
HARLEM SHAKE, TUNISIA STYLE

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A battle of colours and bodies is being waged in Tunisia; Harlem Shake is its latest manifestation.



An event, which went viral on social media and attracted traditional media as well, was thought, initially at least, to have brought some lightness to Tunisia after weeks of sombre mood in the aftermath of the assassination of the Leftist leader Chokri Belaid and the distress it caused.

It all started in a high school located in Menzah, a wealthy suburb of Tunis on the 23rd of February. A group of students, including the son of a prominent Nahdha representative in the Constituent Assembly, set up and filmed a Harlem Shake dance in which they derided Salafis, Qataris, and Saudis. The ministry of Education responded by suspending the school director. Student reacted by pirating the ministry's website and organizing a mega Harlem Shake in front of the ministry's offices on Friday the first of March. Leading to this,

the phenomenon spread to high schools and university campuses around the country. The state did not react but Salafis made stopping the fad their cause. In an attempt to quell this youth reaction, violence erupted in Mannouba campus, at a high school in Le Kef, and on the streets of Mahdia, to mention just different examples.

The verbal play, the costume and the dance itself, tells the story. Harlem shakers claim to represent life with, by setting their dancing and colourful costumes against a culture they see as preaching death and darkness, a reference to black niqabs and gowns worn by salafis, and their trademark black banner. Salafis, in turn, accuse the youth of being immoral and slavish imitators of "trashy" western culture. This division along colour lines is not new

in Tunisia. The carnivalesque character of demonstrations has been more and more visible among seculars and progressives, which resulted most noticeably in celebration of the red and white Tunisian flag, carrying and offering roses, face painting, colourful hats and so on. Recently, street dancing and public performances have been used to mark a celebration of the arts.

Colour and the body have been increasingly used as sites of resistance, protest and expression in public. This has not been exclusive to the self-described progressives and modernists. The expression of faith and religious allegiance has seen an explosion after decades of repression. In addition to hijab, niqab and long shirts and skull caps; black banners, public prayers and speeches have been seen on beaches, avenues and parks. Two particularly memorable moments of this assertiveness are the changing of the national flag by the black banner in the Mannouba campus and the erection of the banner on top of the clock in Tunis Bouguiba Avenue. The result has been a public space inhabited by two different ways of expressing the self, each with its own set of markers and movements. Post revolutionary Tunisia is not only about speeches, strikes and debates. It has been about colours and bodies as well. And no more has this been visible than in the female body, which ended up the most prominent site of a conflict opposing two sets of views on how to dress it, deal with it, talk about it, police it. Examples are too numerous to mention, but the upcoming commemoration of Women's Day on March 8 is already shaping up to be a major flashpoint of this conflict.

At the verbal level, ingenious word play, which has been thriving on social media, came up with label and a slogan for this face off: Harlem Shake against Halal Shlake. While the reference to Haram and Halal is easily spotted, the term Shlake needs explanation. Shlake (or

shlayak, s. shlaka) is the term used for a type of shoe, sandals or flip flops, but also has the connotation of good-for-nothing or useless, ignorant, rustic. The word is also in the last official name of the Foreign Minister (Bou Shlaka), who has been derided for it. For the significance of shoes in this context, we will all remember the scenes when George W Bush had a shoe thrown at him at a press conference in Iraq, and the copycat shoe-throwing acts which followed around the world. Harlem Shake is interpreted as a form of shoe thrown at salafis, and is taken by them as an insult. It derides the rising tendency to label as haram activities related to "celebration of life" and the female body in particular, such as dance, "revealing" dress, partying.

We are witnessing the extreme politicization of a global entertainment phenomenon. In Tunisia, whose revolution was heavily driven by youth and social media, youth are out again to protest the religious turn of their revolution using this same media and extending it to the streets and public squares. The violent reaction, mainly by Salafis, is fuelling the trend and turning it into a national wave, with flashpoints popping up across the country.

Such a division over bodies stands in dialectical relationship to the division of the body politic in the country. It is a result of a polarized polity and the visible expression of it at the same time. Tunisian Harlem Shake inhabits the intersection between youth, the internet, desire, and politics. Anything which takes place in this intersection is likely to be irrepressible. Violence and blind denial can only fuel this mix further. The Shake may fade away, as fads tend to do, but another one will soon come along. We have learnt by now that the mill of politics in post revolutionary Tunisia spares none and nothing, turning the most benign events into fodder for political contestation and even violence. ❄