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► **To cite this version:**

Nadia Marzouki. The Call for Dignity, or a Particular Universalism. Middle East Law and Governance , Brill, 2011, 3 (1-2), pp.148 - 158. 10.1163/187633711X591503 . hal-03460456

HAL Id: hal-03460456

<https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03460456>

Submitted on 1 Dec 2021

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The Call for Dignity, or a Particular Universalism

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Abstract

Although the many difficulties of Tunisia's democratic transition have received significant attention over the past six months, there has been relatively little commentary regarding the claims and attitudes that made the winter mobilizations so unique. The movement's so-called lack of leadership, the proliferation of parties, the economic and financial crisis, the risk of a supposedly Islamist threat—all these themes have been discussed at length by analysts in Tunisia and abroad. Consequently, rather than engaging in yet another attempt to assess the movement's success, or predict its failure, this paper examines an aspect of the mobilization that has attracted surprisingly little attention, namely, the Tunisian protestors' call for dignity (*karama*) and respect (*ihtiram*).

Keywords

Tunisia; dignity; respect; Mohammed Bouazizi; politics of recognition

“What we need to do is to kill ourselves.”¹

Although the many difficulties of Tunisia's democratic transition have received significant attention over the past six months, there has been relatively little commentary regarding the claims and attitudes that made the winter mobilizations so unique. The movement's so-called lack of leadership, the proliferation of parties, the economic and financial crisis, the risk of a supposedly Islamist threat—all these themes have been discussed at length by analysts in Tunisia and abroad. Consequently, rather than engaging in yet another attempt to assess the movement's success, or predict its failure, this paper

¹ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 77, cited in Faysal Devji, *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity, Militant Islam and Global Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 47

examines an aspect of the mobilization that has attracted surprisingly little attention, namely, the Tunisian protestors' call for dignity (*karama*) and respect (*ibtiram*).

What specific claims, and what type of relation to past national narratives and the broader society, does this call express? The Tunisian uprisings represent the end of two main narratives that had informed official discourse and helped governments to maintain a close grip over society since the country's independence in 1956. Joseph Maïla has identified these two narratives as the myth of nationalist "restitution", and the myth of economic "retribution". According to the former, the state would grant people symbolic revenge over the colonial period and restore national pride in exchange for society's compliance with authoritarianism. According to the latter, the state would grant people economic security in exchange for society's obedience.² Yet, in contrast to these former postcolonial projects of restitution and retribution, the demands of Tunisian protesters were essentially about recognition. Though this article does not claim that dignity is the *only* relevant lens through which one should consider the Tunisian uprisings, it assumes that looking at the recent events in Tunisia from the perspective of democratic transition theory alone too hastily imprisons an analysis in an evaluative type of examination, and prevents it from grasping an essential aspect of what made the current debates about democratization possible.

The revolution did not have a "zaim", but it had an icon. On December 17, 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi—a street vegetable seller—self-immolated after a policewoman confiscated his merchandise, his scale, and allegedly slapped him in the face. On that same day, the victim's family and a few union activists marched to the prefecture to express their outrage. Many young people who identified with Bouazizi engaged in a conflict with local police. Riots immediately spread to the neighbouring towns of Menzel Bouziane, Maknas, Argab, and Bin Aoun. A few days later, Houcine Nejji—a twenty-six-year-old unemployed man—threw himself from the top of an electric pylon. The succession of these two suicides, alongside the quick spread of protests in excluded towns of the Tunisian south, the violent response of the police (with the deadly shooting of two protesters in Menzel Bouziane on December 24), and the very late and out of tone declaration of Ben Ali on December 28, simply enhanced

² Joseph Maïla, "Le Moyen Orient dans la tourmente," in *Les Faces Cachées de la Mondialisation*, ed. Thierry de Montbrial and Philippe Moreau Defarges (Paris: IFRI, 2005), 79-95.

the collective sentiment of outrage at local authorities, the police and the national government.³

If the two suicides that served as catalysts for the Tunisian uprisings represent a foundational element of Tunisian post revolution politics, it is because they seem to unsettle most of the key paradigms through which the very possibility of social and political change has traditionally been conceived in the North African context. First, the two suicides have nothing to do with jihadist-type suicide attacks: the violence was uniquely oriented toward the self, no collateral victim was harmed, and no revengeful reference to Islam was uttered by the two men when they killed themselves. Second, the feeling of outrage and offence that precipitated the suicides was not primarily about kinship or family honour, but rather about a lost capacity to function as a human being. Even though the regional disparity soon appeared as a key challenge to the reconstruction of a democratic country following the Tunisian revolution, Bouazizi did not kill himself in order to avenge the honour of his family, tribe, or town. Instead, his actions arose as a consequence of his being deprived of the very capacity to maintain basic necessities of life (i.e., to work, receive an education, start a family, and attend to such basic needs as health and security). Third, the protests that immediately followed Bouazizi's death were not exclusively framed in terms of economic demands. Contrary to the bread riots of the 1980s, Sidi Bouzid's protests appeared from the outset as being oriented at once towards the call for civil rights as well as economic redistribution. Fourth, during the demonstrations that took place until February 2011, very few references to postcolonial or panarabist-type reasoning were made. Despite the deplorable attitude of the French government throughout the crisis, the position of France and Europe was simply ignored by Tunisian protesters. Finally, fifth, references or marks of identification and solidarity with Palestinians were also strikingly absent from protesters' slogans and posters.

The specific character of the Tunisian protests therefore stems from the fact that they took place beyond the narratives of jihadism, tribalism, hunger jacquerie, postcolonialism, and pro-Palestinian mobilization. Rather, they were oriented towards a politics of recognition, that is, the inseparable recognition of civil rights and economic redistribution. Here, the notion of dignity points to the emergence of a form of universal humanism that emerged from the

³) International Crisis Group, "Soulèvements populaires en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient (IV): La voie tunisienne," *Middle East/North Africa Report n°106*, 28 April 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/regions/moyen-orient-afrique-du-nord/afrique-du-nord/Tunisia/106-popular-protests-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-iv-tunisia-way.aspx> (accessed 6 July 2011), 3-5.

bottom-up—independently from academic discussions about the religious-secular divide, and apart from the top-down activism of human rights organizations.

The meaning in Bouazizi's self-immolation

Rather than trying to determine why exactly the Tunisian revolution started on December 17, 2010, it may prove more productive to explain what made Bouazizi's act so meaningful to most Tunisians that it ended up being the catalyst for the revolution.

The Fallacy of Democratic Language

As surprising or extreme as it may have seemed, Bouazizi's desperate act stemmed from the desperate state of Tunisian society—a context in which the political vocabulary of democracy and human rights had progressively lost all meaning and capacity to persuade the Tunisian public. Although the (ironic) appropriation and hijacking of democratic terminology by Ben Ali's regime is indeed not a direct cause of Bouazizi's self-immolation, it does partly explain why his suicide had such an impact on Tunisian minds, and subsequently triggered such an unforeseen mobilization. As freedom of association and freedom of speech had been progressively annihilated, Tunisians had gotten used to simply ignoring the government's tightly censored press,⁴ notably the infamous official daily newspaper, *La Presse*, which most people used as pottery or food wrapping rather than as source of information. In this newspaper, just as in television news programs or in magazines, surrealistic flatteries of the former president's commitment to democracy were proclaimed ad nauseam. For example, on May 3, 2010, a dispatch of the Agence Tunis Afrique Presse (TAP) described in the following terms how Tunisian journalists were celebrating the day of freedom of the press:

Tunisian journalists celebrate this day, in their commitment to accomplishing their role in consecrating the features of a society that is modernist, open, and founded on principles of liberty, democracy, dialogue, pluralism and acceptance of contrary opinion. This determination is made stronger by the political will of the President who continuously grants the information and communication sector a special attention and a constant

⁴ See, for example, Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia, Worsening Repression of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists," 21 January 2010, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/01/20/tunisia-worsening-repression-human-rights-defenders-journalists> (accessed 6 July 2011).

support, and who tirelessly works towards consolidating the role of this sector to impulse a pluralist democratic, through the consecration of a free information, that is pluralist and objective and that answers to expectations and interests of citizens, and that interacts with their concerns and ambitions, based on the idea that responsibility is the corollary of liberty.⁵

Long before the revolution, Tunisian blogger “Astrubal” had written a striking analysis of the vocabulary used in newspapers such as *La Presse*, and shown how words like “people”, “change”, “ambition”, and “democracy” were repeatedly used.⁶ Examining a sample of *La Presse*’s articles, the blogger demonstrated how sentences were built upon series of empty propositions that could be used interchangeably. For example, introductions such as “in the framework of the civilisational challenge” and “in the wake of our renown reformers” could be randomly followed by propositions such as “the importance of the humanitarian aspect of the thinking of our Head of state embodies the exemplary illustration of Tunisia success and shows” or “the immensity of the successes achieved by the country in all domains expresses the steady presidential will to consolidate”, and concluded, indifferently, by statements such as “the smart mechanisms of a societal commitment that calls for the admiration of all” or “this wisdom characteristic of the Tunisian people, that same genius that engendered Hannibal, Ibn Khaldoun, Bourguiba and Ben Ali [sic]”. Several organizations endorsed such empty and flowery statements, most notably women’s rights associations and NGO’s, which French political scientist Beatrice Hibou more appropriately described as “RGOs” (“really governmental organizations”).⁷ The primary task of these various human rights organizations was to celebrate the feminist accomplishment of the president’s spouse, the president’s democratic beliefs, and feed the “Islamist threat” myth in order to justify repression against all possible political opponents.

⁵ “Une information libre et responsable au service d’une société modernist, démocratique et pluralist,” *Agence Tunis Afrique Presse*, 2 May 2010, <http://actualites.marweb.com/tunisie/medias/une-information-libre-et-responsable-au-service-une-societe.html> (accessed 6 July 2011). For an analysis of the pro-democracy language of government-monitored media under the Ben Ali regime, see Myriam Marzouki, “Parler la dictature de Ben Ali,” *Le Monde*, 23 January 2011, <http://lmsi.net/Parler-la-dictature> (accessed 6 July 2011).

⁶ Astrubal, “L’art tunisien de la langue de bois [logiciel],” *Astrubal’s Blog*, 20 April 2004, <http://astrubal.nawaat.org/2004/04/20/1%E2%80%99art-tunisien-de-la-langue-de-bois-logiciel/> (accessed 6 July 2011).

⁷ Béatrice Hibou, *La force de l’obéissance: économie politique de la répression en Tunisie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

In a context where Tunisians had been denied the possibility to develop their own political vocabulary, and where the language of democracy and human rights had lost all meaning, it is unsurprising that Bouazizi's silent renunciation of life, rather than lengthy political discourse, became the foundational moment of the Tunisian revolution. Denying the charade of democracy propagated by Ben Ali's media, Bouazizi's death opened up the possibility for Tunisians to rediscover a capacity to utter meaningful words.

The Pietization of Society

While the vocabulary of democracy and human rights had been transformed into such an artificial and derisory set of references, and while repression and fear had become an integral part of people's daily routine, the moralization of bodily behaviour had become one of the only available practices through which individuals could maintain and express some form of agency. Despite Ben Ali's policy of crushing Islamist opposition, and the subsequent exile of most Nahda leadership, Tunisian society had turned increasingly pious since the 1990s. Beyond the development of public piety,⁸ the spread of religious attire, and the increase of mosque attendance, this pietization was also based on the moralization of everyday experience, in which discussions about the distinction between what is pure and impure, and what is acceptable or inappropriate gained a major role. Both an instrument and an expression of this moralization process, the individual body became the central element of piety.

To a large extent, the situation that prevailed in Tunisia before the revolution is very similar to the one described by anthropologist Johan Rasanayagam in the post-Soviet Uzbekistan of President Karimov.⁹ In his analysis of "how individuals fashion themselves as Muslim when the government attempts to maintain tight control over religious expression, routinely employing the coercive resources of the state to this end," Rasanayagam argues that, in a context where free and public debate has become stifled, "lived experience become[s] a privileged site for moral reasoning."¹⁰ Similarly, in Ben Ali's Tunisia—a context where space for public debate and collective contest was reduced to

⁸ Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁹ Johan Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

nothing—the moralization of bodily behaviour became an essential practice whereby individuals could recover some sense of dignity. From this point of view, the corporal rather than verbal dimension of Bouazizi’s self-immolation may be understood as an extension of the broader pietization of Tunisian society.

A Politics of Justice

The Versatility and Critique of Bouazizi’s Myth

The question remains of how exactly this act gave way to a massive mobilization that ultimately led to the downfall of Ben Ali. Ample commentary has emerged regarding structural reasons such as unemployment, corruption, lack of redistribution due to the predatory practice of the reigning family, and inequality of development among regions.¹¹ However, it is herein worth examining the way in which the Bouazizi myth was so readily constructed and challenged. In December 2010, the vegetable seller was swiftly transformed into the icon of the revolution, whereas Fayda Hamdi, the policewoman who had allegedly slapped him in the face before confiscating his merchandise and scale, was unanimously condemned as a symbol of the arbitrariness and cruelty of Ben Ali’s regime. Yet five months later, Bouazizi’s status as a revolutionary idol has been seriously challenged, while Fayda Hamdi—having been released from jail following five months’ imprisonment (during which she underwent a one-month hunger strike in order to gain the right to a fair trial)—is perceived by many to be as much of a victim of Ben Ali’s regime as Bouazizi himself. After praising the Bouazizi family members as heroes and martyrs, many Tunisians now criticize them as too greedy and arrogant. Their modest apartment in La Marsa, a chic suburb of Tunis, is now sometimes emphatically described as a fancy palace, and some even go so far as to compare Bouazizi’s greedy and vocal mother to the former president’s wife, Leila Ben Ali.

Having closely investigated the exact unfolding of events in Sidi Bouzid since December 2010, French journalist Christophe Ayad has revealed that Lamine Al-Bouazizi, a union activist of the Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens [UGGT], and Fawzi Hamdi, a schoolteacher, member of the UGTT’s local branch, and Fayda Hamdi’s own brother, fabricated the story of

¹¹ International Crisis Group, “Soulèvements populaires,” 21–25.

the slap in the face.¹² Many activists of UGTT, Lamine Al-Bouazizi explained to Ayad, had understood that “the regime was vulnerable” since the Gafsa strikes in 2008, and were waiting for any opportunity to protest against the regime. He admits that right after Bouazizi’s self-immolation, he and his fellow activists presented the street vendor as a unemployed graduate, while the only diploma he actually had was a baccalaureate. Moreover, the union activists spread the rumour of the policewoman slapping the fruit seller in the face. “In order to mobilize those who are not educated, we invented the story of the slap in the face from Fayda Hamdi. Here, it’s a rural and traditional area, it offends people.” A few months later, Lamine Al-Bouazizi and Fawzi Hamdi themselves joined the mobilization for Fayda Hamdi’s liberation: “we were protesting against Ben Ali, not against Fayda.”

Ayad’s investigation into the Bouazizi myth’s fabrication points at two essential elements, which illustrate the uniqueness of the Tunisian movements. First, it shows that the mobilizations did not emerge completely out of the blue, as purely spontaneous and apolitical expressions of disgust and exasperation. Though the self-immolation resonated with the suffering of most Tunisians in Sidi Bouzid and beyond, as well as triggered a real sense of collective outrage, the demonstrations that followed Bouazizi’s death were partly channelled and directed by local UGTT activists, who had been waiting for such an opportunity since well before 2010. The argument here is not that the revolution was entirely orchestrated by the local UGTT chapter. However, despite analyses that depict the revolution as deprived of any leadership and merely emotional, the story behind the Bouazizi myth shows that the mobilizations resulted from the combination of an authentic sense of collective outrage and the leadership of some local union activists.

Second, the public’s relatively quick dismissal of Bouazizi’s martyrdom, and the attendant desire shown by many (even in Sidi Bouzid) to reintegrate the policewoman into her community reveal a striking difference from the way in which supporters of jihadist attacks revere their martyrs. The shifting statuses of the vegetable seller and the policewoman as martyrs suggest at once a form of democratization of the status of martyr, and most importantly, a striking political lucidity among many Tunisians. Having sacrificed one’s life no longer seems to afford the deceased a right to wholehearted, unquestioned veneration, as in the case of jihadist martyrdom. Even though many Tunisians still

¹²⁾ Christophe Ayad, “La révolution de la Gifle,” *Libération*, 11 June 2011, <http://www.liberation.fr/monde/01012342664-la-revolution-de-la-gifle> (accessed 6 July 2011).

mourn and admire Bouazizi, his act, his identity, and his true motives are discussed and commented upon as if self-sacrifice no longer grants martyrs immunity from critical thinking. Moreover, a large part of the Tunisian public has forgiven Bouazizi's very "torturer". Rather than an irrational and indiscriminate thirst for revenge or victimization, this attitude reveals a capacity from Sidi Bouzid's inhabitants to set up political priorities, and distinguish between the people who were actively promoting Ben Ali's system of repression, on the one hand, and those who were essentially struggling to survive in this system (including members of the police force), on the other. It suggests that the protesters are ultimately interested in a politics of recognition and justice, rather than one of revenge or pity.

Images of Bouazizi that have circulated since December 17 are also very instructive in terms of the particular way in which suffering is depicted, and the claims that this representation entails. The difference between Bouazizi's representation and the aesthetics of jihadist martyrdom is striking. Very few photos or drawings of the vendor's burnt body have been published. Instead, the image that became the symbol of the revolution is the portrait of his smiling face, looking aside, raising his hands, in an almost Christ-like pose. Furthermore, the representational figure of Tunisian protesters is a young, skinny male, wearing jeans, t-shirt and tennis shoes. He is very similar to the image of young people who have been protesting in Greece and Spain since the spring, which completely departs from the jihadist aesthetics of blood covered bodies, bombs, and turbans.¹³

The Call for Recognition and Karama

The entanglement of collective outrage and political claims became apparent in the fact that "*karama*" quickly became the rallying cry of Tunisian protesters across classes, professions, and generations. Contrary to what many analysts tried to show at the beginning of the movements, demonstrators asked for much more than bread, and insisted on having the true nature of their protest understood by the international public. When shouting "*Khobs wa ma, ben ali la*" ("better just bread and water than Ben Ali"), or when raising loaves of bread during demonstrations, protesters were deliberately playing with traditional signifiers of Tunisian social movements. They were showing

¹³ French-Algerian artist, Bilal, has represented these figures very well in his work. See <http://www.zoo-project.com/1/> (accessed day month year). BILAL, "Les Martyrs", April 3, 2011.

an astonishing awareness of the demeaning ways in which their government and the international community perceived them—namely, as bread and couscous eaters. In this context, it is very significant that the word that became the motto of all protesters was one that encompasses notions of political and civil rights, as well as that of social-economic capacity. In calling for dignity, Tunisians were not merely asking for the lowering of food prices, but for an end to corruption as a mode of government. Interestingly, the word that spontaneously emerged as the rallying cry of protesters was *karama* and respect (*ihthiram*), not honor (*charaf, namous*). The collective demand was oriented towards a form of universal humanism that is not determined by any cultural or religious particularism. The reality that Tunisian protesters wanted to be recognized is not primarily about Arab, Islamic, or tribal identity, but rather about a capacity to live and function as human beings.

The demand for recognition expresses a form of humanism that is completely disconnected from the fallacious human right discourse of Tunisian RGOs. It also articulates a form of universalism that developed out of the encounter between pious behaviour and social activism of UGTT local leaders. The form of universal humanism that underlies the demands of Tunisian protesters is indeed still in the making. Carrying within itself new categories of action and representation, the Tunisian movement asks for new categories of analysis. To the extent that its universal humanist call for recognition and dignity emerged from a break with fallacious top-down imitation of democratic language under Ben Ali's regime, it evokes what Judith Butler describes as a "performative contradiction"—namely, a phenomenon "that takes place when one with no authorization to speak within and as the universal nevertheless lays claim to the term". This "anticipated universality, for which we have no ready concept, is one whose articulation will only follow from a contestation of universality at its already imagined borders."¹⁴

Conclusion

Six months after the self-immolation of Bouazizi, the list of challenges and difficulties that Tunisians need to address is continuously growing. The precarious security situation, the dramatic economic and employment crisis, the

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 91.

substantial disappointment and confidence crisis caused by the postponement of the elections of the Constitutional Assembly, the conflict between and within the organizations in charge of preparing elections, Ben Ali's mockery of a trial that took place in June in the absence of the former president, the increased polarization in public debate between Islamists and secularists—all these developments indicate that the democratization process is, to this day, extremely fragile. But no matter what comes out of the upcoming months, a dramatic semantic, symbolic and aesthetic shift has occurred, and a new economy of meaning regarding the possibility of free speech is in the making. Rather than radically pessimistic or romantic assessments, this shift calls for a thorough investigation of the manner in which new meanings and norms are formed, as well as caution and modesty as to how established paradigms of democratic transition theory are used.