



The Surprising Revolution

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SUMMARY

Tunisian revolution was surprise for all actors. Authoritarian president Ben Ali had never thought about any possibility that his presidentship would end before his death. At the beginning people at streets could neither imagine that their movement nor change a state system. Western countries and institutions considered Ben Ali an ally because of war on terror/illegal immigration and secular tendencies. A/m article tried to show origin of revolution and its chronology. Huge corruption, weak economy and bad social system which were not able take care of new persons on labour market caused intensive tensions in society. We were able to see many actors and their examples of hopeless conducts. These sacrifices, esp. case of Mohammed Buazizi, were truly ignition spark of whole process.

KEY WORDS

Tunisia, Ben Ali, Revolution, Arab Spring

The Tunisian revolution surprised all — the European Union, France, the United States of America and other MENA states. It was the first revolution in Arab world and its example caused among others revolutions in other Arab countries (i. a. Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, etc.). These series anti-government protests, revolutions and uprisings has been called Arab Spring in connection with Prague Spring 1968 and Revolution of 1848 known as the Springtime of Nations. Tunisia is the most successful example of that process, although the state after Ben Ali faces many problems (corruption, bureaucracy, economic problems etc.). I would like to say something more about the origins of Tunisian transformation in b/m pages.

The Tunisian revolution has been called by many different names. It has been approached through flower as a jasmine or/and animal (Black Swan or Butterfly). Other metaphors related to some technologies of social media (Twitter, Facebook) and more traditional mass media as Al-Jazeera. Therefore, there are many different names for the revolution: the Jasmin Revolution, the Dignity Revolution, the Sidi Bouzid Revolution, the Buazizi Revolution, the Internet Revolution, the Facebook Revolution, the Twitter Revolution, the Wikileaks Revolution, the Al-Jazeera Revolution etc.¹ Some

1 N. GANA, *Introduction*. in: N. GANA (ed), *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution. Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburgh 2013, p. 7.

of these different terms referred to the important role of the social media (Twitter and Facebook) and mass media (Al-Jazeera) to the spreading the revolution. The Wikileaks Revolution had the connection to the publicized cables on Julian Assange's website Wikileaks (named as Tunileaks) which informed about wanton lifestyle and incredible corruption of Ben Ali family and family of his wife Leila Trabelsi.



WESTERNERS AND BEN ALI

Before the revolution, the international community, the Western media, the World Bank (WB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) described Tunisia as a model of economic growth and political stability. However, under the mask of stability and prosperity were mass youth unemployment, huge poverty, large corruption, rising prices and inability for any changes.

Although, Ben Ali nullified the title of presidency for life and limited the position of the president to two five-year terms in 1988, he ran his third term in 1998. The fourth term followed after referendum in 2002. It cancelled term limits and raised the age limit to seventy-five. He won fifth term in 2009 and was already preparing the ground to run for sixth term in 2014.

As I mentioned before, Ben Ali was such a guarantee of stability for Western countries. He was an ally in war on Terror after 2001. As said by the Robert F. Godec, former US Ambassador in Tunisia, Western states wanted to prevent al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and other extremist groups from establishing a foothold in Tunisia.² Ben Ali found in the War on Terror and the so-called Islamist (aka terrorist) threat a convenient ruse to recast allegations of human right violation, along with various abuses of democracy and freedom of speech, as part of the global effort to fight terrorism.³ He was honoured in February 2004 when he was invited in the White House where he was qualified as an ally in the global war against the terrorism by the George W. Bush.

However, the biggest supporter for Tunisian president was France. The relations between Tunisia and France has been special since the Tunisian independence in 1956. They supported former president Bourguiba (1956 and 1987) and Ben Ali (1987– 2011) for strategic security as well as neo-colonial and economic reasons. France helped Tunisia to access to development loans and financial assistance via international institutions (i. a. the IMF, the WB and the EU). On the other hand, Tunisia was a loyal ally and cheap source of labour. France was the most important trading partner. Ties between these countries were very special in the era of the French president Nicolas Sarkozy because of criminalization of political Islam.⁴ The formation of the EU has changed the situation just little. However, the role of France in Euro-Med partnership and free trade agreements has been undoubtable. Also, France stands at the Ben Ali side almost till the end of his era. French Minister for Foreign Affairs,

2 N. GANA, *Introduction*, p. 4.

3 *Ibidem*, p. 5

4 A. A. KALLANDEER, "Friends of Tunisia": *French Economic and Diplomatic Support of Tunisian Authoritarianism*. In: N. GANA (ed.), *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution. Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburg 2013, p. 104.



Michèle Alliot-Marie, offered to Ben Ali “to dispatch French security forces to Tunis to shore up the unpopular regime”⁵

ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY OF TUNISIA

At the beginning of new millennium the Tunisian fiscal policy was rated as good and effective. Tunisia was awarded by the stable rating of BBB/Baa2. An inflation has been lower than 3% per annum up until 2008. The country was also successful reduce its debts. It was supposed that the country would be able to achieve its millennium goals in key development areas as education, health, life expectancy, etc.⁶ However, the 2007 report of the IMF warned that, despite the relatively impressive economic performance in terms of growth, this was insufficient to absorb the large number of new entrants onto the job market every year. Demographic pressure to the social security system was also danger for the state. In 2010 the report of the same institution said that the Tunisian are overly dependent on the EU for exports, tourism receipts, remittances and FDI.⁷ Therefore Tunisia was highly vulnerable to European economic woes.⁸ The Global economic crisis in 2007–2008 meant decline in all monitored indicators. Rising of unemployment was connected also with restructalisation of the labour market away from labour-intensive activities like agriculture and textiles towards more competitive sectors. There were also lack of investment into this sector for creation new jobs’ position which could rise taxes for helping social secure system. However, Tunisia was mentioned in reports of the international financial institutions as an example of sufficient financial policy in the region. At the end of era before the revolution the poverty, youth employment was the most dangerous for country. 87% of food prices were unregulated, last 13% was staple components for the poor, such a semolina. Tunisia was also vulnerable for changing the prices of food in international markets, because they imported more than half of their cereal needs. Red meat and fish were too expensive for most of Tunisians. Between 2002 and 2009 the expenses for regulation prices rose for 7,5 percent. Tunisia subsidized also prices of energy and fuel. Before the revolution 45.6 percent of Tunisian society was described by the African Development Bank as a Floating middle class, that is living on between 2 and 4 dollars per day, and are liable to fall in poverty in the event of economic shocks. It has to be also mentioned that same institution stated that 85 percent of Tunisians were already in debt (average 2000 dollars)⁹

The Tunisian labour force was relatively highly educated. The public sector, which had traditionally employed young graduates, was under fiscal pressures, and an ac-

5 N. GANA, *Introduction*, p. 6.

6 E. C. MURPHY, *Under the Emperor’s Neoliberal Clothes! Why the International Financial Institutions Got It Wrong in Tunisia*, in: N. GANA (ed.), *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution. Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburg 2013, p. 38.

7 M. BRTNICKÝ, *Evropská unie a prostor arabského středomoří. Blízky partner nebo nebezpečná periferie?*, Olomouc 2016.

8 E. C. MURPHY, *Under the Emperor’s Neoliberal Clothes*, p. 39.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 42.

celerating privatization program reducing job opportunities further. In 2008 was unemployment 14.2 percent. Most of them were young people and new graduates.¹⁰ The young unemployment was more horrible in rural and inland areas (almost 40 percent). New jobs were created almost in coastal cities (in sector of services). The Tunisian economy was not increase so quickly to create enough job's opportunities for these persons. Moreover, business environment was based on privilege and unequal application (Trabelsi clan) of the rules of the game and has resulted on less competition as it was mentioned in World Bank Country Partnership Strategy in 2009.¹¹ Without any structural changes was known that there is huge problem. In January 2011 the report by Global Financial Integrity stated that the financial loss because of corruption, bribery, trade mispricing, and criminal activity was average 1 billion dollars per year.¹²



BUAZIZI'S SELF-IMMOLATION

Almost each town in modern Tunisia has own Buazizi's street now. He became a symbol of the revolution. His sacrifice is still reminded in some speeches of president K. Saïed. Who was Mohammed Buazizi? He was a fruit and vegetable street vendor who had to drop out from high school to be able to provide food for his family and sibling in Sidi Bouzid. Sidi Bouzid is a town with forty-eight thousand inhabitants located in the centre of Tunisia. It is also centre of governorate Sidi Bouzid. The economy of the governorate depends on agriculture and belongs to the poorest in the country.

Mohammed Buazizi was constantly harassed by the local police because he did not have a vendor's permit and he did not make enough money to offer bribes to the officers. On 16th December 2010 the police confiscated his cart and electronic scale and insulted and mistreated him. The following day he went to the governor's office to complain, but he was refused to see nor listen to him. So, he bought a can of gasoline, doused himself in front of the municipal headquarters of Sidi Bouzid, and set himself ablaze.

After his self-immolation the protest started in front of local buildings. Family and tribal ties was the most important for spreading the information about his death. Moreover, local syndicalists and political opponents had not forgotten nor forgiven the brutality with which the riot police repressed protests of Regueb and Sidi Bouzid farmers against the abuses of the National Agricultural Bank in June 2010. Therefore, they used that possibility to support the protest. The early slogans were about social demands (work, freedom and national dignity).¹³ Later there were slogans against the ruling family the Trabelsis (scruffy Trabelsis to spare some bread for the poor)¹⁴ or removing the president. The evolution of these slogans is connected with spreading information among other part of the population and made the protests massive. News about Buazizi's social protest was published on the social medias. There was

10 E. C. MURPHY, *Under the Emperor's Neoliberal Clothes*, p. 43.

11 Ibidem, p. 44.

12 Ibidem, p. 50.

13 N. GANA, *Introduction*, p. 10.

14 Ibidem, p. 10.



also information that the Buazizi was unemployed university student. This information helped also to spread the protest among the students.

However, there was also another vendor who set himself in fire before Buazizi. It was Abdesslem Trimech inside the city hall in Monastir on 3th March 2010. His cart was confiscated by the police and his demand to meet with the city mayor was rejected.¹⁵ Third case occurred on 20th November 2010 when Chemseddine al-Hani made some suicide in the nearby town of Metlaoui.

In February 2010 unemployed youth manifested to obtain jobs from the Tunisian administration. This demonstration went on the rampage and was suppressed by the police. Other several months of disturbances happened in Gafsa because of poor living conditions. In August 2010 there was violent clashes between police and protesters in Ben Gardane close to Tunisian-Libyan borders when the Libyan regime first increased taxes on goods crossing the border and then temporarily closed the border crossing.¹⁶

EVOLUTION OF PROTESTS

Around 17th December 2010, a few people on Facebook started to share videos from Sidi Bouzid. They were organized in a closed Facebook group which was later connected with two major Tunisian Facebook Pages (around 800.000 members). Facebook was effective platform for sharing information because of its speed of spreading information, large impact in society (almost 20% of population) and staying outside of censors.¹⁷ The publication and translation into French and Arabic of the cables of the US embassy in Tunis by Nawaat.com was key factor and also highly influential. That information was also published on Facebook pages. Connection of some Facebook users and Al-Jazeera journalist helped to spread information about revolts to that high influent mass media. Al-Jazeera could bring other information than official censored mass-media which tried to compromised the credibility of social networks as a new media source. At the end of third week of protests, after the massacre in Kasserine was created The News Agency of the Protests of the Tunisian Street on Facebook as a semi-professional news platform. However, that page was blocked by the administrators after the announcement of the old regime's supporters very soon. Therefore, the creators of that page made another one which was not deleted.

On 20th December, the minister for rural development Mohamed al-Nouri al-Juwayni came to Sidi Bouzid and promised some funds for a new local employment scheme. On a same day protests were organized in towns of Meknassy, Sidi Ali Ben Aoun and Menzel Bouzaïene. All of them are located in same governorate as Sidi Bouzid.

On 22th December, died another protester Houcine Neji during the demonstration in Sidi Bouzid. He threw himself on high-voltage electricity cables after shouting out "I don't want any more of this poverty".¹⁸ The violent erupted after his death when the

15 N. GANA, *Introduction*, p. 12.

16 F. VOLPI, *Revolution and Authoritarianism in North Africa*. London 2017, p. 76.

17 T. KAHLAOUI, *The Powers of Social Media*. In: N. GANA (ed.), *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution. Contexts, Architects, Prospects*. Edinburg 2013, p. 153.

18 F. VOLPI, *Revolution and Authoritarianism in North Africa*, p. 78.

riot police started to use a tear gas at stone-throwing protesters. On the other hand, protesters set fire to police vehicles.

On 24th December, some part of intervening police units was afraid by the protesters and started to fire live ammunition into the crowd. Young demonstrator Mohamed Ammari was killed and several others seriously wounded. One of them named Chawki Hidri died a few days later. The regime tried to explain this situation as a self-defence. However, the demonstrators were unsatisfied with this explanation.

On 25th and 26th December, demonstration spread in other provincial towns in nearby governorates (Bizerte, Sfax, Kairouan, Meknessi, Regueb, Souk Jedid, Ben Gardane, Medenine, Siliana and Sousse). The protesters focused on police brutality and economical demands. It is also time of first manifestation in capital city of Tunis. However, socio-economical demands started to have its political dimension, but nobody talked about the changing of political system. Demonstration fully reached the capital city on 27th December. Protests in Tunis took place mostly in the Qasbah Government Square and Avenue Habib Bourghiba.

On 28th December, the president Ben Ali had his first speech on TV. He declared that these protesters were unacceptable because they damaged economic development.¹⁹ He warned that the force of law would be used to punish the protesters and blamed unnamed foreign interference for fanning hatred. However, the chiefs of governorates of Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba and Zaghuan were removed after his TV-speech. Minister for trade and handicraft, the minister of communications and the minister of religious affairs were replaced, although none of them were key figures.

On 3rd January 2011, the situation became more violent in the governorate of Kasserine when the forces used lethal force again. After that clashes Tunisian General Workers Union (UGTT) took a part of Tunisian protests when the head of organization declared on 8th January, that they supported the demands of the population and demanded release of all protesters from jails.²⁰ However, the regime started to use lethal power against the protesters often. By 10th January was the official dead toll in provinces Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid twenty-one dead. The most violent confrontations were in Kasserine, Thala and Regueb. Shooting protesters had changed the situation, too. Political slogans were more often.

On 10th January, the second presidential speech on TV occurred. Ben Ali accused unnamed criminals of acts of terrorism that caused the raising death toll. He insisted how much he and his government made for good socioeconomic conditions of the country. He promised creating of 300000 jobs before the end of 2012 and guaranteed full employment of all graduated who have been unemployed for over two years.²¹ He promised political liberalization that political parties would be more responsive to demands of the citizens. However, the Tunisian authorities tried to block social networking sites such a Facebook after his speech.

His concessions were out of reality these days. The UGTT and the Progressive Democratic Party called for a general strike on 12th January. Though Ben Ali speech

19 Ch. ALEXANDER, *Tunisia. From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*. Second edition, London 2016, p. 78.

20 F. VOLPI, *Revolution and Authoritarianism in North Africa*, p. 100.

21 *Ibidem*, p. 102.



the riots continued in many Tunisian cities. On 12th January, protesters attacked with stone-throwing government buildings in Tunis. The night-time curfew was extended also for the capital city. Same day the prime minister Ghannouchi announced that the Minister of interior was replaced by the president and all persons would be released from jails who were not involved in looting. He said that Ben Ali had given instruction to set up a committee of inquiry into the abuses by security forces.²²

On 13th January, there was the third presidential speech on TV. He tried to save his power with many concessions. He used a colloquial Tunisian dialect in an effort to convince ordinary Tunisians that he was close to them.²³ He focused on political roots of the manifestation. He stated that he understood rebels. He told about a press freedom, an end of censorship, the freedom to express political views and organizations peaceful political demonstrations and reformation codes. He promised that he would finish his presidential mandate at the end of his term. However, it was not enough for protesters. The president or his allies tried to persuade the head of army General Ammar for using lethal force against protesters on 13th January. General Ammar refused.

On 14th January protesters got access to the roof of the Interior Ministry. President had to think about the worst possibility. Earlier this week his wife and his two daughters left the capital and state. Persons around president warned him that protesters might to kill him. Firstly, he thought about leaving Tunisia towards France, but his former ally refused him enter. On same day he took his private flight to the second option — Saudi Arabia, where he stayed until his death in asylum. Tunisians started to write new chapter of their history.

CONCLUSION

Tunisian republic before revolution represented classical authoritative regime. The president Ben Ali was the man who tried to hold his power until his death. His wife and her family (the Trabelsi clan) privatized country. Every part of life was controlled by the state. Ben Ali stood out as an ally for Western because of war on terror and illegal immigration. However, he was not able to took care for his Tunisians. Massive young unemployment, high prices and poverty were detonator which blew up in 2010. Acts that started as social indictments of the state changed soon to demands on political freedoms. Ben Ali did not understand this process and new power of the street caused that he was forced to escaped to Saudi Arabia on 14th January 2011. The Western countries were surprised but they had to talk with new Tunisian political power. Very soon they appreciated the Tunisian revolution as something special²⁴, the beginning of new era, the beginning of Arab Spring.

22 Ch. ALEXANDER, *Tunisia, From Stability to Revolution in the Magreb*, p. 80; F. VOLPI, *Revolution and Authoritarianism in North Africa*, p. 104.

23 F. VOLPI, *Revolution and Authoritarianism in North Africa*, p. 104.

24 The United State Congress gave a standing ovation to the Tunisian revolution on 25th January 2011.