

A dispatch from Tunis

Tuesday 4 October 2011, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 16 September 2011).

Tunis is dangerously beautiful. It is impossible not to fall in love with the old town (Madina) or Kasbah for that matter. Lined by trimmed trees and flooded by relaxed tourists, Habib Bourguiba Street is equally fascinating. A legacy from French colonial period, Habib Bourguiba Street is Tunisian version of Champs Elysees. It is hard to imagine only two months ago, these glamorous places were sites of pitched battles between democracy activists and Ben Ali's gendarme. The only visible sign of these battles is re-named January 14 Square at the one end of Habib Bourguiba Street. Once a giant statue of country's founding father, Habib Bourguiba, was encroaching the centre of this square.

Ben Ali, after his coup in 1987, replaced the statue with a time tower. Ben Ali had a craze for building towers studded with clocks in every Tunisian town. 'Like his system, these clocks never worked properly,' says my friend and guide Wasim. A PhD student in Paris, Wasim is back home to help organise the founding conference of Left Workers League. Unlike many Muslim countries, left is a vital element in Tunisian politics. Hamma Hammami, leader of the Workers Communist Party, or PCOT, is a household name. Like other left parties, PCOT was banned as was Islamist Al-Nahda. Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of Al-Nahda, spent 21 years as exile in London and returned to Tunis after the revolution.

Banned and persecuted, Islamists took refuge in mosque or they engaged in charity work. The growing trend of hijab among Tunisian women, is attributed to the growing influence of Al-Nahda. However, bare-heads outnumber the heads draped in hijab. Regardless of their dress, women move about freely and are an essential part of town's life. In crowded trams and public busses, there is no segregation. At offices, shops, campuses, business and trading centers, women are visible everywhere. Yet one does not notice men, unlike our Land of the Pure [Pakistan], greedily staring or harassing women. 'Eve-teasing' does not make headlines in Tunisian press.

Ever since independence, Tunisian women have enjoyed rights unheard of in most of the Muslim countries. In his bid to present a liberal face to the West, Ben Ali, in fact patronized the official feminist movement.

The decisive factor nonetheless that delivered the end of Ben Ali regime was UGTT, or General Union of Tunisian Workers. The UGTT is Tunisian version of British Trade Union Congress (TUC).

The successive dictatorships in Tunisia, instead of liquidating the trade union movement, adopted a policy of co-opting the UGTT leadership to ensure a pliant trade union movement. Hence, a reformist leadership, always ready to compromise, has been historically at the helm of the UGTT.

Ironically, if the persecuted religious right fortified itself inside the mosque, the revolutionary left sought refuge in the branch-level UGTT offices. The UGTT branches became a stronghold of the left in many instances. Though the red trouble-makers were sorted out when spotted yet even a ruthless state apparatus failed to absolutely silence the dissent.

When the revolt broke out, the local UGTT branches became a focal point for mobilizations. The UGTT leadership, initially, remained aloof. That the revolt was widespread to an extent that any

institution resisting it, would have been swept aside. Reluctantly, even the UGTT leadership joined the revolution. This proved the decisive factor in humbling Ben Ali.

'The dictator is gone, but not his neo-liberal dictatorship,' Fatehi Chamkhi told me during an interview. He is the focal person for CADTM, an international campaign for the abolition of Third World debt. He teaches Geography at Manouba University. But the day we met, he had been lecturing his students on the history of revolutions. His students are more interested in revolution than geography these days. 'In the last 23 years, Tunis has paid the international donors a whopping sum of five billion dollar in the name of debt retirement,' he says. In his view, Tunisian revolution is a response to the capitalist crisis that hit in 2008 aggravated in case of Tunisia by the burden of external debt.

He thinks that the ruling elite is trying to pacify the revolution by diverting it to an electoral labyrinth and is not ready to solve the economic or social crisis. He is not alone in his judgment of the situation. This is a wide-spread feeling in Tunisia. The presence of bankers imported from France, in the interim set up led to fresh wave of protests. This led to the resignation of Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi and certain ministers by end-February. A shrewd octogenarian politician, Kaid Essebi replaced Ghannouchi. Like President H'bazaa, Essebi is a relic of the Bourguiba era. Flanked by technocrats, Essebi is seen as a puppet in the hands of big business and the Tunisian army that has assumed importance in the post-revolutionary period. The way international media glorified the role of Tunisian army lacked the historical context. Tunisia is not a military fiefdom. It has been a police state. The police apparatus, inherited from French colonialism, is roughly three times the size of Tunisian army. While the police apparatus is a French product, the Tunisian army has been trained and armed by the USA. The mainstream Tunisian media are busy glorifying the army. But the Tunisian workers will find it hard to ignore the way military repressed Movement for Bread in 1983. Roughly hundred people were gunned down. Similarly, in the 1990s, Ben Ali employed the military violence to crush the student movement.

Though media vultures from West have fled to even sensational spots yet the revolution in Tunisia remains an interesting phenomenon as it unfolds. It is not yet over. Thousands of industrial struggles have taken place. Dozens are in progress. Republique, the tram station next to Hotel Naplouse where I am staying, was deserted the day I arrived. The rail workers were on strike. At the Star insurance company, in the neighboring street, workers have shoed away their boss. The garbage collectors ended their strike days ahead of my arrival. Walking by any major street in central Tunis, one bumps into one manifestation or the other. This despite the return of 'normalcy'. The other day, I met Wafa at café Almazar, for an interview. At the end of our meeting, I asked her if it was possible to discuss politics at public places before the revolution. Her lips parted and eyes grew wide in disbelief. 'Impossible,' she shouts. As we walk to the cash counter to pay the bill, we notice yet another sign of revolutionary change. A Che poster hanging on the wall behind the cashier.

Farooq Sulehria

P.S.

* FROM VIEWPOINT ONLINE ISSUE NO. 70, SEPTEMBER 30, 2011:

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/a-dispatch-from-tunis.html>

* Farooq Sulehria is working with Stockholm-based Weekly Internationalen

(www.internationalen.se). Before joining Internationalen, he worked for one year, 2006-07 at daily The News, Rawalpindi. Also, in Pakistan, he has worked with Lahore-based dailies, The Nation, The Frontier Post and Pakistan. He has MA in Mass Communication from Punjab University, Lahore. He also contributes for Znet and various left publications in Europe and Australia.