

MOUVEMENT COMMUNISTE & KOLEKTIVNĚ PROTIKAPITALU

TUNISIA:

**EMERGENCY STATE RESTRUCTURING
AFTER AN INCOMPLETE ATTEMPT
AT DEMOCRATIC INSURRECTION**

NOTE TO THE READER

We thank Mr. G. Bouvin who, as the editor responsible, makes it possible for us to legally publish and distribute this publication. We wish to point out that Mr. G. Bouvin is not responsible for the political content of the articles and, more generally, for the programmatic positions defended in our press.

PRESENTATION

This document is simultaneously published in three languages: Czech, English and French. This is not because we are such efficient translators but because it is the result of a common work by speakers of these three languages since its very conception. It is a work jointly performed by comrades from KpK, MC and others. We hope that this first step of common political work will be confirmed and amplified in a way which tends towards the unification and centralization of communists.

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INTRODUCTION

For over a month, the Tunisian state faced a spontaneous social conflagration following the suicide of a young peddler in Sidi Bouzid, in the centre-west part of the country. First there were sit-ins, then demonstrations and riots spread from this little-developed region throughout the country and then to the capital, Tunis, and to the more economically dynamic coastal area. When proletarians are willing to defy the forces of repression with bare hands and not retreat from the bullets of the police, they bring to oppositional ferment a determination that can shake state power, despite the more than 100 deaths reported. This is exactly what happened in Sidi Bouzid during the final days of December 2010 and in the first half of January 2011. Thus, in three stages, the movement which began in the south spread to all regions of Tunisia, to finally conclude in Tunis beginning on 11 January.

The intervention of the proletariat in the Tunisian political scene forced a reshuffling of the cards of executive power. The former dictator Ben Ali had to leave Tunisia on 14 January, thus becoming the first leader of an Arab country to leave power under pressure from the street, and the opposition parties and other major players in the Tunisian government are now trying to take their places in a new government.

But as far as workers' strikes are concerned, none had affected the country prior to the fall of Ben Ali. After that event, first in the public sector and then in the private sector, strikes broke out, and the wind of insubordination continues to blow, even if the UGTT (*Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens*, the official state-linked union) is still containing working-class potential.

The text thus comprises:

- A detailed chronology,
- An economic overview,
- A historical overview,
- An analysis of the complex relations between the UGTT and the RCD,
- A study of the strength of the Islamists,
- An assessment of the movement in the larger society,
- An analysis of workers' struggles,
- A tentative conclusion,
- Appendices.

CHRONOLOGY

The fall of Ben Ali

17 December

Mohamed Bouazizi, a young street vendor of Sidi Bouzid (West Central Tunisia), 265 km from Tunis, protests against the seizure of his goods by the police and sets himself afire. The troubles begin the following day, December 18.

When he dies on January 4, a crowd of 5,000 people attends his burial.

19-20 December

Clashes between police and a young protesters' "right to work" march in Sidi Bouzid and in the town near Meknessi. Dozens are arrested, according to the International Federation of Human Rights (IFHR).

24 December

The disorders extend to Bouzayane Menzel (60 km from Sidi Bouzid) where police fire on protesters, killing two and injuring others. It is important to note that the repression and provocations of the police (especially the services under the thumb of Ben Ali) have been particularly deadly in this part of the country. This geographical area, like the south and part of the north, is one of the less developed regions.

28 December

In the wake of new protests against unemployment and the high cost of living in several cities, including Tunis, Ben Ali denounces a "*political instrumentalization*" of the disorders. To try to defuse the uprising, he dismisses the governor of Sidi Bouzid on the 30th.

3 January

Demonstration in Thala (Central West). The violence is marked by looting and the burning of government buildings. Numerous arrests. Violence also in Saïda, near Sidi Bouzid.

6 January

Thousands of lawyers go on strike and demonstrate.

8-10 January

Bloody riots in Kasserine, capital of Thala, where the army is deployed around government buildings, and in Regueb near Sidi Bouzid. 21 are dead in riots, according to the authorities, more than 50 according to the UGTT. Further clashes in Kairouan, the local capital of the central region; demonstrations beginning at the University of Rakkada escalate into clashes with police in the city centre and others are reported in communities in this region, also in the grip of unemployment.

The fifth suicide since December 17 occurs; an unemployed university graduate, Alla Hidouri, 23, commits suicide near Sidi Bouzid; he was shot in the leg in clashes that left two dead and several injured on Dec. 24 in Menzel Bouazaine¹. Further concessions by Ben Ali in a televised speech in which he denounces terrorist acts, while promising to create 300,000 more jobs by 2012.

11 January

The violence continues in Kasserine. Clashes erupt in the evening for the first time in a suburb of Tunis. Demonstrations by artists and regime opponents are repressed in the capital. Closing of schools and universities.

12 January

The Prime Minister announces the dismissal of the Interior Minister and the release of those arrested, except those involved in acts of vandalism, and the formation of a commission of inquiry into corruption.

The army is deployed in Ettadhamen (western suburbs) and in Tunis, where police used tear gas. Two civilians are killed by police in Douz (south) at a demonstration. Five demonstrators

are shot and wounded in clashes in Sfax (Southeast) Arrest of the leader of the Communist Party of Tunisian Workers (the PCOT, which is banned). This is the first political leader arrested since the riots began. A night curfew is declared in Tunis and its suburbs.

EU condemns the disproportionate use of force and the UN calls on the Tunisian government to hold “credible, independent” investigations of the violence.

13 January

Tunis is tightly patrolled by Special Forces after the first night of curfew as clashes take place in the suburbs of the capital, and particularly in the city of Ettadhamen, where repression results in at least one death.

No official figures have been published on the violence that took place in this city and in Intilaka, home to some 30,000 inhabitants and located about 15 km from the centre of Tunis. The army withdraws from the capital, where it had deployed 24 hours earlier, while the country is plunged into an unprecedented challenge to the regime.

On the same day, armoured units and police intervention replace the army on Habib Bourguiba Avenue, a central artery, and in Barcelona Square. Buses filled with riot police are parked in the side streets leading to the main avenue, and enhanced security forces can be seen on the road to the presidential palace in Carthage. Armoured cars of the special intervention police and army trucks are also deployed in the plush northern suburbs of Tunis. The withdrawal of the army comes after violent clashes between security forces and youth on Wednesday night and into Thursday in two neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Tunis, despite a night curfew imposed for an indefinite period, the first such measure since the coming to power of Ben Ali (also known as ZABA, his full initials) in 1987. This day was apparently particularly deadly, the number of protesters shot dead possibly exceeding 30 across the country, almost half of them in Tunis. According to several witness accounts, the shooters positioned themselves on terraces and deliberately cut down their victims. The government of President Ben Ali, however, tries to calm the situation with the dismissal of the Interior Minister and with the release of all persons arrested, to “except those involved in acts of vandalism.”

On the campus of the University of Tunis, teachers gather to protest the murder of a professor of computer science, Hatem Bettahar, a French-Tunisian, who was killed the day before by police fire in Douz, in the south of the country.

Following the peaceful march in response to the death of a receptionist in the resort town of Hammamet (60 km south of Tunis) people put up barricades while others loot a seaside resort. Destruction of a police station and a local office of the RDC.

According to the IFHR, at least 58 people had been killed up to that point in the unrest, since mid-December, and the organization denounces “*a continuing massacre*”.

14 January

A rally begins in the morning on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, attracting all social classes.

Without slogans or banners or guiding organization, the march begins in front of the Municipal Theatre to the Ministry of Interior. The protesters chant: “*Rally, rally, until the fall of the government!*” The gathering turns into a riot, with violent clashes between demonstrators and riot police. Army tanks are deployed to the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs, as well as to the national television and radio stations. Around 2 p.m., Prime Minister Ghannouchi announces: “The head of state has decided, in the context of the initiatives he announced on Thursday night, to dissolve the government and to call on the Prime Minister to propose the formation of a new government, and to organize early parliamentary elections within the next six months.”

A state of emergency is declared. The army controls the airport, and Tunisian airspace is closed.

Mohammed Ghannouchi says on TV at 5 p.m. that he will be acting as interim president in place of Ben Ali, who has left the country. That night, Ben Ali fled, becoming the first leader of an Arab country to leave power under pressure from the street. Later that night, Ben Ali arrives in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Establishment of the new government

15 January

Security forces are set up in the heart of the city. That Saturday, Tunisian Prime Minister-designate Mohammed Ghannouchi declares, *“The authorities are making every effort to restore order in the country, in whose opinion the continuation of the looting is unacceptable”*. Police and supporters of the former Tunisian President Ben Ali are implicated in attacks and abuses against the population in Tunis, according to the witness report of a French diplomat. The head of the Tunisian parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, is sworn in as interim president of Tunisia and states that *“no one will be excluded”* from the political process. Looting of houses, some owned by the Trabelsi, the in-laws of the fallen president, take place in La Marsa, a wealthy suburb twenty miles north of Tunis.

16 January

The curfew is reduced by one hour in Tunis. But clashes erupt in the afternoon in the centre of the city. The army storms the presidential palace in Carthage, where elements of the presidential guard of Ben Ali are holed up. Police in the grounds of the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales* (the Business School), near the presidential palace, call on the army to rescue them. Two snipers are killed by the army, in the city centre in the early phase of clashes between armed militia and regular forces. Somewhat earlier, Ben Ali’s former security chief, General Ali Seriate, is arrested and accused of being responsible for atrocities against the population. A nephew of Ben Ali is detained by the army in central Tunisia on Saturday night.

To deal with the threats and looting of the night before, vigilance committees are set up and spread quickly in various neighbourhoods, organizing patrols to protect the inhabitants. Several witnesses attribute the looting and atrocities in recent days to members of the security apparatus linked to Ben Ali, who seek to sow panic and to set the stage for his return. *“We must not overlook the power to inflict harm of the presidential security force headed by Ali Seriate; it had thousands of followers of Ben Ali.”*

The Prime Minister gathers together representatives of the political parties and from civil society to appoint people to guide the transition process until the elections.

17 January

“It has been decided by consensus to sideline the pro-government parties. The new government will include representatives from the Ettajdid movement, from the PDP, from the Democratic Front for Labour and Freedom, as well as independent personalities.” These formations were part of the legal opposition. The three parties had demanded a general amnesty for all political prisoners.

18 January

Mohammed Ghannouchi announces the formation of a government of national unity, the release of all prisoners of conscience, total freedom of information and the lifting of the ban on all non-governmental organizations including the LTDH.

19 January

On Wednesday, the interim president delivers his first speech since taking office on the evening of a new day of protests. *“I commit the transitional government to overseeing a complete break with the past,”* he said. The day before, he had decided to leave the RCD (*Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique*, the renamed ruling party since independence) with Prime Minister Ghannouchi. Fouad Mebazaa tried to calm things down, committing

himself to grant all the legitimate aspirations of the uprising. He promised an imminent general amnesty, total freedom of information, the independence of the judiciary and the separation between the state and the party. The new authorities multiply their goodwill gestures to the street. The new Minister of Development, Najib Chebbi, from the ranks of the opposition, announces that all political detainees, including members of the banned Islamist movement Ennahda, have been released.

Thousands of Tunisians once again take to the streets of Tunis, Sidi Bouzid, Regueb and Kasserine to demand the removal of the figures of the old regime's national unity government. In all, four members of the new team resigned the day before, dissatisfied with its composition. "*The population made sacrifices*", said Mustapha Ben Jaafar, leader of the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (and one of the resigning ministers). "*Tunisians are not ready to return home by giving a blank check to a team that is not completely cleansed of legacy of Ben Ali*". The curfew in force since Friday is relaxed.

20 January

In Tunis, a thousand people protest outside the headquarters of the RCD, to demand the resignation of the government. The army fires warning shots to deter demonstrators from climbing the wall. The protesters manage to reach the interior ministry and continue their march to the headquarters of the RCD, passing through the police cordon on Avenue Habib Bourguiba without violence. The "street" and part of the opposition question the presence of eight members of the former Ben Ali entourage in the transitional government formed Monday, 16 January.

28 January

The demonstrators, who had been camping for days outside the offices of the Prime Minister on the place de la Kasbah, are removed by police. The anti-riot units use tear gas against demonstrators gathered under the windows of the office of Prime Minister. At least five people are injured during the clashes. An unusual morning silence has prevailed since the beginning of the week at the Kasbah, where hundreds of protesters are again camped under the windows of the seat of the government to discuss in small groups the next step for their movement.

Mohammed Ghannouchi wants to meet the protesters laying siege to the government. Consultations are held in the morning between union representatives and demonstrators. The general secretary of the UGTT Abdessalam Jrad speaks with Ghannouchi, who accepts the principle of a meeting with the protesters. The UGTT tries to convince the demonstrators to return to their provinces, following the formation the night before of a transitional government cleansed of the principal caciques of the Ben Ali regime, which the trade union had tacitly endorsed. Five of the seven former ministers of the last government of Ben Ali are replaced by technocrats and independent persons not known to the public.

But the retention of Prime Minister Ghannouchi is challenged by the most radical fringe among the demonstrators. "*The majority wants to continue to a full cleansing*," said one of the approximately 300 demonstrators, mostly from the provinces, who camped at the Kasbah. After singing the national anthem and raising the Tunisian flag as they have done every morning, the protesters discuss what to think and what to do. The UGTT will participate in mid-day in a meeting with the opposition; the Bar Association and other components of civil society are trying to adopt a common position on the new government, according to Fethi Belhaj, spokesman for the nationalist and progressive current.

Mouldi Jandoubli, executive member of the UGTT, says: "*A government is in place. I believe that's the right attitude. The economy must start up again, and people have to go back to work.*"

Provisional Epilogue

15 February

A group of 28 parties and organizations of different political views (Ennahdha, the Front of January 14, etc.¹, and the UGTT) call on 15 February for the establishment of the Council for the Protection of the Revolution. This body seeks to pay homage to those who lost their lives, and to maintain the aspirations of the Tunisian people.

27 February

Ghannouchi announces his resignation as Prime Minister; he calls on Tunisians to protect the revolution against all those attempting to cause its failure, and to confront the violence and looting committed by its enemies. That evening Mr Beji Caid Essebsi is appointed as Prime Minister. An old warhorse, 84 years old, he had already been in the colonial administration, as well as a minister under Bourguiba and Ben Ali.

1 March

The NCPC calls on the interim president of the republic to dissolve the provisional government and to initiate consultations “*to ensure a national consensus around the choice of a prime minister and to form a provisional government to manage on-going affairs, having members known for their competence and not involved with the former regime.*” He says “*it has been proposed, in response to the draft decree presented by the interim President of the Republic, to oversee the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution, setting its objectives, composition and the conduct of its work ... [] ... in order to elect a constituent assembly that will be responsible for drafting the new constitution of the Republic and for managing the transitional stage.*”

9 March

A county court in Tunis on Wednesday announces the dissolution of the RCD, causing an explosion of joy in the room. Already suspended on 6 February from any activity, the RCD, founded on 27 February, 1988 by Ben Ali, claimed more than two million members out of more than 10 million people.

12 March

The Tunisian Press Agency (TAP) announces a curfew imposed on the evening of Saturday, 12 March in the town of Metlaoui (south) after incidents on Friday and Saturday that left two dead and over 20 injured during clashes between locals over the issue of jobs. Clashes erupted following the posting of false job offers at the Gafsa Phosphate Company (*Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa*) (CPG), proposing quotas on a clan basis. The unrest continues on Friday and Saturday, forcing the authorities to declare a curfew. Units of the Guard and the National Army intervene, make arrests, and seize 16 hunting rifles.

In 2008, the Gafsa mining region was shaken by a lengthy strike, severely repressed by the regime of Ben Ali. The workers had revolted against massive layoffs at the CPG. The company had gone in a few months from 15,000 jobs to 5000, due to restructuring and modernization.

In the same period in Ksar Hellal (20 km south of Monastir), fights between locals and immigrants from the interior had resulted in the destruction of the makeshift homes of immigrants, who had come to work in the textile mills, as well as their return home.

¹ Composed of the League of the Labour Left, the Movement of Nasserite Unionists, the Movement of Nationalist Democrats (Al-Watad), the Baathist current, the Independent Left, the Communist Party of Tunisian Workers (PCOT), the Labour Party and the Democratic and Patriotic Labor Party (PGWPP).

14 March

The Tunisian government refuses to legalize five parties, including three Islamist ones: Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Liberation Party), As-Salam (Peace) and the Sunni party (the other two are Free and Democratic People's Party and the Liberal Democratic Party of Tunisia), determining that they were not founded on democratic principles. Three other parties are legalized: the Party of Justice and Freedom, the Party of the Future for Development and Democracy, and the Movement of Democratic Patriots.

17 March

Hillary Clinton meets with the president. She assured him of US support for Tunisia and for a successful transition. Meanwhile tens of Ettahrir Islamist party activists express their aim of expelling American interests from Tunisian territory, speaking of "*an occupation and of an American massacre of the Tunisian population.*"

21 March

Many Tunisian NGOs (ATFD, LTDH, etc.) call for an increased presence of civil society in the interior regions. In keeping with this, two new sections of the ATFD will be established in Kairouan and Gafsa. The same goes for the LTDH, which plans to open branches in all parts of the country, in order to collect citizens' complaints.

24 March

People sitting in for two weeks in the Kasbah Square are arrested for assault and for insulting aides of the Prime Minister.

28 March

The Tunis Appellate Court turns down the appeal of the RCD; the party is dissolved for good.

29 March

The curfew in the city of Metlaoui is set from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. instead of 7 p.m. to 5 a.m.

31 March

Less than a hundred people demonstrate on Thursday in the centre of Tunis to protest the window dressing of the political transition and to demand real change.

April 1

The government must approve several bills supporting businesses, agriculture and fisheries, for jobs (the creation of 20,000 positions in the public sector, the creation of internships and increased aid for the unemployed) and for regional development (restructuring of the budget allocations to regional and local authorities). The government also calls on Tunisians to return to work and redouble their efforts.

The Avenue Habib Bourguiba is the scene of lively demonstrations. The demonstrators, called out by the Ettahrir Party, had just left the mosques after prayers. Their demands are for religious freedom, mainly for the wearing of the headscarf (*hijab*).

The Financial Markets Authority (AMF), established to monitor the stock exchange, decides to terminate the business listing of 123 Tunisian companies presumed to be involved in numerous cases of illegality by the Trabelsi-Ben Ali clan in recent years.

The number of Tunisians from Kasserine fleeing Libya is estimated at over 2,000 people; the authorities decide today to expedite social services to them such as free access to health care, low-cost loans and automatic enrolment of their children in the nearest schools.

4 April

Silvio Berlusconi announces that a technical committee of the Ministries of the Interior of Tunisia and Italy will begin an investigation of illegal immigration, after his meeting with the Prime Minister of the Provisional Government Beji Caid Essebsi.

5 April

Following protests from environmentalists and accusations of being in the hands of the Trabelsi family, the Afripaper factory in Chebika (Kairouan) decides to close its doors.

The Franco-Tunisian Oil Company ceases operations (following British Gas) in the wake of repeated sit-ins by locals demanding jobs and more development in the Bir Lytayim region near Sfax. This is in spite of an agreement between locals and the company for the hiring of five graduates and grants of 5,000 dinars to twenty others for various projects, in addition to 250,000 dinars for the installation of drinking water for 200 families.

8 April

The Prime Minister announces the creation of 60,000 jobs: 20,000 in the civil service; 20,000 in other state institutions (military and security); 20,000 in the private sector.

11 April

The Supreme body for the realization of the goals of the Revolution, political reform and a democratic transition (sic) approves Article 15 of the law decreed for the election of the National Constituent Assembly, which prohibits members of the dissolved RCD from running for the National Constituent Assembly. Equality of the sexes is also adopted².

14 April

The UNHCR reports that more than 500 Libyans, mostly Berbers, have fled the conflict in western Libya and found refuge in the region of Dehiba the south in the south; beginning April 7, the Minister of Trade and Tourism Houas Mehdi says the prices of consumer staples (cereals and flour, vegetable oil, skimmed milk, tomato paste and sugar) will not increase in the coming period, noting the importance the government attaches to the provisional General Compensation Fund (GCF). Compensation would reach 1,256 million dinars.

14 May

The Tunisian Labour Party, the political expression of the UGTT, announces on Saturday, 14 May, 2011, its entry into the public arena. Its goal is to gather and build reinforcements for a progressive republican bloc. The “Labourites” cast a wide net among voters from the centre-right to the far left.

ECONOMIC OVERVIEW

Presentation

Beginning as a semi-colonial economy at independence in 1956, based on mining (phosphates of the Gafsa company) and the processing of agricultural raw materials (olive oil), with little tourism (52,700 visitors in 1962), and a single new industry (North African Chemical Industries based in Gabes), Tunisia has developed since 1975, becoming one of the first countries to receive relocating European, first of all French, firms. Relevant sectors were mainly textiles and electronics (wiring).

These sectors, after 30 years, were stalled by competition from Asia and other countries with lower labour costs. Tunisia thus began to host companies in more skilled sectors, while trying, in its traditional sectors, to move up the scale by benefiting from its geographical proximity to Europe (as in the case of the outsourcing of automobile production) or by the creation of an Airbus parts assembly plant.

The economy is heavily dependent on trade with Europe. The slowdown of the recovery in the Euro area is the main risk to which the country is exposed, while Europe enters a period of fiscal crisis, flowing from the critical level of indebtedness of some of its member countries and a slowdown in fiscal stimulus.

² This is a first in the Arab world. This provision provides that any list must include alternate male and female candidates at the risk of invalidation in case of non-compliance.

Some statistics on Tunisia (2009)

Population: 10,440,000	Urban population: 65.9%	Rural population: 34.1%
Population 0-14 years: 24%	from 15 to 30 years: 26%	from 31 to 64 years: 42.5%
Life expectancy: 74.5 years	Birth rate per 1000: 17.7	Mortality rate per 1000: 5.7
School Enrolment: (6-14 years): 94.2% girls, boys 94.7%		
Educational attainment of 10-year-olds and up:		
None: 19.5%	Finished Primary School: 33.6%	Finished Secondary School: 36.1%
University: 10.8%		
Share of households with:	Electricity: 99.5%	Running water: 85.3%
TV: 96.7%	Fixed Telephone: 26.1%	Mobile Phone: 89.2%
Personal computer: 14.4%	Car: 22.7%	
GDP: \$ 43.9 billion	GDP per capita: \$4,160	

“The Tunisian economy was characterized by the dominance of the public sector, especially in industry, agriculture and services. However, since the mid-1980s, a major restructuring programme has been established for the national economy,” recalled Miloudi El Ghobentini at the Rabat congress in early 2010. He continued: “The country has privatized all state-owned enterprises operating in industrial production and services, which made possible the emergence of a market economy more integrated into the global economy.” The restructuring undertaken by the Ben Ali regime to reduce the domain of the state seriously contributed to the reduction in new public sector jobs for young graduates. Many of them turned to the informal economy. Miloudi El Ghobentini, then the director of the Tunisian National Agency for Employment, speaking at the above-mentioned Rabat conference, summarized: “In Tunisia, the state no longer creates many jobs (only 8 to 10% of jobs created). The state has privatized almost all firms producing goods and services and has fully withdrawn from the market.” Indeed, more than half the state budget for job creation is dedicated to the formation of micro-enterprises through the Tunisian Bank of Solidarity. According to a study conducted in 2006 by the World Bank and the by Ministry of Employment and Professional Insertion of Youth, the number of jobs created is very low. The distribution of beneficiaries by age shows that about 48% of them are 30-39 years old and 26% between 18 and 30.

Tunisian capitalism is flourishing despite the consequences of the so-called sub-prime crisis cycle of 2008. By far the richest country in the region except for Israel, Tunisia manifests the general conditions of capitalist production, quite close to those in the bottom third of the countries in the OECD, an organization that Tunis has wanted to join for a long time. But in dealing with any presentation of official data, their credibility must be examined. Asked about this in December 2005 by Florence Beaugé³, Ben Mahmoud Romdhane, a bourgeois economist and a professor of economics at the University of Tunis who is opposed to the regime and a supporter of democratization, said:

“Contrary to what some say, the figures I have are reliable. It is true that we can give them a tendentious interpretation, hide them or defer their publication. But, to my knowledge, there are no falsified numbers. If Tunisia did that, it would lose credibility with the international community, particularly the World Bank and the IMF. And then there is an interrelation between the numbers. Falsification would be noticed. Tunisians often complain that it’s the World Bank and IMF which run the country. For my part, I say that in a regime without real statistics, fortunately those two institutions are there! At least in terms of

³ Florence Beaugé: *La Tunisie de Ben Ali. Miracle ou mirage ?* Éditions du Cygne

macroeconomic management, there is a certain rigor. The IMF, through its agreements with the Tunisian government, encourages it to publish information by fixed dates. Reports from the World Bank and IMF on Tunisia are one of the sources of essential information. Without them, where the banking and financial system are concerned, for example, we would know nothing.”

A Developed and Diversified Industrial Country

Tunisia is a predominantly urban country. Life expectancy exceeds 74 years. Close to two-thirds of Tunisia’s population lives in cities, against an average of 43% for so-called developing countries (Source: Coface, 2007). Tunisian social production is firmly oriented to industry. In 2009, the distribution of GDP was as follows:

- manufacturing, 17.6%
- non-manufacturing industries (mining, energy, electricity and construction), 17.4%
- agriculture, 11%
- tourism, 6%
- communications, 6.6%
- transport, 6.4%
- distribution, finance and state services, 35%.

In 2006, the distribution of GDP had been as follows:

- manufacturing, 18.9%
- non-manufacturing industries (mining, energy, electricity and construction), 14.4%
- agriculture, 12.3%,
- tourism, 6%,
- communications, 5.5%,
- transport, 6.4%,
- distribution, 11%,
- finance, 11.1 %,
- services provided by the state, 14.4%.

If we rely on these data and cross-reference them, we arrive at a productive sector of new purely capitalist value accounting for at least half of GDP.

In terms of capital intensity, Tunisia has been advancing at a forced pace with a rate of productive investment (purchases of new capital goods minus write-offs of old capital goods; economists call this “gross fixed capital formation”) constituting nearly 27% of GDP in 2010, according to the IMF. The increase in the technical composition of manufacturing can be read between the lines in the distribution of manpower. In 2009, 31.9% of the employed population worked in industry, mining, energy and construction, as opposed to 48.9% in trade and services (including productive services) and 17.9% in agriculture and fishing. Moreover, despite ten years of strong growth, including during the two major global crises of valorisation in 2000-2001 and 2008-2009, the official rate of unemployment remained stuck at 14-16%, manifesting a growing labour productivity.

The Tunisian work force is, generally, rather disciplined and well trained, as foreign employers are happy to report. The Global Competitiveness Report for 2010-2011 places Tunisia in 7th place in its rankings measuring the availability of scientists and engineers⁴,

⁴ For each age group, the report indicates the number of engineers and scientists available, i.e. having completed their education.

with France ranked 12th, Belgium 13th, Germany 27th, Italy, 54th, or Egypt and Morocco, 25th and 46th, respectively.

The same report moved Tunisia up to 20th place for the quality of its education, better than France (29th), Germany (18th), Morocco (105th) or Egypt (131st). The Agency for the Promotion of Foreign Investment (FIPA) claims: *“At a comparable level of qualifications and skills, Tunisia offers competitive salary costs in proportions ranging from 1 to 5 when compared with European countries.”* Finally, on this point, the Davos Report indicates Tunisia is ranked 32nd in global competitiveness, ahead of Italy (48th), Turkey (61st), Egypt (81st) and Morocco (75th). In comparison, France, Germany, Belgium and Spain are 15th, 5th, 19th and 42nd, respectively.

The infrastructure is adequate. Nine airports with a capacity of 19 million passengers per year and more than 1,400 weekly flights connect the country to Europe (more than a third with France). More than 8,000 ships each year load and unload goods in Tunisian ports for a tonnage of 31 million in 2009. The port and airport infrastructures were considered the 41st best in the world for the former and 30th for the latter. The Tunisian railway network covers the country from north to south and extends over a length of 2256 km. The road network consists of 20,000 km. A third of the population uses the Internet, with 381,982 subscribers in 2009 as against 128,352 in 2007. Total telephone density per 100 inhabitants is 105.2.

Foreign capitalists are well aware of opportunities for valorisation in Tunisia, especially since Ben Ali’s regime offered them a *“total exemption from income tax for ten years for export earnings and for agricultural projects, and for five or ten years for projects located in areas of regional development, according to priority of the region.”* The regime also offered them *“investment bonuses equal to 8%, 15%, or 25% of project costs, capped at between 320,000 and 1 million Tunisian dinars (one dinar was approx. €0.5 in March 2011), according to the priority area, in regional development areas and 7% for agricultural projects”*, not counting support for all or part of employer contributions for employment created, according to the region. *“For 5 years at 100% to 20% for the zones in the higher group of regional development; and up to 10 years, at 100% for the first 5 years then 80% to 20% for regional priority development zones.”* The Tunisian government also offers to cover the costs of projects for regional development at between 25.50% and 75% of the total cost of *“infrastructure, depending on the priority of the region”* (Source: FIPA-Tunisia). *“A renovated and modern tax law, in constant evolution”*, as the Economic Mission of the French Embassy in Tunis enthused.

The result: in 2008, 27% of productive investments in Tunisia were carried out by foreign capitalists, as against 9% in Morocco. Progress was spectacular: in 2005 they amounted to 1,088 million dinars. Four years later, they rose to 2,357 million dinars. At the end of 2009, 3,069 foreign or mixed enterprises were operating in Tunisia, employing 314,299 people as against 455 enterprises and 59,932 people in 1987. In 2009, 34% of these investments were in manufacturing, 54% in energy, 7.5% in services, 3.8% in tourism and real estate and 0.7% in agriculture. Within manufacturing, the share of foreign productive investment in the mechanical sector, in electrical construction and in electronics jumped from 5% in 2000 to 27% in 2009. In the textiles and clothing, their share has remained relatively stable over the same period, at about 13% of the total.

For all sectors, the presence of the major foreign capitalists for 2009 is summarized in the following table:

Country	Companies	Employees	Main sectors
France	1,249	110,000	textiles, electronics, electricity, aerospace
Italy	704	55,600	
Germany	267	48,000	
Belgium	214	22,000	
United Kingdom	88	11,000	
Switzerland	82	12,000	
United States	77	14,000	
Netherlands	77	13,000	
Luxembourg	59	10,000	
All Others	252	18,699	
TOTAL	3,069	314,299	

Year 2009

The enthusiasm of foreign capital is also due, in the summary of the economic mission of the French Embassy in Tunis, to “... *constitutional forms similar to those found in France*”, “*an Incentives Code for investment, a strong framework of incentives for export*”, and “... *a wide range of solutions available to exporters and their Tunisian partners*” for means of payment. But the main weapons of the government for capturing foreign investment are the cost and conditions for employing labour and low energy costs. The minimum wage for 40 hours of work per week is 235 dinars and 272 dinars for 48 hours (July 2010).

Tunisian Capitalism’s strong Resilience in Cyclical Crises

The Tunisian economy passed through the global valorisation crises of 2000/2001 and 2008/2009 without too much damage. Unfortunately, we do not have reliable information on the cumulative results of the various companies, which is the most important indicator, in our view, for identifying cycles of accumulation and crisis in capital. That is why we must refer to far less precise macroeconomic data on growth, including changes in GDP. If we look to the figures released by the IMF, real GDP growth merely slowed.

In the first case, the crisis hit home in 2002. GDP growth fell to 1.7%, preceded by an increase of 4.9% in 2001 and followed by a rebound of 5.6% in 2003. In the second case, things went even better. In 2008, Tunisia’s real GDP rose 4.5%. In 2009, it slowed to 3.1%. In 2010, there was a slight uptick to 3.8%. For 2011 and 2012, three months before the outbreak of the country’s social and political crisis, the IMF was forecasting a GDP growth of 4.8% and 5% respectively. In its report, published in September 2010, the Fund wrote that “*Tunisia has weathered the global crisis; it has come through it with solid fundamentals that are largely the result of prudent policies in the past.*” The report also supported the action of the Tunisian government: “*The prompt and appropriate response of the authorities helped cushion the impact of lower external demand in 2009.*” The Washington-based Fund, in the same document, specified that “*internal demand in 2009 was supported by strong consumption fuelled by an increase in per capita income.*” Despite soaring global food and energy prices, the state and the central bank managed to stem the rise in consumer prices.

The index of consumer prices did in fact increase by 5% in 2008 and 4.8% in 2009, but they showed an increase of only 3.7% in 2006 and 3.1% in 2007. These are rates closer to those of the central countries of the capitalist mode of production than to those on its periphery. By comparison, in Egypt, the price index for consumption jumped 16.2% in 2008-2009 after advancing 11% and 11.7% respectively in 2006-2007 and 2007-2008. In April 2010, the IMF anticipated increases of 12% in 2009-2010 and 9.5% in 2010-2011. But, in the IMF’s view, the sky in Tunis was clouding over. The international fund noted that, due to its

heavy dependence on its troubled “European partners”, Tunisia “*will need to identify more dynamic sources of growth to significantly reduce unemployment, which remains important, particularly among young people.*” As a result of the slowdown in European growth, Tunisia’s foreign trade fell significantly in 2009, erasing the gains of the previous year and increasing the trade deficit. Recent history says that the regime failed. It did not find new sources of growth and unemployment, especially among the youth, did not decline. We will discuss the condition of the workers below.

As a good student of the IMF, Tunisia was preparing, before the outbreak of the proletarian revolt, to revive its long-term programme of fiscal discipline, including a more selective use of subsidies for retail foodstuffs (wheat and oil) and the restructuring of the pension system, including a rising contribution rate and an increase in the retirement age. Meanwhile, Ben Ali and his entourage planned to lower the tax on corporate profits and at the same time to raise the value added tax. As unconditional supporters of permanent fiscal austerity, Ben Ali’s “socialist” RCD had embraced this principle since its founding in February 1988. The party-state was set up within four months after the palace conspiracy, and inscribed this principle on its flag and held to it without fail for more than 20 years. It was a constitutional *coup d’état* that brought to power Ben Ali, the future head of RCD. He ousted the sick, old *Caudillo* Habib Bourguiba (84 years old at the time) on grounds of senility, and at the time was second in command within the executive, as Minister of the Interior, and in the Destourian Socialist Party (PSD)⁵.

The 1990s: an exceptionally serious fiscal and financial crisis

Ben Ali justified his elimination of Bourguiba by the necessity of establishing a regime based on “a multiparty system and a plurality of mass organizations”, and to prevent a *coup d’état* by the Islamists. The main reason for his seizure of power was more prosaic. The state, by far the biggest individual capitalist in the country, on the model of people’s democracies in Eastern Europe, was at the time plunged into an extremely serious fiscal and financial crisis. It was imperative to put things right as quickly as possible, which was not possible until the flight of the autocrat, whose promises of liberalization had remained a dead letter. From the first year of the Ben Ali era, the state asked for help and advice from the World Bank to manage the crisis.

The task was not easy. It took time to overcome the decay of the economic and social formation left by Bourguiba. Eleven years later, in late 1998, public debt and debt guaranteed by the government still represented 80% of Tunisia’s GDP. In late 1997, as part of the financial crisis of the so-called emerging countries, foreign debt amounted to 62.5% of GDP, producing a public deficit of 4.2% of GDP. It was 4.9% a year earlier. In 1985, state enterprises (30% of the value added of the country, employing 33% of wage workers) were collapsing under the weight of debt and had multiple operating losses. Two years before the bloodless coup of Ben Ali, these losses and debts amounted to about 35% of GDP. To finance itself, the government increasingly had to resort to foreign capital. As a result, in 1991, interest payments accounted for 27% of GDP. Five years later, in 1996, the burden still corresponded to 21.4% of GDP and 43% of the state budget. In a failed attempt to keep a high rate of profit, the nationalized banks were themselves overwhelmed by bad loans after extending all kinds of credits to unprofitable businesses. Even in 2003, bad debts accounted for 41% of total loans from nationalized banks. The so-called development banks, whose main task was the financing of infrastructure, sank under the weight of dubious loans in 1998. These amounted to 67.5% of their total loan portfolios.

⁵ The word “destour” is a North African Arabic word (possibly of Ottoman origin) meaning “constitutional”. It was the name of a nationalist party founded in Tunisia in 1920.

Private banks did not fare much better. In 1993, some 34% of their loans were of poor quality. These problem loans corresponded to 24% of GDP. The government and its donors, the IMF and the World Bank, decided to take the bull of the financial and fiscal crisis by the horns with the 9th Five Year Plan, for 1997-2001. Industrial restructuring had begun 10 years earlier under the supervision of the World Bank. Now it was time for banks and the state to go on a diet. By 1998, the privatization of financial institutions was proceeding apace. About 80% of the bad debts of public companies and of the state were eliminated. To speed up the movement, the state executive established structures for private debt collection. The ninth plan alone was not sufficient to get the banks back on their feet.

The crises of 1997-1998 and 2000-2001 once again multiplied the number of dubious loans. By 2003, they represented 24% of total commercial bank loans. The government had to carry out a new fiscal tightening. But the results were slow to emerge. In 2005, while non-performing loans of banks were reduced to 21%, the Tunisian foreign debt amounted to the equivalent of 68% of GDP mainly because of soaring oil prices. The executive did not ease up, applauded as it was by its strong international partners. By 2007, non-performing loans of the banks had decreased to 17% of total loans. The increase in hydrocarbon production offset the new surge in import prices of energy products.

In 2009, GDP growth slowed but the state coffers and banks were in good shape. The IMF finally pronounced the financial sector solid, with only 13% of bad loans on bank balance sheets, at 58% of their face value for the corresponding provisions. Public debt represented less than 43% of GDP. Immediately, the international financial institutions set new objectives for the Ben Ali regime: bring down public debt to below 40% of GDP and reduce the public deficit to less than 2% of GDP. All this was to culminate in the full convertibility of the Tunisian dinar, scheduled for 2014. But these plans had not taken account of the class struggle... As for the Ben Ali regime's corruption, there is not much to add to what is widely known. One might merely mention, in this regard, that the illegal export of capital (about €1.3 billion per year according to the NGOs), the confiscation of land, the manipulation of public markets, the widespread patronage favouring clans and the families in power or close to the autocrat, did not prevent Tunisia from undergoing a strong capitalist development, touted as exemplary for the region. In the intentions of former supporters of Ben Ali and the regime, corruption is the rotten tree that is supposed to hide the forest of valorisation of capital and development and of exploitation in the country.

“In 2011 and probably in 2012, there our financial needs will peak, both in the budget and in the balance of payments. The amount will depend on the rate of growth and on tourism. But we know that our funding requirements are between \$3 and 4 billion” said Mustapha Kamel Nabli⁶, governor of Tunisia's central bank, in an interview with the Wall Street Journal, 15 April, during his participation in an IMF panel. According to the Journal, the Tunisian government is seeking to attract foreign investment while launching a development programme for infrastructure and to help young graduates to find jobs.

Situation of the proletariat

If Tunisian capitalism is thriving, the working class long ago lost all hope of seeing its condition improve. This sentiment is reflected in a 2005 survey by the Tunisian National Institute of Statistics (INS) of unmarried young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine: nearly 2 million of them, 76% of the total, said they wanted to emigrate if the opportunity arose. Comparable figures were only 1.1 million people (45%) in 2000 and 457,000 (22 %) in 1996. The decline in purchasing power is also visible in the indebtedness

⁶ Source: <http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2011/04/15/qa-tunisia-central-banker-mustapha-nabli-on-rebuilding-the-economy>

of the active population. A study conducted in 2007 by the INS showed that 18% of the active population was in debt. The total amount of credits had doubled in four years. Within this, the share of consumer credits had grown incessantly⁷. Without claiming to cover all industries, we present here a non-exhaustive overview of monthly wages in a good number of professions. These salaries are given as net averages, excluding bonuses and benefits

Category	Monthly Salary in Dinars
Medical Doctor (GP)	1,000
Nursing	500
Worker	250
Teacher	600
Judge	1,300-2,000
Journalist	400-600-1,000
Bank CEO	2,300-9,000
Manager of Small/Medium Firm (private)	1,500-5,000
Manager of a public company	2,000-3,000
NITC Engineer* (*New Information Technologies and Communication)	800-2,000
Secretary	250-400
Bus driver (public)	450
Bus driver (private)	250
Policeman	350-400
Bank Employee	600-700
Bank Manager	900-1,300

Year: 2009. Source:

http://www.businessnews.com.tn/details_article.php?t=519&a=19911&temp=1&lang=&w=

Since the minimum monthly wage is only about 250 dinars, women are over-represented in manufacturing employment. Such a wage level keeps most young graduates away; the employment prospects are not up to their expectations. Those under 30 represent nearly half the Tunisian population. Unemployment is essentially youth unemployment: 2 out of 3 unemployed people are under 30. In 2009, unemployment among 15-24 year olds remained high (31.3%) by comparison with to people 50-64 years of age (2.8%), as Elachhab Fathi, Professor at the University of Sfax, attested at the beginning of January 2010. Some 21% of graduates are unemployed. Only 5% of people without education are unemployed.

“The graduates of higher education represent nearly a quarter of the unemployed (19 to 20%) and educated women are most affected (among unemployed university graduates 28% were female as opposed to 13% male; 60% of students are female”, stated Mongi Ben Chaaban, Professor at the University of Tunis, in January 2010

Here is a long explanation by Professor Fathi Elachhab:

“Since the 1980s, productivity in Tunisia has been changing markedly, after which GDP growth in the 1990s greatly increased. However, the creation of employment has not followed a similar trend, and this is explained by the lowering of growth in jobs, as shown by the accelerated growth of the ratio of production to the number of jobs. During the 1980s and in the early 1990s, it was the service sectors that contributed most to the enrichment of job growth. Moreover, the share of services in employment in the non-agricultural sector increased during the 2000’s to 47%, continuing the upward trend which started in the 1980s.

⁷Source: *La Régente de Carthage*

Figures on the elasticity of employment relative to growth show that the period 2005-2008 is rather unique: it records its lowest level since 1987. One can thus understand, now that growth in Tunisia is less job-rich than it was during the 1980s, that it is necessary to 'create' more growth in order to reach the same rhythm of job creation. This change is better explained by structural factors rather than cyclical factors. During the 1990s, the unemployment rate rose fairly significantly from 15.2% in 1990 to 17% in 1998. After that, the rate of unemployment declined steadily, reaching a value of 14.3% in 2008, a decrease of nearly three points. A demographic transition is the main explanation for this. Indeed, until 2004, unemployment fell on average by 0.4% each year, mainly due to the growth of the active population (2.3%) at lower rate than that of employment. This reflects a growth in the population of working age of 2.4% on average per year, offset in part by a decline in the participation rate of 0.1%. The observation of changes in the rate of exit from unemployment, measured as the ratio between the number of people exiting (through job placement) compared with the number of registered job seekers, shows that the possibility of finding work does not depend on the economic situation as recorded. Thus in many phases of conjunctural improvement, the rate of exit from unemployment does not react to an improvement in the economic situation."

In other words, the accelerated capitalist development in Tunisia, the rapid increase in the productivity of social labour, and the shift in its productive structure toward industries that require relatively less labour than traditional manufacturing, has played a central role in the stagnation of the unemployment rate at relatively high levels. The restructuring of the state has also helped reduce, relatively, access to jobs. Paradoxically, the long-term existence of a social safety net that is more solid than those of neighbouring countries has made proletarians less flexible and less resigned to accept appalling working conditions.

As for the health care system, here are the words, in April 2009, of the Economic Mission of the French Embassy in Tunis. They are triumphalist but the figures are indisputable: *"The social security system has reached a coverage rate of 92% in 2008. Health indicators reflect the success of health policy in Tunisia: life expectancy rose from 70.3 years in 1990 to 73.6 years in 2008, and infant mortality fell from 51.6 ‰ in 1987 to 19.5 ‰ in 2008. Mandatory immunization rates in young children reached 95% in 2008. In addition, various health programmes have made possible the containment of several infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, as well as treatment for AIDS patients. However, the challenge ahead remains the control of diseases related to individual behaviour such as diet, including diabetes, obesity, cancer and cardiovascular disease."*

The local production of medicines, produced by thirty laboratories, provides between 42 and 45% of the market supply.

Changes in the unemployment rate

	Men	Women	Total
1966	15.2	13.4	15
1975	16.2	14.2	15.6
1984	16.9	14.8	16.4
1994	15.2	17.6	15.8
1999	15.4	17.2	16
2000	15.2	16.9	15.8
2001	14.8	16.2	15.4
2002	15.2	16.4	15.6
2003	14	16.2	14.5
2004	13.4	17.4	14.3
2005	13.4	17.6	14.3
2006	13.4	17.6	14.4
2007	12.8	18	14.2
2008	12.6	19	14.4

Unemployed university graduates

2003: 59,000

2006: 74,000

2007: 86,000

2008: 115,000

Unemployment by age 1966-2008 in percent

Ages	1966	2008
18-19	37	32
20-24	15	30
25-29	13	24
30-34	12	14
35-39	10	7
40-44	10	4
45-49	10	3
50-54	13	3
55-59	13	3
60-64	15	2

Structure of the active population by level of education (%)

	None	Primary	Secondary	Higher
1999	19	41	31	9
2000	15	40	35	10
2001	15	40	35	10
2002	15	39	35	11
2003	14	39	36	11
2004	14	37	37	12
2005	13	36	38	13
2006	13	34	40	13
2007	12	34	40	14
2008	10	35	40	15

Manufacturing Industries in Tunisia

According to official statistics, in November 2009 there were 5,756 companies employing 10 or more workers. The textiles and clothing sector (TCI) is the biggest, with 36% of companies, followed by agribusiness and food, (18%) and then machinery and metallurgy (MMI), 10%. No less than 48% of these companies are exclusively oriented to exports. All told, 485,000 wage earners work in them, with 41% in textiles and clothing, (TCI), 14% in food, 13% in the electrical industry, electronics, and appliances (EEAI) and 7 % in machines and manufacture (MMI).

France is the largest foreign investor in partnership companies (43%) followed by Italy (29%), Germany (9%) and Belgium (7%). These partnership companies are heavily represented in textiles and clothing (60%), electronics (11%), machines and manufacture (9%) and building materials, ceramics and glass (8%).

Between 2004 and 2008, the value of manufacturing production jumped from 26.29 billion dinars to 43.76 billion, posting an average annual increase of 14%.

The value in textiles remained stable, reaching 5.36 billion in 2008 with an average annual increase of 1%. The first sector in value terms, the food industry, has increased 10% to 9.927 billion. The highest increases are those in the chemical industry (up 33%, to 8.858 billion), electronics and appliances (21% to 4.356 billion), leather and footwear (17%, to 5.681 billion) and machinery and manufacture (14% to 3.706 billion).

Investment in manufacturing, 1.84 billion dinars in 2004, remained slack during the next three years, before jumping to 3.26 billion in 2008, increasing in one year by more than 50%.

Aircraft construction up to now mostly in wiring moved up to the construction of frames with the establishment of Aerolia in December 2010, which by 2014 will have an industrial park and 750 sub-contractors in Tunis. This sector currently employs about 5,000 workers, primarily in French companies, five times more than a decade ago.

In 2008, manufacturing accounted for 79% of exports of goods from the country, a stable rate since 2005, when it was 82%. However, foreign trade in manufactured goods is clearly in deficit, with a coverage rate of 82% in 2008. It was only 71% for aerospace and only 26% for machines and manufacture. The main surplus sectors are the textiles leather and footwear, ceramics, and to a lesser extent, electronics and appliances

The economic consequences of the events

The following gives the figures for unemployment (between 500,000 and 600,000 more unemployed in 2010), for growth (around 1%, according to the latest IMF estimates) and the various foci of government policy in the coming months, namely regional development, social support and economic revitalization.

According to the French daily *Les Echos*, foreign direct investment (FDI) in Tunisia decreased by 28.8% in the first quarter of 2011, as indicated by the Tunisian Agency to Promote Foreign Investment. Foreign investment in the first quarter was 339 billion dinars (170 billion euros) compared to 476 billion dinars (239 billion euros) during the same period in 2010.

FDI in the sectors of manufacturing and energy is down 23% and 30.8% year-on-year respectively in the first quarter. Foreign investment normally generates about 25% of new jobs annually, and constitutes a major contribution to the development effort of the country. Minister of Finance Jalloul Ayed presented a grim economic picture of the country, indicating growth between 0 and 1% and job creation more than three times lower than that originally intended. The thousands of young people fleeing the country for Italy and France do not seem to believe in any imminent economic recovery or in any assistance from the Tunisian government. They dream only of leaving for Europe.

Moreover, with the closure of the Tunisian-Libyan border, thousands of Tunisians living from exchange and informal trade suddenly find themselves with no source of income – for example, according to official statistics, the border village Ben Guerdane alone has some 80,000 people hit hard by the shutdown of trade with Libya. Moreover, the flow of thousands of refugees, both Libyans and foreigners fleeing the war in Libya, has made life even more precarious in the south.

Synthesis

As a good student of the IMF, Tunisian capital has achieved a modernization allowing it to become an industrial platform for large foreign companies, mainly European, seeking skilled workers to exploit, but at reduced costs. These investments initially focused on textiles, clothing and leather, but have diversified into areas with a higher organic composition. In aeronautics, production took off, for example, in wiring, for example, before moving on to the construction of more complex plane frames, requiring a more skilled workforce. But this development remained localized on the coast, especially in the Tunis region.

Financial and fiscal crises were gradually dealt with, but at the cost of an increase in social inequality. Economic development had not solved two major problems, namely youth unemployment, both of university graduates and others, and the economic underdevelopment of the interior. Unfinished land reform left the country at the mercy of the tensions on the markets for agricultural raw materials.

The beginning of the revolt, in Kasserine, combined all three ingredients.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Brief overview (1956-2008)

We can divide the history of Tunisia since independence into several periods:

- 1956-1963: consolidation of power both with respect to France (the Bizerte affair) and internal opponents, the execution of Salah Ben Youssef (born in 1907, an opponent of Bourguiba from 1955, sentenced to death in August 1961); the outlawing of the Communist Party in 1963.
- 1963-1969: the attempted statification of the economy under the rule of Ahmed Ben Salah (Secretary General of the UGTT in 1956, later a minister, deposed in 1969 and sentenced in 1970 to forced labour, finally escaped into exile) resulting in the establishment of agricultural cooperatives under state ownership, which failed because of the refusal of land collectivization (Ouerdanine riots, in the Sahel, in January 1969, where the police fired on protesters, killing a farm worker and triggering riots, with a dozen people killed in the ensuing repression) and because of the discontent of the people working in cooperatives.
- 1969-1975: a liberal economic turn under the guidance of Hedi Nouria (1911-1993). Tunisia prepares to host the first foreign investment (investment code in April 1972). There is a slight loosening of the omnipotence of the PSD, but Bourguiba takes matters in hand; the liberal wing of Ahmed Mestiri (1925) is purged from the PSD in January 1972, and Bourguiba is proclaimed president for life.
- 1976-1981: A repressive turn: repression against the strikes in Ksar Hilal in 1977, the riots of January 26, 1978, the reining in of the UGTT in 1978, etc.

On 10 October 1977, the workers of Sogitex (a state textile company) in Ksar Hilal launch a strike against management “sabotage”. They occupy the premises but are removed by the police. The next day the strike continues, the workers demonstrate and are joined by high school students. Hearing the rumour that a demonstrator was killed, the whole town comes out into the street. The police respond and make arrests. But the next day at 11:00 a.m., the entire region turns out to support the workers. The police are overwhelmed. The state disappeared. It is the army, with armoured cars and planes and 500 men, which intervenes on the morning of October 14 to occupy the city. Confronted with this deployment of forces, the population pulls back. Order returns.

These events, in the city where the Neo-Destourian Party was founded in 1934, mark the beginning of the “political” offensive of the UGTT.

On 26 January 1978, the UGTT calls for a general strike and demonstrations across the country. The UGTT uses the discontent to tip the balance in its favour in its power struggles with the DSP. The strike is a success in Tunis and Gabes. Starting at 9 a.m., demonstrators converge on downtown Tunis, including striking workers, the unemployed, students, etc. At 10 a.m., the police intervene and the protests turn into riots. At 1 p.m., when the police are overwhelmed, there are already 51 dead. At 2 p.m., the government decrees a curfew overnight and calls in the Army. Habib Achour and the executive of the UGTT are arrested.

- 1981-1987: After a timid attempt at a political opening (elections opened to the opposition, legalization of the Tunisian CP), repression becomes the standard response to the crisis and to all demands (repression of the riots in January 1984, repression against the UGTT, the arrest of Habib Achour). Rise of Islamism.

On 29 December 1983, Prime Minister Mohamed Mzali (1925-2010) announces increases in the prices of essential commodities. In fact, the intention is to end state-“subsidized” prices in order to maintain a semblance of redistribution, but one from which the rich also benefit. In the first increase since 1968, the price of bread and flour is increased by 100%. Beginning in the south on 3 January, in Gabes, Kasserine, etc... riots break out in several cities, including Tunis. The UGTT is absent from the demonstrations. The unemployed, the precarious population and poor farmers are in the forefront of the fighting. The government decrees a state of emergency; the police are overwhelmed. The army intervenes with armoured cars. On 6 January, Bourguiba announces the withdrawal of the measures. There are, officially, 84 dead and 900 injured and 10 rioters are sentenced to death.

- 1987-1999: Ben Ali, Minister of the Interior of the last Bourguiba government, ousts him and promises the moon. In addition to an economic recovery through a new round of foreign investment (a free-trade agreement with the EU in 1994); this period is characterized by the fierce repression of the Islamist party *Ennahdha*, leading to the arrest of more than 10,000 of its activists
- 2000-2008: repression and corruption are the two mainstays of the regime.

Tunisia has thus reproduced the trajectory of many countries after decolonization. After an attempted political alignment with the Soviet Union or with the Arab nationalist bloc, resulting in a period of “socialization” which is nothing but an attempt by the state to substitute for the weakness of capital accumulation, the failure of the this stratagem results in a realignment toward the former colonial power and the US, and an opening to foreign investment. Faced with the first revolts, the regime uses the repression that it also applies against

the Islamists, and once the situation is stabilized, it sinks into corruption and nepotism. However, Tunisia presents two unique aspects:

- The effort made since independence, and never abandoned, to invest in education, making the country one of the producers of quality university graduates, where illiteracy is marginal,
- The reaffirmation of secularism and of the place of women in civil society and the labour market.

The Events in Gafsa - 2008

In 2008, serious agitation and opposition shook the Gafsa basin for more than 6 months, and especially the city of Redeyef. The unfolding of events was reported by observers on the scene. This region, whose only resource is the production of phosphate and its derivatives, had been affected by the mechanization and rationalization of labour, which reduced the size of the Gafsa Phosphate Company (15,000 to 5000 jobs in a few years) by 75%. The unemployment rate was around 30% (more than 40% for the youth). The falsification, in January 2008, of the results of a competition for jobs at the company, as well as massive layoffs, set off the powder keg.

This time the injustice was no longer passively accepted. The unemployed, students, and laid-off workers decided to occupy the local headquarters of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) whose leaders were deeply involved in the deceptions that covered up special access to jobs for friends and family. Repression and arrests only cemented the support of the rest of the destitute population for the protesters. Many trade unionists in secondary education participated in the struggles; some became iconic figures of the movement. Some demands were for more justice and for an end to nepotism, but they were also mixed with appeals to patriotism and for the development of the region, as the peaceful side of the ferment.

The population of Redeyef had a freer and more audacious attitude. Indeed, in early May 2008, police repression hardened, resulting in more victims and the encirclement of the city. The locals came together and decided to leave the city. It was the intervention of the unions, which negotiated a pullback of police repression with the state, which made it possible to defuse the movement and to allow the return of the families who had already left. Needless to say, repression continued. While many activists fled into the mountains, most of the union leaders wound up in Ben Ali's jails, where they continued fighting through the courts. The state gradually granted trials, which provided a forum for the prisoners, lightened the sentences, and finally released the detainees in late 2009. This episode was probably the ferment which made it possible for a part of the Tunisian state to draw up, together with numerous associations or opposition parties, a post-Ben Ali alternative. Meanwhile, those in Redeyef with nothing to lose showed a determination which continued into the recent events. We should note that despite its length, the conflict remained confined to the mining area, with the exception of a few riots that took place in early June 2008 in the governorate of Kasserine (which paid a heavy price during the recent uprising). In this area, there was once again a struggle within the UGTT between supporters of the RCD and the "rank-and-filers" who supported the movement.

THE RCD AND THE UGTT, THE TWO PILLARS OF THE TUNISIAN STATE

The single party

The RCD is nothing but the old official party from the Bourguiba era. The Destourian Socialist Party was renamed in 1997 (and was a member of the Socialist International). The RCD was expelled from the Socialist International on 18 January 2011. This party, which claimed more than two million members out of a population of ten million, was not only a party “to which one had to belong in order to be able to work”, but was a real political force which gathered under its roof all the influential people of Tunisia, CEOs, politicians... Networks of the former party would continue to work for a while, either in the shadows or in the new political formation, although it was dissolved on 9 March 2011 by court order.

Socialism in Tunisia and the UGTT, the union-party (1961-1969)

The other political force is represented by the UGTT, the union federation claiming more than 500,000 members, which is a real party, and since its founding in 1946 has been in competition with the official party. It is useless to consider the UGTT as an advocacy organization of workers whose ties with state power constitute a betrayal by the union bureaucracy. The UGTT represents a political current of that part of the ruling class which favours an economic policy under state control.

Its propensity for participating in the management of capitalism in Tunisia has been confirmed throughout of its existence. The most important experience undoubtedly began in 1961, when Ahmed Ben Salah was appointed minister to implement the policy that he himself had drafted at the 1956 congress when he was Secretary General of the UGTT. This policy involved the nationalization of virtually all of the economy. Of course political change at the top was not made democratically and Bourguiba put an end to this orientation in 1969 in an authoritarian manner. However, this federation has always tolerated in its midst unions taking more or less radical positions, and has never found itself in danger from doing so.

Unionization, at least in state enterprises, is very significant in Tunisia. For example, in 2009, the unionization rate in the post office and in telecommunications was about 50%, and of the order of 70% in secondary education. After independence, the growing importance of the UGTT in economic policy, through the actions of its secretary general, Ahmed Ben Salah, pushed the country toward the adoption of collectivist economic measures. In 1961, the political leaders opted for this strategy and began to expand state control in all areas of the economy. This shift was marked by two important decisions. The first was the creation of a large Ministry of Planning, to which the Ministries of the Economy, Finance, and Agriculture, as well as Trade and Industry were added. Ben Salah took charge and thus had control over all economic policy. The second is the adoption of a development plan which was in force for ten years (1962-1971), a plan based on the resolutions of the UGTT congress of 1956. The main objectives of this plan were economic decolonization, improving the living standards of the population, reducing dependence on foreign capital (and thus for more self-reliance) and the creation of a national market. This phase saw an accelerated process of collectivization, especially in the agricultural sector.

In May 1964, the National Assembly decreed the expropriation of land in foreign hands - owned primarily by Italian and French families - in order to create 300 state cooperative farms. France froze all financial assistance to Tunisia, plunging the country into a serious economic crisis. In 1966, Bourguiba toured Europe, launching the negotiations which lead to the signing of an initial commercial agreement on 28 July 1969 in Tunis. This was

however a paradox, since the rate of collectivization by then had reached 90% in agriculture. In August, the public sector included wholesale and retail trade, a significant portion of industry and the banking sector; transport, electricity and mines, already under state control. Only the tourist sector was left to private management.

The UGTT has always faced a dilemma since the end of the 1960s:

- it must either assume the functions assigned to it by the state, and thus filter out the requests of its members and defuse the demands of its base. In doing so, it is outflanked by the actions of regional and local unions and by non-unionized workers.
- or else, it identifies itself with the social protests, if only to contain them. And then it risks running afoul of the authorities and undermining the interests of the union cronies of the regime.

In the 1970s, growth was accompanied by a change in social composition, characterized by the diversification and development of a skilled blue and white collar work force and by a layer of young and dynamic entrepreneurs associated with foreign capital. Growth was not benefiting the whole population. Regional disparities between the west and the Sahel coast on one hand, and between the north and the south on the other, as well as between town and country, were deepening along with social inequalities.

In January 1977, a social contract was drawn up by the various social partners – the UGTT and the employers association (Utica) - but also by the PSD (which would become the RCD) and the government... But the evolution of the conjuncture conditions alters the terms of the contract: starting in 1977, the sharp rise in consumer prices sets off “wildcat” movements.

At the end of the year, the deepening of social tension impacts the structure of the UGTT. Habib Achour, the union’s general secretary, resigns from the Central Committee of the PSD. On 22 January 1978, the Administrative Commission of the UGTT decides on a 24-hour general strike for 26 January. The results: 400 injured, 51 dead according to official sources; the national leadership, including Habib Achour, arrested and sentenced; hundreds of activists and union organizers arrested all over the country. A pseudo-congress is organized to take over the union structures and install a new leadership, directly related to the PSD. But a war of position is organized to defend the autonomy of the union and, for the first time since independence, a break with the ruling party takes place

After this first social warning, the Gafsa affair (cf. above) occurs in January 1980. An armed commando of Tunisians trained in Libya but entering the country by way of Algeria, seizes the city as a starting point for an insurgency which was intended to spread. The choice of Gafsa is not random. It was indeed one of the cities where the urban crisis was simmering most acutely, crystallizing all the spatial and social imbalances in Tunisia. For Bourguiba, the warning was serious, and in March 1980, he set in motion a controlled process of greater social and political opening. The state allows the UGTT to proclaim its independence.

A period of calm in 1981-1983, marked by agreements for wage increases, ran up against the worsening economic situation and the implementation of the Sixth Plan (1982-1986), in the context of a pullback by the state and a policy of real prices. In October 1983, the state decided to remove the subsidy for cereals and related products, beginning in 1984. The result is a doubling of their consumer price. In the last week of December, the government formally announces its decision. Riots, known as the “couscous revolt”, began in the south, spread throughout the country, and reached their climax in the capital. The demonstrators targeted symbols of luxury and the state. The regime was forced to use the army. There were dozens of deaths and hundreds of injured. Finally, Bourguiba decided to cancel the increase and restored calm. Nevertheless, while helped by a good cereal harvest in 1985,

the government could not curb the balance of payments deficit. It decided on the necessity of a severe wage freeze, which was met with the hostility of the UGTT.

Strike actions resumed in August 1985. The government, helped by the anti-Libyan consensus which arose in reaction to an expulsion of 30,000 Tunisian workers from Libya, decided to bring the union to heel. After forcibly ousting all the regional leaderships and again sentencing Habib Achour to years in prison, and after having stripped the legitimate leadership of all its resources, the PSD could then, in January 1987, organize an extraordinary congress of a normalized UGTT. The autonomy won and recognized in 1981 was over. The regime cut itself off from its main channel of communication with civil society and from its main safety valve.

OTHER FORCES IN PLAY

The army

The Tunisian army has neither the military, economic and political significance of the Egyptian and Algerian armies, nor the civil war experience of the Algerian army. Nonetheless, despite its modest size and weight, it appeared during the events as a force for stability, apparently independent of the power of Ben Ali, and even as a force for change.

Formed at independence, on 20 March 1956, from a staff of 9,500 soldiers and officers taken over from the French army, the army already had 20,000 men in 1972, with an additional 10,000 men in the paramilitary forces. During this period, its single exploit was its inability, in 1961, to recapture the naval base at Bizerte, which was still occupied by the French army.

Today its membership consists of:

	Army	Air Force	Navy	Paramilitary
Membership	27,000	4,000	4,500	9,000
Equipment	143 combat tanks 355 light armoured cars	27 fighter planes 16 transport aircraft 57 training aircraft 30 helicopters	50 vessels including 23 light and medium patrol boats	

There are, in all four services combined, ten ranks of senior officers, five ranks NCOs and four ranks of enlisted men. Military service has been compulsory for men since 1957 and since 2003 for women but only 30% of each age cohort actually undergoes it.

The Tunisian army has not had a chance to perform brilliantly in any war against its powerful neighbours, Algeria and Libya, but has participated in numerous international operations for the UN (Africa, Asia and Kosovo). However, in January 1980, it recaptured the town of Gafsa when it was occupied by opposition forces supported by Libya. Domestically, it intervened in October 1977 in Ksar Hellal and in January 1984 in Tunis.

Since then, the army has stood by, gaining prestige for its neutrality, a prestige that improved further when it refused to participate in the repression against demonstrations. It appears as a guarantor of both stability of the process of change.

The Islamists

Ennahdha (Renaissance Party) is by far the most important Islamist political party. Formerly known as the Islamic Tendency Movement (ITM) from 1981 to 1989, it had won 17% of the votes (some say even 30%) in the legislative elections of 1989. Tolerated in the

early years of Ben Ali's regime, its supporters underwent fierce repression after those elections and after the electoral victory of the FIS in Algeria in June 1990, allowing Ben Ali to conjure up the spectre of Islamism. Its founder Rached Ghannouchi went into exile in London in 1989, after the legalization of the movement. Between 1990 and 1995, 30,000 of its members were imprisoned and tortured

Most activists were released in 2004. In the 1990s, the only oppositional figure who supported the Islamists was Moncef Marzouki, president of the Tunisian League of Human Rights (TLHR), spokesman for the National Council For Freedoms in Tunisia, and president of CPR (centre left) beginning in 2001. Themselves victims of the repression, the opposition parties (secular and democratic left) gradually opened a dialogue with Ennahdha. They went as far as to form, in 2005, the October 18th Coalition for Freedoms, an alliance of the Progressive Democratic Party, the social democrats of the Democratic Forum for Labour and Freedom, the PDP of Najib Chebbi (liberals and former "Marxists"), the Islamist Ennahdha and the PCOT (Communist Workers Party of Tunisia), along with some associations and still more minority parties.

The thousands who came to welcome Rached Ghannouchi at the airport when he returned from exile easily overshadowed the hundreds of opponents of the values of the Islamic Party. Legalized in early March, Ennahdha has thus re-emerged. On 6 March, several hundred supporters gathered in the Ezzahra neighbourhood in the southern suburbs of Tunis, to attend the first public demonstration of the party. Speeches and notable guests such as Ali Ben Romdhane, the UGTT general secretary and himself close to Ennahdha, were on the programme. Veiled women on one side and men on the other kicked off the campaign for the elections to the Constituent Assembly...

Even though Ennahdha played no role during the uprising, it could benefit from the divisions and from the low visibility of the sixty parties running candidates in the elections on 24 July.

During the uprising, Ennahdha remained discreet and moderate (even arguing in particular for the principle of gender equality in the future Constituent Assembly) and was legalized after a 30-year ban. Beginning in February 2011, an opinion poll gave Rached Ghannouchi, the Islamist leader, 1.5% of the vote. It is nonetheless hard to know what will become of the organization; this is how Nicolas Beau, a Tunisia specialist, describes the situation: *"It is true that only the Islamists seem to have a clear strategy; they passively enter the UGTT, the only known and recognized real force in the country; they create multiple parties as their fronts. They move into the social arena, particularly in the south. Further, Saudi Arabia with one hand protects the former dictator, who fled to Jeddah, and with the other hand financially aids Racheid Ghannouchi, the leader of Ennahdha. Ghannouchi issues soothing statements at every occasion. Local demonstrations against the arrival of Hillary Clinton or for closing brothels keep the Islamist flame burning."*

In the view of the researcher Pierre Vermeren, *"there is a strong Islamist sensibility within the population: the religious discourse, moral or moralistic, feeds on the denunciation of corruption and the economic behaviour of various mafias. The soil is very favourable"* and *"Tunisia is subject, like all countries in the region, to the ideology promoted by the major Gulf media"* (but, of course, this includes Al Jazeera).

What is certain, however, is that the Tunisians who identify with traditional and religious values are increasingly assertive. The most visible outward sign is the growing number of women who wear the veil. Beginning in 2004, more and more women began wearing the veil, defying the repression of the Ben Ali forces, and imposing their will on various administrations. Sales of Islamic clothing have expanded significantly. Today about 30% of women are veiled. By contrast, those who remain committed the values of the

emancipation of women are rarely seen. On 29 January 2011, only one hundred of them marched in Tunis to demand gender equality and secularism.

Another variant of political Islam is the Hizb ut-Tahrir, which presents itself as a non-violent organization, and is fairly active in Tunisia. It was born out of a split from the Muslim Brotherhood. This movement operates in over 70 countries and has several million members and supporters. Its purpose is to establish a new caliphate and Sharia across the Muslim world. This movement has not been legalized by the transitional government

The political parties

Some opposition parties were allowed under Ben Ali but were only shells. In fact they represented only very limited circles, and only in Tunis; in short, a fake opposition.

Today, there are:

- The Movement of Socialist Democrats (MDS) of Ahmed Khaskhoussi;
- the Popular Unity Party (PUP);
- the Pan-Arab Socialist Party of Hassine Hammami;
- the social democrats of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) of Maya Jribi;
- the Social Liberal Party (SLP) of Hosni Lahmar;
- the Unionist Democratic Union (UDU), the party of Ahmed Inoubli;
- the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (DFLL);
- the Social Democrats of Mustapha Ben Jaafar;
- the Green Party for Progress (GPP), an ecological party, led by Mongi Khamassi.

Still further parties include Ettajdid (Renewal, the former Tunisian Communist Party), a centre-left party and two left *groupuscules*; the Party of Patriotic and Democratic Labour (PPDL) and the Communist Democrats (CD), who were the only ones who demarcated themselves, in 2006, from Islam by declaring their “*absolute refusal of any joint action with the Islamists, the protagonists of a project based on the manipulation and exploitation of religion.*”

According to figures provided by the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior in late April 2011, 63 new parties had been created since January 14 and this figure will be revised upwards, given that there are currently 49 pending applications. The ministry said that 66 applications were denied by his office because they did not meet legal requirements. That said there is no need to worry - after the death of Franco, the number of parties fielding candidates in the Spanish elections was about 300.

THE OFFENSIVE OF US DIPLOMACY

For years, the U.S. supported authoritarian regimes in the Middle East to ensure stability in the region, but things have changed. If the first signs were visible under the presidency of George W. Bush (speech, 6 November 2003), the policy turn became clearer when Obama arrived in power. He has continued, in all his speeches in Africa, but also in the rest of the world, to advocate democracy, as he did in his speech in Cairo on 4 June 2009, during which he also called on youth to “remake this world”. It is therefore not surprising that starting on 14 January 2011; the American president has taken the side of the demonstrators and renewed his call for democracy and for elections.

All this came down to support work, throughout the duration of the uprising in Tunisia, and to taking up the cause of the demonstrators. And this was also true for Egypt, even though it was an ally. This attitude contrasts with that of French diplomacy. Two days before Ben Ali fled; the Minister of Defence offered him the expertise of his police to manage the uprising, in a desperate attempt to save the regime. The former colonial power supported the authoritarian regime until the last moment, not wanting in any way take the risk of compromising business ties. Painfully, and with a cabinet reshuffle, the French government

made a 180 degree turn to align itself with the US position. This policy change opened a period when the US put pressure on its former allies to install democratic regimes, calling into question its former alliances in the Middle East. Washington's foreign policy recognizes the reality of regional instability and runs the risk of even initially amplifying it.

This is why it causes gnashing of teeth among the other major countries of the world. Its objectives are, in the medium and long term, the consolidation of capitalist domination in a destabilized region, increasing US influence and modernizing states swept up in the wave of rebellions by enlarging their social base and extending the governance of bourgeois law. The dominance of bourgeois law makes it possible to allow it to separate the permanence of the state from the vagaries of the political personnel who periodically take over or lose control of the executive. The "new" American diplomatic shift returns to the foundations undermined by the Cold War and by the need to conduct a foreign policy determined by the single and necessarily reductionist logic of forming anti-Russian fronts and alliances. But this policy is certainly not universal. The United States is not willing to entertain regime change in Saudi Arabia, for example. Its position in Bahrain, where it asks the protesters to come to terms with the regime, is the Achilles heel of its new stance in the Middle East.

The sudden departure from Tunisia of thousands of young proletarians, taking advantage of a relaxation of border controls, is the most obvious sign of their position, which remains essentially defensive. It also signals a practical defiance of the promises made by the capitalists of the entire world and by the new masters in Tunis. Understanding the new geopolitical situation is essential for the emergence of an independent and autonomous labour movement in the region.

WORKING CLASS DEMANDS AND LIBERTARIAN ASPIRATIONS

The tension over employment we described earlier, and especially among young graduates, fed into a ferment that was not taken seriously by the state, whose sole response was repression. In Tunisia, a personal recommendation was the rule for access to any type of job. The system of corruption and blackmail over jobs made it possible to divide proletarians for decades. The omnipresent police, unsanitary prisons, the bullying of relatives and torture in the police stations rounded out the system designed to crush even the bravest. On the other hand, the state was engaged in tracking down the flourishing informal economy, in order to increase tax revenues. This practice involved harassment of a large part of the population, from factory workers to business people, by way of the unemployed. Episodes of protest broke out and challenged the repression. In August 2010 in Ben Guerdane, the announced closing of the local border to stop trafficking resulted in a general revolt of the entire population. The police got their revenge by vandalizing, one by one, the shops in the city and making massive arrests. In spite of this, the state pulled back and the border was reopened. Following the immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the first clashes and demonstrations from December to early January focused on demands related to the labour market and the high cost of living.

Whatever the limitations of such demands (the right to work is not a communist slogan), they emerged directly from the Tunisian working class and particularly from its poorest strata, living in the less developed regions of the country and experiencing a high rate of unemployment.

In addition to the formal demands, during various displays of anger, there were acts of reappropriation, by looting, which are the immediate implementation of these demands. The latter have an economic and defensive origin: they appear in response to the global crisis (rising food prices in the region) and to the state of the labour market.

Nonetheless, the first moment of the movement, once it took hold, made it possible to move to political and offensive demands. Even before they were raised, the succession of

illegal demonstrations and clashes with police raised practically the questions of democratic freedoms and the confrontation with an authoritarian state. This ability to channel the movement of libertarian aspirations, till that point merely diffuse in the population, made their expansion beyond the poorest workers to other sectors: workers with less precarious situations, lawyers, the commercial petty bourgeoisie etc.

The defensive movement born in the working class was slowly transformed into a strictly political movement within civil society. If the workers' demands, far from disappearing, remain a driving force in their places of origin, they move into the background. In the foreground, there is a convergence of libertarian aspirations onto one single demand: the end of the Ben Ali regime. One fraction of the ruling group was able to understand the limits of this demand: they prepared to get rid of Ben Ali, not merely to save the state, but to strengthen it by restructuring it.

The announcement of the departure of Ben Ali had several effects. First of all, as a brake on the movement: the less advanced sectors were satisfied with what was seen as a victorious outcome, left the movement, and even turned against it in calls for order. Second, more radical elements moved on to the next level: getting rid of any leaders associated with the Ben Ali regime, beginning with Prime Minister Ghannouchi. Third, while the fight over state power in Tunis continued, a wave of instability shook all levels of society to its depths.

These last two points are transposed and crystallize in particular ways. On the one hand, the young demonstrators for democracy refuse any political recuperation. On the other, in the workplaces, the issue at hand is "getting rid" of the bosses; in high schools, getting rid of principals and teachers. The libertarian aspirations, having converged against Ben Ali and his regime, now spread in an anti-authoritarian sentiment.

All other things being equal, these actions show the same limitations as the call "Ben Ali out" in January, transposing them to another level. Simply ousting leaders or corrupt bosses, without an autonomous will to transform society, only makes for restructuring and the replacement of one leader by another, in the medium to long term. If we limit ourselves to seeing off a CEO, without touching the organization of work - unless we consider Tunisian management to consist only of parasites useless to production - it is obvious that replacing that organization will become necessary. Of course, we should also not reject this phenomenon *en bloc*. The ability to "get rid of" bosses is evidence of a certain level of the balance of forces in various workplaces, and tends to shift fear onto the management's side. Further, these anti-authoritarian expressions often seem linked to demand-based struggles in the workplaces.

The opening of a period of instability leaves the field open to all demands, particularly those of workers, including those who have not participated in the movement. According to Marc Mercier, head of Bonna Tunisie, a subsidiary of BTP, a French company: "*During the revolution, the workers kept the factory. A week later, they demanded a 30% wage increase. A few days later, former members of the RCD, the UGTT and former employees were stationed outside the factory, saying 'No one comes in!' The UGTT guys at the factory were overwhelmed by members of their own union coming from elsewhere to make a better bid. The two sides even threw rocks at each other.*"

WORKERS' STRUGGLES

Before the fall of Ben Ali

We need to look at how the proletariat has handled its most natural weapon: the work stoppage, the strike. We can say that strikes began to appear just after the fall of Ben Ali. Before, during the period from December to mid-January, we found no evidence of strikes. It was primarily the precarious proletariat or the unemployed who, in this phase, swelled the ranks of the agitation attacking the symbols of the domination of Ben Ali and opposing the forces of repression in the streets. The more stable proletarians certainly participated in the demonstrations, but we could find no instance where the cessation of production as such was used explicitly as a means to make the government cave in. This does not mean that production was not disrupted, but the fact was more the result of the curfew and the need for employers to keep the tools of production safe from possible damage, often helped by the workers themselves, as was the case with employees of Tunisia Telecom who defended the company offices, or employees of JAL, the leading European footwear business, which organized security shifts to defend the workshops against any damage.

After the Fall of Ben Ali

Starting in mid-January, the press began to report on strikes in the public sector enterprises but also, to a lesser extent, in the private sector. We can identify two reasons for understanding the development of this strike wave that lasted until the end of February.

One was to put pressure on the choice of politicians. When the hegemony of the RCD was tottering and people were calling for the departure of the governors and other key figures of the regime, regional general or sectorial strikes were called by sector in some districts. There was also the case of the successful strike, but one with purely political goals, at Tunisie Telecom in February, which derailed the listing of the company on the stock market. We can recognize, in this demand for nationalization, a favourite theme of the UGTT.

The other, more promising reason is that once the dictator was gone, the social reasons underlying the ferment found themselves at centre stage. The demands were: enforcement of the laws on working hours, increased wages, and permanent status for the precarious. Subcontracting and insecurity of employment seem to have been particular targets. These few examples from the press are probably only a part of what happened.

The workers of the Faurecia textile factory staged a sit-in 28 January 2011, demanding better working conditions, wage increases and the revision of employment contracts, whose duration is limited to one month or even 15 days. 360 women workers at Fleritex Export (a garment company) struck on February 3, demanding wage increases, the right to permanent status, social security coverage and the payment of overtime and bonuses on time.

In a German assembly plant for electromechanical components where workers struck, 1,500 of them gathered outside the headquarters of the company, demanding the regularization of their deplorable social and professional status, the right to a stable contract, salary increases and the abolition of subcontracting. The Tunis Africa Press Agency quoted several workers stating that the management of this company had been entrusted to people who for years had exploited the staff and forced them to work more than 12 hours a day, without overtime pay or any other remuneration.

Throughout the month, many other cases of work stoppages or strikes lasting several days were reported – the strike of temp workers at Shell and Oilibya, the strike and dock workers at the Regional Transport Company in Bizerte, the strike by employees Italian

company L'Art du Soulier, the strike of the Tunisian Stevedoring and Handling Company, the strike in port of Rades, the blockage at blocking the Gafsa phosphate company.

If these movements seemed to slow in late February, this was undoubtedly due to the bargaining power of unions, which sometimes quickly concluded an agreement permitting the resumption of work. The employees of the Tunis city government, in a statement on 17 February, praised the decisions just taken by their leadership granting permanent status to contract workers and temps. They even decided to donate a day's work "*to contribute to efforts at the national level to meet urgent social grievances*". But in early April they went on strike for their permanent status. This case was not isolated and further strikes occurred in March and April, even as the rhetoric of the government and trade unions was more than ever aimed at the resumption of economic activity, which had slowed at the beginning of the year.

On 24 March, the employees of JAL, totalling 4,500 in Tunisia, violently attacked the CEO of the company over the issue of wages, sequestering him for six hours. "*Some workers tried to enter through the windows, and wanted to attack me with a screwdriver. Honestly, it was very hard*", he told AFP.

Management responded by temporarily closing the three production plants and suspending the payment of wages. Even though the employees returned to work after two weeks, the wage issue may return. "*I've worked here for 12 years and I make only 300 dinars (€150). I don't want an immediate raise. I'd like to at least talk to the CEO about our situation*", Fouad, a 47-year old worker said to a journalist. The bitterness was even greater because on 15 January, the JAL employees were the first to return to work in the entire industrial area of Menzel (Bizerte). The CEO had promised them a bonus of 500 dinars.

Perspectives

The quality of what is happening in Tunisia lies in the fact that the ferment has not been limited to merely getting rid of Ben Ali, but is deeply rooted in the class struggle. We see the unity displayed by the demonstrators in January now giving way to a divide between those who want everything and at once (democracy, pay, living conditions) and those who are pushing for the resumption of business as soon as possible.

The lockout at JAL in late March but also those at the CFTP (Franco-Tunisian Oil Company) on 2 April 2011, at SITEM Electronics and at Union Africaine Garments show that the struggle will be tough, but the workers have been mobilized to make their demands stick for a long time. Many Tunisian proletarians have chosen to do what all workers of the world have been doing since the beginning of capitalism, namely leaving for places where they have a better chance of finding work. They have therefore left Tunisia and are found by the hundreds in French and Italian cities. The welcome they receive contrasts sharply with the enthusiastic rhetoric one hears in those countries about the "Tunisian revolution".

CONCLUSION

For revolutionaries, recent events in Tunisia will long remain an important source of reflection. The richness and ambiguity of the popular movements that have shaken this small Mediterranean country and accelerated history in this major world region and beyond deserve close analysis by militants of the workers' movement. We therefore reject the falsely cut-and-dried, and in fact symmetrical, analyses of these movements as "purely proletarian" or "purely democratic". The Tunisian proletariat is, far more than elsewhere, the real origin of the revolts throughout Middle East. Its revolt against high prices, poverty and unremunerated unemployment made this upheaval possible. A rebellion involving only a few tens of thousands of people at the end of their tether in a forgotten area of the hinterland set off the powder keg.

This was a fire that this same proletariat could not spread before, despite their past struggles at times at least equal in intensity to those of recent months. Soaring food and energy prices, and the inability of the states in the region to quickly grasp the destructive potential of these movements, made the difference. The perception that the ruling classes are emerging faster and in better shape than workers from the financial and budgetary crisis unleashed class hatred. The repression of very determined but, all in all, peaceful demonstrations did the rest. Instead of stopping the proletarians, this convinced them all the more that the only collective solution is in the street and that the only worthwhile fight is one that does not retreat when faced with the use of force by the state and its armed bodies. The riot and the attempted insurgencies became commonplace and are still marking the rhythm of social life in these countries.

Every stratum of civil society which had no stake in the particular political form of bourgeois rule in Tunisia quickly joined the movement, bringing to it disparate aspirations and demands, often conflicting with the original inspiration of a decidedly proletarian cast. Repression became slicker, thus hampering any real class polarization within the movement. The lowest common denominator slid, over time, from the days of the defensive struggle of violent eruptions by the proletariat against its degraded material living conditions, to an interclassist battle dominated by the demand for political democracy and the rejection of "corruption" of the ruling group, a battle which also used illegal street mobilizations. The weak presence, in the revolt, of organized segments of the factory-based working class has certainly contributed to the dilution of the class struggle into the democratic struggle to streamline and modernize the domination of capital.

This does not imply that the workers in revolt have ceased to exist by themselves, or that they have stopped their advance to yield to their temporary allies. The social and political instability that prevails in Tunisia, the urge to get out of the country, also expressed with rage and despair by tens of thousands of young poor people, the hopefully long-term weakening of the state, are all signals that indicate that the class struggle has not been extinguished and that its potential remains fundamentally intact. The presence of a factory-based working class, relatively larger than those of other countries in the region, aroused by the social agitation, is certainly a strong factor of hope. The tradition of combativity, never broken, in the country where the whole Middle East ferment began, is certainly another. Conversely, the absence of any autonomous expression by the proletariat, coupled with the successful facelift of an omnipresent union as well as the resurgence of an organized political Islam, imposes on the subordinate classes a terrain of political confrontation which is not their own.

The confiscation of the terrain of working-class politics carried out so far with a certain success by these two currents is now the main obstacle to be overcome. Surmounting this obstacle is in the hands of all proletarians in revolt, but the prime responsibility for the

outcome falls to the factory-based working class. If they fail, in their autonomous struggles, to re-establish the politics of the rebellion, which means centring them firmly in the practical radical critique of the relations of production, such politics will never be fully political and will not, moreover, be efficaciously defensive. The limbo of the short-lived riot, which forgets its specific social reason along the way, threatens the proletarian advance in this country.

This is more true in Tunisia than elsewhere, because it is in this country that the chances are best of simultaneously going beyond the defensive nature of the movement (which has been only partially taken up), as well as its hybrid and incomplete political form. It is also in Tunisia that such riots have been more numerous than elsewhere since 1978. Failing this, capital will achieve a more solid equilibrium because it will be built on a purely political victory, rather than a military one. In this case, and only in this case, can we include the recent struggles in Tunisia as fully and definitively part of the process of the democratic restructuring of the state.

To avoid this outcome, with the worst political consequences for the proletariat in the region, it is imperative to encourage any attempt to organize, even by a small minority, proletarian goals and anger into groupings which escape union control and which assert the working class content of the movement. These political organizations of the base do not currently exist, because the most serious fighters for the class have allowed themselves to be absorbed by the dynamics of direct confrontation with the apparatus of repression and by the work of purging the “corrupt” elements of the former regime. Instead of acting on the rock-solid basis of independent political struggle, the use of force by the proletariat becomes a substitute for such a struggle. Social pressure mounts, but the political safety valve established within the state and in the political and trade-union organizations, remains in place. Although it has been transformed and renewed piecemeal, this safety valve is working very well. In this context, as in Egypt, the proletarians will most likely interpret the greater freedom they have won to put a piece of paper in the ballot box as a huge gain. The key question is to know how long this expanded bourgeois democracy will succeed in sowing illusions. We have no answer to this question, but the simple fact that it can legitimately be asked is a huge improvement over the recent past.

APPENDICES

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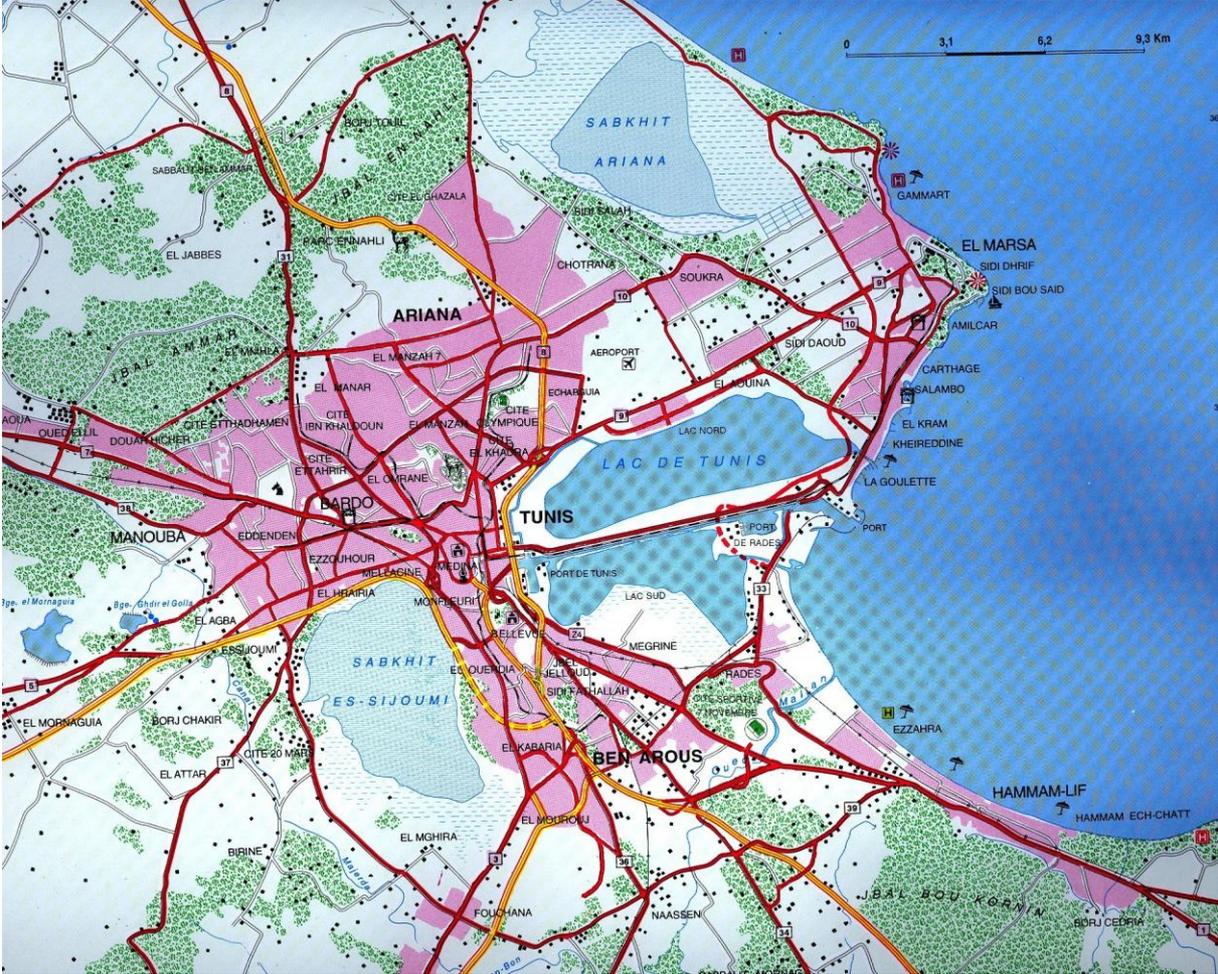
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Maps

Tunisia



Tunis



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“By cowardly giving way in their everyday conflict with capital, they [the workers] would certainly disqualified themselves from the initiating of any larger movement”

Karl MARX,
Wages, Prices and Profit, 1865