

Tunisia: Opportunists and the Revolution

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In a manner infused with the spirit of Western Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, some Arabs have held that a despotic mentality has taken root among most of their fellow Arabs as a result of their cultural and educational background.

One advocate of such a view in the not-so-distant past was Moncef Marzouki, the transitional president of Tunisia, when he was still living in France as an opponent in exile of the previous president, the tyrant Zine el Abidine Ben Ali.

In an article he published on *Al Jazeera's* website on 19 February 2010, Marzouki cited the French scholar Beatrice Hibou (who belongs to the Orientalist school), author of *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, to explain Tunisians' alleged "obedience" to their tyrants by attributing it to a mentality ingrained in them over the course of generations (these theses have been powerfully refuted by the Tunisian scholar Mahmoud Ben Romdhane in a recent book in French).

Marzouki argued that whoever reads Hibou's book "understands that what bewilders the Western mind about Arabs is our transcendent ability to obey the most corrupt of rulers, while Western culture is based on the refusal to obey injustice and on legitimizing the right to resist it."

He thus added to the Orientalist image of Arabs an idealized image of "Western culture" as if it were an eternal given, overlooking the fact that the most despotic regimes in modern history were established after the First World War among two of the oldest Western civilizations, Italy and Germany. This is also overlooking the fact that, prior to modern history, the West went through a long period of absolute monarchy.

Marzouki went further, outmatching the French Orientalist: "Take any Tunisian or Egyptian or Yemeni walking down the street and put him in power. There is a 90 percent chance that he will act in a way not much different from that of Ben Ali or Mubarak or Saleh."

One of the most important achievements of the current Arab revolutions with regard to the image of the Arabs is that it shattered the caricature shaped by Western Orientalism about Arab submissiveness and Arab or Muslim cultural addiction to servility, as if Arabs hated freedom and loved tyranny.

The revolutionary wave that started in Tunisia and is still in its initial stage proved to the entire world that Arabs hate tyranny and yearn for freedom no less than any other people. It also proved that when they "aspired to life" - to borrow from the famous verse by Tunisian poet Abul-Qasim al-Shabi - and managed to break the barrier of fear, they accomplished uprisings that became a model to emulate around the world.

When Marzouki himself returned to Tunisia upon the downfall of Ben Ali, he was so overcome by the revolution's euphoria that, for a moment, he resorted to class analysis in the manner of the radical left, publishing on 10 March 2011 these insightful lines:

"Revolutionaries are not the ones who reap the fruits of the revolution. After the revolutionaries

comes the time of the opportunists, and after the epic comes the time of failed hopes. For the poor of Sidi Bouzid return to their poverty and the cemetery dwellers in Cairo return to their cemeteries. No radical solutions are given to their problems, only lots of promises that may or may not be fulfilled."

"As for who gains the most, in our case it is the bourgeoisie: it enjoyed a decent standard of living under despotism but its lives were poisoned by its corruption and its suppression of freedom. With the end of despotism, the bourgeoisie – through the sacrifices of the humble and the poor – adds to its economic and social rights the political ones it had been denied, while the poor classes themselves get political freedoms that do not feed hungry mouths."

Popular wisdom says that power corrupts. After he became president of Tunisia, Moncef Marzouki could no longer understand why the people of Sidi Bouzid refused to return to their poverty, rejected empty promises, and insisted on radical solutions to their problems. He suddenly found their refusal and insistence so distasteful that he resorted to borrowing the tyrants' usual arguments, as if he wanted to confirm what he had written two years ago.

When asked in an interview on *Al Jazeera* on 20 January 2012 about the popular protests that have not ceased in Tunisia since the downfall of the tyrant, Marzouki replied that they are, on the one hand, the result of the deposed regime's legacy and of economic paralysis. To which he added:

"But, there is also exploitation, politicization, and incitement from some quarters, either out of irresponsibility or with the intent of sabotaging this revolution – both these factors are at play. There are people that I consider irresponsible like the far left who say now we love the revolution, and they know that this government is in its first month, this is what I consider irresponsibility."

It is an old tune that Tunisians and Arabs generally are familiar with: The masses cannot possibly rise up on their own against their miserable living conditions. There are always "agitators," "subversives," "irresponsible culprits," and "extremists" – of various political colors – inciting them to protest and revolt.

This logic fails to understand that rage over exploitation and misery leads naturally to political radicalization. It reverses this fact into the idea that the radicals are the ones who create public outrage over misery and exploitation.

What the new Tunisian president has failed to understand is that his call last December for a six-month social truce was doomed to fail because it was not accompanied by any program indicating a real intention on the part of the new Tunisian government to respond to the people's obvious needs and basic demands, for which the people revolted and toppled Ben Ali.

Hamadi Jebali, a leader of the Ennahda Movement and the prime minister of the Tunisian transitional government, did not hesitate to claim on *Al Jazeera* (22 January 2012) that the economic decline in Tunisia this past year "is due to the phenomena of sit-ins, blocking roads, and wildcat labor strikes." He added that these mass protests prevented the implementation of new investment projects that were going to provide "thousands" of job opportunities.

In Marzouki's own previous words, the gentlemen who are in power today want the masses to end their struggle now that the dictator has been overthrown and want "the poor of Sidi Bouzid to return to their poverty...No radical solutions are given to their problems, only lots of promises that may or may not be fulfilled. As for who gains the most, it is the bourgeoisie: it enjoyed a decent standard of living under despotism but its lives were poisoned by its corruption and its suppression of freedom. With the end of despotism, the bourgeoisie – through the sacrifices of the humble and the poor – adds to its economic and social rights the political ones it had been denied, while the poor classes

themselves get political freedoms that do not feed hungry mouths.”

One does not need extraordinary insight to realize that the winners of the first post-uprising elections and governments are truly the opportunists and not the revolutionaries, as Marzouki himself rightly said when he was still moved by the thrill and wisdom of the revolution.

Condemning labor strikes and blaming them for the country’s economic decline, as well as playing that same old tune of the “extremists” and “subversives” of the “far left,” have become the common language of the new rulers in both Tunisia and Egypt, in a way that reminds us irresistibly of the deposed regimes.

But the masses that one day aspired to life and experienced the taste of freedom will not stop struggling and protesting before “fate answers their call,” even if only years later.

Gilbert Achcar

P.S.

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* Gilbert Achcar teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London.