

The Youth Revolution

A First Reading of the Social and Cultural Conditions Surrounding the Tunisian Revolution

Introduction

Revolutions will always retain a certain degree of ambiguity, particularly if we choose to approach them by only looking at the objective reasons that cause a revolution to erupt. In order to overcome such a challenge, some of those who insist on finding “the causes” of a revolution revert to assessing the direct causes. They then try, with certain unwarranted and imprecise juggling, to review the indirect causes in a more often than not arbitrary manner.

But, besides the causal question of “what caused” a revolution is the other question, which is actually more valid, but at the same time also liable to be more disappointing and frustrating,



Mehdi Mabrouk

Mehdi Mabrouk is professor at the Sociology Department at the University of Tunis. He has published extensively on clandestine migration, violence and youth. His recent book publications include “Voile et Sel: Culture, Foyers et Organisation de la Migration Clandestine en Tunisie” (2010). He co-founded after the revolution the Forum Tunisien des Droits Économiques et Sociaux. In March 2011 he was appointed to the Comité Nationale pour la Réalisation des Objectifs de la Révolution et la Transition Démocratique et les Réformes Politiques.

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and which was posed by the renowned French historian Ernest Labrousse¹ following the centennial celebration of the French Revolution; that is: “How did the revolution come about?” This historian, who devoted most of his life’s work to the French Revolution, concluded with results that were most frustrating for followers of causal reasoning as he presented numerous, varying and even contradictory readings of that revolution, without closing any of the proverbial doors to the floodgates of yet more questions and perplexities.

To avoid the less systematic approach of the causal, we propose to exchange the causal question with the methodical, so that our efforts will be channeled towards finding the “logic behind the functioning of the revolution”. It is a question that does not negate the causes but rather considers these amongst all the other factors involved in creating an environment that was conducive to, and within and upon which the wills of the actors involved, their resources and their competencies interacted and worked throughout the various stages of the revolution.

Indeed, the epistemological dilemma increases when we recognize that the Tunisian revolution is still in progress and in motion. It has not stabilized and remains full of life, dynamics and vigor. Thus, the distance in time between scholarship and the revolution remains quite short, and the immediacy of emotional attachments will likely cloud certain truths.

How did events unfold in Tunisia, and in less than one month a produced a revolution that no one could have predicted, or planned for in advance? What is the sum of symbolic and material resources that the actors so hurriedly invented and devised throughout the course of events in the shadows of this “revolutionary” environment?

A Collective Memory of Social Protest

Several hasty readings on the Tunisian Revolution have limited their view to the facts and events that unfolded between mid-December 2010 and mid-January 2011, over the duration of one month only. As such, the revolution is uprooted from the historical and its context of memory, and the link between the revolution and its historical and psychological roots is broken.

It is likely that the suicide of the young man, Mohamed Bouazizi, in front of the Sidi Bouzid governor's office could have been just another addition to previous incidents; it may not have led to the kinds of events that followed had it not been for a sum of factors, which were not borne of any prior planning or preparation. Indeed, in many cases, improvisation, adventure and risk play a critical role in changing the course of events and in transforming them qualitatively.

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This is where the causal approach stumbles, as it insists on explaining revolutions through the rationality of its actors and their precise, pre-defined calculations. Indeed, reducing the revolution to its events, and cutting its ties to the past is an often committed scholarly error.

Throughout its modern history, and particularly with the rise of the Tunisian nation-state, Tunisian society has witnessed and experienced a series of social and political protests and intifadas (uprisings). However, so as not to become entangled in the folds of the past, despite its importance, it is sufficient to refer to events that took place starting with the late-1980s. The events of January 1987, which became known as the events of Black Thursday, was one such incident where the government used the force of arms against protests led by Tunisia's only workers union, the General Union of Tunisian Workers. Subsequently, there were the "Bread Protests" that took place in 1984, the Mining Basin protests of 2008, the protests that took place in the border area of Ben Guerdane in October 2010, and finally, the social protests that began in the city of Sidi Bouzid, which quickly

escalated and transformed into the revolution that would overthrow one of the most ruthless and repressive political regimes in the Arab world. In addition to all these events, political and military clashes took place between the former political regime and the Islamist *Al-Nahda* movement in 1991, as well as armed confrontations that took place between the regime and groups affiliated to al-Qaeda, better known as the events of the city of Suleiman.

Regardless of the particular social, economic and political contexts of these events and their spontaneous and impulsive nature, they nevertheless tolled the bells, although no one took much notice. Nevertheless, these incidents would become lodged in the collective subconsciousness along with the hope that they could nurture the action and mobilizations of individuals and groups when needed.

Other than these different events, the country was defined as being relatively stable, at least on the political level. With the defeat of the *Al-Nahda* Islamist movement after its bloody struggle with the regime, the state was now able to take over the reigns of power and to take full control of the public domain², which it monopolized in a violent manner. Indeed, to control this domain, it would hold part of the opposition hostage by blackmailing it, while it disbanded and scattered other elements of the opposition, laying siege upon all those who opposed this and made this difficult. Meanwhile, on a social level, the country entered into a phase of "social peace" based on a policy of negotiations between the government and the General Union of Tunisian Workers, the only recognized labor union – negotiations which mostly revolved around an increase in wages every three years.

The ranks of this peace were left undisturbed save for a few, scattered individual and limited group protests every now and then, which usually took the form of sit-ins or hunger strikes that became so prevalent that, at one point, some came to call Tunisia "the capital of hunger strikes".³ These forms of protests were mostly related to social and political grievances

regarding issues such as depriving persons from obtaining passports, expulsions from jobs and arbitrary terminations of employment for political or union-related reasons, and protesting against unjustly tried cases in court. Moreover, these incidents of protest usually ended without achieving their objectives.

Meanwhile, and on a more general level, the legal political power map lost all its representation of political powers and social forces. The result was a distorted collective social fabric used by the prevailing political

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Wide segments of the population, and particularly the youth, remained far from or resisted being inducted into any specific framework, because of fear or of apathy, in remote places and communities to which politicians and the elite rarely ventured, until an invisible and inconspicuous feeling of opposition began to grow. The political community lost its connection to the social community⁴ and political structures disintegrated as did the social “center”, which usually takes on the role of maintaining social frameworks and the role of mediation, especially in times of crises. The Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), the General Union of Tunisian Students, the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT) Union and the Tunisian Bar Association and others were all disbanded or virtually eliminated. The regime suffered from this when

it lost control over the escalating protests and sought out a mediator, to no avail.⁵

In the meantime, the regime continued its strategy of employing its “firefighters” to extinguish any social or political fires. Moreover, it succeeded in containing inflamed areas every time a fire was ignited here or there; it succeeded in extinguishing the fuse every time. The dread of terrorism and treason were some of the most effective tools employed in confronting these social eruptions. However, the last wave of protests, sparked in 2008, exposed the limits to employing such tactics and means.

All of these protests took on different forms. But, in every case, protestors would end up face to face with the security forces. In general, all these would progressively transform from a tone of peaceful demonstrations at the beginning, into clashes with state security forces towards the end.

However, day after day, the protests in Sidi Bouzid managed to attract more and wider social strata that already carried with them varying and sometimes even contradictory experiences, expectations and expressions. This phase would become the first phase of the many faces of the revolution. By the first week of January 2011, or nearly two weeks after the first outbreak of protests, the character of the protestors would no longer be homogeneous. Indeed, as the bullets of the security forces rained down to kill the university professor, Hatem Bettaher, on Wednesday, January 12, 2011, in the city of Doux in the southwestern part of the country, other groups of protestors in other cities across the country were burning down government buildings, security headquarters and other government administrations. Certain neighborhoods were transformed into liberated areas, where all traces of the state were eradicated with only the bullets remaining to bear witness to its presence.

With that, in our opinion, the Tunisian Revolution entered its second and decisive stage, which would conclude with the former

president fleeing the country on January 14, 2011.

What perhaps represented the momentous difference between the social protests that Tunisia experienced previously and what took place in the city of Sidi Bouzid, in our view, was not the extraordinary nature of the suicide, and its magnitude – because several Tunisian cities

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witnessed similar, and perhaps even harsher and more abominable events – but rather the logic of the catalytic and creative improvisation that characterized and evolved throughout the course of events that followed this act, and the revolutionary environment which swiftly developed thereafter.

The Forest that Concealed the Tree

As of the mid-1990s, the unemployment crisis amongst university graduates began to develop into a very serious problem for the political authorities and the bodies concerned with engineering higher education systems. At first, the matter was limited to the graduates of liberal arts disciplines and humanities, but after almost a decade, the crisis extended to graduates of scientific and technical disciplines. Later, this became a dilemma that all the programs and systems in the country were unable to transcend, for many reasons. All this coincided with the global financial crisis, the repercussions and distress of which are still affecting the national economy today. Indeed, official sources estimate that there are over 150,000 unemployed university graduates.

In 1991, the state introduced an incentive package to encourage the private sector to absorb these graduates; however, it seems,

this initiative was insufficient. The financial and administrative corruption that plagued the economy and its management also represented a major impediment to the kind of domestic and foreign investment that could have absorbed these numbers. Two decades later, the unemployment rate still hovered at the same level and only slightly edged to 13.8%, according to official statistics issued prior to the revolution. In the meantime, according to statements made by ministers in the first and second transitional governments, the real unemployment figures are much closer to 25%.

The underlying reasons behind this failure are complex. The first originates in a higher education policy that has progressively reduced selectivity and generalized higher education under various categories. This all took place at the same time that the demographic boom in the numbers of Tunisian youth peaked. Moreover, according to demographic estimates and projections, these numbers will only begin to decline after 2012. The other reason includes economic factors related to certain development patterns where the absorption of work applications in the national job market does not exceed one-fifth of those seeking jobs in general, and even much less amongst university graduates. The third reason is related to the way admissions to higher education institutions have been configured to channel a third of the students into liberal arts and humanities disciplines because they do not have sufficient scientific competencies, while disregarding the possibilities for their future employment.

The problem would become increasingly exacerbated. But contrary to what would be expected, Tunisian youth confronted all this, over the past twenty years, with modest and limited protests and movements which were generally led by smaller organizations that were not recognized, such as the Union of Unemployed Graduates, which often innovated amongst different forms of protests such as creating human chains across streets, sit-ins, hunger strikes and so on. However, the reaction

of the security apparatus and political and ideological differences led to divisions in these groups which then led to the rapid disintegration of their protest actions.

And, without delving into the details of what took place in Sidi Bouzid and in the rest of Tunisia's cities, it appears that – especially when one considers the weakness of Tunisian civil society, social movements and political

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parties in framing their movements and mobilizations – expressions of dissent over the past two years have been channeling towards suicide as a form of protest, where the isolated, defenseless individual casts upon himself the manifesto of his own futile death. This is the most extraordinary of suicides, where one bears witness against oneself, incriminating and sentencing oneself to a death sentence, pushing one to depart permanently from the holds of serenity, tranquility and hope. Indeed, this social fragility led to conditions and fertile grounds that finally began to find bolder forms of expression.

The Suicide Manifesto: A Conducive Environment

The suicide committed by the young 23-year old man with a university degree, Mohamed Bouazizi, was the spark that ignited the protests that finally led up to the revolution. But, this would not have been possible if it were not for:

1. The vulnerability of economic and social conditions in the country, as demonstrated by socio-economic statistical data.⁶ Indeed, numerous medical reports warned about these conditions as being related to the

risk factors in the growing suicide rate in Tunisia over recent years. Moreover, with the expansion and development of random free market economics in the country and the widening circles of the marginalized, one can state the following:

- The country was increasingly afflicted by the prevalence of a suicide “ethos”, which a study conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) warned of as being an ethos that undervalues life and facilitates death (perceives death with ease). A feeling of loss of value, of lack and of deficiency, particularly amongst the wide strata of young unemployed and marginalized men, gave death a certain appeal. This may explain the “suicide contagion” which prevailed throughout the weeks of the protests.
- A form of acute deafness afflicted the state apparatus, particularly that part of the state related to public sector services and interests, which lost the capacity to hear the voices of the people, or incited or pushed these voices away through its programmed, endemic apathy or its deliberate humiliation of the people.

The frequency of suicides in Tunisia indeed requires more in depth analysis. The feeling that the individual had been stripped of everything was exacerbated by the deterioration of the traditional social fabric, which once provided a feeling of refuge amongst family and a sense of security by association in a collective social security net. Meanwhile, this collective social security net was transformed, in its entirety, into an arm of the state that provided the state with a reservoir to reinforce its legitimacy through deepening political patronage and nepotism, blackmail and a form of bargaining similar to political handouts. The latter included charitable societies being allowed to deal with social problems in return for funding, in juxtaposition to prohibiting any independent

social and charitable initiatives due to fears that these may develop into opportunities that could be exploited politically.

Individuals were stripped and disarmed of the moral and value mantle that once supported them during times of adversity and crisis. The Tunisian individual found himself under the terrible wheel of the state, naked of

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any human protection or value cover to support him. Thus, suicide became one of the more feasible options for this individual. Indeed, the scenes of suicides posted by social networking sites would become an eloquent declaration of condemnation and a manifesto of a country that eats its own children.

These suicidal tendencies were of the outcomes of the state's strategy to dry up all proverbial springs during its battle with the *Al-Nahda* movement, in the 1990s. The psychological resources and tools required to cope and to act in times of acute crises were greatly undermined, adding disaster to misery. Tunisians were to endure times of extreme hardship lacking the psychological and socio-cultural resources required to confront and to cope, while being denied any shape or form of collective or institutional shelter, support or protection.

Deadly Timing

The timing of these social protests became an ally of the protestors. No one planned for this, or chose this path. The events took everyone by surprise. The circumstantial and situational

context was likely the primary actor driving these protest movements, pumping meaning and life into them with all that the intricacies of the social and political scene entailed. It was more than ripe, or so most thought. Suicide represented the ultimate form of protest, drawing forth sympathizers on the basis of blood ties, sides taken or the cause – a drive that progressively took root in Sidi Bouzid and later, in other parts of the country.

At the political level, the timing of these events unfolded in the wake of campaigns conducted in support of the country's president to allow for his nomination to another, fifth term, in violation of the current constitution, which had already been altered more than once to allow him other extended terms in office. Less than three months after the 2009 elections and without any apparent justification, professional bodies, social associations, persons of influence and newspapers pro-actively launched this campaign in a way that still raises questions. The hypothesis that there may have been internal struggles taking place at the wings of power, at that time, would perhaps make all this easier to comprehend.

The mobilization of media in propagating total consensus and unrivaled support for the political regime and its choices could not be continued after the events which unfolded in Sidi Bouzid. Indeed, the regime's choices, especially those related to unemployment, equitable development and dialogue with the youth could no longer be sustained except at terrible cost. For, unlike the narratives told by the political regime, it was proven beyond a reasonable doubt that these choices, in themselves, were the greatest of failures.⁷

In addition, the events in Sidi Bouzid took place:

- With the conclusion of the International Year of Youth (IYY), which was “our initiative” that the political regime marketed so well – a year which Sidi Bouzid celebrated with funerals, where the choice was between suicide and being shot to death. Meanwhile, the image that was propagated by the media

regarding Tunisia's youth was no more than misinformation that benefited the regime's narrative: that this was a gentle, meek, docile, malleable youth; this was a youth unconcerned about bread on the table, but rather more concerned and more passionate about the colors of rival sports teams and emotional chitchat. But the events proved that the features and character of Tunisia's youth were different than that which was propagated by the official media. They are indeed rather more ambiguous and confusing features.

- Less than one month after the inauguration of the "youth parliament". Indeed, the criteria used for appointing members to this "parliament" did not take into account

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the most minimal of standards when it came to truly representing the political and social diversity that marks this social stratum.

- At the same time that the National Youth Consultation⁸ survey presented its finely packaged and previously known results – a report which is endemically replete with deontological flaws that undermine its scholarly and ethical credibility. I do not believe that this study presented, despite its pleasant and softened approach, the concerns expressed by the youth of Sidi Bouzid and the rest of the areas in Tunisia inflamed by protests.
- During a fledgling experience of "dialogue

with members of the government" which was broadcast by Tunisian national television in its usual composed and calm manner. In this "dialogue", the true voices of the legitimate spokespersons for these real segments and strata of society were absent, and substituted by perverse and false extras that recited an archaic script.

- After Tunisia headed the Arab Women Organization, a position that was not only promoted by propagating Tunisia's successes in the domain of women's rights and freedoms, but more so because of the exaggerated image of one woman's stubborn political ambitions that fed into the silent revolutionary environment. The teatrocracy⁹ and its political conduct adopted by the regime reached a point of provocation that bred an environment appropriate and conducive to revolution, and where the silent spectators bemoaned this theatrical performance which humiliated them with barefaced arrogance.

At the social level, the revolution erupted at a time when:

- Mobility at a political level was nearly stagnant. Legal and even illegal forms of opposition were marked by stagnation, volatility and decline. Political movements, including political alliances, had splintered, weakened and disintegrated.
- Social movements were weakened, such as the women's movement, unions and youth movements. Students were being arrested yet universities did not witness any protests of real significance. The same was the case with the waves of lay-offs and arbitrary terminations that resulted from the global economic crisis.

The situation, in its entirety, inspired some to propose various scenarios in which these events were planned for in advance, and that matters were prepared for in a manner that would push the revolution towards a certain direction by pre-

defined groups, with the capacity to maneuver, adapt and meet expectations.

The Circles that Embraced the Revolution

Numerous researchers and thinkers prefer to use the terms “revolutionary episodes” or “revolutionary stages” in order to avoid using the single term “revolution”, which signifies an abrupt and surprising moment that accomplishes all its tasks at once in a linear way. We understand revolutions according to an ascending, accumulative, incremental and progressive course within which ruptures, volatility, hesitation and confusion are its most candid and realistic attributes.

The Tunisian revolution worked according to the logic of the alternate ebb and flow of the tide. It was a revolution marked by successive waves that broke, and every time a wave ebbed it left behind a residue that was then carried away with the next wave.

Those watching the first scenes that unfolded directly after the suicide of the young man, Mohamed Bouazizi, will also note that this event was embraced by three societal circles, even if they vary and are dissimilar in form. These circles would seek to mobilize their human and symbolic resources to act in these events without ever having marked their place

what would govern the course of events that took place thereafter.

The weakness of social movements (students, youth and women’s movements) and political movements, in a context marked by an absence of the ability of civil society, and particularly its organizations, to attract youth, was what made these protests uncontrollable and viable for revolution. This weak point in Tunisian society was what significantly and qualitatively changed the nature of these protests and transformed their dynamics into that of a revolution. Between the incident of the individual suicide and the revolution, certain circles worked to embrace the protests without actually having the ability to direct or control them. Indeed, in many cases, events dragged these circles, sweeping them into the momentum of their rumbling, violent currents – willingly or unwillingly.

- The first circle that embraced these events included family and kin, or clans and tribes; and this circle did not act as social structures, as these structures no longer exist, but rather as feelings and emotions; as tenderness, empathy and sympathy. Memories were milked, pumping forth a history of persecution and oppression that goes back to even before the establishment of the nation-state. This collective history quickly evolves into a culture of the persecuted and wronged, which finds its legitimacy and justification in unjust and unequal patterns of development. The support that family and kin gave the protests should be considered a decisive factor in the evolution of events in Tunisia, particularly in terms of moral and emotional support. Indeed, during past social and political protests, the political regime sought to incite families against their sons and daughters, convincing families that rebellious children were victims of groups who have deceived them and led them along the wrong path.

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as clear landmarks in the path before. Indeed, these circles’ ability to improvise, to adapt and to act with the psychological and emotional resources, that included will and morale, is

- The second circle included the unions. When the families and kin of the victim gathered in front of the governor's office in Sidi Bouzid, local unionists and syndicate members were quick to join. Most of these came from the elementary and secondary school sector, as these individuals represented the largest part of the union structure that was most opposed to both the policy of the centralized union and the political regime at the same time. This segment was the most politicized, anchored and stubborn part of the unionist structure; unlike, for example, the unionist scene in the Mining Basin, which was fragmented by and vulnerable to tribal rivalries, as well as burdened by the fact that their regional leadership was dependent on and benefited from the centralized union structure. In the Mining Basin protests, the centralized leadership sacrificed the local leaders of the Mining

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Basin union (who were educated men that were consequently expelled at the height of the protest movements that the south Tunisian Mining Basin witnessed). Indeed, during the last two years, the weakness of the central trade union was the reason for the growing defiance and increasingly headstrong nature of the local unions. Indeed, it was local trade unionists that rallied around the protest movements, and who were able to take hold of the unclear

and hesitant demands of the protestors, and gave these demands a clearer language and terminology. It was the unionists that rooted these popular, social demands within a deeper political reading of the context, and then took on the task of spreading these demands outside their original geographical domain to inflame the broader social public in Tunisia, where the environment of oppression and resentment would also play a crucial and catalytic role.

- The third circle included the legal sector. Lawyers were also amongst the first to follow and join the family of Bouazizi. Sympathies, empathies, feelings of incitement, anger and condemnation represent psychological resources for mobilization that are more than often ignored by scholars of past revolutions for the benefit of a more rational computation and analysis. But, the Tunisian protests would take on another dimension when it took on a legal and rights-based conscious. This consciousness would act out in the documentation of the outrageous political and human rights violations that provided these protests with the grounds for much greater degrees of international sympathy, and with the momentum and capacity to network internationally.

And despite the fact that the significant role that these three circles played is clear, this synergy may not have been as highly effective if it were not for the proper employment and efficient use of new technologies in communications, social networking and the media.

Media, Citizenship and Social Networking

What happened in the media was a principle factor in the Tunisian revolution to which all its stages are indebted. Indeed, two other young men committed suicide in the same, if not more heinous manner; however, these incidents blew over and a snowball effect never took place. But, this time, this generation of youth was able to support the protests and carry out battles in the

media that changed the course of events and that greatly embarrassed the political regime.

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This was represented:

- In the manner in which events were relayed immediately (and even live); the way that detailed investigations into events unfolding locally were carried out and relayed; the ability to grasp the smallest of details and the documentation of these details – all of which began to form a living memory of the events that could be reproduced and invested in repeatedly and continuously; and, the ability to successfully relay and rapidly exchange information related to the clashes that took place between the protestors and the security forces in all parts of the country, particularly the Tunisian Interior, where coverage of the beginning of the revolution in the media was of great importance. Indeed, this form of communication, social networking and exchange of information is the most important manifestation of the power of media, par excellence.
- In the manner in which public opinion was mobilized in support of the protests, to defend them, and to respond to the distortions and misinformation that was being spread about them, particularly in the state media – which kept on insisting on the idea that these were isolated incidents led by extremist groups that were trying to ruin and ransack the country. These alternative commentaries, analyses and reading of events would make a great difference. Through this media and communications activism, youth were able to inspire citizens and especially youth

to assemble and mobilize in the protest movements and to take part in all its activities, from the very beginning. It was passionate communications that stirred emotions and feelings, for the sake of a cause that, both communicators and the communicated to, believed was just.

- In the manner in which the misinforming official story relayed by the state media was refuted; the official story continued to insist that these were riots carried out by criminal gangs and terrorists, and that those killed by security forces were killed in legitimate acts of self-defense. The media and communications that countered the state media was a form of “defensive” communications that sought to disprove the image that the regime was trying to propagate. Indeed, in the last week, video clips were amassed and published, showing the extent of the human rights violations and the corruption committed by the ruling family. The documentation of the various forms of security and financial violations and the cases of corruption, amongst others, committed by the former regime kept the collective protest memory alive, and allowed this collective memory to be continually and instantaneously reproduced for the sake of reinforcing the increased assembly and mobilization of people, until the “revolutionary” moment was generated and produced.

Third and fourth generation mobile phones all the other advanced forms of communications were used. With these tools and their fertile imaginations, the youth played a decisive and critical role in continuously producing and nurturing events. In contrast, the official and semi-official media continued using a backwards discourse and technology that languished in its archaic place. All of this showed the clash of visions and interests. It was a time where certain figures were exposed as belonging to another world where some still imagined it was possible to monitor and stop

information, fence-in events and monopolize the image and representations presented to the people and to the outside world.

Certain satellite stations would also play a decisive role, such as France 24, Al-Jazeera, Al-Hiwar, amongst others, in maintaining the rhythm of the protests in the lives of people, who became increasingly more repulsive of the official media. These satellite stations came to represent a stronghold that the citizens could take refuge in; where they could escape from the distortions and misinformation presented to them by the official media's rhetoric.

In addition to the latter, the new culture (the internet culture) created the appropriate groundwork for civil mobilization and lifting the siege. Statistics disseminated via the World Wide Web showed that Tunisian youth occupied the first rank from Africa and the Arab world in the percentages of penetration and engagement on social networking sites on the web. These youth came to represent a reserve army capable and willing to use all the resources available to them in what they believed was a noble cause. On the other hand, the prevailing belief that information would remain hostage to the limits of social chatting was a miscalculation that the Fourth Youth Consultation came to depend on.

This culture was able to create a quantum difference in the manner in which people received information about the events taking place. It took the protests, citizenship and patriotism to a higher level, and managed to spread this synergy across the entire virtual frontier. It seems the entry of youth proficient in the use of modern technologies (the new generations of computers and mobile phones, of managing and engaging with social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter...) is what pushed events to a wider level, nurturing the popular culture of non-politicized social groups with its wide circulation of poems, songs, video clips, caricatures and anecdotes. Indeed, we stand before a new political culture that has its own language which no longer relies on political rhetoric but rather on, at times raw and spontaneous, images and slogans. These

networks were able, despite the absence of figures with national-political or unionist charisma, to speak in the name of the more vulnerable strata of society as its real, "official spokespersons". Youth have become involved in proposing and debating on every level. They are engaging in a space, a new frontier that is public, virtual, interactive and effective that

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genuinely embodies and embraces Tunisian youth and their true discourse and dialogue.

Future Challenges

The bulk of the substantive and social causes that were behind the eruption of the protests in Tunisia have moved forward, to another stage. It is very important, despite all difficulties, that the (next) state show good will and intentions in responding to all the challenges before it in a manner that meets with the expectations of the populations that took to the streets and overthrew the previous regime.

As we stand before the positive developments, particularly at the start of the dismantling of the tyrannical system and the institutional structures upon which this tyrannical system has been based – such as eradicating all the links between the state and the ruling party and disbanding the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) that represents the former regime's ruling party, which is responsible for a large part of the oppression and repression meted out by the authorities for more than twenty years; as well as bringing those figureheads responsible for political and economic corruption to justice; in addition to taking immediate measures to liberate the

media and the political scene –, we must take note of the following challenges facing the country's future:

- That the “protest consciousness” will splinter and will become displaced onto provincial and tribal-based ideologies, particularly in the absence of a single revolutionary ideology with which the protesters were previously mobilized. The underlying signs and traces of this subliminal ideology began to emerge during the Mining Basin protests, where the coast was accused of that it “had occupied” the “interior” of the country. Similarly and in this context, there was noteworthy display of return of pride of Aroushi¹⁰, tribal and provincial loyalties (such as al-Mathaleeth, al-Jallass, al-Farashish, al-Humama, al-Ayar, etc.) in chat discussions that took place on social networking sites during these last protests. Meanwhile, Tunisia has always been proud that it was able to build a state, based on institutions with a profound international heritage. However, the anarchy that the country witnessed after the fall of the regime revealed a terrible setback in this regard and a strengthening of the traditional structures that lie beneath the state. If we were to compare between the events that took place in the Mining Basin in 2008 and that which took place in Sidi Bouzid, the uprising in the Mining Basin was the largest and the longest protest in Tunisia, up until now. These protests went on for almost six months, and they were led by unionist leaders with local influence and impact. For those who believed that the point of weakness in the Mining Basin protests was embodied by a dependency on a Aroushi-tribal logic, which was unable to speak the language of wider social strata, it also seems that those events continued under a veil of cautious sympathy by the political class. Indeed, Aroushi dependencies and Aroushi-quotas

governed the workings of this mobilization and paved the way for creating an environment conducive to blackmail and barter.

- That the demands and broad line causes upheld by this uprising, especially political ones such as freedom and transparency, are circumvented by fomenting and reproducing the kind of fear the former regime nurtured in a manner that recreates the political exclusion of certain political considerations, particularly pan-Arab and Islamic ones.
- That there may be a tendency amongst certain political forces to want to reproduce, in the name of the revolution, a totalitarian system based on an ideology that is presented as a panacea. This is particularly the case since the revolution took the intellectual and political elite by surprise. Thus, dialogue and alternatives to the past were not allowed the latitude and time to mature in a consensual manner. We must also be wary of the nature of many political movements that, more often than not, are not open to plurality and the right to differ.
- That regional and universal revolutionary forces are “besieged,” or at the very least, blackmailed and curbed so that they will not become a source of inspiration for Arab and other communities as well.

Conclusion

Regardless of which characterization is used to describe that which took place in Tunisia, whether it was a social “intifada” (uprising), or revolution, or otherwise, the fall of the regime and Tunisian society entering into the phase of transitioning into a democracy by storm were not the outcomes of the sum of objective causes, which may have led to the birth of a revolution. For, as we have shown, the causal approach, which implicitly builds on an absolute fact, remains inherently and inevitably incapable

of understanding the full scope of what actually takes place during times such as these.

The environment in Tunisia was conducive to what eventually transpired, fueled by mistakes made by the regime and the incapacity of

The environment in Tunisia was conducive to what eventually transpired, fueled by mistakes made by the regime and the incapacity of centrist, civil society structures to contextualize and provide a framework for that which was unfolding.

centrist, civil society structures to contextualize and provide a framework for that which was unfolding. The severe polarization that took place between the ferocious, security regime and the masses of unbridled feelings led to an emotional flood that had nowhere to channel its expression. This synergy allowed the inventive imagination to gain a creative and reproductive spontaneity in a manner that shows that the protesting social strata could not have won the battle according to a logic of pre-determined objectives and pre-planned scenarios, but rather according to the logic of accumulating cycles, sequences and strikes. Every time the protesting forces entered into a new cycle, the ceiling of protest was raised until, in the last stretch, it was radically transformed in its nature, in its character and in the nature of its demands.

A revolution was born in Tunisia in the course of this creative and catalytic volatility, uncertainty and chaos that even surprised those in the very womb of the revolution. It would indeed wildly inspire the admiration of many if all this was really the objective of the protestors from the beginning. Perhaps, it is all this that justifies the absence of the term “revolutionaries” from the literature of the Tunisian revolution.

Endnotes

- ¹ Ernest Labrousse, « 1848-1830-1789. Comment naissent les révolutions », Actes du congrès historique du centenaire de la Révolution de 1848, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1948, p. 1-20
- ² For more details on this, please refer to Jürgen Habermas, *l'espace public*, Paris, Payot, 1986
- ³ Tunisia would witness a wave of hunger strikes by political prisoners, civil society activists and political party members. Perhaps the most prominent of these hunger strikes was the one undertaken on the occasion of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2005 (which took place in Tunis). This summit also became an opportunity to form the October 18th Coalition between some leftist political parties, Islamists affiliated with the Al-Nahda movement at that time, and independents, such as Ahmad Najib al-Shalabi, Lutfi Hajji, Mukhtar al-Tarifi, Ayyash al-Humami and Mohammad al-Nouri, amongst others.
- ⁴ For a more in depth analysis on the particular perplexities of civil society in the Arab world, refer to Azmi Bishara's "A Contribution to the Critique of Civil Society", Centre for Arab Studies, Beirut, Lebanon; 2000.
- ⁵ Tunisian newspapers published the contents of a telephone conversation that took place between President Ben Ali and the head of the National Bar Association asking that the latter intervene to calm the situation; and, despite the latter's acquiescence, in principle, the majority of lawyers refused this. It is also important to mention that not so long ago these same newspapers had described the head of the association as an "extremist" (in the religious sense).
- ⁶ Refer to the General Union of Tunisian Workers' economic study on the regional development of the Sidi Bouzid region (Between a Constricted Reality and Promising Possibilities), Tunisia; 2010.
- ⁷ At the peak of the events taking place in this region, Tunisian television, as represented by Channel 7, covered the visit of a youth delegation from the German Youth Parliament, in which a group of German youth was shown as being very enthusiastic and in awe of the "Tunisian experience".
- ⁸ A survey conducted by Tunisia's National Observatory of Youth every four years. In it, the National Observatory tries to diagnose the attitude of youth with regard to a whole series of issues, as it seeks to gather knowledge about their aspirations. It is also accompanied by great deontological and scholarly flaws that undermine its sincerity and credibility.
- ⁹ See Georges Balandier, *Le Détour : pouvoir et modernité*. Fayard, Paris 1985; [Translator's note: "This close association between political power—or abuse of power—and ostentatious, duplicitous show—that is, what is nowadays known as "theatrocracy", quote taken from, "The Spectacular In and Around Shakespeare", Edited by Pascale Drouet; first published in 2009 by Cambridge Scholars Publishing]
- ¹⁰ Aroush is one of Tunisia's most powerful tribes of Berber origin. (Editor's note)

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