

# The “islands of integrity” as an anti-corruption strategy: A Tunisian case-study

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this study is to offer an academic and a practical background interpretation of the Tunisian anti-corruption strategy through Hirschman postures “Voice”, “Loyalty” and “Exit”. In addition, we discuss the design of an anticorruption mechanism to implement best practices and whistleblowing within the Tunisian public sector. Four public sectors were chosen to shed light on their goals as enhancing whistleblowing managerial mechanisms for detecting fraud. We conducted 38 semi-structured interviews, through telephone or face-to-face in a mutually agreed setting, in the offices of Tunisian Anti-Corruption Agency, the Government services of the prime minister, and The United Nation Development Program « UNDP ». The research methodology adopted to collect secondary data includes peer-reviewed literature, books, grey literature such as working papers, reports published by the UNDP local representation in Tunisia, the Tunisian anti-corruption agency’s reports, and some media articles inquiry. The study found out that the concept of “Voice” can be considered as a whistleblowing organizational attitude, considering its capacity to denounce wrongdoings through the digital workflow of public compliance services, and the benefits from a more flexible stand which is in line with the strategies implemented by the organization. In this regard, “loyalty or exit” attitudes share mainstreamed in the “blue code of silence” or retaliation process against whistleblowers without succeeding in imposing them in the ethical practices of the organization. Our study provides a useful contribution to the anti-corruption strategies debate. It draws upon the capability to implement a change in public management through an impact of “voice” attitude and highlights the concept of resilience as the “whistleblowers” ability to fundamentally create a new improved system when ecological and social structures make the existing system belong to “Exit or Loyalty” management attitude.

**Keywords:** Whistleblowing, Tunisian institutional transition, “Loyalty, Voice and Exit”, Hirschman, island of integrity, digital public management, best practices, corruption, governance.

## INTRODUCTION: THE ISSUE OF CORRUPTION ANTI-CORRUPTION STRATEGY IN THE TUNISIAN POST-REVOLUTIONARY CONTEXT

After the Arab Spring Revolution on the 14<sup>h</sup> of January, 2011, the Tunisian government emphasized the need for promoting a new governance process supported by an international program (World Bank Group Report “The Unfinished Revolution”, 2014). The first measure taken in this new transition public governance was to settle an Anti-Corruption Agency (21<sup>st</sup> February’s Decree, 2011) and

technical and financial support has been adopted through international cooperation with the United Nations Development Program “UNDP” (Oiken and Pande, 2012). Benchmarking law mechanism has been proposed to empower the Tunisian democratic institutional process (UNCAC, 2008; De Sousa, 2009). Two specific laws have been adopted by the Tunisian parliament: whistleblower protection act (2017) whistleblowing management within both public and private sector, the second law consisted in a public asset declaration for political, public top managers and Non-Governmental Organizations “NGO” leads (2018).

Despite various academic studies dealing with the anti-corruption process worldwide, they have one aspect in common, both the North African whistleblowing process, and the Tunisian experience are understudied. Indeed, anti-corruption literature is disseminated without undertaking deep and descriptive Tunisian practical research being conducted. Furthermore, international qualitative empirical studies are quite a few compared to quantitative material research (Kohler, Bowra, 2020). This paper assumes much importance by being among the first qualitative study on the Tunisian public program “island of integrity”, with an emphasis on the internal institutional approaches dealing with a fight against corruption in a democratic transition process (Ben Mansour, 2020; De Sousa, 2009). Our research sheds light on the internal institutional process to enhance a new public mechanism by digitalization and administration empowerment (Mabkhout and Ben Kahla, 2013). This whole system aims to achieve the improvement of the quality of public service delivery and to protect the public interest in four (4) vulnerable public sectors affected by structural corruption (UNDP, 2012). While the Tunisian revolution was expected to fight corruption, the international rankings and notably transparency ranking show no evolution of the institutional weaknesses. Tunisia was ranked 69<sup>th</sup> by International Transparency 2021 report.

Paradoxically, this issue is under-researched by Tunisian academicians. The only studies dedicated to the phenomena have been produced by NGOs such as the Tunisian Public Investigator Association (ATCP, 2014), by editing an evaluating report to the “little corruption”, in order to describe the spread of the phenomena to the entire institutional system.

The central question of this article is: How does Hirschman's theory help us understand the “island of integrity” strategy settled in four different Tunisian administrations? And what role should this process play?

In this study, we focus on four public sectors called “island of integrity” considered as promoting Tunisian public administrations in the most sensitive areas impacted by corruption (Tunisian National Statistics Institute, 2014). The study analyzes the different forms of interference in these strategic public sectors. Beyond the ethical dimension the, anti-corruption program is based on whistleblowing practices that have to face cultural values where the whistleblower is seen as a traitor or a snitch (Kenny, 2019; Hersh, 2002; Milliken, *et al.*, 2003; Pershing, 2003).

Kamdem (2007) underlined the lack of African managerial literature or studies dealing with morality in the field of business, and that could explain the difficulties linked to governance in some African countries (Ben Mansour, Ben Kahla, 2014). Farooqi *et al.* (2017) and Wanjiru- Gichure (2006) points out failure in governance implementation. This study focuses on two levels in analyzing the interactions dealing with the Tunisian public

management anti-corruption process. Hence, the need to understand how these four “islands of integrity” are cooperating and dealing with the national anti-corruption strategy, this study describes:

- How “Loyalty, Voice or Exit” are highlighting the efficiency with which the anti-corruption mechanism is impacting the four “island of integrity”.

- The social and managerial aspects of digitalization of Tunisian anti-corruption management process in implementing the “island of integrity strategy”.

### **Anti-corruption programs literature and theoretical background**

Anti-corruption programs are adopted by government authorities to guarantee the preservation of public interest in any public service provided (Clarke and Craft, 2017). Donor funds have paid more attention to anti-corruption programs by promoting international community intervention with the sense of a duty of “common good” (Degaspero and Mainardes, 2017; Swedlund, 2017; Andon *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, benchmark approaches emphasize the ideologic background in choosing public governance policies (De Sousa, 2009). This study observes that academic literature lacks evaluation studies about the institutional success or dismissal of the North African whistleblowing process (Ben Mansour, *et al.*, 2016). Hence, the Tunisian democratic transition is marked by various comparative analysis to reduce corruption risks which have become a complex and global Tunisian institutional ecosystem (Transparency International Report, 2021) like Central and Eastern European countries in democratic transition where agencies mushroomed by the late 1990s (De Sousa, 2009), Tunisia chose to have a National Anti-Corruption Agency, promoting whistleblowing process within public institutions. Indeed, the anti-corruption process in Tunisian law is based on the whistleblowing process, whistleblower protection, assets declaration and public institutional empowerment through financial, technical and training programs. Also, the digitalization and modernization of the public institutional process are advocated by donor funds (European Union, Korean Cooperation and USAID) and by the Tunisian anti-corruption strategy (National Integrity System, 2016).

Hence, we observed that academic literature lacks evaluation studies about the institutional success or dismissal of the North African whistleblowing process (Ben Mansour *et al.*, 2016). As a matter of fact, the misunderstanding of social and human public management context in enhancing the whistleblowing mechanism and detecting fraud could be a new evaluation system. Indeed, the whistleblowing process, as developed in the literature, creates organizational misunderstanding

due to cultural and sociological impacts (Farooqi *et al.*, 2017). A whistleblower is often “rejected” by his colleagues as an informer who betrays his colleagues and the firm, to which he fears retaliation due to the “blue code of silence” (Kaplan and Kleiner, 2000; Qusqas and Kleiner, 2001).

Tunisian anti-corruption underlined strategy program in the “island of integrity” strategy, developed by Ronald Mc Lean Abaroa, in La Paz, Bolivian capital (1985).

UNDP is the principal donor fund for technically and financially supporting this anti-corruption strategy. Inspired by both, Maclean and Klitgaard (2019), who came up with a formula, that they believed could explain the causes of corruption in La Paz, and would help them to tackle it: « Corruption = Monopoly Power + Discretion – Accountability C = M +D - A » (Word Bank Group, 2019). As mayor of La Paz municipality, Maclean launched several reforms leading to better governance within the private sector and more efficiency in public governance. However, the first interrogative observation in this study is the “island of integrity” strategy is according to La Paz’s experience, is a completely different method of introducing economic values whereas Tunisian and UNDP methods begin with legal benchmarking and digitalization process. Hence, these four public institutions are the Ministry of Finance, more precisely a subdivision of the national customs house, the Ministry of the Interior through the local municipalities and police institutions, and the Ministry of Health.

These four “islands of integrity” have become the pilot project by providing financial and technical support to fighting corruption and whistleblowing mechanisms in Tunisia. Furthermore, UNDP allocates financial contributions for “Per Diem consultancy” to set up laws by international experts, to buy software and to meet all the needs required by the strategy (Mabkhout and Ben Kahla, 2013). Therefore, our research stresses the dynamic of the implementation of the public “best practices” process which depends on the capability of various levels of organization efforts and efficiency criteria (George, 2020).

Digitalizing is considered as the solution to fulfill the organization’s ambitions and the objectives in adopting strategic policies and facilitating daily actors’ practices (Clarke and Craft, 2017). However, the role assigned to social and human relation to digitalization, to collective problem-solving in terms of governance and anti-corruption, is integrated into new public management theories (Pittroff, 2014). In order to understand how to settle the whistleblowing process in anti-corruption public institutions, Hirschman’s theory could help this study in explaining the criterion of organizational success or failure.

### **Hirschman voice versus loyalty or exit: Toward whistleblowing process**

In “Exit, voice or loyalty”, Hirschman (1970) proposes a

conceptual strategy of individual action toward an individual reaction of dissatisfaction. In previous research (Ben Mansour and Ben Kahla, 2014) we admitted that those three types of attitude can describe the potential anti-corruption reactions in the whistleblowing process. Indeed, this theory admits three types of manager reactions to “dissatisfaction” (Ben Mansour and Ben Kahla, 2014).

This conception allows us to determine the three potential reactions of public managers towards a corruption act. Indeed while observing a non-ethical transaction, the public manager can fear retaliation by conforming to the “blue code of silence”, which in this study is described as “Loyalty”. The posture of “Loyalty” both to pairs or the unethical top manager or hierarchy, is encouraged by organizations process which maintains a misunderstanding of laws, of whistleblowing protection and undertakes any effort of institutional transparency. Loyalty here could also be explained by a fear of retaliation and job firing.

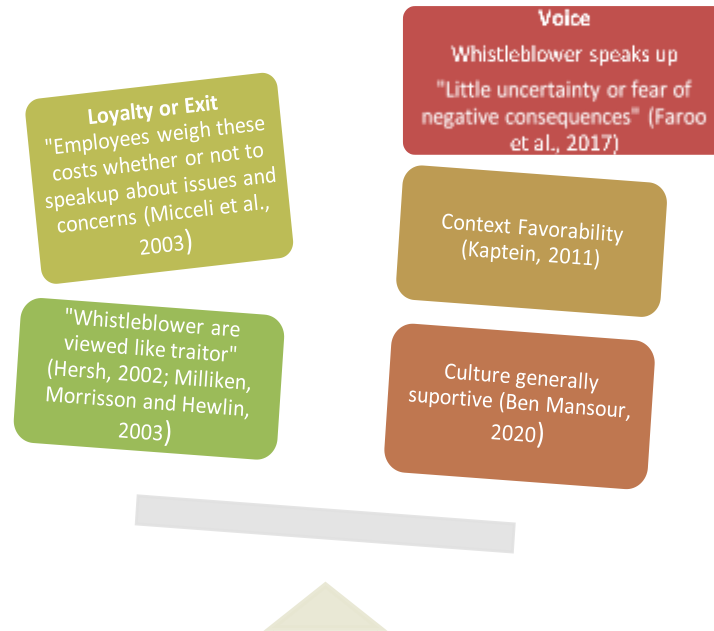
The attitude of “Voice” is the most appropriate for describing the potential whistleblower who discloses pieces of information about misconduct within the organization. The manager rejects the unethical organizational situation and decides to denounce by “Voice” attitude. Voice requires a public mechanism or a digital channel process to blow the whistle and to receive complaints and ensure training within the public service. Ethic codes have been explained at all organizational levels in order to emphasize misconduct and unethical behaviors. Material facts, statistics, digital tools contribute to the success of building a firewall for detecting misconduct or transactions, first the whistleblowing process.

Whereas “Exit” situation can be the result of “dissatisfaction” from the work climate and unethical work transactions which imply the whistleblower is either fired from the organization or is ignored and decides to leave the workplace by formal resignation.

This study’s results reveal new technical knowledge for a successful transition from a behavior dilemma to a best practices adoption, including psychosocial knowledge of groups, representations and interests within imply organization through 3 attitudes: loyalty, voice, or exit (Hirschman, 1970; Ben Mansour and Ben Kahla, 2014). (Figure 1)

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology with a narrative inquiry research design. Data were collected from August 2020 to October 2020 from top manager members of “islands of integrity” and consultants dealing with the Tunisian public anti-corruption program and donor funds UNDP based in Tunisia, which is promoting



**Figure 1.** Whistleblowing conceptual design through "Loyalty, Voice or Exit" (Hirschman, 1970).

the democratic transition within public institutions. The data collection has been described through narrative inquiry, temporally, meaning and social aspects inherent in the anti-corruption mechanism settings have been explored during the interviews. The verbatim data collected from literature settings were analyzed from literature settings. This study was conducted during a research consultancy mission ordered by a UNDP fund donor. The respondents were assured of the confidentiality of information as part of the ethical consideration. Questions on managerial experience and the impact of "the island of integrity" in the daily organization and work. All interviews were digitally recorded and directly written for a scientific transcription and a complete verbatim accounting. 38 respondents in semi-structured interviews were conducted, by telephone and face-to-face process in a mutually agreed setting, mostly in the offices of the top managers of UNDP Tunisia, the anti-corruption agency, branches of the national customs board, the Ministry of Interior through local municipalities and police institutions. The respondents included three (3) mayors of three (3) concerned municipalities in the Djerba department and their deputy assistants, three (3) top managers from the customs division, in interior defense and police security. Two (2) members from the "ARP" and the National Tunisian Assembly, five (5) members from among the UNDP senior consultants, five (5) consultants in whistleblowing process in the anti-corruption agency, three (3) hospital head directors and their (3) local points in the regional departments in Rabta, Jendouba and Djerba

public hospitals, two (2) top managers in prime ministry and three (3) engineers in charge of ERP and digitalization workflow. The researcher used an interview schedule that constituted fifteen (15) questions and was administered within the allocated time of each interview, which is an average of one hour and a half. In order to analyze the collected data, we used the N'vivo 10 software, which highlights theme categories and conceptual codes. The coding system allowed the development of in-depth content analysis, on the one hand all from verbatim, and the other hand, by comparing this research to official speeches and confidential reports given by UNDP and the Tunisian anti-corruption agency. The collected data was coded and analyzed thematically based on the research objectives using N'vivo 10 software. The coding system allowed the researchers to develop an in-depth content analysis, on the one hand all from verbatim, and on the other hand, by comparing this research to official speeches and confidential reports given by UNDP and the Tunisian anti-corruption agency (Table 1).

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This original analysis contributes to identifying the qualitative factors that explain the dynamic contribution of each actor and public "island of integrity" counterpart. This study aims at describing the whistleblowing protection process within the Tunisian administration and how the impact of digitalization emphasizes the management of

**Table 1.** Methodology process of data collection.

Review and conceptual work	Data selection	Data collection	Data analysis
<p>For review paper and conceptual work over 31 research articles were systematically reviewed on Hirschman Theory, Whistleblowing Review stakeholder theory, Anti-corruption salience, institutional theory and public management sector.</p> <p>Relevant articles were identified from the text and bibliography of renowned articles and were also searched using several electronic sources, e.g., Web of sciences; Business Source Complete, Elsevier, Cairn, Scopus.</p>	<p>In-depth multiple case studies “island of integrity”</p> <p>Two tail case study design has been used: health and customs services</p>	<p>Data were mainly collected through archive material and semi-structured interviews.</p> <p>In total 38 interviews of managers, consultants, stakeholders and independent analysts were conducted, translated and transcribed.</p> <p>Archival material including over 315 pages was collected from a variety of sources.</p>	<p>We employed qualitative data analysis and relied on matrix display and analysis to examine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The fund donors and their “logical” empowerment policy for Top Managers and whistleblowing process.</li> <li>- The efficiency of synergy on digitalization public internal services and procurement process with anti-corruption agency:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “TUNEPS”: endorsing training and human resource empowerment to use TUNEPS which is an e-procurement system used setup to consolidate processes of purchasing, sourcing and tendering, and contracting and ordering public procurement and can be used by multiple public actors.</li> <li>-National central pharmacology supply chain and hospital distribution through “DJIN”: Daily digital nominative distribution of drugs with “medical electronic cart”</li> <li>- The Efficiency of “Digitalization of customs services” through Digital application “AMTIAATY”, “WADHIYATY”, SHIKAYATY”</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

NVivo 10 software, which highlights categories and code.  
 Producing a dictionary of themes.  
 The coding allowed us to develop an in-depth content analysis.

Tunisian public sector policy.

**Result n°1: “Loyalty or Exit” and the failure of anti-corruption process**

The study found out that the democratic transition process is highly based on the anti-corruption agency for settling advocacy and whistleblowing empowerment and lobbying for law mechanism. The study also established that this vision is promoted by Tunisian development programs and international cooperation partnerships. Hence, the UNDP organization deeply implements the “Tunisian national

system of integrity which is true to the study findings by the World Bank Group Program (2014). This implementation through agencies allows the distribution of those funds and the development of international institutional cooperation. Indeed, UNDP is an intermediary between the Tunisian public state and the Korean Cooperation Agency the « KOICA ». As a major fund donor, UNDP supports Tunisian and International experts in order to work on the anti-corruption national strategy by establishing that there are four vulnerable public institutional sectors especially affected by structural corruption (UNDP, 2012). The national customs in the “Ministry of Finance”, the “Ministry of the Interior” through local municipalities and the police

**Table 2.** Donor funds are involved in public governance programs in Tunisia.

Country	Donor fund	Program title
Benchmark of Bolivian experience, in "La Paz" municipality UNDP	UNDP	"Island of integrity"
Germany US Aid	GIZ, NSIC	"Declaration of assets"
Benchmark Korea UNDP	Koika South Korean International Cooperation Agency	"Island of integrity" Whistleblowing act
France World Bank Group Report	French Development Agency World Bank Group	Open Governance Partnership "OGP" Expertise France PAGOV

institutions, and "Ministry of Health" were chosen as anti-corruption pilot priorities by providing financial and technical support for fighting corruption and using whistleblowing mechanism. Furthermore, UNDP dedicates a financial contribution to "Per Diem consultancy" to elaborate laws by international experts, to buy software and to meet all the needs required by the strategy. Benchmarking programs and studies proposed to the Tunisian public institutions are so peculiar that many experiences and governance concepts fail and reflect the inability to conclude programs. Hence, the "island of integrity" strategy symbolizes this holistic method that has been extracted from the Bolivian context in order to be applied to in Tunisian institutional ecosystem (Ben Mansour, 2020; World Bank Group Report, 2014). We can even observe the different anti-corruption programs and donor funds supporting public program governance described in Table 2.

Moreover, the instability of major actors of the "island of integrity" called "the focal point" leads to the misunderstanding and discontinuity of the anti-corruption program - something observed by a relevant focus study (Ben Mansour, 2020). At that time, it was that top managers have been removed due to the nature of their nomination and their political connection. So, each minister staff member nominates new Top Managers according to their political belongings and ideologies.

This study, however, established that Top managers have been removed because of the nature of their nomination and their political connection. The study findings further established that each minister nominated a staff Top Manager based on political affiliations and ideologies.

This institutional discontinuity is exacerbated by the nomination of two new Head Managers within the board of the National Anti-Corruption Agency in a short period from October 2020 to June 2021. "Loyalty or Exit" attitudes are

confirmed by results mentioned in Table 2 that show this incapacity of a public institution to keep up continuity in the democratic transition process. The dilemma is to respect the loyalty policy and in case of disloyalty, there is no other alternative than to exit. These findings hold true to Hirschman's analogy, "Loyalty or Exit" and explain the failure of anti-corruption sustainability.

## Result n° 2: Voice and whistleblowing digital process in Tunisian Public "Island of Integrity"

Unlike literature considerations, the "Island of integrity" strategy is promoted by Top managers called "focal point" (Ben Mansour, 2020) (Table 3). These Top managers initiate in the four "islands of integrity" teams to allow them to join training sessions. They are also in charge of capitalizing on legal, administrative and procedural knowledge developed within the framework of the Tunisian and international institutions in the public anti-corruption programs. "Voice" attitude here is promoted and designed in public daily management activities. Voice attitude requires "channel" as digital applications, IT networks and e-platforms to empower the potential whistleblower and reinforce ethical behaviors within public services.

Hence, UNDP and the national anti-corruption agency try to structure the intervention focus all synergies and interactions of all stakeholders impacted directly or indirectly by the institutional functioning of the Integrity Unit (users, officials, associations, professional orders, ministries in joint supervision). "Kick-off" sessions maintain a creative dynamic of change through a series of "Quick Wins" necessary to reduce resistance to change. As stated by a chief senior expert:

*"Quick wins allowed us to have successful first steps in the programs, as capitalizing*

**Table 3.** Removal frequency of the major public actors of the anti-corruption strategy, "focal point" managing the "island of integrity" during Strategy Reform 2016-2021 (Ben Mansour, 2020).

From 2011 to 2021	Donor fund financing the whistleblowing process	Who chose the focal point?	Criteria for being a focal point	Number of times the focal point has been removed?
Tunisian National Anti-corruption Agency	Tunisian International Partnership Public Funds Cooperation	Head of Government	Political Consensus Political connection (Ben Mansour, 2020)	5 times 2011 2011-2016 2016-2020 2020-2021 2021?
Ministry of Internal Affairs	UNDP/ADB	Director General of the Tunisian Customs	Top Management General Customs Division Political connection (Ben Mansour, 2020)	2 times 2016-2018 2018-2021
Ministry of Health	UNDP/ADB	The Ministry Staff	Top Management Control Auditor Political connection (Ben Mansour, 2020)	3 times 2015-2017 2018-2018 2018-2021
Ministry of Interior	UNDP/GIZ	The General Direction of Police	Group Captain on Police division Political connection (Ben Mansour, 2020)	2 times 2016-2018 2018-2021
Ministry of Local Communities	UNDP/GIZ	The General Direction of the Local Affairs	Administrator Top Management Political connection (Ben Mansour, 2020)	No removal 2016-2021

*the "TUNEPS" training in municipalities, in order to endorse training and human resource empowerment to use TUNEPS which is an e-procurement system. The three adjoints to mayors of Djerba take part in these sessions in order to consolidate processes of purchasing and contracting and ordering of public procurement and can be used by multiple public actors." (Chief Senior Expert, Verbatim n°1)*

*missing budget, it is after all an international partner, we have to be independent somehow" (Adjoint in an "island of integrity" municipality, Verbatim n°2).*

Another interviewed person states that the e-procurement system developed by "TUNEPS", an IT platform is not for free, and to be allowed to use it as a municipality, "fees" should be given to the National IT Central called "CNI":

*"As an adjoint to the mayor municipality, our budget can't afford the annual fees for the network and the mayor didn't achieve to formulate this request to the local affairs ministry. The UNDP can't give us every*

Coordination of every digital effort has been done in order to afford the time and financial budget and in order to realize "Quick wins" and to convince every public administrator to believe and to adopt professional best practices:

*"We knew that channel of alert and bureaucratic transactions have digitalized with IT Platform by Local affairs ministry. So, we engaged in training sessions and empowered the municipality managers to be keen on the public management digital process. And in a month, they began to work with the digital app "Rokhssaty", for building permits and "Chikayaty", for whistleblowing requests, and "Gestparc"*

*internal intranet to know exactly the municipality numbers of cars and their administrative use. The digital transaction was an efficient process in order to stop corruption acts and misconduct behaviors.”* (Top manager in Djerba municipality, Verbatim n°3).

The customs “island of integrity”, “La Goulette” harbor began proceeding in digital recording for incoming visitors by digital numbers and non-material registrations. The e-registration avoids direct transactions with customs officers. Every boat passenger had already registered and paid his customs fees before onboarding via the IT platform: “Wadhiiyaty” for cars fees, “Amtyaaty” for personal belongings (e.g., computers, clothes, watches) and “Chikayaty” for whistleblowing purposes.

The digitalization of every bureaucratic process was a guarantee for non-human mediation in public procedures management. We observed that every public actor is more self-confident in providing public services. All that digitalization offers a better impact on the anti-corruption program.

Moreover, in the health “island of integrity”, digitalization deals with the public procurement of the whole supply chain of drugs in Rabta Hospital. Indeed, the “DJIN” digital daily nominative distribution of drugs in Rabta hospital, made was possible with the purchase of an electronic card, which prevented any unethical act from medical staff. An interviewed Doctor involved in the anti-corruption strategy states that:

*“As a doctor in Rabta Hospital, I’ve been really motivated by the anti-corruption project, we have been empowered about whistleblowing protection law and we participated in the brainstorming session involving risk assessment and the supply-chain of medicines and drugs. As a result, we identified and developed DJIN with the financial support of UNDP. The ministry of health can’t afford to purchase equipment for the other island of integrity: Jendouba and Djerba Hospitals”* (Top manager and doctor in Rabta Hospital, Verbatim n°4).

All in all, faced with an unforeseen situation, the top managers consider that all outcomes’ solutions for the anti-corruption process could not be afforded by UNDP financial program, while the ministry of health did not plan a budget for the island of integrity program.

*“All the budget that UNDP proposed for the ministry of health could not buy all the IT software and develop the DJIN digital e-distribution of drugs two “island of integrity”. Instability of nomination in this ministry*

*contribute to stopping the public anti-corruption program.”* (UNDP expert, Verbatim n°5)

“Voice” attitude is successful when e-procurement, IT platform and technical channel are settled in order to receive whistleblowing alerts and to prevent non-ethical transactions from public managers and actors. The empirical results show that the instability of the “focal point” cannot afford to guarantee stability and continuity in the whistleblowing public process. Besides, this unsustainability reveals the loss of time and possible quick-wins positive impacts that we describe in the “island of integrity” concerns by new digital equipment.

### **Result n°3: Discontinuity and budget**

Discontinuity of public anti-corruption programs reveals a new aspect in democratic transition countries which is the impact of the political decisions and top managers lobbying. First, we observed that every “island of integrity” is singular and does not have the same level of technical equipment, administrative specialties and quality standing. The question that we asked all stakeholders “are you convinced by these choices?” revealed that: most of them did not understand the choice of “island of integrity” and attribute criterion to political motivations. A customs Top manager revealed that:

*“As customs Top manager, I can insist that there is no way to compare the harbor of “la Goulette” and “Ras Jdir”. The first one is a sea harbor and the latter is a land harbor. Each one has specific rules, various human resources and Ras Jdir deals with defense security. We cannot even compare our results between la Goulette and Ras Jdir. They are too singular.”* (Customs Top Manager, Verbatim n°6)

This choice responsibility is also shared with the fund donor, they are involved in this process, and so they must monitor and evaluate their investments. Hence the utilitarian discourse adopted by financial funds is put into question by the strategic actions of the stakeholders as soon as they are evaluated. Separately in their respective countries, the “on-the-ground” expert evaluation missions reveal that institutional managers seem to want to derogate from the ethical recommendations of “soft law” texts.

### **CONCLUSION**

Compared to other researches, which have been less



focused on the “effectiveness” of whistleblowing within the public anti-corruption strategy (Miceli *et al.*, 2009, in de Graaf, 2019). Our research is enlightening the internal institutional process on blowing the whistle on misconduct and empowering public administration by being more efficient in order to preserve the professional whistleblower’s career and discovering any weak internal auditing processes. We described how digital processing action could engage new dynamic change and upgrade the public quality services. But public authorities’ incapability to provide logistic and financial support are brought into question by the crisis or shock experienced in “the island of integrity” when it can no longer continue their evolution.

In our empirical study, the utilitarian discourse adopted by financial funds is questioned by the strategic actions of the stakeholders as soon as they are evaluated. Separately in their respective “island of integrity”, the “on-the-ground” expert evaluation missions reveal that institutional managers seem to want to derogate from the ethical recommendations of coherence and holistic programs.

Therefore, we observe that the empirical study contradicts the managerial literature where “top management” could not successfully reach better empowerment of the ethical values within the organization. Moreover, the organizational characteristic of this management is also its political involvement, which “drowned” any organization’s progress (Hoffman and Hegarty, 1993). Indeed, the choice of “ideal type” of focal point should bring back a model of “managers” belonging to an organization’s permanent staff.

### Research limitations

This research is an attempt to innovate the field on executive programs with public anti-corruption policies. Tunisian democratic transition has been impacted by “the island of integrity” strategy developed by the UNDP fund donor and executed by the Tunisian anti-corruption agency.

This research sheds light on the internal institutional process to enhance new public mechanisms by digitalization and administration empowerment (Mabkhout and Ben Kahla, 2013). This whole system aims to implement the quality of public service delivery and to protect the public interest in four (4) vulnerable public sectors affected by structural corruption (UNDP, 2012).

We tried to contribute to the analysis of the capability of Tunisian institutions to build “Voice” channels and digital mechanisms in order to endorse best practices within an integrity climate. Digitalization of every administration process has been considered as a quick-win approach to creating a dynamic relationship between institutional actors and an “island of integrity. Voice strategy

contributes to adopting ethical codes for all organizational levels in order to emphasize which are misconduct and unethical behaviors. Material facts, statistics, digital tools contribute to the success of firewalls for detecting misconduct or transactions, first of them the whistleblowing process.

But “loyalty or exit” are also demonstrated in our study through the unsustainability brought by how Top management nominations are made. Hence, we observe that instability and political connections impact the efficiency of improving the “island of integrity” strategy and the self-confidence of institutional actors.

Therefore, multidimensional anti-corruption programs are based on different types of political vision and ideological mindset, which could explain the misunderstanding of executive agenda and plans. We reckon that methodology and donor funds strategies impacts are fundamentally obeying different ideological background policies, and this diversity, even in the conception of “whistleblowing” status is so far hiding the misunderstanding of governance meaningful concepts. These considerations create various social and managerial aspects that we have described through Hirschman attitudes impacting deeply the complexity of the “island of integrity strategy” in Tunisia. Hence, “Voice” represents a democratic way and manner to implement KPI for anti-corruption performance whereas, “Loyalty or Exit” emphasizes the incapacity of “island of integrity” to maintain legal and practical channels to improve daily public service quality.

This research has dealt with strategic and confidential public information which emphasizes the lack of evaluation reports with clear insights. Indeed, donor funds in Tunisia develop benchmarking programs related to public governance as experiencing different settings without any Key Performance Indicators (George, 2020). Tunisia is dealing with an anti-corruption agency, inspired by eastern and central European countries but also fighting public corruption with “Bolivian municipality experience” which is “Island of Integrity”, where the La Paz mayor engaged with the private sector to minimize the municipality budget. Moreover, the whole project is financially supported by the Korean International Cooperation Agency “Koica”. These multipart anti-corruption programs are based on different types of political vision and ideological mindset, which could explain the misunderstanding of executive agenda and plans.

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