

Tunisia - The Bouazizi Spark: The Beginning of a Long Revolutionary Process

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People gather on December 17, 2011 in Sidi Bouzid's Mohamed Bouazizi square, named after the fruitseller whose self-immolation sparked the revolution that ousted a dictator and ignited the Arab Spring. Thousands of Tunisians rallied in celebration of the first anniversary of the popular uprising that toppled their long-standing dictator and unleashed the Arab Spring revolutions.

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It is great honor for me to join you in celebrating this first anniversary of the beginning of the Tunisian revolution in this very city of Sidi Bouzid, the city of Mohamed Bouazizi, from where the first spark of the revolution was ignited that spread like a wildfire throughout the Arab world, wonderfully illustrating the famous Chinese saying, "a single spark can start a prairie fire."

I was pleased to notice in the invitation letter from the Committee for the Commemoration of the First Anniversary of the 17 December 2010 Revolution that the group chose to name the Tunisian upheaval the "December 17 Revolution" after the day of the first spark, instead of naming it the "January 14 Revolution" after the day when the despot Ben Ali fled.

In the discussion now developing in Tunisia about which of these two designations is the most appropriate — excluding the misleading and Orientalist "Jasmine Revolution" already used for Ben Ali's coup in November 1987 — I am strongly in favor of naming the revolution after the day it started, just as the Egyptians named their own revolution the "January 25 Revolution."

My preference is due to the same reason that led me to characterize what we are witnessing in the Arab region as a long-term revolutionary process, not a completed "revolution" that some people would like to reduce simply to the ousting of the old regime's chief.

In reality, Ben Ali's flight on January 14, much like Mubarak's resignation on February 11, was nothing but one stage in an ongoing revolutionary process, which may well continue for a long time much like the French revolution. It began on 14 July 1789 and — according to most historians — was only completed ten years later with Napoleon Bonaparte's coup of "18 Brumaire" (9 November 1799).

Socioeconomic bases of the Revolution

To be sure, my assertion that we are facing a long-term revolutionary process does not stem from any propensity to project the French model upon the ongoing Arab revolutions. I very much hope that our own revolutionary process will not lead to coups by the likes of Bonaparte, though such outcomes are possible indeed in a part of the world that has seen so many military coups in contemporary history. Rather, my insistence on the long duration of the process is based on a fact that should be obvious to anyone who contemplates the current uprisings – that they are fundamentally driven by deep-rooted socioeconomic issues, even in countries where the popular movement fought or is still fighting for democracy and political freedoms against a despotic regime.

This reality comes out clearly if one considers the current revolutions within the context of the rise in social struggles that paved the way for them during the preceding years. It should also be abundantly clear to anyone who contemplates the true meaning of the revolution's first spark here in Sidi Bouzid.

For, it was not primarily Bouazizi's discontent with the nature of political rule in Tunisia that led him down the path of martyrdom, but the miserable living conditions imposed upon many young Tunisians like him, forced to resort to marginal and precarious sources of income in order to get by. These conditions are now well symbolized by the stone-carved monument representing a street seller's cart that has been erected in Sidi Bouzid's central square in memory of the man.

This reality was best expressed by the slogans that prevailed in the first days of the mass uprising in this province, and afterward in the neighboring impoverished provinces that constitute what a Tunisian newspaper aptly called yesterday the "revolutionary basin." The uprising's slogan in Sidi Bouzid — "Employment is a right, you band of thieves!" — was a direct echo of the 2008 uprising in the Gafsa mining basin that centered on the issue of employment.

Moreover, if we consider the tripartite motto "Work, Liberty, National Dignity" that encapsulated the Tunisian revolution's agenda on the pattern of the French Revolution's famous motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," we find that what has been achieved until now is only liberty, however important it may be. As for the first demand regarding employment, its fulfillment does not even appear on the horizon, and while getting rid of Ben Ali's despotic custody over the people partly achieved "national dignity," there can be no complete dignity without a dignified life free from the humiliation of unemployment and poverty.

Unemployment and the Arab Revolutions

Two main features that distinguish the Arab region from the rest of the world emerge when one tries to identify the causes of the huge revolutionary upheaval that is sweeping all our countries. The first is fairly clear. Our region is home to the world's highest concentration of despotic regimes in a single geopolitical space. By contrast, the second feature is often overlooked. For many decades, we have had the world's highest rates of unemployment (including graduate unemployment, which in the case of Tunisia went from 5 percent to over 22 percent since Ben Ali took power in 1987).

Not only does our region stand out for the highest female unemployment rates in the world – a major feature of our underdevelopment – it also has the highest youth unemployment rates among men and women under the age of 25. The youth unemployment rate in what international organizations call the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is about 24 percent, whereas it is no more than 12 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa and 15 percent in South Asia, even though they are quite a lot more

impoverished and populated than our region. This is notwithstanding the fact that these figures are based on official statistics provided by states, and everyone knows that they are far below reality.

Moreover, unemployment as counted here is limited to those who claim to be seeking a job and do not report even one hour of economic activity during the days preceding the survey. This means that the large numbers of those who have given up on finding employment, or are engaged in marginal activities that can rightly be categorized as “disguised unemployment,” do not show up on the radar.

It is this basic social reality that constitutes the deep source of the revolutionary explosion that has swept through our countries. Record unemployment results from poor development and increases it in return, thus entrenching our countries in a vicious circle that produces social marginalization and misery, both material and moral. Seen from this angle, the victories in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya are only the first stage of a revolutionary process in three countries that lacked freedom and democracy to varying degrees.

Money and politics

This first stage has consisted in winning political freedoms and achieving a formal democracy predicated on those freedoms. True democracy, however, cannot be fulfilled unless equality is added to freedom — not only equal rights, which remain strictly formal, but equality in material resources as well.

Indeed, the principal shortcoming of Western democracies — reflected in their deep crisis that translates in the low proportion of eligible voters who actually participate in the voting — is that they represent “the best democracy money can buy,” as one American critic aptly put it. The electoral process in such a deficient and illusory democracy depends highly on money, including television which is the main propaganda tool in our societies of the spectacle.

There are attempts to limit the gaping inequality created by money in politics in a few Western countries, where the state has put a ceiling on election campaign budgets and participates in funding them, also granting all competitors the chance to present their platform to the public on television. These attempts have a limited impact compared to the huge influence of money in politics, but they represent at least an acknowledgement of the problem.

What we have achieved thus far in Tunisia and Egypt is a formal but deficient democracy that places little restraint on the role of money in politics in keeping with the unbridled form of capitalism that prevails in our region. Both countries have held elections for a constitutional assembly that have been blatantly dominated by money resources. The funds received by religious parties from oil countries in the Gulf played a prominent role in the elections, in addition to the privileged coverage that these parties get from the most important Arab television network: Al Jazeera, whose connection with them and support for them is known to everybody.

Money and television did not only profit religious parties, however. It also played a decisive role in the electoral results of lists such as the Popular Petition in Tunisia led by Mohamed Hechmi Hamdi and the coalition of the Free Egyptians Party led by Naguib Sawiris, two entrepreneurs each of whom owns a major television station.

The religious parties enjoyed important resources in addition to the prestige stemming from the fact that they constituted the principal opposition force for the last few decades (and managed to build an extensive organization over the years in Egypt), not to mention their religious demagoguery and their playing on the emotions of believers.

It is no wonder then that the primary goal for these parties after the fall of the dictators in both Tunisia and Egypt became expediting elections. They argued that they want to speed up the consolidation of the “revolution” and prevent it from being hijacked, but in reality they are rushing to reap the fruits of the revolution’s labor before others get a chance to deny them.

Development without corruption

As a result, the basic problems that sparked the social explosion and set off the revolutionary process in our region, best epitomized by our record unemployment, were almost non-issues in the elections, which were dominated instead by the lures of identity — religious, sectarian, regional and even tribal.

The forces that came to dominate the political scene uphold “programs” (if one may call them that) that do not differ significantly from the previous regimes’ in the social and economic realms, except for a few vague slogans and false promises of the kind voters are accustomed to on the eve of elections. These are empty promises and slogans that are not backed up by any serious plan of implementation; in fact, they are premised on the ignorance of ordinary voters.

All the forces that dominate the electoral scene adhere to the neoliberal principles prioritizing the market, the private sector, and free trade, the very same principles that led our countries to the current quagmire in the first place. The grave problem of development that our societies suffer from results indeed from the type of capitalism that prevails in our countries, along with the dominance of the oil rent over our economies. It is a capitalism of quick profits, with no incentive for long-term productive investment capable of inducing intensive job growth, especially as it fears the lack of stability that characterizes the Arab region.

The truth is that the revolutionary conditions that are unfolding in our region, with the corresponding rise in social demands, will only worsen the unwillingness of the prevailing capitalism to engage in job-creating investment.

The inescapable truth therefore is that our economic development will not come about by relying on private capital. It requires a clear break with the neoliberal model in order to put the state and the public sector back in the driver’s seat of development, and devote the country’s resources to this major priority through progressive taxation and nationalizations.

For all their drawbacks, the developmental policies that were implemented in our region from the 1950s to the 1970s did have a better impact and social effects than the neoliberal policies that followed. What is needed today is a return to the developmental policies of these times without their concurrent despotism and corruption, whereas the regimes that replaced them have only done away with developmentalism while keeping despotism and taking corruption to a much higher level.

The fact that the masses have got used to making their voices heard in the streets and squares ever since the revolution started in Sidi Bouzid provides the key condition for popular democratic control over the concentration of the nation’s potential in the hands of the state. This is a necessary condition if the Arab world is to finally tread the path of development without corruption, after having experienced development with corruption and corruption without development successively since the 1950s.

The workers and youth movements

Because it is at the heart of the production process, and combines the knowledge and expertise of the working class, the worker's movement is the most qualified to oversee state development policies — so long as it remains independent and free.

We know the crucial role that the worker's movement played in both Tunisia and Egypt in the revolution's first stage, bringing down the dictators and sweeping away the symbols and institutions of the old political order. Nobody can ignore the fundamental role played by the Tunisian General Labor Union in this respect, nor the decisive role of the workers' strikes movement in Egypt which began to expand in the days leading up to Hosni Mubarak's resignation. These also led to the creation of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions whose ranks swelled to nearly 1.5 million members within a few months.

Herein lies the paradox of the revolutionary process that we are witnessing. The men and women of the labor movement paved the way for the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and played a decisive role in ousting the old regime, but they have been completely absent from the electoral stage. While the labor movement is arguably the only progressive force that has popular roots and a national reach capable of beating the conservative parties and raising itself up to the leading position in order to implement the necessary revolutionary change, it was physically absent from the electoral battle, as it lacked political representation. Hence it was also absent politically, with the parties that dominated the electoral scene almost completely ignoring the working class's problems and demands, pushing them at best to a very secondary position.

The same goes for the youth movement, with its significant female component, which initiated the uprisings and revolutions, and continues to stand at their forefront everywhere. Yet, it was almost completely absent from the electoral stage, which has been dominated by political organizations led by older men who advocate a puritanical moral regime and an obscurantist cultural regression, far away from the aspirations of the vast majority of the revolutionary youth.

In short, we stand before a historical discordance in social nature between, on one hand, the forces that paved the way for the revolutionary movement, ignited it and pushed for its radicalization, sweeping out the institutions of the old regime; and, on the other hand, the forces that came to dominate the electoral scene and win the majority of parliament seats, all of which joined the revolutionary mobilization after it had already started and after having initially denounced those who set it off.

It is a discordance in nature between, on one hand, the deep problems that provoked the revolutionary explosion and continue to afflict the workers, the marginalized, the women and the youth; and, on the other hand, the forces that have seized the political spotlight and are trying to reduce the battle to a struggle between "secularism" and "Islam." They claim to represent "Islam," which they put forward as "the solution," thus illustrating the appropriateness of the critique of the use of religion as an "opiate of the masses" intended to distract the people from facing the basic problems afflicting them.

This discordance can only be overcome through the build-up of the political representation of the workers' movement and its entry into the electoral arena with the aim of coming to power in alliance with the independent youth and women's organizations. As long as this is not achieved, the causes that provoked the revolutionary upheaval will not fade away but indeed will get worse, thus ensuring that the revolutionary process that was first ignited in Sidi Bouzid on 17 December 2010 will truly be a long-term process.

This lecture was delivered in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia on 18 December 2011 by invitation from the Committee for the Commemoration of the First Anniversary of the 17 December 2010 Revolution.

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P.S.

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