Rethinking the Root Causes of The Tunisian Revolution and its Implications

ABSTRACT  What happened within and beyond Tunisia in 2010–11 has been told repeatedly from a number of perspectives, each putting a greater or a lesser emphasis on one or several variables ranging from society, politics, economics, to religion or the involvement of external dynamics. An exploration of the causes of the Arab Spring and the factors that shaped its outcome is critical when answering several frequently raised questions, some of which are highlighted here. This article provides a concise picture of the Arab Spring and its consequences for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It defines the meaning of revolution by examining various explanations and interpretations provided by several theorists and shows which explanation(s) best fits the Tunisian case. Moreover, the study explains how multiple factors, such as social and economic injustice, authoritarian rule, the internet, and social media have played a role in enabling the Tunisian Revolution to happen.

KEYWORDS: Tunisian Revolution, Zine El Abidine Bin Ali, despotism, corruption, regional disparity, social media

INTRODUCTION

More than seven years ago, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) witnessed watershed events, resulting in the long awaited, yet varied, political and social transformations. The protests first started in Tunisia in late 2010 and early 2011, surprisingly ousting Zine El Abidine Bin Ali—once an unchallengable ruler—from power. Rapidly the spark spread to the other countries of the MENA region, including Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Morocco, and Bahrain (Eyadat 2011, 3), thereby setting in motion a domino effect that came to be popularly known as the “Arab Spring,” “Arab Revolution,” or “Arab Awakening.” Encompassing most of the MENA region, the so-called Arab Spring took everyone by surprise and the civil protests, wars, and other political developments that continue to take place have since kept the whole region...
on edge (Rosiny 2012, 1). Like slow-moving tectonic plates, the longstanding political, social, and economic issues finally created advantageous conditions for these upheavals. However, for those who challenged the status quo, all hopes of progress and development and the establishment of representative governments were quelled; the bright spring, full of hope and promise, quickly receded into a sad and gloomy winter.

Numerous questions as to the causes of these episodes have been frequently raised and discussed. They are based on whether politics, religion, and economics, freedom, human rights, and dignity were at the root of the issues; whether the lack of political space, freedom of speech, unemployment, the ban on various Islamic practices, or the regimes’ corrupt nature were what led to the materialization of these events; the role of youth in these revolutions; the roles and impacts of different social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube and the related social media at large; whether these events were completely endogenous; or to what extent the role of external actors influenced the way in which protests unfolded and the different responses regimes gave to mobilizations.

Whatever the causes and explanations, the Arab Spring was long in the making. Among others, social, political, and economic issues contributed multifariously to what was already a grave situation prevailing throughout the MENA region that culminated in the form of popular mass uprisings (Pollack 2011, 2). Protests that took place in Tunisia acted as a modus operandi for the other countries in the region, and the first to follow was Egypt, where the protesters who assembled en masse in the now famous “Tahrir Square” or “Liberation Square” shouted slogans such as Isqāt al-Niẓām, “Bring down the regime” (Eyadat and Schaefer 2013, 203). Within no time, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria followed suit (Brynen et al 2013, 17). Oman, Lebanon,

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1 A big debate raged about when and who used the term ”Arab Spring” for the first time. Keating (2011) has made a fine attempt to answer this question as did Osiewicz (2015) and Bacon (2016), among others. Keating reveals that Marc Lynch, Foreign Policy magazine’s well-known analyst, made the first reference to the term Arab Spring in January 2011 in a post entitled “Obama’s ‘Arab Spring’?” (Lynch, 2011). Previously used in 2005, however, the term referred to a short-lived and failed event of flowerling of democracy movements across the MENA region. After Lynch, the Egyptian politician and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohamed ElBaradei, in an interview with the German magazine Spiegel Online, made the second reference to the term (ElBaradei, 2011). He, amid contextualizing the term historically and replying to the question related to the “domino effect” theory, stated: “Perhaps we are currently experiencing the first signs of an ‘Arab Spring’ (e.g. similar to the so-called Prague Spring of political liberalization in Czechoslovakia in 1968).” Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that “Arab Spring” is the term that has stuck and which has been widely used in the literature produced so far. For more details, see Keating (2011), Osiewicz (2015) and Bacon (2016).
Morocco, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia witnessed similar protests (Dupont and Passy 2011, 2–3). Highlighting the lack of political freedom, corruption, and unemployment, the protestors in most of the MENA demanded reforms, if not complete regime change. The “tremors” that stunned the entire world can still be felt, and no one is quite certain when the aftershocks will end, or when another shockwave of popular unrest might occur (Pollack 2011, 1). In fact, Kenneth M. Pollack’s statement goes well with the analysis of Marc Lynch, who highlights that it is a common phenomenon, as similar waves of protests and revolts have erupted in the past in the region (Lynch 2012, 65). However, the results of the Arab Spring vary from establishing a promising democracy, as in Tunisia, and introducing reforms, though limited, as in Morocco and Jordan, to turning into civil wars of enormous proportion where the state structures collapsed, as in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Hence, the post-Arab Spring period is characterized by both continuity and change (Rivetti 2015; Rivetti and Di Peri 2015; Hinnebusch 2015b).

Following Muhammad Morsi’s ousting from power in July 2013 by the army general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt firmly re-established Hosni Mubarak-style military rule (Masri 2017, xxv). A movement opposed to authoritarianism and in favor of democracy in Egypt, therefore, had been reversed.

In the same vein, the situation in Syria, Libya, and Yemen remains extremely precarious with routine killings amounting to massive human and material destruction, plundering, and fragmentation. For instance, the conflict in Syria, as Safwan Masri observes, resulted in the worst humanitarian disaster of our time and the largest refugee crisis since World War II (Masri 2017, xxvi). However, the agony continues, as Idlib—the country’s last rebel stronghold—is becoming a battleground for another confrontation with a potential of producing another humanitarian disaster.²

In Libya, the aftermath of the power struggle will be the hollow shell of violence that will haunt the state and its citizens for generations to come (Eyadat and Schaefer 2013, 203). Rightly said, Libya in the post-Gaddafì era represents a failed state—ungoverned and unstable—where political divisions, widespread violence, and other socioeconomic tensions are governing the current landscape of the country. According to the analysis of Kamel (2018),

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². Highlighting the outcomes of this war, Kirikçioglu (2018) affirms that solving the Idlib problem through a military offensive “can only open the door for a worsened humanitarian situation, new refugee waves and the end of the possibility of a political solution.”
Libya presents an example of a continued rejectionist attitude of various elements, internal and external, which is the reason for its failure to develop a pluralistic political system. In general, the country was characterized by state collapse, anarchy, and chaos, with conflict between ever-changing alliances of armed groups and the expansion of the activities of Islamic State (Droz-Vincent 2018, 434). Similarly, the political transition in Yemen also failed and the current fighting has left the country as divided as ever, making the future of the country grim. Involving both internal and external actors, Clausen (2018b) argues that the fragmentation of the Yemeni state has resulted in a shift to more localized struggles over access to resources and power. The country, where the internal power struggle is between Saudi Arabia and Iran, remains in a chaotic state and, therefore, largely embodies the legacy of Syria and Libya. In such formidable circumstances, how far federalism and decentralization can ensure peace and stability and contribute to the building of a stable state structure in Yemen (Clausen 2018a) remains an open question.

Following these transformations and amid chaos, confusion, and uncertainty in the MENA region, the Tunisian experience is promising and inspiring, hopeful and unique, but it may be too early to comment on how far it will go and how successful it will prove. Despite apprehensions, there is no doubt that the events of December 2010 and January 2011 yielded a positive change in Tunisia where the process of reforms continues. Besides approving a new constitution considered enlightened and enshrining individual freedoms, it has strengthened the culture of political pluralism and established new democratic institutions, with relatively little violence (Marzouki 2015). Hence, it has made it the only country in the region that until now has not succumbed to the winter witnessed in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen in the form of violence, civil wars, military rule, and a refugee crisis, among others.

Some of the important engagements in this article include the contention among various scholars and analysts about what exactly makes a revolution and to what sort of reforms and changes it leads. The study also directs attention to analyzing the significance of various interlocking factors, such as the existence of the police state, lack of justice and dignity, lack of political space, and fraudulent economic practices, contributing to the making of the Tunisian Revolution. Moreover, it discusses how the use of modern technology, such as the internet and social media, in contrast to the old sources, helped in the rapid mass mobilization and fast dissemination of the information to the entire world.
EXPLAINING THE REVOLUTION

Jack Goldstone, an American, historian, sociologist, and political scientist, has stated that from time to time human history has experienced various types of revolutions, especially during periods of fast population growth and economic change (Goldstone 1993, 320). All these revolutions play a decisive role in changing the course of history. Examples are the American and French revolutions of the eighteenth-century, the two watershed events in modern history that established a new socio-political order. For instance, the French Revolution of 1789 entirely changed the country’s political setting by deracinating the centuries-old monarchy and feudal system and shaped the fate of future generations within and beyond France. Other examples of more recent revolutions may include, inter alia, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Chinese Revolution of 1949, and the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Among the series of revolutions, both old and new, the Tunisian Revolution signifies yet another important example of revolution in human history, having both differences and similarities vis-à-vis past revolutions. The scholarly debate continues about what exactly makes up a revolution, what is its stimulating ideology, how it can be realized, and what fundamental changes should occur to call a particular event a revolution. Similarly, of late, much attention has been directed to debate about the exactness of the term “revolution” to indicate any of the 2010–11 revolts, including the Tunisian one.

While examining the issue, the word “revolution” can be broadly summed up as a successful attempt by a large group of people to produce by force a fundamental change in the existing sociopolitical and economic institutions of their country. Hague and Harrop (2004, 137), amid defining revolution in a similar fashion, argue that “[w]hen the existing structure of power is overthrown, leading to a long-term reconstruction of the political, social and economic order, we can speak of a revolution.” They further add that “[s]uch episodes are rare but pivotal, inducing broad and deep alterations in society.” Theda Skocpol, an American sociologist and political scientist, provides a structural explanation of revolution (Skocpol 1979, 4). She believes that revolution is a rapid, basic transformation of a society’s state and class structures; and revolutions are accompanied, and in part carried out, by class-based revolts from below. The analysis of Goldstone about revolution also connotes

3 For a more intriguing and detailed analysis about the French Revolution, which elucidates so many subtle points and sheds a light on its far-reaching political and social implications, see Kropotkin (n.d.).
a major transformation in the political institutions through mass mobilization, both formal and informal. He claims that revolution consists of three main overlapping stages: state breakdown, the ensuing struggle for power, and the radical reconstruction of the state (Goldstone 1991, 37). Another set of literature assesses the revolution with respect to the relationship between authoritarianism and various forms of political contention outside of the institutional realm of the state. For instance, Chomiak (2011a, 77) argues that revolutions should be approached as heightened moments of political contention rather than a large-scale systemic overhaul. Therefore, in the case of Tunisia, a widespread feeling crossed the boundaries of the permissible, carved out a space of open resistance, made the way for heightened moments of political contention, and finally marked a puncturing of repressive conditions under the authoritarian rule and represented a radical rupture from country’s dictatorial past (Chomiak 2016).

Therefore, in certain senses, the explanations of Goldstone and Chomiak make the Tunisian case a revolution. For example, the argument provided by Goldstone regarding revolution partly fits the Tunisian case in the sense that through mass mobilization Bin Ali’s regime was overthrown, which was subsequently followed by a power struggle. Moreover, if there was a regime change, on the one hand, there was no radical subversion of the state apparatus, on the other, because several earlier structures and the same old elites remained. Therefore, commensurating with the existence of a deep state that is manifested in Tunisia even today in various ways indicates that it is not necessary for every revolution to result in the radical and complete reconstruction of state institutions; rather, they can branch out in many different ways.

Moreover, socio-psychological theory that places an emphasis on individual motivations rather than political or social groups can be one theory, among others, in helping to understand and explain the Tunisian Revolution or vulnerability of people to the uprising groups. It suggests that actually a key motivator to revolution is endured grievances and deprivation that breed a sense of resentment and, thereby, contribute to political discontent (Hague and Harrop 2004, 137–38). Ted R. Gurr, a political psychologist, claims that political instability only results from deprivation when combined with a belief that conditions are worse than they could and should be (Gurr 2016). Mancur Olson, in a similar analysis, claims that the fast economic growth that does not meet at all the aspirations of society for a better life leads to relative

deprivation, instability, and revolt (Olson 1971, 219). Samuel P. Huntington states that those societies generally prone to revolution have experienced some social and economic development and it is here where the processes of political modernization and political development have lagged behind the processes of social and economic change (Huntington 1970, 265). Studying the divergent trajectories of the Arab Uprising, Hinnebusch (2015a, 210) put it as follows: “The challenge authoritarian regimes face is that once societies reach a certain level of social mobilization (education, literacy, urbanization, size of the middle class) regimes that do not accommodate demands for political participation risk they will take revolutionary forms.” Therefore, all this emphasizes that the state formation path(s) matter, particularly in understanding how the past tangents of states’ formation close off some possibilities and make others more likely, and how they produce variable results on a particular event/uprising, and vice versa (Hinnebusch 2015b, 12).

Put simply, the self-immolation of Muhammad Bouazizi—the young, impoverished street vendor frustrated by joblessness—perhaps embodies Gurr’s, Olson’s, Huntington’s, and Hinnebusch’s arguments about the significance of socio-psychological factors, relative deprivation, and lack of political accommodation or space that are significant variables to provide a general explanation of political dissent, revolt, and violence. Although a surprising personal act, put in the broader sense it symbolized the collective grievance of the people of Tunisia that compelled them to revolt and that finally turned into collective and sweeping changes across the MENA region. Bouazizi’s act represented his personal frustration as well as a protest of Tunisia’s corrupt procedures and lack of avenues for socioeconomic advancement, thus symbolizing the plight of millions of Tunisians (Chomiak 2011b, 70). In the case of Tunisia, economic indicators suggested that from the period when Bin Ali assumed office to 2008, the country’s per capita gross domestic product (GDP) had more than tripled from US$1,261 to US$3,786. These data clearly show that although Tunisia experienced economic growth, Bin Ali still made no serious attempt to eradicate economic inequalities, regional disparities, and fulfill the demands of the common people. As a result, the classes who suffered most in terms of inequalities were the medium and upper income groups who mobilized most during the uprising. Therefore, in short, in the case of Tunisia, it was the longstanding case of grievances and political and economic deprivation of various shades that compelled the people to attempt to challenge and transform the existing political institutions and, thereby, bring a viable socioeconomic and political change.
THE PATH TO THE TUNISIAN REVOLUTION: CAUSES AND REASONS

Although the 2011 revolution was spontaneous, sudden, and rapid, inflated by certain decisive factors, and sustained by a number of actors, mainly the youth, the process of its development and materialization, however, had begun much earlier, with its roots deeply embedded in an acute social, political, and economic profile (Schraeder and Redissi 2011, 7–10). The demands of the Tunisians and of others were largely very simple and similar, as they shouted in favor of political freedom, decent economic opportunity, and self-dignity. Many factors were similar between various countries in the MENA region experiencing series of protests, yet particular grievances were associated with each revolution and those defined the demands of the people in their respective countries. For example, in Tunisia and Egypt, an utter lack of political space, an unaccountable authority, a corrupt regime, lack of dignity, fewer job avenues, and less development, among others, had resulted in the hatching of the intense hatred against the authoritarian regimes. Hence, these concerns helped to build a broad nationwide resistance that finally evicted both Bin Ali and Mubarak from power. The dismal economic situation, corruption, lack of justice and dignity, and lack of political space were the significant modalities that would help to elucidate why the “historic event” took place and how the path to revolution was navigated. In view of that, the following discussion, along with examining the role of social media as a new tool for protests, broaches some of the significant factors that contributed hugely to the Tunisian Revolution.

Without underestimating the impact and importance of political and social concerns, the self-immolation of Bouazizi, however, implies that the Tunisian Revolution was mainly driven by economic concerns. The incident at the Gafsa mining basin of Tunisia in 2008 was, according to Chalcraft (2016, 1), likewise inspired by unemployment, government neglect, and unfair contracting. However, it is also important to point out the role of several structural protests contesting the status quo. They qualify as critical junctures in defining the key moments of political change in the MENA region. For example, the labor movement that had been moving en masse in Egypt since 2004, the Tunisian General Union of Labour (UGTT), and other movements operating elsewhere in the region had kept up a steady stream of mobilization on social and economic rights. Indeed, the Arab uprising in one sense was largely the expression of these trends (Chalcraft 2016, 5).

Although Tunisia did not represent a complete success story as far as the economic situation during Bin Ali’s era is concerned, its economy, however,
was indeed doing better than those of its neighbors. The World Bank, amid acknowledging the economic success of Tunisia, called it a “top reformer” in regulatory reform (World Bank, International Finance Corporation, and Palgrave Macmillan 2008, 79). Bin Ali had promulgated different reforms that included a shift in favor of a more liberal free economy, introducing privatization, and further positioning Tunisia as an export-oriented country (Masri 2017, 32).

Therefore, under Bin Ali, the economy was moving in a positive direction, particularly due to cooperation with international financial institutions and close ties with the European Union. Moreover, the better harvests, together with the increase in exports, higher domestic investment, and the booming tourist industry, resulted in a further strengthening of the economy. Hence, a sustained per capita growth in GDP of about five percent was recorded annually from the mid-1990s to 2008 (Masri 2017, 33; El-Khawas 2012, 7; Achy 2011, 4). Then in 2008, the global financial crisis experienced by European countries—Tunisia’s chief trading cohorts—substantially damaged the economy of the country. The sharp drop in the demand for Tunisian products reduced the range of exports, contracted the industrial sector, and consequently slowed the expansion in services. Nonetheless, Bin Ali managed to rebound and improve the economy once again (El-Khawas 2012, 7). The maintaining of a stable increase in GDP brought praise from the Global Competitiveness Index which rated Tunisia first in Africa and thirty-second globally of 139 countries (Schwab 2010, 328–29). In short, the general narrative of the Tunisian economy had been one of impressive growth.

Despite so-called economic stability and good performance on a macro-economic level, some genuine issues and problems marred the broader hallmark of this rosy economic picture. Regarding this, Masri highlights that millions of Tunisians, representing a broad spectrum of economic strata, social backgrounds, and regions of the country, were aware—some intuitively—of how the seemingly successful economy had some serious underlying problems (Masri 2017). In this “delicate authoritarian bargain,” as Lahcen Achy refers to it, between the regime and society, everything seemed to be in place as long as the former succeeded in providing economic and social gains to large segments of the population in order to secure its legitimacy and political stability in return (Achy 2011, 5). However, the failure of the regime to create more decent jobs for the educated youth, the vast increase in casual and low-paid jobs in the informal sector, coupled with the rising economic inequality and regional disparities, heavily disturbed the nature and balance of the
authoritarian bargain. Gradually, the number of the marginalized and least-benefited classes in society increased, hence a key reason for the erosion of the regime’s legitimacy (Achy 2011, 5).

A closer look at the economic situation that prevailed under Bin Ali across Tunisia shows a picture of gross social injustice as far as opportunities and the distribution of sources across classes, regions, and age groups are concerned. Out of this authoritarian bargain, those who benefited the most were the upper and upper middle classes of the rich coastal cities, especially Tunis and Monastir, whose standard of living was on a par with those living in Eastern and Southern Europe (Perkins 2014, 234). Cavatorta and Haugbølle (2012, 184) have posited the gloomy picture of this economic growth: “While the fundamentals of the economy might indeed have been good enough for global markets and international investors and trading partners, the economic miracle of Tunisia had a very dark side where under-employment, unemployment, difficult access to the labour market, income inequalities and wide regional gaps were the main features.” Therefore, the framing of policies by Bin Ali to boost the economy and the fixing of various multi-billion dollar public projects in reality contributed largely to socioeconomic inequality and regional disparity between the rich coastal cities of Tunis, Monastir, Mahdia, and Sousse, and poorer interior places, such as Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Mednine, and Gafsa (Hamid 2011, 111). Aleya-Sghaier (2014, 31), amid analyzing regional and social imbalance in the country, points out that the coastal areas for both historical reasons and unjust regional policies, and at the expense of other regions, had witnessed huge development in the form of infrastructure, social facilities, factories, hotels, and universities than all the midwest and southern provinces. He further remarks that, by 2010, the brutalities of the regime crossed all limits and, as a result, the sense of injustice and marginalization in the midwest and south had become unbearable. Many scholars have pointed out that, in parallel to the success of the economy, a special class, very close to Bin Ali, received maximum benefit from the regime’s economic programs and policies. In other words, it reflects the perfect image of a corrupt government that in every respect supported favoritism and nepotism in politics, economics, education, health, and other sectors throughout the country. The observations of Rex Brynen and others also support the view that corruption and nepotism were becoming increasingly rampant within regime circles. “[T]he primary beneficiaries of economic growth and of the regime’s privatization policies were increasingly to be found among the coterie of crony capitalists close to the RCD [Democratic Constitutional Rally/
Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique] and President Ben Ali. The president’s extended family—especially his sons-in-law and the Trabelsi family of his wife, Leila—were particularly prominent beneficiaries of this” (Brynen et al. 2013, 19).

Further, the story shared by an insider, Marwa Hermassi, is more powerful in revealing the exact picture of how Bin Ali and his regime managed the economic, political, and social affairs of the country and the impact they had on common Tunisians (Hermassi 2015). “For many years, most Tunisians were struggling daily to survive while the president’s family (especially his wife’s family), their friends, and their clan and anyone [and everyone] having close contact with the presidential family or their entourage were getting richer. Here was the situation: poor people getting poorer, rich people getting richer, no jobs, and not even the possibility of expressing ourselves or criticizing government policy or the president’s wife or family. People were fed up with the social injustice” (39). This dangerous situation compelled the then US ambassador to Tunisia, Robert Godec, to remark that the opulence with which El Materi and Nesrine (his wife) lived and their behavior made clear why they and other members of Ben Ali’s family were disliked and even hated by some Tunisians.

Abes Hamid, a magistrate by profession, emphasized that the excesses of the Ben Ali family were growing (Hamid 2015). He claimed that Ali was a dictator whose authoritarian regime was enforced with the help of a gang, which is his wife’s family. Hamid went on to say that this group “transformed the country into private property, which they plundered and whose institutions they exploited for personal gain [and hence] their wealth reached unimaginable amounts” (21).

In this oligarchic system or sclerotic regime, to use Godec’s term (The Guardian 2010), the power and economic abuse by Bin Ali, Leila Trabelsi, and other privileged persons and groups profoundly strengthened and expanded corruption in the inner circles. For example, the monopoly of wealth by the Trabelsi family was extremely flagrant and disproportionate because they were in command of almost every industrial activity and financial dealing, which extended from banking, manufacturing, construction, agriculture, petroleum, and transport to communication and technology. A year before the 2010 WikiLeaks memos, Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, two French journalists, exposed how deep the influence and corruption of the Trabelsi family ran in Tunisia. The authors use “regent” to refer to Bin Ali’s wife, who, according to them, was a cunning businesswoman entirely responsible for the creation of
a mafia-like network, sustained by her brothers and other relatives who accumulated vast amounts of wealth (Mnasri 2011; Honwana 2013). This entire situation exacerbated dissent and dissatisfaction among the general masses, and showed the degree to which Tunisia was becoming a mafia-state run by Bin Ali’s family circle. On this issue, Aleya-Sghaier (2014, 33–34) claims that Bin Ali and his accomplices from the Trabelsi, Chiboub, Matri, and Mabrouk families constituted a mafia that ruled Tunisia up to January 14, 2011.

Moreover, Bin Ali’s populist move to introduce compulsory education up to the age of sixteen and to make higher education easily accessible transformed the educational institutions simply into degree factories. The youth who pursued education and earned higher degrees in these institutions, which were largely incapable of guaranteeing suitable job opportunities for their graduates, went through an intense period of desolation and despair. Job creation, as highlighted previously, was mostly in low-skilled and low-wage informal sectors. As a result, young degree holders, against the pressure of finding jobs, could only obtain casual work and low-paid jobs. While overall unemployment was close to fourteen percent, because of the large number of young graduates leaving universities every year, many observers estimated that the youth unemployment rate was more than thirty percent. Honwana (2013, 26) and Masri (2017, 33–34) estimate that thirty-one percent with an engineering degree, fifty percent with a technical and master’s degree, and sixty-eight percent with a master’s degree in legal studies were unemployed at the beginning of the revolution.

Timo Behr and Mika Aaltola contend that this group of unemployed youth expressed disenchantment and dissent with a political and economic order in which personal relations trumped qualifications and where crony capitalism allowed those in a position of power to amass fabulous wealth (Behr and Aaltola 2011, 3). In this connection, the observation of Moncef Guen about the condition of the Tunisian youth and the level of their frustration is appropriate (Guen 2011). He argues that for the educated youth, the poverty index was touching seventy percent. This helps to explain why there was a massive participation of youth in the revolution, especially in the deprived regions of Tunisia. In search of dignity and honor, the Tunisian youth, the unemployed,

5. Overall, the growing rate of youth unemployment in Tunisia, which is still a huge problem for the new Tunisian establishment, showed Bin Ali and his regime’s total disinterest and indifference to addressing the issue and the lack of ability of the labor market to absorb the youth with third-level degrees. Moreover, the problem became more acute because of Bin Ali’s program to expand the education system that gave much preference to quantity over quality.
and the angry finally decided to bring about a political change through mass mobilization and, thereby, redefine the nature of the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Political repression and despotism appeared to be another primary reason, and it was a long-term source of despair that increasingly intensified discontentment among the country’s common masses against the regime. Though Bin Ali, when he assumed office, promised social and political reforms, in practice he strengthened the ruling party’s apparatus, co-opted the other groups, and heavily clamped down on Hizb al-Nahdah. Many scholars justifiably called Bin Ali’s Tunisia a “façade democracy” (Sadiki 2002a). Larbi Sadiki, in a detailed analysis about whether or not Bin Ali’s Tunisia was a façade democracy, contends that despite democratic stirrings and an electoral democracy, Tunisia had not yet approximated the standards of a liberalized polity, and that Bin Ali had not lived up to his three undertakings, especially democracy and a shorter presidency. He also contends that political singularity, clientelistic, and corporatist control over society, and the superficial nature of participation and contestation point to a façade democracy (Sadiki 2002a, 123).

In order to maintain the structure of this façade democracy and sell it to a wider audience, Bin Ali and his apparatchik, besides controlling the UGTT by corrupting its leaders, created various political parties that brilliantly played the role of a loyal opposition, thereby providing legitimacy to Bin Ali and his regime. Therefore, it reflects the fact that Bin Ali provided no space at all for the other parties that had a clear anti-regime agenda, particularly Hizb al-Nahdah and the Communist Party of Tunisian Workers (PCOT), to operate and engage in meaningful political participation. In this regard, Sadiki (2002b, 505) noted that the Tunisian regime had more or less appropriated and deployed all state resources to reproduce itself without much serious competition. If anything had remained constant during the twenty-three years of Bin Ali’s rule, it was political repression, exploitation, corruption, nepotism, and human rights violations, leading to the breaking of all his promises one by one (Bruce 2013, 6–8). While neglecting the genuine demands and needs of the common masses, Bin Ali remained heavily engaged in power monopolization, repression of dissidents, and the patronization of the coterie of capitalists close to him (Paciello 2011, 9–10). Hence, it was rightly speculated that the economic growth and its fruits, circumscribed within a particular class, was in reality Bin Ali’s attempt to prolong, secure, and make impregnable his authoritarian character (Cavatorta and Haugbølle 2012, 184; Brynen et al. 2013, 19).
Of particular note is Godec’s statement about the Tunisian regime being “a police state,” with little freedom of expression or association, and serious human rights problems. “The problem is clear [because] Tunisia has been ruled by the same president for 22 years. He has no successor. […] He and his regime have lost touch with the Tunisian people. They tolerate no advice or criticism, whether domestic or international. Increasingly, they rely on the police for control and focus on preserving power” (The Guardian 2010). More fitting would be to apply Ayubi’s (2008) generalization about the “fierce state” or “hard state”: one that uses force and violence, among other things, to ensure its direct control and dominance and to achieve its goals and objectives (394).

By this definition, Bin Ali’s system qualified as a “fierce state,” “police state,” or a “mukhabarat state” because he primarily dealt with the society via coercion and brute force (449). Bin Ali, like other Arab autocrats, used the services of large bureaucracies, an extensive police force, and harsh prisons to strengthen his own position and power, and thereof maintain the status quo (xi). Having firsthand experience of how the Tunisian state operated, understandably Ayubi’s account describing the situation of the country is no exaggeration.

Other accounts also substantiate the fact that Bin Ali surpassed Habib Bourguiba in the matter of the reestablishment of a strong authoritarian state. Since assuming power, his major concern was how to remain in power for a longer time. To serve that purpose, he, in his lust for power, increasingly relied on the police and, consequently, increased their number, estimated to be between 130,000 and 200,000. Interestingly, the number far exceeded the police in France, a country with a population five times larger than Tunisia’s. The sole purpose was to sell the message to the public that, with the help of the police and other members of the RCD who were particularly entrusted with the job of spying, the regime was closely monitoring every “suspicious” activity. These state-sponsored agents particularly monitored the activities of anyone associated with Hizb al-Nahḍah or with other powerful opponents. The police had a free hand to conduct searches, concoct false stories, make arrests, and, finally, make the experience of the arrestees as humiliating and brutal as possible. Even the family members and relatives of both Islamic and secular (so-called) extremists, imprisoned or living abroad, were not spared this exercise and were also subjected to degrading treatment (Masri 2017, 30–31; Aleya-Sghaier 2014, 33). The police, in particular, and other institutions, in general, were exclusively serving the interests of Bin Ali. A fine example in this regard would be the judiciary that Bin Ali intimidated and used, according to
Aleya-Sghaier (2014, 33), for his own purposes, prosecuting political opponents, trade unionists, students, journalists, and human rights defenders.

Such a state of affairs engendered political despotism, favoritism, rising unemployment—especially among the youth—rising inflation, corruption, injustice, withered freedom of speech, human rights violations, and economic disparity between the poor and the politically patronized class.

Hence, these causes proved extremely vital in propelling unrest among the masses and ultimately sparked an unquenchable fire that spread across the nation (Masri 2017, 37). The self-immolation of Bouazizi, followed by the brutality perpetrated by the security forces to suppress the protests, only added fuel to the now blazing inferno. The disillusioned masses, especially the youth, in a desperate attempt rose up against the regime that had, as per Eyadat and Schaefer (2013, 202), “trampled upon dignity and violated basic human rights.” Bouazizi, the symbol of resistance and the voice of the voiceless, could not take any more of the injustice that Bin Ali had perpetrated since assuming power. Once again, all this implies that the authoritarian bargain that Bin Ali had with his people was quickly losing its appeal and, more importantly, following the protests in Gafsa in 2008, Bin Ali’s so-called democratic facade and economic narrative started to fade and crumble. Bin Ali, to put it simply, had destroyed his honor and prestige through authoritarianism, nepotism, and abuse of influence. As a result, in the case of Tunisia and elsewhere, the emergence of these events explains the unfolding of the “politics of resistance” and the end of “politics of fear”—expressions used by Charles Tripp (Tripp 2013, 4). In short, the implementation of policies by the systems of power that consistently and systematically disadvantage and exclude the vast majority of the population whilst privileging the minority end the politics of fear and feed into politics of resistance, therefore taking as its core issue the lines of discrimination themselves.

THE TUNISIAN REVOLUTION: INTERNET, MEDIA, AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

What role, if any, did the internet, media, and social networking sites play in the Tunisian Revolution? To answer that question, an examination of the role of various channels of media in the Tunisian Revolution revealed that they

6. Anne Wolf, through factual data, has provided an account, both painful and powerful, about the inhuman treatment experienced by the imprisoned members of Hizb al-Nahdah and the sufferings of their families. For more details, see Wolf (2017, 80–86).
were very effective tools in organizing the protests, accelerating the revolution, and disseminating the latest details about the current situation to a wider audience within and beyond Tunisia. Breuera, Landmanb, and Farquhar (2014, 1) have argued that the internet’s prominent role in the diffusion of popular protest across the Arab world has re-energized the debate on the implications of social media networks for political mobilization and patterns of protest diffusion, as well as the impact of social media networks on individual political engagement. Likewise, Chalcraft (2016, 5) argues that the new modes of coordination, through the internet, for example, and new forms of leaderless organizing had come into being. Therefore, it suggests that, by and large, these channels have become significantly low-cost and effective tools for protest and political mobilization.

As a new form of protest embodying online activism, these channels gave Tunisians a significant platform from which to break their silence, generate a healthy discussion, give updates about new programs, mobilize the masses, and organize the protests. Breuera et al. (2014, 1), in referring to “resource mobilization theory” (RMT), maintain that social media helped a tech-savvy generation to break the national media blackout in Tunisia. It also provided an element of emotional mobilization by depicting atrocities associated with the regime’s handling of the protests and enabled intergroup collaboration that resulted in spreading a large cycle of protest. Apart from filming and sharing the protests, more importantly it served as a powerful medium to expose the authoritarian face of Bin Ali, his regime, and its propaganda at large. Therefore, this online mobilization process, besides translating and communicating disparate modes of grievance in the country, galvanized at the national level a more focused critique of the Bin Ali regime (Breuera et al. 2014, 6). Social media, according to Masri (2017, 51), gave substantive, symbolic, and organizational force to the revolution. More importantly, social media acted as the most important tool in transforming a large number of people from being mere observers of activism to being activists themselves (Alterman 2011, 104).

Tunisia was the first Arab country that, in 1991, provisionally installed the internet facility. From the mid-1990s, Bin Ali and his regime had spent heavily in promoting the telecom sector in the country, and within a decade Tunisia had one of the most developed telecommunications infrastructures in the region. Surprisingly, figures reveal that, by 2008, out of a total population of 10.2 million, there were 1.7 million internet users accessing it from their homes and workplaces as well as from public internet centers set up
throughout the country (Breuera et al. 2014, 8). Despite investing considerably in the internet and other communication infrastructures as tools of economic transactions, Bin Ali, in comparison with other dictators in the MENA region, closely monitored usage of the internet and frequently practiced communication censorship. The Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) was given legal authorization to intercept various messages and material considered to be contrary to public order and morality (Breuera et al. 2014, 8). Pertinently, while developing the most detailed internet-specific laws that limit freedom of expression, in Bin Ali’s Tunisia there were thirty-six censorship cases between 2000 and 2006—second in number only after Iran (El Gody 2007, 223–24). For political reasons the Tunisian regime applied a substantial degree of restriction on any source engaged in online dissent, which included shutting the internet service for any amount of time and banning different websites and blogs (223). The censorship culture, aimed at preventing the real information from dissemination, continued until Bin Ali’s departure from the country.

Nonetheless, the authority’s ban on and censorship of the media to stop the dissemination of events, control voices of dissent, and silence the masses failed miserably; in other words, it was of limited utility in suppressing the protests (Larémont 2014, 15; Ramadan 2012, 45). In Tunisia, between 2002 and 2007, cell phone subscriptions jumped from 5.9 percent to 75.9 percent. A similar spike took place in the frequency of the internet and Facebook users. For instance, out of a population of 10.5 million, about 2.5 million were Facebook users, and the profiles included both young and old, men and women, employed and unemployed, high-school students, university students, doctors, academics, lawyers, and journalists (Aleya-Sghaier 2014, 45). Thus, increasing access to cell phones and the proliferation of social media users created, according to Larémont (2014, 15), an electronic alternative platform for social and political organization that Tunisian and other governmental authorities in the MENA region found extremely difficult to control. International media networks such as Al Jazeera, El Hiwar, Al Arabiya, the BBC, and CNN played a critical role while covering the revolution. Lynch (2006, 5) has already highlighted the role of satellite television, including Al Jazeera, in creating an Arab public sphere and in prompting revolutionized political behavior.

The Tunisian Revolution has forced many to concentrate on how various media outlets play a role in shaping a particular event. For example, Aleya-Sghaier (2014, 45) believes that the sympathetic role of Al Jazeera in particular
was decisive because it transmitted videos, images, comments, live broadcasts, and discussions on what was going on in Tunisia, while others satellite channels were half-hearted, if not entirely hostile, in their coverage. According to Alterman (2011, 108), Al Jazeera, watched by millions of Arabs, was an important channel of information that played a key role in bringing images of swelling protests in Tunisia to local and regional audiences. In a way, all these media outlets acted as alternative sources of information for people across the world. Therefore, the widespread use of cell phones, the internet, Facebook, and Tweeter became some primary instruments in organizing protests and disseminating information to a global audience, in addition to revealing regime abuses and disclosing government corruption (Larémont 2014, 26–27; Saidin 2018, 74).

The Tunisian youth, who formed the majority in the protests, were masters when it came to the use of the latest communication technologies. Benefitting and making best use of these technologies and social networking sites to record and post on the internet, the Tunisian tech-savvy generation succeeded in attracting the attention of the people both regionally and globally. Schraeder and Redissi (2011, 11) contend that the widespread use of cell phones and social media, most notably Facebook and Twitter, was critical to the protests’ rapid spread throughout the country. It was a revolution fought on multiple fronts, yet containing various trends, and one of the important weapons included cyber warfare that encompassed particularly internet forums, Facebook updates and posts, Twitter feeds, YouTube channels, and blogs (Honwana 2011, 8). Therefore, social media functioned as a catalyst to hasten the Tunisian Revolution that otherwise would have certainly evolved at a much slower pace (Saidin 2018, 74). According to Barrie Axford: “[T]he immediacy afforded by publicity through social media, the impact of these vignettes of revolutionary action or state brutalism appeal to wider audiences largely because they are touched primarily by the human tragedies being played out. Support for the causes encapsulated in the images may be intense and widespread but fleeting, as the rhythms of the issue-attention cycle unfold and the contagion of going viral subsides. Many such images were taken by protestors or passers-by using cell phones or Blackberries and this now seems the modus operandi of the street protestor and proto-revolutionary alike” (Axford 2011, 684).

The dissemination of information about various events through photographs, videos, or text updates on various social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube frequently turned viral through the sharing
distribution by millions of other users throughout the world, thus
inspiring Tunisians, more than ever, to convert their efforts into creating “his-
tory.” Pertinently, these communication tools, especially Facebook, greatly
facilitated mass mobilization and explain why the revolution was dubbed the
“Facebook Revolution” by the Western media. In short, from the above dis-
cussion, it is quite evident that the internet and other media outlets, amid
reflecting public sentiments, played a significant role, if not in launching the
revolution, but in contributing to the formation of an enlightened and politi-
cized citizenry (Aleya-Sghaier 2014, 45) and, to a lesser extent, in determining
the success of the revolution.

CONCLUSIONS: THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE

This article argues that the uprising in Tunisia—spreading quickly across two
continents, unsettling the political environment in more than a dozen coun-
tries, and ending the rule of four dictators—was long in the making. It would
therefore be naïve to say that the historic events that shook the MENA region
had no root causes or reasons, or, in the words of Tariq Ramadan, “neither
political will nor economic logic” (Ramadan 2012, 49). Moreover, the impor-
tance of the role played by the internet, social networking sites, and the media
cannot be overemphasized or downplayed. Rather, the present study main-
tains that under an authoritarian regime, where aggrieved individuals face
additional challenges, these tools contributed powerfully to expanding the
wave of protests in Tunisia and elsewhere.

The process of continuity and change and the varied trajectories of mobi-
lization in the MENA region are specifically related to combinations of politi-
cal, economic, military, and social factors. Following the Arab Spring, some
of the countries continue to be governed by the ancien régime, which now
has a stronger grip on the state affairs than ever before, whereas some others
have visibly turned into failed states, such as Yemen and Libya. Therefore, only
Tunisia stands as an exception as its political setting has up to the present mor-
phed into modest change, starting from a relatively peaceful transition to an
almost successful functioning democracy. It is for this reason that analysts,
activists, and political pundits all praised Tunisia for its success story. Some
of them view it as a beacon of hope and, consequently, propose it as a model
for the region. Nonetheless, whether Tunisia can serve as a model for the rest
of the MENA region is a debatable issue for analysts and observers. Based on
Tunisia’s indigenous and quite distinct rich history of reform that differs from
the other Arab countries, Masri (2017) openly denies the theory of Tunisia serving as a model. The factors responsible for Tunisia’s successful transition, according to him, “were either indigenous to Tunisia or many generations in the making” (6).

Despite Tunisia managing to escape the fate that other MENA countries faced, the failure of the successive governments to cure the ailing economy, create jobs for the educated youth, and improve the living conditions of the people is seriously endangering the regime and is also a major cause for the popular unrest in the country. A more recent example in this regard is Abderrazak Zorgui, a thirty-two-year-old photojournalist from Kasserine, who, like Bouazizi, set himself on fire in protest over injustice, corruption, and threatening social conditions. Zorgui’s act of self-immolation has once again sparked protests in various cities, including Tunis. Although it is believed the situation will not get out of control, leading to a threatening of the establishment as in 2010–11, it is also a wake-up call for the establishment to make deep structural changes and produce viable solutions to a myriad of socioeconomic problems.

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