 'things are fine now, but what if the person who comes after him isn't so clean'. This trait was accentuated by the contrast with his opponent in the second round of the elections, Nabil Karoui, who spent a portion of the campaign in prison for accusations of financial crime, and, irrespective of whether you thought he was scum or a political prisoner, inescapably acquired a reputation for being something like a Tunisian Berlusconi.

Réalité Tunisienne, a show known for its vox-pop interviews on Bourguiba Avenue, Tunisia's largest and most famous boulevard, uploaded a video to YouTube on the 18th of October, 2019, which they entitled 'After cleaning up the streets, let's clean our mentalities and eliminate bribes for a better Tunisia'. In the video they interviewed people by asking questions such as 'We are currently observing an awakening (*hâlit wa'î*) since Kais Saied was elected. Do you think it will last'? 'What do you think of the campaign to clean up and change the Tunisian mentality'?, and 'Apart from the streets, what else needs to be cleaned up in Tunisia'? To a non-Tunisian ear, the peculiarity of the video's title and the journalists' questions is revealing of the association between cleanliness and politics that this chapter hopes to convey a sense of. As represented in the opening quotes, the answers people gave consistently restated the themes of the city's physical cleanliness, the 'Tunisian mentality', and political corruption as a fluid series of interconnected, almost interchangeable predicaments.

The name that was given to these campaigns to celebrate the election of the man who was supposed to be incorruptible and sweep aside the rest of the garbage that was clogging up the political sphere, was *hâlit wa'î*. The expression, attributed by participants to Kais Saied's campaign speeches, is difficult to translate. Meaning 'state of consciousness' or 'condition of awareness', it is tempting to translate it as the 'awakening,' or even the 'elevation' or 'illumination' movement. It had a connotation of uplift, and of sudden vision or stirring. *Wa'a* is also conjugated as a verb to describe acts of moral or intellectual growth, such as to realise or apprehend, to awake, or to grasp or perceive.

True to these vague and diverse meanings, the campaign had a variety of inspirations and objectives, depending on who you spoke to. While the cleaning efforts attracted the most attention in the media, the television channel *Al-Hurra,* in its reportage on the campaign from the 20th of October, 2020, summarised its objectives as a jumble of 'promoting civilised behaviour, respect for the law, and the boycott of overpriced goods'.[3] When we contacted the administrator of the Facebook group *hâlit wa'î* to express our interest

3 Beginning in the summer of 2019, a few months before the presidential elections, there was an ephemeral national campaign that could be roughly translated as 'Better living by boycotting expensive prices', the aim of which was to encourage people to refuse to buy foodstuffs whose prices had recently multiplied, in particular potatoes, bananas and *zgougou* (a substance made from pine

in studying the cleanup campaign, he replied that he started the group solely to 'support Kais Saied to win the presidential elections' and had never taken part in any of the clean ups. Two young people who had participated in the original clean up campaigns and whom we interviewed in 2020 after the corona virus pandemic told us that *hâlit wa'î* was now about hygiene, and its aim had become preventing the spread of the virus. There were also misunderstandings between different participants about why they came to the cleanup events. For instance, a young woman from Utica who volunteers in an association that organises the annual Sustainable Development Goals camps for high school and university students told us that she joined other young people from her neighbourhood on the first day of *hâlit wa'î* because she was excited to see people finally picking up garbage in their neighbourhood. 'But most of them spent the whole time taking selfies to put on their Facebook', she complained:

> I said to them 'Hey guys, how about putting down your phones for five minutes and actually working a bit'!? I didn't go back the next day. After that experience, I decided it wasn't worth it. We weren't there for the same reasons.

Similar differences of interpretation of their objectives emerged in group interviews in Douar Hicher, a peripheral suburb of Tunis. A 22 year-old man explained to us enthusiastically: 'I was one of the participants in *hâlit wa'î*, which was started by young activists who supported Kais Saied, who supported the idea that he represented, as well as the man himself as a candidate for president'. As soon as he had finished speaking, another participant (male, 25) hastened to respond to this characterisation by saying:

> Politics is the thing I hate most. When I hear the word 'politics', I run for the hills! I can't even stay in the room when people start talking about politics. So as far as I'm concerned, when I saw this campaign, I was totally uninterested in knowing whether it was organised by politicians, or whoever. All I thought was: "sounds like a nice opportunity to help our country." […] I said to myself "this is a chance to clean up some of the dirty spots around Douar Hicher, the ones everybody who lives here knows about." […] We got up in the morning with the desire to clean up, and to draw [e.g. paint murals]. People woke up one morning and wanted to do a little cleaning and painting, that's it'.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his 'phobia' of politics, his vote in the presidential elections went to Kais Saied, he acknowledged. His sister, who would also have voted Kais Saied had she been 18 years old at the time of the elections, explained that:

> When I heard there was a 'state of consciousness' and a clean-up campaign, I decided to go. It would be good for us, and good for the country, I thought, and would show that Tunisia has been cleaned up thanks to the efforts of its youth. The meaning for me was that Tunisia was uniting itself, and that young people were doing something to make to the country a better place.

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cones that is used for making deserts, especially those served during religious holidays). The campaign succeeded in forcing a number of food wholesalers to dispose of unbought stocks.

Toward the end of the conversation, the 35-year old president of a small neighbourhood association returned to the political meaning of *hâlit wa'î*:

> If today we repeated *hâlit wa'î* under another name – I mean if we organised another clean-up campaign but called it something other than *hâlit wa'î* – a lot of people, especially young people would take part. Because within the *hâlit wa'î* movement there were people who wanted to clean up the country, but who didn't believe in the *hâlit wa'î* label because of its association, at that time, with Kais Saied, his supporters, and the Ennahdha movement, which supported Kais Saied.

In addition to being a celebration of the election of the 'clean' candidate and an expression of the type of change to which many people aspired through Kais Saied, two additional important dimensions of *hâlit wa'î* were 'self-help' and expression of pride. Echoing the anti-establishment posture of Kais Saied, whose principal electoral argument consisted of reiterating that he had no party, no platform of policies, and no campaign organisation, many participants in *hâlit wa'î* sought to manifest their belief in the notion that public and state institutions are inoperative, and that meaningful change or improvement can only come from individuals, acting independently. The pride that they sought to express was of course nationalist, but also had a class and generational dimension. In the Bardo neighbourhood, a middle-class area to the West of Tunis, where the Parliament is located, groups of participants in *hâlit wa'î* crowded in front of television cameras in order to be filmed singing the national anthem. Elsewhere, a young man in a TV interview explained that he took part as a response to Nabil Karoui's claim, in the presidential debate, that Kais Saied's approach to running the country was a 'Walt Disney programme'. The expression was supposed to mean that it was an imaginary and unrealistic approach. 'We want to prove to Kais Saied's opponent [Nabil Karoui] and to the entire world that we are not Walt Disney. As young people, we are educated and aware', the man said. In a YouTube video with approximately 120,000 views, the vlogger Yacine Ben Osman shared his vision of *hâlit wa'î* through voice-over commentary of people cleaning the streets while waving Tunisian flags. He viewed the movement as a continuation of 2011 and a new revolution 'against the politicians who have shown us the bad side of our country':

> We united ourselves, and freely elected someone who is clean, with whom we will work for progress. People have said of us that we are dirty, and that our country is dirty, but I am here to tell you that we are not dirty. And if our country is dirty, then we will clean it, politically, and literally.

The message contained in the video's hashtag 'clean in front of your house', is reinforced by the narrator's incessant repetition of the imperative 'Clean! Clean'! The video concludes with the claim that the campaign has changed the opinion of 'those who saw us as marginalised and underdeveloped':

> Now they see us as civilised. […] We will continue until our Arab neighbours have heard of our campaign and also become 'conscious'. Then, there will be nobody who can say they are better than us.

In summary, *hâlit wa'î* can be seen first and foremost as a political '(non-)movement' (Bayat 2010) in support of the candidate Kais Saied before he was elected, but it can also be seen as a form of political consciousness awakening in self and others, concerning corruption, the broken promises of the revolution, and the country's economic problems. Finally, *hâlit wa'î* should be considered as a festive demonstration of joy and hope in the immediate aftermath of Kais Saied's election. In its wake a number of other online groups were born, such as 'We want our country to be clean' (*nhibu bladna nadhîfa*), which had 230,000 members within three days of its creation, or 'Clean up your country' (*nadhafbladak*). The metaphorical meanings of these campaigns, which might be seen as efforts to show and reclaim 'Tunisia's dignity' while demonstrating that the country is 'deserving of democracy' and that Kais Saied's supporters are 'serious' people, relies on the association between cleanliness, on the one hand, and civilisation, respectability, and high standing (*ruqiyya*), on the other.

The Waste Crises in Sfax: 'Something is Rotten in the State of Denmark'

So what happens to the reputation of the 'clean' President when there is a sudden and massive accumulation of actual waste in the country? In the context of waste and cleanliness as metaphors of the kind we have been observing, how can such an event be understood politically? The idea that the legitimacy of the state is challenged and potentially undermined when waste goes uncollected has been made by a variety of authors working in diverse contexts, including studies in Lebanon (cf. references below), Palestine-Israel (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019), Senegal (Fredericks 2014: 534), and in literature review-style pieces covering multiple sites around the Mediterranean (Bouhlel 2020; Baker 2022: 54–55). In a manner that is analogous to municipal solid waste, Arefin shows how a breakdown in the sewer system in 1980s Cairo was one of the first threats to Mubarak's newly inaugurated rule, and how getting it fixed quickly was central to consolidating his legitimacy (2019: 1062–65). The closure of Beirut's principal landfill without the concomitant opening of an alternative in 2015, resulting in spectacular accumulations of waste, was interpreted by many people in Lebanon as a quintessential demonstration of the absence of a state and the failure of public authorities to live up to their stated core attributes (c.f. Abu-Rish 2015; Arsan 2018: 369–419; Geha 2019). The knock-on effects included a national political crisis, the birth of a political movement called 'Beirut Medinaty' that presented a list of candidates in the city's municipal elections, called for the resignation of the Minister of Environment, and parliamentary elections, with some activists calling for the dismantling of the sectarian regime (Arsan 2018: 388) and the election of a new president (Khalil 2017: 708).

Several authors have sought to explore this idea in Tunisia, arguing for instance that the accumulation of waste after 2011 was a sign of the downfall of the authoritarian regime and the beginning of a period of instability (see Loschi 2019: 93; Loschi 2016). So far, Darwish has done the most to push this idea, arguing that the idiom of waste eventually became a common vehicle for expressing pessimism and critique of the rocky post-2011 political transition in Tunisia:

> The phrase *balad al-zibleh* (country of rubbish) was employed in discussions about corruption, traffic, and the seemingly slow pace of political transition. Garbage became a metaphor for everything that was perceived to be wrong with Tunisia during the Transition (Darwish 2018: 68; 2020).

This was the period during which the rap artist Kafon's song *Houmami*[4] became a national hit for the way it captured the 'shit life' of people from lower class neighbourhoods. Its most famous line, 'we live like trash in the garbage bin' is still often cited in 2023.

There have been several 'waste crises' (primarily Djerba) and political scandals involving waste (the resignation of Prime Minister Elyas Fakhfakh and the 'Italian waste scandal') in recent Tunisian history. These 'runners up' – examples that could, and should, be analysed in more detail – are a reminder of an almost uncanny recurrence of waste at the core of political crises and corruption scandals in Tunisia. That is an important point for appreciating this paper's broader significance, and contextualising *hâlit wa'î* and Sfax waste crisis as involving recurrent themes. The choice to focus on the Sfax crisis derives in large part from the way it is a parallel reply, or counterpoint, to *hâlit wa'î*. The choice is also justifiable in terms of the events' significance for Tunisian politics. 'Sfax' has been the most severe of the waste crises and, significantly, the protests and mobilisations it generated were essentially the first, and so far the only, moments of real public contestation and violent clash since July 25th, 2021, the date on which Kais Saied dissolved the Parliament and began a process of dismantling political and judicial counter-powers and checks and balances.

What happened in Sfax follows a similar pattern to the cases of Djerba and Monastir. In all of these cases, longstanding grievances of nearby residents of a dumpsite were galvanised as the facility reached, then overran, its expected lifespan without ceasing operation. The residents began to protest and eventually forced its closure. At this point, the municipal collection authorities, as well as the private companies to whom the service is sometimes subcontracted, have nowhere to put the waste they collect. Then begins the dumping of waste in allegedly 'unowned' land, dry riverbeds, marshes, and wetlands. This situation usually continues until authorities manage to reopen the old site by promising that it is a 'temporary', 'exceptional', and 'emergency' measure: unavoidable until a new dumpsite is ready. However, in Monastir, the waste has continued to be dumped in a protected wetland for over a decade. In Djerba, the original site has been caught in a cycle of reopening and re-closing every few years, with no lasting alternative having been found. The way the authorities claim to always be somehow 'caught off guard' by such events, so that they only begin working on creating a new landfill – a process that takes years – with the closure event of the old one often makes these cases seem senseless and avoidable. There is a real parallel here with the governance situation in Lebanon, described by Arsan as 'focused entirely on the short-term, the exceptional and the temporary – on the next six months, the next year – but utterly uninterested in, or incapable

4 A *houmami* is someone from a *houma*, meaning a 'popular' (*sha'abi*) neighbourhood. The word means something like hoodlum, both in the sense that it refers to people from the hood, and connotes young thugs.

of, devising dispensations for the long run' (Arsan 2018: 372), except that Tunisia lacks the historical factor of civil war that Arsan uses to explain Lebanon's short-termism.

The landfill for the greater Sfax area is located approximately 20 km to the West of the city, near the town of Agareb (pop. approx. 15,000). Since 2017 residents of Agareb have been protesting against the presence of this dump, notably via a campaign they call 'I am not a dump' (*manîsh msab*), a slogan that along with, 'close the dump' (*sakker al-msab*), has been used widely in Tunisia in recent movements against landfill locations, and other forms of pollution too, such as industrial wastewater (cf. Robert 2021). The movement began to get some national media coverage in 2019 (for a detailed, chronological, treatment of this social movement, see Moulin 2022: 103–104), but what was to become the 'Sfax waste crisis' in the minds of the public and in national and international media has its origins in the dump's closure in the fall of 2021. Without an alternative site, waste began to accumulate in the streets. Attempts by authorities to reopen the dump in Agareb were met with redoubled protests from nearby residents. Clashes were at times violent, resulting in a police station being burned and the death of an activist. Consistent with the Ministry of Interior's approach to avoid stoking up conflict and social movements in recent years, the police withdrew. Then, as a sign that things were 'serious,' the military was deployed on presidential decree to re-establish order. The dump was never reopened, however. While this represented a real victory for local residents, it resulted in a regression to the waste disposal system that had existed before the opening of the Agareb landfill in 2008, which meant the dumping of waste in dozens of uncontrolled sites (allegedly unowned land, dry riverbeds, etc.) throughout the agglomeration. For want of a better alternative, the city's two former dumps, one in the industrial zone of Thyna, and the other on the seafront in the city's port, were reopened. A significant amount of waste collection was stopped entirely, with municipal authorities at times making efforts to move it from the centre to more peripheral areas, to maintain some appearance of cleanliness and order in the core neighbourhoods. Residents affected by the waste accumulations filed cases before the administrative courts, resulting in injunctions ordering the municipalities to remove the waste, but still in a context where there was no designated or controlled facility for receiving it.

There are many angles through which to approach these events analytically. For example, the 'crisis committee', established in the summer of 2022, tried to facilitate solutions to the ongoing situation, and whose work Maha Bouhlel was able to follow as an observer, provides an interesting insight into the functioning and limits of local governance and participatory models in the context of the push for decentralisation in Tunisia. In a more advocacy-oriented spirit, the dump's location and management has been criticised as a form of 'systemic ecological terrorism' that is 'produced naturally by the global economic system and national political systems' in Tunisia (Moulin 2022: 105). The thread we wish to pull out of this tangle concerns the manner in which the 'Sfax waste crisis' became a national affair involving Kais Saied and the largely political interpretation it was given, foremost by the president himself. Rather than consider it a local or regional matter, Kais Saied quickly entered the fray himself, gathering the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior on 8 November 2021 in order to sermonise to them in these terms:

> I am meeting with you today to examine the issue of waste removal in Sfax, in the knowledge that it has an objective aspect, but also that the accumulation of causes, which over many years led to the environmental issue of which everyone is now aware, is also – we must inform Tunisians – a matter that has a staged and artificial aspect, since those who history rejected are searching for garbage and waste, since they are, after all, themselves in history's dustbin.

His terminology here is rich in meaning and difficult to translate for both linguistic and contextual reasons, as well as reflecting the speaker's reputation for his idiosyncratic use of perplexing and tangled language. Two points are worth further discussion here. First is the juxtaposition between the terms, objective (*mawdou'î*) and artificial (*mustana'*). The first of these two terms signifies that which is objective, but also impartial and non-partisan, whereas the second is an adjective that can be applied to anything that is artificial, theatrical, or made up. The President thus implies that the situation in Sfax has been amplified and artificially manipulated for partisan ends. Whether this sort of insinuation that the country's problems stem from plots, conspiracies, un-Tunisian activities, and so forth is the result of genuinely held belief or is deliberate manipulation, it remains a recurrent motif in contemporary Tunisian politics. The second point concerns the phrase about the people who are consigned to the rubbish bin of history. This phrase was much-commented upon in the country, and many Tunisians found it amusing. It is immediately recognisable as a way of designating the political movements and actors who oppose Kais Saied, in particular the 'National Salvation Front,' a kind of anti-Kais Saied block. It wonderfully illustrates the weaving of an entire thread of political thought through references to waste as a substance and metaphor, in which both Kais Saied and his ostensible opponents vie to chuck one another in the garbage as a form of unappealable political discredit. Once consigned to the dustbin by history, Kais Saied's political opponents emerge trying to dirty his image by fabricating a scandal around garbage collection, ultimately confirming that they themselves are trash, reaffirming the initial verdict toward them.

Kais Saied employed similar phrasing once again in 2022 when a fire broke out at one of the 'temporary' landfills that was reopened at the beginning of the crisis. Summoning his Minister of Environment, Leila Cheikhaoui, he spoke to her in these terms in a video published online by the official channel of the Presidential Palace:

> The issue is environmental, and everyone knows that this affair is about the environment. […] So whoever talks about the possibility of overthrowing the state[5] is delusional and is, once again, in the garbage dump of history. His place is amidst the waste that he has been letting accumulate for weeks and months.

It is precisely the de-politicising insistence of the 'environmental' dimension of the crisis that tells us what is really at play here, with that something being highly political. Defining reality in a manner that is consistent with the interpretation for which he is arguing, Saied sees his opponents' symbolic place in the garbage bin of history as confirmed by

5 It is interesting how he speaks of their aim of 'overthrowing the state', carefully avoiding the word 'regime', which has too many close and negative associations with pre-2011 governance structures.

their physical recourse to waste as a political weapon. In other words, the waste crisis in Sfax is but a concrete realisation of his opponents' trashiness, quite the opposite of impugning the president's governance.

Kais Saied's take is of course but one spin on events, and through our interviews and fieldwork we can typologise the rhetorical positions or framings of the issue into three categories. The first stance belonging to employees of various levels of government and the public sector (Agence Nationale de Protection de L'Environnement, ANPE, and the Agence Nationale de Gestion des Déchets, ANGED) for the most part describes the crisis as technical in nature: the landfill had reached its capacity (or not). If these actors accepted to engage in discussions about the political nature of the crisis it was often by allusion, or 'off the record' once our formal interview had ended. Next, the activists of Agareb themselves sought to characterise their movement as being based on the need to protect people's health, and to protect the environment. They also developed a discourse around 'environmental justice' which included a strong dimension of equity. Finally, a number of activists articulated an explicit awareness of the implications for their struggle of the different positionings, for example one activist told us:

> Environmental causes are noble causes, like the fight against racism. The whole world defends the environment. When a problem is environmental, people all around the world will support you, but when you have a political problem, nobody is interested.

However, a number of people we spoke to, without necessarily being Saied supporters, did believe the argument that the residents of Agareb were seeking to amplify the crisis for political ends and in particular in order to damage Kais Saied's image. For instance, one former elected parliamentarian explained that according to him:

> The movement was not 100 percent innocent. Even if it contained an element of social protest, it was also instrumentalised. As I explained to you, many people have deep conflicts with Kais Saied, his government, and his political direction. They took advantage of this situation, and had no real desire to resolve the problem.

According to this way of seeing things, the residents of Agareb, who mostly support the Nahda and Karama political parties, which are of Islamist leanings, have been seeking to get 'revenge' against Kais Saied since 25 July 2021 when the president stripped parliamentarians of their immunity from judicial proceedings and dissolved the Parliament. Hicham Mechichi, the Prime Minister at the time, was a member of the Nahda party, and since Nahda and Karama, with support from Qalb Tunes, formed a Parliamentary majority at that time, Kais Saied's 25 July actions were considered as having sealed the conflict between the president and these Parliamentary blocks.

Conclusion

The political meanings of cleaning and waste, within and beyond crises actually involving garbage in the material sense, provide some interesting insights into how many people in Tunisia think the sphere of politics and public administration is fundamentally put together, what is wrong with them, and how these problems might be addressed. Thus, the actual physical stuff of waste has a particular capacity to materialise – that is to make visible and give physical existence to – what is wrong in the country, (i.e. corruption, bad governance, and so forth). It metaphorically opens up two meanings. While cleaning up trash is one way of speaking about getting rid of the rubbish physically, it also hints at the political transformation required: to establish societal order, to organise space, and to discipline citizens, in order to make them fit for a modern and ordered state. While there are significant conflicts of interpretation over who is responsible for 'rottenness' of the state/politics and how it can be rectified, the underlying diagnosis and idiom for its expression is quite widespread and certainly recognisable by all. In that sense, this chapter is about inequalities and contemporary Tunisian politics, and underscores the importance of notions of decomposition, stench, rejection, and the efforts to overcome them as part of the unfolding political forces at play in the country.