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From People to Citizens in Tunisia

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While Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation will undoubtedly remain the iconic image of the 2011 Tunisian revolution, another set of pictures has also stuck in the minds of Tunisians. On the evening of January 14, despite an army curfew, a man staggered across Avenue Habib Bourguiba, shouting, "Ben Ali fled — the Tunisian people is free! The Tunisian people will not die! The Tunisian people is sacred!"

The scene, captured on camera by Al Jazeera, deeply moved many Tunisians. Throughout the spring into April, the pan-Arab satellite channel ran the clip over and over as filler for the minutes between the news hour and the preceding programs. Along with other slogans disseminated by Al Jazeera, like the famous, "The people want the fall of the regime," this evocation illustrates that "the people" (*al-sha'b al-tunisi*) has come to be the decisive category of identity in the country. The concept of *sha'b* is hardly new, of course, but it was the revolution, as broadcast into Tunisian and Arab living rooms by Al Jazeera, that made it effective for the first time.

Indeed, from the beginning of protests in December 2010 to the resignation of interim Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi on February 28, 2011, a love affair of sorts grew between Tunisian demonstrators and Al Jazeera. A robust interaction developed whereby the network used images of Tunisians to promote its coverage and the protesters carried signs reading, "Thank you, Al Jazeera." Tunisians were perfectly aware of how their revolt was misperceived. The numerous demonstrators who brandished loaves of bread, chanting "Bread, yes — Ben Ali, no," were objecting to analysis of their discontent in the Western press as purely economic, another "bread riot" to be quelled with minor subsidy adjustments. No,

Tunisians argued, they represented not the hungry and downtrodden, but the entirety of the Tunisian people claiming their dignity. The emergence of the term *sha'b* was part and parcel of this collective *cri de coeur* and thus of the success of the revolution.

Rulers and Ruled

The normative dimension of the category of “the people” is novel in post-colonial Tunisia. Previous social movements, while often quite militant, did not take on an overtly political thrust. During the bread riots of 1983-1984, for example, the notion of *sha'b* ironically appeared mainly in the patronizing rhetoric of the regime, as when President Habib Bourguiba announced his decision to reverse planned increases in the prices of bread, sugar and pasta. “O Tunisian people,” said Bourguiba in his televised address, “I have decided that we are going back to the former situation.” Neither these disturbances nor earlier ones were able to transform the relationship between ruler and ruled so that “the people” had agency as well as needs. After independence in 1956, Bourguiba promulgated an ideology based on the ideal of a homogeneous, united, modern, Francophile and secular national body. [1] In the name of this ideal, he crushed his main rival Salah Ben Youssef, a proponent of pan-Arabism close to Nasserism, and methodically constructed the image of a leader (*za'im*) who was the sole legitimate benefactor and protector of the people. [2] While Bourguiba’s era saw significant achievements in literacy, public health and women’s rights, the paternalistic relationship that developed between the *za'im* and Tunisians left little room for participatory politics. After Zine El Abidine Ben Ali seized power in 1987, this form of governance turned into a pervasive police state that restricted the space available for collective action even further. Abiding by the “pact of obedience” [3] or open resistance were the only two alternatives.

In January 2008, violent protests took place in the town of Redayef, a town of 26,000 located near the mining basin of Gafsa. The workers of this economically abandoned area took to the streets to express their anger at the fraudulent results of a hiring competition launched by the state-owned phosphate company. Most of the 81 positions opened by the company were given to workers with friends in high places, and not, as per an agreement between the company and the labor

federation, to sons of workers who had died or been injured in work accidents and other inhabitants of the region. Despite its intensity and determination, which spread to the neighboring towns of Metlaoui and Moulares, and included a large number of women and unemployed graduates, the movement remained essentially about advocating the rights of mine workers of the Gafsa area. It did not translate into a wider mobilization demanding the comprehensive rights of the Tunisian people. Most Tunisians, again, chose the option of the "pact of obedience." On December 17, 2010, the day that Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire, all that began to change.

As the revolutionary moment of 2011 gives way to uncertainty and anxiety over security and the outcome of the democratic transition, it might be tempting to dismiss the power of the category of *sha'b* as illusory. To do so, however, would be to miss two important aspects of what the notion of *sha'b* has achieved.

Consensus and Justice

"The people," like the nation, is what the scholar Benedict Anderson called an imagined community. One might point to various discrepancies between this imagined community and the real sociology of the Tunisian population — divisions of class, for example, or ideological affiliation. It is nonetheless important that the category of *sha'b*, and not Islam or workers or unemployed graduates, emerged as the rallying cry of the Tunisian revolution.

"The people" has subsequently become the reference point that political projects must adopt to be accepted as legitimate. This fact has the effect of making the projects more inclusive and, one may hope, broadening minds. On March 10, in an interview on Al Jazeera, Abdelfatah Mourou, second-in-command of the Islamist Nahda party, referred to the *sha'b*, not Islam or Muslims, as the central category of the Tunisian polity. When asked about Nahda's position toward partisan politics, often considered to contradict Islamists' ideal of unity, Mourou insisted on "the right of the people to its self" (*haqq al-sha'b li-nafsihi*). "The people may have different feelings," he granted, going on to contend, "the only parties that will win will be those chosen by the people." The concept of *sha'b* seems to compel Mourou to acknowledge pluralism. The necessity of framing decisions in terms of the interests of the Tunisian people has

equally become apparent in a number of declarations by Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi, as well as members of the League for Defense of the Revolution, party and association leaders. Every protest or strike — whether of journalists, railway workers or janitors — invokes not only the name of the demonstrating group, but also of the “Tunisian people.” Within the Arabic and Francophone media, there has been major transformation, though the habits of the old regime are far from fully uprooted. Articles, op-eds and forums about the expectations and needs of the Tunisian people proliferate. The notion of *sha'b* has established itself as the relevant signifier of consensus. One may fear that the newfound hegemony of this term will lead to anti-democratic consequences. Reference to “the people” is no guarantee of democratic intent; a particular group or party could try to hijack the revolution, presenting itself as a manifestation of the popular will. But it is unlikely that Tunisians will be so credulous, precisely because of the absence of leadership in the Tunisian revolution that has been so extensively remarked upon. The explosion in the number of political parties (more than 70) is regarded as a sign of fragmentation. But it could just as well be argued that the plurality of voices is clear evidence that the normative power of the category of people cannot be coopted by an opportunistic new *za'im*. The attitude of *dégage* or *irhal* — directed at Ben Ali and then two interim cabinets — has been criticized as capricious and unconstructive, but it clearly shows that Tunisians are not ready to abandon their recovered rights to free expression to any pretender to the throne. The self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi indeed manifested the tremendous suffering of people living in depressed towns like Sidi Bouzid, Casserine and Tataouine. But the movement that occurred between December 2010 and February 2011 was about dignity and justice, not collective self-pity. It is very unlikely that a *za'im* claiming to have miraculous healing powers will be able to seduce Tunisians, who are advocating a politics of justice, not compassion.

Terms of Debate

While the revolution has made the supposedly amorphous Arab “street” into a self-conscious people, many challenges lie ahead in the formation of democratic citizenship. The revolution has made apparent a plurality of voices, but also important

divisions. In the face of these divides, simply calling for unity is vain at best. Bridging the gaps seems particularly urgent in three areas: regional, generational and cultural.

Bouazizi's desperate act has revealed dramatic disparities between the poorer interior and the economically and politically more powerful coast. During the Ben Ali era, the relationship between the coast and interior was often described as pure center-periphery exploitation. Now, at a time when revolution fatigue is setting in, some political leaders might be tempted to play the provincial card and stir up regional antagonisms. Already, in the empty cafés of Sousse and Monastir, it is not uncommon to hear the people of Sidi Bouzid blamed for the absence of tourists. Conversely, the inhabitants of rural areas do not seem to trust the commitment of the coast dwellers to achieving true change. While party leaders and Prime Minister Essebsi seem aware of the dangers of regionalism, others have not hesitated to start down this slippery slope. In May, Farhat Rajhi, who was dismissed from his post as interior minister in March, triggered a nationwide scandal after contending, in an interview broadcast on Facebook, that coastal leaders were fomenting counter-revolutionary plots. This declaration, though it lacked evidence, helped to spark a new wave of demonstrations that were violently repressed by the police. While Rajhi's freedom of expression should be protected, such provincial sentiments are completely unproductive.

Most of the participants in the Tunisian revolution are under 35. If their call for respect has been heard, their sense of hopelessness about the job market has not disappeared. A significant minority of the country's youth still dreams of only one thing — escaping to Europe. As for others, they organize in associations and shop for ideas among the new political parties. Yet a huge gap remains between the youth activism and the response of the government. The *irhal* attitude of the young demonstrators can be defined as a libertarian stance toward authority, derived from a mixture of distrust for the government, ignorance of older political activists, interest in a strong, active civil society and skepticism toward projects and ideals that seem to contradict an individualist, utilitarian approach to politics. The youth are increasingly anxious about their immediate future: How will they complete their studies? How will they find employment? Will they be able to marry and

raise a family? They are struggling with how to contribute constructively to the national debate on these questions. In view of this disposition, it was worrisome that on May 4 Essebsi told the nation that his main priority is to reestablish the "prestige of the state." The police then quashed demonstrations on May 6-7 in Tunis and Siliana, leading to the decision to reinstate the curfew on May 9. The interim government shows little understanding of the type of political participation that youth are interested in and capable of.

Last but not least, there is the debate between Islam and secularism. In light of the unquestionable popularity of Nahda, many have fallen into the trap of the "Islamist threat" paradigm. The secular left is frightening itself by imagining a scenario, in which a landslide Islamist victory leads to a military coup, as in Algeria in 1992. Declarations made by Nahda leaders Rachid Ghannouchi and Mourou about their respect for the rules of democracy and their commitment not to alter the personal status code or establish *shari'a* are derided as doublespeak. No matter how justified these fears are, exclusion of Islamists has proven a bad idea, both in Algeria and Tunisia. Inclusion in the political game, as in Morocco, has led to more positive results. The problem with political Islam, in Tunisia and elsewhere, is not that it is too political but that it is not political enough. It is not integrated into a transparent and competitive political sphere, where, instead of one "Islamist threat," there are many parties within the Islamist nebula. Although there is no extensive survey, it is far from clear that the pious Tunisian middle class embraces the project of Nahda. Many of these middle-class Tunisians want to express piety in the public sphere, but do not trust Nahda leaders and are very attached to gender equality. Some other parties, such as the newly founded Islamist party Alliance Nationale pour la Paix et la Prospérité (that includes Kamel Omrane, former minister of religious affairs under Ben Ali), the secular, center-left Congrès pour la République or the center-right Afeq, as well as new unions, have understood the complexity of the supposedly homogeneous Islamist electorate. They refuse to resort to the old tool of sowing antagonism between Islamists and secularists. As Tarek Masoud has shown, it is pointless to speculate about whether Islamists are truly democratic. [4] What matters is to establish solid institutions

that safeguard the possibility of robust public debate. Proportional representation is a good method whereby Islamists can be included in electoral competition while guaranteeing significant pluralities for other political trends within a national assembly.

The continuing dominance of the category of “the people” in the public sphere raises hopes that neither Islamists nor secularists will be able set the terms of debate and that other, more immediately compelling issues will stay on the agenda. It is necessary to maintain a focus on the people’s practical problems to prevent the Tunisian revolution from sliding back into the false dilemmas of the 1990s.

Endnotes

[1] See Mounira Charrad, *States and Women’s Rights: The Making of Post-Colonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

[2] See Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Habib Bourguiba, la trace et l’héritage* (Paris: Karthala, 2004).

[3] See Béatrice Hibou, *La Force de l’obéissance: Economie politique de la répression en Tunisie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

[4] Tarek Masoud, “Are They Democrats? Does It Matter?” *Journal of Democracy* 19/3 (July 2008).