

Tunisia Sparks Arab Revolutions

Ridha Kéfi

Tunisian Journalist

Member of the Editorial Board, *Afkar/Idées*

The fleeing of former President Ben Ali on 14 January 2011 after a month of social unrest affecting every city in the country and with over 200 deaths can be considered a surprising episode because of its rarity in the normal course of State histories, and an important turning point in the history of Tunisia, a country with a population of 10.5 million that has had to endure two successive dictatorships since independence from France, those of Habib Bourguiba (1954-1987) and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011).

This date has a historic scope, not only for “little” Tunisia, but also for the entire Middle East and North African (MENA) region, where, following the triumph of the Tunisians over Ben Ali, peoples revolted, one after another, to oust their despots. Indeed, the winds of revolt blew over Egypt, where former President Hosni Mubarak was forced to leave the highest office after thirty-one years of unshared power, but also over Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Jordan, Syria, Algeria and even Morocco. At the time these lines were written, the governments in power in these countries were also facing more or less virulent protest movements and were resorting to violence to contain their raging populations. We are therefore witnessing a sort of *remake* that recalls what happened in Tunisia – give or take a few details and according to the specificities of each country –, namely, pacific protests led essentially by young people, beyond all partisan frameworks, with demands that can be summed up in three words: dignity, liberty and democracy. This is what lends the Tunisian revolt its importance and exemplarity. It was the Tunisian revolt that invented the

strategy, the method, and came up with the means. The other peoples of the region who have followed the movement have but applied this *modus operandi*, with more or less success depending on the case.

We must emphasize here that what just happened in Tunisia in early 2011 is not a simple “palace revolution”, and much less so a military putsch, as certain French media would have us believe, under the influence of their country’s intelligence services. The latter, who were visibly surprised by the fiery popular revolt that set Tunisia ablaze, did not wish to admit that what was happening was simply a revolution, that is, an explosion of generalized fury in which all walks of society participated, following in the wake of youth, triggered by profound indignation and an irrepressible will for change, and that in four weeks got rid of a despot whom everyone believed impossible to overthrow, and swept away a regime among the most well-established in the Southern Mediterranean. How did this revolution manage to break out? What conditions made it possible? Who are the real actors? And what are their chances for success? In other words: will they attain the goal they have set themselves, i.e. to build the first real democracy in the Southern Mediterranean area?

The Spark Set Off by Sidi Bouzid

Historians will remember 17 December 2010 as the date of the onset of the first Arab revolution of the 21st century. On that day, in Sidi Bouzid, a city in the Centre-West of Tunisia, street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, slapped in the face by a police officer, and a woman at that – an extreme humiliation in that highly traditionalist region – attempted to lodge a complaint with the governor of the region

(the prefect), but was prevented from entering the government buildings. Enraged, the young man, who was the sole breadwinner for his family, all members of which (parents, brothers and sisters) were unemployed, doused himself in flammable liquid and immolated himself. Transported to the emergency ward of a hospital in Sfax, then to Tunis, he died suffering terribly.

In the context of a dictatorship where corruption and repression had become increasingly unbearable, what could have remained a minor incident became, as of 18 December, the detonator of a protest movement that gradually spread from Sidi Bouzid to all the cities in Tunisia. Relayed, with photos and videos as support, by social networks and foreign media in the face of the deafening silence of the local media, the movement grew and was gradually joined by people from all sectors of society. The youth having been joined in the meantime by trade unionists, professional associations (lawyers, journalists, etc.) and militants of radical opposition parties – those who had become satellites of the Ben Ali Regime maintained a silence reflecting complicity –, the protest movement ended in apotheosis on 14 January 2011, in a massive protest in front of the building of the Ministry of the Interior, symbol of Ben Ali's repressive system, located on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, Tunis. And it was due to the determination of the Tunisians, who demanded his departure in a single voice, shouting "Get out!", that General Ben Ali finally decided to flee in the evening, seeking refuge in Saudi Arabia.

This end to one of the most brutal dictatorships in the region is the logical outcome of a long process of political disintegration of a repressive, corrupt regime that succeeded in turning all Tunisians against it. It also announces the beginning of a long process of democratic transition that all Tunisians are calling for but whose contours and tempo they are still struggling to define.

The End of a Regime

How can the political downfall of the Ben Ali regime be explained? The latter, an army officer long directing military intelligence, joined the Ministry of the Interior at the end of the 1970s. Over the course of his chequered career, he was often at the heart of events marking the country's history. Dur-

ing the incidents of 26 January 1978, 20 January 1980 and 4 January 1984, which registered dozens of deaths among the civilian population, the former general was the head of security. His quick ascension in the political hierarchy with the help of the gradual demise of former president Bourguiba's power allowed him to rise in less than a year (between 1986 and 1987) from the post of Secretary of State for Security to that of Interior Minister and then Prime Minister. The only military officer to have formed part of the Bourguiba regime, he eventually deposed the latter and took power, namely on 7 November 1987.

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Ben Ali did not take long to establish his dictatorial regime. As of 1991-1992, after the dismantling of the Islamist *Ennahdha* movement, whose members were sentenced to long prison sentences or forced into exile in Europe, he did not tarry to impose total control over political life. Opposition parties had to choose between playing the role of useful puppets in a façade of pluralism or that of pariahs muzzled by a strong police machine. The media, national organisations (employers' associations, labour unions, farmers, women, etc.), associations of professionals (magistrates, journalists, lawyers, etc.) and the ensemble of civil society ended up under the iron control of an increasingly centralised regime, where all decisions were made by the Head of State and his immediate entourage, consisting of members of his family, in particular his wife, and certain close collaborators.

It is this personalised and centralised regime that gradually moved towards a form of "thug rule" not stopping at any abuse: persecuting opponents, torture, unfair and fabricated trials, abuse of social goods, nepotism and corruption.

Although Ben Ali succeeded in ensuring a certain stability in his country at the price of gaining control by force of all political decision-making and public

action levers, although he succeeded in keeping the economic machine in a more or less proper operative state, with an average annual growth of 5% during his two decades in power, although he succeeded, moreover, in gaining a following, both nationally and internationally, for the idea that a dictator who brings prosperity, even if it is relative prosperity, is better than a democracy bringing instability and uncertainty, the deposed dictator nonetheless committed a number of fatal errors that turned his presumed power into an immense weakness in the eyes of his fellow citizens. These errors were:

- The carte blanche given to his family members, who took control of significant sectors of the country's economy, often by illegal means;
- His total indifference towards demands for liberty and democracy expressed by the country's elite, the most well-educated in the Arab world, as well as by young people;
- The neglect of inland regions of the country (Northwest, Centre-West, Southwest and South). These traditionally rebellious regions bordering on Algeria and Libya did not receive their share of investments, infrastructures and attention from the State. Having developed a certain mistrust of the central government over the course of the years, it was these regions, where unemployment had reached double the national average (30% as compared to 14%), that finally sparked the revolt. The world recession of 2008, whose effects began to be strongly felt in Tunisia, a country whose economy is based on industrial exports and tourism, did the rest.

Ben Ali, Europe's "Favourite Dictator"

How was a regime of such characteristics able to enjoy the active support of the majority of European countries, to the point where, while the revolt grew in Tunisia, they long hesitated to distance themselves or express the least criticism towards a partner who had real bullets shot against peaceful demonstrators? The reactions in Paris, Rome, Berlin, Brussels, Madrid and London, to cite only Tunisia's main economic partners, were late, timid and without conviction, which created the sensation among Tunisians of having been left to their fate. And it will most certainly be a long time before they

forget their grievances against the European Union and Western countries, who, at the first popular, pacific outburst in the Southern Mediterranean region demanding dignity, freedom and democracy, immediately turned their backs on these principles, which they demand so garishly when Iran, China or Cuba are concerned.

Why didn't European countries foresee these demands? Why did they underestimate them? In fact, seen from Western capital cities, Tunisia under Ben Ali had all the guarantees of the ideal partner:

- It was the first Southern Mediterranean country to have signed an Association Agreement with the European Union (in 1995), by virtue of which it dismantled all tariff barriers with Europe for industrial products and established a free trade area with Europe, effective as of 1 January 2008;
- It effectively collaborated in the anti-terrorist struggle, in particular after the 11 September 2001 attacks;
- It also took an active part in the struggle against illegal migration;
- It played the role of moderator in the Southern Mediterranean area and was an active agent in the Middle East peace process;
- It thus offered an image of stability in a regional environment where areas of tension are not lacking.

For all of these reasons, and not only, this Tunisia was considered a model European countries would have liked to duplicate throughout the region. That the population of this country was crushed under the weight of a dictatorship of the most atrocious and corrupt nature evidently mattered little for European strategic calculations.

On another level, the deposed dictator, who had his hands on entire sectors of the national economy, which he administered (nearly) as if they were his private property, set up a vast system of propaganda. Organised around the Tunisian External Communication Agency (TECA), this system bribed politicians, artists, writers and journalists, often handsomely rewarded, who lobbied for the regime in the main European media.

Thus, every time human rights organisations, relaying the appeals of Tunisian civil society, denounced Ben Ali's human rights violations, the network of friends of Tunisia, above all in France, went into

action to defend the dictator: an open, moderate, pro-Western man, enemy of Islamists, etc. Thanks to this propaganda machine, Ben Ali had actually succeeded in lending weight in Europe to the idea that he was the sole rampart against the rise of Islamism in Tunisia and that if he fell, the Islamists would take power.

Many Europeans, sincerely or out of self-interest, were willing to take this lie at face value, which consequently lent the Ben Ali regime, above all in Europe, a sort of halo of integrity that not even the corruption scandals bespattering the members of his clan or their human rights violations could dent.

Ben Ali, a rampart against Islamism? This myth, which Europeans and Americans considered obvious, did not long stand the test of the Tunisian revolution. From the first demonstrations by youth, everyone was able to see that the slogans being brandished had nothing to do with Islamism. The demonstrators were simply demanding greater freedom, respect and participation, but also more dignity, justice and equality. These were no “food riots”, as certain European media stated at first, perhaps considering that in the Southern Mediterranean, there could be no demands other than for food. It was a revolution of (and for) dignity.

The Revolution at a Crossroads

Another characteristic of this revolution: the movement that led up to it escaped all partisan control. It was spontaneous and massive, without recognised leadership, rejecting all political control whatever its origin. And even if some parties, organisations and civil movements eventually joined it, the movement has remained independent and refractory to any attempts at appropriation. This may be its strength, but it is also its weakness. For a revolution can help build a modern democracy; but in the absence of a credible and unifying leadership, it can also lead to disorder and anarchy. And this is the main challenge of the Tunisian revolution, which is now at a crossroads.

The day after Ben Ali fled, 15 January, the political system was strongly shaken by the scorched earth plan established by the deposed president before he fled, which resulted in the release of all common law prisoners, acts of pillage and arson in numerous enterprises, serious breaches of public

security and a series of assassinations whose circumstances have not yet been cleared up.

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The very evening of 14 January 2011, however, the establishment of a transition government allowed constitutional continuity to be preserved. This government is in charge of handling general affairs, relaunching the economic machine and organising the elections for a constituent assembly. This assembly, which should be elected on 24 July 2011, will be in charge of restoring popular legitimacy and drawing up a new constitution.

In the meantime, commissions that should ensure the conditions for a smooth democratic transition have been established. The High Commission for the Realisation of the Goals of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition is working on the reform of the electoral code and the conditions for organising pluralist, transparent and credible elections, the first in the country's history.

The National Fact-Finding Commission on Cases of Embezzlement and Corruption is investigating affairs involving members of the former clan in power. Its mission is to prepare substantial case files against members of the Ben Ali clan in order to assist the judiciary to restore the rule of law, and above all, to repatriate the clan's assets held in foreign banks.

The National Fact-Finding Commission on Cases of Abuse during the Last Period is in charge of investigating the assassinations committed in the weeks before and after the fall of the regime by snipers deployed in the country and whose identities and affiliations are the object of speculation. Who are these killers? To which security force did they belong? And from whom did they receive the orders to fire on peaceful protesters? A heavy silence surrounds these questions, while the families of the victims and public opinion lose patience.

A fourth commission, called the National Commission for Media and Communication Reform, is in charge of establishing a new media system over the ruins of the system inherited from the former regime and to ensure the establishment of conditions for balanced, transparent coverage of the forthcoming elections. The majority of current media (television channels, radio stations, newspapers, etc.) having all been involved, to differing degrees, in Ben Ali's despotic system, the Commission, like the other commissions mentioned, is having a great deal of difficulty carrying out its mission.

The future of the Tunisian revolution is contingent on this government's capacity to withstand the criticism erupting everywhere, continue dealing with urgent matters and establish, regardless, the conditions for successful elections

The generalised atmosphere of suspicion, heightened by the demands to judge former collaborators of the ousted regime, the settling of accounts among members of the public administration and

social movements in public and private enterprise represent definite threats to the process of democratic transition.

The transition government has made numerous decisions designed to break with the past, namely, arresting and trying numerous members of the Ben Ali clan and its close collaborators, the removal from their posts of some forty former senior security officers, the dismantling of the political police service, the dissolution of the former party in power, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), etc. Unfortunately, this government is having great difficulty in reaching unanimity due to the slow pace at which it is dealing with urgent matters. Also, protesters continue to demonstrate in the streets to demand its dissolution, suspecting it of attempting to gain time in order to "clean out the Augean stables" and thus eliminate traces of past embezzlement by certain figures of the Administration.

The future of the Tunisian revolution is contingent on this government's capacity to withstand the criticism erupting everywhere, continue dealing with urgent matters, rendered even more complicated by the collateral effects of the war in Libya, and establish, regardless, the conditions for successful elections on 24 July 2011, which the Tunisians, just as their European partners and the international community as a whole, hope will put the first Arab democracy on the right track.