

# **“Yezzi Fock!” (It’s Enough!) - The Tunisian Intifada**

Saturday 15 January 2011, by [PRINCE Rob](#) (Date first published: 13 January 2011).

“Yezzi Fock!” This slogan has become the theme of the nationwide protests in Tunisia which continue unabated. Enough' refers to the high levels of unemployment in the country, the pervasive corruption, especially of the two ruling families and the decades of seething repression which has kept Zine Ben Ali in power now for 23 years. And with that, protestors in different parts of the country are tearing down President Zine Ben Ali's portrait, a harbinger of things to come perhaps. Triggered originally on December 17, 2010 by the suicide of a 26-year old university graduate who had had his unauthorized fruit and vegetable stand confiscated in Sidi Bouzid – and who soaked himself with gasoline and lit a match – the protests have only intensified, despite government attempts to suppress them continue. If anything, the situation is deteriorating as the opposition is only intensifying in the face of growing, if not massive repression. AsKerym', my unknown but insightful Tunisian correspondent, comments: The demonstrations will continue because:

“The people know very well that he’s (Ben Ali) trying to cool things down, and once the situation returns to normal, he will betray them again....just like he did before . In other words , this people happen to distrust this weird man and his mobster gangs. Therefore quitting the protests now, means more repression and more arrests to be expected, and unemployment will remain an unsolved issue in Tunisian society .□So far, the situation is snafu, but not without hope .”

Among the confirmed reports:

Joining Tunisia’s lawyers, the country’s artists have taken to the streets and joined the calls for an end to repression, corruption along with calls for the government to deal with the unemployment crisis. A number of the country’s leading cultural figures – artists, rappers, and leading intellectuals have been arrested.

The trade union confederation in Sfax, Tunisia’s second largest city after Tunis, have joined the protests, calling for a strike in the city.

The Tunisian government has closed all the high schools and universities in the country **until further notice' in an attempt cool what started as ayouth rebellion'**, but which has long extended to broad sectors of the population.

At least some of the weapons being used against demonstrators are **made in the USA'**, including tear gas {{Unconfirmed but worrisome}} In Kasserine where a number of people were killed by security forces over the weekend, the government employed snipers on building tops who shot into the demonstrations, killing people at random. There are reports that the snipers are not from the Tunisian military who are actually trying to protect the demonstrators but from a special unit of Ben Ali's security police called the Brigade de

l'Ordre Public (BOP). Formed in the 1980s, the B.O.P. is based upon a French model. Demonstrations have now erupted in the interior agricultural center of Beja, in Djendouba and the northern coastal city of Bizerte. According to one source, in Beja, the police station, the local offices of the ruling party (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique) and a bank in which the Ben Ali/Trabelsi families are part owners were burnt to the ground today. Some members of the Ben Ali/Trabelsi families are leaving the country, in one case for Canada. Tunisians living outside the country, all over the world, including in the United States are mobilizing, overwhelming in opposition to the current government. {{Economic Considerations}} Although the protests in Tunisia began in opposition to the country's economic policy, they have more become political in nature, with growing calls for Zine Ben Ali, the country's dictator-president, to step down. To date, Ben Ali refuses, hoping to crush the opposition with the country's 180,000 strong security police. He combines fierce repression with promises of economic reform and a government jobs program. Tunisians have heard these promises before. Three years ago, when a six-month long protest over unemployment and social decay in the country's mining district around Gafsa erupted, Ben Ali pursued a similar approach – repression and the promise of jobs. Virtually no economic development followed. The country's official unemployment rate stands at 14 per cent. However youth unemployment for people between the ages of 15-24 is at least double that, and in some parts of the interior, as high as 50 per cent. Furthermore the main areas of job creation – the tourism industry, textile manufacturing targeting the European market infree trade zones' and what is left of Tunisia's agricultural sector – are producing low wage jobs. And as in response to IMF/World Bank pressures, government subsidies continue to be reduced or eliminated from food and gasoline; even those with jobs find themselves having difficulty making ends meet.

None of the current economic problems weighing on Tunisia are new., High unemployment (plus low wage jobs and growing unemployment for the country's university graduates) has been plaguing the country for some time as has Ben Ali's long standing policies of repressing dissent of any kind, in the name of course, of countering Islamic radicalism; this despite the fact that Islamic radicalism, while it exists, has less of a base in Tunisia than virtually any other Arab state.

The economic rut in which Tunisia finds itself is a result what has long been its strategic role in the global economy as primarily a peripheral or semi-peripheral country whose mission has been to provide cheap manufactured products – and now cheap vacations – to core countries, especially in Europe. Can the Tunisian economy evolve, break the role that it has played in the global economy since its reality was reshaped by French colonialism to meet the needs of Europeans for cheap Thibar wine? I think it can. It has the human capital to do so.

Other countries – among them China, S. Korea, even the Nordic countries if we spread the historical time line a little, have reconstructed themselves. Perhaps out of the ashes and pain of the current moment, fresh ideas, directions for the country's future will emerge and the suffering the country is now enduring will not be in vein. Indeed, if Tunisians at present are appalled and saddened by the repression, people would be missing the point not to realize that this is also a moment of great hope, of transition, of the possibility of the success of reform.

This combination – an authoritarian political system that supposedly' delivers economic growth -- is often referred to as the Korean Model,' based on the dramatic development of the South Korean economy since the 1950s from an economic backward to one of the most dynamic economies of modern times – albeit not a miracle either, but still very impressive.

At the heart of the Korean model is the need to keep wages low and labor union activity in check through a repressive government in order that the accumulation of capital thus resulted can be re-invested into modernizing the economy. The logic continues that once the economy is modernized, authoritarianism can be eased and democratic processes encouraged. I would argue that it sort of' happened in South Korea. But the Tunisian economic comparison with South Korea fails on a number of key counts. In Korea, there was something of a transition to democracy after 3 decades of repressive rule. The South Korean economy was a highly protectionist economy that did not open itself up to foreign capital until very late in the game and even then, not that much. Its industries were protected as was its currency. Foreign investment had to follow strict criteria. Perhaps most importantly, the role of the state in the S. Korean economy, as in Japan, has always been central to the country's economic development. South Korea benefitted from its status as a front-line state in the Cold War. As with the competition between East and West Germany, there was always a political dimension to the economic competition between North and South Korea, with the former being something of a basket case, the latter one of the Asian Tigers'. The point here is that South Korea could break the IMF-World Bank structural adjustment rules and get away with it in a way that Tunisia couldn't and didn't. And a large measure of its economic success comes from the fact that S. Korea did not have to follow the rules that were imposed upon Argentina, Mexico or Russia.

Tunisia on the other hand began opening up its economy, privatizing elements of it, opening the country to foreign investment with fewer and fewer strings already in the early 1980s and has, as a result, paid the price. The economic sectors which were modernized – textiles, mining did not produce enough domestic capital to invest in new technologies and take the country in new directions, despite its highly educated work force. Foreign investment, let loose with fewer and fewer regulations, as in Thailand, concentrated in real estate, the financial sector and tourism, none of which help development that much.

So Tunisia has gotten the authoritarian' aspect of the S. Korean model without producing the development revolution. If one looks closely at Tunisian society on the eve of independence in 1956, it is rather striking. There was most definitely what is referred to today as a highly developed civil society' with participation of most sectors of society in the political movement that led to independence. But that civil society was first seriously weakened by the country's first president, Habib Bourguiba who saw it as a threat to his personal power. Then it was smothered by Ben Ali — or more accurately, Ben Ali tried to snuff it out. And yet despite everything, under the surface it has continued – until it erupted once again full force after the death of Mohammed Bouazizi.

So why is it now that the country as a whole has been pushed over the edge if these trends have been in play for so long?

In the end one never knows why it is that objective social conditions erupt into revolt. More often than not they do not. But still, there are a number of factors which might explain the current unprecedented protests.

Income distribution has sharply polarized in the past few years. As Basel Saleh points out, the top 10 per cent of Tunisia's economic ladder control 32 per cent of the national income. The top 20 per cent control nearly half. Tunisia's income inequality is so severe that the bottom 60 per cent of the population control only 30 per cent of the country's wealth, again with 40 per cent of the population taking home 70 per cent of the national income. At the same time, two families at the top, the Ben Ali's and Trabelsi's have come to dominate the country's economy. One WikiLeaks cable from the

U.S. embassy in Tunis suggests that the two families have their hands in and on 50 per cent of the country's economy. As the disparity between wealth and poverty increases, the corruption of the two ruling families has come more into focus.

There are regional disparities too, well known in the economic literature, with the northern and coastal cities benefitting much more from Ben Ali's economic policies than the interior and the south which have long suffered. It should not be surprising to anyone who has followed Tunisian events over the past 30 years that social unrest, protest and rebellion tend to originate in the interior and the south.

2009 was not a good year and Tunisia's economy suffered despite World Bank/IMF claims that the country has weathered the global financial crises better than many places. Tourism was down as were textile exports to Europe only aggravating the already existing socio-economic crisis

But the straw that broke the camel's back in this case is the growing distrust and distaste among the broader population for president Ben Ali's wife, Leila Trabelsi and her siblings who have been scrambling to dominate whatever sectors of Tunisia's economy they could, dominating the IMF pressured privatizations which have marked the country's economic transition. It appears rather likely that Ben Ali was positioning his wife to 'take over' the country in four years when he supposedly would retire. The thought that Zine Ben Ali would turn over power to Leila Trabelsi - and that the corruption at the top would thus be blessed and institutionalized that much more only added to the seething anger about to explode.

However else the situation in Tunisia plays out, the likelihood that the Trabelsi family will replace Ben Ali has all but gone up in smoke. Mohammed Bouazizi, the young unemployed man whose suicide by fire started this protest movement, has inadvertently taken one of Tunisia's richest families, the Trabelsis along with him. The first result of the Tunisian intifada is to de-legitimize that clan so that politically speaking they are dead. It was not just Mohammed Bouazizi that went up in a ball of flames but the Trabelsi family's political future in Tunisia. Let us see what other lessons unfold.

Afternote: the Tunisian army has now taken control of the city of Tunis. It is not clear at this time, whether or not this is a military coup. That said, strange as it might seem, there is the sense that at the least, the army is there not only to restore order, but to protect the populace, much of which is protesting, from the security police. As for the developments in Tunisia, it seems right now that the president is being cornered, it's do or die . Desperate "counter attacks" , although expected, won't do him no good .□He's tried every possible way to divert the situation, calling the uprising the work of external parties and calling the protesters a bunch of masked thugs . Then shuffled and reshuffled for no comprehensible reasons, delivers another speech with the same repressive tone and with no single word whatsoever on the heart of the matter, which is concrete plans to tackle the huge social and economical problems that had made Tunisian youth revolt against it . Rightly so, when corruption becomes a generally accepted social phenomenon, whereby two families are in control of fifty percent of the country's wealth .

However, the army seems to have chosen the People's side. Yet, the regime will not give up finding all means to buy time and to grab for dear life, because the rope is loosening up and is about to snap.

**By ROB PRINCE**

---

**P.S.**

\* From CounterPunch, January 13, 2011:

<http://www.counterpunch.org/prince01132011.html>

\* Rob Prince lectures in International Studies at the University of Denver. He can be reached at robertjprince comcast.net