

This other hidden face of the Tunisian revolution: its rurality

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■ Executive summary

Based on a unique survey, this sociological analysis tackles one of the lesser known aspects of the Tunisian revolution. During the hectic period that followed the fall of Ben Ali's regime, the media and political analysts stuck to the initial image of Mohamed Bouazizi – the young man whose self-immolation sparked the revolution that overthrew Ben Ali – as one of the many young urban university graduates from the city of Sidi Bouzid who had had to “lower” himself to work as a fruit and vegetable street vendor. By extension, they described the Tunisian revolution as an urban revolution and the expression of dissatisfied educated young people who, in spite of holding university degrees, were doomed to be unemployed and live as a downgraded middle class. The rural aspect of the revolution is largely underestimated. In this analysis we aim to correct this version of events and show that the Tunisian revolution had a strong rural aspect. The consequences of this underestimation are likely to emerge in years to come.

Introduction

On the evening of 17 December 2010, the beginning of the Tunisian uprising, every news medium in the world was talking about Muhammad Bouazizi, who had set fire to himself following his being humiliated by the Sidi Bouzid city police, and presenting him as one of the many young urban university graduates who had had to “lower” himself to work as a fruit and vegetable street vendor.

In reality, Muhammad Bouazizi had not finished high school. He had come to the city after having been expelled from his maternal uncle's farm, which he co-owned, by a bank that had decided to seize the mortgaged land based on its assessment that the project the bank had funded had failed.

During the hectic period that followed the fall of Ben Ali's regime, the media and political analysts stuck to this initial image of Bouazizi and, by extension, kept describing the Tunisian revolution as an urban revolution and the expression of dissatisfied educated young people who, in spite of holding university degrees, were doomed to be unemployed and live as a downgraded middle class. In this analysis, we aim to correct this one version of events that arose from

Bouazizi's act by showing the extent to which the fire that erupted in the sky over Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine at the end of December 2010 took on an interesting rural shade.

The individual who made history

A few months before Muhammad Bouazizi set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid, another man, who lived in Monastir, one of Tunisia's oldest coastal cities, and who also worked as a street vendor, had resorted to the same act for similar reasons. In contrast to Bouazizi, *he* had fallen into oblivion. His death was considered to be an *isolated* private act of suicide and failed to trigger a large protest movement and generate collective affection towards its “victim”. In actual fact, the city of Sidi Bouzid differs from Monastir, which is an old urban centre characterised by highly developed sociological individualism and a relationship to the countryside dominantly modelled by economics.

In contrast, in Sidi Bouzid, the poor street vendor's suicide exceeded its personal uniqueness and reached a much more complex collective dimension, which led in turn to a political revolution.¹ What happened exactly? A closer

1 See Lahmar, Mouldi, ed. 2014, *The Tunisian Revolution: The Local Trigger under the Microscope of the Social Sciences*, Beirut, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies [text in Arabic].

look into the events will give us one of the keys to understanding the rural–urban continuum that is the phenomenon at the root of the revolutionary forces that made the headlines.

Bouzizi's theatrical suicide and what happened next in the rural suq

The “first day” of the nationwide Tunisian revolution occurred on Friday 17 December 2010, the day of Muslim prayer in mosques. Around 2:00 pm, a pale, worn out and extremely nervous young man pushed a cart filled with vegetables in front of the governorate office (the largest administrative districts) near the mosque and taxi stand. After a few shouts to protest his fate and misfortune at the hand of state agents, the man, later identified as Muhammad Bouazizi, hesitated momentarily before suddenly self-immolating his body and fuel-soaked clothing. Before his parents arrived and started a confusing scene of lamentations, people had come rushing from everywhere in an attempt to save his life, progressively creating a gathering of hundreds of people protesting against the daily recurrent political and administrative injustices and humiliations that citizens were subjected to.

There were no street demonstrations as such on that day. It was only the next day, on Saturday, the day of the weekly suq in Sidi Bouzid that the world fell apart, and did so because the regional trade union office, along with a few opponents and local intellectual figures, had called a demonstration to protest in the main street against what had happened and also because people from the suq significantly joined in the demonstration en masse.

Who are the people who come to Sidi Bouzid's suq every week, which stretches almost over the whole city space? Obviously there are Sidi Bouzid citizens who come to buy vegetables, meat and other fresh produce, but most importantly there are rural people and street vendors who come from the western part of the country to buy and sell and resolve administrative matters with the public services.

According to a former member of the once influential political party founded by Bourguiba,² that Saturday,

18 December 2010, was a memorable day, almost unheard of since the independence movement against French colonisation: “high school students rebel very often, but this time around there were adults, the very adults, citizens from rural communities and inhabitants of Sidi Bouzid ... the old and the wise had not demonstrated in this way in a long time ... they wore their traditional dress, ‘burnous’, ‘jebba’ and ‘lehfa’.”³

These older rural people and farmers who come to the suq in Sidi Bouzid to sell their produce were obviously not numerically the most important group arriving from the rural areas on that day, but their participation in a demonstration that had been organised by trade unionists and opponents of the regime belonging to the intellectual class (students, university professors and secondary school teachers) was remarkable. It impressed the older local political actors who themselves had joined the Neo-Destourian Party after the Second World War, playing an important political role in integrating their region in the new political entity under construction, and so this process continued in a renewed fashion and with new means (partisan political sections).

The political characteristics of the rebels

This phenomenon, which has been overshadowed by the explosive developments that occurred in the cities, is indeed worthy of attention. One needs to refer to the sociological characteristics of rebels to understand it better.

To describe statistically the people who took part in the demonstrations between 17 December 2010 and 14 January 2011 in the street mobilisation in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, we will use the data gathered in a survey carried out in these regions at the beginning of 2012.⁴

The first question one might want to ask is: Who took part in the street demonstrations in the said time frame in the Governorates of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine?

2 PSD, for Parti Socialiste Destourien [Socialist Destourian Party], transformed after 1987 by Ben Ali into RCD, Rassemblement démocratique constitutionnel [Constitutional Democratic Rally].

3 The “burnous” is a seamless cloak of woollen fabric mostly woven by women; it is worn over a “jebba”, which is a dress that is open on the chest and made out of silk or other fabric; “lehfa” is a sort of long scarf worn by men around their necks or rolled around their heads.

4 The survey was organised with the support of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies [Doha]. The representative sample included 1,000 persons chosen from the region's inhabitants, 18 years old and over. Five criteria were selected: Governorate (Sidi Bouzid–Kasserine), dwelling (communal–non-communal), gender, age and level of education. The survey took place in February 2012.

Participation in the demonstrations⁵ according to socio-professional category

| Socio-professional categories | Percentage of participants within this category | Percentage of total demonstrators |
|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| Farm worker ⁶ | 28.9 | 7.0 |
| Commerce and industry workers | 61.8 | 8.5 |
| Craftsman, small shop owner, independent worker | 28.3 | 3.6 |
| Employee, public officer or school teacher | 46.5 | 9.1 |
| Middle manager or secondary school professor | 64.1 | 1.6 |
| Top manager or independent professional | 17.8 | 0.1 |
| Businessman or entrepreneur in trade, industry and services | 40.9 | 0.5 |
| Unemployed | 63.4 | 34.4 |
| Retired | 9.4 | 0.7 |
| Auxiliary in agriculture, commerce and services | 30.1 | 7.4 |
| Domestic servant | 11.9 | 8.7 |
| Pupil or student | 74.7 | 17.4 |
| Sick or disabled person | 6.9 | 1.0 |

Source: field survey⁷

Three general observations can be made based on this table, along with a fourth more specific point that relates to our main argument.

Firstly, as far as numbers are concerned, unemployed people (with secondary school and university level education), pupils and students, middle managers, public officers or school teachers, housewives, and commerce and industry workers were the trigger and mobilising forces of the demonstrations, whereas the “farm workers” who also took part represented only a relatively small number of the total demonstrators.

Secondly, with regards to the socio-professional category, pupils and students, middle managers and independent professionals, unemployed people, and workers in commerce and industry mobilised the most.

Thirdly, it appears that the rejection of the regime was so general that up to 40% of local businessmen and retail, services and industry entrepreneurs (here at the local level), who would usually be close to the regime, had lost faith in it.

Finally and most importantly, it appears that farm workers who, as previously underlined, who do not work full time on their land, represent the category of people who participated least in the demonstrations against the

regime, which supports the idea that the Tunisian revolution is rather an urban phenomenon.

Yet one needs to underline that rural dwelling in the centre of Tunisia – the low and high steppes – is rather scattered, which does not facilitate communication or political discussion in general. It is also important to add that, as far as trade union history is concerned, Tunisia stands out as being under the weak influence of the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) in the agriculture sector, which is mainly characterised by a country life organised around family activities and the main unit of production and consumption. The Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fisheries (UTAP) and the sections of the ruling party (Democratic Constitutional Rally, RCD), which are both interconnected, have somehow helped to organise farmers, the majority of whom are illiterate. This may explain why this category of people has remained rather in the background during recent events.

Rural and urban dimensions in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine

In the language of city planners and sociologists, the term “city” generally refers to specific forms of dwelling, culture and economy that are separate from agricultural labour and country life in general. This is the reason why when the international news media mentioned Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine as the first cities of the Tunisian revolution,

⁵ Participation in the demonstrations means that the respondent took part at least once in the demonstration against the regime between 17 December 2010 and 14 January 2012.

⁶ The category of “farm worker” is confusing. In fact there are no farm workers as such in irrigated agriculture, which represents only 13% of the total agricultural land in Sidi Bouzid, for instance; yet many of them are seasonal workers. That said, the majority of persons who define themselves as farm workers are in reality small farmers who do not work full time on their land. We will return to this later.

⁷ This field survey was organized by Mouldi Lahmar and a research team between February and March 2012 in the Governorates of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine. The survey resulted in Lahmar, Mouldi, ed. 2014. *The Tunisian Revolution: The Local Trigger Under the Microscope of the Social Sciences*, The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Beirut-Doha (text in Arabic). Table of content: 18th and 19th century political history of the region, the deteriorating terms of trade in a skewed political market, the rebellious generation, local culture and the revolution, the socio-political sensitivity of the informal economic sector in crisis, rebellious cities, the fire that consumes Bouazizi: a psychological analysis.

cultural imaginary took over, influencing the way the revolution was interpreted as a solely urban phenomenon.

In fact, one needs to take into consideration two major pieces of information that have been considerably altered during observation because they modify the representation that has so far dominated the Tunisian revolution. The first piece of information relates to the fact that these two governorates where the demonstrations against the now fallen regime started, that is to say Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, have the highest rates of rurality in the country: 74% and 60%, respectively.

Inhabitants in the seven governorates in the north and mid-western part of Tunisia according to living environment, 2004

| Governorate | Communal environment ⁸ (%) | Non-communal environment (%) |
|-------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Sidi Bouzid | 25 | 75 |
| Kasserine | 40 | 60 |
| Kairouan | 32 | 68 |
| Siliana | 36 | 64 |
| Kef | 50 | 50 |
| Jendouba | 27.5 | 72.5 |
| Béjà | 40.5 | 69.5 |
| Tunisia | 64.9 | 35.1 |

Sociologically, neither Sidi Bouzid nor Kasserine appear to form any sort of well-defined urban entities that would entail a functional morphology for housing and services, a trade economy, small businesses and industries, a form of management of public affairs and a culture specific to the degree of social division of labour and individual lifestyle. So, even if it is true that political and civil institutions that do not rely on kinship, neighbourly relations or job-related communitarian forms of belonging have been in charge of public affairs in these “cities”, it remains the case that the absence of democratic political life had reduced the importance of these institutions in the production of the political and economic conditions specific to an urban environment. In fact, these “cities”, born after the colonial period as small centres in charge of security control and administrative affairs, began only 50 or 60 years ago to attract people from the adjacent countryside. Following a rural exodus, newcomers, originally with a farming background, have tried to fit into a rapidly expanding parallel economy, mostly since the mid-1980s, during which the donor-imposed structural adjustments have forced the Tunisian State to stop intervening massively in its economy. This has also resulted in the fact that the popular districts that came out of this movement in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine ended up looking different from the initial city plans that had been drawn up for these small

towns. Consequently, these two urban centres, as for many other inland Tunisian towns, have lost control over the construction of their city, making room for the political and economic hegemony of the countryside to expand.

What kind of hegemony are we talking about? It is important to consider the prevailing role of Destourian sections spread around the rural world, which here encompasses the majority of inhabitants in these regions. There are 620 sections in the Governorate of Sidi Bouzid, where around 75% of people live outside the communal environment, and 530 in Kasserine. They determine votes in all the political elections for the ruling party at regional and national level. Also noteworthy is the fact that the social transformations that took place in the country have strongly altered the former tribal identity, and one can firmly assert that kinship has not facilitated stirring up in other small urban centres in the region after Muhammad Bouazizi set fire to himself, but instead that the same social conditions existed before the revolution in all these places.⁹ In other words, the slogan “karama”, which means dignity, was not shouted to avenge a humiliated kinsman, but instead to demonstrate indignation at the extreme deterioration in the individual and collective conditions of social existence, as redefined by the inhabitants of this region in accordance with new economic, cultural and political aspirations.

Secondly, Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine were not the only urban centres in these two governorates where demonstrations, often deadly, took place. In fact, almost half of the people who took part in demonstrations against the Ben Ali regime lived in non-communal areas that are classified as rural.

Participants in the demonstrations according to their background

| Background | % |
|--------------|------|
| Communal | 51.5 |
| Non-communal | 48.5 |
| Total | 100 |

Source: Field survey

According to this table, one can see that almost half of the demonstrators lived outside the cities, which proves the direct involvement of the rural population in the protest movement. Furthermore, it is possible to see from yet another angle that more than half of the categories that have been the most important in the demonstrations numerically, that is to say the unemployed, pupils (18 years old and over) and students, live in the adjacent countryside. Better still, in the Governorates of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, 59% of industry and commerce workers live in non-communal areas, and although their participation is

8 Communal dwelling refers to urban dwelling; however, for tax reasons and other technicalities related to land-use planning, communal space extends over smaller urban centres in complete rural areas.
 9 See Lahmar, Mouldi, The deteriorating of terms of trade in a skewed political market; in Lahmar Mouldi, ed. 2014.

not numerically as important because of the weakness of industry and the domination of family businesses, 60% did nevertheless take part in the demonstrations.

The rich rural history of the event and its cultural meaning

In 1989, we conducted a survey in a “duwar” (hamlet) situated on the administrative border between the Governorate of Kef (in the north-western part of Tunisia) and the Governorate of Kasserine further south (the central western part of Tunisia). The origins of the hamlet’s inhabitants go back to Ouled (the son of) Mshael, an old tribal group from which originated Ali Ben Ghedhehem, well-known leader of the 1864 Bedouin revolt against the Tunis-based central authority. The survey looked at water consumption and traditional non-renewable sources of energy (wood and others). As we were talking with one of the duwar dwellers, an old man of approximately 85, looking sheepish and “beaten” approached us (in his eyes we were state officers) to ask for a cooking gas cylinder, stating that neither he nor his “old lady”, as he called her, had anything to cook with. Upon learning that we had not come to distribute aid, he angrily and bitterly shouted: “My great-grandfather is Ali Ben Ghedhehem and obviously you know of him! Today his descendant is begging for something to cook with and just look, sir, what kind of water we are drinking now! What a life!”

This man’s deep wound encapsulates in fact all the old Bedouins’ (semi-nomadic livestock farmers) wounds, particularly of those whose lives were most affected by the deep transformations of French colonisation, later confirmed and consolidated by the national independent state. First to be confiscated were their weapons, next their political autonomy and a major part of their land, and finally their historical cultural domination over the country.

The birth of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine

The birth of the city of Sidi Bouzid, along with the re-emergence of the city of Kasserine, as it is now known, in the close vicinity of the disused ancient Roman city of Cilium, is one of the most striking expressions of these big historical transformations.

With regards to human geography and anthropology, the region of Sidi Bouzid is inhabited by the descendants of the ancient tribe Hamamma, who which could may be found all the way to the Governorate of Gafsa in the south-west of Tunisia. Hamamma have played a prominent strategic role, both numerically and economically, in Tunisian north-south political dynamics. In reality, the territory they occupied is situated midway along the inland transhumant trade and war corridor that links the cereal-growing northern part of the country to the date-producing south, connecting Tunisia to the depth of Saharan Africa via the Libyan Fezzan desert. Their geographical location and the warrior-like Bedouin character directed them towards extensive sheep and camel farming and gave them a liking

for breeding and riding horses, which unfailingly attracted the attention of the precolonial Tunisian State and led to the forging of alliances in the region. The city of Sidi Bouzid was created from these very places steeped in history, and the name of Sidi Bouzid itself carries a very powerful meaning: it is the name of a saint and the name of a famous Bedouin Arab warrior, leader of the Oriental tribe the Banou Hilal, which invaded and destroyed North Africa on several occasions between the 11th and 13th centuries, using the same trade route that links up the southern desert with the greener and richer north.

The city of Kasserine re-emerged a little further in the north, on the far western margin of the high Tunisian steppes. It is almost buried between two mountains, whose western slopes open up towards the Algerian territory (one of them, Chaâmbi, forms the roof of Tunisia). This region is characterised by a hilly and mountainous landscape, much more densely forested than the region of Sidi Bouzid, and also by plains extensive and rich enough for the pasturing of sheep and camels.

The current inhabitants of the region are the descendants of the Frechich and Mejer, two large Tunisian tribes which have lived for a long time in the region alongside other marabout groups such as the Ouled Sidi Tlil and Ouled Sidi Abid. Like their neighbours, the Hamamma, they are originally Bedouins, but not necessarily Arab, and they practise extensive sheep and goat farming and, to a smaller extent, also breed cows and camels. Equally good warriors and horse breeders, they attracted the attention of the French army in Algeria from the mid-19th century. As far as politics in concerned, the Mejer and the Frechich were relatively autonomous, and in 1864 they took the lead in the great inland popular uprising against the central authority.

During modern times, the Hamamma, Frechich and Mejer, alongside their neighbours from the low steppes and other areas in the central and southern part of Tunisia, have become market gardeners, and “citizens” with a Tunisian identity subjected to the state. These modern times have also witnessed their settling down and joining the urban culture, initially under the domination of the colonial influence and then of the national independent state.

This resulted in the urban expansion of the cities of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine. In 1956, the small town of Sidi Bouzid’s population was 1,500 inhabitants, but 10 years later, in 1966, it had more than tripled in size, and by 2004 it had multiplied by eight, reaching a figure of 40,000 inhabitants.

The expansion of the city of Kasserine started a little bit earlier than that in Sidi Bouzid, and it is most likely that its strategic location (its direct proximity to the Algerian border and the presence of Algerian people mainly during the height of their independence between 1958 and 1962) had encouraged the Tunisian State to invest politically in this region. In the early days of independence in 1956, it

was transformed into a governorate, then, later on, the small town turned into the regional administrative centre where Tunisia's largest paper-making factory was constructed. With this historical movement from the high steppes to the city, the urban population grew from a few thousand in 1956 to 75,000 in 2004.

Who has been living in these new cities? First, a few public servants, working in administration, and their families joined the few inhabitants who had long been living in the area, along with security and surveillance agents, a few craftsmen and shop owners. Then came the workers from the construction and commerce sectors with their families, among them those who worked for the paper-making factory, and a few small and medium-sized retail businessmen and service entrepreneurs (cafés, restaurants, etc.), transport workers and a few other very precarious professions. This growing influx has heavily influenced the urban morphology of these two cities and their popular districts: about 90% of the people living in the communal areas in these two governorates belong to these social categories,¹⁰ as did Muhammad Bouazizi, and many of those who came on 17 December 2010 and in the following weeks to fight for his cause and against the daily humiliation of the poor people and against the representatives of a despotic state.¹¹

The time of the olive trees

How did people come to live in these small increasing urban centres? Have they broken all social ties with the countryside? To answer this question, one needs to look historically at the ways in which the Bedouins, who lived in the area, have been transformed from a society based on extensive livestock breeding into a sedentary society of farmers cultivating the soil and growing olives.

That transformation took place during colonial times. In fact, the people who lived in these regions up to the beginning of French colonisation in 1881, that is to say the Hamamma, the Frechich and the Mejer, did not know much about growing trees. Everyone owned the land and took part in breeding sheep and camels. Housing, or rather tents, was light and transportable to ensure spatial mobility, and young people, mostly horse-riding warriors, were expected to defend the group. The state did exist, but tribal groups managed their affairs autonomously, the exception being when these affairs threatened the interests of the state.

The colonial intervention toppled that traditional configuration. Firstly, the disarmament of the Bedouins led to the loss of their identity as warriors and to their subsequent direct subjection to the controlling forces of the administration.

Secondly, the older semi-nomadic people left their mobile lifestyle behind to settle down in one place, which involved taking up farming. Consequently, this evolution immediately put an end to the collective property rights over the land, leading to the rapid development of private and family-based property rights. The most concrete expression of this transformation can be found in the extension of that principle via the institution of a land register that contributed to the implosion of the tribal group, formerly the main unit of production (in which everyone used to look after the livestock), into a multitude of autonomous family units that independently own and use the means of production, mostly the land, and independently benefit from state protection.¹²

Thirdly, Bedouins exchanged one activity for another: extensive farming for extensive olive growing. This transformation led to two major consequences that over time have noticeably modified local society, bringing new challenges whose implications will become apparent to us following the developments of 2010–2011. The first consequence is that the majority of new farmers in the region are inactive most of the year once the olive trees have been planted (it takes about eight years for the trees to mature and start producing fruit with modern technology), because once they start producing, they stop requiring intensive labour, at least not until the picking season starts. The rest of the time the farmers are somewhat idle, as there is not much work left to do with livestock, because where olive trees have been planted, sheep farming has receded, making the breeding of camels for the transport of goods and tents unnecessary.

The second consequence is that olive growing is entirely a speculative activity, as families keep only a small proportion of the olive oil extracted for themselves. New farmers entering the market quickly become almost fully dependent not only on the local but also on the national and international markets. This economy has rapidly become fully monetised, putting an end to the short-lived experience of self-subsistence of this new society of farmers.

Finally, it is important to note that, unlike other Tunisian regions in the north or around Sfax, these regions did not experience such rapid colonial extension, which implies that most of farmers have been spared egregious despoiling and could keep part of their land, at least those who did not live in the few small towns scattered around the country.

¹⁰ See our 2012 survey published in Lahmar Mouldi, ed. 2014.

¹¹ On the creation of the popular area of Sidi Bouzid, Mourad ben Jalloul and the collective protest and 17 December 2010 uprising, see "La révolte des quartiers populaires de Sidi Bouzid (Tunisie)", *Les Cahiers d'EMAN*, 2014; 22.

¹² For more details on the historical transformation in the region of Sfax, see Lahmar, Mouldi, 1994, *Du mouton à l'olivier, essai sur les transformations des campagnes maghrébines*, Tunis, Cèrès. On the Tunisian high steppes, see Atia, Habib, 1977, *Les hautes steppes tunisiennes ...de la société pastorale à la société paysanne*, Université de Tunis-CNRS, Paris-Tunis. On the region of Kairouan, see Zghal, A., 1967, *Modernisation de l'agriculture et population semi-nomades*, Paris, La Haye, Mouton.

Farmers according to the area of their land (Governorate of Sidi Bouzid), 2004, %

| Farm size (hectares) | Kasse % | Sidi Bouzid % | Tunisia % |
|----------------------|---------|---------------|-----------|
| No land | 0.3 | 0.3 | 1.9 |
| 0–5 | 36.5 | 40.3 | 52.3 |
| 5–10 | 26.5 | 23.6 | 21.2 |
| 10–20 | 19.7 | 19.5 | 13.8 |
| 20–50 | 13.6 | 13.3 | 8 |
| 50–100 | 2.8 | 2.3 | 2 |
| 100+ | 0.6 | 0.7 | 0.8 |

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, 2006 survey on farming

This historical transformation took place over the 50 years from Tunisian independence in 1956 to the beginning of the last century. As it took two generations to plant trees, there has not been any large exodus to the cities, meaning that Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine have remained ordinary small centres, in charge of administrative and security control.

The time of schooling

The second most important revolution in these regions came with independence and, more precisely, with the development of education across the whole country. In fact, during colonisation and the expansion in olive growing under the threat of spoliation (planting trees was a way of avoiding expropriation of land), the national movement succeeded in reaching the inland regions, such as Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine. Illiteracy was one of the obstacles that confounded the nationalists' attempt to spread the message of liberation in these regions. This is why the Tunisian State decided in the early days of independence to dedicate 30% of its national budget to education, as it was considered the most important way of bringing Tunisian society into the modern age and allowing children from lower social classes to achieve social mobility.

In practice, it was only in the 1970s that this project really expanded to the inland regions, that is to say exactly when

the olive trees had become productive and when olive farms stopped requiring so much intensive labour. In this context, attending school became both the main driver of the country's social modernity and the only "democratic" means of social mobility that farmers could rely on to spare their sons the fate of becoming poor and illiterate farmer as they had.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the school system was relatively selective on every level and, consequently, a many farmers' sons left school before the secondary level, which meant that they were left to rely on their rural families and on farming. Mandatory basic education introduced in the 1980s with primary education reforms has transformed the situation: children could not leave school before they turned 16. During this time, they lost their identity as farmers reliant on agriculture and only those who graduated from high school and continued studying saw a change in their professional horizons.¹³

These educated young people moved to the cities of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine and other smaller urban centres that had emerged here and there in the two governorates in the mid-1980s.

Employed labour force (%) according to level of education and place of residence in 2010

| Governorates | Illiterate | | Primary education | | Secondary education | | Tertiary education | | Total | |
|--------------|------------|-------|-------------------|-------|---------------------|-------|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | Urban | Rural | Urban | Rural | Urban | Rural | Urban | Rural | Urban | Rural |
| Sidi Bouzid | 10.2 | 34.5 | 27.5 | 39.6 | 38.3 | 22.7 | 24 | 3.2 | 100 | 100 |
| Kasserine | 12.5 | 31.0 | 30.7 | 44.5 | 38.3 | 20.5 | 18.5 | 4.0 | 100 | 100 |

Source: Population and employment survey, INS, Tunis, 2010

¹³ See Ben Zina, M. A. "A rebellious generation", in Mouldi Lahmar, ed. 2014.

People who had newly moved to the city became construction workers or small shop owners, craftsmen and small entrepreneurs in the services and transport sectors. People who had earned degrees became school teachers, secondary school professors, medical professionals, and lower and mid-level public officers in local administration or were just unemployed.

These grand transformations have taken place over the last 30 years, that is to say over one generation. If this phenomenon is representative of Sidi Bouzid or Kasserine, it is not specific to these two cities (this happened in most of the newly founded inland cities in Tunisia where the dispossession of Bedouins and their heirs had been less considerable). Furthermore, the majority of city dwellers often retain quite strong relationships with their families who still live in the adjacent countryside. These relationships are based on two types of link.

The first is economic and relates to land property rights, as the Muslim system of inheritance includes every right-holder (man or woman, although women are sometimes wronged). In fact, not only do some city dwellers own farmland – bought or inherited (33% in the Governorate of

Kasserine and 11.2% in Sidi Bouzid in 2014) – but also most heads of households are bound to inherit from their parents who live in the countryside. This explains why often new city dwellers co-owned farms with their brothers who were still working as farmers. Consequently, employees, public servants, shop owners or even smugglers invested part of their small savings in the farm businesses held under undivided co-ownership.¹⁴

The second link is of a socio-cultural nature. In fact, the economic transformation that took place in these regions was characterised by the fact that once the olive trees came to fruition, farm labour became less intensive and required farmers to work only during the winter during the picking season, and so only once or twice every three years. This resulted in two major phenomena.

On the one hand, olive growers grew older and almost stopped working: 59% of farmers in Kasserine and 61.8% in Sidi Bouzid are 50 years old or older (Tunisia: 65.3%). In these two governorates 83.9% and 84.6% of farmers in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, respectively, are either illiterate or do not have a secondary education.

Age distribution of farmers in Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid (%)

| Governorate | Younger than 35 years | Between 35 and 40 years | Between 40 and 50 years | Between 50 and 60 years | 60 years and older |
|-------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Kasserine | 8 | 9.2 | 23.8 | 22.2 | 36.8 |
| Sidi Bouzid | 7.7 | 8 | 22.5 | 24.4 | 37.4 |
| Tunisia | 6.4 | 6.8 | 21.5 | 22.3 | 43 |

On the other hand, the sons who stayed to work with their fathers are not occupied with farm work for the whole year: in 2004, 63.9% of farmers in the Governorate of Sidi Bouzid worked on their land with or without additional paying jobs. The proportion is 54.8% in Kasserine (Tunisia: 52.3%).

Finally, having kept the undivided co-ownership of land or not declared their land to the national land register, many peasant families are excluded from the system of agricultural credit, and, when they do access it, they are not really familiar with the “mortgage culture” which “legitimises” land dispossession when they fail to reimburse their loans. So, although between 1999 and 2004 83% of farmers in Sidi Bouzid and 87.4% in Kasserine had not applied for loans, 72.4% of farmers in Sidi Bouzid and 47.7% in Kasserine justified their decisions by saying that it was difficult to access the credit system. Only 12.9% and 24% of farmers, respectively, explained their reluctance as being based on a fear of getting into debt.¹⁵

These transformations and the legal administration of land rights have produced an entire social category of old and poor peasants in need of their sons’ and daughters’ support and deprived of their Bedouin honour (karama¹⁶), in complete contrast to their semi-nomadic ancestors’ pride and autonomy. Some, like the ageing descendent of Ali Ben Ghedhehem whom I met in 1989, cannot afford a modern lifestyle, not even buying a cooking gas cylinder, which costs only a few dinars! The most educated of their descendants have left the countryside and become public servants, craftsmen, shop owners, etc. Yet, the professional horizon of these educated young people has been seriously reduced by the state’s inability over the last decade to provide jobs in a saturated public administration. As did their fathers before them, the unemployed, having lost their karama, turned it on 17 December 2010 into the key message of their revolution.

14 Before moving to the city and becoming a street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, Muhammad Bouazizi used to work a farm in partnership with his maternal uncle, who himself held a job as an independent worker not in the agricultural sector.

15 Survey on the structure of farms 2004–2005, op. cit.

16 Honour – *karama* in Arabic – has more than one meaning and cannot be treated as an all-encompassing phenomenon, as explained by Marcel Mauss. See Mauss, Marcel, 1923–24, “Essai sur le don, Formes et raisons de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques”, *L’Année Sociologique*, 1. See also our 2011 article “A propos du sens de la révolution de la ‘Karama’ ” [in Arabic], in Mouldi Lahmar, ed., *Sur la révolution, Tunisie et Libye*, Tunis, Art-Print.

The new rural Tunisia

The regions of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, which hosted the first popular demonstrations against the political regime at the end of 2010, are a mere product of the historical transformations that have politically and culturally fused the cities and the countryside into one socio-economic continuum.

In fact, other transformations associated with these land, agricultural, demographic, educational and urban changes have taken place in these rural areas – and all over rural Tunisia – deeply affecting rural life and building social and cultural bridges with the urban world and with the whole world beyond. Among these transformations, lifestyle, which encompasses housing, food, communication, transport, etc., has changed a lot.

As far as transport is concerned, camels are not used any more, and they are almost an extinct mode of transport or of cultivating the land for that matter: 2,000 head remain in the Governorate of Sidi Bouzid (about 600 in Kasserine). Donkeys, horses and carts are used by farmers only to go from their houses to their fields or to the closest weekly market. They have been replaced by cars, buses and trains for medium- and long-distance travel.

On this matter, although Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine are not well connected by asphalt-surfaced roads, it is important

to note that the farmers who opted to grow vegetable crops for market rather than growing olive trees¹⁷ in Sidi Bouzid¹⁸ have gained both a permanent job and a relatively stable source of revenue throughout the year. This has allowed some of them to acquire small transport vehicles. Tractors have also replaced the youngest members of the labour force, now busy with school or having gone elsewhere to look for a job.

As far as housing is concerned, tents, huts and even houses constructed with temporary materials have long disappeared. Now most of the houses are made out of purchased durable materials, at times following surprising architectural styles. In parallel to these changes in housing, the new generation craves new styles of furniture, painting and decoration. Finally, new technology has given the rural population access to worldwide television channels, while mobile phones enable farmers' sons and daughters who work or study far from home to stay in touch their parents.

Commercial olive and of vegetable crops, poor farmers' seasonal work and the revenues earned by the young generation, which has left for the cities or abroad for professional reasons, have all helped bring about extensive exchanges in the markets in these regions, generating in turn all these cultural and technological novelties.

Domestic utilities and appliances by household (%), 2004

| Governorate | Year | Electri-city | Televi-sion | Fridge | Mobile phone | Computer | Car |
|-------------|------|--------------|-------------|--------|--------------|----------|------|
| Sidi Bouzid | 1994 | 60.1 | 59.9 | 19.9 | – | – | 10.1 |
| | 2004 | 98.2 | 81.1 | 63 | 37.4 | 1.4 | 15.2 |
| Kasserine | 1994 | 57.5 | 48.5 | 21.2 | – | – | 7.2 |
| | 2004 | 96.5 | 76.3 | 48.6 | 32.9 | 2.2 | 12.4 |

The cultural practices in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine's rural areas have been affected by these profound transformations. Better still, the young generation of educated rural people who had been advised to opt out of agriculture is now the one bringing life to high schools, cafés, restaurants, shops, the market place, the waiting rooms and counters of public administration buildings and most of in all offices, all throughout the day, and all thanks to the changes in the market and the new modes of transport and communication. The city dwellers, mostly adults, can now use modern modes of transport to visit their ageing parents, whom they support socially and economically, in the countryside occasionally, to look over the family farms that sometimes remain under undivided co-ownership and also to take part in friends' and families' wakes and wedding ceremonies.

Between 17 December 2010 and 14 January 2014 every single one of these people demonstrated side by side to defend the same ideas, chanting the same slogans and shouting the same demands. There was no separation between the city and the countryside, and the "humiliated and insulted" – an expression borrowed from Dostoyevsky's famous novel – from both worlds attended in almost equal proportions.

Conclusion

It is this very socio-cultural continuum, comprising the cities of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine and their adjacent countryside, that gave the Tunisian revolution its specific, yet pretty much unexamined rural aspect. Yet, although the demonstrators were both urban and rural, it is important to

¹⁷ More than 85% of occupied farm land.

¹⁸ 13% of the geographic area of occupied farm land in the governorate.

note that the rebels did not make any demands specifically in favour of farmers. In fact, the slogans have not called for agrarian reforms, and neither have the press nor the analysts paid any attention to this issue, which is rather remarkable from a sociological point of view. How can we explain this phenomenon in terms of conception and representation? In a study published separately, we explain the revolutionary phenomenon in these regions, based on the concept of the political market, and we argue that the spark that set fire to this whole region, and later to the whole of Tunisia, is to be found in the deterioration of the terms of trade within a distorted local political market. This analysis sheds a more global light on to the issues at stake at the local political level, regardless of the actors' social backgrounds, because, before the revolution, the political sections of the ruling party were scattered all over the social regional fabric.¹⁹

With regard to the broad and inclusive participation of the rural population in the popular demonstrations, particularly important on market days, we argue here that the young political elite that led the movement did not see either agricultural labour or the fact that their parents were peasants in a positive light. Thanks to their professional training and culture, they aspire to new horizons that differ greatly from their parents'. Beyond their self-perceived interests or their thirst for a modern lifestyle, this elite has interiorised an idea of progress that considers farmers' culture and lifestyle to be an impediment to development and its promises of freedom and honour. A question may come to mind: Can the Tunisian political and intellectual elite maintain the same relationships with Tunisian farmers in the future?

19 See *La révolution tunisienne* (Mouldi Lahmar, ed.), op. cit.

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