

THE JASMINE REVOLUTION

The Jasmine revolution was quick and clean. Now Tunisia faces an important transition period and counts on its traditional allies and friends for political, economic, and logistical support. Turkey, as a country with regional ambitions and an important trade partner, needs to learn more about Tunisian dynamics. Tunisians expect more from Turkey. Of course the burden is mostly on the shoulders of Tunisians themselves. Tunisians have no right to fail the transition to democracy and will hopefully remember the martyrs, starting with Bouazizi, as they shape a new future for the country.

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Based on my discussions with Turkish people, I have noticed that most do not know about the differences between the various Arab countries. The majority sees Tunisia just as any other Arab country from the Middle East. However, Tunisia has a different character due to its proximity to the Mediterranean Sea. Tunisia is at the door of Western Europe and it has inherited the cultural richness of dozens of civilizations that have inhabited its lands in history- Berbers, Phoenicians, Romans, Jews, Arabs, Andalucians, Ottomans, Maltese, Italians, French... Jews, Christians, and Muslims... adding up to 4000 years of Tolerance. The first known republic, the Republic of Carthage, was founded on Tunisia's land.

In addition, in the Arab world, Tunisia was the first country to:

- abolish slavery in 1848;
- have a constitution in 1861;
- abolish polygamy in 1956;
- legalize abortion in 1973;
- and tell a Dictator “Degage” or “Hit the Road” in 2011.

Tunisia, since it obtained independence on 20 March 1956, has experienced two periods of dictatorship. The first period (under Habib Bourguiba – the founding father of the independent and modern Tunisia) lasted between 1956-1987. Habib Bourguiba was Tunisia's Kemal Atatürk. He built the state and economy from scratch, separated religion from the state, and developed the economy with far reaching reforms. Habib Bourguiba never had a private plane, yacht or castles in St. Tropez. He left power in 1987 as a result of seven medical professors signing a document declaring him incapable of running the country. On 7 November 1987, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali took power following this (bloodless) Palace *coup d'état*. He gave hope to the people for a new era of democracy. After the crisis of 1987, Tunisian economy was a success story in the Mediterranean basin.

From 1990 onwards the country's average rate of annual growth fluctuated between 3.5 to seven percent. The former French President Jacques Chirac, on an official state visit said that development of Tunisia was more important than freedom of speech.¹ Tunisian intellectuals interpreted this comment to mean “Eat and Shut up”. The same idea was elaborated on by Nicolas Sarkozy during his visit in 2008. Sarkozy was made an honorary citizen in Tunis in 2008 and praised the Ben Ali government for expanding liberties in Tunisia.² He declared that the

¹ Pia Christina Wood, “French Foreign Policy and Tunisia: Do Human Rights Matter?”, *Middle East Policy Council*, Vol. 9 No .2, 17 December 2002, <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/french-foreign-policy-and-tunisia-do-human-rights-matter>

² “Sarkozy flayed for claiming rights ‘progress’ in Tunisia”, *World News*, 30 April 2008, [article.wn.com/view/2008/04/29/Sarkozy_flayed_for_claming_rights_progress_in_Tunisia/](http://www.wn.com/view/2008/04/29/Sarkozy_flayed_for_claming_rights_progress_in_Tunisia/)

assessment of Tunisia as a one-man dictatorship seemed to him quite exaggerated. Moreover, the IMF chief, Dominique Strauss-Kahn praised Ben Ali's Tunisia as a model for other emerging countries during a visit to Tunis in 2008.³

Bourguiba had left a country free of corruption, whereas in the 23 years of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's rule, his family and his wife Leila Tarbelsi's family stole at least two percent of the Tunisian growth. The World Bank estimated that Tunisia's growth rate could be two or three percent points higher (at India's level of growth) if corruption and nepotism were removed.⁴

The regime of Ben Ali came to an end as a result of a social movement that no one was expecting. In fact, Tunisia's closest ally, France, was also caught by surprise, leading the French government to replace its ambassador at the end of January 2011. The uprising was mainly organized to put an end to nepotism, not to implement an alternative political program or project. The people of Tunisia were already complaining about the distribution of wealth and growth, and also about freedom of speech and democracy deficits.

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In fact, the catalyst of the uprising was an act by a man named Mohamed Bouazizi, in the provincial town of Sidi Bouzid. He burned himself after being humiliated by a female municipal official on 17 December 2010. His chariot on which he sold vegetables and fruits without license had been confiscated and he had no other source of income for his family. In response to Bouazizi's dramatic act, the people starting spontaneously protesting on the streets. The regime's response to this movement was two weeks of police repressions.

The quick spread of the movement in all the cities of the republic was possible due to social media (mainly Facebook) and the internet in general. 20 percent of ten million Tunisians have a Facebook account. In the social media, people were sharing stories about the ruling family, for example about their wealth, and lifestyle.

³ IMF Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn's Statement at the Conclusion of his Visit to Tunisia, Press Release No. 8/291, IMF Website, 18 November 2008, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2008/pr08291.htm>

⁴ "Tunisian economy to be purged legally, exiled economist says", The Daily Star, 18 January 2011, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=3&article_id=123767#axzz1CzhA7Jp

And within days the ideas that defined the movement transformed from simple demands such as “dignity, work and freedom” to “Ben Ali Out!” The uprising did not, however, have a political figure to rally around as an alternative.

The chants by the people protesting included verses from the poem titled “The Will of Life,” by Abou El Kassim Chebbi:

If, one day, a people desires to live, then fate will answer their call.
And their night will then begin to fade, and their chains break and fall.
For he who is not embraced by a passion for life will dissipate into thin
air, At least that is what all creation has told me, and what its hidden
spirits declare...⁵

“when the people want a better life, destiny has to bow... if, one day, a people desires to live, then fate will answer their call.”

On 13 January 2011, Ben Ali declared in a speech, that everything would change, he would form an anti-corruption committee and retire at the end of his mandate in 2014.⁶ At the end of his speech, the international community witnessed a performance on the internet that can best be described as an ambivalent mood among Tunisians: some accepted to give him time, and others did not. This debate ended with an unanimous call for people to go out on the streets. The next day, on 14

January, 30,000 people were on Bourguiba Square in the capital Tunis shouting for hours “Degage...Degage!”. The same happened in all major cities. This was the first time in the Arab world a dictator is clearly asked to “Go Away” and was told that the “GAME IS OVER”.

During these events, the Tunisian army demonstrated an example of discipline and ‘republican behavior’, acting within the bounds on constitutional rights. The army refused to use force against the demonstrators and even put tanks between demonstrators and police in order to protect people from the police forces. On 14 January, it was the army that informed the President that he had to leave. The people knew about the chief of staff by name (General Ammar), but he had kept out of politics. The only time he spoke was on 25 January when he assured the

⁵ “Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi: The Poet of the Tunisia and Egyptian Revolution”, The Moving Silent, 29 January 2011 <http://themovingsilent.wordpress.com/2011/01/29/abu-al-qasim-al-shabi-the-poet-of-the-tunisia-and-egyptian-revolution/>

⁶ “Tunisia President Ben Ali ‘will not seek new term’”, BBC World, 13 January 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12187084>

demonstrators –as he stood in front of the Prime Ministry in Al Kasbah square– that the army would be the Guarantor of the Revolution.

Ben Ali left his office at 5.00 PM on 14 January without resigning. On the same day Mohammed Ghannouchi, the Prime Minister, was proclaimed the president. On 15 January, Fouad M'Bazaa became the interim president for 60 days – which has now been extended to six months.⁷

The story related by the pilot (Captain Sheikhrhou) is that Ben Ali was supposed to take his wife and close family to the airport to leave for the Tunisian island of Djerba. At the last moment, General Serati (the head of the Presidential Guard) asked him to leave with his family, and come back the next morning. The Trabelsi family was refused access to the plane. General Serati planned to arrest the family of Trabelsi and be seen as a hero. On 14 January, at 17:40 the plane took off. Ben Ali asked the pilot to divert to Djeddah. Once the plane was in the air, the army declared the airport a military zone and closed the Tunisian airspace. The army bypassed Serati and arrested 33 members of the Trabelsi family at the airport. The presidential plane came back on 15 January at 6 am without the President.

During this time, there was lack of clarity about which constitutional clause to use. On 14 January, for example, Clause 56 was used – which calls for the prime minister to become the acting president in the case of temporary incapacity of the president to govern, until the return of the president or the end of the mandate (whichever comes first). Then on 15 January, Clause 57 was declared by the constitutional court: which states that in the case of death or permanent leave of the president, the president of the parliament takes the presidency and organizes elections within 60 days. (Which, as stated above, has been agreed by all parties to be six months).

On 15 January, Tunis lost all its peace and security. Police officers left their positions creating a security vacuum. Looters started breaking into the houses of members of the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families. In the afternoon the army deployed and asked the neighborhood committees to organize their security. Looters and militia were arrested by the “barehanded” population and handed in to the army. Many of them were the special presidential guard members.

On 16 January, after securing the whole city, the army decided to take over the operation room of the presidential guard, inside the Palace of Carthage. The Guard

⁷ “Rioting, looting hits Tunisia as new interim president is sworn in; new leader promises unity”, NY Daily News, 15 January 2011, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/2011/01/15/2011-01-15-rioting_looting_hits_tunisia_as_new_interim_president_is_sworn_in_new_leader_pro.html

resisted for a few hours to negotiate a way out of the country. A safe passage was not given and General Ali Seriati, the presidential security chief, was arrested for plotting against the government.

During the last battle between the Army and the presidential guards in Carthage, young people, again on the Internet, were preparing the next step of the revolution: they were inviting people to protect their revolution by not panicking, returning to normalcy, and to work on Monday morning. On the other hand, Ben Ali loyalists wanted to create anarchy and chaos.

On 18 January, normal daily traffic resumed on the streets of Tunis. Some demonstrators asked for more (e.g. resignation of all the Ben Ali party members), however, there were also beautiful scenes of young people cleaning the streets and helping municipal employees. This action was started in the city of Bizerte by young rappers, singing the National Anthem and cleaning the streets. Videos of the act were placed on the Internet, and their action was matched in almost all the cities.

On 18 January, I was impressed and proud of my country and the level of education of its people and its army. "It is not to impress you, but I AM TUNISIAN," I posted on my Facebook profile.

Today, a transition government consisting of technocrats is in place. The ministers are mainly human rights activists, ex-communist party members,⁸ members of the social democratic party, some intellectual figures, and a young blogger. The main task of the government is to prepare for the parliamentary and presidential elections.

Today, in Tunisia, it is business as usual, or in fact, much better than usual. All political parties are preparing for the elections. With the exception of a moderate Islamist segment of the Enahda (Renaissance) Party –which received 17 percent of the vote in 1987 and arguably represents less than 10 percent of the constituents now– all the other parties are secular. Rachid Ghannouchi (President of Enahda), after his arrival from London, where he spent 20 years in exile, has declared that he will not stand for presidency.

Seven to ten candidates are likely to run as presidential candidates and two of these potential candidates are women: Maya Jribi, Secretary General of the PDP-Democrat Progressiste, and Sihem Bensedrine, a human rights activist who is well-known for her constant opposition to the ex-regime.

⁸ The communist party was Tunisia's first political party but it never ruled the country.

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Turkey, is a country with regional ambitions and is also an important trade partner for Tunisia. The Turkish company TAV recently opened the biggest airport in Tunisia and the first official tourism sector delegation to visit Tunisia after the Jasmine revolution was a Turkish group, headed by Basaran Ulusoy, the chairperson of TURSAB (Association of Turkish Travel Agencies), on 4-6 February 2011. To parallel the prospective boom of business relations, the understanding of Tunisian social and political dynamics should also develop among Turkish media, opinion makers, and the larger policy community. Increased interaction with Turkish counterparts will aid Tunisia's transformation and help substantiate Turkish claims to regional influence.

Of course the burden is mostly on the shoulders of Tunisians themselves. Tunisians have no right to fail the transition to democracy and will hopefully remember the martyrs, starting with Bouazizi, as they shape a new future for the country.

Let me conclude by saying that to the list of Tunisia's "firsts", it is highly possible that we will soon add: the first Arab and Muslim country to have a Woman President of the Republic in June 2011.

To repeat a verse of Tunisia's National Anthem "when the people want a better life, destiny has to bow" and "If, one day, a people desires to live, then fate will answer their call."