

Tunisia: IMF “Economic Medicine” has resulted in Mass Poverty and Unemployment

Protest by Suicide as a Symbol of Resistance

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Mass and spontaneous demonstrations erupted on Friday, December 17th in the city of Sidi Bouzid (central Tunisia) when Mohammad Bouazizi, a 26 year-old, doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire after a female police officer slapped and spat on him. The only crime Bouazizi committed was that of being a street vendor selling vegetables and fruits without a permit, in a country where neoliberal economic policies failed to provide economic opportunities to Bouazizi and thousands of others like him.[1] Bouazizi's attempted suicide, which comes hard on the heels of police humiliation and confiscation of his only source of income, reveals the utter despair prevalent today among Tunisia's population especially college graduates. Twenty-four years of ruthless corruptions, dictatorship, and neoliberal economic policies led to wealth being concentrated in the hands of very few people connected to President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and his wife's family. Bouazizi, a college graduate,[2] was trying to live in dignity and provide for his family by becoming a street vendor despite living in a country that is considered an economic miracle and one of the African lions by western economic monitors and analysts.[3]

The miserable economic conditions in the interior of the country, lack of employment opportunities and political freedoms pushed Bouazizi, like thousands of other young men and women in the Maghreb countries, to the margins of society. Tunisia's national unemployment rate, which understates the true unemployment situation, stands at 14%.[4] However, the youth unemployment rate (those between 15-24 year-old) is at 31%. The income share of the top 10% is approximately 32%, and the top 20% of the population controls 47% of Tunisia's income. Tunisia's inequality is so severe that the bottom 60% of the population earns only 30% (the top 40% take home 70% of the income).[5] Still, the IMF describes the government management of the economy and the uneven economic growth which benefited mainly northern and coastal cities while marginalizing the interior of the country as a “prudent macroeconomic management.”[6]

The despicable behavior of the police officer described above is not uncommon in Tunisia and is condoned by the police state that ignores basic human rights, shows no respect for the dignity of its citizens, and does not tolerate any signs of dissent. Poverty, unemployment and oppression have pushed yet another young man to commit suicide just few days later after Bouazizi's attempt. On Wednesday, December 22nd, Hussein Nagi Felhi, also unemployed, unfortunately succeeded in committing suicide by climbing a high-voltage electric power line. He was electrocuted and died on the scene. Witnesses say the young man was shouting “no for misery, no for unemployment” as he climbed the electric pylon.[7]

The epidemic of youth unemployment, inequality, political repression, and lack of any

meaningful freedoms inflamed solidarity among the population which took to the streets in a spontaneous and unplanned organic protests. Within days of the attempted suicide by Bouazizi and the suicide of Felhi, protests spread across the country and reached the capital Tunis and are still ongoing even in the face of total national media blackout and police brutality which resulted in the killing of an 18 year-old. This is not the first time the dictator of Tunisia Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has faced street anger over joblessness and economic misery during his 24-year reign, but this is by far the most serious challenge to his rule. About three years ago in January 2008, his security apparatus crushed protesters in the southern mining town of Redhayef when workers and young people protested wages and unemployment.[8] At that time, over 300 people were arrested as a result of the protests.[9] However, this time the desperation among the population has reached the boiling point. Aided by social media, some protesters launched a Facebook page to document riots and share news although the government promptly shuts down any protest-linked websites.[10] The demonstrations are increasing in intensity and show no signs of abating. The protesters are fed up with the status quo of a self-enriching and corrupt ruling family which is the de facto governing system in the Middle East and North Africa.

A Western Ally: The Hypocrisy of Western Neoliberal and Foreign Policies

Respect for human rights and freedom of the press is almost nonexistent in Tunisia. The Heritage Foundation Index of Economic Freedom labels Tunisia as ‘mostly unfree’ nation and marginally close to being repressed—its lowest score.[11] Transparency International ranks Tunisia among its seriously corrupt nations with a score of 4.3 out of 10 (10 being free of corruption and 1 as most corrupt), and Tunisia is considered ‘not free’ according to Freedom House Index.[12] This is no surprise in a country where the government controls almost all aspects of people’s lives. Young people are especially tightly controlled and monitored. Even fields of study in post-secondary education are decided by the government where the Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Scientific Research decides in which field of study students will be placed.[13]

Although the protests that are spreading across the country took on the form of social unrest for the first few days, they rapidly metamorphosed over the last ten days to become a mass political rally by the people. The protesters are now on the streets calling openly for the president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to leave office by holding signs in Tunisian Arabic dialect that read “Yezzi Fock” (Ben Ali, it is enough) which has become the protesters’ political slogan. Labor and industry unions which played an active role in public life since independence from France are also supporting the protesters. President Ben Ali, nearing 80, is very aware of the gravity and the real threat to his grip on power. His first reaction was to preempt the protesters by firing some local officials, replace some ministers in his cabinet, and then immediately promising more investment and job creation completely oblivious to his record after 24 years in power. When these empty promises failed to deflate the protesters’ anger, he resorted to the routine policies of riot police and explicit threats directed to his citizens. Facing the most serious unrest in the history of his rule, he took to the airways and gave a televised address in response to the demonstrations. He vowed to punish “the minority of extremists” whom he blamed for the riots (as he calls them) and also indicated that these protests “will have a negative impact on creating jobs. It will discourage investors and tourists which will hit jobs.”[14] It appears that the President’s main concern is the tourism industry which is tightly controlled by his family and that of his wife as revealed by several Wikileaks concerning the economic and financial corruption of the first family.

The Tunisian dictator and his family are touted by Western governments as an example of a stable and progressive North African Muslim nation. The neoliberal economic policies are hailed as prudent and wise by the IMF yet these policies primarily benefited his family, that of his wife in addition to other well-connected wealthy Tunisians. In one incident of corruption revealed by Wikileaks, the Son-in-Law of the President purchased a 17% share of a bank just before it was to be privatized and then sold the shares at a premium. Readings from Wikileaks U.S. diplomatic cables underscore that success in the Tunisian economy is directly related to connection to the first family. Income and regional inequalities are on the rise in Tunisia. Job creation and widespread prosperity promised by defunct orthodox economic dictates never trickled down to the masses or even materialized for most unemployed college graduates where net migration has been steadily increasing rising from -16,000 in 1980 to -80,000 in 2005.

The Tunisian Government is an important ally for the U.S. in its resource-driven colonial wars with Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. A United Nations report on secret detention practices lists Tunisia as having secret detention facilities where prisoners are held without International Red Cross access. [15] Intelligence services in Tunisia cooperated with the U.S. efforts in the War on Terror and have participated in interrogating prisoners at Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan and in Tunisia. Recent Wikileaks diplomatic cables reveal that the U.S. not long ago was concerned about the growing anger on the streets and the corruption of Ben Ali and the Trabelsi family (his wife's family) who treat everything in the country as theirs. A list of Wikileaks cables from the U.S. Embassy in Tunisia posted on The Guardian newspaper website indicate that the U.S. considers Tunisia as a police state "with little freedom of expression or association, and serious human rights problems," and the Ben Ali family as a "quasi mafia." [16] Nevertheless, the State Department boasts about the active support the Tunisian security forces receive from the U.S. in spite of the Ben Ali's government record of serious human rights violations. According to the State Department website:

"The United States and Tunisia have an active schedule of joint military exercises. U.S. security assistance historically has played an important role in cementing relations. The U.S.-Tunisian Joint Military Commission meets annually to discuss military cooperation, Tunisia's defense modernization program, and other security matters." [17]

The fate of the protests is unclear at this point. The Ben Ali government is frantic to control the situation by sending police and security enforcements in the cities affected by the protests. The protesters have been peaceful and have not resorted to any violence or destruction of property. Some protesters simply held a loaf of bread and others are simply holding signs that call for jobs and dignity. In the meantime, the IMF is continuing to push Tunisia to more austere economic policies on the expenditure side, recommending that the government ends its support for food and fuel products and reform its social security system, a code word for privatizing the pension system in Tunisia which benefits the masses of poor Tunisians. [18] The greatest hypocrisy in all of this is that the IMF recommends these policies in the name of greater employment and growth which is the IMF's cut-and-paste recipe for all nations it studies.

In the meantime, the Western international community has been largely silent about the protests. The U.S. corporate-run media is as usual busy selling air time to corporations eager to cash in on the Christmas holiday while simultaneously raising their prices to squeeze more out of their customers. [19] The New York Times and the Wall Street Journal didn't report on the Tunisian protests at all. The U.S. State Department remains tight-lipped on the

issue and has yet to release any statement on the situation. The U.S. government's deafening silence confirms the inherent hypocrisy in U.S. diplomatic and foreign policy that is widely known, detested, and recently confirmed by Wikileaks released U.S. diplomatic cables.

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Notes

[1] See Aljazeera story in (Arabic), 23 December 2010:

<http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/D2ACC91E-B225-411B-8073-AC6C79845D77.htm>

[2] There are conflicting reports on whether Mohammad Bouazizi is a college graduate or not. But most news sources indicate that he is. See:

http://dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=2&article_id=123016#axzz19WbaUTRj

[3] 'African lions' is a term used by Boston Consulting Group to describe the eight countries driving growth on the continent: South Africa, Algeria, Botswana, Egypt, Mauritius, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. See Florence Beaugé, Economic power of the 'African lions' tallied. , The Guardian Weekly, 10 June 2010: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/jun/09/morocco-southafrica>

[4] Julian Borger, Tunisian President Vows to Punish Rioters After Worst Unrest in a Decade. The Guardian, 29 December 2010:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/29/tunisian-president-vows-punish-rioters>

[5] World Bank Indicators: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.MA.ZS/countries/TN?display=graph>

[6] Joël Toujas-Bernate and Rina Bhattachary, Tunisia Weathers Crisis Well, But Unemployment Persists. IMFSurvey Magazine: Countries & Regions , 10 September 2010:

<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/so/2010/car091010a.htm>

[7] Amro Hassan, Tunisia: Apparent Suicide Triggers Youth Protests Against Unemployment. The Los Angeles Times, 23 December 2010:

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2010/12/tunisia-suicide-triggers-youth-protests-against-unemployment.html>

[8] Human Rights Watch, World Report Chapter: Tunisia, January 2009: <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/79260>

[9] Amnesty International, Behind Tunisia's Economic Miracle: Inequality and Criminalization of Protests, June 2009:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE30/003/2009/en/2e1d33e2-55da-45a3-895f-656db85b7aed/mde300032009en.pdf>

[10] The facebook page for protesters can be accessed via

<http://www.facebook.com/yezzifock?v=photos#!/yezzifock?v=wall>

[11] The Heritage Foundation, 2010 Index of Economic Freedom:
<http://www.heritage.org/Index/Ranking>

[12] Freedom House, Freedom in The World Country Report , 2010 edition:
<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2010> , and Transparency International Corruption Index
http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results

[13] Housa Trabelsi, Unemployment Haunts Tunisia's College Graduates. The Megharebia, 30 July 2010:
http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2010/07/30/feature-01

[14] Tunisian President Says Job Riots are not Acceptable. The BBC, 28 December 2010:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12087596>

[15] See United Nations report on secrete detention practices
<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/13session/A-HRC-13-42.pdf>

[16] US embassy cables: Tunisia - a US foreign policy conundrum, The Guardian, 7 December 2010:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/217138>

[17] Background Note: Tunisia, U.S. State Department, 13 October 2010:
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5439.htm#relations>

[18] See note 4

[19] Matthew Boyle, Wal-Mart Raising Prices on Toys, Squeezing More Out of Holidays. Bloomberg News, 15 December 2010:
<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-12-15/wal-mart-raised-prices-on-toys-this-month-squeezing-more-out-of-holidays.html>

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“The fight is never about grapes or lettuce. It is always about people.” (César Chávez)

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