
A REVOLUTION FOR DIGNITY AND FREEDOM THAT CAN NOT BE COLOUR-CODED

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AP Photo/Christophe Ena

I know that the fashion over the last few years has been color-coded revolts and movements (orange in Ukraine, green in Iran, yellow for kifaya (Enough) movement in Egypt, etc.). The Tunisian revolution cannot be color-coded, in more senses than one. A minor reason may be people's disgust with the former ruler's favorite color, purple, which adorned its buildings and pictures of Ben Ali himself. The country is also known in the Arab world as "Green Tunisia". But no green was in sight during the revolution, and all the purple is gone. Instead,

and while you could see the occasional red Che Guevara poster, t-shirt or hat, the only dominant color has been the country's flag, red and white. In fact, on any given demonstration, you have the impression the national football team is playing a crucial game. Flags are thrown cover cars, waved, worn, saluted. But most importantly, the Tunisian revolution has caught those who incubated revolts in CIA labs and elsewhere, napping. They had no color or flower prepared for the occasion. This was a homegrown movement whose intensity and

speed surprised everyone. Jasmine is of course a national obsession in Tunisia. Songs linking Tunisia and Jasmine, by the legendary Hedi Jouini, for instance, are part of the collective memory:

*The smell of my country
Is roses and jasmine
It pleases the eye.*

But the creative youth of the Tunisian revolution immediately changed the song to express the moment:

*The smell of my country
Is gas and gun-powder.
It burns the eye.*

Jasmine, sun and beaches are lovely images, which managed to enter the marketing machine of mass tourism and mark the country. But the only thing blooming in Tunisia now, says Ezzedine Rebhi, a retired French teacher from Kasserine, to the French paper *Le Journal de Dimanche*, is Tunisian youth.

The term Jasmine Revolution, reassuring and soft as it is, caters to exotic imaginary, and lab-incubated revolts. It may be good for business and foreign-directed uprisings, but it does not capture what this revolt means or the way it came about. This is a rejection of business as usual, of big and dirty business of EU and US-supported dictatorships. For when Tunisian rose up, everyone was napping: analysts, Middle East policy academics, Western government, traditional media and even the Western public, comforted by the smell of Jasmine coming from this Mediterranean resort. As figures and accounts of Ben Ali and his allies emerge, the stink of corruption mixed with the stench of death are released. Kasserine, in central Tunisia, bears witness to both and debunks the soft gloss on a revolution that is perhaps best described by Tunisian francophone poet Abdelwahab Meddeb as “Beautiful because it is just and just because it is beautiful”. During the past month,

beauty was everywhere: flowers on friendly army tanks, candle vigils on the steps of the national theater, phrases of freedom sketched spelled out by university students using their bodies, songs of protest, acts of solidarity, women ululating in demonstration, very poetic, rhyming slogans. Yet it is no Jasmine Revolution. Kasserine encapsulates why not.

When I arrived in the town on the morning of January 23, exactly one month after leaving the place, it felt like landing in a liberated city: no policeman was in sight, images of Ben Ali and his purple-colored posters and party building have vanished, acts of solidarity were visible and so was a look of subdued pride. Family and friends have been describing the changes to me on skype and by phone, but reality was different. The city smelled of death, and across it, death was on exhibition: in the graffiti; the enlarged photos of 17 of the 50 residents killed in cold blood – more than half of those killed in the entire revolution; in the daily procession of these photographs; in the local Youth Club “recaptured” from the former ruling party, RCD, and renamed Martyrs Club, as the beautiful banner clearly shows; and in the cemetery located on the Southern outskirts of the city (across, in fact, from a memorial to the fallen of Kasserine pass of 1943). Kasserine is a city of global memories and local death. But, it was equally clear, a victorious city. For in Kasserine, I sensed immense pride and exuberance even, of a victorious youth. And nothing encapsulates this regained dignity more than the slogan sprayed in black paint across white walls in the city centre: Raise your head up, you are in Kasserine. This was a defiant reversal of “Smile, you are in Tunisia”, so much propagated around the world by tourism posters, often, as matter of fact, featuring a boy in traditional Tunisian dress, offering a bouquet of jasmine.

To call this “Jasmine Revolution” falls within the same attempts, coming from those caught napping, to reign in people’s will to break out

of all chains, including foreign control and images designed for public consumption or exotic comfort. There is something to fear about this revolution: it said NO to Western official duplicity about democracy in the Arab world; it gave an authentic voice to people's dignity; it ushered in the age of citizenship in Tunisia and across the Arab world, after decades of dehumanizing oppression and neglect. Should it succeed, it will be the beginning of the end of consent and servile acquiescence. In the words of their poet, Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, an oracle proclaimed in the early 1930s, the Tunisian people have chosen life and freedom and fate has responded:

*If people choose life one day,
Fate will surely respond.
Night will dissipate
And chains will be broken.*

Tunisia is waking up to a “new morning”, to quote its poet again. Something magic is blooming in Tunisia, irrigated by blood and suffering, but also by human dignity and yearning for freedom. No one denies that this has been the most surprising of revolutions in recent memories. For this reason, everyone feels the need to catch up. The knives are out already, and color-coding is a symptom of that. Tunisians call it the revolution of dignity and freedom. And thus it shall be named. ❀

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