

human rights & human welfare



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working paper no. 60

**Tunisia–The Imprisonment of Fahem Boukadous (Part One of a series)**

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Posted on 16 October 2010

<http://www.du.edu/korbel/hrhw/working/2010/60-prince-2010.pdf>

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## Tunisia–The Imprisonment of Fahem Boukadous (Part One of a series)

August 2, 2010

“The only way that the [Tunisian] state deals with social problems is with police repression”  
-Moktar Trifi, President of the Tunisian League of Human Rights

By Rob Prince

(Note: it has come to my attention that this little harmless blog is currently censored by the Tunisian government, meaning that the content is blocked by the authorities there. I am honored to learn this. Although difficult to substantiate, there is a good chance that it is a credible claim. As a result, I intend to write many more pieces on the situation in Tunisia, a country whose relative economic success in Africa is matched only by the seething repression of all forms of dissent by its unpopular government—a democracy in name, but dictatorship in fact—run by Zine Ben Ali, who was trained in a US police academy several decades ago. Ben Ali became Habib Bourguiba’s Minister of Interior and then, in what amounted to a “medical coup” of sorts, overthrew Bourguiba, had him declared incompetent to rule, and took over. That was nearly a quarter century ago. –RJP)

### Who Is Fahem Boukadous?

To most Americans with the exception of those few who, for whatever reason, have an attachment to the North African country of Tunisia, the name Fahem Boukadous, foreign to American ears, means nothing. It means a good deal more to "Reporters Without Borders" and to the US State Department that actually issued a statement (half way down the page) on his behalf, to the US intelligence agencies and military that have carefully followed the Spring, 2008 uprising in the Tunisian region of Gafsa—deemed the most extensive and militant social protest in that country’s history in the past quarter century.

During the Gafsa protests (more, much more on this in later posts) Fahem Boukadous was there in the mining town of Redeyef at the center of the social storm, reporting for the satellite TV network El Hiwar Eltounsi on the events as they unfolded. Along with several other journalists, among them young female journalist Zakregh Dhifaoui, Boukadous was indicted on conspiracy, charges of “forming a criminal association liable to attack persons and their property,” and “disseminating information liable to disturb the public order.” Many of the trials themselves seemed fixed. For example, residing judges refused to order medical examinations for defendants who claimed they had suffered torture at the hands of the local police. In Boukadous’s case, the heart of the matter is that he was merely doing his job—reporting on the events unfolding in Redeyef without government filters. This, in the eyes of the Ben Ali regime, with its long history of repression against dissent, was enough to send Boukadous to prison.

When the arrest warrants were issued, Boukadous went underground, but was captured at a Tunisian hospital just after receiving medical treatment for the chronic asthma from which he suffers. A few weeks ago, now two years after the fact, Boukadous was sentenced by a court in Gafsa to four years in prison. He now languishes in prison in Gafsa where his health is seriously deteriorating; Gafsa is

located close to the edge of the Sahara some 250 miles southwest of Tunis. Summers there are difficult with temperatures frequently reaching about 120 degrees fahrenheit (50+ centigrade).

On July 23, 2010, Boukadous apparently suffered a major asthma attack which was ignored by the Gafsa prison authorities, who refused to administer the oxygen Boukadous needed. Indeed, he was actually denied medical attention at the time and was simply left in his cell to rot. According to a report that appeared on the "Reporters Without Borders" website on July 28, 2010, it is only after his fellow inmates beat on the doors of their cells and shouted for help that the prison guards finally intervened. A doctor from the Gafsa Hospital arrives some forty minutes later. Boukadous had already slipped into critical condition. It was only through his timely intervention that Boukadous's life was saved. Boukadous's wife, Afef Benaceur, has been active on her husband's behalf, drawing attention to his situation.

Without outside pressure, it is unlikely that Fahem Boukadous will live to see the end of his sentence. He should be immediately released. All indications are that the charges were trumped up in the first place.

### **Tunisia: A Country Divided...No Economic Miracle**

The events leading to the arrest, conviction and imprisonment of Tunisian journalist Fahem Boukarous began more than two and a half years ago. In a sense, his imprisonment is "collateral damage" to an uprising against poverty, injustice, unemployment, and degradation that exploded in the phosphate mining district centered around the city of Gafsa in Tunisia's far west near the Algerian border. Boukarous was little more than a "messenger"—relaying the scope of the social protest movement to his country and the broader world through *Himar Eltounsi*—the TV satellite network station he worked for.

But his reporting, and those of other honest journalists who were able to penetrate the district blocked off for months by Tunisian security forces, stripped the veil off the myth of the happy little North African country in which economic progress, fueled by European tourism, was leading to a generalized prosperity. Instead what came through to anyone serious enough to watch and listen, is a country divided, divided between its super rich—a bevy of families, many of them related to the country's president Zine Ben Ali on the one hand, and the multitude of the Tunisian people living growing poverty on the other.

The division between the more prosperous northern section of the country around Tunis and the seriously economically and socially deprived south also reared its head. Any student of modern Tunisian history knows that again and again the calls for social justice, to make the Tunisian government live up to its promise of greater democracy and prosperity almost always have originated in the south, be it from the same Gafsa phosphate miners who took the last Tunisian president, Habib Bourguiba or the poor people from the coastal region of Gabes near the Libyan border who led the "food riots"—demonstrations against the lifting of subsidies on bread in the early 1980s as part of the Tunisian response to IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs.

### **The Good Women of Redeyef**

On or about April 10, 2008, thirty women from the Tunisian mining town of Redeyef took to the streets, calling for the release of their husbands, fathers and sons, held in prison in the regional center, Gafsa. Some of them were widows whose husbands had died in the mines the families of which had received no benefits. Some were the mothers of the region's unemployed youth, that some sources say had reached the 40% level.

The men they were supporting had been jailed protesting the lack of job opportunities and what appeared to be the manipulation of job hiring practices at a local phosphate mine. Specifically, a number of the activists had just returned from Tunis where they had participated in a solidarity event organized by one of the many "Redeyef Support Committees" which had sprung up all over the country. On April 4, 2008, a "day of solidarity" was held in Tunis with some Redeyef trade unionists and activists in attendance. Returning home to Redeyef they were arrested along with dozens of others, among them Adnan Hajji, mentioned above, secretary of the local branch of the teachers' union. In response and solidarity, the Gafsa area teachers' union suspended classes and called a general strike that lasted three days.

Belying the image of passive oppressed Muslim women so often portrayed in the European and US media, and fueled by the righteous rage that comes from exploitation and injustice, the women marched to the jail to demand the release of their husbands. As they marched to the center of the town, hundreds of others joined them. The next day, as proof that protest actions can produce results, the Gafsa regional authorities released imprisoned activists to their waiting women-folk. Released prisoners and their wives then returned to Redeyef, their home town. Some 20,000 residents of this city of 37,000 turned out to greet them, more than half of Redeyef's population.

And there amidst the crowds, Adnan Hajji, a local teacher spoke to the crowds. He would emerge, at that moment, as one of the key leaders of the social protest movement which was then at its height. Amidst miners union banners and people carrying signs with slogans like "The people's wealth goes to build palaces, while we live in tents" and "we are going on strike for the right to work," Hajji addressed the crowd.

His words resonated with the multitudes listening. "We, here, are the people; we will fight until either we win or die...What we are fighting for are basic rights for ourselves, our families, our youth."

"What we have here,' he went on, is the culmination of many years of poverty, destitution and injustice...The company is stealing the wealth that we have created through our labor and put it in the hands of a few wealthy individuals at the expense of the people."

A spontaneous and popular movement which would keep struggling despite repression and censorship had taken shape.

### **Six Months of Sustained Protests in Gafsa Region**

The event which was to trigger six months of militant social protest against the Tunisian government of Zine Ben Ali and the state-run phosphate company that runs all of the mines, the Compagnie Phosphate de Gafsa, or CPG, seemed innocuous enough.

On January 5, 2008, the CPG published a list, the results of a public examination for the recruitment of eighty new employees at its phosphate mines. But the list was considered fraudulent, “cooked” in such a way that the position went to people “with connections”—family connections that is— with members of the shrinking miner’s union, a branch of the Union Generale Tunisienne de Travail (UGTT). The suspicion abounded that the union and the company had struck a deal, excluding all but a short list of applicants. In a region where youth unemployment is estimated by a number of sources to be as high as 40%, the results were seen not only as unfair, but more as intolerable.

Almost immediately thereafter, the spark of rebellion exploded into something larger and broader than the issue of who did or didn’t pass CPG’s exam. It quickly expanded into a regional social movement for jobs, social programs and against the neglect and injustice which has characterized the Ben Ali’s approach to the region for decades. At the heart of this rebellion were the region’s long neglected youth, women, many local educators and finally, forced by the flow of events, the local union itself. During the early months of 2008, demonstrations for jobs took place at least once a week, with participants filling the streets of Redeyef in peaceful, organized and disciplined protest to the economic and social conditions of the region. As the movement built over January and February, support committees sprung up in the major coastal cities of Tunis, Sousse, Sfax as well as in France which hosts a large Tunisian community as well.

The goal of this protest movement was to enter into direct negotiations with the Ben Ali government to procure a commitment from the central government for jobs, better social programs.

### **Some Results Followed by Pronounced Repression**

Interestingly enough, these first demonstrations *did produce some results*. In April, both the regional Gafsa area authorities and the central government in Tunis committed themselves, or so it seemed, to address some of the grievances. Promises were made.

Unfortunately, in retrospect, the Tunisian government had something else in mind and that their willingness to listen and negotiate over the grievances was simply a tactical maneuver to buy time in order to organize a crippling blow to the movement, which in essence, was nothing more than a reform movement which had been peaceful and despite everything, at least until this point, respectful of the central government.

From all descriptions of the events, the crackdown was far worse than the people of Redeyef anticipated. Just when it appeared that some agreement had been reached, and the protests started to ebb, the government opened up a savage wave of repression whose goal was to “decapitate” the movement’s leadership and pulverize the movement. It was meant to be an example—as such crackdowns almost always are—to others in the country who might have economic and social grievances as to the price that people would have to pay from calling openly for justice.

The crackdown was unleashed. The government accused the movement’s leadership of trying to organize a coup. It included a massive wave of arrests of several hundred, including children as young as five and six years of age, widespread torture and other forms of repression. In June, the repression reached its peak as the Tunisian police opened fired on a crowd in Redeyef, one that was not even demonstrating, but simply coming and going in the town’s market place. Two people died; one of them was a young man originally from Redeyef, who had found employment on the island of Djerba. He had come back home to give his first paycheck to his ailing family, was not a part of any

political action or group, just happened to be in the wrong place—central Redeyef—when the police open fired and was killed. Another was mortally wounded and died later in a hospital in Sfax, on the coast.

At this point, with people in Redeyef being machine gunned from armored personnel carriers and tanks by their own government, a massive movement to simply empty out the city, and migrate across the border to nearby Algeria began. "If the government wants to occupy Redeyef," they said, "*they can have it.*"

It turns out that Ben Ali was more even more threatened by a mass exodus of Tunisians from Redeyef to the Algerian border than he was even of the social movement itself. The exodus undercut his claims that Tunisia is "an economic miracle." The conditions of life are so bad in this part of the country that the whole social fabric of life had collapsed. This is, alas, not good for tourism or investment. Fearing the negative publicity that such a migration would entail if it reached the international media, the Ben Ali government sent troops to the border, not to keep people from getting in, *but to stop the residents of the Gafsa region, their movement and their hopes crushed by their own countrymen from leaving!* Fleeing Redeyefites were threatened with being charged with high treason, for trying to emigrate. It took the intervention of some of the protest leaders themselves—some of whom would later be sentenced to long prison terms for their role in the protests—to convince many of those fleeing, to stay and live to fight another day.

### **Root Causes of the Protests: History of The Gafsa Phosphate Company**

The phosphate mines of the Gafsa region of Tunisia were first discovered in 1897 by one Philippe Thomas, a veterinarian, local prison warden and amateur geologist. A number of towns, which previously did not exist, were created to service the mine, among them Redeyef, Oum Laarayes, Metlaoui, and El Mdhilla. From the outset of the mining era at the turn of the 20th century until the present the Gafsa mining belt has suffered from the kinds of abuses not uncommon to mining towns the world over: brutal land grab from the indigenous population; intensive exploitation of natural resources; dangerous working conditions and along with it high accident and mortality rates; economic activities that produced nothing short of huge amounts of pollutant wastes; environmental degradation.

### **A System that Breeds Despair and Revolt...**

The workforce itself is based largely on patronage, clan and family ties that have excluded many. The work includes low wages, very little job security and the management positions are often manned by foreigners, especially from France. It is a system set up to breed despair and revolt. It should not be surprising that, time and again (1930s, 1970s, 2008), it is from the workers in these Gafsa region mines—along with the communities in which they live—that some of the most militant and best organized movements of protest and social change have erupted and spread throughout the country:

- In the 1930s it was both the economic practices of French colonialism that were opposed. The role of the Gafsa miners, and more generally, the Tunisian working class, in the struggle against French colonialism has hardly been appreciated.

- Then in the 1970s, the miners and their union rose up against Bourguiba's drift towards authoritarianism. It was their efforts, in tandem with the democratic elements in the cities, that forced Bourguiba to open to Tunisia to more of a multi-party democracy with greater press freedoms.
- And now, as recently as 2008, the conditions of life in the Gafsa region—inexcusably neglected by Ben Ali and his government—have led to the current uprising—and that does appear to be the correct word that describes these events, which like previous episodes includes both economic (jobs, regional development) and political (end to the pervasive repression, more freedom of expression and real democracy—not the charade that currently exists). And once again, in their own way, the good women of Redeyef are fighting for more than their own self interest, but for what one might call "the humanization" of the whole country.

Virtually all of these practices, which came into force during the colonial period, have continued after Tunisian independence in March 1956. Indeed it is rather impressive the degree to which economic structures and practices first developed and instituted in the French colonial period have held fast in the post-independence period. Other than the mines, the region offers little employment opportunities. Indeed, phosphate mining is the only show in town. On the edge of the Sahara (not quite full desert but close), the possibilities for agriculture are slim and while the Tunisian coast has a large and developed tourism infrastructure that supports some seven million foreign visitors a year, mostly from Europe, the interior areas around Gafsa are rather barren and dry. For the people living there, the mines are the only source of sustenance, the only possibility of employment in spite of the poor working conditions and low wages.

Indeed it is rather impressive the degree to which economic structures and practices first developed and instituted in the French colonial period have held fast in the post-independence period.

After independence, the CPG became a state owned industry run by the government in Tunis. In 1996 it was merged with Tunisian Chemical Group. Looking at the Tunisian phosphate industry on paper, it looks to be a success story, hiding its human consequences behind typically deceptive economic indicators:

- Tunisia is one of the world's leading producers of phosphates, mineral fertilizers and refined phosphate products. CPG has been active in mining for more than a century.
- Mineral production itself under Tunisian auspices is now more than half a century old. CPG operates seven open cast quarries and one underground mine.
- The phosphatic field holds an important position within the Tunisian economy both in labour level and in trade balance worldwide. The Tunisian phosphate industry is fifth

amongst the international operators in the field. Natural phosphate and its by-products (Phosacid, DAP, TSP, DCP, etc.) are exported to fifty countries on five continents.

- In 2002, phosphates were Tunisia's third largest export commodity, greater than hydrocarbons which ranked fifth. Together, Tunisia's phosphates, base metals and petroleum products provide most of the country's foreign earnings with phosphates alone accounting for 13% of the total value of national exports. Overall, the mineral industries contribute around 4% of GNP.
- Annual production of merchant phosphate in 2007 reached eight million, placing Tunisia the fifth in the world for phosphate production.
- Not only that, Tunisia has been more successful than many peripheral countries in the global economy in that it has successfully developed a more profitable refining component. After having been exporting all its phosphate rock production during the first fifty years of its activity, Tunisia entered successfully into phosphoric acid and mineral fertilizers production and developed this new activity so that Tunisia is now processing refining more than 80% of its phosphate production.
- GCT owns four industrial sites located in Sfax and M'dhilla (for TSP), Gabes (for Phosphoric Acid, DAP, DCP and AN) and Skhira (for Phosphoric Acid).

A profitable, well run company, at least on paper, it has the potential for being an engine for Gafsa regional development. But just as many oil producing regions of oil producing countries don't necessarily benefit materially from the wealth they extract, neither do the mining communities of the Gafsa region. Poverty, social problems with the predictable social unrest and rebellion all have a long history in the region. Those structural weaknesses were all exacerbated by, of all things, the modernization of the industry. But as it is a state owned and run company, it is even more inexcusable to so little of its profits gets recycled back to the Gafsa region.

Although the modernization of the Gafsa mines began before CPG merged with Tunisian Chemical group in 1996, since then, the mines have been significantly modernized: deep shaft underground mining has been largely replaced by mechanized open pit mining involving heavy machinery and fatalities have been reduced.

But as a result of this modernization, as elsewhere where similar changes have been institutionalized, **75% of the mining work force has been laid off, with no opportunities for alternative employment in the region.** Mines that used to employ up to 20,000 workers now offer employment to around 5000; those jobs that do remain are "the envy of the region" but they are precious few and far between and depending on the source, the unemployment rates are estimated to be at least 30% overall, and more than 40% for youth between ages eighteen and twenty-five. Modernization has included a high degree of sub-contracting. The mines employ poorly paid sub-contractors to do a fair amount of the work with low salaries and no job security.



Again, the consequence of modernization of the Gafsa mining region is not atypical. Mechanization has led to increased productivity and profits on the one hand, but a dramatically shrinking mining workforce on the other. The company's profits soar...as does unemployment in the mines.

Gafsa's story has been repeated worldwide, including here in the USA, to some extent. For example, the 1985-2005 modernization of the Appalachia coal industry in the USA, accomplished through the proliferation of strip mining (surface and mountain top removal mining) increased mining production by 22% *while the number of jobs decreased by 55%*. More profits, smaller work force, a ton of environmental problems that are, once again, poorly regulated (*Nation Magazine*, April 15, 2010, Cracking Big Coal).

Likewise, modernization of the Gafsa phosphate region has brought profit to the owners, but poverty and despair to the region. Global tale—this is the Tunisian version. Fahem Boukadous's "crime" was simply to have reported honestly on this social crisis, but by so doing he burst the myth that Zini Ben Ali's government has been spreading that Tunisia is an island of prosperity and social calm, "an economic miracle." There is no economic miracle, but rather more of a Potemkin village economy based on tourism; and if there is "social calm"—it is the calm of repression a held together by one of the most repressive government anywhere, and I might add, once again, despite occasional and rather meek official protests of Tunisian government human rights abuses, long supported financially and politically by France and the United States.

## Tunisia—The Imprisonment of Fahem Boukadous (Part Two of a series)

### How Repression Works in Tunisia

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Fahem Boukadous, the journalist for El Hiwar Eltounsi, who suffers from asthma and is languishing in a Gafsa jail serving a four-year sentence, got caught in a repressive web that has been a long time in the making in Tunisia. Some of Tunisia's practices, it can be argued, were inherited from the colonial days when a legal system functioned in such a way as to limit or eliminate dissent, and in which the heavy hand of the French secret police was felt everywhere. The goal then—as now—was to present an "image of democracy" while at the same time repressing, crushing any genuine manifestation of an independent Tunisian political voice.

The two Tunisian leaders of the independence period, first, one of the nation's founders, Habib Bourguiba and then Zine Ben Ali, followed in the French footsteps. Both, early on in their rules, promised "glasnost," i.e. political openness, and multi-party democracy. Both pulled away from these promises as soon as their grip on power became even mildly undermined and turned to more authoritarian methods.

Bourguiba was a master, in particular, of playing one group within Tunisian society against the others. He would cultivate different constituencies (Baa'th, labor movement, etc.), let them take some initiatives for a short time, and then crush them brutally while encouraging another constituency. And thus he maintained power and tightened his grip. The price of his success was that he failed to create the kind of open political culture in which his succession could be crafted democratically. Ben Ali, still in power after twenty-three years, followed a similar pattern but was, all told, less clever and as a result, generally much more brutal than Bourguiba.

Bourguiba's legitimacy, at least in part, was a result of his having led Tunisia's anti-colonial struggle, a source of legitimacy that Ben Ali cannot draw upon. Because he is less politically nimble, Ben Ali's base of legitimacy within Tunisian society is weaker than Bourguiba's and finds himself thus caught in a vicious cycle. To retain power, without a substantial social base within Tunisian society (he has one but it is rather narrow), he must resort again and again both to greater repression, as he did in the case of Fahem Boukadous and the social movement of Redeyef, and lean quite heavily on his foreign supporters in Washington DC and Paris. And the latter of course, exact a certain price for their backing.

### Bourguiba and Ataturk

Technically, one could argue that Tunisia is a democracy. It has a constitution and it is true that legally, Tunisian legislation concerning women is about as "modern" as anywhere in the Moslem world. Habib Bourguiba was a great admirer of Turkey's Mustafa Mustafa, Kemal Ataturk,

whose path of "forced modernization from above" in many ways served as Bourguiba's blueprint. Such an approach emphasizes "development" at the expense of "democracy." A fundamentally mechanical and militarily oriented path to development, it is essentially "impatient" especially where it concerns cultural change and grassroots democracy. In Turkey's case, until recently, where "democracy"—i.e., the will of the Turkish people—intervened with Ataturk's development project, the military, Turkey's standard-bearer of Ataturk's program.

In Tunisia, things work a little differently but to the same end; it entails a super-tight control from above of the political system, including the military and the security forces, by the president of the country, whose power is virtually absolute. The trappings of democracy are there. There are political parties, a few at least. Opposition parties are "permitted" but as soon as either they raise too many issues or begin to grow, they are beaten down, first weighed down with rules that limit their operation, and if they persist, decertified and then crushed. There are also several media outlets, some that on occasion challenge the regime, but their fate meets about the same end as the political parties. There is even a Tunisian Human Rights Committee, supposedly to watchdog the regime and "challenge" it. It is also the case that very few people have actually been killed by the Ben Ali regime (from what can be gleaned from outside sources at least).

But in the end, all that is little more than window dressing—packaging that hides a far more consistently insidious reality. For, if on the surface Tunisia is a democracy, scratch that surface and what emerges rather quickly is a pervasive police state, one that has always magnified "outside threats," be it the communist threat during the Cold War years, or now, the "threat" of Islamic fundamentalism to justify its repressive policies. These policies in fact flow from a different logic which will be examined below.

### **Tunisia and the 1967 Middle East War**

It was early June 1967, by which time I had been in the country for about nine months. The rather large group of US Peace Corps volunteers (including myself) was, as I recall, some 250 strong, made up of teachers and architects in the main. Another group of kindergarten teachers would soon follow. The group was spread literally all over the country, some in the larger cities, many in very small towns. My closest friends within the group found themselves in places like Maktar, Le Kef, in the region between Sousse and Sfax along the coast, and some on the island of Djerba.

I was assigned to L'Institut Bourguiba des Langue Vivantes, an annex to the University of Tunis L'Institut Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes, or as we used to call it, "Bourguiba School" that specialized in the teaching of foreign languages, mostly to government workers and students who were bound for the UK or USA to study. It still exists. A friend of mine in Denver studied Arabic there a few years ago, and more recently I was in communication with several others who had done

likewise. I lived a few blocks away in an apartment building across the street from what was then a Monoprix (a French department store, similar to Woolworths).

Although geographically Tunisia is a long distance from Cairo, a bit further to Tel Aviv, the Middle East War which was about to unfold between Israel, Egypt, Syria and Jordan was on the minds of the whole country. Tensions in Tunis mounted as the war approached. When the war did break out, on June 5, 1967, Tunisia, some 1500 miles away from the fighting, exploded too. It was an explosion of sympathy for the Arabs countries involved in the fighting, and for the Palestinian people who were caught in the middle. The explosion took the form of angry demonstrations all over the country, but none were angrier or more militant than in the capital Tunis.

And while the social explosion was one of opposition to Israel, the United States and Great Britain, the protest movement would ultimately turn against Bourguiba, undermining his legitimacy. He understood that he had to act and act quickly, and this he did in a number of ways quickly and efficiently:

- First and foremost, he fashioned himself before the broader public as the great defender of the Arab cause—of Arab nationalism, support for the Palestinians, etc.—which included, at least rhetorically ,willingness to take up arms for the Arab cause.
- Secondly he had to find scapegoats, a way to re-direct the white-hot mass anger away from his regime. At least in part, he tried to steer mass anger against Tunisia's small, but in 1967, still not insignificant, Jewish Community (to be explained below).

Bourguiba had to find ways to dissipate the Arab solidarity movement that had burst forth, to dilute it and eventually shut it down. In the aftermath of the war, he had to dissolve, or to put it more bluntly, crush the opposition, both those social forces involved in the protest, and others, like the Tunisian Ba'ath Party in those days, that he viewed as a strategic threat to his power. (Keep in mind that over the years Bourguiba saw everyone as a strategic threat, as would Ben Ali decades later.)

As the war opened up on June 5, 1967, there was virtually nowhere in the capital not teeming with people, chanting, demonstrating, unquestionably rooting for "their side" In the first days of the war, the British embassy in the center of downtown Tunis was burnt down and, if I remember correctly, several of the embassy staff died in the fire. Protests targeted the US embassy too, in those days located just up the street in Ave. de la Liberte, the street on which I lived, but a small embassy marine contingent kept the demonstrators at bay. Jewish shops, many of them on the same street in the area of Tunis' main synagogue were looted as well. I saw much of this with my own eyes, as a young man of twenty-two who was too curious or too foolish not to obey the Peace Corps request that we remain inside our apartments.

But it was precisely in those days that I also saw Bourguiba's tactical brilliance up close.

These demonstrations were not only an indication of Tunisian sympathy for their Arab brothers and sisters on the front. In a very fundamental way, the legitimacy of Bourguiba's rule was also called into question, both what he had not yet achieved domestically as well as questions concerning his foreign policy, his growing closeness to the United States in particular. Each day that the war continued, Bourguiba's legitimacy and grip on power seemed to be slipping away. He knew he had to act; my sense was that his actions those days saved his regime.

The key was to give the appearances of being a militant supporter of the Arab cause, while in fact doing as little as possible concretely to further that cause. Events essentially forced him to ride the militant Arab nationalist wave, identify with it on a rhetorical level, enough to convince the Tunisian people that he too, remained a committed Arab nationalist and to find ways to divert and dilute the political challenge at hand.

One has to recall that Arab nationalism in 1967 had a large, decisive anti-British and anti-French colonial component, that the colonial period with all of its suffering was still vivid in the minds and lives of Tunisians and other Arabs and that the Israeli-Arab conflict was basically conceived within the same framework. The independence of Algeria in 1962 and the terrible war for independence there that preceded it was only five years away. As Algeria's eastern neighbor, Tunisia had suffered collateral damage from the war and understood from close up the savagery that was France's war against the Algerians.

A few years prior to that, in 1956, France, Great Britain, and Israel had launched their invasion of Suez, with the goal of toppling Gamal Abdul Nasser from power. The tri-partite invasion was turned back only after US President Dwight D. Eisenhower intervened, pressuring—well, actually ordering—these US allies to withdraw.

Using his unusual oratory skills, Habib Bourguiba was able to maintain what was, for a few days at least, his feeble grip on power. This he achieved with no small amount of flair. In the first days of the war he called for a solidarity rally in the Tunis football stadium. The place, that seats tens of thousands, was packed. And there in front of the angry masses, Bourguiba told the audience, and through the miracle of television, the rest of the country, what they wanted to hear. His was a rousing anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist speech. In retrospect, I believe he was basically adopting Nasser's oratory, and to project himself, at least for a few moments, as a kind of Tunisian Nasser, leader of the Arab nationalist cause, ready to stand up to Zionism and Imperialism. The "supreme leader" was ready to make the "supreme sacrifice"

He did something else suggesting that his actions matched his words; it was a calculated gamble, but it worked. In that speech Bourguiba called for volunteers to go to the front to join their Egyptian brothers in the fighting. This call struck a chord. As I recall, almost half the country volunteered. Enormous numbers of Tunisians from all over the country, all ages, from all backgrounds stepped

forward. They came to Tunis, to the recruiting centers—and there, in front of tens of thousands of those ready to go fight, "the Supreme Leader" made a yet more militant speech, that was again televised to the entire nation, and reprinted ad nauseum in Tunisia's newspapers in both French and Arabic. It was as if the whole country was mobilizing.

But to quote my favorite Shakespeare line, in the end it was little more than sound and fury signifying nothing. The volunteers were not flown to the front—which would have taken hours—although granted Tunisia probably didn't have the supply planes to do it. Instead they were put on trucks, many of them I was told that had no covering and supposedly driven to the front. In actual fact not one truck ever left the country or even made it to the Libyan border. They went down south, along the coast into the Tunisian Sahara where in June already the summer temperatures begin to soar. Some actually went back and forth up and down the coast for several weeks.

The war only lasted six days. Weeks later trucks filled with Tunisian volunteers, none of whom had been given arms of course, were still going up and down the coast. Thus were the radical energies of the Tunisian people dissipated, burnt to a crisp in the southern Tunisia Sahara sun. The threat to Bourguiba's hold on power had passed. He had survived. What soon followed was a major wave of repression.

### **Scapegoating Tunisia's Jews**

But now to the looting of Jewish shops in Tunis, something I witnessed firsthand, yet another cynical use/abuse of power. It was little more than state sponsored anti-Semitism, perhaps not of the Hitler variety, but of what I would call the Bourguiba variety; that is, limited, selective in nature, but with the goal of scapegoating Tunisia's Jewish Community to divert attention from Bourguiba's own failings and to turn the nationalist furor towards another target.

Most of the people in the streets of Tunis those first days of the war focused their anger against Israel, the United States or Britain. They did so with chants, leaflets, banners, in the cafes pretty much everywhere. On the third or fourth day of the war, in the morning around 10am, I watched the following scene unfold: a group of 75-100 men, appearing rather poor, were sacking local shops on Avenue de la Liberte. Yes, a disturbing scene in any event, but as it turned out, far from random. I have a clear memory of two or three men, directing the mob. One of them had what seemed to be a list of specific shops to be looted and the crowd went from one store to another doing their dirty work. At one point though, one of those who seemed to be running the show, shouted to those inside one of the shops "Not that one," he said in anger, "the one next door." I concluded from this comment that the wrong shop had been trashed.

But which were "the right" shops, and which were "the wrong" ones?

It is not hard to unravel that mystery. Virtually every trashed shop on Ave. de la Liberte, and elsewhere in the city was Jewish owned. "The trashers," it turned out, were lumpen proletarian elements (unemployed and homeless), rounded up, paid, and brought into the center of town on open air government trucks and then "turned loose" on what I would learn a few days later were Jewish shops. It was all orchestrated, the Jewish shopkeepers actually warned by public officials to stay away from their shops on certain days. It had the markings of a government-instituted provocation. An old cynical tactic: turn the popular anger away from its causes and from Bourguiba's own policies, confuse anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, blame Tunisian Jews—whether they supported Israel or not, which is irrelevant—for somehow causing the war which they had nothing to do with.

In some ways the tactic worked and in others it didn't. The Tunisian people have a history of openness and moderation—Tunis in particular. The fact that 15,000 Jews still lived in Tunisia in the late 1960s, this nearly twenty years after the establishment of Israel, and a decade after Tunisia's independence, is an indication of that tolerance. But undoubtedly, the anti-Jewish riots of 1967 shook the community and soon thereafter, over the next few years, many, many of them left—more for Paris than for Tel Aviv—their property and businesses taken over by Tunisians, many with close ties to the president himself. Knowing exactly how to "put make-up on the corpse," however, Bourguiba arrested a few of the ring leaders, threw them in jail, and re-imbursed the Jewish shopkeepers for their losses, all of which "looked good" in France and the USA. But something far more precious was lost in the bargain, as Jews who had lived in Tunisia, some for several thousand years, others from the time of the Spanish inquisition, were once again pressured to flee elsewhere, to safety, leaving only a skeletal community to continue in Tunis and on the island of Djerba.

## Tunisia – The Imprisonment of Fahem Boukadous (Part Three of a series)

August 17, 2010



*Fahem Boukadous on Oxygen, Just Before Entering Prison In Gafsa*

The picture here is of Fahem Boukadous, hospitalized with acute asthma, probably in Sousse, Tunisia, last month, just before being sent to prison for four years. He somehow manages to flash the peace sign with the fingers of one hand, and hold up his press card with the other, this despite being attached to an oxygen machine.

Boukadous's "crime" was that he covered a six month protest in the Gafsa mining region for a Tunisian owned, Paris based, satellite television station for which he has been sentenced to four years in prison. Originally the sentence was for six years, but, according to one source, the leaders of the Redeyef mining district social movement were able to negotiate the sentence down to four years. The government's hard line against the journalist is a result both of his reporting and the fact that he and his wife, Afef Bennacour, have been active in the country's democratic and human rights movement for some time.

The government of Zine Ben Ali, Tunisia's president, was trying to suppress live coverage of the events which went on over a period of six months starting in January 2008 in Tunisia's phosphate mining district in Gafsa Province; the center of the protest movement was Redeyef, a town of 38,000 that have virtually no other economic lifeline than the mines. Over the past twenty years, as a result of modernization of the mines combined with a substantial level of government corruption and neglect, the mining workforce shriveled from as many as 20,000 (according to one source) to a mere 5000 employed throwing tens of thousands of miners throughout the district out of work, and triggering regional unemployment rates estimated at 40% for the area's youth.

These untenable conditions sparked a social revolt against unemployment, despair and government corruption which embraced the overwhelming majority of the region's population regardless of age,



social class. Boukadous was (apparently) the only journalist to cover the events live and as such, provide a link between the movement and the rest of the world.

### **The Limits of Tunisian "Glasnost"**

After the Tunisian government had repressed the movement itself, it turned on those who had reported the 2008 events to the outside world, with Boukadous being the prime target. He was indicted on charges of "reporting information deemed threatening to the public order." It is a formulation vague enough to be interpreted in any manner that the Tunisian government wishes and bares a striking similarity to similar vague and repressive legislation here in the United States under the Patriot Act.

Hoping to stifle what has been two decades of negative publicity much of which has appeared in the French Press and in the publications of human rights organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders, (and specifically with the case of Fahem Boukadous in mind), on June 15 of this year, Ben Ali pushed legislation through the Tunisian Parliament that "loudly" condemned the human rights groups and their reporting.

The legislation makes it a criminal offense to engage in "actions deemed harmful to the country's interests and economic security." Again, it is vague enough to cover any criticism of Tunisia the government government might deem "inappropriate." Besides tightening the screws on formal internal dissent (not particularly developed as both the state and private press are government run), such legislation is also meant to target foreign journalists who have repeatedly exposed and embarrassed Ben Ali and his twenty-three year repressive rule.

### **International Criticism of Ben Ali Over the Boukadous Imprisonment**

The harassment, arrest, torture, imprisonment of human rights activists in Tunisia is nothing new. Although human rights organizations and occasionally the French press, follows it, for the most part the international media has ignored this pattern of abuse and repression, if anything only occasionally giving Tunisia a mild slap on the wrist, if that. With the Boukadous case, in part because it is such a blatant case of open repression, added to the fact of Boukadous's health condition, the pattern has been broken.

Reporting on this case has been *international* in nature. Boukadous's case has been reported in detail in the Arab press, including in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt. The Ethiopians have written about it as have other sub-Saharan African countries. Although it was a brief piece, Boukadous's sentencing was covered by *The Economist*. The French Foreign Ministry issued a statement critical of the Tunisian government, as did the US State Department, which was quoted as being "deeply concerned" (well, about as deeply concerned as the US State Department is about human rights violations among US allies, which isn't usually very deeply concerned) about the "decline of political freedom in Tunisia," as if it the repression just started recently.

Still, the international coverage has forced the Tunisian government to respond, to defend Boukadous's sentence. Thus, the Tunisian judiciary issued a statement on June 15 defending the prosecution of Fahem Boukadous, claiming that he was "a part of a criminal gang...that damaged

both public and private property.” The Tunisian government also alleged that Boukadous *really isn't a journalist* and that is just a cover for his radical political activities. Pretty shabby stuff, if you ask me. Boukadous is indeed a journalist, and despite his youth, has also long been concerned about Tunisian human rights violations. In 1998, ten years prior to Redeyef, he was sentenced *in absentia* for his human rights activity.

### **Hints of Tunisian Repression in the 1960s**

There were "hints" of how repression worked in Tunisia the years that I was there with the Peace Corps, which were, the proverbial "tip of the iceberg" Two examples remain, even after all these years: first, the repression of the Tunisian Ba'ath Party in the aftermath of the June 1967 Middle East War; and second, the severe repression of the student movement after a downtown rally in 1968 protesting the US war in Vietnam, coinciding with a visit of then US Vice President Hubert Humphrey. In some ways both are indicative of deeper patterns of Tunisian repression still functioning today.

Although, generally speaking, US Peace Corps volunteers were generally insulated from the political developments taking place in the country, every now and then a little confused insight would burst through. So it was when the rumor circulated that the husband of the director of L'Institut Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes was arrested and imprisoned for his activities in Tunisia's Ba'ath Party. That was my first awareness that there even was a Tunisian branch of the Ba'ath. I did ask if the Ba'ath Party was legal, if our director's husband had broken any laws—usual simplistic questions from an American, I suppose. The answers only added to my confusion.

One of the early challenges to Habib Bourguiba's rule in the early 1960s was the rise in influence of Tunisia's Ba'ath Party. Modeled after and in close contact with Ba'ath parties in Syria and Iraq, the Tunisian Ba'ath took root in the country and began to exert a modest influence in the mid 1960s. Arab nationalist in orientation, and based in mostly in the professional classes, with some influence in the middle ranks of the military, in Tunisia, as elsewhere in the Arab world, it tended to critique Bourguiba's "drift rightward", already apparent by the mid 1960s. In particular, it criticized what were already Bourguiba's anti-democratic tendencies and his flirtation with Western (French and US) interests.

### **Bourguiba Crushes Tunisia's Ba'ath Party**

It is difficult for me to assess just how strong was the Tunisian Ba'ath at the outbreak of the June 1967 War. I'm sure there are some analyses of the situation that would shed light on the extent of its role or base. But my impression was that it wasn't very strong and did not represent a serious potent threat to Bourguiba's power base, which was still eleven years after independence, more or less secure. Bourguiba's reputation had hardly eroded; he was still considered the "father"—rightly or wrongly—of Tunisian independence and was quite popular.

What followed the 1967 War, was an intense Tunisian media campaign and wave of repression against the party's Tunisian supporters. Tunisian Ba'ath members were described as "outside agitators;" they were accused of planning a coup, and the party itself was characterized as pro-Nazi, undemocratic, etc.. It was hit hard and, to my knowledge, never recovered.

## The Pattern of Repression

What needs to be emphasized here *is the pattern of repression* which in many ways remains the same forty-three years on and, as I will argue, is based in large measure on the pattern of French repression during the colonial period. The pattern is as follows:

- Political parties, media outlets, social movements (students, labor, human rights, etc.) are given legal status. Getting legal status in Tunisia is in itself a rather tedious affair in which from the outset a great deal of censorship is involved: commitments to be "good boys" (i.e. uphold the constitution), to keep criticisms within certain bounds, and so on.
- Accepting "the rules," the party begins to function, operate, organize and agitate for whatever is its program. Initially it enjoys a certain amount of freedom of movement and expression. Those parties/movements that fail to gain substantial inroads in the Tunisian body politic are generally permitted to function without much state interference. Since they are marginal, it doesn't matter much as they represent no threat to state power. Furthermore, they feed the illusion (necessary for international respectability and all that goes with it—business deals, economic and military aid, etc.) that the country is "a democracy," or "democratizing" or "moderate" or any one of those meaningless and politically loaded terms that essentially translates into the idea that "they" (in this case Tunisia) are in "our" (in this case, the USA, France) camp and therefore "kosher."
- But some political parties and movements in Tunisia do gain traction, a genuine base within some sector of society, and their influence begins to grow. At different times, organizations, movements as different as the Tunisian trade unions, university students, professional organizations (journalists, doctors, lawyers), political parties such as the Ba'ath, Tunisian Islamic parties, or in some instances the Tunisian Communist Party, have begun to grow with their influence finding resonance among different sectors of the population.
- The growth of grass roots public opinion is usually permitted *up to a point*. Even Ben Ali, in the first year of his coming to power, promised "openness," if only to gauge the level of opposition he'd soon move to repress. This permits the government to gauge how serious, how mature is the movement, with whom it resonates. Think of it like a "social pressure valve": the authorities open it a bit, both to determine the extent of the movement and to release the pressures that have been created. *And then it is simply and systematically crushed.*
- The "threat" to the established order that each and every one of these movements represented is then *exaggerated*. Exaggerating the threat is a vital ingredient in the state's repressive tool kit as it needs to convince public opinion, even and one might say *especially when it is not true*, that the public order is threatened. The notion of "an imminent threat" is key, as it then justifies the inevitable *overkill* that follows in the state's repressive measures. As the Ben Ali government *specializes in repressive overkill*, it constantly needs to exaggerate the threats to its legitimacy.
- It is a pattern of "reform" followed by "repression," one that is in no way limited to Tunisia and has been internationalized to a certain extent. Think of the pattern of reform and

repression in the former Soviet Union: periods of "openness" (early 1920s, 1950s under Khrushchev, post-1985 glasnost under Gorbachev) followed by—in the case of the USSR—the most severe and thorough repression.

- One finds this pattern in a number of other Arab countries as well—Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, and Algeria immediately come to mind. Let those little liberal squirrels come out of their holes, permit them to write a few investigative reports, make a few documentary films, write a book or two. Let them *push the limits of openness*. But before their ideas, theories—be they on human rights, politics or economics—can take root, flush them out now that they have exposed themselves **and crush them**.
- The key here is that the repression in Tunisia during the Bourguiba period usually happened *one movement at a time*. It is, after all, important to maintain the democratic facade and to be able to argue, as the Ben Ali government tries unsuccessfully to do, that the government is adhering to "the rule of law." It is not all movements that are repressed, just some (usually the most potent, active and democratic ones).
- Such a system also becomes one of "divide and rule," pitting one social movement against another as they scramble for "legitimacy" and to somehow cleverly follow and yet break the rules.

### The Velvet Glove and the Iron Fist

The pattern described above is, despite its rougher edges, essentially the softer face of Tunisian repression. It has a harder, even more merciless edge, an uglier face, at times of crisis. There are even *some limits* to its soft face. Yes, some Tunisian human rights activists have been killed or died in prison, but for the most part Tunisian repression consists of extreme monitoring. It is a society "watched" by its secret police as thoroughly as was East Germany—harassment, imprisonment, and torture are common, while freedom of speech and action are repeatedly suffocated.

I am not sure that one can "take solace" from the fact that—at least to my knowledge and until now—human rights activists are not "disappeared" as they were in Argentina at the time of the colonels, or rounded up in stadiums and then executed by the thousands as they were in Chile after the 1973 coup that brought the fascist dictator—a term I do not use lightly—Augusto Pinochet to power (with a little help from Henry Kissinger). Still, the repression is pervasive, unrelenting, psychologically and medically damaging, often not limited to a targeted individual but to his/her extended family and network of friends, whether they are politically active or not, a kind of collective punishment.

On occasion, the state does show its fangs and the repression takes savage forms. So it was with the 2008 social protest movement in the Gafsa mining district that Fahem Boukadous had the courage to cover with so much insight, talent and accuracy. Reading the articles and watching the video footage of the repression at Redeyef, it was striking how surprised, shocked the demonstrators were that the Tunisian government—for all its sorry record on human rights—would *open fire on its own citizenry*. At Redeyef, Tunisian repression was taken to new lows, even for a scoundrel like Ben Ali. Such dastardly actions are not without long-term and deep consequences, even if these consequences are not yet apparent. Domestic abuse had become outright murder. It could be a

turning point in the country's history, not unlike the tragic events of Setif were in May 1945 for the history of Algeria.

So it also was with the repression of the progressive student movement in Tunisia in the late 1960s.

Somewhere in his journals French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote about the student demonstrations at the University of Tunis in early 1968. For supporting the student movement, Foucault, who was teaching in Tunis at the same time I was there, was arrested and tortured for his homosexuality and then expelled from the country. Foucault's students had come to him, asking for support, something that the philosopher, following his heart and moral values, could not and did not deny them.

The focus of the student movement, was, for me, quite curious: the university students wanted to protest the US war in Vietnam, which had entered a particularly murderous stage at that point. The focal point of their protest was the visit of Hubert Humphrey to Tunisia to garner support from Bourguiba for a US escalation of the war (and as I later learned, support for possible use of US nuclear weapons in the war). To this end, to "welcome" the US vice president, the university students organized an open protest specifically at the main intersection of downtown Tunis where Ave. de la Liberte intersects with Ave. Habib Bourguiba. A person could actually sit in the Cafe de Paris at that intersection and "watch the action" as I did one day.

The demonstration was short but sweet, lasting no more than ten minutes with leaflets and posters left all around. The students quickly scattered, leaving the Tunisian police, who arrived a few minutes later, with what we would inelegantly call in English a case of "political blue balls." They very much wanted to beat up on students, and had come to that crossroads for exactly that purpose; they were "pumped" and "primed" for the task, only to find the place deserted, the students having made their hit and run demonstration and then blended back into general population.

Forty-three years later, I still see those angry policemen with their tear gas canisters, their batons that looked like thirty-eight ounce baseball bats, their submachine guns ready to fire with no immediate outlet for their frustration. They had been tricked, beaten; and they knew it, as did everyone else who happened to be in downtown Tunis that day.

But this is Tunisia; not Paris or New York or even Denver, where demonstrations are more likely to be like Sunday picnics—a nice march, a few boring speeches, and unless you're Black or Chicano, rather safe and tame affairs. It's a bit different demonstrating in Tunis, then and now. The next day the police were "unleashed" in the student districts in the area of the university (just west of the city's "medina"). They beat up hundreds of students and passers-by. Several were killed and hundreds were arrested, convicted, and given long prison sentences.

So there are Tunisian precedents to Redeyef in 2008. Outright challenges to the state's authority are openly crushed, as much in Bourguiba's time as in Ben Ali's. Tunisia is not a country where movements for social change—economic reform movements like the one in Redeyef or student peace movements like the one in Tunis in the late 1960s—can function in the open. And when they do, the state strikes. This mix of "softer" and "harder" forms of repression and denial of human rights is a pattern inherited from the French colonial period.

## Consequences of Bourguiba's Policies: Strangling Tunisian Democracy

Habib Bourguiba was a master at exactly this kind of politics, and the incident I stumbled across—the repression of Tunisia's Ba'ath Party, was simply one episode in a series of repressive measures Bourguiba took all along the course of his thirty-one years in power. One could say that Bourguiba *succeeded* in eliminating the different challenges to his power, but at the price of something close to strangling participatory democracy in the country.

If Zine Ben Ali has taken the country's repressive measures further than Bourguiba, the fact remains that Ben Ali inherited a system that was already well-oiled and instinctively *anti-democratic*. One understands Stalin only by carefully studying Lenin. One understands Ben Ali by studying Bourguiba; and one understands Bourguiba by understanding patterns and methods emerging from Tunisia's experience with French colonialism, which has left its mark not only on the country's post-colonial economic structures, but also on its political system and the pattern of repression.

## Tunisia – The Imprisonment of Fahem Boukadous (Part Four of a series)

August 19, 2010

### Tunisia: An Example of the "Singapore Model of Development"—Development Without Democracy

How much of the extensive system of repression in place today, to which the good people of Redeyef and journalists like Fahem Boukadous have fallen victim, draws its inspiration, structures and roots from the period of French colonialism? I would argue a fair, if not extensive, amount. It is not only the economic structures of that period (1881 – 1956) that were passed down to "independent" Tunisia, but political and repressive structures as well. And then there is the pattern of pre-independence history, the internal power struggles between the "old" and "neo" Destour (Old and New Constitutional Parties) that greatly influenced the undemocratic one-party system which exists in Tunisia today.

All of this converges in post-colonial, modern times, into what in political economy is oftentimes referred to as "The Singapore Model" of development, a model which encourages economic development *at the expense of democracy*. Although it has other aspects, economically this model emphasizes repression of wage demands to encourage export competitiveness; politically it is based upon one-party rule, to ensure a consistent economic development policy that would be compromised by multi-party democracy with could entail different economic plans. It is also a model *specific to peripheral and semi-peripheral countries within the global economy*. Wage repression (keeping wages down) not only increases competitiveness, but it keeps the costs of raw materials and basic food stuff (or the expenses relative to tourism) attractive to the core countries, an old and persistent pattern of core-peripheral relations in the modern world system.

Although Singapore is credited with the model, it probably is actually based on the Japanese development model of the late 19th century, which promised an almost military-like disciplined structure of development, with little political input from below—development without democracy.

Such a model was embraced not only by Japan, but also South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and to a great extent China and Russia today.

Such a model is explicitly bureaucratic, undemocratic, and authoritarian. Popular demands for increased wages and greater democratic participation are seen as threatening to the system and are opposed and repressed in a variety of ways—some subtle, others more brutal. Besides the obvious—that human and economic rights are being violated, despite the existence of a constitution—all this flies in the face of "the promise of independence" and why it was that in the colonial period so many Tunisians were willing to risk life and limb to enter into the anti-colonial struggle. The promises of independence are not vague. To the contrary, they are very specific: greater prosperity and greater democracy for the great majority of Tunisian people and the promises of modernism—promises that could not be achieved under the framework of French colonialism.

### **Tunisia of the Protectorate**

The French colonization of Tunisia formally started in 1881. It was a part of the scramble for African colonies by different European states, and most particularly the British-French competition to control access to the Suez Canal, gateway to India and the Asian trading networks, all this prior to the discovery and strategic use of petroleum as an energy source. Despite the fact (and perhaps because of it) that Italians were five to six times more populous in Tunisia than French settlers, French pressures to gobble up and integrate Tunisia into the French sphere of influence were especially pronounced from Algeria, a French colony since 1830.

In the late 1800s France attempted to expand its influence in Africa from its Algerian base in *a number of directions*—west to Morocco at Spain and Germany's expense, eastward to Tunisia at Italy's expense and southward (and then east) across the Sahara ultimately with an eye of controlling a portion of the East African coast, both along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean at Britain's expense. In North Africa and the Middle East, the great scramble for colonies concentrated on what might be called the underbelly of the Ottoman Empire, those regions which were nominally under Ottoman control but easily picked off by this or that European power. First Algeria and then Tunisia were "ripe" for the pickings.

Like so much of Africa at the time, Tunisia was a simple pawn in that great power game. Although not lacking in human resources—one of the most cultured, urbane places anywhere—its value was and has always been *more strategic than economic in nature to France*. The pretext for the French seizure was the failure of the ruling bey, or Ottoman governor, to repay loans or the interest on loans owed to France. This provided the excuse for France to pressure the Tunisian government, to accept French domination, with the threat of severe military action had the bey not agreed. As happened elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire, France literally took over the Tunisian treasury, reorganized its banking system in a way that today's International Monetary System would be proud to give priority to repayment of foreign loans and essentially brought Tunisia "into the fold," so to speak.

The French takeover of Tunisia did not sit well especially with Italy, with its large settler community in the country, and whose islands lay within miles of the Tunisian coast. For the next sixty years, especially during the period of Mussolini's rule, but starting prior to that, Italy had its own imperial designs that included Tunisia, in part to mollify the Italians, whose support France wanted and

needed for European wars, and in part because there was *no international support and consensus* for France's Tunisian land grab, France was careful to veil its ambitions, which were nothing less than to annex Tunisia as it had Algeria, behind a facade known poetically but inaccurately as "a protectorate."

In the end a protectorate is essentially a colony, but it sounded somewhat softer. A "protectorate," in principle, will someday be its own independent country. France was supposedly "protecting" Tunisia—administering it, "modernizing" it, the usual colonial drivel—until it could stand on its own two feet, much as a regent would "protect" an aspiring adolescent monarch, not yet mature enough to rule on his own. While much of Europe was opposed to open French annexation of Tunisia at the time, a French "protectorate" had a less ominous ring,—to Europeans at least—less permanent in nature. It suggests that somewhere down the line, the protectorate, when it had "matured" and "was ready," would gain independence and go its own way politically. And of course the French, who always had a way of covering what was little more than brutal colonial exploitation with a lovely linguistic twist, would be happy to cut the cord and "offer" Tunisia independence: *La Mission Civilisatrice* in action.

How touching.

Of course all that was for public consumption; the reality—if not as brutal as Leopold's Congo—was quite different. Call it what they would, Tunisia became a French colony. While it maintained the facade of political autonomy, every detail of life in the country was overseen by French governor general. The economic, legal and political systems of the past were, for all practical purposes, dissolved. The formal period of the French Protectorate in Tunisia did not last that long in the broader scheme of things—only sixty-two years. But in that time period, the old economic and political system was nothing short of pulverized, and the culture itself traumatized, so much so that the transformation has been permanent. The key elements of the colonial system forced upon Tunisia by France.

In sixty-five years of French rule, a rather short amount of time, a radical reconstruction was forced on the country, not without great trauma, from which it is still reeling in pain today. Thus it was that the Tunisia of old, like so many societies that fell victim to colonization the world round, was pulverized, reworked, and restructured to become what it is today, despite all the talk to the contrary: a peripheral zone of the world market (read: capitalist) economy and a producer of agricultural exports and raw materials (in Tunisia's case phosphates, citrus fruits, and other food stuffs) for a European—predominantly French—core.

Again, as elsewhere, all this was accomplished with virtually no input on the part of the Tunisian people themselves, who from the outset of the protectorate, until the day in 1956 when they won independence, protested, resisted in whatever ways they could. It is true, up to a point, that neither the process by which Tunisia was colonized nor its movement for independence were characterized by the levels of unthinkable and savage violence that their neighbors to the west in Algeria experienced.

That said, the "protectorate" was no cake walk; it was harsh, at times brutal, and France found it necessary to institute nothing short of a police state in Tunisia for most of the colonial period.



Small gestures of openness, democratization—little more than crumbs in the overall scheme of things—would be followed by severe repression.

What are some of the repressive characteristics of the French colonial period that continued past the birth of Tunisian independence in 1956?

- *Circumscribed freedom of expression.* While there was limited freedom of expression even during the colonial period, it was, as today, heavily censored. During the colonial period censorship targeted the voices of Tunisian independence. It was illegal to call for an end of French colonialism. Today it is illegal to criticize the Ben Ali government or even to report upon it in an unfavorable light. Formally freedom of expression existed in both periods; in fact it didn't in the past, and doesn't now
- *A vast government-inspired intelligence network to monitor domestic developments.* The French police and intelligence services have long been among the world's most pervasive and intrusive, monitoring social developments, social movements that challenge their authority. The Tunisian intelligence network is based largely on the French model. In an age of advanced communication it includes the monitoring of all forms of communication, be it cell phones, computers, etc. Add to this the support that Tunisia gets today on intelligence matters from the United States and France through its security partnerships in the war on terrorism.
- ***Constant efforts to split the opposition so as to turn it on itself, weakening unity.*** An old tactic. During the French colonial period, the French excelled at keeping the modernist, pro-Western reformers and the religious movements at odds with each other. The struggles between the different tendencies of the independence movement (old and new "Destour," or Constitutional Party) were so intense in the period just before independence in the 1940s and 1950s that they were in armed conflict with *each other almost as much as they were engaged in struggling against the French.* The armed clashes—which affected the Algerian national liberation movement even more—were especially intense as independence approached. The French hand in these struggles was not insignificant. These pre-independence internal struggles did not end with the dawn of independence by any means. So long term bitter antagonisms were set in place that continue until the present.
- ***The harshest physical repression—extensive use of torture, targeted assassination, government open firing on crowds, execution by firing squad or guillotine came down on the Tunisian labor movement.*** The 2008 repression of the Redeyef social movement for jobs and an improvement in the economic conditions of life in the Gafsa phosphate mining district was not the first time that the Tunisian working class faced government submachine guns. Of course in 2008 it was Tunisian security forces that open fired while prior to independence it was a French led security force. Strike actions in the mines—with casualties was not uncommon during the colonial period, especially during the 1930s. Mass popular expressions of independence were also crush with machine gun bullets as they were in Bizerte. While much has been reported on the extensive use and abuse of torture by the French in Algeria, far less publicity has surfaced concerning torture in Tunisia during the colonial period *which was also extensive.* And it is with the extensive use of harassment and torture of its own people that the Ben Ali government most resembles the French colonial authorities.

