

Tunisia:: Revolution of the citizenry ... a revolution without a head

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Research Papers

**Tunisia: Revolution of the citizenry ...
a revolution without a head**

Dr.Larbi Sadiqi

Series (Research Papers)

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Introduction

The Tunisian popular revolution, which led to the fleeing of Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali to Saudi Arabia and the overthrow of his 23-year rule, represents a critical juncture and the beginning of a new historical era in the Arab world. The shockwaves of the revolution did not stop at the Tunisian borders, spreading into many Arab countries and flaring a hidden power in these populations. This popular will was fed by common grievances, starting with corruption, despotism, one-party rule, and the concentration of the national wealth in the hands of a small group of capitalists who have amassed their wealth at the expense of the subsistence of the people and the confiscation of their freedom with the use of the military baton.

President Ben Ali ruled the country for over two decades, during which time the people showed him loyalty while simultaneously harboring hatred and resentment; the intensification of injustice and repression, however, brought the people's true feelings to the surface. This came in the form of a vast revolution that has puzzled many researchers in political science and democracy studies; in reality, the question of Arab democracy was – and remains – on the agenda of Arab thinkers who have spent years offering propositions and predictive readings of the Arab condition.¹

The Tunisian revolution exhibited itself as a popular revolution by all measures, catching the attention of many historians and writers in various fields; for years to come, the revolution will be a rich topic for many works and writings that examine its various facets. In this paper, which will be followed by a book on the same topic, the researcher attempts to expose the features of the revolution from different perspectives in order to provide a preliminary, academic, narrative of the events.

Historical Overview

Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali assumed power on the morning of November 7, 1987 after his “constitutional” coup against then leader al-Habeb Bourguiba. Under Ben Ali, Tunisia saw the worst forms of autocratic rule, especially on the part of the security figures who clutched to power and made democracy and freedom into a boogeyman for the regime and those close to it. The Islamist opposition received the lion's share of purges, torture, and exclusion, and Tunisia saw successive blows being dealt to the freedom of faith and public liberties, especially the freedom of expression. Tunisian security forces were trained to regard those with political opinions, as well as democracy advocates, as a threat that needed to be excised. At varying intervals, the Tunisian scene saw a number of events that, collectively, intensified the state of

¹ Azmi Bishara, *On the Arab Question: a Preamble for an Arab Democratic Manifesto*, (In Arabic), (Beirut Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1st ed., 2007).

simmering that reached its apex with the revolution; these included the events of the mineral basin and the reneging on agreements between the state and the movement's leadership, and the repression, persecution, and trials that followed. The Wikileaks release on the corruption of the regime had far reaching effects, despite attempts to censor the information, blocking and banning many Internet websites, making it difficult for Tunisian citizens to access information.

Methodology

Research problem

The research problem is based on the existence of a despotic, autocratic regime that ruled Tunisia for 23 years, engendering a difficult economic, social, and political reality that led to the accumulation of a state of resentment and feelings of marginalization, which caused the flaring of a massive revolution that overthrew the regime on January 14, 2011. This paper attempts to answer whether the revolution was organized or an impulsive act devoid of any form of organization.

The importance of the research question

The value of this research emanates from the success of the popular Tunisian revolution against the regime of the deposed President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, and the protestors ability to reach their objectives, with the felling of the head of the regime, his fleeing abroad, and the beginning of a new phase of democratic transformation in Tunisia. Secondly, this revolution exhibited unique features compared to other popular rebellions since it had no official or declared political leadership – at least in its early stages.

Research objectives

This research attempts to present a preliminary reading of the Tunisian revolution up to the moment of Ben Ali's fall, along a number of auxiliary targets, including:

1. An introduction to the latent reasons that led to the uprising of the Tunisians and their overthrow of the ruling regime.
2. An Explication of the popular incentives that pushed the masses to the streets, all the way to the Qartaj Palace and the fleeing of Ben Ali.
3. The qualities that permitted the revolution to maintain its persistence, before and after the fall of the head of the regime.
4. An analysis of the constituents of the popular movement that has reproduced the spirit of democracy.

Research questions

- What were the reasons and factors that led to the flaring of the Tunisian revolution?
- How was a popular revolt, without a clear political leadership, capable of achieving its goal and bringing down the regime?

The theoretical framework of the study:

In defining the concept of revolution, Eric Hobsbawm describes revolutions as a major transformation in the structure of society. Hobsbawm focuses on the notion of “transformation,” but in the historical context of Europe between 1789-1848, which was the focus of his work.² He points to four distinctive elements when discussing revolution, which are:

Specificity: Hobsbawm here stresses that each revolution has its own temporal and geographic specificity, and that no two revolutions are exactly similar.

In the Arab context, each country carries its specificity in terms of the demographic makeup, the geographic nature, and even human customs; Tunisia’s demographic composition and geographic conditions are different from neighboring countries, and Tunisia is endowed with its own specificity that distinguishes it from other societies. This would debunk some comparisons that tried to claim the Tunisian revolution was a repeat of the revolution in Iran in 1979.

Triumph: With reference to the triumph of a new system over an old one, this was represented in Hobsbawm’s work by the victory of liberal capitalist thought over the feudal economy. In the Arab context, we could also speak of the victory of an Arab value-system (with all its facets) over an old value-system. The heart of the matter, in the Arab case, was the occurrence of a rupture between two diametrically opposed systems.

The geographic dimension of the revolution: Hobsbawm points to the importance of this element in the case of neighboring countries, and in the process of transformation (a reference to the effect of Europe over North America). In the Arab context, this dimension is manifest in the spread of the revolution from one country to another, and due to the geographic proximity, the unity of religion and language, the shared history, and the similarities in the political, social, and economic reality of most Arab countries. Tunisia’s revolution should be understood in this context, with the waves of the revolution spreading to neighboring geographic regions East and West, which was noted by the Arab thinker Azmi Bishara in his reading of the Tunisian revolution.³

² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848*, (London: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 2-17.

³ Azmi Bishara, “The time of revolution, the speed of light, and the Tunisification of Arabs”, *al-Jazeera.net* January 24, 2011,

Accumulation: Hobsbawm explains that revolutions are driven by factors that have accumulated over many years, to the point of creating pressure on the system's base, leading to the explosion in the form of revolution. In the Arab context, it could be said that the revolt in Tunisia was the result of the accumulation of social, economic, and political pressures over the popular base, causing the flaring of the Tunisian revolution. This also applies to many Arab countries that witnessed, and will witness, similar revolts.

In the European context, Hobsbawm writes on the crisis of the outmoded regimes in the northern and western parts of the world, identifying the source of their crisis in the lack of legitimacy, the spread of despotism, and the restriction of freedom, in addition to the social and economic crises in North America and Western Europe. These crises are the shared element with the Tunisian revolution, since the last years witnessed the succession of economic and social crises, in addition to a crisis on the level of human rights and liberties, which contributed in a major way in the eruption of the revolution.

At this point, we must pause to examine the appellations used to refer to the Tunisian revolution, including the term "Jasmine Revolution," which we find to be an orientalist term that lessens the importance of the revolution, which – in the eyes of its makers – was a revolution of freedom and dignity, for which they spilled much blood in the face of a despotic police regime; this revolt was not – as it was pictured in the Western, orientalist discourse – a jolly stroll through a Jasmine garden. The momentum that was observed by the author in Sidi Bouzid and al-Qasrain expresses the truth of this revolution as a pursuit of freedom and dignity, a notion that was stressed by the lawyer Khalid al-Uwainiya,⁴ one of the field leaders of the revolution.

In his study of the demarche of revolutions in Eastern Europe, Roger Petersen, author of *Resistance and Rebellion*⁵ attempts to answer the question: how do normal people become capable of rebelling against strong, brutal, and violent regimes? His theoretical explanation was that revolutions begin in the form of protests, and these protests take a popular character that breaks the barrier of fear or makes people forget this fear, which then turns into an overwhelming public rage that is dubbed a revolution. This can be realistically applied to the Tunisian case; in Tunisia, modest protests began in Sidi Bouzid for a duration of time, which later took a popular dimension in an escalating manner while spreading to other cities, especially the capital Tunis, eventually turning into popular rage that was capable of overthrowing the regime of the deposed President Ben Ali.

<http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/099FDDB5-D3A9-43E7-AC9C-46E50E56DC3E.htm>.

⁴ Khalid al-Uwainiya, personal interview with author, February 4, 2011, Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia.

⁵ Roger Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Another common term used when referring to Tunisia's events is that of the "uprising," which was coined by the Palestinians when facing the Israeli machine of repression with their bare chests. The author believes that the Arab revolts are not far from the Palestinian "uprising" model, and these revolts have – to a large extent – drawn inspiration from the Palestinian *Intifada* to liberate themselves from despotism and injustice.⁶ This was explicated by the author in a research paper entitled "Towards Good Arab Governance: From the democracy of bread to the democracy of elections," where he attempted to link the Palestinian uprising with the Arab bread uprisings in order to gain an understanding of the dynamic of popular mobilization in the Arab Homeland.⁷

We should note here that the term "revolution" will be used according to Hobsbawm's acceptance of revolution as a rupture between an old system and new one, which took place in Tunisia. The term "uprising" may be used to describe the events in Tunisia at their beginnings.⁸

The Roots of the Revolution

In this part, the analysis focuses on the factors and background that can explain the state of Tunisian popular mobilization, and which ultimately led to the triumph of the revolution.

Cultural and Intellectual Legacy

Tunisia's history offers many scholars, thinkers, poets, and men of literature, politics, and government, aside from Tunisia's great legacy as the once capital of the Arab Maghreb, the city of Qairawan and its prestigious university, al-Zaytuna University. Many of the hallmarks of Arabic and Islamic literature and thought belong to this country or have inhabited it, such as the great Islamic scholar Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun, the Ottoman reformist Khireddine Pasha al-Tunusi, and the celebrated poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, in addition to a number of thinkers and politicians who faced colonialism with their thought and political literature. These literatures remain present in the thought and memory of the Tunisian people, and played a major role in creating the state of political mobilization in Tunisia, which was crowned with the popular revolution.

⁶ Larbi Sadiqi, "Popular Uprisings and Arab democratization", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 32(1), 2000, pp. 71-95.

⁷ Larbi Sadiqi, "Toward Arab Liberal Governance: From the Democracy of Bread to the Democracy of the Vote", *Third World Quarterly*, 18(1), 1997, pp. 127-148.

⁸ It should be noted that despite the intense media coverage of the Tunisian revolution, on the level of academic research, the academic community is still grappling with the event; this study, therefore, is a modest attempt that relies on primary sources (including testimonials and interviews) in order to clarify the situation and analyze the revolution from a rigorous academic perspective.

One of the matters that were noted by the author was the ability of the people to summon literature and poetry – especially that of Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi – and employing it in the rebellion against the deposed president, a phenomenon that manifested itself when the crowds chanted al-Shabbi’s famous verses “if the people wished to live, fate must respond”. The political literature of the historic Tunisian leader Farhat Hashshad was also employed as the main slogans carried in the revolution, including “freedom, democracy, social justice”.

One of the most important historical works, considered a seminal source on Tunisia’s history, is *Ithaf Ahl al-Zaman* by the Tunisian historian Ahmad Ibn Abi Al-Dayyaf.⁹ This book reveals an important issue, which is that, at the time, reform was not an imported Western idea as many claim; in his long introduction, the author theorized for reform in a manner rejecting absolutist rule, calling for its conditioning to religious law; he cited countless arguments in support of his reformist call and the necessity to limit the injustice and transgressions of the Beys (regional governors in the Arab Maghreb in the Ottoman period carried the title Bey). The religious scholar Ibn Abi al-Diaf stood against despotism and absolutism regardless of their form, opining that despotism goes against religious law, making it invalid; when the ruler burdens his citizens with taxes and rising prices, the continuation of his rule becomes an unjustifiable error. The book also included a call to the Muslim scholars to embrace what the author termed “the conditions of the time,” a reference to progress that spread among the community within the greater nation. What matters, according to Ibn Abi al-Diaf, is that the people of knowledge and wisdom reach a formula that balances all these elements, while conforming to the principle of justice.

In sum, we cannot overlook the momentum that Tunisia had as one of the poles of the Arab Renaissance movement and the first Muslim country to promulgate a constitution, in addition to being the first Arab and Muslim country to abolish slavery. These factors, we believe, provided an intellectual and activist backdrop with 150 years of historical legacy, which contributed to reinforcing the legitimacy of the revolution’s demands and to supplying it with an intellectual heritage with a reformist and modernist bent.¹⁰

⁹ Ibn Abi al-Dayyaf finished writing the book in 1872, after a decade of work; its full title is *The Wonderment of the People in the Chronicles of the Kings of Tunis and the Age of Peace*. The book chronicles Tunisia’s history since the entry of Islam, affording long sections to the Ottoman rule of Tunisia and the era of the Husaini Beys. The book, whose original title was intended to be “The Necklace of Pearls” is available in several manuscripts in international libraries, and has been an important source for notable historians, such as the French Andre Remon who verified four manuscripts of the book, the most important of which is in the custody of the Sadiqiya Library, which is part of the Zaytuna Mosque. This important book was not printed and published until the 1960s, and appeared in eight tomes. It was fully reprinted in 1990 with a shared effort between Tunisian and Algerian scholars.

¹⁰ Khireddine al-Tunusi, *The Straight Path in Knowing the Conditions of Realms* (in Arabic), (Tunisia, the Tunisian establishment for sciences and letters and arts, Bait al-Hikma, 2000).

Economic Conditions

The economic reality of Tunisia included a lot of support and approval from international institutions and large economic powers. The World Bank, as well as the International Monetary Fund, praised the levels of economic development, while the deposed Tunisian president received admiration and praise from the former French President Jacques Chirac for these alleged achievements during Chirac's visit to Tunisia in December 2001. These assessments, however, did not reflect the veritable economic reality for the Tunisian society as a whole. The regions of the Tunisian north, for example, received the priority, with generous and continuous support during the years of the deposed President Ben Ali, while the central and southern regions suffered neglect and marginalization for long periods. The Tunisian National Institute for Statistics points out that the unemployment rate for the year 2010 did not exceed 13%, while non-governmental sources – including the Tunisian General Labor Union – put this rate at 50%, especially in the central and southern areas.

As for the distribution of wealth, Tunisia saw wide variations, as the national wealth was concentrated in the hands of a small clique that is –directly or indirectly – linked to the regime. In this regard, *La Régente de Carthage*, a book by two French authors, Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, speaks of the extent of the influence of Leila al-Trabulsi and her family in dominating and controlling a large share of the economic activity. This took place either by acquiring economic and financial institutions, or by acting as mediators who were paid a percentage commission in order to facilitate the administrative or financial processes.¹¹ The French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, claimed that the family of the deposed president, in addition to his wife's, controlled over 40% of the total economic activity in Tunisia.¹²

In its 2010 annual report, Transparency International notes that Tunisia ranks number 62 out of 180 countries on the global corruption scale surveyed in the report.¹³ On the same theme, researcher Beatrice Ebo from the Center for International Studies and Research says that the spouse of the deposed president, as well as members of his family were able to access all major companies by playing the role of mediators in the privatization schemes and large acquisitions, and by garnering commissions from these companies.¹⁴

On the level of economic development, the Tunisian National Statistics Institution reports – in its 2008 statistical digest – that the total amount spent on development through the Ministry of Development and International Cooperation from 2006-2008 reached 311.6 million Tunisian

¹¹ Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, *La Régente de Carthage*, (Paris: éditions la Découverte, 2009),.

¹² *Le Figaro*, January 23, 2011.

¹³ See Transparency International report

¹⁴ See Center for International Studies and Research

Dinars, while the same report says that the total budgetary spending under the heading “environment and sustainable development” for the same period was 306.5 million Dinars.¹⁵ This fact could open a wide debate over the mechanisms and ways of spending these sums, and why the central and southern regions remained marginalized with weak developmental opportunities.

Tunisian society is distinguished by a young demographic, with the youth aging 15-39 and constituting 43.7% of the population. The Tunisian labor market is also endowed with a large proportion of Tunisians who are employable, with 66.4% of this population in the 15-59 age group,¹⁶ while the unemployed number – according to official 2010 statistics of the National Statistics Institute – was around 491,000, constituting 13% of the workforce. However, when examining the distribution of the unemployed over the different age groups, we find that the percentage of those without employment aged 20-29 years old reaches 60.1%.

The Social Situation

The social conditions of Tunisia were a strong force behind the eruption of the revolution. Population surveys point to an elevated proportion of youth – as a demographic category – in Tunisian society. According to the data of the National Statistic Institute, those aged 15-29 represent 28.4% of the total population, while those between 15 and 39 are 43.7% of Tunisian society – an indication of the predominance of the youthful element in Tunisian society.

As for social conditions, those who are 15 and above and who are unmarried make up 40.5% of the population,¹⁷ an indication of the weak financial means of the youth wishing to marry and, consequently, their inability to start stable family lives. Husain al-Dimasi,¹⁸ Professor of Economics at Susa University, points to the deteriorating economic conditions and the spread of unemployment as a main factor preventing the Tunisian youth from establishing families and households.

The 2010 figures of the National Statistical Institute for general living conditions show that 33.9% of the total population, over a third of Tunisia, inhabit a neighborhood that is not serviced by a local authority, which is reflected in lower standards of services, such as electricity, water, roads, waste disposal and public health, as well as other services usually provided by municipal councils. These same statistics indicate that this percentage has decreased by a mere 1.2% in six years from 35.1% in 2004, which drives us to question the policies of Ben Ali’s cabinets over the

¹⁵ The National Statistics Institute, *The Annual Statistical Digest of Tunisia*, Issue 51, 2008 (In Arabic).

¹⁶ The National Statistics Institute, *The National Labor Survey for 2010*, December 2010 (In Arabic).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Personal interview with the author, February 14, 2011 in Susa.

last years. The deprivations and marginalization of these areas go back to the era of al-Habib Bourguiba,¹⁹ but the suffering has increased and taken dangerous social dimensions under Ben Ali.

Tunisian families also suffer from a lack of clean water, with the aforementioned statistics showing that 13.8% of families do not receive drinking water from the water distribution company.²⁰

Sidi Bouzid and al-Qasrain represent two extreme cases of abject poverty, with a perpetual plague of unemployment, and the inability to fulfill the basic needs of Tunisian families. In these regions, it is easy to observe many Tunisian families living in shantytowns due to the extreme poverty and the spread of unemployment; had it not been for the Tunisian societal network, the situation would have been much worse than it currently is.

Education Levels

Tunisia occupies an advanced position among its neighbors in the Maghreb in terms of education; despite this, the illiteracy rate, at 19%, is considered elevated. The figures of the National Statistics Institute show that illiteracy is at a low 2.1% for the 10-14 year-old age group, 2% for those aged 15-19, and 7.4 for Tunisians between 20-29 years of age. This rate, however, climbs to 60% for those between 60 and 69, and 81% for those above 70.

As for geographical distribution, the illiteracy rate in the areas classified as “non-municipal” (i.e., informal and unregulated) rises to 30.6% compared to 13.2% in regulated municipal areas, another testimony of the policy of marginalization directed against these parts.

On the other hand, statistics relating to the distribution of the employed, according to their level of education, indicate that those employed with high degrees (post-secondary education) form 16.2% of the workforce, while those employed with a secondary education are 37.2%, and those under working with as “primary education” constituted 35.6% of the total employed workforce. This reflects the low capacity of the Tunisian economy to employ degree-holders and the high level of unemployment among this category in the country.²¹ According to the same statistics, unemployment reached 39.4% among those categorized as having “secondary education” and

¹⁹ Al-Haneefi al-Fareedi, lawyer and member of the Committee to Protect the Revolution in al-Qasrain; personal interview with the author, February 11, 2011 in al-Qasrain.

²⁰ Mouldi al-Riahi, Political Bureau member in the Democratic Coalition for Labor and Freedoms; personal interview with the author, February 9, 2011 in Tunis.

²¹ Through interviewing members of this group, the author heard living testimonials which had in common the resentment felt by this group and its frustration with the spread of unemployment and the weak capacity of the labor market in integrating college graduates, which leaves a harsh negative influence upon the various aspects of their social lives.

32% for those with “high education,” while those with no academic degrees of any sort showed a very low level of unemployment at 4.5%.

The Political Situation

Political life in Tunisia was reduced to the domination of the Constitutional Democratic Rally party, which dominated the ensemble of the activities in political life. The extent of this hegemony increased with the arrival of the party’s head – the deposed president – to power in 1987, following a bloodless coup orchestrated by Ben Ali against then-president Bourguiba. Since that date, until Ben Ali’s fall on January 14, 2011, the party controlled the majority of seats in the Parliament (over 80% of the total seats) in all the elections that took place since 1989.

Thus, the party controlled the totality of parliamentary life, leading to the passing of legislation and laws that, in turn, favored the ruling party. This was demonstrated in the constitutional amendments that were approved by the Parliament in order to guarantee the perpetuity of Ben Ali’s rule, including the 1998 amendments that removed the limit on the number of Presidential candidacies, and the 2002 amendments that abolished the term limit for the presidential position and raised the maximum age for presidential candidacy from 70 to 75 years. These amendments legitimized the landslide victories of the party’s candidate, deposed President Ben Ali, in the presidential elections in the years 1989, 1994, 1999, and 2004, with a percentage hovering around 90% of voters.

Parties and Political Participation

Upon seizing power in 1987, President Ben Ali presented the Tunisian people with a bundle of promises for political reform, starting with the allowance of more political freedoms and the integration of independent parties with real political participation along with the ruling party. However, these promises soon vanished, and Ben Ali reneged on these reforms, ruling Tunisia with an iron fist, which dealt a major blow to political life in the country.²²

As a whole, these amendments represented a stasis in political life, and an affirmation of the ruling party’s monopoly over its different facets, which led to a blocked political horizon and the hegemony of the culture of one-party rule and the leadership of the sole leader, which negatively impacted the conditions of life whether economic, social, or legal. Tunisia found itself in an atmosphere of political dissatisfaction, with social classes feeling resentment and anger and a feeling of injustice, humiliation, and the loss of human dignity. Ahmad Bin Salih, former prime minister in Bourguiba’s 1960s cabinet, states, “political despotism and the failure to develop a

²² Brieg Powel and Larbi Sadiqi, *Europe and Tunisia: Democratization via Association*, (Routledge: Studies in Middle Eastern Politics, 2010).

democratic system are among the motives that caused the Tunisian revolution.”²³ On the other hand, the well-known figure of the political opposition Hamma al-Hamami (head of the Communist Party of the Tunisian Labor) speaks of political and economic aspects, arguing that “the era of Ben Ali saw a state of double exclusion, politically and economically, which reflected negatively on the conditions of political life as a whole”;²⁴ in his opinion, that was the main factor behind the flaring of the revolt.

Party life in Tunisia consisted of parties revolving around a center; this center was the Constitutional Democratic Rally that other loyalist parties revolved around.²⁵ Munsif Bin Jafar, head of the Coalition for Labor and Freedoms,²⁶ says, “party life in Tunisia has suffered throughout the reign of Ben Ali, which included the mushrooming of the ruling party and the liquidation of the main opposition forces in favor of small parties that revolve around the regime. These parties, known as the loyalist parties, were created to add a democratic façade to the Tunisian partisan life.”

The head of the Nahda movement, considered as the most notable of parties that opposed Ben Ali’s regime, Sheikh Rashid al-Ghannushi, says that at the beginning of his reign, “Ben Ali freed thousands of detainees from the movement, and entered into a dialogue with its leadership in order to liquidate this critical dossier.” Al-Ghannushi believes that “the participation of the Nahda movement in the April 1989 elections created an unprecedented momentum, infusing public opinion with optimism and hope in the future; this electoral momentum, however, made the regime resort to the easy, murderous solution, formulating a comprehensive plan to exclude the main force of opposition in the country: the Nahda party. This led to a mixture of police and judicial repression, libel in the media, and the insistence on dubbing the opponent as a terrorist and a fundamentalist and a threat to the gains of modernity.”²⁷ The movement was liquidated and excluded from the Tunisian political scene when they were first prevented by a legal framework for political action, and then through the legal prosecution of its members under different charges, and the imprisonment of its leaders and adherents.

Civil society in Tunisia has long suffered harassment by the official Tunisia authorities during the rule of Ben Ali. During that period, it was such that “no one belonging to the networks of civil society in Tunisia was safe from government intervention, not even professional unions, which were regarded as critics of the government. By using measures ranging from bureaucratic

²³ Personal interview with the author, February 12, 2011.

²⁴ Phone interview with author, February 9, 2011.

²⁵ Muhammad Abu, activist in the Tunisian Lawyer’s Committee; personal interview with the author, February 12, 2011 in Tunis.

²⁶ Personal interview with the author, February 10, 2011 in Tunis.

²⁷ From an interview with the Algerian *al-Shuruq* newspaper, September 16, 2010.

harassment to physical assault, the Tunisian government put many Tunisian unions under its mercy.”²⁸

This proves that the ruling regime had cast an iron cage that did not allow any independent activism for the organizations and institutions of Tunisian civil society.²⁹ Despite all of this, the truth of Tunisian struggles in the field of human rights cannot be ignored, and the same goes for unionist activism and the judicial order, which formed a civic legacy that came to fruition in the revolution that succeeded in felling one of the most brutal authoritarian and autocratic regimes in the Arab Homeland.

The Human Rights’ Situation

The state of human rights in Tunisia prior to the revolution was the subject of a rich collection of complaints by numerous human rights’ organizations – international, regional, and local – against the Tunisian government for its human rights’ record over the past decades. However, on the official international level, Tunisia was not the target of major criticisms by many foreign governments and heads of states, with the justification centering on Tunisia being an important partner of the West in the so-called “War on Terrorism” that was launched after the September 11, 2001 events.³⁰

The Catalysts of the Revolution

The revolution cannot be properly understood without noting the catalysts that were a big contribution to the continuity of the revolution, and to its success in the overthrow of the regime and the fleeing of the president and his retinue. These catalysts were:

Social Networking Technologies

To maintain communication with the masses, the Tunisian revolution relied to a large extent on electronic media tools, especially social networking websites. This tool of horizontal communication was one of the major elements behind the revolution’s success; through these tools, the rebels were able to broadcast their voice to a large section of Tunisia youth, in addition

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Tunisia: Silencing Unionist Voices,” (In Arabic), October 2010, <http://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2010/10/21>.

²⁹ Ubaid al-Breeki, Assistant Deputy of the General Labor Union; personal interview with the author, January 31, 2011 in Tunis.

³⁰ French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said on March 22, 2009 that “there are transgressions of human rights in Tunisia, and journalists being harassed, and sometimes jailed, and a strict public policy;” on November 6 of the same year, the spokesman of the French Foreign Ministry said “we feel concern due to the difficulties faced by journalists and human rights’ activists in Tunisia ... and we have expressed the reasons of our worries to the Tunisian Ambassador, and we shall discuss them with our European partners.” See Human Rights Watch, “Tunisia: Events in 2009,” (In Arabic), <http://www.hrw.org/ar/world-report-2010-23>.

to the outside world. These websites and applications were also used to report on events in a direct and uncensored manner to a large section of the Tunisian people.

Tunisia is distinguished by the high levels of literacy and education compared to neighboring countries, as well as by the high levels of usage of social networking websites, which is the highest among the youth of the neighboring countries. In January 2011, Facebook users in Tunisia constituted 19.09% of the population, with the percentage of people between 17 and 44 years who use the website reaching 87% of the total users.³¹ This is a major indicator on the role of such mediums when the regime controls the conventional media and confiscates the right to opinions and to free expression. These mediums functioned as outlets for the revolution, the expression of opinions, and the ability to debate ideas and proposals regarding a variety of problems affecting Tunisian society – social, economic, and political. There was also a number of online blogs that had a clear role in breaking red lines in Tunisia and dealing with sensitive matters, such as the “Nawat” blog.³²

Electronic mediums facilitated communication and “abolished the domination of the center over the peripheries, and eased the flow of ideas and information without the presence of the censor.”³³ A young woman who participated in the revolution described the public space on Facebook as an exercise in freedom, with open debates and exchanges of ideas about society’s problems; when the regime attempted to block the website, activists were capable of accessing it by using proxy servers.³⁴ These electronic websites were among the factors that incited the masses to protest and take to the streets. Despite the fact that the revolution began in the city of Sidi Bouzid, it was quickly carried through these mediums in the form of invitations, photos, and video clips broadcast over the Internet. In many instances, invitations for demonstrations took the form of Facebook invites, which quickly spread through word-to-mouth to become a public invitation, leading to the mobilization of large crowds in angry demonstrations that filled many of Tunisia’s cities.

On this level of electronic communication and organization, the Tunisian revolution registered another historical first that paved the way for the region’s peoples to be inspired to exploit these tools to free themselves from the yoke of injustice and despotism.

³¹ <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/tunisia>

³² <http://nawaat.org/portail/>

³³ Wail Laifi, personal interview with the author, February 5, 2011 in Sidi Bouzid.

³⁴ Lilia al-Waslati, during a program on the youth of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions on Al-Jazeera live, February 20, 2011.

Esprit de Corps and Solidarity

The central and southern regions of Tunisia are known for the dominance of the clannish character and notions of tribal *esprit de corps* that typifies the mode of life of the locals. These characteristics were deemed unacceptable by the regime of al-Habib Bourguiba who attempted to endow a civic character to the nation, and to pronounce the triumph of the concepts of modernity and belonging to the homeland. However, the regime of deposed President Ben Ali used the tribal card to edify his authority along the adage of “divide and conquer”; quickly, however, this scheme backfired, as the tribal card became one of the most notable factors in the eruption of the revolution.

The Bouazizi clan was overwhelmed by feelings of tribal solidarity given what their son, the young Muhammad al-Bouazizi, had endured at the hands of a policewoman and the disregard of his complaint by the Governor, which was followed by him committing self-immolation in front of the Governorate’s hall. This incident stirred tribal feelings and the *esprit de corps* of the clan – “the members of the clan gathered and decided to take revenge on the symbols of the regime; crowds of angry protestors came out in massive protests that were joined by a large number of the city’s youth. The protest turned into violent clashes with the police, and the more brutal the regime became, the stronger the will of the youth and their insistence on achieving their demands.”³⁵ Some young men who were among the vanguard of the revolution against Ben Ali’s regime recount that “the police forces turned the city of Sidi Bouzid into a military base, the regime’s aides were everywhere; therefore, we slept during the day and would take to the street at night, ambushing the regime’s men in the streets and the dense neighborhood until we were able to wear out the police and security.” Solidarity and *esprit de corps* represented a source of energy for the revolution from its beginnings, until the revolution was joined by other social and party forces, and saw its effect spreading until it reached the capital Tunis.

Impulsiveness and Personal Motivation

The revolution and its events were characterized by impulsiveness and the individual motivation of the protestors. Most of those who came out in this revolution were of the “non-ideologized” youth who do not belong to any of the political currents. The self-motivation emanating from feelings of marginalization and social and political injustice was the reason for the continuous

³⁵ Salim al-Bouazizi (Muhammad al-Bouazizi’s cousin), interview with the author, February 5, 2011 in Sidi Bouzid.

flow of the youth into the streets and their participation in the events on all levels. This energy grew daily, like a snowball, until it reached the gates of Ben Ali's palace, forcing him to flee.³⁶

This motivation did not stop with Ben Ali's flight and the achievement of the major goal of the revolt, but continued demanding the overthrow of the cabinet; several slogans were cast in the period following Ben Ali's flight, such as "Ben Ali is in Saudi Arabia, and the government remains the same," "the people want to overthrow the government". This dynamic was intensified with the launching of the march from the southern regions to the capital, with the aim of protesting to bring down the government. "With their personal motivation, the youth were capable of achieving several demands that the regime figures attempted to skirt, in an attempt to steal the revolution and empty it from its content. The government enacted modifications in the temporary cabinet that approximated, to an extent, the demands of the people."³⁷

Until today, this initiative and motivation, always being prepared to take to the streets, represent the real guarantee against the confiscation of the revolution and its dilution; the days following Ben Ali's flight showed the extent of the persistence of the masses and their ability to mobilize into the streets.³⁸

Crisis of Confidence

During his rule, Ben Ali created an intense crisis of confidence between him and his people; this was obvious during the last years of his reign, with many regime figures (such as the Minister of Development and International Cooperation Muhammad al-Hadi al-Jamwini, Minister of Telecommunications Samir Labidi, Minister of Education, and others) making promises of development, job-creation, and a just distribution of wealth, but these statements were not believed by the populace, and the same went for Ben Ali's three speeches to the Tunisian people, which left no impression on the Tunisians who continued their revolution. This crisis of confidence ended up creating a barrier between the regime and the people, with the people determined to reach their goals of freedom and liberation from the yoke of despotism.

³⁶ Young activist Ayman al-Fakhrawi says: "we used to take to the streets to confront the regime's men, aware of the high degree of risk to our lives, but we did not care in search of salvation and regaining our dignity that Ben Ali and his family had slighted through 23 years of absolutist dictatorial rule." Personal interview with the author, February 10, 2011 in Susa City.

³⁷ Zakiya Daifawi, personal interview with the author, February 12, 2011 in Tunis.

³⁸ After the revolution, the masses forced the new foreign minister to resign after he made statements cajoling the French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, who is considered by the majority of the Tunisian people as a partner to Ben Ali in his repression and despotism. The same energy forced the new French ambassador to apologize to the Tunisian people for his lack of diplomatic courtesy and his belittling of the Tunisians' revolution – the ambassador presented his apology live on air on al-Jazeera Channel on the program, "News from the Maghreb" on February 19, 2011.

An opinion survey, focusing on the Tunisian youth working in the Boumandil and Bab al-Filla markets in Tunis,³⁹ showed that the government did not realize the demands of the protesting masses, who believed that “it was impossible for the government to achieve its promises of employing 300,000 citizens in a record time, especially since the people have tested the veracity of such promises in the past. Ben Ali’s speeches backfired and inflamed the revolution further.” The head of the Progressive Socialist Party, Mia al-Jareebi, opines that “over 23 years of reign, the regime of Ben Ali has created a crisis of confidence with the people, and the last speeches of the deposed president did not match the expectations of the people due to their lack of credibility, and the fact that they consisted of threats and delusions.”⁴⁰

Heavy-handed Security

Most dictatorial regimes around the world are distinguished by the dominance of the security aspect over the regime, and by the submission of all facets of political life to the fears over the safety of the leader and his regime, with all of the state’s resources being devoted to this end. The deposed Tunisian president had come to power through a white coup against the former-Tunisian President al-Habib Bourguiba, and it is from Bourguiba’s regime that he inherited the security mindset. Since that date, Ben Ali governed the country with the heavy stick of the security services; the Ministry of Interior received the lion’s share of the government budget, and Ben Ali opened the coffers for the ministry and gave it a special level of attention; the internal security forces in Tunisia numbered twice the size the army – with around a security officer for each 100 citizens, which is, according to Rashid al-Ghannushi, leader of the Tunisian Nahda movement, one of the highest proportions in the world.⁴¹

The security mindset controlled all aspects of life in Tunisia, and as the leader of the Coalition for Labor and Democracy Munsif Jafar says – the security services interfered in the most intimate details of people’s lives. An environment of fear, intimidation, and systematic state terror fell over much of Tunisian public life; fear of the security dominated the mind of every Tunisian.⁴² This environment engendered a state of political stasis, social frustration, and low individual productivity, which reflected negatively on the country’s social, economic, and political life, leading to successive crises such as poverty and destitution, in addition to a general apathy regarding effective political participation in public life.⁴³

³⁹ Personal interviews with the author, February 2, 2011 in Tunis and al-Kaf.

⁴⁰ Mia al-Jareebi, personal interview with the author, February 2, 2011 in Tunis.

⁴¹ Rashid al-Ghannushi, personal interview with the author in the airplane on his flight back to Tunisia, January 30, 2011.

⁴² Munsif Bin Jafar, personal interview with the author, February 10, 2011 in Tunis.

⁴³ Mia al-Jareebi, personal interview with the author, February 2, 2011 in Tunis.

“Many of the figures of the ruling regime and the president’s court practiced what could be termed as organized state terrorism, with people being terrorized with the baton of security; political, economic, and financial corruption spread, and Tunisia came under the control of a feudal class that is exploiting the country’s wealth and resources, relying on the security baton; this was made apparent in the corruption cases involving the deposed president and his entourage, including his family and that of his spouse Leila al-Trabulsi, as well as some figures close to the regime.”⁴⁴

Breaking the Barrier of Fear

Tunisia saw multiple uprisings against the despotism of the executive power, whether under Bourguiba or Ben Ali. The southern regions witnessed the bread uprising in 1987, the uprising of the mineral basin, the uprising of Bin Qardan, and other events that reflected the popular rejection of the policies of the Tunisian regime as a whole. However, most of these uprisings did not reach their target and were aborted due to the barrier of fear that frightened most Tunisians, with security hovering over the heads of citizens. This wall of fear, however, was broken,⁴⁵ and the case of the young Muhammad al-Bouazizi represented the first crack in that wall, which was taken down by the youth of Sidi Bouzid as they sought their dignity and liberation from the totalitarianism of Ben Ali’s regime. With the first spark, started by al-Bouazizi, the Tunisian people lunged into the confrontation to bring down the despot Ben Ali, and the ways in which the protestors confronted security in the streets of Sidi Bouzid were the clearest sign of the breaking of the wall of fear. The protestors were able to exhaust the police forces due to the many ambushes they set for them, and killings and sniping in Sidi Bouzid and al-Qasrain did not repel the protestors from taking to the streets and pursuing their demonstration against the regime, despite the fact that the police “attempted to terrorize the protestors through intentional murder by the bullets of snipers and by using explosive ammunition.”⁴⁶ Many of the martyrs who fell in al-Qasrain died with gunshots to the head, either from the front or the back, clearly indicating that they were shot by snipers barricaded in high positions in the town.⁴⁷

Poetry and Imageries of Freedom

The revolutionaries were inspired by the lyrics of the Tunisian national anthem, which combined verses from Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi and the Egyptian poet Muhammad Sadiq al-

⁴⁴ Interview with Jafar and al-Jareebi.

⁴⁵ Larabi Sadiqi, “The Battle of Sidi Bouzid and the Ghosts of the Uprising” (In Arabic), 1984, <http://www.aljazeera.net/nr/exeres/067f2a66-7998-4816-915b-60bb57f3a1d2.htm>.

⁴⁶ Ali Al-Dhahiri, security official in the Feryana Police Center; personal interview with the author, February 9, 2011 in al-Qasrain.

⁴⁷ Al-Zein Abdallah, Chief Coroner in al-Qasrain’s provincial hospital; personal interview with the author, February 9, 2011 in al-Qasrain.

Rifai, and with their verses the revolutionaries raised the slogans of change and freedom in the face of Ben Ali:

“We live and die by the oath, the life of the dignified or the death of the greats.”
“If the people decides to live, fate must answer the call.”

Poet and novelist Muhammad al-Yusufi⁴⁸ believes that al-Shabbi’s famous verse was used as a political slogan, because it had become part of the cultural make-up and the collective discourse; chanting the anthem was a way of taking a stand.

Popular Songs and Rap Music

“The chief of the country” and “oh Tunisia our homeland” were simple colloquial lines sung by rapper Hamada Ben Omar (aka, “the General”), but, at heart, his songs spoke of the despotism of the political authority and its disregard for the suffering of the people. Such popular songs and rap music found their way to the masses of the demonstrating youth and spread widely among the Tunisian populace, representing for many young men and women a source of revolutionary inspiration and patriotic emotion.

A “Revolution without a Head”: the first, spontaneous spark

The question that poses itself here is: how was the revolution able to march “headless” to the critical juncture in Tunisia’s history and cause the flight of Ben Ali?

The oft-repeated statement “the Tunisian revolution came as a matter of accident” does not reflect a scientific understanding of the nature of societal dynamics; the revolution had many of its essential ingredients available to it, which had the upper hand in its flaring. Change in the conditions of a people is not possible without the availability of the ingredients of such change; Tunisia’s renaissance, which was begun by the revolution, was the result of many factors that helped create it and instigate the change that spread to most countries of the Arab Homeland. In this regard, this paper will discuss the role of these elements in making the revolution – in its beginnings – appear headless and spontaneous.

A Society of Youth

Tunisian society is distinguished by the youth of its demographic, with those aged 15-39 years representing 43.7% of the population. This youthful strength and initiative was the major engine for change. The revolution was the expression of a new phase of change in the life of the

⁴⁸ Mahmud Munir, “Tunisia ... also poetry brings down despots,” (in Arabic), <http://www.aljazeera.net/nr/exeres/001f3420-343c-419d-8671-723d09832e35.htm>.

Tunisian people, this change could not have occurred without the presence of these young elements to motivate the powers of society. The highest proportion of the revolution's martyrs belonged to this group, and they represented the majority of those marching in the street demonstrations, and the majority of those who confronted the police, who marched on the capital and besieged the Carthage Palace on Friday January 14, and who maintained the protests and prevented the attempts to steal or obfuscate the revolution.

This characteristic of Tunisian society was the dynamo of change in society as a whole, making this – unquestionably – a revolution of the youth. The youth category was distinguished by its political awareness even if it were not affiliated to political organizations. The political environment under Ben Ali suffered from a state of “desertification,” and it could be said that the youth were thirsty for the political participation that was denied to the generations preceding them. The case of Muhammad al-Bouazizi reflects, in its essence, the political deprivation of the rights to expression and participation. Through this revolution, the youth created a new political environment that affords a wide space for effective political participation.

This overwhelming thirst for participation may explain the spontaneous flocking of the youth into the ranks of the revolution. In this regard, a gulf appears between two generations: the first has monopolized political activism for decades and became a de facto guardian over all matters, and believes that it possesses truth and the entitlement to rule; on the other hand, a youth that is observing the economic and social problems surrounding it, while harboring a great deal of latent energies, that require wisdom to be properly employed in a process of political and economic development.

It needs to be mentioned that the Tunisian youth were more reliant on their will than on leadership; the political leadership was incapable of expressing their hopes and ambitions. The youth pushed the political leaders to follow them to the revolution's arena, and the youth took the initiative, making with their willpower the opportunity for change. We could also mention a natural law: the will of humans is the measure of the advancement and progress and civilization, in all past and present nations, the main ingredient for progress in any field has been the power of will. What used to be seen as impossible under the yoke of Ben Ali and his police regime – who controlled all aspects of life – became possible due to the “will” of these youth.

This desire for change created a will, or a state of defiance and persistence against the horrific repressive machine employed by the Ben Ali regime. In the first days of the revolution, the regime attempted to resort to a strategy of “shock and disorientation” in order to dissuade the rebellious youth, and to force it to surrender and withdraw. However, the repression of the regime was faced with defiance and insistence. The more the regime raised its level of brutality in the street, the more determined the revolutionary youth became in confronting the terror of

Ben Ali and his regime. This has gradually led to raising the ceiling of the revolution's demands. A state of open defiance was pronounced between the youth of the revolution and the regime, forcing the regime into successive concessions that did not fulfill the demands of the protestors, whose radicalism intensified until the head of the regime was overthrown.⁴⁹

At this point, we should not underestimate the idea that the revolution has an emotional momentum that is charged with anger; emotional factors were among the catalysts of the revolution, which began without leadership or a specific ideological program, but it expressed a comprehensive will to reform all aspects of life through the recuperation of the people's sovereignty.

Organizing and Directing the Revolution

In its second phase, the revolution seemed more institutionalized and directed than the previous phase, which was due to the efforts of the mid- and low-level cadres in civic organizations – including legalists, unionists, teachers, and politicians. These groups joined the revolution and were capable of structuring its activism within a socio-political context that was directed against the head of the regime. This was clear through:

A. Broad popular support

The regime's autocracy and the spread of corruption in all corners of the state, in addition to the slighting of dignity and the transgression over rights have coalesced to create a state of popular discontent, resentment and anger at the ruling regime; they have also founded a broad condition of solidarity in all of Tunisia, from the East to the West, from the North to the South. This state of solidarity served as a host and a shield for the revolution, increasing popular support and guaranteeing the integration of all stripes of society in the revolutionary movement, regardless of their social strata, economic class, or political affiliation. A noteworthy feature was the importance of tribal links, which constituted an important element for the spread of popular solidarity with the revolution. The tribal and clannish perspective of the people of Sidi Bouzid, with concepts such as *Hamama* (offering aid and relief), was much stronger than their civic belonging; their instincts and emotions went for their young son who burned himself in front of the Bouzidi public on the doorstep to the governorate hall. The regime attempted to loosen this

⁴⁹ Larbi Sadiqi, "Tunisia after Sidi Bouzid: The beginning of a new phase," (In Arabic), found online at, http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/222657?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter.

tribal sense and the popular solidarity through mediators and unionists, and by offering promises of millions of dinars for local development, but this was insufficient to limit the spread of popular solidarity with the revolution. The regime labored to obscure the revolution in the media by preventing local outlets from discussing any local, national, or humanist items that might stir the sympathy of the Tunisian public. The last to report the events of Sidi Bouzid was the Tunisian satellite Channel 7, and the Tunisian journalist did not even mention the matter due to censorship and higher orders.

According to the journalist Muhammad Abu: “I have been amazed by the extent of popular solidarity with the revolution’s demands, tens of thousands, both men and women of all ages, took to the streets chanting against the regime and calling for reform and social justice while singing the Tunisian national anthem; the imagery was that of a massive popular upsurge in a critical, historic event. I could almost affirm that nobody remained at home except those unable to march in the street. The sight of the demonstrations and protests inspired feelings of pride, and events were doubtlessly heading towards the victory of the people over this corrupt regime.”⁵⁰

B. The slogans of the revolution

The revolution was able to maintain its vitality and resilience through simple and expressive slogans that reflected the concerns of the people and the problems of society; the early demands of the revolution were social, quickly turning political;⁵¹ as a whole, these slogans expressed the aspirations and hopes of the people of Tunisia in a better tomorrow. At the beginning, the slogans voiced social demands, such as “employment is a right, oh gang of thieves,” “(we want) bread and water, not Trablusis”. For the first time, slogans were raised referring to the corruption of Ben Ali’s in-laws, such as “no, no, to the Trablusis, who stole the budget.” Quickly, these chants took a political character and began expressing political demands, such as “Tunisia is free, Ben Ali out!” and “Tunisia is free, the Coalition Party out!”

Husain al-Dimasi, Professor of Economics at the Faculty of Law of Susa University,⁵² interprets this evolution in slogans: “The regime hardened in its unresponsiveness to the revolution’s demands, which raised the ceiling of political demands until the revolution raised its now-famous historic slogan, which became an epithet for our current historical era: ‘the people want to bring down the regime’.”

⁵⁰ Muhammad Abu, personal interview with the author, February 12, 2011 in Tunis.

⁵¹ Attorney Fadhil al-Saihi, Union activist defending the marginalized population in the city of Tala; personal interview with the author, February 12, 2011 in Tunis.

⁵² Husain al-Dimasi, personal interview with the author, February 12, 2011 in Susa City.

The revolutionaries maintained their stance and coined a number of slogans to upkeep the momentum of the revolution and its broad appeal with continuous popular support. Such slogans from that stage included: “oh, regime, you coward, the people of Tunisia do not get humiliated,” “loyal, loyal, to the blood of the martyrs,” “the martyrs, the martyrs, we shall not deviate from the principles,” “there is no god but god, and the martyr is the beloved of god.” In general, these slogans spoke to popular emotion and the collective Tunisian consciousness, urging people to rise up against the humiliating reality.

From a revolutionary perspective, these slogans represented a noted political maturity despite a quarter century of repression and political despotism. Through the evolution of these slogans, we find that the youth of the revolution did not accept “half-measures”. When the Prime Minister, Muhamamd al-Ghannushi, announced his assumption of the presidency following Ben Ali’s flight, the revolution rejected the succession, maintaining the popular pressure to bring down the regime. New slogans arose such as “sit-in, sit-in, until the regime falls,” and “a month, or two, we are not leaving,” expressing a popular rejection of the attempts to skirt the revolution, especially when an interim cabinet was formed with a majority of figures belonging to the former regime, with the same old faces that were detested by the people. A new round of slogans included “a play, a play, the cabinet remains the same,” and “Ben Ali in Saudi Arabia, and the government remains the same,” insinuating the continuity of Ben Ali’s regime in power. Popular pressure continued until the government was altered, with new elements partially expressing the demands of the revolution in the interim phase and until the conduct of new elections.

C. Civil society forces and the parties joining the revolution

The Tunisian Labor Union is one of the oldest and most respected civil society institutions in Tunisia. Throughout its history, the Union has offered a popular incubator for national activism, as most of the Union’s leaders also led the movement for liberation from colonialism, such as Farhat Hashad and Lahbib Ashur. The Tunisian unionist movement has a long and influential legacy in social, economic, and political life in Tunisia, but the unionist movement only joined the revolution, interacting with it intensively, in its last stages. The revolution’s events erupted on December 17, 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, then spread to nearby towns and cities, such as Miknasi, al-Riqab, Sidi Ali, Ben Aoun, and Manzal Bouzian.

The first unionist movement in solidarity with the revolution took place on December 25, eight days after the flaring of the events;⁵³ hundreds of unionists and legal activists gathered in Muhammad Ali Square in the capital Tunis as an expression of solidarity with the people of Sidi Bouzid and as an act of protest against the repression of popular demonstrations, the arrests, and

⁵³ Muhammad Abu, personal interview with the author, February 12, 2011 in Tunis.

the use of live ammunition against the unarmed protestors. The Tunisian General Labor Union, however, did not interact with the events until December 27, 2010, dispatching two members of the executive office to the Sidi Bouzid province. The envoys met with the provincial governor in an attempt to avoid the security solution in dealing with the events, and to release the detainees.⁵⁴

Unions entered the stage in force when the lawyers' union announced a strike for a single day on Thursday January 9, 2011. This strike succeeded in bringing the unionist movement into the heat of the revolution, and the first statement of the Labor Union came out on January 11, 2011, declaring the legitimacy of the protestors' demands and demanding that official authorities respond to these demands.

General Characteristics of the Revolution and Self-leadership

The Peaceful Character

Since its first spark in Sidi Bouzid, the Tunisian revolution was marked by a peaceful character. The youth faced the bullets of the security men with their flesh, with dozens of these youth falling in peaceful demonstrations against the regime. The youth maintained the peaceful character of the movement throughout its march,⁵⁵ and the demonstrators besieged the symbols of the regime's repression in the police stations and the ruling party's headquarters, "and unlike the common belief that chaos would ensue in numerous cities, the youth revealed a high sense of responsibility towards public goods, and their care to protect public institutions under the circumstances was puzzling."⁵⁶ During the revolution's events, the protestors did not attack private or public properties, and Judge Faisal al-Munsir, of Tunisia's Judges' Association, believes that "the revolution was able, due to this peaceful character, to neutralize many members of the security and army forces during the bloody confrontations."⁵⁷ A number of the security elements joined the ranks of the protestors, and the greatest achievement of this peaceful character was the army's refusal to intervene directly, and when it was ordered to confront the demonstrators, it categorically refused to do so, taking the side of the revolution and supporting its march towards democratic transformation.

Moral Superiority: A revolution without vengeance

The second notable characteristic of the revolution was its moral superiority over the regime and its supporters; despite years of repression, despotism, and injury, the revolutionaries were not

⁵⁴ Tunisian *al-Shab* newspaper, February 28, 2010.

⁵⁵ Lawyer Fadhil al-Saihi, personal interview with the author, February 12, 2011 in Tunis.

⁵⁶ Ali al-Dhahiri, security official in the Feryana Police Department; personal interview with the author, February 9, 2011 in al-Qasrain.

⁵⁷ Faisal al-Munsir, personal interview with the author, February 4, 2011 in Susa City.

overtaken by feelings of vengeance: “there was no vengeance and no blood spilling in the streets; the drive of our revolution was against the ruling regime and its symbols, and we did not aggress any element who was a regime supporter after the revolution’s triumph.”⁵⁸ In most revolutions, especially in Africa, victory is often followed by vengeance exacted on the regime and its main figures, which did not take place in Tunisia. Mia al-Jareebi explains that with “the tolerance and the will to begin a new era, and the dominance of the language of dialogue and debate over that of bullets and disdain, which the Tunisian people experienced in the era preceding the revolution.”⁵⁹ This reflects a form of political direction, where political leaderships intervene to assure the dominance of the peaceful tendencies and notions of forgiveness over the activism of the protesters.

Patriotic Sense: Founding security committees for the protection of neighborhoods and property

The regime in Tunisia attempted to create a state of chaos in the revolting cities and neighborhoods by withdrawing police protection from these areas and unleashing a number of thugs – thieves, petty criminals, and convicts – to sow corruption and terrorize the populace. The purpose was to switch the priorities of the people so that personal safety and the safeguarding of public and private properties become the overriding concern, distracting the people from their revolution. However, the Tunisian youth used the newfound freedom with a high degree of responsibility, and the years of repression and frustration did not succeed in producing a violent anti-social reaction;⁶⁰ in fact, the reaction was targeted at the regime’s symbols rather than public properties. From this, we can deduce that an equivalency was made between public and private property, for each belongs to the people and to the revolution, which emanates from the people.

The regime labored to label the protestors with criminality and terrorism, sabotaging public interest. This was apparent in the first and second speeches of the deposed president during the revolution. However, the youth and people of Tunisia have proven their moral superiority and their heightened patriotic sense. These is attributed to the field commanders of the revolution forming security committees in all regions to safeguard security and protect private and public property from saboteurs.⁶¹ Here, two classes of leadership emerge: a higher leadership for political direction, and a field leadership to preserve the property of the people. In other terms, it was an instance of the people leading the citizenry by themselves, which is the essence of “the spirit of democracy”.

⁵⁸ From the interview with al-Asad al-Bouazizi.

⁵⁹ Mia al-Jareebi, personal interview with the author, February 2, 2011 in Tunis.

⁶⁰ Munsif Bin Jafar, personal interview with the author, February 10, 2011 in Tunis.

⁶¹ Ayman al-Fakhrawi, personal interview with the author, February 10, 2011 in Susa City.

This represents further proof that the revolution has a profound popular dimension, contrary what dictatorial regimes often claim regarding the presence of “foreign hands” aiming to conspire against “the achievements of the people”. Through this analysis of the demarche of the revolution, we reach two main conclusions: the broader meaning of the social solidarity, the emergence of the field leadership, and the autonomous leadership is that the people are worthy of its sovereignty, and that the revolution was the moment of birth of this sovereignty.

Conclusion

The Tunisian revolution is living proof that people cannot be caged and repressed indefinitely; a moment of “will” is destined to occur at the end. Arab peoples have known numerous instances of protests and political strikes, some of which were labeled as uprisings. In years past, strikes relating to social demands were successive in the Arab Homeland, and these phenomena spread over varying periods from the East of the Arab world to its West, from its North to its South. A lack of necessities and unemployment were the most common elements in these uprisings, and the term “bread uprising” or “bread riot” became commonly used by political writers and authors. In the countries of the Arab Maghreb, this term was recycled with a Maghrebine inflection and two notorious terms were born: the “khebzist” (Bread-ists) and the “heitist” (“wall-ists”: a reference to the unemployed youth who gather in the streets leaning against walls). The democratic potential in these bread uprisings, and economic protests against the transgression of the economic compact between the rulers and the ruled, belies the notion that these protests were mere “rebellions by hungry bellies,” or spontaneous apolitical bouts of anger. These actions recast the political consciousness of the protestors and embody their struggle for social justice and civic rights.

When discussing such “revolutions from below,” we often analyze the interest groups behind these movements; the “khebzist” abandons his state of nonchalance and rebels when his daily bread is endangered, and the “heitist” – literally, the man leaning against the wall – is the unemployed, frustrated, and desperate young man.

The first group was excluded repeatedly by the ruling regimes by guaranteeing its short-time survival within the socio-economic system; however, the “heitists” represented the poorer social groups that are most restless, and who – in the end – carry the revolutionary potential due to their endemic frustration and discontent and their inability to build a meaningful, dignified future. The clash of these groups with the authorities reaches a critical juncture when the conditions keeping them in a state of dependence collapses, what I term “the democracy of bread”. Therefore, these revolts cannot be seen from a short-term perspective and judged to be motivated by mere economic motives; they are also shouts against frustration, a conscious political expression of

anger and protest against “social injustice, corruption, nepotism, despotism, and the regime’s incompetence.”

With the rising cost of living for the majority of the population, in addition to a backdrop of economic stagnation and the gradual abandonment of government subsidies, the state becomes unable to fulfill its commitments, and the contract with these marginalized groups becomes void, and the repressive apparatus of the state loses – subsequently – its functional legitimacy.

Economic crises prompt the “khebzists” and other forces of rejection to take to the streets intensively; in such popular protests, the people taste the meaning of political participation, deepening this practice and permitting ideas of dissent to spread through the open defiance of political authority. The rebellious street becomes a bond grouping the political opposition, including the marginalized, the unemployed, and the frustrated youth, who are all candidates for spontaneous solidarity, and who view themselves as real or potential victims of the regime, which pushes them to direct their anger at higher echelons: the regime’s symbols.

Tunisia’s revolution, followed by the great revolution of February 25 in Egypt, and soon the Libyan revolution, renew hope in an Arab democracy emanating from within the Arab Homeland, proving without doubt that Arabs alone are capable of change, and not through Western intervention. The bloody experiment of United States-style democratization in Iraq did not harbingery democracy as much as it did blood and destruction.⁶²

During the last quarter of the 20th century, Arab populations lived in a state of popular effervescence that was caused by a number of factors, mainly the rise in the price of bread and other staple goods. Between January 18 and 19, 1977, Egypt knew what became known as “the bread uprising”. Tunisia (1984) and Sudan (1985) also witnessed similar events. In Palestine, on the other hand, the stone uprising against the Zionist occupier was a hallmark of our modern times. Algeria (1988) and Jordan (1989) also witnessed political protests and strikes due to the increase in the price of bread and nutritional goods, and these strikes visited Jordan again in 1996, and Tunisia in 2008, in what became known as the events of the mineral basin.

Arab regimes dealt with these protests from a security angle, judging that the spread of these strikes would slide the country into political chaos, and that repression and despotism were required to prevent the Islamists and the fundamentalists from exploiting these events to reach power.

In this “boogeyman” situation, the regimes were able to garner internal acquiescence and foreign support, allowing Arab regimes to repress these protests one at a time.

⁶² See: Azmi Bishara, *To Be an Arab in our Times*, (1st ed.), (In Arabic), (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2009).

It was clear, from the get-go, that these protests were not merely “a revolution of the empty bellies,” but an expression of a political awareness of the necessity of struggle for social justice and the redistribution of wealth.⁶³ These events were the result of an accumulation that took place over several phases, and reproduced itself in a the form of a massive event, ”the Great Arab Revolution,” aiming at the formulation of a new social compact based on social justice and citizenship rights, which is what the Arab World is witnessing today.

⁶³ Larbi Sadiqi, *Rethinking Arab Democracy*, (1st ed.), (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2010), p.283.