

Tunisia: Form Bourguiba's Era To The Jasmine Revolution & Fall of Ben Ali

ABDER-RAHMANE DERRADJI

Reading Universitesi

ABSTRACT

Current political violence in 2011 and what became termed as the Spring Revolution in Tunisia are the result of an accumulation of politico-social and economic injustices created by the hegemony and control of one single centralised rule in the hand of one single man surrounded by party-cadre and political profiteer elitists. Since the national independence in 1956, Habib Bourguiba ruled Tunisia with no proper competitor and then was elected to rule for life until his overthrow by Ben Ali, his trusted security commander in a white palace coup. With the latter in power, the ruling Democratic Constitutional Party (RCD) created a new pattern of dictatorship for the president and his family entourage to rule with an iron fist. With the suffocation of the traditionally active civil society, Ben Ali created a record number of associations to play the figure head of a civil society to support him and used them against both Islamic as well as leftist activists. This article is an attempt to historically investigate the rule of Bourguiba, and Ben Ali's rule and profile events, which led to the Spring Popular Revolt until the total collapse of his regime.

Key Words: Tunisian politics, political violence and suppression in the era of Habib Burgiba and Ben Ali, civil society, roots in Tunisia of the Arab Spring

Tunus: Burgiba Döneminden Yasemin Devrimi ve Bin Ali'nin Düşüşüne

ÖZ

Tunus'ta 2011'de başlayan ve Bahar Devrimi olarak isimlendirilen siyasal şiddet, sosyo-politik ve ekonomik adaletsizliklerin oluşturduğu bir birikimin sonucudur. Bu birikim ise, tek adam yönetimi ile onun etrafındaki parti kadroları ve siyasi menfaat elitlerinin elindeki tek merkezli yönetimin kontrol ve hegemonyasının bir sonucudur. Habib Burgiba, Tunus'u 1956'da kazandığı ulusal bağımsızlıktan sonra hiçbir ciddi rakibi olmadan yönetmiş ve çok güvendiği güvenlik komutanı Bin Ali tarafından bir beyaz saraya darbesi ile devrilmesine kadar yaşam boyu yönetici olarak seçilmiştir. Bin Ali iktidara geldikten sonra iktidardaki RCD partisi, başkan ve aile efradının ülkeyi demir yumrukla yönetebilmesi için yeni bir diktatörlük sistemi yaratmıştır. Bin Ali, geleneksel aktif sivil toplumu baskı altına almış, onun yerine kendisini desteklemesi ve İslamcı veya solcu gruplara karşı kullanabilmesi için kendisinin öncülüğünde birçok dernek kurdurmuştur. Bu makalenin amacı, Bahar Devrimi Ayaklanmalarının temeli olan Burgiba ve Bin Ali yöntemlerini ve başlıca olayları tarihsel açıdan incelemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tunus siyaseti, Habib Burgiba ve Bin Ali döneminde siyasal şiddet ve baskı, sivil toplum, Arap Baharı'nın Tunus'taki kökleri

Like any of its Maghreb neighbours, Tunisia was historically faced with turbulent, colonial and post-colonial events that marked the country with similar but also distinctive features. Although it did not produce a popular colonial uprising similar to Morocco or Algeria, Tunisia is known for its trade unionism's militancy and political struggle during Bourguiba at war but also for its advanced - although suffocated - civil society in post-independence era. Historically, the Tunisian nationalists first led the Destour and neo-Destour party to challenge colonial France. From its old founding fathers, like Abdel Aziz Al Thalibi in the twenties, to the neo-Destour generation led by Habib Bourguiba in the thirties to finally achieve national independence from France politically, the movement witnessed various fluctuations and setbacks.²¹ But differently, from the rest of the Maghreb, Tunisia did not produce similar violent course of nationalist guerrillas like Morocco, Libya, or Algeria. Also the process and pattern of decolonisation in Tunisia was slightly different and that was due to the Tunisian National Movement that was first led by the Tunisian intellectuals of the first generation of Al Thaalibi, then came the second more revolutionary or rather more politically conscious like Habib Bourguiba, who in fact did not hesitate to take over leadership after the independence and total control of Tunisia itself.

TUNISIA UNDER HABIB BOURGUIBA

It is important to remember that political violence, or rather rivalry, had first started at the political level between leading parties over national leadership.²² Nonetheless, it was also the long struggle in post-independent Tunisia of the Tunisian Trade Worker-Unions in collaboration with the popular masses, which incited and soon provoked public protest against the regime of Habib Bourguiba. Post-independent Tunisia was perhaps seen as the most important period of political violence in its modern history. But as had been said earlier, the regime of Bourguiba was not only oppressive, but also, a repressive one as far as civil liberties and individual rights were concerned. As it went along, the nature of his regime soon provoked the Tunisian masses to protest at various levels, notably economic as well as political.²³

It was very ironic for instance to see that Bourguiba, who was himself one of the first Tunisian nationalists who fought for principles of freedom and civil liberties and who incited the masses to rise against colonial France, was himself found suddenly suffocating the same ideals in post independent Tunisia under his rule. With the worsening of human right issues and denial of both political as well as economic rights, protest became one of the daily events in the country.²⁴ And since that day onwards, the repressive and oppressive nature of Bourguiba's regime became a case in point.

By provoking a state of political as well as economic violence into the country, the regime's attitude had in a way provoked further protest and opposition to take shape and, in some instances, to go underground. The *Tunisian Civil Society* - that was both rooted and historically unique in the Arab World became then amongst the opponents to stand against Bourguiba's (PSD), or the Socialist Destourian Party, and its repressive institutions. Kamel Labidi (March 2006) added on this issue that "By the end of the 1960s there was extreme repression of student groups in response to the prevailing mood of opposition on campus, unusual in Arab Universities then. The students groups certainly contested the hegemony of Bourguiba's party but they were not opposed to his plan to modernise society. The clampdown coincided with the regime's introduction of free market policies. Several victims of repression went on to found the Tunisian Human Rights League (Tunisian Human Rights League) and the Tunisian branch of Amnesty International, the first organisations of their kind in the Arab World." The chain of repression and summary arrests did not, as events developed, stop at the opposition, but it also even touched those who were surrounding Bourguiba himself. This did not however prevent the civil society to grow and gradually develop.²⁵

At that time, furthermore, secular opposition, which ranged from moderate to left wing, was frequently under attack. For example, in January 1978, the UGTT, Tunisian Trade Union Offices were attacked and had their members even killed. Other incidents incited by a Libya-based group of Tunisian rebels²⁶ was also reported on the southern mining town of Gafsa during the month of January 1980. (Labidi 2006) further remarked that "Despite the harassment of independent (Errai) or Islamist (Al Marifa, meaning Knowledge) newspapers, more new publications, including *Le Phare*, *Démocratie*, *L'Avenir*, the Islamist *Al Mojtamaa* (society) and the Progressive Islamist 15-21, completely changed the media landscape." But it was in the eighties, when real political discontent became apparent. With the tailor-made and orchestrated elections of November 1981, Bourguiba's party emerged again victorious while eclipsing a number of opposition parties like the Tunisian Communist party (PCT), the Democratic Socialist Movement (MDS) and the future popular unity Party. Nonetheless, the situation further worsened especially with the breaking of bread riots (economic violence) and which were blamed on Libya in December 1983 when Bourguiba's army itself severely suppressed the rioters while arresting trade unionist activists and its old leader, Mr. Habib Achour alongside other Islamist activists. Facing internal pressures at home as well as external ones, mainly coming from Libya and indirectly from Algeria, that was still faithful to its revolutionary principles of socialism, Bourguiba's regime then finally began to show indices of decline.

TUNISIA UNDER BEN ALI'S RULE

Ben Ali, who served at the head of Security Police with a military background as a general, was not very much different in the opposition's eyes than former President, Habib Bourguiba, especially after his tenure of the presidency and leadership. Many of the Tunisian masses, and those in opposition [who formally welcomed his white coup against Bourguiba, including Bourguiba's staunch enemy, the Islamic party], however believed that the new regime (under Ben Ali) would compensate them, or at least, ease the existing tensions of confidence between the top and the summit. Rachid Al Ghanouchi (The Islamic party's leader) himself endorsed the perceived change by a public statement noting that "In God, above all, and then, in the President" (Labidi 2006). But in contrast to the opposition's hope, the repression against his Anahda, Islamic party, was ruthless. Reports informed that up to forty of its members either died under torture or jailed without trials in the 1990s the fact, which encouraged those at large to escape like Al Ghanouchi himself and seek exile abroad.

It may undoubtedly important to remind that with his arrival to power, Mr. Ben Ali gave the impression of restoring civil liberties, and installing genuine democratic republic far from arbitrary arrests and excess of power's abuse. These claimed arguments had as a result quickly boosted his popularity especially at the beginning when he practically ordered a series of pardons from May 1989. (Waltz 1995) But those who criticised him, believed that clemency was not a sign of democracy, but also only applicable to top and elite members of the Tunisian society, especially who opposed Bourguiba like Ben Ali himself. It is further acceptable to believe that the regime of Ben Ali, despite the passed series of social and economic reforms, was in fact trapped into as many observers remarked two major ends. One, to endorse pluralism (and might suffer a set back if the elections would be run fairly, and genuinely) and second, to encourage civil as well as secular societies to take shape. This was soon translated in April 1989 Parliamentary elections, where 76 per cent of the 2.7 million voters took part and expressed themselves. The Democratic Constitutional Party (RCD) won all 141 seats, despite the fact that the Islamic Tendance gained 14 per cent leaving the other opposition parties, like the MDS: Movement of Social Democrats of M. Ahmed Al Mestiri and the Tunisian Communist Party as well as four other groups to gain no more than 3 per cent of the votes.

Probably, one of the most acute mistakes, which the Tunisian opposition had committed, however, was its apparent disunity. While for instance secular parties, like the liberals, and the communists worked separately and most of the time clashed with the Islamists on University campuses (A common incident, which had also frequently occurred in Morocco, Algeria as well as in Libya), the Islamic activists had on the other hand often prepared in contrast to lead their battles lonely, against the government while using both democratic and mass rallies, which often ended into public, but spo-

radic violence. The government under Ben Ali, on the other hand, which was aware of that divide between the secular and the religious opposition, exploited it to keep control and power monopoly until its final collapse. Nonetheless, the Tunisian opposition remained along this line despite all joint efforts to form a national bloc, similar to the Moroccan opposition's style alongside general public protest, which also stayed imprisoned into a web of seculars versus religious, whilst leading their solo battles.²⁷

With the Islamic activists re-gathering, their strength and presence were soon felt at the national scene and this despite the continued repression. Unlike a number of Islamic orthodox militants, who basically do not believe in western, democratic debate and the political game of democracy, the Tunisian Islamic party had, in contrast, tried hard on a number of attempts, to get itself legally established, and wished to take part into the democratic race, but with a little success. This was however due to the denial of its request for recognition by Ben Ali's regime since the eighties onwards. Its rejection was in fact based on the ground that 15 out of 20 of its members in the Poli-bureau had according to the Tunisian government criminal records. As a result of this denial, the party was forced to solely pass to political action, and on its own initiatives campaigned through inciting pamphlets as well as provocative literature leading its members to a wave of arrests, and restriction of its activities at both universities and other institutions.

For example by October, its ideologue since 1987, Ali Aridh, and Enahda spokesperson, Abdel Fateh Moro, were held in custody. (Susan, Waltz, *Tunisia, the African Contemporary Record*, B46-B47).²⁸ In fact, it took a while for the Tunisian, Islamic Party to come to realise that Ben Ali's government did [still does] neither recognise, nor believe in an Islamic Party to join the democratic rally and political participation. Exactly similar to the FIS treatment in neighbouring Algeria and other Islamic parties throughout the Great Maghreb, Ben Ali, like most Arab leaders, still officially, believed (until his ousting during the Tunisian Revolt in 2011) in an adopted, secular-western formula that endorses total separation of politics from religion. A concept, which had long been, debated on and fought for during the collapse of the Catholic Church's power and its defeat against secular forces during the French revolution in 1789.

But despite this denial, the Tunisian Islamic Party, En-Nahda, and its supporters kept their protest campaign in shape - at least peacefully, but occasionally, violently, when it was needed. May be one of its setbacks was however, found in its leaders' race for power within the movement itself. For instance, in November 1988, An-Nahda Renaissance Islamic Tendency signed the National Pact, and in May 1989, Ghanouchi, its leader, confirmed the movement's diversity. Its other leaders, who did not share his strategy, had in fact on the other hand, different views, and since then, the race for total Power and leadership within this movement became a case in point. (Waltz, B46-B47).

In June 1989, the Islamic party further re-appealed to the government for both legalisation and recognition, but when its appeal was rejected again, hard line activists

within the broadened Islamic circle took the protest to the streets. This time, it was about another group and members of a new generation still unrecognised, but with more radical tendencies called, the Islamic Liberation Army, [ILA]. This soon led the campaign against Ben Ali's regime while projecting its new strategic goals. But as it went along, the government retaliated by arresting forty Annahda members as well as, other forty ILA individuals (Waltz, B47).

With the tensions building from both Islamic as well as, other secular protest movements, the regime of Ben Ali, intelligently, passed a reform package. In fact this policy meant to re-assure the Tunisian masses and lease the tension internally. Under his rule, Tunisia, witnessed many changes and various reforms at various levels. Politically, it was acceptable to believe that the Tunisian People had really relaxed from the autocratic rule of Habib Bourguiba and his traditional, regional clan. But this change did not - in the opposition's view - totally release the Tunisians from the web of new, faked democracy of Ben Ali. The belief was that the new system was tailor-made to suit the new Ben Ali's clan and entourage. (Maddy-Weitzman: 2006 *Maghreb Regimes Scenarios*).

His leadership was characterised by a strongly rooted cronyism as well as favouritism too. (Waltz, B67).²⁹ Further, it was in fact in January 1990, when Ben Ali himself truly, tried to contain all opposition groups. A campaign, which his government, primarily, launched by creating a new body called the *Supreme Council of the National Pact* chaired by Mr. Karoui. The plan was on electoral codes, education reforms as well as, on future municipal elections. But unexpectedly, and despite that An-Nahda's (*The Islamic Party*) denied recognition in previous months, it was finally allowed to at least publish a newspaper that would from now on identify its views vis-à-vis those reforms. But soon, the reform plan failed, due to its non-genuine nature in the opposition's views and inefficiency.

So, it was acceptable then to believe why, for example, Ben Ali's reforms were not satisfactory to the opposition. They knew that the projected strategy behind was to contain them, or at least, as had been observed earlier; an attempt to de-popularise and marginalise them, especially, the Islamic activists who were perceived as a real threat and by fear that they could grow bigger like the Algerian Islamic trend in the neighbouring region. By spring of 1990, the Tunisian authorities released a number of Islamic activists but kept only those who were perceived, or suspected to represent a real threat to national security.

All in all, amongst those who were released, were in their majority, secular militants like members of the Communist Workers' Party, members of the illegal Popular Unity party (PUPI), students as well as a number of Islamic moderates. Further, it is important to remember that the years of the nineties were as far as the opposition

was concerned very decisive since Ben Ali's regime had to not only face this time, a religious opposition which was perceived already as a real threat, especially after the year 2000 and beyond, but had to also confront a barrage of newly formed opposition groups in bloc.³⁰

During the year 2000s, and beyond, Tunisia like the rest of the other Arab countries that joined the US alliance also embarked on the new campaign to fight what became termed as the war against *International Terrorism*. This had in a way helped the regime to exploit the aftermath of the September 11th attack's climate and suffocate all opposition groups, in order to control the National Press as well as defy Human Right Organisations at home and abroad. (Africa Confidential, 8).³¹

The wave of repression was seen by the opposition as also intentional and well planned in order to allow the President's ruling Party, the RCD to remain in power but also legally.³² Nonetheless, and despite the nature of Ben Ali's regime, which is seen even in the year 2010 as non or less democratic by western standards, still found support from countries like Britain, France and the US as long as Ben Ali's regime remained tougher and firm against the perceived '*Threat of Islamic Militancy*' especially after the new advent of AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Arab Islamic Maghreb).³³

Whether real or exaggerated, Islamic activists in Tunisia still - until the collapse of Ben Ali - represented an opposition strand, despite their illegality and controversial popularity while defying their opponents. This was relatively, found in the national census which declared that the Islamic bloc still represented twenty per cent popular support. For instance, their Journal Dawn [Al Fajr] sold roughly 40,000 advance subscriptions. Susan Waltz (1995, B470) noticed that "The first issue was delayed in March 1990 because no available press could handle an order of 100,000 copies."

Having been re-elected, Ben Ali's regime found good grounds in strengthening its position especially during the coinciding regional and international events. Amongst these, one could cite the 11th September attack on the US soil, the Gulf wars and their impact, the 2002 bomb attack on the historical, Jewish synagogue on Jerba Island in Tunisia itself, which killed 21 people (Jerba Synagogue attack, Global Jihad, 08/11/2007) as well as the bloody events in neighbouring Algeria. So, the state's security emergency laws, and its quick shift towards the US and its western alliance notably the south European flank [countries in the Mediterranean] gave Tunisia a new stronger hand to crack down on any opposition group in the country. From that day on, any legal or illegal opposition's activity was henceforth seen as a terrorist act and would therefore fall under the banner of Fighting against International Terrorism. Within this environment, Ben Ali had according to the opposition further suffocated the freedom of speech, the civil liberties and abused general human rights. (Narahnet.com, 10: 2004, p.AP).

It is important to add furthermore that regional as well as international events and social networking which concerned Middle Eastern, Arab and Islamic affairs had in fact dramatically changed the views and strategies of Islamic organisations, let alone the general Patterns of political violence in types and forms. In Tunisia, and despite its claims of totally eradicating Islamic activists from the national scene, or at least, reducing its threat, there was still the presence of *Groupe Tendance activists*, (despite their banning) and which confirmed their re-emergence and growing strength before, during and after the Tunisian Spring revolt in 2011. Under those said events, it became naturally logical to believe that both radicalisation and commitment to the Islamic cause, alongside the secular, but stronger, civil society would in fact remain important push factors in contributing to the destabilisation of Ben Ali's regime.

The direct consequences and result of a partial American diplomacy still favouring Israel at the expense of the Palestinian cause, the war against Afghanistan, the Israeli aggression against Lebanon and Gaza, the advent of Al Qaeda with its international franchised links, the Gulf wars and the destruction of Iraq, the various terror attacks on Spain, the UK's as well as, the US's, and last not least, the bombing of Lebanon as well as, controversies over western conspiracy in fully or partially, siding with Zionist Israel at the expense of the Palestinian cause had all encouraged Islamic activists in general and inside Tunisia, amongst Tunisians abroad to regain grounds and strength.³⁴ Nonetheless, besides the 'Islamists' who suffered oppression [still do] under Ben Ali, there were also other secular opposition groups subjected to the same treatment. For example despite the praising of Ben Ali by reporters without borders in their annual report 2006 on the government's press freedom measures already announced in 2005, the regime did not hesitate in practice to suffocate both the state and privately owned media while continuing a crackdown on journalists with the assistance of a 130.000 strong police force.³⁵

Government anti-opposition campaigns (whether political, legal or military) were not in fact limited to target Islamic activists only, but were also directed - and this was the general trend - against all opposition movements that did not share the views and ideals of the established regimes in the Arab world, notably the North African region.³⁶ The censorship of the national Press, the prosecution of journalists for libels and those who were or are perceived as violating the code of national morals, human rights activists as well as academics, authors of sensitive or critical articles were all common features of governments' attitude in the said region.³⁷

SIDI BOUZID PEOPLES' REVOLT & ITS IMPACT: SPONTANEITY: BREAD & BUTTER REVOLT OR SOCIAL VIOLENCE?

According to a number of Tunisian, reporting journalists and lawyers on the scene witnessing events at close, like Mr. Djillali (from Tunisian Lawyers' Association interviewed by Al Jazeera Satellite TV Channel), the real protest first began from Sidi Bouzid place as a result of its exclusion and isolation by Ben Ali's regime. It started with total spontaneous incidents of uncontrollable crowds of youngsters demanding for employment and other basic social rights with no political motives. Like in its neighbouring Algeria, the youth were in fact in their majority, jobless, marginalised and more important, with little options to choose. With the impact of the world economic crisis and high prices of consumer goods and other commodities, it became very apparent that the common peoples of North Africa, including Tunisia, would not be able to cope with easily. Likewise, the Maghreban youth, Tunisian in particular found suddenly themselves with degrees and diplomas but with no proper jobs. The amount of corruption, favouritism and cronyism was so intense that it became the daily routine norm in society. Accordingly, the youth had two options, to either migrate abroad namely to Europe using illegal means like their neighbour Algerians via clandestine boats for those who could afford it, or to simply accept the bitter reality and join the impoverished crowds using and exploiting what is minimal and available for survival.

The panoramic scenes of street non-licensed street vendors of goods, fruits and vegetables (like in Algeria), became more than a norm as a source for survival for the depressed unemployed. And this, what had exactly happened to Mohammed Al Bouazizi (The first victim of the uprising). He, like his comrades, displayed his fruits and vegetables' stall pursuing a routine day, but was barred by the local authorities. But once being denied of his rights, and further humiliated by a police woman, his reaction, was to only resort to self-inflicted damage, and in protest he set himself on fire. A reminding picture of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk who first burnt himself in public in protest against oppression and colonialism. (Spencer 2011, 20- The Middle East Correspondent) ³⁸ Then, from Sidi Bouzid, the protest grew political where it affected other cities like Sfax, Gabes, Tala, Kasrine, Bengerdan and Douz, in order to become soon national especially when it became centralised in the capital Tunis. It was against social but more important this time, against oppression and repression of the regime where the population was tightly controlled by massive police force. (Samuel 2011, 21).³⁹

ORGANISATION & POLITICAL DEMANDS: POLITICAL VIOLENCE

The spontaneity of the uprising, driven by first bread and butter demands, soon turned political and became of a daily basis. A number of observers remarked that if the uprising stopped, the regime would surely re-instate itself sharper and harder than before with a draconian set of laws and regulations against the Tunisian peoples. The shift from spontaneity to a well organised protest in both demands and reactions became a real case in point as hundred of slogans red like *Khuz Ou Mah Ben Ali La* or (Water & Bread But Ben Ali No), or *Ben Ali Degage* (Ben Ali Get Out), or even *Ben Ali Ya Jaban Tounes La Tuhan* (Ben Ali Oh Coward!, Tunisia Will not be Humiliated).

Nonetheless, when the government forces (security and army forces) failed to stop, contain or even reduce the tensions of the uprising all over the country, it became apparent that compromise, or rather concessions from the government's side had to be made or at least to deliver concrete promises that might convince the angry crowds to calm them down. According to Mr. Fihri the spokesman of Tunisian Doctors' Association, the biggest massacres were recorded in the city of Kasrine where more than 50 people recorded dead, bearing in mind that the said region was suffering at around 70 per cent of unemployment. (Live interview with Mr Fihri, the General Secretary of the Tunisian Doctors Association in Kasrine, Al Jazeera TV Channel).⁴⁰

Soon it became thinkable to believe that even powerful security and police states like Tunisia under Ben Ali could be brought down and defeated by the peoples' will. A message that was in fact sent and felt throughout the entire Arab world. From the *Ocean to the Gulf*, Arab dictator leaders followed the news with graphic and dramatic scenes on satellite TV channels at close. So under such intense environment, Ben Ali addressed the Tunisian people on a live televised speech calling for calm and promising quick reforms alongside early parliamentary elections into six month time.⁴¹

According to Mr Mazri Haddad's suggestion, [the Tunisian Ambassador to the UNESCO], the President [Ben Ali] had to give a second speech into the Tunisian colloquial language, which all the Tunisians (from all walks of life) would understand since his first one was in a way directed to only the intelligentsia. Further, that due to the false received in formation, which the Ambassador and his associate, Mr. Raouf Annadjar, [as claimed] and the methods used by the security forces against the civilian protestors forced him to resign. Also that the ambassador, as he stressed it in a live interview with Al Jazeera Satellite TV channel was not convinced of the Islamist Plot, which Ben Ali had warned on the phone. Whether true or false, it was also revealed that the ambassador himself [Mr. Mazri] was amongst the first defenders of President Ben Ali's wife [Leila Attarabulsi] after the publication of the scandalous book [*La Regente De Carthage* or *The Ruler of Carthage* by Catherine Gracier], in which the president family and relatives' cor-

ruption were exposed. Further that he himself was one of those who had very well served Ben Ali and was trusted. (Live interview with Mr Mazri Haddad [the Tunisian Ambassador to the UNESCO in France, Al Jazeera Satellite TV Channel, London].

Just two days later, after his speech, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in almost all over Tunisian cities especially Tunis the capital, Ben Garden, Kasrine, Tala, Douz, Sidi Bouzid, Al Hamah, and Al kef with anti-Ben Ali slogans reading again, [*Khubz U Mah U Ben Ali, La, or Bread and Water but Ben Ali No*]. This was later on further backed by other slogans depicting Ben Ali's family and wife [Leila Attarabulsi & relatives]. But through his Minister, Mr. Mohammed Al Agerbi (Minister of Professional Formation & Employment) the President pledged quick reforms and promises and appealed to the Tunisians via a live interview with the London independent based Satellite Channel, Al Mustakila (The Independent) to provide around 300,000 jobs while he warned of foreign hands who provoked the revolt. He also reminded the people of the government's yearly commitment of spending 1700 Dinars just as main products' subsidies. Nonetheless, the other part of the appeal also included a threat of looters, saboteurs as well as trouble-makers whom he warned that the law would soon look into their crimes and punish them.

Generally, amongst the main quick reforms, which the President had promised via his speech and his Minister (through satellite interview), were as follows;

1. Further increase in employment for the years 2011-2012, including for those holding degrees and diplomas.
2. Calling for a national forum or gathering that would include university academics, political parties and other associations by next month (February 2011).
3. Promotion of regional media and subsidy of audio-vision production units for people's use and inform about their daily torments.
4. Appeal to all peoples' deputies and central structures of political parties as well as, administrative officials at both Wilayas and regional levels.
5. Exemption of taxes for a period of 10 years to help the less privileged.

But despite those concessions, the protest intensified in other cities, like R'gab where Mosque worshippers were suddenly attacked by security forces leading to 6 persons dead, a number of arrested as well as others wounded. In other cities like Sfax, Kasrine, Tala, Sidi Bouzid demonstrations continued according to a number of eye witness like, Mr. Alaa, Abdallah Al Basit Husny, Ali Al Badri and Mr. Al Khadraoui who informed Al Jazeera Satellite TV Channel via live interviews.

After dissolving the government and promising early elections into six month period, Ben Ali further promised that he would not stand for the next presidential elections. Then with the uprising getting organised by day, this time under the banner of political parties and various trends of civil society associations, including trade union workers as

well as those of legal profession, it became apparent that the intense situation as it were, would not stop and more dangerous, it went out of government's control. Further that after the Tunisian army took over the strategic sites like airports, ports, and government installations it led assaults on those groups while arresting other family relatives related to Ben Ali who attempted an escape. Amongst those, however, was Mr. Salim Shiboub, Ben Ali's brother in Law who informed the military forces that Ben Ali's special security forces had booby-trapped around 800 cars scattered all over Tunisia especially in the capital Tunis. (Reda Chenouf, Al Khabar Newspaper, 18 /01/2011) ⁴²

On January 14th 2011, thousands of protesters gathered around the Interior Ministry. According to a number of journalists and others of legal profession, the situation was in fact caused by the regime's policy of marginalisation and exclusion of the common peoples, who were in their majority simply poor. Although the revolt acquired some organisation at that stage in a number of recorded cities, it remained for some party leaders, like (Mr Ahmed Najib Ashabbi, leader of the Tunisian Progressive Democratic party), still spontaneous.

SECURITY, CONTROL & VIGILANTISM: PEOPLES' MILITIAS VS BEN ALI'S SECURITY FORCES

Nonetheless, the intensity of the uprising continued despite the government security forces' aggression. It was reported that violent confrontations took place in the capital Tunis between the protesters and the forces. On the 13th of January 2011, 16 demonstrators died in Ras Al Djebel region, and on the 14th around 20,000 protesters took to the streets in Sfax, but without the military forces interfering. It is very important to note here that unlike in other revolts where the army / military forces joined in backing the police and security forces in situation after protests went out of control, in Tunisia in contrast, the situation was rather different. As observed, the military remained flexibly, neutral then appeared more sympathetic especially when it launched its assaults against other security forces around the airport areas and other regions.

According to a number of eye witness journalists on the scenes, like Mr. Osama Ben Salem, Mohammed Hamrouni, and Lotfi Hadji, the demonstrations continued with a non-stop protest reaching even top rich and privileged areas like the prestigious Street of Al Marsa close to the Presidential Palace and surroundings. The security was at that point totally out of control from Bengerdan to Benzerte cities but the masses still continued to defy the dying regime of Ben Ali. It was also reported that the protesters, including looters and other opportunists who joined in were a way of mixed views. The central rail station in Tunis the capital been set to fire, big foreign supermarket chains like Geant and Carrefour vandalised and burnt after being looted were all scenes of the spontaneous

angry crowds' revolt. Nevertheless, it is important to observe that for instance, while the popular masses targeted the state's symbols, public, as well as private properties related to Ben Ali and his family,⁴³ the other looters on the other hand did not spare any revolting civilians or properties in their assaults. The security plain clothed gangs (including snipers) related to Ben Ali were very involved in a number of operations. According to an eye witness who reported directly to Al Jazeera satellite TV Channel, Mr. Djelloul Hadjlani that for instance at Ibun Sina Street, Sidi Bouzid City, looting and kidnapping of girls, rape as well as pillage by masked armed gangs (Ben Ali's special security forces) became alarming and reached its peak. Another one called Mr. Hisham from Nable city also appealed to rescue civilians from those armed gangs and looting.⁴⁴

The leadership vacuum left by the escaped President [despite him living behind a care-taker President, Mr Mohammed Al Ghanoushi, who was also unpopular amongst the Tunisian popular masses] created a real problem into the country. Issues of an interim government and its legitimacy, the security and control of the civilian masses, the public and private properties as well as the entire safety and integrity of the whole country soon became the first tasks to discuss amongst the Tunisian intelligentsia and other popular segments to debate.

Although rumours of him organising his escape even prior to the popular revolt, Tunisians talked about a number of foreigners who maintained his private security during the revolt, besides his special strong force, citing Mossad agents; French, Libyan and even Algerian security services being involved. Ultimately, the final episode of his rule was both swift and unexpected. But as reported by a number of journalists he left with his private jet escorted by four helicopters with Libyan, French as well as Saudi security protection. Once flying over Malta, he was instructed by the French security (who refused him landing on their soil) to refuel in Sardinia, then in some smaller, undesignated French airport, he then flew towards Dubai in the UAE. There where part of his relatives, including his wife who had earlier escaped loaded with 1.5 tonnes of pure gold and other assets, Ben Ali finally reached his final destination in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

CONCLUSION

Whether for good or evil, Tunisia will remain unstable for a while for at least 10 to 15 years for a number of objective factors. First, that centralised provisional government or leadership is not fully accomplished nor totally accepted by the masses, especially when remnants of the previous political as well as military corrupt figures are still occupying pocket positions. Second, being squeezed between a fragment Libya and uncertain regime in Algeria still fighting loose terror groups throughout the borders' belts of North Africa and the Desert Sahel, Tunisia will remain very affected. Third, that with the departure of Ben Ali and the dismantling of the old regime, or at least part of

it, its tourist industry has dramatically been affected. Fourth, with a shaky government that had practically failed to make its rules respected, popular demonstrations, petty crime as well as other social unrests in other town became closer to a norm if not of a daily event. Last not least, with the influx of new escapees and waves of refugee, the country would soon face a problematic to further accommodate those bearing in mind that thousands of even Tunisians are now struggling to secure their daily livelihood especially in small border towns as a result of their own revolution. So within such an environment, neither the EU financial backing and recent packages, nor the government promises would secure its full stability or convince the populace that is right now, still trying to adapt to post-revolution's life style and pattern.

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NOTES

- ¹Modern Middle East Sourcebook Project, Islamfishe "Tradition and Change in the Tunisian Nationalist Movement: Documents from the Destour and Neo-Destour Parties, 1920 and 1936. (http://sitemaker.umich.edu/emes/sourcebook/da/82634/Filesource/1920_destour.Pdf//search=Tunian%20party).
- ² For example that "In the later years of the struggle for independence, the Destour and Neo-Destour became rivals, with the neo-Destour and Bourguiba successfully manoeuvring for complete control of Tunisia one year after its independence from France in 1956." Electronic Middle East Sourcebook, *ibid*. (<http://sitemaker.umich.edu/emes/sourcebook&mode=single&recordID=82634>). See also, Encyclopaedia Britannica online, www.britannica.com/eb/article-9030094.
- ³ It was noted that "Economic malaise and political repression during the late 1970s led to student and labour unrest. A general strike called by the General Union of Tunisian Workers UGTT on 26th of January 1978, in order to protest assaults on union offices and the harassment of labour leaders, brought confrontations with government troops in which at least 50 demonstrators and looters were killed and 200 trade union officials, including UGTT Secretary General Habib Achour, were arrested. Prime Minister Hedi Nouira was succeeded by Mohamed Mzali in April 1980, making the advent of a political liberalisation... An economic slump in 1982-83 brought a renewal of tensions, in January 1984, after five days of rioting in Tunis, the government was forced to rescind the doubling of bread prices that had been ordered as an austerity measure." History: Tunisia, Encyclopaedia of the nations, www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Africa/Tunisia.
- ⁴ Kamel Labidi, Tunisia: Independent, But Not Free, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, English Edition, March 2006, (mondediplo.com). (Kamel Labidi: March: 2006) wrote in this respect, in an entitled article 'Tunisia: Independent But Not Free' that "Bourguiba, writing in newspapers such as *La voix du Tunisien*, took advantage of the relative freedom as described by Talbi to criticise the protectorate, which had been set up in 1981. In 1932 he launched a militant newspaper, *L'Action Tunisienne*. Two years later he founded the neo-Destour Party,

a modern political organisation inspired by socialist and communist parties... Bourguiba exploited his standing as a long term opponent of colonialism, with many years in prison or exile, to strengthen his authority at home and abroad.”

⁵Movements and civil society in Tunisia developed ever since; some took shape in forms of proper movements, whereas others remained either Public then became vulnerable to public prosecution, humiliation and arrests by the authorities. As for the rest went underground, especially after the last phase of the eighties onwards, including Ben Ali’s era. “With the start of economic deregulation and the slackening of PSD control under the government of Heidi Nouira, the UGTT distanced itself slightly from the regime. The launch of a newspaper Echaab (the People) gave it greater freedom of expression; the independent newspaper ER-RAI (Opinion) first appeared in 1977, the year of the LTDH’s foundation.” (Kamel Labidi: March: 2006).

⁶This pro-Libyan group - as it went along – further provoked the various Tunisian media to fully engage later on, as what became termed at the time, as anti-government crusade.

⁷Kamel Labidi (March 2006) expressed it in *Tunisia Independent But Not Free* that “...The President’s advisers took advantage of such blindness to discredit much of the opposition by involving it in rigged elections intended to perpetuate the illusion of Political pluralism. Even the Politicians and union leaders, lawyers, journalists and academics who had once distinguished themselves by courage and lively criticism, fell silent. The most striking example was Omar Mestiri, the founder of the MDS, who retired from political life after the 1989 election. Assisted by trusted army officers and interior Ministry officials, Ben Ali was able to take complete control of the machinery of the state.”

⁸It is worth noting that Mr. Ali Aridh (the Anahda ideologue) was amongst the seven sentenced to death, in a trial by state security court, which is now abolished.

⁹In fact “...Ben Ali subtly destroyed patterns that had over three decades placed the reins of power in the hands of men from the circumscribed geographic area of Tunis, and the Sahel. The new cabinet, marked by its relative youth, did not neglect the two main human resource pools but also gave unprecedented representation to the centre, south and western areas of the country...Most taunted within the April 1989 cabinet were the so-called ministers of openness: Mohamed Charfi, Moncer Rouissi, Dali Yazzi, Habib Boularess, Hammouda Ben Slama, and Ahmed Smaoui, each bringing some measure of political independence and all changed to address serious social problems.” (Susan Waltz, *Tunisia, the African Contemporary Record*: B67-B68)

¹⁰For instance “In August 1989 trial defending PUPI [Popular Unity Party] Secretary-General Jelloud Azzouna against charges defaming the head of state, attorney Rachida Nasraoui was unable to convince the court that President’s Person and Policy were not equally protected from Public criticism and was herself jailed for four days.” (Susan Waltz, p.B469).

¹¹See also, Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, Maghreb Regimes Scenarios, *The Middle East Review of International Affairs, MERIA*, Volume 10, No.3, Article 8/10, September 2006, (<http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2006/issue3/jv10no3a8.html>).

¹²For instance, that “The most credible opponent, ex-communist Ettajdid’s Mohamed Ali Halouani, who dared argue for separation of state and RCD, officially got 0.95 per cent - about the same percentage the media gave his campaign. Middle class supporters demonstrated on

the eve of polling. Halouani plans to contest the results at the Constitutional Council, which could be risky: main stream opposition parties can be routinely harassed...just before polling, Congres Pour La Republique leader, Moncef Marzouki was charged with taking part in an unauthorised meeting in Paris, running a non-recognised party and attacking national morals...Hamma Hammami was assaulted in Public by Plain-clothes men believed to be Police officers." (*Africa Confidential*, 5 November 2004, Vol.45, No.22, p.8).

- ¹³ For a simple reason is that "...Ben Ali's position as an anti-Islamist hard-man limits criticism from the United States, France and Britain...In a masterpiece of understatement, the US state department's Adam Ereli said there were questions about the degree to which these elections were fully contested. France's Jaques Chirac sent congratulations." (*Africa Confidential*, 5 November 2004, Vol.45, No.22, p.8).
- ¹⁴ It was noted for instance that "...Recent threats to Egyptian and Tunisian writers reflect a growing confrontation between Islamists and other Muslims. Egyptian Philosopher Said Mohmoud El Ghomemi has said he would give up writing about Islamic religion and history because of death threats. Several of his books critically examine Islamic history and deconstruct the version claimed by fundamentalists; he also writes a weekly column for Roz el Youssif Magazine...In the case of Egypt, the Islamic activists accused El Ghomemi of fabricating the threats in order to beg from Copts and secularists." (*African Confidential*, *ibid*, 22nd July 2005, Vol.46, No.15, p.8).
- ¹⁵ Reporters without borders, (Tunisia-Annual Report 2006 www.rsf.org/article) noted that "the authorities, who hosted the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis from 16-18 November, also hit out at Human rights activists and opposition supporters. The national journalists' union, SJT (With more than 150 members), was forbidden on 7th September to hold its founding congress. Yet the national constitution and the 1966 labour law guarantee freedom to form trade unions. The labour law does not say unions must have prior approval of the government...Two journalists were still in prison in 2005. Hamdi Jebali, former editor of the weekly Al Fajr, has been in jail since 1991 for libel and belonging to an illegal organisation: lawyer Mohamed Abdou was sentenced to 18 months in prison on 28 April for writing an article on an internet website. Woman journalist and human rights activists Sihem Bensedrine, editor of the online Magazine Kalima was targeted by an obscene press campaign. Several pro-government dailies, including Al Chourouk, Al Hadith and As-Sarih, used sexual imagery to accuse her of selling her soul."
- ¹⁶ These views still stand today with different degrees in every single Middle Eastern country.
- ¹⁷ Algeria-Annual Report 2006. It is important to note that on July 4th 2006, coinciding with Algeria's National Independence Day, President Bouteflika issued a decision to pardon all journalists convicted of defamation or insulting state institutions. For further information, refer to *Reporters Without Borders*, Presidential Pardon Welcomed But Need For reforms Stressed, *ibid*.
- ¹⁸ After Mohammed Bouazizi, set himself a light on December 17th in protest against injustice, violence erupted spontaneously throughout all over Tunisia. This situation worsened especially when the young Bouazizi passed away while in Hospital on January 5th 2011. Since then, popular revolt took shape and got transformed seeking a full and radical revolution.

- ¹⁹ It was noted for example that “...Mr Ben Ali’s country has one policeman for every 40 inhabitants and two thirds of these are plain clothed. Fear of the police was so great that even those among France’s 600,000 strong Tunisian Diaspora were afraid to speak out against the regime.” (Henry Samuel: *US: We will be watching Things Closely*, *Daily Telegraph*, Saturday 15th 2011, p.21).
- ²⁰ This information was also reported from other sources like in *Al Mustakila*, *the Independent Satellite TV Channel*, London, and *Al Hiwar*, on the Debate Satellite TV Channel, London.
- ²¹ The full first speech was formally shown on *The independent Satellite TV channel*, *Al Mustakila*, London.
- ²² These pieces of information on those unidentified groups have been reported by eye witnesses in *Al Jazeera*, *Al Mustakila* as well as, *Al Hiwar*, including Euro-news Satellite Channels.
- ²³ Like the chasing of some of his wife’s relatives of Attarabulsi family, attempting an escape at the international airport of Carthage and their final apprehension with the help of the military.
- ²⁴ Rumours mentioned security men hired from the Israeli Mossad and other foreign agents. In general, the insecurity which soon became the torments of the protestors and other civilians was a case in point. Once the army managed to relatively, deploy and set up check points, a number of foreigners were arrested. We counted four Germans, two Swedish with arms and other military equipment.