

## **Youth and the Tunisian Revolution**

Prepared for the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum by  
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This paper focuses on young people's involvement in the Tunisian revolution based on interviews conducted with young activists just six months after the overthrow of the dictatorship. Young people described their political mobilization, recounted their participation in crucial events, and reflected on the problems they and their country face in the transition to democracy.

The paper makes three main arguments: First, the revolution was initiated by disaffected young people, who succeeded in bringing together a broad coalition of social and political forces against Ben Ali's regime. Second, the coalition was able to bring down the regime due to longstanding and widespread discontent in the country that stemmed from factors such as: massive unemployment (especially amongst youth), unequal regional development and lack of equitable distribution of wealth, stifling political repression and corruption within the ruling family. Third, the young people who initiated the revolution are not politically organized, and old and newly established political forces, many of which do not represent the interests of the youth, are now occupying the void created by Ben Ali's departure. Thus, the current transition is characterized by tensions between the older and younger generations, and the future of the revolution will largely depend on how these tensions will be resolved.

Between 18 December 2010 and 14 January 2011, young Tunisians were at the vanguard of a wave of protests that led to the fall of president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. When Ben Ali, his wife, Leila, and a few relatives fled the country into exile in Saudi Arabia, it marked the end of an era in Tunisian history.<sup>2</sup> How did a spontaneous movement led by young people manage to overturn a supposedly stable ruling regime? Who were the protesters? How did the protests spread and escalate? Why did they succeed? The accounts of the revolution offered by young participants in the movement not only highlight the main

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<sup>2</sup> Tunisia became a French protectorate in 1881. The country gained its independence in 1956, and Habib Bourguiba, its first president, established a one-party state. He ruled the country for 31 years, repressing Islamic fundamentalism and establishing rights for women unmatched by any other Arab nation. Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, a former minister of the interior and prime minister, led a bloodless coup against Bourguiba and became president in 1987. Until January 2011, Ben Ali and his Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party exerted total control over parliament, state and local governments, and most political activity, in true dictatorship fashion.

events but also articulate the perspectives of those who had been excluded from the political process before they took the situation into their own hands. Their vivid recollections add depth and texture to the headlines and newsflashes that were visible to the rest of the world during this tumultuous time.

The Tunisian revolution started in the center of the country in the small town of Sidi Bouzid where, on 17 December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi<sup>3</sup>, a 26-year-old fruit vendor, set himself on fire to protest economic conditions and police mistreatment. Fayda Hamdi, a 45-year-old female officer of the municipal police, confiscated Bouazizi's wares because he did not have a vendor's permit. Bouazizi was furious and reportedly insulted her. Some people mentioned that he said something like: "What can I do now? Should I now weigh my fruits with your two breasts?" Reacting angrily, the officer slapped him in the face in front of everyone. For a Tunisian man, being slapped by a woman in public constitutes a major humiliation.

Deeply offended, Bouazizi tried to lodge a complaint with municipal authorities. Apparently the governor refused to see him, even after Bouazizi threatened, "If you don't see me, I'll burn myself." True to his word, he acquired a can of paint thinner, doused his left arm, held a lighter in his right hand, and set himself alight while standing in front of the main government building of Sidi Bouzid. He succumbed to his wounds at the military hospital in Ben Arous eighteen days later, on 4 January 2011.

A couple of hours after Bouazizi's self-immolation, several hundred young people assembled in the same place to express their solidarity with Bouazizi and protest economic hardship and youth unemployment, as well as police abuses. Clashes between demonstrators and the police erupted as more people joined in the rallies. Protesters set up a coordinating committee that began relaying information to demonstrators. Images and videos of the protests and of police brutality against demonstrators surfaced on the Internet through Facebook. For the moment, however, national media completely ignored the uprising in Sidi Bouzid.

On December 20, young people in the neighboring towns of Kasserine, Gafsa, and Sfax staged protests in solidarity with Sidi Bouzid. Over the next few days they spread to Regueb, Meknasi, and Menzel Bouzaiene. Protestors responded to police violence by throwing stones, burning tires in the middle of the street, and torching official government buildings and cars. The police fired on the demonstrators, killing two 18-year-olds, Mohamed Ammari and Chawki Hidri, in Menzel Bouzaiene. Many more were injured, but the protestors did not retreat. During that week young bloggers and cyber activists from Tunis and other regions flocked to Sid Bouzid, Menzel Bouzaiene, and other towns to join in the demonstrations and to record and report the events to the country and the world. Images and videos were posted in the Internet and picked up by international media, particularly Al Jazeera and France 24.

On December 25, the regime's development ministers announced urgent measures to deal with youth unemployment in the regions where young people were demonstrating

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<sup>3</sup> I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of my interviewees, with the exception of public figures or individuals whose identity had already been publicly revealed in the media and other outlets.

against the government. The demonstrators were not placated; protests continued to grow, and participants defied curfews and police repression. A group of cyber activists organized demonstrations in the capital, Tunis, in solidarity with those in Sidi Bouzid. The next day, demonstrations spread across the country as Sousse, Ben Garden, Mahdia, and Bizerte joined in. On December 27, thousands of people gathered in Tunis. The protests became national, as young people and trade unionists took to the streets in unprecedented numbers.

On December 28, President Ben Ali, who was on vacation in the Persian Gulf, returned to the country to try and restore order. To appease the demonstrators, he immediately visited Mohamed Bouazizi at the Burn and Trauma Centre of the Ben Arous hospital. He then made an impromptu television address to the nation criticizing the protestors as “a minority of extremists and agitators in the pay of others, and against the country’s interests, resort to violence and street disturbances.... This is negative and anti-civil behavior... and impedes the flow of investors and tourists which impacts negatively on job creation.... The law will be enforced rigorously against these people.” He argued that “these events were triggered by one social case, of which we understand the circumstances and psychological factors and whose consequences are regrettable,” and declared that “the exaggerated turn that these events have taken [is] a result of their political manipulation by some... who resort to some foreign television channels, which broadcast false and unchecked allegations and rely on dramatization, fabrication, and defamation hostile to Tunisia.” Ben Ali’s speech was not well received, and protests continued.

On January 4, 2011, Mohamed Bouazizi died of his burns. After the announcement of his death, protesters gathered in the streets of towns and villages across the country. The funeral of Mohamed Bouazizi took place on January 5 at Garât Benour, a village located 16 km outside of Sidi Bouzid. More than five thousand people attended the ceremony, which was under police surveillance to make sure it did not turn into a major political demonstration. However, as Ali Moncef, a 26-year-old man from Sidi Bouzid who attended, told me, “Our quiet presence in the funeral was already a political statement... many of us did not know Bouazizi or his family personally.”

On January 6, cyber activists Slim Amamou, Aziz Amami, Soufienne Bel Haj, and Bullet Skan were detained in Tunis. The same day the 22-year-old Tunisian hip-hop artist Hamada Ben-Amor, known as El General, was arrested in Sfax (Ryder, 2011). A critic of the government, he had released a song called “Mr. President, Your People Are Suffering” that attacked Ben Ali. Over the following days police reinforced their crackdown on demonstrators and fired on the protesters. More than 20 people were killed in Kasserine, Regueb, and Sidi Ali Ben Aoun (Dégage, 2011).

On January 9, the government announced that it would invest \$5 billion in development projects and to employ 50,000 university graduates in the next few months.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Tunisia unemployment protests continue, at least 14 dead,” *Arab Reform Bulletin*, 11 January 2011, available at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=42269> (accessed July 2011).

The next day Ben Ali promised to create 300,000 jobs over the next two years.<sup>5</sup> On January 11, Ben Ali replaced Minister of Interior, Rafik Haj Kacem, and announced the release of everyone who had been arrested during the protests.<sup>6</sup> These measures were aimed at appeasing the young protesters, but “it was too little too late” said 31-year-old Ali from Kasserine.

On January 13, a curfew was declared for Greater Tunis, which includes Tunis, Ariana, Ben Arous, and La Manouba, from 8 p.m. until 5:30 a.m. Ben Ali addressed the nation and promised to respond positively to the unrest if violence ended right away. He declared that he would not seek reelection in 2014. “I have understood you all... I’m speaking to you because the situation needs radical change; yes, a radical change... I understand the unemployed, the needy, the politicians, all those demanding more freedom. I have understood everyone. But what is happening today is not the way Tunisians do things.” Ben Ali announced that he had ordered his security forces not to use firearms against the protestors. For the first time in his twenty-three year presidency, he used colloquial Tunisian rather than Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in parts of his speech. According to El Mustapha Lahlali, an Arabic scholar, “by switching to dialect, Ben Ali may have been trying to appeal to a wider section of Tunisian society, especially those less educated people who could not easily follow his speech in MSA. He may also have wanted to remind his own people that he is a Tunisian and try to bridge the social gap between himself and the wider Tunisian public. The use of dialect could also be interpreted as an attempt to bypass the middle-class people taking part in the protests” (Lahlali, 2011).

Many young people thought that this speech was orchestrated by the regime to gain time and give the impression that the majority of the people supported Ben Ali. Zeid, a 21-year-old law student from Tunis, said: “Five minutes after his speech we heard people on the streets shouting ‘Viva Ben Ali.’ I looked carefully and saw that these people were in rented cars and they were all from the RCD (the party in power)... They wanted us to believe that the people were with Ben Ali. I quickly went to Facebook and everyone was noticing similar situations in their neighborhoods, the same rented cars full of members of the RCD. Then we decided that we needed to come out in force to counteract them, hence the huge protests the next day, January 14.”

“Ben Ali Dégage!” shouted thousands of young Tunisians gathered in front of the Ministry of Interior in the Avenue Habib Bourguiba in the centre of Tunis. On January 14 Tunisians went on strike, and hundreds of thousands joined the demonstrations in Tunis, Sousse, and Sfax, the three largest cities in the country. In the beginning it was a very peaceful demonstration, people shouted ‘Enough is Enough,’ ‘We Want Freedom,’ and ‘Ben Ali Dégage (Ben Ali Go!).’ But in the afternoon the police started shooting tear gas canisters at the protesters. By 5 p.m. the national television announced that Ben Ali would be leaving power in six months. But people were not happy they wanted him to leave right away and continued shouting ‘Ben Ali Dégage!’ At around 7 p.m. Al Jazeera and France 24

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<sup>5</sup> “Tunisie: Ben Ali s'engage à créer 300 000 emplois entre 2011 et 2012,” *Le Monde*, 10 January 2011, available at [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/10/tunisie-ben-ali-s-engage-a-creer-300-000-emploientre-2011-et-2012\\_1463646\\_3212.html#ens\\_id=1245377](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/10/tunisie-ben-ali-s-engage-a-creer-300-000-emploientre-2011-et-2012_1463646_3212.html#ens_id=1245377) (accessed June 30, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> See “Tunisie: le régime libère des manifestants mais emprisonne un dirigeant,” *Le Monde*, 12 January 2011, available at [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/12/le-ministre-de-l-interieur-tunisienlimoge\\_1464465\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/12/le-ministre-de-l-interieur-tunisienlimoge_1464465_3212.html) (accessed June 27, 2011).

announced that Ben Ali had left the country for exile in Saudi Arabia. According to Tarik, a 27-year-old from Menzel Bourguiba, “Some people say they saw Ben Ali’s plane in the air.... Because the airspace was closed his was the only airplane authorized to fly that day. People say he flew out in a Tunisair plane because the military refused to fly him.”

## **The Underlying Causes of Discontent**

Tensions had been rising steadily within Tunisian society over the past decade. Bouazizi’s self-immolation ignited protests that expressed longstanding discontent among various groups and social strata. Frustrations stemmed not only from economic malaise, but also from suffocating repression and increasingly visible kleptocracy within the ruling family (Carpenter and Schenker, 2011).

### *Uneven Regional Development and Massive Unemployment*

The global economic downturn had especially serious effects on the Tunisian economy between 2007 and 2009. Rates of unemployment and underemployment, which were already high, soared, particularly in the tourism industry. Nearly thirty percent of all Tunisians aged 20-24 were unemployed, and young graduates were most affected (World Bank, 2008). Popular dissatisfaction was especially acute in the central and eastern regions of the country, such as Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa, Jendouba, and Kef, which had been completely neglected by the government.

The neo-liberal economic policies of the old regime reinforced a pattern of uneven development that marginalized the central and eastern desert regions and concentrated wealth in the northern and western coastal regions of the country. This approach also resulted in low wages and job insecurity and failed to generate enough jobs to employ young people entering the workforce. Tunisian economists Nabil Mâalel, from the ESSEC at the University of Tunis,<sup>7</sup> and Zouhair El Kadhi from the Institute of Qualitative Studies at the Ministry of Development, pointed out that Tunisia’s development model was popular with the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These institutions praised Tunisia’s approach because it encouraged foreign investment, created a flexible workforce, and lowered taxes on businesses. Mâalel emphasized that, while structural adjustment policies generated considerable growth in recent decades (see also Ben Romdhane, 2009), the fruits of growth have not been evenly distributed.

Regional economic disparities are a damaging legacy of these policies. The central and western regions, where the revolt began, have experienced extremely high rates of unemployment; poverty rates are four times higher than those in the rest of the country. The regime of Ben Ali did not make any public investments in these regions; instead, it offered tax breaks and incentives to businesses in the vain hope that private investment would spur local development (Rogers, 2011). With little public or private investment, few new jobs were created. Unequal regional development and massive unemployment have been at the heart of young people’s discontent and created the conditions for the Tunisian revolution. Even before the 2010 protests in Sidi Bouzid, major revolts occurred in 2008 in

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<sup>7</sup> ESSEC stands for École Supérieure de Sciences Economiques et Commerciales (School of Economic and Commercial Sciences).

Redeyef, Skhira, and Ben Garden.<sup>8</sup>

### *State Corruption*

The notorious excesses of the authoritarian regime played a major role in exacerbating popular dissatisfaction. Tunisians became more aware of the corruption of Ben Ali and his ruling clique in 2009 through revelations published in international media.<sup>9</sup> It became common knowledge that the president and his wife, Leila Trabelsi, ran a mafia-like network involving family and close friends that plundered the country and amassed amazing wealth. They controlled all major businesses, from information and communication technology through banking to manufacturing, retail, transportation, agriculture and food processing (WikiLeaks, 2010). According to cables sent by the U.S. ambassador to Tunisia, Robert Godec, in July 2009 and published by WikiLeaks, Ben Ali's son-in-law, 28-year-old Mohamed Sakher El Materi, owned a shipping cruise line, concessions for Audi, Volkswagen, Porsche, and Renault, a pharmaceutical manufacturing firm, and several real estate companies. Leila's brother was able to launch a new airline, Karthago, that took over lucrative charter flights previously operated by Tunisair, the state-owned airline, and borrowed Tunisair planes whenever he wanted (WikiLeaks, 2010). As Tunisian sociologist, Slaheddine Ben Fredj, pointed out the Ben Ali–Trabelsi clan controlled the economy so tightly that it discouraged direct foreign investment and economic growth. Everything had to go through the family, which would force potential investors into partnerships and joint ventures and threaten those who would not play by their rules (Hibou, 2004; 2006).

Many Tunisians were familiar with what happened to McDonalds. A WikiLeaks memo describes the situation: “McDonalds undertook lengthy market research, obtained necessary licenses and real estate leases, entered commercial agreements, secured a local partner, and established necessary product supply chains. Their investment, however, was scuttled by a last minute intervention by First Family personalities who reportedly told McDonalds representatives that ‘they had chosen the wrong partner.’ The implication was clear: either get the ‘right’ partner or face the consequences. McDonalds chose to pull out completely at great cost” (WikiLeaks, 2010). The family also tried to stifle the development of successful companies outside their control by intimidating legitimate businessman. The Tunisian middle class was gradually excluded, in favor of a small, close-knit clique of relatives that included siblings and in-laws as well as distant kin of Ben Ali and Leila Trabelsi (Hibou, 2004; 2006; WikiLeaks, 2010).

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<sup>8</sup> The January 2008 protests in Redeyef, Gafsa, constituted one of the first open demonstrations against Ben Ali's regime. The revolt was sparked by the unfair and fraudulent recruitment practices by the region's major employer, the Gafsa Phosphate Company (GPC). Job applicants demanded more employment opportunities and protested favoritism in the recruitment process. The unrest in Redeyef quickly expanded to other mining areas and froze activities in the mining industry for over several months (Amnesty International, 2009). Unemployed youths also staged protests in Skhira and Ben Gardane in 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, *La Régente de Carthage: Main Basse sur la Tunisie* (The Regent of Carthage: A Stranglehold on Tunisia) appeared in France in 2009. Another source were the WikiLeaks memos in 2010 that exposed the magnitude of corruption among Ben Ali and his family.

Nassir, a 31-year-old man from Tozeur whom I met in Tunis, shared this story with me: “I know of a young man who had a brilliant business idea. After he deposited the project proposal for approval at the ministry in order to be granted the necessary permits, he was contacted by a representative of the Ben Ali-Trabelsi family. The person said to him that the family liked his project and was willing to have a partnership with this young man. He said that with them (the family) the young man would be in good hands to develop the project successfully. The person said that his contribution would be open all doors and facilitate things with state bureaucracy, etc. and he wanted 75 percent of the revenues of the business. The young man thought the deal was not fair, but he had to accept because otherwise he wouldn’t be able to do anything.” After telling me this story, Nassir asked: “How did this person get hold of the young man’s project? Only civil servants at the ministry could have passed it on. This shows how corruption works; the family controls the state apparatus.” “The state and the law work for them,” he concluded. The family threatened small entrepreneurs as well as big businesses, alienating both the middle and the lower classes. I heard several stories of potential young entrepreneurs being stifled by the regime and discouraged from undertaking any serious business ventures in the country.

### *Political Repression and Lack of Freedom*

Political repression and the lack of civil liberties was a third important factor that provoked popular discontent. Tunisians were not allowed to voice any criticisms of Ben Ali and his government, and the regime systematically repressed any forms of political dissent. Human rights activists, journalists, and members of the opposition were subjected to constant surveillance, harassment, and imprisonment (Kausch, 2009). Legislation used to exert pressure on journalists and editors was amended to tighten restrictions on freedom of expression. The regime developed a sophisticated approach to online censorship and denial of free access to the Internet. The authorities blocked access to several Internet sites and engaged in large-scale “phishing” operations of its citizens’ websites and private accounts. In addition to suppressing the media and the Internet, the regime repressed any popular criticism of the government and its leaders. As Nassir from Tozeur put it, “in my 31 years of existence the first time I heard someone criticize the president and say things against the government was during this revolution.... Nobody dared to voice any criticisms before.” In Bizerte, 24-year-old Ayoub told me that “If Ben Ali were still in power you wouldn’t be able to speak freely with us about our views regarding our country and our future.” Moreover, freedom of association was almost non-existent. With few exceptions, such as the Tunisian League for Human Rights, all organizations and associations that worked on political issues were denied legal registration (Kausch, 2009). Independent organizations and opposition parties had a very limited margin for maneuver, since they were not allowed to hold public meetings or engage in any sort of public criticism of the regime (Kausch, 2009; Paciello, 2011).

### **The Main Actors of the Revolution**

Several factors converged to set off the uprisings that resulted in the fall of Ben Ali’s regime. The key actors in this revolution were Mohamed Bouazizi, young cyber activists, young unemployed graduates, and civil society groups, including the trade union movement, lawyers, and opposition parties that joined as the conflict escalated.



### *Mohamed Bouazizi: An Accidental Martyr?*

The story of Bouazizi and his role in the revolution has been a source of debate. Some present him as a heroic martyr and the father of the Tunisian revolution. He has been credited with galvanizing frustrated youth across the region to stage mass demonstrations and revolt against their government. This view was dominant in the foreign media in late December and early January. Headlines of some major foreign newspapers read: “Mohammed Bouazizi: the dutiful son whose death changed Tunisia's fate” (*The Guardian*, London, 23 January 2011); “How a single match can ignite a revolution” (*The New York Times*, 26 January 2011). The Tunisian-born mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, announced his decision to name a Parisian square or street after Bouazizi in tribute to the Tunisian revolution (Ben Hammouda 2011:15).<sup>10</sup> Inside the country, Bouazizi was also seen by some as a revolutionary hero who changed the course of history in Tunisia and influenced events in other North African and Middle Eastern countries. Many young Tunisians with whom I spoke during my visit to the country in June 2011, however, expressed mixed feelings about the way Mohamed Bouazizi's role in the revolution was portrayed. Aouidet, a 23-year-old actor from Bizerte, contended: “Bouazizi is not *the* hero of this revolution. There have been many other young men who set themselves on fire as a protest against the government before him. For example, in Gafsa in 2008, there were many martyrs that immolated themselves in that revolt... Bouazizi was simply a catalyst.” Zeid, 21-year-old from Tunis, maintained that “Bouazizi was just a trigger, and we should acknowledge him for that, but he shouldn't be seen as the main... hero of the revolution. This revolution has many young martyrs, but they are not mentioned in the media, just Bouazizi.... We have to end the personality cult; that's what we fought against by overthrowing Ben Ali.” Young people's perceptions of Bouazizi and his place in the revolution seem to have shifted following rumors that his family accepted money and favors from Ben Ali. Aouidet explained that “initially many people identified themselves with Bouazizi and his family. But the situation changed a bit when the family started accepting gifts from Ben Ali.... and from the foreign media and they became like ‘stars’.... They fell into Ben Ali's trap of trying to silence the revolution with a few bribes.” During my visit to Sidi Bouzid I spoke with many young people who shared these views. They pointed out that the Bouazizi family had moved out of Sidi Bouzid after receiving a large sum of money from Ben Ali and were reported to have visited him at the presidential palace. Indeed a square named after Bouazizi in the center of Sidi Bouzid was later changed to People's Square.

### *Cyber Activism*

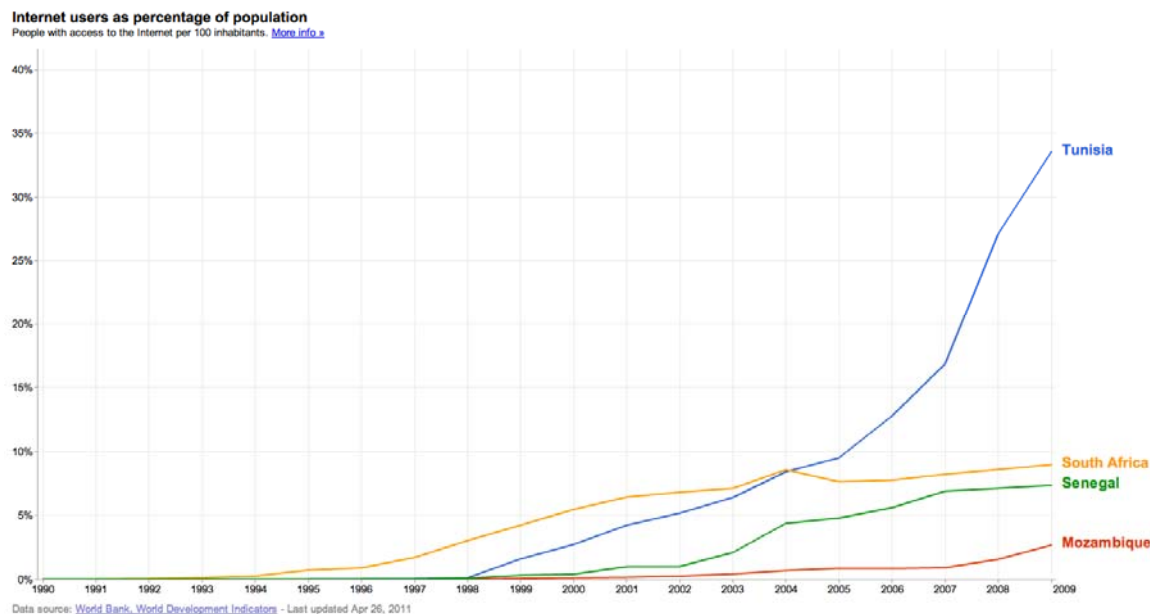
The Tunisian revolution was fought not only in the streets but also in Internet forums, blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter feeds. Young bloggers used online social networks to expose government abuses and distributed information about the situation in Sidi Bouzid and other regions of the country on web, while the government-controlled print and broadcast media completely ignored the popular uprising. The development of the Internet in Tunisia was rapid; there are public Internet cafes (publinets) everywhere in the country. Growing numbers of young people accessed cyberspace to escape the repression that prevailed around them (Ben Hammouda, forthcoming, 2012). There were 2.8 million users

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<sup>10</sup> See also *Afrique Presse News Agency*, 9 February 2011, available at <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/02/tunisia-paris-to-have-either-a-rue-or-place-mohammad-bouazizi.html> (accessed June 29, 2011).



by 2009 (Meddah, 2009) and 3.6 million by March 2011.<sup>11</sup> The chart below, produced in April 2011 by the World Bank, shows the rapid growth of Internet usage amongst the Tunisian population as compared to Mozambique, South Africa, and Senegal<sup>12</sup>.



The Tunisian regime censored the Internet for many years. Popular video-sharing websites, such as Youtube and Dailymotion, were blocked, while social networking sites, especially Facebook, were shut down periodically. During the revolution, a cyber war raged between the government and Tunisian cyber activists fighting for freedom of expression. Ben Ali’s regime selectively targeted and blocked websites and intimidated bloggers who disseminated information against the regime. With cyberspace under siege, Twitter became the activists’ bastion.<sup>13</sup> In April 2010 the government blocked more than one hundred blogs, in addition to many other websites. The government’s approach was described by many as invasive and paranoid. As cyber activist Aziz Amami pointed out, “In this country we didn’t really have the Internet; what we had was a sort of national Intranet.” On January 6, 2011, several Tunisian bloggers and Internet activists were arrested. They were accused of hacking government websites with an international online group known as Anonymous,<sup>14</sup> a loosely knit group of cyber activists that drew world attention for supporting the whistle-blowing website WikiLeaks. Anonymous became an “Internet vigilante group” and led a

<sup>11</sup> Facebook alone had 2.4 million users in March 2011, more than one-fifth of the population. It is estimated that today 84 percent of Internet users access the Internet at home, 76 percent use the Internet at work, and 24 percent use public Internet cafés (Internet World Stats: Africa Stats, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> The countries used for comparison in this chart reflect the focus of my research on youth in Africa

<sup>13</sup> Because people could access Twitter via clients rather than going through the website, many Tunisians could still communicate online. The web-savvy used proxies to browse censored sites (Ryan, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> According to Slim Amamou, the power of "Anonymous" resides in its universality and its broad representation that goes beyond any existing criteria for distinguishing between human beings. This common identity, or rather non-identity, allows its members to speak and act freely. See Slim Amamou’s presentation of Anonymous for TED Carthage, available at <http://tedxcarthage.com/videos-2010/114-slim-amamou-anonymous> (accessed June 19, 2011).

campaign against companies that stopped providing services for WikiLeaks, which they called “the payback operation,” and targeted Tunisia after the government censored a Tunisia-based website set up to host the WikiLeaks memos. Tunisian cyber activists had full control of the situation and knew exactly what they could do themselves and how external support could contribute to their struggle (Ryan, 2011). As Bullet Skan, a 17-year-old cyber activist from Tunis, told me, “We told Anonymous that their initial interventions in Tunisia to retaliate for the censorship of WikiLeaks were not effective enough. We asked them for help with specific targets.” Attacking government websites was dangerous for those living within the country who risked arrest if they were identified by the authorities.

After Anonymous succeeded in disrupting at least eight government websites, including those of the president, the prime minister, the ministry of industry, the ministry of foreign affairs, and the stock exchange, as well as the government Internet agency, several young Tunisian bloggers were arrested in a desperate attempt by Ben Ali’s regime to silence online activism. Among them were three young cyber activists whom I interviewed during my stay in Tunisia: Slim Amamou, Aziz Amami, and Bullet Skan.

Slim Amamou, aged 33, is the best-known Tunisian cyber activist, not just because of his active role in the revolution but also because he became a member of the transitional government after the fall of Ben Ali. Slim had already been targeted by the regime. In May 2010, he and his friend Aziz Amami planned a demonstration in Tunis to protest against Internet censorship. The day before the planned demonstration, they were both arrested and interrogated by Tunisian police and were forced to record and post online a message calling off the protests. Nevertheless, on that day, young Tunisians gathered in “flash mobs” wearing white t-shirts to protest Internet censorship.<sup>15</sup> I asked Slim how he became involved in the recent uprising.

I am a member of the social network Twitter, and on December 18, 2010, I saw the information about the uprisings in Sidi Bouzid and the Internet postings made by Ali Bouazizi, the cousin of Mohamed Bouazizi. I saw videos of people saying that they wanted to work and they wanted freedom. Because I am an activist for freedom of expression... I became interested in the events in Sidi Bouzid. I was already working with a group of activists on issues of freedom of expression and I decided to engage our group in publicizing the events in Sidi Bouzid. I went down to Sidi Bouzid with a few colleagues and we made our own videos of the events in Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, and other areas. We placed our information on the web, which was immediately picked up by people all over the country and by the international media.

Aziz Amami, 28-year-old from Tunis, worked closely with Slim. They went to Sidi Bouzid together to report on the events of December 2010. Amidst police repression and brutal attacks against participants in the revolts in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, Aziz decided to join the protests. On December 25 and 27, together with Slim and other activists, Aziz helped to organize two large protests in Tunis in solidarity with those in Sidi Bouzid.

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<sup>15</sup> Steve Stecklow, “Web’s Openness Is Tested in Tunisia,” available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303544604576430041200613996.html> (accessed July 7, 2011).

Aziz was already known for his skill in planning and organizing demonstrations.<sup>16</sup> During the late December protests, which brought hundreds of youths into the streets, Slim Amamou captured the events on his cell phone, which was directly picked up by Al Jazeera and transmitted in real time to the entire world.

Bullet Skan, another cyber activist, started playing with computers as a young child. He quickly moved from computer games into hacking people's email. "In my Internet adventures I came across a group of Algerian hackers and befriended them, and they taught me a number of hacking tricks." He then took upon himself to discover proxy ways of accessing sites the government had blocked, and came across Takriz,<sup>17</sup> a network of Tunisian dissidents founded in 1998, that was one of the most critical cyber voices against the dictatorship of Ben Ali. Through Takriz, Bullet Skan became a cyber activist at the age of fifteen, moving away from hacking toward helping expose the abuses of the regime. He became involved with other cyber activists in the fight against Internet censorship, including Slim Amamou and Aziz Amami with whom he ended up behind bars when he was just 16 years old.

Housem a 27-year-old cyber activist in Kasserine, located in the central region 35 km from Sidi Bouzid, took pictures and videos with his cell phone and posted them on his Facebook page. After a few days he started posting them on Al Jazeera's site as well. Housem said that as the protests intensified in Kasserine, reporters from Al Jazeera, France 24, and other foreign media descended on the city and asked him to assist with information after their departure. But Housem did not send them anything because he feels that "the foreign media abandoned Tunisia to focus on Egypt."

The work of cyber activists like Slim, Aziz, Bullet Skan, and Housem was critical to expose the atrocities of the regime to the Tunisian people and to the world. The regime could no longer say that the protests were simply the actions of isolated young gangs or criminals, and it could not deny its excessive and brutal use of force. Young bloggers and cyber activists were essential in establishing communication among young people through the cyberspace. They planned, organized, and shared ideas about their political insurgency through the Internet.

### *Young Unemployed Graduates*

The majority of the young people who took to the streets were unemployed and underemployed graduates who were disillusioned with the government. Many of them have completed higher education and have valuable technical skills, but are still unable to find work. In Tunisia, access to higher education is guaranteed to anyone who passes the baccalaureate examination at the end of high school. Largely as a result of this policy, the

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<sup>16</sup> Since high school Aziz has been involved in organizing strikes and protest marches, one of them was during the period of the second Palestinian *intifada*. In 2008 he was expelled from university for being the main organizer of a protest in solidarity with the revolts in Redeyef in Gafsa.

<sup>17</sup> Takriz has been an apolitical and independent network since its inception; its core values are freedom, truth, and anonymity. But it is regarded as the voice of the resistant Tunisian youth. It was censored in Tunisia from August 2000 on. The Takriz network had hundreds of active members online and offline, inside and outside Tunisia. Takriz advocated freedom of speech and human rights in Tunisia. See <http://www.takriz.com/>

number of Tunisians who graduated from college tripled in a single decade. The Tunisian educational system<sup>18</sup> has produced more graduates than the job market has been able to absorb. Fifty-seven percent of Tunisians ready to enter the labor market are university-educated, but they are even more likely to be unemployed than less educated youth (Mahjoub, 2010). Youth unemployment rose dramatically from 22 percent in 1999 to 45 percent in 2009 (Paciello, 2011; Haouari, 2011). Yet even these new figures underestimate the extent of youth unemployment, as they do not include many of those who, after failing to find work, have entered the informal economy or left the country.

According to the African Development Bank, the upward trend in the unemployment rate of university graduates is the consequence of the youth bulge, the high number of students, a mismatch between the demand for and supply of skilled workers, and the relatively low quality of training received by many graduates (AfDB, Economic Brief, March 2011). Economists at the University of Tunis have criticized the education policies of the last decade for focusing on quantity rather than quality. Nabil Mâalel and Zouhair El Kadhi have pointed out that Tunisia has always been a ‘good student’ of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). El Kadhi explained: “The government was often more preoccupied with pleasing the international institutions rather than looking at what was good and effective for the country, and the education policy was one such instance.... We suddenly started producing an excess of graduates, there were graduate schools everywhere... and there were no links between the educational system’s outputs and the needs of the labour market.” Mâalel added that there was no foreign investment in the private sector to help absorb this trained work force despite the attractive financial incentives offered by the government. In Tunisia, the state has been the main employer and the public sector has been the only avenue for secure work.

In the mid-1990s the government established the Tunisian Solidarity Bank (BTS) to facilitate the development of small enterprises and expand employment. However, it quickly became an instrument for political control, with credit lines being offered to members of the ruling party, the Constitutional Democracy Rally (RCD). In 2000 the National Employment Fund was established to try and minimize graduate unemployment (Kallander, 2011). Young unemployed graduates wanting to start small businesses were encouraged to apply for micro-credit at very competitive interest rates (Hibou, 2009). According to some young people I interviewed, however, this scheme was corrupt. Nassir, a 31-year-old man from Tozeur, pointed out: “This could have been a good thing, but these BTS funds had strings attached... because you had to be from the RCD, or be willing to sign up to the RCD, in order to benefit from the scheme.” Indeed, young people were reluctant to join the party (Hibou, 2009). The BTS became an instrument of the state used for political

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<sup>18</sup> Basic education in Tunisia is divided into two cycles, six years of primary education and three years of preparatory education, and is free and compulsory for all Tunisians. Secondary education lasts for four years and is aimed at preparing students for university-level studies or entry into the workforce. Post-secondary education includes three cycles of schooling. After two or three years, students are awarded a diploma for the first cycle of university studies (*Diplôme d'études universitaires de premier cycle*, DEUPC) or a diploma for technological university studies (*Diplôme d'études universitaires technologiques*, DUT). The second cycle of higher education lasts about four or five years and leads to a Masters degree or a diploma that allows the graduate to work or continue studying. The third cycle leads to terminal degrees at the doctoral level, the professional Diploma of Specialized Higher Studies (*Diplôme d'Études Supérieures Spécialisées*, DESS).

control and to reinforce patron-client ties. Access to public- and private-sector jobs was monopolized by those connected to the regime (Goldstone, 2011; Kallander, 2011; Paciello, 2011).

Left with no opportunities for work, young graduates survived in irregular underpaid jobs in the service sector, construction, and foreign call centers. They also became involved in smuggling and cross-border trade, especially across the borders with Libya and Algeria. Some migrated to other countries in the region and in Europe. Indeed, without any serious support from the state, many unemployed young graduates were bound to find their livelihood in the informal sector. But these strategies did not guarantee any long-term job security and made them disillusioned with the government's ability to address their problems. It is not surprising that they became the main actors of the Tunisian revolution. They are young, knowledgeable, and full of energy, but they have no jobs and no real prospects for the future. They had no stake in society and were prepared to engage in violence out of sheer desperation. During the twenty-nine days of protests, young unemployed graduates came out into the streets in force and skillfully used the Internet to fight the system in the hope for better opportunities.

### *Civil Society Groups*

Tunisian lawyers staged large protests in front of the courthouses in Tunis and other cities across the country to protest government abuses and defend human rights. On December 31, the Bar Association called for national demonstrations and staged large protests in Tunis, Sfax, and Djerba. Hundreds of lawyers came out onto the streets dressed in their robes, but they were violently beaten by the police.<sup>19</sup> Civil society groups composed of teachers and journalists joined the lawyers in supporting the demonstrations. As the conflicts escalated, the opposition political parties, too, became involved (Ben Hammouda, forthcoming, 2012). Although the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) initially decided to play a mediating role between the government and the demonstrators, it soon changed its position. Local and regional unions decided to join the youth much sooner, forcing the leadership of the UGTT to call for peaceful marches in protest against police repression and in support for young demonstrators on 11 January. The participation of the UGTT helped form a broader national coalition against the regime. As Hakim Ben Hammouda points out, at this point the youth revolt was transformed into a revolution as the demands widened from a solution to socioeconomic grievances to regime change (Ben Hammouda, forthcoming, 2012). The dissident network Takriz has also been credited with infusing political demands into the protest movement. But some young people, especially the cyber activists and unemployed graduates, pointed out that they were aware that removing the regime would be necessary in order to effect radical change. As 37-year-old Hichem pointed out, "jobs and food without freedom" would not be enough. "If we went for a minimalist approach we would soon be disappointed and want more.... Freedom is paramount."

### **The Challenges of the Democratic Transition**

How do young people view the post-Ben Ali era and the political and social developments

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<sup>19</sup> See Lina Ben Mhenni's report to Global Voices Online, available at <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/01/01/tunisia-lawyers-assaulted> (accessed June 26, 2011).

that have marked the Tunisian transition? To what extent does the interim coalition government represent the aspirations of the younger generation? What roles do young Tunisians want to play in the process of building a multiparty democracy, and what issues are they grappling with as they prepare for the October 2011 elections?

### *The Transitional Coalition Government*

Following the departure of Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, the speaker of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, immediately became interim president, and an interim government was formed on 17 January 2011. The mandate of the provisional government was to manage the first phase of the country's political transition and prepare for the election of the National Constituent Assembly, which will approve a new Tunisian constitution. From the moment it was formed, the interim government faced serious challenges. The first and second governments were headed by interim Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi, who was a cabinet minister under Ben Ali.

His first government included members of the ruling party, the RCD (in French *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique*; in English, Constitutional Democratic Rally). Young Tunisians rejected this government from its inception, despite the fact that it included the young cyber activist Slim Amamou. Protesters in Tunis called for the resignation of the interim government. Ten days after its establishment, the first interim government was dissolved and a second, more inclusive government was appointed, still headed by Mohammed Ghannouchi. On 25 and 26 February 2011, antigovernment rallies called for his resignation. Protesters voiced frustration over the slow pace of change and accused Ghannouchi of being too close to Ben Ali's regime.<sup>20</sup> As 37-year-old Hichem pointed out, "the revolution has gotten rid of Ben Ali, but his regime is still in power.... The RCD is still commanding everything."<sup>21</sup> Other young people made a similar point metaphorically, saying that "we cut off the head of the beast, but the beast was still very much alive." Indeed, Ghannouchi's government failed to dissolve the RCD and to take measures to reform the repressive security apparatus.

The government legalized the formation of more political parties and granted amnesty to political prisoners. It issued an international arrest warrant for Ben Ali and his close relatives abroad, as well as warrants for the arrest of members of his extended family in Tunisia. National committees were established to deal with human rights violations, embezzlement and corruption, and constitutional reform (Paciello, 2011). Concerns were raised, however, regarding these committees' ability to carry out their tasks effectively, because they had limited mandates and few resources, and lacked legal authority. Youth took to the streets again, and after days of protest Mohammed Ghannouchi resigned on 27 February 2011. Beji Caid-Essebsi, formerly foreign minister under Habib Bourguiba,<sup>22</sup> replaced him. Caid-Essebsi appeared more neutral, as he had managed to keep some

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<sup>20</sup> See Kim Wilshear, "Tunisian Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi resigns amid unrest." *Guardian.co.uk*, 27 February 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/27/tunisian-prime-minister-ghannouchi-resign> (accessed July 6, 2011). See also "Two Tunisian ministers quit government", *BBC Africa*, 28 January 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12604730> (accessed July 6, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Interview conducted in Tunis on June 9, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Habib Bourguiba was the first president of Tunisia.



distance from Ben Ali's regime. Soon after taking up his post, the new interim prime minister announced the dissolution of Ben Ali's political police and security apparatus, which was a critical issue for the young protesters and the opposition parties. However, the elections, initially scheduled for 24 July 2011, were postponed to 23 October 2011.<sup>23</sup> This delay worried many young people because it allowed the old guard to continue its control of the country. In a belated and largely symbolic attempt to break with the old regime, the transitional government proposed to ban from the elections all those who, at some time in the last ten years, had held major positions in the RCD. However, the ban excluded previous members of the government, as well as their advisors and staff. Opposition party leaders have refused to endorse this policy, warning that it is insufficient to satisfy the Tunisian people. Many young Tunisians I spoke with thought that the interim government is maintaining the status quo while offering a few palliatives to youth and the poor.

Young Tunisians today are seriously worried about the direction the country is taking and doubt that Caid-Essebsi's government is willing and able to dismantle the power structures of the old regime (Paciello, 2011). "They changed Ghannouchi for Caid-Essebsi, but that doesn't solve anything," asserted Ahmed, a 20-year-old man from Grombelia. "Both of them are part of the same old style of politics of Bourguiba and Ben Ali.... They will not bring about the change we need. The youth... is not sufficiently represented in the transitional government." A'isha, a 24-year-old woman from Nabeul, seconded his views, asking: "Where is the youth in this transition process? What I see is the absence of the young generation in the interim government.... They put a new young Secretary of State for youth as if young people can only deal with youth stuff, which I find quite patronizing.... Young people were in the forefront of this revolution but today they have been set aside. It is the older generation that is in the government and busy creating political parties," she concluded.

Young unemployed graduates continue to press the interim government for solutions to their problems. In May 2011 a group of about 300 young unemployed graduates decided that it was time to take the Kasserine governorate to task by staging a sit-in in Martyrs Square in the centre of the city. "Four months had passed since the fall of Ben Ali and the governorate had not lifted a finger to help the unemployed graduates.... After the revolution they made many promises but nothing was happening.... They asked us to put together small entrepreneurial projects, and we did.... Still, nothing happened. So we decided to do something," explained 29-year-old Raouf, one of the organizers of the sit-in. They protestors were demanding a response to the project proposals they had submitted for approval. When I met Raouf in mid-June he and his friends were still waiting to hear from the governor. In an attempt to address the evident discontent of jobless young graduates and appease the young people who were still in the streets protesting against at the forefront of the revolution, the Tunisian transitional government introduced an unemployment subsidy for university graduates actively seeking employment. Young people think that this monthly grant of 200 TND is intended to buy them off; it appears to be a palliative measure rather than a solution to the country's massive unemployment problem. As 26-year-old Fatma stressed, "We don't want temporary benefits because this will not solve our main problem; rather, what we need are stable jobs that would protect us

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<sup>23</sup> See Ira Kumaran, "Tunisian interim government delays Constituent Assembly elections," 29 June 2011, available at <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/jun2011/tuni-j29.shtml> (accessed July 6, 2011).



against unemployment.... These benefits can only be a short-term measure; we are looking for a better solution. We want stable jobs.”

## **Building a Multiparty Democracy**

### *The Eradication of the RCD's Power and Influence*

One of the major discussions going among Tunisians today, and among young people in particular, is how to deal with the former members of the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) who continue to hold power. In addition to ministers in the interim government, they include the senior civil servants who control the state administration and major business companies. Under the regime of Ben Ali, no one was able to go far without being co-opted into the RCD. The party dominated all aspects of political, economic, and social life in the country. During the dictatorship there was no separation between the state and the party, and real multiparty democracy was not allowed. Young people who hold a radical position want all former RCD members to be removed from the government and excluded from politics. Arfaoui, a 23-year-old woman from Bizerte, said: “Although the RCD has been dissolved after the revolution, its members are still around and they use the disguise of revolutionaries, democrats, etc.... They are now establishing new political parties.... They all need to be out sooner rather than later.” In the same vein, 37-year-old Hichem, an architect from Tunis, commented disappointedly that “Tunisia currently has twenty-four regional governors, and of those, seventeen are former RCD members; even today!... This is completely unacceptable.... They should all be out and not be able to occupy political positions for a period of at least five years.” Many of the young men and women I spoke with believe that the transitional government is not doing enough because “Benji [the Prime Minister] himself is protecting his RCD friends and making sure they maintain the power and benefits they enjoyed with Ben Ali.” declared Zeinab, a 24-year-old woman from Tunis.

There are an estimated two to three million ex-RCD cadres and officials still active in the state administration and the private sector. Some young people think that if they were all removed at once, the country might collapse. As 31-year-old Nassir from Tozeur pointed out, “the RCD was not just a political party; the RCD was the state. They not only constituted one-third of all Tunisians but also controlled everything in the country.” Some people suggested that the new government should phase their withdrawal from political life, starting with the top former RCD members and gradually going down through the ranks as they prepare new people to replace them. Nizar, a 48-year-old man from La Marsa, said: “Ben Ali’s political regime was... entrenched in all aspects of Tunisian society.... We need to find ways of changing the system without destroying the country. We will have to do it step by step.” Others suggested focusing on the “big fish” and forgetting about the lower-level people who joined the party because it was the only available avenue to upward mobility. For example, one of 22-year-old Nourddine’s relatives “worked for a state-owned company for many years, but he wasn’t getting the promotion he thought he deserved. Only after he accepted the RCD membership card did he manage to get his promotion.” He was hardly a committed party member. Still, it is difficult to untangle the various motivations, and possible coercion, that led people to join the RCD. Many young people argued that all former RCD members should be held accountable because they benefited from the old regime.

## *The Emergence of New Political Forces*

When Ben Ali's regime was toppled, Tunisia had only eight political parties.<sup>24</sup> Since then the RCD has been abolished, opposition parties have been legalized, and new political forces have been created and authorized to join the electoral register. By the end of June 2011, the country had 94 political parties on its electoral list. But this is not the final tally, as new political parties have applied to stand in the Constitutional Assembly elections in October 2011. Neji Zouairi, an Interior Ministry official in Tunisia, said on June 24 that "We are currently looking into 31 more applications for new parties . . . [and] have rejected 118 applications in the past few months."<sup>25</sup> The myriad political parties in Tunisia today provide an impression of political pluralism. Some align themselves along a left-right axis; others have a religious orientation. Young Tunisians pointed out, however, that they have not been involved in the current scramble to create political parties. Most have chosen to remain uninvolved in partisan politics, so their voices are largely absent from those debates. Young Tunisians are keen to participate in the democratic transition, but they are skeptical about the available channels. They expressed concern that individuals, parties, and civil society organizations are attempting to profit from the revolution. Entities with such names as "January 14 Front" and "Council to Protect the Revolution" are seen as opportunistic, because they have not earned the right to these titles (Collins, 2011). This concern extends to some political actors and groups that had been opposed to Ben Ali's regime but quickly regrouped to stand in the elections without listening to young people. Nizar, a 48-year-old from La Marsa, said: "I see this rush to establish political parties and gain visibility in the political arena as a process of appropriation of the revolution by the adult population, especially the elites."

In contrast, few of the new political formations have coherent programs, clear policies, or ideological positions. Parties that were banned under Ben Ali are little known, and those that were co-opted by the former regime remain suspect. No single political party appears to carry widespread legitimacy among youth, and no group is seen as being representative of the revolution itself. Young people want a government that is capable of undertaking major reforms in the economy, security, justice, and the media and represents their interests and those of other impoverished, marginalized people.

Young Tunisians despise party politics, which they associate with corruption and abuse of power. Rather than establishing "traditional" political parties, they conceive their political intervention through civil society associations and social movements that directly address their problems. Young people are eager to take part in the upcoming October elections, but they are concerned that the proliferation of political parties with no clear programs poses a real problem. The young Tunisian electorate needs to be educated to use their power at the ballot box. That's why activists are creating associations to prepare young people for the forthcoming elections.

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<sup>24</sup> The political parties legalized during Ben Ali's regime were: Mouvement des Démocrates Socialistes (MDS); Parti de l'Unité Populaire (PUP); Parti Démocrate Progressiste (PDP); Parti Social-libéral (PSL); Union Démocratique Unionist (UDU); Mouvement Ettajdid (ME); Forum Démocratique pour le Travail et les Libertés (FDTL); Parti des Verts pour le Progrès (PVP).

<sup>25</sup> Habib Toumi, "Number of political parties in Tunisia shoots to 94", Gulfnews.com, 25 June 2011, available at <http://gulfnews.com/news/region/tunisia/number-of-political-parties-in-tunisia-shoots-to-94-1.827415> (accessed July 11, 2011).

Sawt Chabeb Tounes, meaning “My Voice: The Voice of Tunisian Youth,” is a nonprofit, nonpartisan association established by a group of young Tunisians following the revolution. Sawty aims to provide objective information about democratic principles and values, political parties and their manifestos, and the role of citizens in the transition process. Sawty operates through an informative and interactive website; it holds conferences, workshops, interviews, and public debates on a variety of topics. The association operates under the banner, “The Future Is in Our Hands!” In April, Sawty organized a discussion in Tunis about youth employment between students and leaders of six political parties (the FDTL, PCOT, Republican Party, Ennahda, Social Centre Party, and CPR). The students wanted to hear what steps these parties would take to resolve the massive youth unemployment problem. The leaders proposed to include the fundamental right to work in the new constitution, reform Tunisia’s employment laws, revisit and adjust the definition of employment, and create a national centre for employment. On a more practical level, they advocated encouraging small entrepreneurial projects, supporting young people in their job search, reinforcing professional training and linking it directly to the needs of the job market, and putting an end to corruption and favoritism in the allocation of jobs. While these ideas sound sensible, many young people I spoke with saw them as empty promises because they are not linked to specific political programs that take into account larger structural problems, such as reform of the educational system, migration, the national budget, and do not provide the resources that such measures would require. Ultimately, real reform would have to consider changes in Tunisia’s current economic development model, which is heavily focused on tourism and concentrates resources in the northern and eastern coastal regions. The debates and discussions that youth associations organize will contribute to creating a better-informed and politically savvy young electorate.

## **Conclusion**

Young Tunisians who were excluded from traditional arenas of political citizenship created their own forms of political expression in cyberspace, hip-hop, and the streets of Tunisians towns and villages. They found new ways of defining their relationship to state politics and new forms of engagement with their society. They resisted Ben Ali’s efforts to compensate for the lack of civil and political liberties with palliative social policies and token welfare measures (Hibou, 2006; Ben Romdhane, 2007). The apparent stability of the regime vanished with the economic crisis and soaring unemployment rates that, together with political repression, fed a growing malaise in the country. The events of December 2010 and January 2011, which began in the less developed regions of the country, however surprising they were at the time, are understandable in retrospect. Tunisians had had enough, and unemployed educated youth had nothing to lose. Bouazizi’s self-immolation galvanized them into action, and young people started the first of a wave of revolutions across the region.

A particular combination of factors made the Tunisian revolution the success it turned out to be. First, the growing malaise in the country made it difficult for the regime to continue along the same path. Second, the large number of university-educated youths without employment or prospects constituted a mass of potential activists who had only to be mobilized. Third, Tunisians had extensive Internet access, and its youth were savvy about using the Internet for subversive purposes and defending it from government

ensorship. Fourth, the Tunisian military was quite weak and did not back the regime, while the police were hated for their brutal attempts of repression. The ensemble of all these factors led to the creation of broad coalition movement that, by mid-January, included all the important sectors of society. Indeed, in the final days before Ben Ali and his family fled, this youth-led movement was embraced by a large constituency, which transcended regional distinctions and included unionists, lawyers, journalists, and teachers (Paciello, 2011; Alexander, 2011; Marzouki, 2011). The regime had alienated too many sectors of Tunisian society to survive. Citizens from the forgotten areas of Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa, and Jendouba joined with elites from the affluent cities of Tunis, Sousse, and Sfax to overthrow Ben Ali. The regime had undermined the relatively large Tunisian middle class, as well as oppressing the poor. Crucially, the military, which Ben Ali had been marginalized, sided with the people by refusing to intervene in favor of the regime. In contrast to the situation in Egypt, the military had little or no vested interest in the status quo, as it had been overshadowed by the security services (Anderson, 2011). Ben Ali over-invested in the police to control Tunisians, to the detriment of investment in the military (Kallander, 2011).

According to sociologist and political scientist Jack Goldstone, “For a revolution to succeed, a number of factors have to come together. The government must appear so irremediably unjust or inept that it is widely viewed as a threat to the country’s future; elites... must be alienated from the state and no longer willing to defend it; a broad based section of the population, spanning ethnic and religious groups and socioeconomic classes must mobilize” (Goldstone, 2011:8). In the end, this broad coalition, transcending differences of class, age, ethnicity, religion, and political ideology, turned individual problems and grievances into collective ones and translated immediate socioeconomic demands into a political revolution. All these groups sided with the young people who took it upon themselves to confront the establishment and initiate this radical change. From the many Bouazizis who burnt themselves to the bloggers and cyber activists who exposed government abuses and the many young people who courageously defied bullets and police brutality shouting “Ben Ali Dégage! (Ben Ali Go!),” young Tunisians were the catalysts and main actors of this revolution. The Tunisian revolution led by disfranchised youths is a powerful example of “citizenship from below” that emerged outside traditional political structures.

The transitional period after Ben Ali’s departure, however, has presented considerable challenges, particularly to youth. Tensions between the older and younger generations continue. The scramble to establishing new political parties has been an adult-driven process with little participation by youth. Young people who were major players in the revolution appear deeply disgruntled about the course of the democratic transition. Not only have their lives changed very little after the popular uprisings, but also their hopes for social transformation seem to be fading. Now they are worried that their revolution might be taken over by those still clinging to the politics of the old regime. Young people, especially in the central and western regions, where the revolution began, feel that the world has abandoned them and that their revolution has been stolen. Nevertheless, young Tunisians are determined to make their voices heard in the coming elections and are organizing and educating themselves to defend their interests. They vowed, “The revolution

is not over; it has just started.”<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, “we have done it once,” and if need be “we can do it again!”<sup>27</sup> It is clear that, young Tunisians are no longer bound by hegemonic political discourses and ideologies and are creating their own spaces and ways of engaging the state and society.

The October 2011 elections should establish the National Constitutional Assembly and create what Ben Hammouda (forthcoming, 2012) calls the “Second Republic in Tunisia.” One of the most pressing challenges for the new government will be to deal with some short- and medium-term grievances in order to establish a climate of change and freedom, to develop new democratic institutions and a more inclusive economic development program. The United Nations has already been approached by the new regime for electoral, constitutional and economic assistance, three areas in which the UN system has significant capacity and expertise. In their efforts to help this nascent government address the longstanding grievances and show the population a new way forward, the UN and the broader international community could play a useful role by recognizing the Tunisian youth’s concerns, and supporting these emerging forms of social and political participation.

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<sup>26</sup> Arfaoui, a 23-year-old woman from Bizerte.

<sup>27</sup> Ali, 31-year-old man from Kasserine.

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