



Mohamed Bouazizi and Tunisia: 10 Years On

By Habib Ayeb



Mohamed Bouazizi's name is familiar to all; less so is his background, although the facts of his story are well known and documented. This article will explore the links between the different sequences of 'protest' processes in Tunisia, from the 2008 strikes in the minefields, to the most recent (2017-20) El Kamour protests in the country's south-east. It will also consider the concept of socio-spatial class solidarity, both in turning an individual suicide into the spark for a major uprising, and in facilitating collective resistance and its role in long revolutionary processes.

Two key questions arise: what in Bouazizi's profile, life and circumstances was of such [significance that his suicide](#) sparked a huge popular uprising whose impact, direct and indirect, was felt worldwide. And what can he teach us about the origin, scale and longevity of the Tunisian revolution?

We must therefore examine the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi within its familial and personal context, but also within the more general context of the political protests against the Ben Ali dictatorship, and especially against the processes of dispossession, impoverishment and exclusion. Sidi Bouzid was clearly a focus of the protests and resistance then spreading throughout Tunisia's marginalised regions. The prolonged mining strikes of 2008 were a key stage in the actions.

Born into poverty, Mohamed Bouazizi was raised by his mother after he lost his father at the age of three. As the eldest son he grew up with a moral 'obligation' to support his mother, to the detriment

of his education, and he left school without qualifications. Some time before his dramatic act, he acquired a barrow and scales and started selling vegetables but his informal business attracted endless administrative hassles and police harassment. Finally, on 17 December 2010, the police seized his meagre equipment to put a stop to his trading. Angry, frustrated and desperate, he turned to the only act of resistance that still [appeared open to him](#) and thereby unwittingly triggered the countdown to Ben Ali's fall, scarcely one month later, on 14 January 2011.

'Individual' suicide and class solidarity

Between the prolonged mining strike of 2008 and the shows of solidarity unleashed by Bouazizi's self-immolation, many social movements were active across Tunisia. Among them were the protests made in Sidi Bouzid in June and July 2010 by peasant farmers whose demands focused on a number of issues: access to natural resources such as agricultural land, and water for drinking and irrigation purposes, state aid, and the complex problem of indebtedness.

According to several witnesses interviewed in Sidi Bouzid, as well as two family members, Mohamed Bouazizi took an active part in these demonstrations. Whether or not this is so, I would identify a clear link between the peasant 'protests' of summer 2010 and those that followed Bouazizi's desperate act - a link that explains why this particular case, in contrast to other suicides, sparked a popular uprising across the country. First to take to the streets after Bouazizi's self-immolation were other peasant farmers' children identifying with his fatal act of resistance and despair.

Here was a clear example of 'class solidarity' among local populations directly affected by the region's multiple social and economic problems. Over the next few days that same class solidarity also found expression nationwide, moving from the 'rural' zones (including 'rural towns'), to the popular quarters of larger towns, and finally to the big urban centres, including Tunis. The progress of the protests suggests the existence of a distinct class-consciousness embracing all the 'popular' classes, rural and urban.

Since the early 1980s, the governorate of Sidi Bouzid has been the site of a rapid, state-initiated intensification of farming, designed to create a modern, export-oriented agricultural hub based on exploiting deep underground water reserves and attracting private and public capital. Over the past four decades Sidi Bouzid has been transformed: from a semi-arid desert fringe with an extensive agriculture based on olives, almonds, pasture and winter cereals, it has become Tunisia's leading agricultural region, producing over a quarter of the nation's total output of fruit and vegetables.

But behind this undoubted technical success lies a real social and ecological failure. Socially Sidi Bouzid remains one of Tunisia's four poorest regions (of 26 in total), while ecologically the level of the water table is plummeting, water for irrigation is increasingly saline, and soil damage is visible, even to non-specialist eyes.

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Here investors - who are mostly outsiders, often called 'settlers' by the local population - accrue capital and profits; meanwhile peasant farmers accumulate losses, tragedies and suicides. Without this huge socio-spatial fault, which divides Tunisia between a dominant centre and dependant periphery, Mohamed Bouazizi's death would scarcely have merited a mention. And that same divide also lies at the heart of several other shocks which will be discussed below.

After the Sidi Bouzid uprising ended with the fall of the Ben Ali dictatorship, several more protest movements arose, all forming part of the same resistance processes in the social and spatial periphery.

The Jemna oasis movement began in 2011 and concerned rights to land and resources, while the El Kamour movement (2017-20) also involves rights to local resources and in particular to 'development': two different struggles each of which constitutes a key moment/sequence in the same process of dissent.

At Jemna and El Kamour, as in other cases, the key to mass mobilisation lies in the processes and dynamics of socio-spatial class solidarity: 'This is where I come from, I belong to this region and this social group, I am being deprived of resources materially and/or symbolically, so I support those who dare to say "no" and resist'. In summary, this is what you can hear in Kebili-Jemna, Tataouine-El Kamour and elsewhere; what you can read in the media reports of declarations made by local populations. And underlying it all, 'driving' resistance and 'cementing' solidarity, lie profound feelings of injustice and demands for dignity.

Jemna: rights versus law; a disruptive legitimacy

Following the Sidi Bouzid episode and the fall of the dictator, in 2011 an oasis was 'discovered' that was probably new to the majority of Tunisians. Situated in the desert, midway between Kebili and Douz, the Jemna oasis owed its sudden appearance on the map to a significant new collective action, stemming directly from specific elements of colonial history that resurfaced after the wall of silence placed around them had been breached.

While most French colonists chose to settle in north or north-west Tunisia and created big cereal farms and/or stock-raising enterprises, and even vineyards and orchards, others preferred to head south and specialise in date farming - in particular the Degla variety, whose export market in France and Europe was virtually guaranteed. Among this latter group was one Maus De Rolley, who in 1937 created a new date-palm plantation around the core of the ancient Jemna oasis. The plantation today covers some 306 hectares, including 185 hectares planted with approximately 10,000 date palms.

Although local populations had held these lands as common and indivisible (tribal) property, they were dispossessed without compensation on the pretext that nomadic herding (pastoralism) was not a genuine productive activity, and that the land therefore was uncultivated. At independence, these populations - who had battled against the occupiers - held great expectations that the new authorities would return their stolen lands.

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When the colonial lands were nationalised in 1964, however, the government decided to place them under state control, confiding their management to the body that administered the state's agricultural land, the Office des Terres Domaniales (OTD), which thereby became Tunisia's biggest agricultural landowner. Bolstering this strategy was the collectivisation policy of the 1960s, which aimed to reorganise agricultural land and create state 'socialist' cooperatives.

Yet the real argument against the redistribution of the nationalised lands lay elsewhere: small peasant farmers were judged too ignorant and archaic, too lacking in the necessary financial and technical means, to develop a modern intensive agricultural sector - a stigmatisation that still recurs

today whenever discussion returns to this subject and/or to questions of agricultural models and political choices related to farming and food.

Over the following decades, the heirs made some efforts to reclaim these lands, but it was not until early 2011 that the first organised occupations of OTD lands were launched by local populations describing themselves as the legitimate successors. Among them was Jemna's local population, who occupied the former De Rolley plantation, claiming rights of property and of exploitation. The authorities demanded an end to the occupation, and the resulting impasse lasted for several years. The government argued that the occupation was illegal, while the occupiers countered that they held a legitimate right to resources and especially to community assets, including the indivisible and inalienable commons.

After a long period of tension a compromise was reached. By mutual agreement, the state ceded full management of the palm plantation to the local population while retaining ownership of the land. Might the latter have believed this negotiated settlement to be the only viable compromise?

Underlying the government position was the fear that any solution implying the grant of freehold to the legitimate heirs might create a legal precedent and set an example that would unleash a torrent of other land claims, all drawing on the same colonial and post-colonial past. But the occupation alone had set that example already, inciting other local populations to reclaim - with some attempts at occupation - the lands snatched from their grandparents during colonisation. Furthermore, I would argue that the Jemna case also served to fuel claims of a legitimate right to other local 'natural' resources such as water, minerals (for example, phosphates) and oil that mobilised populations in the Tatouine region.

El Kamour: the 'will of the people'

Resistance entered another phase, not without success, at El Kamour - a locality situated in the barren steppes of south-eastern Tunisia, south of the town of Tataouine, on the tarmac road leading to the oil-fields in the extreme south of the country. The 'dispossession pipeline' carrying crude oil to the port of Skhira, 50 kilometres north of Gabes, runs through here, and this geographical position close to the pipeline is the immediate reason for El Kamour's sudden appearance on political maps of Tunisia, as well as in the media.

Behind El Kamour, however, lies the governorate and town of Tataouine (Tataouine is the capital of the governorate of the same name), with over 180,000 inhabitants. Arid and barren, this region contains most of Tunisia's oil reserves, producing 40 per cent of its petrol and [20 per cent of its gas](#). Yet Tataouine also records some of the nation's highest levels of poverty: in 2017, for example, 28.7 per cent of its active population were unemployed (compared with a national average of 15.3 per cent), while for graduates the [rate rose as high as 58 per cent](#).

Events in El-Kamour, 2017-2020: a brief chronology

The [El Kamour movement](#) began on 25 March 2017, with protests in various localities in the governorate, all converging on the town centre of Tataouine. The protesters were demanding a share of local resources, particularly oil, as well as greater employment opportunities and infrastructure development. Met by silence from the government, on 23 April they organised a sit-in at El Kamour. Tensions mounted on both sides, and an escalation became inevitable after the prime minister visited Tataouine and met the protesters. His plans to calm the situation with a few token promises came to naught and the discussions ended in deadlock. On 20 May the pumping station was occupied for two days before being cleared by the army, and tensions remained high.

Eventually, on 16 June 2017, an agreement was signed with the government through the mediation of the Union générale tunisienne du travail (UGTT), which acted to guarantee its implementation. The terms of the agreement promised the creation of 3,000 new jobs in the environmental sector by 2019, and 1,500 jobs in the oil industry by the end of 2017. A budget of 80 million dinars was also earmarked for regional development. But, to the frustration of the local population, the agreement was never implemented. The government simply bided its time, gambling that the militants would tire and the movement run out of steam.

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On 20 May 2020, however, the El Kamour activists resumed their protests and sit-ins in several places, piling on the pressure and blockading several routes to bar them to oil-industry vehicles. On 3 July they organised a new general strike throughout the public services and the oilfields, and on 16 July they closed the pumping station, blocking the pipelines carrying petroleum products north. But the El Kamour militants had to wait until 7 November 2020 before they could reach an agreement with the government’s representatives, in return for which petrol producers and other oil-sector enterprises were to resume operations immediately.

Signed by the head of government on 8 November 2020, the agreement contains a number of key points, including several that had previously featured in the 2017 accord but had not been implemented. These included, dedicated 80-million-dinar development and investment fund for the governorate of Tataouine; credit finance for 1,000 projects before the end of 2020; 215 jobs created in the oil industry in 2020, plus a further 70 in 2021; 2.6 million dinars for local municipalities and 1.2 million dinars for the Union Sportive de Tataouine.

The big social movements discussed above all have several points in common. Firstly, they are very largely located in southern, central, western and north-western Tunisia, the same marginalised and impoverished regions that between 17 December 2010 and early January 2011 saw huge protests in support of Bouazizi and against current social and economic policies. Secondly, while differing in detail, the principal demands of these movements all relate essentially to the right to resources, services and a decent income. None, or virtually none, are linked to ‘political’ demands (political rights, individual freedom). Thirdly, in their choice of language, and of several ‘spectacular’ actions, these social movements display a radicalism that marks a clear break with the political games played in and around the centres of power. Finally, almost all these movements are denounced and accused of regionalism and tribalism, sometimes even of separatism and treachery. Protesters are suspected of being manipulated, of being puppets in the hands of a political party or foreign power.

Yet these movements have enjoyed some, albeit relative, success – a success impossible without the class solidarity shown in the three examples discussed above, and the ties of domination and dependency that for decades have characterised the relationship between Tunisia’s centre of power (the east coast) and its deprived and impoverished periphery. Finally, these same examples, and other more recent cases, demonstrate that the ‘revolutionary’ processes launched in early 2008 are still active in Tunisia and will probably remain so for many years to come.

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