

Tunisia: Was it a revolution?

Written by Simon Hawkins

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SIMON HAWKINS, FEB 8 2011

With the cascading events in Tunisia, there has been much debate about whether or not this represents a real revolution. The question is clearly important, however it is not clear exactly what the standard is for determining whether or not it is a revolution. Much of the debate seems to focus on whether or not Tunisia will move out of an autocratic system of government and into a liberal democracy. However, while the question of what form of government will arise in Tunisia is vitally important, this is a limited understanding of revolution. Revolutions are as much social as political, sometimes leading to their own forms of repression. The French revolution may have overthrown a king, but it led to the crowning of an Emperor. Whatever the eventual political outcome, Tunisians have already experienced a real revolution. Their actions have undone the decades old system of power, creating new possibilities for years in the future, regardless of the developments of the next few months or years.

If one hasn't lived in a police state it's difficult to understand how it insinuates itself into daily life. Ben Ali's Tunisia was a cult of personality. His image was ubiquitous, in schools, stores, workshops, billboards, newspapers, television, and so on. One could never escape his gaze, both literally, from all his images that stared down at one, and metaphorically, from the lurking presence of the secret police. Political conversations were only possible between friends, either whispered, or behind closed doors. While the rules were never made explicit, everyone knew them. When a Tunisian university colleague grumbled about recent educational reforms, I jokingly told him that he needed to watch what he said. He replied with greater seriousness that it was okay to criticize policy, but never the person who made it.

To say that Tunisians lived in a state of fear would be an exaggeration. The reality is that with politics foreclosed, people turned to other things. With economic conditions so difficult, there were plenty of other things to focus on. And yet the state (or rather, Ben Ali, for in a cult of personality the two are indistinguishable) was never far from people's minds. People believed that the state had its hand in everything. When the number of students passing the high stakes baccalaureate exam went up, people told me that the state had rigged the results to make itself look better. Conversely, university students believed that the faculty had government orders to fail a certain percentage of students every year. When the state raised the educational qualifications needed for teaching jobs, students rallied against this, charging that the real reason was to keep students in school longer, reducing the unemployment statistics. The truth or falseness of any of these claims is not the point. What mattered was that people believed it. And lurking beneath it was the specter of violence.

Whenever there was the possibility of unrest, buses of police and paramilitary forces would appear in the side streets, an implicit promise of what was to come if people didn't behave. While there was a network of informants, not all the secret police were completely secret. Underemployed young men taught me the tricks for spotting them. Walkie talkies were one dead give away. While sitting with a friend in a crowd, we heard the unmistakable crackle of a walkie talkie. My friend looked at me whispered, "you heard that?" I nodded. "You know what it means?" I nodded. This semi-visible presence reminded everyone that they were being watched.

I only saw the violence become explicit once. Walking down Avenue de Paris, a major thoroughfare, a man emerged from a small alley. Suddenly two men appeared behind him, grabbed him, pulled him into the alley and began beating him. None of the Tunisians passing stopped to enquire, and neither did I. I've seen all sorts of other violence, (purse snatcher, fight, domestic violence) draw a crowd, but this was clearly different. One knew where the lines were.

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Where to go or not go. How to stay uninvolved.

Lurking over all of this was the hulk of the Ministry of the Interior building on Habib Bourguiba Avenue. As befits its occupants, it's an ugly gray building with dramatic iron bars across the windows. Although torture and abuse took place in a variety of locations in Tunisia, this was the center of it all. No regular person could get too close to it. The sidewalk in front was closed to pedestrians and it was forbidden to even point a camera at it. It was the embodiment of the state's repression, and it was the focus of the massive protests on the final days of Ben Ali's rule. There were other places they could have assembled. Constitutionally, the seat of power should have been found in the Place du Gouvernement in the Kasbah, but it did not have the same power in people's lives. One isn't forced to cross the street to avoid those buildings and tourists are encouraged to take photographs.

To rally in front of the Interior Ministry was to reject Ben Ali's entire power structure. If they could demonstrate that that building had no power over them, that they refused to be afraid of its always-lurking threat to them, then the entire structure of governmental domination was undone. Crossing the line irrevocably changed the nature of power in Tunisia. While the uprising had been growing for weeks and could, in theory, have gone on for much longer, once the demonstrators seized that space, the end, and a rapid one at that, was inevitable.

The vast majority of experts had not predicted a revolution. Certainly the motivations were clear to all but the most casual observer, but such an event was unprecedented in the Arab world. The Tunisians themselves had great resentment toward the state and the president, but there was little hope that any change was possible. The events of December and January shattered that impression, changing the preconceptions of outsiders, but also of Tunisians themselves. Tunisians became unified and proud. They realized the power they possess.

What they do with that power is a separate question. Yes, the future is unclear. There are no guarantees of liberal democracy. A different form of autocracy may well arise. The unity among the classes will probably fracture. Corruption can never be completely eradicated. The unrest will not aid the precarious economy. But the people have proved to others and themselves that they can unite to defy an oppressive government. Their example has changed the relations of citizens to governments across the region, creating a new sense of what is possible. It is unlikely that there will be a domino chain of collapsing states across the Middle East, but make no mistake; there has been a revolution.

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Simon Hawkins is an assistant professor of Anthropology at Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania. He first went to Tunisia as an agricultural extension agent with the Peace Corps in 1988, and has been returning for academic research ever since. His current project is with a community of salesmen working in the center of Tunis' old city, the medina.