

14 January in Tunisia or The Mischievous Grin of History

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“Tyrants appear great only because we are on our knees.”

Etienne de La Boétie

Never has this phrase of Etienne de La Boétie resonated more with the Maghreb population than over the last few days, when the Tunisian people have risen up and put an end to a paradoxical situation. While the most clear-sighted of us recognised this situation as a chapter waiting to be closed, no-one could say for sure when or how this would happen.

Suddenly, voluntary servitude transformed into an intense passion for life and for freedom. But by what miracle, and with what alchemy, does the mystery of ancestral submission dissolve and the flower of joyful disobedience bloom? Over the coming days and weeks historians will explain, using well-documented articles, the strong impulse for modernisation that has existed within Tunisian society since the mid-19th century: the major political reforms; the oldest constitution of the Arab world; the modern educational choice (Sadiqiya College); the major urbanisation of the land; the old reformist tradition; the modernist elites (Khayreddine, Haddad, Bourguiba...), etc. Did Abdallah Laroui not insist, more than forty years ago, that: *“There are undoubtedly objective reasons for the “personal power” prevailing in the Maghrib today. In some respects it can even pose as “enlightened despotism”; but in the long run it can achieve legitimacy only if it prepares for, or allows others to prepare for, its replacement. [...] The future belongs to the cities. We must encourage urbanization rather than try to impede it for fear of the problems it engenders. But since urbanization will for a long time be a step ahead of industrialization, the new urban masses will have to be organized and work somehow found for them which, even if not economically profitable, will be socially educational [...] True, the situation is not uniform. Despite appearances, **the most appreciable results in the right direction have been achieved in Tunisia, thanks to its nineteenth-century experience.**”* Abdallah Laroui, *The History of the Maghrib: An Interpretive Essay*, Ed. Maspero, 1970, Trans. Ralph Manheim, 1977.

Social demographers, following in the footsteps of Emmanuel Todd, will highlight the impact of the reform of the Code of Personal Status (1956) on the modernisation of the family, demographic transition, the deconstruction of patriarchy and the emergence of the new individual, released from the rags of tradition.

Geographers will underline the nature of the relationship between man and land and the extremely advanced urbanisation of Tunisia – even the great extent to which it manages to accommodate man and land. Sociologists and economists, on the other hand, will point to the arrival of those new players – the educated youth – connected to the rest of the world and aspiring to live at its pace. They will remind us of the position and role of the Tunisian middle class and highlight the role of new information and communication technology in fostering the rapid development of Tunisian civil society. Other fine and rich interpretations will emerge over the coming days, months and years, in response to this major event that we will henceforth call “The Tunisian Revolution”.

And if, in years to come, this great moment of rupture leads to the establishment of a democratic political system, supported by a modern and open society – as we hope it will – do we not risk seeing the notions of Arab exceptionalism and universalism make a radical resurgence? Can we continue to consider “the desire to be modern” to be the specific fate of the West? Can we still argue that only the West has chosen to place its political future in the city and in rationalism, and that “the East” continues to live in the fixed order of families, clans and tribes, in the shadow of religion? Would we still dare to say that “Arabs”, “Muslims” and “Africans” care more about bread than freedom and that they are trapped in the cycle of a revolutionary past?

Nevertheless, all those who just a few weeks before had spent every day sitting in one of the many cafés on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, seeing the resignation – or what we believed to be such – on people’s faces, flicking through the indigestible newspapers on offer or listening to the inevitable spin of the official media, will always remember that Friday (14 January 2011) as a kind of epiphany: the veil of submission was suddenly torn and the dawn of that hallowed day rose up like the bright smile of a new page of history.

All of a sudden, the people stood up and the tyrant appeared small – too small to keep hidden the vast horizon opening up before Tunisia.

It is worth noting that several clear-sighted intellectuals, and many of the most hardened political opponents, were ready to accept the programme laid out in the speech on 13 January and to cooperate with the regime on the basis of the new policies it presented. But the people decided otherwise. A passion for freedom had already spread throughout society and taken hold at its very core. A spark of pride was lit in the hearts of men, making it suddenly impossible to bear their state of servitude any longer, to the extent that even death was preferable. And after a long sleep, the spirit stirs, rejecting any form of guardianship, and “dares” to change the course of history.

Tunisia was the first Arab country to pass from absolutism to constitutionalism, in 1861.

May she now become the swallow that heralds a wave of modern democratisation, unstoppable and irreversible, across the Arab world and beyond.

Casablanca, 15 January 2011

Notes
