

This article was downloaded by: [Habib Ayeb]

On: 29 September 2011, At: 17:24

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Review of African Political Economy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/crea20>

Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution

Habib Ayeb ^a

^a Social Research Centre, American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt

Available online: 26 Aug 2011

To cite this article: Habib Ayeb (2011): Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution, *Review of African Political Economy*, 38:129, 467-479

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2011.604250>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

BRIEFING

Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution

Habib Ayebe*

Social Research Centre, American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt

The Tunisian revolution has clearly constituted a real political surprise inside as well as outside the country. No specialist, observer or politician, Tunisian or non Tunisian, really predicted this revolution, either for Tunisia or for any other country of the region. Of course, many have anticipated social rebellions and outbursts of unrest in one country or another, particularly as a response to sudden price increases – as happened in Algeria at the end of 2010 – or to other governmental political decisions or actions. But no one expected a revolution.

This article explores some important aspects of the Tunisian revolution and in particular its two principal and determinant aspects: the first aspect deals with the geography of the revolution and consists in ‘reconstructing’ the process in time and space, with a close look at the series of events since January 2008, beginning with the strikes and demonstrations in the mining region of Gafsa (south west), and their distribution across the national territory. The second aspect deals with the roles and the discourses of the different social groups and classes during the whole process (since January 2008). The objective is not so much to show a supposed clear

rupture between the different regions and social groups of the country, but rather to prove that the spatial, economic, social and political marginalisation of one part of the country and society in favour of another was the direct cause of the revolutionary process that ended the mafia dictatorship of Ben Ali-Trabelsi. It was due to an ad hoc and conjunctural alliance of the middle classes¹ and the popular classes around a common demand: dignity, a major condition for the ability to be and to do.

It was not expected, but it could have been

The exploration of what happened and what is happening today in Tunisia reveals a process that began on 17 December 2010, if we consider only the recent sequence of events. It is a process that is profoundly transforming the country’s political cartography alongside the emergence of new political actors, discourses, spaces and topics of debate and action, at the same time as the political transformations that have reached right up to the head of state. Clearly, we are now awaiting a ‘refounding’ process of citizenship, ‘collective’ identity, rights, freedom, state and the nature and norms of the state’s relationship with its citizens. Such processes could not have been attained by even the most violent of revolts, such as Tunisia experienced in 1978 and 1984. Throughout this article, I refer to Sidi Bouzid, a

*Email: habib.ayeb1@gmail.com

marginalised region in the south of the country, and Sidi Boussaid, a richer region in the north of the country, as their polarity is a useful metaphor for the events that developed this process of revolution.

To answer the other recurring question of why Tunisia was the first Arab country to experience this revolutionary² process that ended what many called a ‘mafia dictatorship’, it was often argued that this related to the level of education in the country, considered the highest among the countries of the Arab League; to the freedom of women and the family code, adopted in 1956; to the general economic level; and to the middle classes and the youth ‘networks’ that had sprung up as a result of the spread of computers and the Internet, the latter desired by Ben Ali himself, and even turned against him by hundreds of thousands of bloggers and ‘Facebookers’, despite widespread censorship and the famous web error message *404 Not Found*, known to young Tunisians as *Ammar*.

However, these explanations are not enough to explain the phenomenon. Two arguments go against it: first, the ‘cultural’ level of the middle class is visibly not as high as is widely believed. In fact, almost all observers emphasise the general fall in levels of education and quality of public schools. Second, the Tunisian revolution was started not by the middle class or in the northern urban centres, but by marginalised social groups (the southern mining region workers and the unemployed, particularly graduates) from southern regions, which themselves are suffering from economic, social, and political marginalisation. We had to wait till the beginning of January 2011 to see the middle class intervening actively in the revolutionary process.

We could also think about it in the abstract and explain why the process did not take place in the other countries before Tunisia. In reality, if we do not limit the analysis to the last accelerated

phase of the revolutionary process (December 2010 to January 2011), and if we consider that the revolutionary process is an ‘accumulation’ of struggles, resistance movements and attempts to propose/impose new political alternatives, we have to remember that similar processes were, and are still, taking place over periods of several years in many different countries. There were, for example in Egypt, numerous strikes, demonstrations and protests, sometimes quite violent, particularly in 2006 and 2008. Other attempts took place in Yemen, Lebanon, Algeria, Jordan and Morocco. At the same time, Tunisia has experienced several protests and demonstrations, particularly in Redayef and in other regions of the country. Violently repressed, these protests were not able to threaten the authoritarian system and they were even less able to cause the fall of the dictator. I will return later to this long process which started with the ‘revolts’ experienced in the mining region of Gafsa, in the south-west of the country.

However, it seems to me that among the decisive factors of the revolutionary process, two are particularly important:

- (1) Tunisia had the kind of dictatorship that probably has no equivalent – in its structuring and organisation – in the other Arab countries. An absolute dictatorship with a modernist face, built on three essential pillars: a) a real organised economic mafia that is incomparable (as regards its functioning and hierarchical organisation) to other forms of corruption and even mass corruption that many other countries have experienced, specifically Egypt and Morocco; b) a very effectively performing and a technically modern police system; and finally c) a systematic clientelistic policy of selective redistribution of resources with a particular preference for the

middle social class that could see its levels of consumption rising very quickly over the last 20 years (increase in incomes, easy access to loans and credit, etc.).

- (2) The acute and systematic marginalisation of the southern, central and western regions, as opposed to the concentration of wealth and power in the north and the east of the country.

In this article I will particularly try to explore this second point, which explains many aspects and dimensions of the Tunisian revolution. Yet we should not lose sight of the fact that the first cause of the fall of this dictatorship was in its rigid and brutal nature. It was a dictatorship that hermetically closed down all potential spaces for expression, such as the media, research centres and civil society organisations, and exercised terror as a privileged strategy of government.

On the pretext of struggling against religious fundamentalism and terrorism (particularly against Islamists) and therefore of protecting Western countries but also local secular elites from the risk of having political power seized by Islamist movements, the dictatorship progressively and methodically succeeded in crushing any political, individual or organised opposition and in reducing all the media to silence. Frequent political procedures and condemnations, usually heavily disproportionate, were the systematic response to political activity or actions considered political, including minor actions. The anti-terrorist law, rapidly drawn up after 9/11, freed security forces from any legal and 'technical'³ restrictions. Systematic torture was almost the standard welcoming ceremony for young men, even when the accused answered investigators' questions. This repressive security policy ended up creating a political vacuum and closed any space for debate, contrary to other countries, including Egypt and Morocco where, despite

everything, inhabitants do enjoy significant margins of expression, which may have limited people's desire to resist oppressive regimes.

Foreign newspapers were often banned, their websites censored, and, more widely, the homepage of the vast majority of websites that provided any information about the Tunisian political system was generally replaced by the infamous '404 not found' message. Finally, books that might have been useful to Tunisian readers rarely crossed the frontiers legally. Carrying books not specifically permitted by the authorities led the owner directly to jail. These varied prohibitions and forms of censorship inevitably resulted in a vacuum that both increased frustration and fostered a challenging spirit and the will to defy the bans. However, books circulate under people's coats, and young Tunisians have progressively become experts in banned Internet connections, circumventing and evading all the obstacles raised by the police contingents in charge of the censorship policies. These young people, passionately interested in technologies and the Internet, succeeded in gaining the sympathy of many companies, such as Microsoft. This company offered an unbreakable proxy online identity, and hackers' groups have given these young people thousands of tips and tools for gaining unmonitored access. This cyber-war was therefore won by the users who even succeeded, just two weeks before the fall of the dictator, in blocking all governmental portals, thanks to pressure from the group of hackers known as 'anonymos'. As stated by Benjamin Stora, 'the Tunisian paradox lay in the contradiction – unsustainable in the long term – between a high level of education and an authoritarian state treating its citizens as illiterate.'⁴

To this oppressive regime should be added the corruption and patronage system built by the Ben Ali-Trabelsi clan. Whether it involved a job, a bank loan, buying a car with credit facilities, importing machinery or raw materials, exporting or

even just marketing any product, getting your electricity connection, drinking water or a sewage system installed, or building a house, bribery was the rule and, in most cases, membership of the RCD (ruling party) was useful if not indispensable, especially in marginalised regions such as Sidi Bouzid. Merely having a passport was a privilege, and renewing it, particularly if lost or stolen, was a long-drawn-out matter requiring considerable patience, composure and, above all, well-placed relations. This explains the fact that in the same RCD party, there are almost 2.5 million members out of a total population of barely more than ten million inhabitants. The cost of drinking water, electricity and drainage had reached excessive levels, aggravating the dynamic of impoverishment and marginalisation of whole sections of the society. Finally, employment had gradually become a 'privileged luxury' out of the reach of low-income families even with qualifications.

Corruption can of course occur in many countries of the world including 'democratic' countries. But when corruption becomes systematic and coded, it starts to look more like a structured and hierarchical organisation than a mere abuse of personal power.

The revolution of margins against the centre?

Tunisians tell a very political anecdote, the truth of which is difficult to confirm. It concerns the first Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba (1956–1987), but it is still very topical. During a public meeting in the oasis town of Tozeur, situated in the west of the country, Bourguiba, who particularly liked this kind of meeting with 'his' people (and considered the 're-education' of the people his main mission), was interrupted by a peasant from the oasis who asked him to create a sardine factory in Tozeur. Surprised, Bourguiba

asked why a sardine factory should be built in a town more than 250 km from the sea. The answer was: 'Si l'Hbib (Mister Habib), but the distance between Tozeur and the sea did not prevent the construction of a date factory in Monastir' (the city of the president, situated on the east coast of the country). The story does not tell what happened to this unfortunate peasant. However, the anecdote does show that there are two Tunisiyas: one, the Tunisia of power, money, comfort and 'development', which covers the coastal areas, particularly the capital city and its upper-class suburbs and the Sahel (including the Gulf of Nabeul, Sousse and Monastir) and, second, the marginalised, poor, submissive and dependent Tunisia (of the south, the centre and the west).

As mentioned above, and representing these two Tunisiyas, I use the the rich region of Sidi Boussaid in the north of the country, and the marginalised region of Sidi Bouzid in the south of the country, to illustrate the differing experiences of the different parts of the country. Sidi Boussaid in the north boasts jasmine, while Sidi Bouzid, in the south, is better represented by alfa, or esparto, grass.⁵ These two regions clearly experienced the revolution in very different ways.

When we look at the chronology of events, and especially some key moments in the revolution, it is tempting to assume that it was a revolution of the south against the north of the country, and of the margin against the centre.

The spark that lit the fuse of the revolution was Mohamed Bouazizi's decision to set himself on fire in order to reclaim his dignity, consequently liberating the Tunisian people from fear and the dictatorship. He could have come from any other region but perhaps the series of events leading up to his action would not have been the same, or have had the same consequences. Other young people had taken their own lives before this in protest at their own situation, but without setting in

motion the political processes that were unleashed in Bouazizi's case.

It is clear that all the regions and marginalised social groups (and later on, the middle class from the interior or the coastal parts of the country) have identified with this young unemployed graduate seeking dignity, recognition and social and economic 'security'. Numerous objective reasons relating to solidarity and identification have been advanced, but the most important, for me, is the total economic dependence of the south on the north, although the south doesn't lack 'natural' resources such as water, agricultural lands, oases, ores, gas and oil.

Marginalised areas and the areas of revolt

Since independence and even before it, the south, centre and west of the country have suffered from the economic and social consequences of the unbalanced and unequal developmental policies that were particularly concentrated on the capital Tunis, the Sahel, some big coastal cities, such as Bizerte and Sfax, and tourist zones, including Djerba and Hammamet-Nabel. All the major economic and social indicators show a dividing line between the developed north and the Sahel, on the one hand, and the underdeveloped west and south on the other. In the first bloc, the map shows a large concentration of infrastructure, investment and resulting positive economic and social indicators. In the second, there is an area with an extractive economy, where the rather negative socio-economic indicators show a large zone of poverty that is unrivalled in the other parts of the country, covering all the landlocked governorates of Sidi Bouzid and Seliana, that have no direct access to the sea or to a border zone or even to an important road axis. Being marginalised, these regions have also experienced a process of human desertification because they are necessarily zones of emigration towards wealthy parts

of the country and, to a lesser degree, abroad.

More precisely, this is a large part of the country that observes its resources being transferred to the other part without any real compensation or benefits in exchange. Oil and gas are transferred to the north to be processed and refined, or otherwise are exported: only a small amount of these is used locally, in particular by chemical industries in Gabes or for producing electricity. Ores, particularly phosphate (but also iron and other mineral resources extracted from the south-western regions of the country in Gafsa, Tala and Kasserine) are also sent by trains towards processing factories in the Sahel and the north of the country or abroad. Public or private investments come essentially from the north or the Sahel that, directly or indirectly, benefit significantly from the spin-offs of these extractive activities. The local population is generally employed as labourers who thus benefit in a very small way from these essentially extractive activities.

The water resources in the south of the country and particularly in Sidi Bouzid (where the rainfall averages less than 200 mm each year) are no exception to the rule of intensive extraction from which the north and the east of the country are the first to benefit. In the oases, except those of Gabes where the immediate proximity with the sea prevents the production of non-local varieties of date palm, water is first mobilised for the intensive production of '*Deglet Nour*' dates, mainly for export. In Sidi Bouzid, underground water serves to irrigate numerous large irrigated investment farms and large modern olive plantations created with private investment funds from the country's second city, Sfax, and the Sahel. Olives produced there are sent to the oil mills in Sfax to be pressed. The olive oil is therefore marketed in Tunisia and overseas under the Sfax trademark name, *Chaaln*. Far in the south-east, in the Djefara, huge amounts of underground water are used in the investors' new irrigated

lands and especially in the tourist zones of Djerba and Zarzis. More generally, in all the south and south-east, irrigated lands are generally created by northern investments. At the beginning of the 1990s, the first irrigated farm in all the southern parts of Tunisia used to pump water at an average depth of almost 70 to 80 metres. Nowadays, the average depth is between 150 and 200 metres.

In rural areas, the aggressive competition over the natural agricultural resources, such as water and land, is shown not only through the geographical transfer of wealth, but also through a rapid marginalisation of the peasant subsistence agriculture. In the region of Gabes, for example, while the total agricultural irrigated surface has more than doubled since 1990, moving from 6000 to more than 15,000 hectares, the total traditionally irrigated surface (inside oases) has halved falling during the same period from 1200 to almost 600 hectares. To different and varying extents, the process is similar in all the oasis zones and is more serious in Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa and Kasserine. The fundamental difference between the new irrigated lands and the old peasant farms is that in the first case we are in an agribusiness context, where the choice of crop is governed by profit, and in the second, the choice of what is produced is what ensures families' food security.

Because of the unequal competition between investors (agribusiness, tourism, industry, etc.) and local populations, including peasant farmers, access to employment has progressively decreased and has been reduced to low-paid casual day labour. The daily wage in the new irrigated lands is some 5 to 6 euros for men (equivalent to 1 kg of meat), around 3 to 4 euros for women, and less for children. Incomes are low and inadequate, but, worse than this, are seasonal only. For young people, who typically are educated and usually graduates, the chance to find a job, particularly in Sidi Bouzid, is

practically non-existent. In general they emigrate to tourist resorts and/or to the large cities where, even if they do not find fixed employment, they may at least find small jobs and informal activities to cover their immediate needs. The anonymity that the host zones offer liberates those young people from the feeling of being 'useless', and permits them to look after themselves first, while waiting for a better alternative. Meanwhile, their families do not need to look after them. This is called a strategy of surviving the problems of access to resources. But the exacerbation of the process of marginalisation of whole regions, of the continuous impoverishment of a large part of the population, and of the dispossession of people's vital resources, including water and land, have created the conviction that the economic development was not for these marginalised populations, and even less for children. It is a feeling of exclusion clearly linked to the uprising of December 2010 and the extraordinary acceleration of the revolutionary process that followed.

Humiliating and provocative behaviour by local authorities (more concerned about their status and privilege than about improving the situation of the people they should be looking after) aggravated the social and economic atmosphere. Mohamed Bouazizi, like other thousands of people, managed to ensure an income that would cover his basic needs by becoming an itinerant fruit seller. When he was prevented from doing this, by having the crucial tool of his scales confiscated, he protested and insisted that they give them back to him and let him work and live honestly. But when he received a slap in response, he set himself on fire. Through his desperate gesture, he showed everyone that his dignity was for him a line that should not be crossed by others. This explains why his gesture was immediately taken up in the streets by hundreds of thousands of people, particularly young people, everywhere in the south and other parts of the country, to claim the end

of humiliation and marginalisation by shouting: *khoubz ou maa we Ben Ali laa* (we may live by only eating bread and drinking water, but never more with Ben Ali). We know what followed.

A revolutionary process in two periods, at two speeds, but with one victory

While Bouazizi's suicide gave a boost to events that accelerated and made possible the rapid end of the dictatorship less than a month later, it would be quite wrong to suggest that the whole process started with this dramatic episode, and thus deny a build-up of a long series of political actions and workers' demands for rights, for example in the workplace and to health services. We can differentiate relatively long periods of time (months and years) and short ones (days), and may consider that the overall process that led to the end of dictatorship of Ben Ali took place in two distinct periods, with relatively different dynamics and rhythms. The first period that started, say, in 2008 and lasted till December 2010 is that of the growing effect of strikes, demonstrations and resistance. The second period, which started on 17 December 2010 with the suicide of Bouazizi, is obviously that of acceleration of the revolutionary process, that surprised all observers, forcing the dictator – said to be invincible – to escape overseas. The following chronology⁶ shows the whole process:

- 5 January 2008: a recruitment procedure organised by the CPG (Phosphate Company of Gafsa) offers jobs to candidates from outside the region. Local people consider the process to have been rigged, and young people occupy the UGTT (General Tunisian Labour Union) office with their families and set up tents for a sit-in. This movement reaches Erredeief, Oum Lares, Metlaoui and Feriana. It results in three people being killed and around 100 arrested and charged. In December 2008, 38 union members go on trial: five are released but the others are sentenced to prison (ranging from a suspended sentence of two years to 10 years). Six leaders of the resistance movement receive the maximum sentence, as they were accused in court 'of leading demonstrations that undermine the public order by throwing stones and Molotov cocktails against the police'. This is denounced by their defence as a 'parody of justice'.
- A strong international movement leads to the sentence being revised. In February 2009, the court in Gafsa very slightly changes the first court decision on the 30 accused, and condemns them to long sentences. As a result, Adnane Hajji, spokesman of the movement, and Bechir Laabidi find their sentences changed to eight years' imprisonment. However this trial is exploited by the accused leaders to show the extent of systematic torture, maltreatment and corruption.
- August 2010: As a result of the frontier being closed between Tunisia and Libya, riots break out in Ben Guerane. The official version explains this decision to close the frontiers by the need to control the very active informal trade between the two countries that feeds hundreds and even thousands of families, either by creating informal jobs, usually precarious and on the margins of legality, or by offering the local population expensive products cheaper than through formal channels. However in fact it was due to the Trabelsi mafia realising that it had been missing its cut from this lucrative activity and now wanting to control it. Their plan

was to transfer these informal activities from the frontier to the region of Sahel (coast) by opening a direct maritime line between Tripoli, the Libyan capital, and the Tunisian port of Sfax. As a result, tens of people are arrested, tortured, dragged before tribunals and given heavy sentences.

- 17 December 2010: Mohamed Bouazizi sets fire to himself in Sidi Bouzid⁷ after being slapped by a policewoman (which of course made the perceived humiliation much greater) who stopped him from working as an itinerant fruit seller, under the pretext of not having the required permits.
- 18 December 2010: the beginning of the movement. There are slogans about high prices and unemployment, with a marked political content; ‘work is a right, you band of thieves’, in a clear allusion to Ben Ali and his wife’s family. There is violent repression, but also, in a completely new occurrence, demonstrations organised at night to harass the security forces.
- 24 December 2010: the movements spread to Menzel Bouzaienne, a small town of 5000 inhabitants. The police violence leads to the murder of two young people and to tens of people being injured.
- From 3 to 7 January 2011: continuing in Sidi Bouzid and Menzel Bouzaienne (under blockade), the movement spreads to Saida (a village of 3000 inhabitants) and then beyond Tala (in Kasserine) on the Algerian frontier.
- 4 January 2011: The national leadership of the UGTT union declares its support for the demonstrations that are spreading over the whole country. It should be added that although the national leadership of the UGTT took time to reach this decision, local leaderships had

supported the demonstrations since the beginning and had provided the young demonstrators with practical skills and knowledge, networks and material support, such as rooms for meetings, speakers, etc.

- From 8 to 10 January: The city of Kasserine becomes the main theatre of confrontation, along with Regueb and Ben Aoune (30 km from Sidi Bouzid) where tens of people are killed. After the closure of schools and universities (a decision taken by the authorities in an attempt to crush the widespread events), the movement starts to take a clear national dimension. The movement propagation is made towards two directions: from the centre of the country to the south (Kebili, Tozeur, Douz, Ben Guerdane, Mednine) and to the north (Beja, Jendouba, Kef) and in the small towns which are peripheral to the coastal metropolis (Jebeniana near the city of Sfax).
- 8 January 2011: A big massacre in Tala and Kasserine reinforces national solidarity and the radicalisation of the movement – the slogans of which have become overtly political and directed against the government and the regime.
- 9 January 2011: Ben Ali, still authoritarian and intransigent, delivers his second speech (his first speech had been just a few days after the first troubles following Mohamed Bouazizi’s action). He insists on an immediate end to the troubles that are affecting public order, by whatever means necessary.
- 10 January 2011: demonstrations reach the city of greater Tunis through neighbourhoods such as Ettadhamoun, Intilaka and Ibn Khaldoun, where most of the inhabitants, generally of modest means, come from poor or marginalised regions.

- 11 January 2011: other neighbourhoods in Tunis, such as Zahrouni and Sidi Hssein, join the movement.
- 12 January 2011: it is the turn of Kram, a poor suburb of Tunis situated in the middle of the richest ones. According to a young man in Kram who took part in the movement from the very beginning, young people from upper-class parts of the northern suburb of Tunis (Marsa, Carthage and Sidi Boussaid) used to come to demonstrate in Kram. As it has more working-class residents, Kram becomes the demonstration space for the richest demonstrators.
- 12 January 2011: a big demonstration of tens of thousands of people is organised in Sfax, the country's second city. Slogans are openly political (for freedom, democracy etc.).
- 13 January 2011: a demonstration is organised in Mohamed Ali Square, in front of the national UGTT union office. It is harshly suppressed and broken up by the police. That night, Ben Ali delivers his third speech, where he seems totally unsettled, almost trembling, and fails to convince. This the first time in his rule that he has spoken using Tunisian dialect, and he announces the total opening up of Internet connections and the ending of all restrictions. He feels and has understood the level of urgency, but it is evidently too late to save his power.
- 14 January 2011: huge demonstrations take place in Bourguiba Avenue, the main avenue in Tunis, in front of the Ministry of the Interior. The main slogan is: '*Ben Ali: dégage!*' (Ben Ali, get out!). That night, Ben Ali has already left the country seeking his first refuge. The revolutionary process has just recorded its first victory over the dictatorship system of Ben Ali-Trabelsi. However, this extraordinary victory is more the first step of a process which did not start on 17 December, and which has not yet finished.
- 17 January 2011: only three days after the departure of Ben Ali, a new government is announced. It is almost a copy of the last government of Ben Ali, and is led by Ghannouchi, Ben Ali's prime minister since 1999, with the main leaders of the former dictator's Constitutional Democratic Party in all the key ministerial positions.
- 21 January 2011: a 'freedom caravan' comes from Sidi Bouzid and several other regions of the country to put pressure on the new government. On 23 January, thousands, including members of the 'freedom caravan', organise a continuous sit-in in the Kasbah square, (situated in Tunis close to the Medina and surrounded by official buildings and ministries) only a few metres from the prime minister's offices. The sit-in is broken up by the police on Friday 27 January, but has succeeded in bringing about the resignation of all the RCD ministers, except for Ghannouchi, who resigns only from the RCD, and leads to the installation of the new government.
- 20 February 2011: a second sit-in takes place in the Kasbah to insist on the resignation of the second Gannouchi government, suspending the two legislative assemblies and electing a constituent assembly. This sit-in starts on 20 February and runs till Friday 4 March, after having its basic demands met, including a new government with a new prime minister, and with 24 July set as the date for election of a constituent assembly whose role is to write a new constitution.

We are therefore clearly in a cumulative process of learning and resistance, in

which the events from 17 December to 14 January were the most rapid, yet decisive, phase. It is only by tackling the revolutionary process in its 'thematic' (from social and economic demands to political claims), spatial (from the centre, the south and the west to the north, the capital and the Sahel) and temporal (from January 2008 onwards) entirety that we can discern this revolutionary process as clearly different from the episodic rebellions and, *a posteriori*, as a real revolution that causes deep spatial and societal structural transformations, along with effects at the level of the state.

The middle class role; the convergence of interests, or when dignity becomes a collective demand

(a) From convergence. . .

Despite the fact that it was above all the outcome of an uprising of marginalised regions and populations of the country against the more privileged regions, the revolution can not be considered the result of class struggles alone. Although it is difficult to ignore the social classes and their roles in the revolutionary process before and after Ben Ali, the fall of the regime on 14 January happened as a result of a general mobilisation that largely transcended social class configurations and social categories. Real fieldwork and detailed surveys and research still need to take place, but an early assessment points to a convergence of interests between marginalised classes and groups and the middle classes.

While the marginalised classes protested with demands for employment, food and an end to marginalisation and exclusion, the middle classes fought tooth and nail for individual liberties, for political rights of expression, organisation and participation, for the consolidation or affirmation of their new rights, especially for women, and for an improvement in incomes and standards of living. But there was one main demand at the centre that was common to both

groups: dignity. When Mouhamed Bouazizi did not find a job, he created one for himself (as a fruit seller). When he was prevented from carrying out this job, he tried to carry on working in any way he could. When the tools of his trade – the weighing scales – were seized, he called on his contacts to intervene with the authorities. But when he was slapped, he set fire to himself. Nothing could better express the fundamental importance of dignity in the social dynamics and in the revolutionary process in Tunisia, as indeed elsewhere.

Chronologically, the revolution essentially began in the south as a result of the actions of young graduates and unemployed, all from relatively or very poor and marginalised families and from economically and socially marginalised regions. In spite of the violent responses they received from the police, with a dramatic toll of deaths, injuries and arrests, and the first two speeches by Ben Ali, which were violent, insulting, and associated the demonstrators with terrorists, several demonstrations in support of the young people in the south were rapidly organised in the north and in some towns of the Sahel. These demonstrations turned, very quickly, into political demands including for an end to privileges for the elite and for respect for human rights. As well as young people, we saw the progressive mobilisation of the UGTT⁸ local sections, of lawyers, and of civil society in nearly all of the regions, especially in the week before the big uprising of 14 January.

In summary, we can say that: 1) the revolution clearly started in the south and was mainly for the right to dignity. This is why calling it 'the jasmine revolution' is not very consistent with events. There is more jasmine in Sidi Boussaid than in Sidi Bouzid, where alfa grass predominates. 2) The dictatorship fell due to a general movement and uprising of the whole population – of all social classes. 3) The violent actions of the police and of militia before and especially after 14

January affected all neighbourhoods, from the richest to the poorest.

(b) ... to strategic differentiations

Logically, a convergence of interests and class alliances is always temporary and lasts as long as the process. It ends when one of the allied parts achieves its own objectives. In most situations, the logic of maximising benefit and limiting risk is not completely absent. In Tunisia, this logic has been completely respected: the poor and/or marginalised classes and workers, with their demonstrations in Redayef and in the entire mining area of Gafsa, started a revolutionary process as early as 2008. The second phase of this process was very accelerated, and took place between 17 December 2010 and 14 January 2011. At the end of December, those popular classes were actively joined by the middle classes and particularly by youth, hungry for freedom. Together, they caused the fall of the monster, Ben Ali.

After the departure of the dictator and after installation of the first transitional Ghannouchi government, with the ministers of Ben Ali and the RCD holding the most important ministerial positions, there were debates: should we let the government operate the transition up till the legislative and presidential elections, or should we continue the revolutionary process in order to definitively finish off the system of Ben Ali-Trabelsi, and ensure that the situation could not be reversed or the dictatorship returned? The supporters of the first option drew attention to the risks of a serious economic crisis, particularly after the departure of investors and tourists. According to the supporters of the more radical line, the problem was not only Ben Ali as a person, but even more the economic and political systems. Since then, two socially *and* politically differentiated discourses and strategies have been going on, alternately agitated and calm, depending on events, and accompanied by political actions and specific demands.

At the beginning there was the 'freedom caravan' coming from Sidi Bouzid and other marginalised regions of the country to occupy the Kasbah in order to force the RCD ministers to resign. As we know, the sit-in was broken up by force on 28 January, but it succeeded in forcing the government to change its composition. This gave birth to the second Ghannouchi government that included only two RCD members occupying technical ministerial positions of less political importance. At the same time, people representing the middle class and urban bourgeoisie were actively campaigning to demand an end to demonstrations and strikes in order to let the transitional government do its job and to kick-start the economy which, according to them, was verging on bankruptcy. This campaign was run at the same time via the Internet (e.g. Facebook) and on the street, with a demonstration organised in support of the first Ghannouchi government, in front of the municipal theatre of Tunis, on Bourguiba Avenue, only two or three days before the great success obtained by the militants who occupied the Kasbah.

This episode recurred a few weeks later in almost the same way, with a second occupation of the Kasbah (from 20 February to 4 March 2011), with militants coming from the south and the west of the country to force the resignation of the prime minister, the dissolution of both assemblies, and the election of a constituent assembly. Immediately, the opposing groups were mobilised to support the second Ghannouchi government, arguing about the risks of anarchy, of economic crisis, etc. In order to be heard, they chose to organise a sit-in in El Kobba, a sports compound situated in the wealthy quarter of El Menzah. On Facebook and in the press, there were accusations and counter-accusations.

It is again in the Kasbah that is the scene for the victory and the ensuing celebrations, with the nomination of a new prime minister, Beji Kaid Essebsi, who is

not from the circle of Ben Ali-Trabelsi, the departure of many contested ministers, shelving the two assemblies (for a long period of time) and designating a date, 24 July 2011, for the election of a constituent assembly whose role is the writing of a new *destour* (constitution). In July 2011, the date was postponed until 23 October 2011. The radicals gloated, and the 'silent majority' kept quiet, preferring the humility of appearing a good loser to humiliation. Behind all this, the classes are clearly playing for position regarding their immediate and long-term interests.

In this positioning, there are the south and the north; there are poor and marginalised classes and middle classes. There is the demand for social and economic rights. There are Sidi Bouzid and Sidi Boussaid. And there is alfa grass and jasmine. But are we facing the real opposition of one part of the country (society and space) against another? Further in-depth research is certainly needed before this question can confidently be answered.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while we are waiting for a necessary distance to enable a more profound analysis, we can provisionally advance some remarks that I consider it important to remember:

- The whole world saw that this revolution took place without leadership or dominant ideology. However, it is important to stress some points: 1) The right to dignity is now and for the first time, as far as I know, unavoidable in the analyses of the Tunisian, and more widely, sub-Mediterranean societies. This concept, however, is not new and it is well placed in social science analysis in Asia (particularly India) and in Latin America; 2) Social and economic rights become important, particularly as a response to the marginalisation of a large part

of the country and of the population. Being linked to the economic, social and political marginalisation, the competition over resources and the unequal development are again put at the centre of the debates dealing with development; 3) The interests and struggles of classes are objectively too obvious to be ignored in any attempt to explore and analyse the revolutionary process and its different steps that were characterised by successions of alliances/convergences and of differences and even very obvious oppositions.

- This does not really mean a permanent breaking off or a clear separation between social classes: the interaction of family structures, geographic origins, professional fields, social classes etc. make this separation very unlikely. Nevertheless, the different interests and strategies are expressed very differently during the moment of opposition and differentiation but also during the (rarer) moments of alliances such as those observed when the dictatorship fell.
- Another element of customary readings of the political evolution of Arab societies, focusing on the significance and strength of Islamism, is relatively marginalised and reduced to a modest level, even as a result of the total absence of Islamists in the revolutionary process. It is certain that this 'absence' is not only a result of the violent repression that Islamists have suffered from at least the 1990s (if we only consider the episode of Ben Ali, starting with his rise to the presidency in 1987). Like other political groups, political Islam has been very clearly overtaken by the process of revolution in all its phases, from 2008 up till the most recent events.
- Finally, the question of whether the events in Tunisia were a rebellion or

a revolution becomes a relatively unproductive argument that is further linked to some readings dealing with the history of revolution and particularly to the French revolution, which some people call 'the mother of revolutions'. What is certain is that it is a continuous political process that radically modifies the way citizens in Tunisia introduce themselves and redefine their roles, their rights and their hopes. Nearly three months after the departure of the dictator and his mafia, no one has succeeded in imposing themselves as a leader, and no political tendency has been able to impose a precise political line.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Fadwa Saidi and many other Tunisian students for the rich discussions on the role of youth in the revolution of Tunisia, and Mabrouk Jebahi, historian and anthropologist, for the wealth of information related to the recent history of the country and his careful reading of the text.

Note on contributor

Habib Ayebe is a Tunisian social geographer at the Social Research Centre of the American University in Cairo, Egypt. He writes and researches on rural and agrarian change, water resources, poverty and marginality, and is currently conducting research on competition over agricultural, rural and environmental resources and the marginalisation of small farmers in Egypt, Tunisia and India. His most recent publication is *La crise de la société rurale en Egypte ou la fin du fellah ?* (2010, Paris: Karthala).

Notes

1. In this essay I perhaps take some liberties with the complex concept of 'middle class', which should be defined at the outset. By middle class, I mean the social group composed of individuals whose functions, social status and/or incomes are different from 'popular' classes and from social marginalised groups, on the one hand, and of high bourgeoisie on the other hand.

2. I consider it legitimate to talk about a 'first Arab democratic revolution', unless the Lawrence of Arabia 'revolution' is considered a real revolution, which does not in my opinion correspond to the facts.
3. A young graduate and unemployed man – which is the case for hundreds of thousands of young people – who apparently does not shave and who frequents the mosque at dawn for the first prayer of the day is systematically suspected of active Islamism, and can experience the prison life sequence that starts with the torture sessions in police stations or even the cellars of the Ministry of the Interior.
4. Stora, B., 2011. Tunisia is not Algeria, neither is it Morocco, nor Iran. *Marianne*, 718. 22–28 January, p. 41.
5. Alfa, or esparto, grass, also known as 'halfah' (alpha/alfa) grass or 'needle grass', *Macrochloa tenacissima* and *Stipa tenacissima*, is a perennial grass grown in northwest Africa and the southern part of the Iberian peninsula employed for crafts (ropes, baskets, espadrilles, etc.). See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esparto> [Accessed 10 May 2011].
6. This chronology was reconstituted from numerous different sources. However, many elements were partially or integrally taken from those published in the very rich document '*une cartographie géomédiatique de la crise tunisienne*' published by the website of CIST ; Collège International des Sciences du Territoire [The International College of Territory Science]. Available from: <http://www.gis-cist.fr/index.php/main-sections/axes-de-recherche/geomedia-mapper/dossiers-du-cist/pourquoi-sidi-bouziid/2-une-chronologie-desevenements-tunisiens/> [Accessed 28 March 2011].
7. Sidi Bouzid belongs to the central region of Tunisia. A town of 5000 inhabitants in 1973, promoted chief town, Sidi Bouzid became in a short period of time a medium-sized town of 40,000 inhabitants. In the 1970s, the region experienced an important development of irrigated crops, but some years ago, this activity quickly declined due to salinisation of agriculture lands, problems of underground water tables, etc. See: <http://www.gis-cist.fr/index.php/main-sections/axes-de-recherche/geomedia-mapper/dossiers-du-cist/pourquoi-sidi-bouziid/>.
8. The UGTT was the only labour union up till 1 February 2011, when the CGTT (Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens) was founded.