

# Youth, Political Activism and Resilience in Tunisia

**Mohamed Kerrou**

Professor of Political Science  
Faculty of Law and Political Science  
University of Tunis El-Manar

It is customary to invoke resilience as a capacity for resistance and readjustment in Mediterranean countries in crisis (Greece, Lebanon, Tunisia...), allowing them to avoid the global collapse that has affected countries such as Libya and Syria, which have sunk into bloody, devastating civil wars.

Resilience refers to the ability of the state and society to regain their original capacities and to meet the challenges threatening them. The social and political system thus becomes capable of sustaining itself and readapting to new, emerging situations that would otherwise induce major dysfunctions.

Resilience unfolds in relation to the challenges posed by threats, which, in the case of Tunisia in transition, are of three types: the security threat linked to terrorism, the political threat caused by endemic corruption, and the socio-economic threat resulting from the rise in unemployment, illegal emigration and social protest movements, which bring production to a halt.

These social movements are a matter of political activism and are driven by a youth yearning for work, dignity and freedom, the three watchwords and demands that shaped the 2011 revolution.

However, the plural category of youth is so affected by social decline that it is driven towards mobilizations outside political institutions (parties and associations).

This raises the question of what is going on with the new forms of protest, which are divided between demonstrations in solidarity with political commitments on the one hand, and popular riots resulting

from the dialectic of resentment and repression on the other.

## The Rise of Social Protest Movements

At first glance, the space for social movements seems to be expanding lately, with the rise of protests in several cities, especially in suburban areas and public squares of the capital, Tunis.

On closer examination, we realize that we are dealing with weak structuring and institutionalization of this space.

For instance, the nightly events that took place in the suburbs in mid-January 2021 were more like a riot. Lasting five nights in all, they were underpinned by violence and arrests, before being replaced by daytime demonstrations of a political nature, limited to the capital, around the main artery, Bourguiba Avenue, where the Ministry of the Interior is located, and Bardo Square, where the Assembly of People's Representatives (ARP) is situated.

It is true that the Tunisian revolution took shape in an environment of rioting that had formed in the wake of Mohamed Bouazizi's immolation. It was distinguished, however, by the desire to break away from this, as conveyed by the central slogan "the people want the fall of the system" (i.e. *nidham*), as well as by the driving role of the trade union centre, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), which decreed a general strike at the time, followed on a nationwide scale.

Yet nothing of the sort emerged from the wave of protests that developed in relation to the tenth anniversary of the revolution, which the government refused to celebrate by decreeing a four-day "targeted confinement," for reasons that were more political than health-related. This provocative decision

led young people to leave peripheral neighbourhoods and attempt to join the protest movement on 26 January, on the occasion of the ARP's debate and vote of confidence in the ministerial reshuffle proposed by the government. But their attempt to join the demonstration failed due to the organizational limits of the protest movement and the official decision to barricade public squares and prevent demonstrators from reaching them.

In order to understand the configuration of current protest, is important to jointly examine the driving factors, namely: the context of global crisis, the staging of the revolution, the failure of national dialogue and the struggles for position within the ruling bloc

In terms of the balance of power, the same is true of the demonstration on 30 January. Despite the virtual mobilization, they only managed to gather a hundred or so young demonstrators demanding the release of more than a thousand detainees and denouncing the repressive system in place. The fact remains that the latter demonstration was distinguished from the others by the performance of its actors, who set their actions in a "carnival of appearances," defying the police through an aesthetic and political simulation that had more to do with alter-globalization dramaturgy than with classic political theatre. In this manner, they signalled the appearance of the "wrong generation," with a strong message aimed at the political class in the form of a slogan: "the wrong generation against generalized corruption."

In order to understand the configuration of current protest, which remains limited but quite varied, with the possibility of evolving depending on the reaction of the authorities and the capacity for mobilization, it is important to jointly examine the main, driving factors, namely: the context of global crisis, the staging of the revolution, the failure of national dialogue and the struggles for position within the ruling bloc.

## Global Crisis and the Staging of the Revolution

For the past ten years, Tunisia has been struggling with a global crisis aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic. The political instability generated by a semi-parliamentary, semi-presidential system based on a proportional voting model has led to a fragmentation of the party landscape and a crisis of governance. The choice of a hybrid and impotent political system has proven costly in economic and financial terms. The result has been a slowdown in growth, exponential over-indebtedness, a decline in investment and a rise in unemployment and precariousness.

In addition to this political, economic and social crisis, which has further accentuated social and regional inequalities, there is a crisis of mistrust in politicians and a crisis of moral and ethical values.

It is therefore not only the standard of living and the state of infrastructure and public healthcare that have deteriorated to the point where the country looks as if it had been through a war, but also social and interpersonal relations have been tested.

The profound logic at work in this period of uncertain transition is that of the fragmentation of the political, the social and the subjective, as if anomie or the absence of rules had become the only shared language.

The transformation of the conjugal family and the extension of individualization, with all that it implies in terms of isolation and psychological distress, are experienced in a dramatic way by young people lacking an affective community, authority and material, educational, professional and cultural resources.

The result is a generalized "*mala vita*" and a youth left to its own devices almost everywhere, but particularly in working-class neighbourhoods and hinterland towns, where there is a lack of everything and where the informal sector orchestrates the world of survival for citizens seeking to be acknowledged.

The riot, which constitutes a spontaneous expression of collective emotion, relates to two different types of violence: that of the rulers who are incapable of articulating a coherent discourse, and that of the governed who attack the symbols of political and financial power.

However legitimate it may be in terms of the demands of its actors, who are denouncing injustice and arbitrary

trariness, the riot is nonetheless an infra-political language, seeking words to replace the violent acts. Unlike the rioters in peripheral neighbourhoods, who are mostly out-of-school teenagers, the young people involved in the political demonstrations have been socialized into politics at university and through the structures of the minority left-wing and civil society parties that support the protest movement, without reflection or public debate.

The common point between the two “youths in revolution” is the joint rejection of the system and the misery of a world that deprives them of the right to live and enjoy freedom, as shown by the new slogan “the system is corrupted by the power and government” (*“fâsda el mandhouma bel h’akemwelh’kouma”*), and their condemnation of the heavy prison sentences imposed on smokers of cannabis and other drugs. The glaring contradiction between the libertarian aspirations of youth and the conservative demands of a power devolved to the Ennahdha Islamists, allied with the populists of Heart of Tunisia (Qalb Tounes) and the Dignity Coalition (Itilaf al-Karama) in a context of global crisis, is resolved – in appearance only – by staging “the revolution of dignity.”

It is as if the present dramatization of a past revolution could compensate for the shortcomings of a corrupt administration at all levels and an opposition undermined by internal struggles and incapable of building a unified democratic front.

### The common point between the two “youths in revolution” is the joint rejection of the system and the misery of a world that deprives them of the right to live and enjoy freedom

Somewhere, the revolutionary celebration, mediated by social networks via Internet and using the forms of expression of football ultras, makes a spectacle of the counter-power tasked with transmitting to the community and ideologized intellectuals the waking dream of emancipation from oppression through the imagination.

The revolutionary catharsis that took place during the “Tunisian wedding season,” i.e. the month of Janu-

ary – cold because of the seasonal temperature and hot because of the physical proximity of demonstrators, masked and unmasked alike – at was at once a ritual of confrontation, negation of the established order and affirmation of the Self and the “Us” in the face of social and political exclusion.

In this respect, the revolutionary ritual was akin to violence as a dual process of disintegration and integration of a youth struggling with the subjective and collective identity malaise of the “in-between”: between childhood and adulthood, between utopia and “*Realpolitik*.”

### “Wrong Generation” vs. “Corrupted Generation”

Essentially, the “Wrong Generation” is in line with the digitalization and globalization of the world, and with the demands of minorities oppressed and stifled by social and moral control.

The “Wrong Generation” opposes what it considers to be the “Corrupted Generation,” linked to the old regime and the “system of dictatorship,” without distinguishing between the two periods – Bourguibian and Benalian – which are seen as a unified whole, although they are different “power blocs,” with a mixed and differentiated alternation of modernizing reforms and repression of freedoms.

The conflict is about ideological and symbolic issues, of which the appropriation of space is a fundamental component. Thus, the older generations, born in the twentieth century, are attached to the nomenclature of the streets inherited from independence, whereas the new generations tend to mark out the space according to new identities. This seems to be the case of the central artery, Avenue Bourguiba, which some young revolutionaries would like to rename Avenue of the Revolution, with the approval of Islamist and Arab nationalists.

The different generations do not have the same relationship with public symbols such as the statues of historical figures. While the equestrian statue of Bourguiba seems to be out of the crowds’ reach, that of Ibn Khaldun, following its renovation and inauguration by the Islamist mayor, was tagged by demonstrators on 6 March. The demonstration had been organized by left-wing groups demanding the release of young detainees, including the queer activ-

ist Rania Amdouni, who was sentenced to six months in prison for “insulting an officer of the law.” It is true that following criticism of this “vandalism” against a famous person, the youth returned to remove the anti-police/system tags and refurbish the memorial.

The Wrong Generation is a new phenomenon emerging in early 2021, at odds with the conservative political oligarchy. It is neither a political party nor a civil society organization, but a movement of “anti-fascist, left-wing” sensitivity, denouncing “the return of the police state.”

### The Wrong Generation is politicized according to a new model that does not follow traditional political standards while being radical in its criticism of the state’s repressive apparatus

During the demonstration on 26 January 2021, a couple of protesters defied the riot police by kissing one another on the lips. Similar acts (giving the police the finger, throwing paint at them, using obscene words and gestures...) by young people in colourful outfits and dyed hair occurred during what some called a “historic day of protest” on Bardo Avenue and Square, to protest against the ministerial reshuffle and the policy of the ruling blocs. It was a pioneering event: the junction of the public and the private in a framework marked by rejection of laws and codes that are anachronistic with respect to the evolution of Tunisian youth.

On the one hand are young people who have graduated and are open to the world despite the precariousness of their material and psychological conditions. On the other hand, such citizens aspiring to freedom are confronted with outdated legislation and closed attitudes emanating from a moralizing police and judicial power imposing severe sanctions on light drug users, surveillance of couples in public spaces and moral censorship inspired by the Islamic “hisbah.”

Hence the divide between generations and, beyond that, between the governed and the governors in a situation of crisis and conflict at the head of the

state (between the President of the Republic and the Head of Government supported by the Islamic-liberal coalition), and between the state and society, auguring a rise in tensions without any dialogue or credible initiatives for conflict resolution.

In practice, the Wrong Generation is an informal structure made up of free individuals and composite groups of various tendencies: LGBT, libertarians, anarchists, left-wing activists... and young people without any political or ideological affiliation.

Opposed to the Corrupted Generation – a term referring to elders in general, and to the groups in power in particular –, the Wrong Generation is politicized according to a new model that does not follow traditional political standards while being radical in its criticism of the state’s repressive apparatus. In short, the Wrong Generation aspires to live on its own terms, breaking with the norms imposed by the “fathers” of family and politics, by empowering itself on a physical and psychological level. Hence the calls for the legalization of cannabis, sexual freedoms as an integral part of individual freedoms, and full individual dignity.

### National Dialogue, Power Struggles and Political Violence

The failure of the national dialogue is at the origin of the rise in tensions, the struggles within the power bloc and the violence that seems to be increasing despite isolated attempts to calm the situation.

Proposed by the trade union centre, which has a tradition of conciliation between the opposing poles of power and counter-power, the dialogue proved impossible to conduct because of the President of the Republic, Kais Saied’s refusal to negotiate with politicians who are reputed to be corrupt and extremist. This ethical stance also reflects a rejection of the Islamists’ plan to recover the dialogue in order to maintain their positions of power, in the wake of the successive experiences of the first (2011-2014) and second Troika (2019-?), not to mention the “historic compromise” sealed with the Nida Tounes party and its founder, the late President Caïd Essebsi (2014-2019).

Ennahdha’s strategy is oriented towards recovery through concessions and the pursuit of the “Tamkin” policy, or infiltration of state bodies. Such a strategy,

which succeeded with the head of government Youssef Chahed and continues with the current president of government Hichem Mechichi, consists of creating a conflict between the two presidencies – Carthage and the Kasbah – in order to strengthen parliamentary power to the detriment of presidential power.

### The future of the revolution and transition depends on the economic, social and cultural integration of young men and women who have thus far been excluded from political decision-making

The aim of this action and retraction is to weaken the executive in order to establish the hegemony of the Islamists and their domination as guarantors of protection against the risk of exclusion from the political arena and return to prison, as experienced during the Ben Ali era.

Chosen and appointed by the President of the Republic, the current head of government was quickly won over by the Islamists in power and their allies, who ensured the Assembly's approval of his government and then that of the January 2021 reshuffle, notwithstanding the reservations expressed by the head of state vis-à-vis the ministers suspected of corruption by the I Watch organization.

As a result, there is an arm-wrestling match between Carthage and the Kasbah via Le Bardo, whose

speaker, Rached Ghannouchi, denounces the possible return of presidentialism in a period of democratic transition.

Tunisian public opinion is increasingly stunned by the fights and insults that take place in the Assembly, where symbolic violence has become a daily practice decried by the nationalist, democratic and populist opposition.

Short of a coup d'état, which some people are publicly advocating, or of a reform emerging from within the system, the deterioration of the political situation could lead to a generalization of violence and a failure of the experiment in transition from authoritarianism to democracy. In the face of this catastrophic scenario, democratic hope persists thanks to the resilience of civil society, which draws its strength from a long historical tradition of conflict and dialogue.

While it is true that the myth of the "Tunisian exception" has been definitively buried by political instability and violence in the public arena, the future of the revolution and transition depends on the economic, social and cultural integration of young men and women who have thus far been excluded from political decision-making.

Such exclusion is the product of a partisan and clientelist notion of power conceived as "booty" (*ghanima*) at the disposal of election winners, bargaining operations that the Court of Auditors has pointed out as being illegal and non-transparent.

This raises the question of what has happened to the project of building democracy, which is now blocked by the actors of the transition, who are inclined to defend their partisan interests by any means, rather than the constitutional principle of "sovereignty of the people."