
THE TUNISIAN REVOLUTION THREE YEARS ON

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The revolution in Tunisia was in many important ways a revolution in language. This is to be expected since dictatorships traditionally usurp language or falsify its meaning. They also exercise control on what to say and how to say it.

The revolution in Tunisia brought about what might be called a decentring of language and a democratization of register. These phenomena affected cultural production as well daily speech. Examples include: the proliferation of dialect; code switching down rather than up the social register; spontaneous and unrestricted multilingualism in the media; coining new terms and an abundance of jokes. The stilted

and pompous language of dictatorship was re-appropriated, inverted and recast for revolutionary and emancipated times.

In a nod of recognition to this creative and influential phenomenon, I will use salient terms, phrases and slogans that gained currency in Tunisia since January 2011, to take stock analytically and critically, of landmarks and key developments in the country over the past three years.

GET OUT OF HERE

An obvious place to start is the internationally recognized word, *Dégage*, meaning *leave*

or *get out of here*. The term did not enter revolutionary lingo until 14 January but soon became emblematic, not only of Tunisia but also of the other Arab revolutions; from Egypt to Yemen. Together with the slogan “The people want to bring down the system”, they ushered in a wave whose ripples have not subsided. After its spectacular success on Bourguiba Avenue, *dégagisme* became the order of the day, and has been replicated many times since, including in small communities, factories and offices where officials were forced out.

With time, the word lost some of its lustre as chaos and disorder became intolerable. Today, there is less *dégagisme* and more realism, although longevity in office remains short, particularly in terms of political appointments, as we will see below. It became more difficult to oust “legitimate” officials without resistance.

Legitimacy (*shar’iyya*) has been used in four variations since 2011: revolutionary, electoral, popular and consensual. These are often seen in hierarchical and competing orders. At the beginning, revolutionary legitimacy (*shar’iyya thawriyyah*) allowed a number of measures which would have been illegal or inconceivable in another context. It licensed the creation of new institutions and committees to run the affairs of state and organise a transition. In October 2011, electoral legitimacy (*shar’iyya intikhabiyya*) became the supreme and unique way of running the country, giving the winning Islamist party, Ennahda and its allies, relatively free reign. This was soon challenged when a year had passed without the Constituent Assembly finishing the drafting of the constitution. A window was opened for contestation and a return of legitimacy to the “street” and the people (*shar’iyya sha’biyyah*) and demonstrations were organised in this direction, including massive ones in August 2013.

As crisis threatened the country, the key civil society organisations (UGTT, mainly),

led the way to establishing a consensual legitimacy (*shar’iyya tawafuqiyyah*) by which political parties agreed a new power-sharing arrangement and a road map. The outcome of this has sped up the constitutional process and most recently, designated an “independent” Prime Minister to replace the elected one.

This clash of legitimacies was played out in different ways in Egypt, which in turn helped shape the outcome in Tunisia where the threat of either a military coup or widespread violence by the extreme right may well have focused minds. Now, what has happened to the old order in all of this ?

REVEALING REMNANTS

Azlam (stooges) and *fulool* (remnants) of the former regime have had a very revealing journey. The initial revolutionary drive led to banning the former ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), arresting key figures and barring many from running in the 2011 elections. But soon this experienced cadre of the old state turned from Trojan Horse in disputed elections to potential allies. Some of them formed their own parties, others joined the newly established Nidaa Tunis, while others were courted and hired by the ruling Ennahda.

Three years on, former regime loyalists have almost a dozen small parties of their own, while several ministers have been set free. They are *azlam* no more. Why was this the case? The answer is in the interface between the conceptions and practices of transitional justice (*‘adala intiqaliyya*) and the Law to Safeguard the Revolution (*qanun tahsin al-thawrah*). Tunisia became unique in assigning an entire ministry for transitional justice and human rights, run by the Islamist lawyer, Samir Dilou. His party and some of its allies did however decide to propose a parallel legislation designed to ban those who served under Ben Ali, and even under Bourguiba, from elected office.

This was seen by many as revenge justice ('adala intiqaamiyyah) or selective justice ('adala intiqa'iyya). The departing PM, Beji Qaid Sebsi, saw in this a move tailored against him and he managed to weaken its appeal until it was finally abandoned on 15 December 2013 when the long-awaited Transitional Justice Law was passed. Other actions, which come under transitional justice, such as reparation, have been under way, again selectively and in complex ways, largely to appease Ennahda's former prisoners and those who benefited from the General Amnesty Law of 2011. The latter seems to have been so rushed that it was accused of contributing directly to the rise in terrorist activity in the country.

Indeed several people who were arrested or are currently on the wanted list for acts of violence, including the killing of the leftist leader Chokri Belaid on 6 February and NCA member, Mohamed Brahmi on 25 July 2013, were released from jail in an amnesty despite the fact they were held under the terrorism laws. These two dramatic killings marked a turning point in Tunisian political violence and would cause two governments to fall, or more precisely, to change. PM Djebali left his position to be taken up by his Minister of the Interior, Ali Laarydh, while the latter was driven to leave his place in turn to an "independent" PM, selected on 14 December 2013.

Neither murder case has been solved yet. Terrorism, isolating and mainly targeting leftists and security forces, has created a climate of fear which has become the main reason for a popular demand to overhaul the entire management of the transitional phase.

Tunisia has in fact seen five governments in three years. But it has had only two presidents. The first was put in place by applying an article of the old constitution to prevent a vacancy in the president's office in January 2011; the other was giving the office through a deal with the majority party, although he won a mere 7000 votes for his seat in the NCA.

The radical change from an all-powerful president in the person of General Ben Ali and the charismatic and iconic Habib Bourguiba before him was bound to create a perception of loss of the "aura" of the presidential office. But no one had bargained for a figure like Mohamed Moncef Marzouki. Seen as impulsive, wry and light, if not frivolous, he became the butt of jokes and soon was named *tartur* (clown), which was as much a comment on his demeanour as it was on his status as President with very few prerogatives after the bulk of power was moved to the PM in the parliamentary system now in place.

Marzouki features regularly in comedy shows, and is a hit on the ubiquitous and powerful Facebook, particularly in the skits *Sayis khook* (a take on facebook) and the night shows broadcast by a liberated and somewhat unregulated media. The President of the Assembly, Ennahda's president and Qaid Sebsi have been subjected to similar treatment. But while all three are approaching their seventies, and have acquired some power, the question remains: what has happened to *shabab al-thawra* (the youth of the revolution) and *Istihqaqat al-thawra* (the benefits of the revolution) since 2011?

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE YOUTH?

Paradoxical as it may seem, Tunisia has seen the median age of its top politicians increase dramatically over the last three years. Exemplary of this was the appointment of Beji Qaid Sebsi, aged 84, as PM of the second interim government and Ennahda's favourite would-be head of the fifth government, Ahmed Mestiri, aged 92.

This can be explained by the return in force of Bourguiba's lieutenants who were marginalised by Ben Ali, and the relative trust put in the men of the Bourguiba era. This trust soon developed into nostalgia as the secular and civil character of the state came under threat from rising Islamists of many varieties. Likewise,

political parties have been largely led by what might be called “historical” leaders, which tend to be over 50, and in the case of Ennahda largely over 60.

The youth found themselves marginal to the political process, not to mention victim to a rise in unemployment. As time went on, some of them found themselves in protest lines again, while others were attracted by Salafi movements, including violent jihadism; as police records and media coverage have shown. It is ironic of course that the famous January 2011 statement by an elderly man in celebration of the revolution, “we grew old awaiting this historic moment” (harimna...) may now be an apt description of how many young people must be feeling as they await to benefit from a revolution they began.

With the return of the old guard and the marginalisation of the youth, women stepped in. Tunisians often proclaim: “*Nisa biladi nisa’un wa nisf* (the women of my country are women and a half)”. The celebrated line is taken from a poem by the iconic Sghaier Awlad Ahmed in praise of women who have traditionally been prominent in Tunisia’s public life over the last 50 years but who have also taken an active part in the resistance to Ben Ali. Inscribed on t-shirts, sung by many groups and used in proverbial ways, the line points to a number of instances and outcomes of the revolution with regard to women. As a result of parity in electoral lists in the October 2011 elections, a good number of women gained seats in the NCA, including the position of Deputy President of the Assembly, which went to a member of Ennahda.

But it is in civil society and in the media that women have had most visibility and impact. In addition to women’s associations, several major organisations are now headed by a woman, including the Journalists Association; the Magistrates Association; the Union of Industry

and Commerce (business owners) and National Television.

Perceived threats to gains made by women in Tunisia (ban on polygamy; right to divorce; right to custody; equality before the law, etc) in addition to the well-entrenched social practices of mixed space in schools and the work place, have galvanised women like never before and propelled their voices into the public sphere. The revolution has also brought about – or brought to the public – a new type of woman activist, the veiled Islamist woman, a phenomenon to contend with.

Three years into the revolution, Tunisia has changed in important ways. The direction of this change is still not clear. But important gains would be hard to deny. Chief among these are: freedom of the press and association; demystification of political power and of politicians; loss of the personality cult, which used to litter Tunisia with photos and posters exhibiting leaders. Another main gain has been the consolidation of civil society and the unprecedented building of a block of unlikely bedfellows, namely the labour union (UGTT) and the employers’ association, in a body which has been managing national dialogue and mediating between conflicting political parties.

Other changes include an incursion of political violence into public life; a complex social picture; an atomised political scene and an insertion of “Islamic” identity politics. Three years on, Bouazizi’s story has been rewritten a number of times but, as a new photo of his grave shows, he has receded back to his former neglect, just like his hometown, Sidi Bouzid. The economy has deteriorated but the economic model remains unchanged, as evident from the fact that the choice of the new PM was between a successful businessman and fancier of international clout, both running international companies.

On the wider perspective, Tunisia has moved

from a romantic story to a testing ground for transnational political Islam, the global strength of the market economy and the potential for progressive politics and a new way of being in our world. At this stage, not one of these sides can claim victory: however, no side has been defeated either. ❄

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