

THE MAGHREB: At the center of global history and culture for millennia

What comes to mind when we think of Tunisia?

On the 17th of December 2010, a Tunisian street vendor – Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi – at his wits end from municipal corruption and harassment set himself on fire in public. This single act of self-immolation, the ultimate sacrifice in any protest, catalysed the most profound political upheaval in the Arab world since the 1970s. It precipitated the downfall of some of the Middle East's most deeply entrenched dictators, including Tunisia's own Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Culminating in the gory Western backed overthrow and murder of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, part of the ferocious clamp down since 2011 by authoritarians across the developing world and including even Russia has been informed by their very personalised horror of the fate that befell some of their erstwhile peers in the northern region of the African continent.

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For some, the many influences that inform Africa's sense of itself today emerge out of Tunisia too. A Berber population initially accommodating of – and then overrun by – the Phoenicians several centuries BC. A Phoenician civilisation itself overrun by the Romans in the early centuries AD. A few more arrivals and departures fast forwarding to the Muslim

conquest. The French colonial period. Independence. All the way through to the 2011 revolution which inspired the 'Arab' spring. A term to which some north Africans react with annoyance – reminding us that not all north Africans are 'Arab.'

That history, visible wherever we chose to look and see. That reminder that people have been running all over the Mediterranean for almost three millennia. From current day Palestine out to Spain and Morocco, then back again. But also into and from the continent's interior. Timbuktu, for example, was first settled in the 5th century BC. By the 10th century AD, it had become a key node in the dense network of trans-Saharan trade routes of slaves, gold, ivory and salt across the Maghreb and into the Mashreq.

That history, alive around us. That dense network – across the continent instead of externalised – being what the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement now seeks to re-create. It is not for no reason that Tunisia has sought observer status with the Economic Community of West African States. It is not for no reason that Morocco has sought to actually join ECOWAS – an estimated 85 per cent of Moroccan foreign direct investment is now in sub-Saharan Africa.

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The contradictions of history also alive around us. While both Morocco and Tunisia have signed onto the ACFTA Agreement, none have so far indicated their willingness to sign onto the African Union's draft Protocol on free movement in Africa. Yet free trade means full factor mobility – of goods and services as well as persons. Those old trans-Saharan trade routes are

not dead – they are used now for drug and human trafficking (more slaves). With the Maghreb signing onto the European project of externalising and securitising its own migration control, our aspirations in one sense are compromised by our practice in another sense.

The Maghreb and the AU. Where are we at today?

Algeria seems to be resting on its liberation laurels – having been home to so many African liberation movements that it has always had easy gravitas within the pan-African space. It is still the dominant player as concerns African peace and security policy. But its internal dynamics are now in the open as concerns its economy.

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Egypt is still bitter with the AU for having dared to suspend it – and is closing down internally by the day. It also relies less on the AU than on bilateral relations with different African states to get what it needs done today. Libya is a mess internally. That mess lending itself to the chaos spreading down into the Sahel. It has long been unable to sustain its injection of influence, money and power into the AU.

In short, the old players on the continental scene are retired from the action today. Giving Morocco a free hand regarding its return to the continental stage. And making what's become of Tunisia post-revolution so very important.

Tunisia has just gone through its fourth election post-revolution – this time for the municipal level as envisaged by

its post-revolution Constitution. Which remains the biggest success of that revolution. But participation in the municipal elections were low – from over 70 per cent turnout for the election of the constituent assembly post-revolution to an over 70 per cent stay-away rate last week. The low turn-out can partly be explained by the general lack of knowledge about the role of municipalities in the new political structure. But the fact that ‘independents’ were the biggest winners of the elections points too to popular disaffection with the parties of both the Islamists as well as the old-regime-recycled. The economic grievance and inequalities that sparked the revolution remain unaddressed – and, after a while, excitement at the end of dictatorship is inevitably overtaken by desires for real democratic dividends.

Civic organisations may have more than doubled post-revolution – to over 20,000 formally recognised civic organisations today. But civic leaders speak about the ‘domestication’ of citizen action. By the increased formalisation of citizen action through regulation. By the requirements for civil society ‘representation’ in all the new public institutions, which has functioned to co-opt and constrain citizen action. By slow constitutional implementation – with many new public watchdog institutions yet to be up and running, Executive power has been un-checked and tended to re-concentrate itself. By ‘crowding-out’ by all the external actors who wanted to ‘help’ the revolution.

And so on and so forth. All the things that constrain citizen organisation everywhere else on the continent. All the things that lend themselves to our hopes in transitional moments eventually being squandered. Including – and most importantly – not having citizen or political action that actually structurally and substantively addresses what triggered those revolutions and transitional moments in the first place – that is, economic grievance and inequality.

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new north African players on the pan-African scene. Those new players are dealing with different internal dynamics and pressures than their predecessors. What is it we will all take from their entry to the continental stage?

Meanwhile, in Morocco, while the King stands above the fray, the Islamists are in charge in coalition. Formal political organising aims to remove that coalition. Popular protests have stayed focused on the predations of big business.

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