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Tunisia: A Revolution Still Without Monuments

→ Malek Lakhal



Plaque paying tribute to the martyrs of the western Kram. Credit: Myriam Amri



Arab Reform Initiative

It has been ten years since the resounding cry “Leave!” shook the formidable gates of the Ministry of Interior along the Habib Bourguiba Avenue at the heart of Tunis. Over the past ten years, the “Avenue” has become a labyrinth of barricades and barbed wire. Entire areas have become pedestrian-only due to police barriers, and large sections of sidewalks are no longer accessible to the public. This includes where the Equestrian Statue of Bourguiba has stood since 2016, on top of a marble base several meters high, a small distance away from its original spot, having been moved one year after Ben Ali’s coup d’état. In what was then known as the November 7 Square, Ben Ali erected a first clock tower (where the number seven in “November 7” took the place of “six”) before replacing it with another, 32-meter-high tower in 2000, which still stands to this day. A few days after the revolution, the November 7 Square was dubbed the 14 January 2011 Square. However, if we were to visit the square today, we would have a hard time figuring out its new name. The large sign that should indicate its name reads “Habib Bourguiba Avenue” instead. The main revolution square was not even misnamed; it has simply become non-existent in the grand continuum of the Habib Bourguiba Avenue. This toponymic detail speaks volumes about the progressive elimination of the small marks that the Tunisian Revolution has left on public spaces in Tunis.



Figure 1: Indicative sign, a few days after the 2011 revolution. Credit:

M. Rais



Figure 2: The same spot in 2021[1]. Credit Malek Lakhal



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The silence of the revolution is in sharp contrast with the almost comical uproar that Ben Ali or Bourguiba stirred to solidify their presence in public spaces. In the case of Ben Ali, this was manifested through giant portraits, the number 7 (in reference to November 7, 1987, the date of the “medical” coup d'état that toppled Bourguiba), purple (his favorite color), and “silent clocks”¹ in city centers. As for Bourguiba, he manifested his presence through busts, statues and, of course, “Habib Bourguiba Avenues” in almost all Tunisian cities.

The revolution, by contrast, did not leave much of a mark: A nearly invisible “14 January 2011” square; a “Mohamed Bouazizi Boulevard,” previously called the “7 November 1987 Avenue,” which is referred to today by its administrative name, the “National R21 Road;” and lastly a handful of marble plaques placed by families or neighbors as a tribute to the victims of State violence (referred to as “martyrs” in Tunisia), who died on the streets of some quarters. This article will tackle the official memory of the revolution - or rather the lack of thereof - in the capital. While this absence is attributed “officially” to administrative reasons, it nonetheless remains deeply political in nature. Given that this issue draws a clear fault line between those who believe that the revolution was a breaking point in national history and those who view it as no more than a small hiccup along the way, it also highlights the failure of the revolution’s proponents in transforming the revolutionary moment into a political prospect.

The Non-existent List: A political convenience

Officially, according to the Tunis Municipality, currently headed by Mayor Souad Abderrahim of Ennahda Movement, the construction of monuments was prevented by the lack of an official list of the revolution’s martyrs and wounded.² This list was finally published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Tunisia on March 19, 2021.

It took ten whole years of action and advocacy by the families of the wounded and martyrs for this list to finally see the light of day. Over the course of the past decade, at least four institutions have produced lists of martyrs and wounded persons: The Commission of the Martyrs and Wounded of the Revolution, which is



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a branch of the Higher Committee on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the authority that is officially in charge of producing this list; the Truth and Dignity Commission, which published its own list based on the complaints and testimonies submitted to it; the Ministry of Interior; and finally military tribunals.

While the Commission of the Martyrs and Wounded of the Revolution published a list on October 8 2019 on its website, it did not cross-check its list with those produced by other parties, particularly the Truth and Dignity Commission. Khayem Chemli, in charge of transitional justice at Lawyers Without Borders, says that, “The Commission of the Martyrs and Wounded of the Revolution has long refused to collaborate with the Truth and Dignity Commission, despite the fact that this could have saved considerable time and prevented errors.”³

The president of the Commission Taoufik Bouderbala himself said in December 2020 that it was not certain that the list was free of any errors or omissions. In fact, the list produced by the Commission and published in the Official Gazette includes only 129 deceased and 619 injured. For comparison, the Commission assigned the same task in February 2011, managed by none other than Taoufik Bouderbala, included 338 deceased and 2,147 wounded in its final report. These differences can be attributed in part to the definition adopted by the decree establishing the Commission of the Martyrs and Wounded of the Revolution at the Higher Committee on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. As per Article 6, “martyrs” are defined as “persons who have risked their lives for the revolution, who have died or who have suffered injuries resulting in disability between December 17, 2010 and February 28, 2011.” Moreover, during the Commission’s work, accusations of falsified medical certificates were addressed by Bouderbala against certain wounded persons. After the publication of the list in the Official Gazette, challenges must be brought in the form of complaints before the Administrative Tribunal, which has received more than two thousand appeals since the publication of the list on the Commission’s website in October 2019.

In addition to the confusion surrounding the list, the Prime Ministry delayed its publication in the Official Gazette. Since its publication online by the Commission in 2019, there have been several announcements stating that the list would soon be published in the Official Gazette. On March 19, 2021, the list was finally published, two days after Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi announced it. Khayem



Chemli believed that this delay was political:

"Under Béji Caïd Essebsi and Youssef Chahed, the climate was hostile towards transitional justice in general and towards any recognition of the revolution. The work of the Truth and Dignity Commission was obstructed by all ministers [...] Under Kais Saïed, the government of Elyes Fakhfekh (February - September 2020) gave priority to transitional justice, which is why the report of the Truth and Dignity Commission was published in the Official Gazette. However, [his successor] Hichem Mechichi is being manipulated by Ennahda and Qalb Tunis, two parties opposed to transitional justice. Politically speaking, the entire political class is responsible for this fiasco."⁴

From December through January, the families of martyrs and the wounded occupied the headquarters of the General Authority of Resistance Fighters, Martyrs and Wounded of the Revolution and of Terrorist Operations. This took place in the aftermath of the police violence exhibited on December 17, 2020, the anniversary of the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi - and, for many Tunisians, the legitimate date for the commemoration of the revolution - during a protest organized near the Prime Minister's headquarters. On that day, the wounded and the families of martyrs gathered to demand the publication of the list.

These same families and relatives are the ones who placed the very rare plaques in homage to the martyrs in public spaces in Tunis. These have mostly been private or collective initiatives done without the support of the central government and, barring a few exceptions, without the support of municipalities either. As such, a park at the heart of Tunis was named by local residents after Helmi Manai, the 23-year-old man who was killed by law enforcement on January 13, 2011. In western Kram, in the northern suburb of Tunis, a marble plaque pays tribute to the eight people killed by the police in the neighborhood in January 2011. There is also a plaque to which a roundabout was added in 2019, after being commissioned from an artist by the Municipality.

Local Choices with Political Motivations

The Municipality of Kram is one of the very few municipalities across the country which erected a monument, of its own free will, in homage to the revolution.

Fathi Laayouni, mayor of the Kram Municipality, who was elected during the 2018 municipal elections, is known for his disputes with the central government after establishing a Zakat fund, as well as for his disputes with Kais Saied and for his eccentric roundabouts.⁵ Since his election, roundabouts all over the city have been adorned with sculptures (a sea turtle, a 1948 map of Palestine with a drone hovering over it, a coronavirus molecule being crushed by a caduceus representing the healthcare sector, etc.) which have become the subject of ridicule on social media and in the press. One of these roundabouts, at the entrance of western Kram (nowadays known as Kram-ville), pays tribute to the eight martyrs who died in January 2011 in this popular neighborhood in Tunis. According to Laayouni, the lack of a list was never an obstacle to the construction of the monument:

“It’s a small town, everyone knows each other. Residents know who the martyrs are. When our municipal council was elected, there was already a marble plaque with the names of the martyrs of Kram. The residents had put it there. We had no interest in the details of the official list. As you can see, they have yet to publish their list, even after ten years. We know our martyrs very well and we took the initiative to soothe the pain and suffering of the families and dedicate a place in the city for it,”⁶ he said in September 2020.



Figure 3: Plaque paying tribute to the martyrs of the western Kram. Credit: Myriam Amri



Figure 4: Roundabout paying tribute to the martyrs of the western Kram. Credit: Myriam Amri

Now that the list of martyrs and wounded persons has been officially published, it is no surprise that the issue of paying tribute to the martyrs and the revolution in the capital will become more politicized, revealing each party's position with regard to the legitimacy of what many of the previous regime's supporters scornfully refer to as "the wheelbarrow revolution," in reference to the fruit and vegetable cart that the police confiscated from Mohamed Bouazizi.

Speaking on behalf of the Tunis Municipality, Henda Belhaj Ali, municipal councilor and president of the Names and Monuments Commission, argues that one must be rigorous in choosing when to pay tribute "in order not to fall into the trap of populism, which undermines the value of such acts,"⁷ considering Laayouni to be a prominent example of a populist figure. To illustrate her view, she gives the example of a square in El Khadra quarter in Tunis called "Habib Bourguiba Square" before the revolution but renamed "Martyr X Square"⁸ (sic) immediately following the revolution. According to her, the martyr in question

"was not a militant and was not taking part in the protests. The young man, may God rest his soul, went out and lit a joint. A sniper stationed far away saw the flame, fired, and killed him [...] Should we dedicate a public square to that? [...] I believe that public squares or streets should be named after people who have offered something valuable to Tunisia. People who have sacrificed something. People who have taken



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part in protests, who knew the risks they were taking, who were willing to give it all to effect change in Tunisia, who have sacrificed; those are the people who deserve to have a square named after them.”

She adds: “We cannot put the name of a victim on a wall that will stay there for decades. A martyr, however, who took part in protests or who organized a protest, is more worthy of such an honor.”⁹

Therefore, the councilor is explicitly differentiating between “martyrs” and the victims of State violence. According to her, the “true” martyrs, the militants who take political stances, those have a place in history. As for the victims, they are not worthy of such an honor, as they are nothing more than collateral damage. This distinction can perhaps be attributed to the inability of the Tunisian State, formed after the independence, to recognize the full citizenship of those who have historically been relegated under the pretext of “backwardness” and the lack of certain characteristics: the lack of modernity, the lack of civilization, the lack of education, and, in this case, the lack of political motivation.¹⁰

According to Ali’s colleague Ahmed Bouazzi, municipal councilor in Tunis affiliated with the opposition “Democratic Current,” the lack of official monuments dedicated to the revolution is profoundly political. He believes that: “The political and executive powers and the Ministry of Interior are against the revolution and its memory.”¹¹ According to him, two monuments symbolize the re-establishment of the previous regime: The Equestrian Statue of Bourguiba and the headstone in homage to the martyrs of the Ministry of Interior, located a few meters from one another. He explains:

“Placing a statue of Bourguiba right where the revolution took place is an act of revenge against the revolution, against the youth and the martyrs. It is a way of saying: we are back. As for the headstone, it is a statement by the Ministry of Interior, who is telling us, ‘we built this for our martyrs and you are not allowed to touch it or come near it. Whether you like it or not.’”¹² They know that nobody wants that headstone to be there. That’s why it is so inaccessible: they don’t want anyone to touch it.”

The two monuments are in fact inaccessible to the public. The statue of Bourguiba



was shortly accessible following its inauguration, but the public was barred from coming near it after tags were sprayed on the base of the statue in 2016. As for the headstone of the Ministry of Interior, it is located within the very large perimeter that the Ministry has closed off for its own security. It has never been accessible to passers-by. Bouazzi goes on to say: “The capital is an area occupied by the Ministry of Interior. They do what they want. They place barriers wherever they want. The Municipality is helpless.”¹³

What Monuments for the Revolution?

Going beyond the unwillingness to celebrate a revolution that came to deconstruct the political narrative based on a consensual and modernist conception of national unity, Iheb Guerhazi, architect and doctoral student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), believes that “the revolution has failed to define itself as an ideological project,” and, consequently, to be represented: “The revolution did not evolve from a moment to an idea. How can one represent a moment?” he asks.¹⁴

Guerhazi believes that there are two interconnected reasons for this failure: On the one hand, narrative structures had been absent from public spaces for twenty-three years under Ben Ali; and on the other, the political establishment in Tunisia has refused to embrace the radical revolutionary moment.

In contrast with the doxa that Ben Ali was right to invest heavily in shaping public spaces to solidify his presence, Guerhazi argues that the symbols of the Ben Ali era (the number “7,” the color purple, the clock towers in public squares) were empty shells, devoid of any meaningful narrative: Ben Ali wanted to hide the fact that he had nothing to say or add through an omnipresence of insignificance in public spaces. “The number 7 is merely that - a number [...] The clock towers are nothing more than that [...] All this was to say: ‘I am here, and I am not going anywhere.’ Twenty-five years after this void in representation, it was very unlikely that a sudden resurgence of meaningful representations would take place.”¹⁵

The rejection of radicality, the search for compromise and consensus, inherited from Ben Ali’s regime,¹⁶ and, more importantly, the inability to reinvent the national narrative to include the men and women who were left out during



decades of power monopolization by coastal areas is another reason that Guerhazi mentions to explain the revolution's failure in leaving a mark on public spaces:

“The first three years of the revolution were a radical moment. The dictator was gone. The State of 1956 was in shambles. People wanted radical change. They wanted to feel the change in their own lives, not just at the level of their collective psyche. They wanted their daily lives to change; they wanted to reimagine themselves as individuals. Alas, the only people who could offer such a change in Tunisia were the jihadists.”

The alliance between Ennahda Movement and Nidaa Tounes reinstated the national narrative of Bourguiba, which Ennahda hastened to adopt. This alliance also sealed shut the already small window of opportunity for radical change.

However, this longing for a new life and a new dawn for the country and its people seems to still be present in at least part of the population, and the promise of radical change was in part echoed by Kais Saied. It is no coincidence that his election in November 2019 was quickly followed by a large-scale public space cleaning and embellishment campaign by citizens. In fact, the campaign was entitled « حالة الوعي » (State of Consciousness), thereby signaling a reclamation of public space by citizens.

The lack of monuments in honor of the revolution is a sign of the refusal by the powers-that-be to acknowledge that the revolution has become part of the national narrative in its own right. For the moment, the national narrative of 1956 - that of great enlightened men and of modernization - still reigns supreme, despite being heavily contested. Under this narrative, the revolution is nothing more than a small hiccup along the way. The few tributes to the unknown individuals who lost their lives while expressing their desire for change carry very little weight, even when they are recognized by local authorities. Public space remains a significant political issue which, given the various ways in which it is either confiscated by the State or reclaimed by citizens, reveals the fluctuation between the return to the old regime, where everyone would remain in their place, and the advent of democratization, where marginalized groups and those who have historically been left out of the national narrative can have a say.¹⁷





Endnotes

1. The term was coined by Iheb Guermazi.
2. As confirmed by municipal councilor Henda Belhaj Ali.
3. Interview with Khayem Chemli, Tunis. March 2021.
4. Interview with Khayem Chemli, Tunis. March 2021.
5. The author of this article is preparing a documentary on the roundabouts of Kram.
6. Interview with Fathi Laayouni, Kram, September 2020.
7. Interview with Henda Belhaj Ali, Tunis, February 2021.
8. The square is in fact called “Martyrs’ Square” and pays tribute to two martyrs who died during clashes with the police in January 2011: Elyes Krir (killed on January 16, 2011 while defending the neighborhood at night with other residents. Elyes was killed by an unidentified shooter in a black car according to witnesses) and Alaaeddine El Thairi. According to one of them, Alaaeddine El Thairi is mentioned in the definitive list of the martyrs of the revolution.
9. Interview with Henda Belhaj Ali, Tunis, February 2021.
10. Lakhal, Malek. The “lack” of citizenship in Tunisia: A critical reading. Masters dissertation. Paris. 2017.
11. Interview with Ahmed Bouazzi via telephone. Tunis. February 2021.
12. Bouazzi used the Arabic expression “فوضىة فوضىة فوضىة.”
13. Interview with Ahmed Bouazzi via telephone. Tunis. February 2021.
14. Interview with Iheb Guermazi. Tunis. March 2021.
15. Interview with Iheb Guermazi. Tunis. March 2021.
16. Hibou Béatrice. *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte. 2006.
17. See: Rancière Jacques, *On the Shores of Politics*. Paris: Folio Essays. 2004



About the author



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Malek Lakhal is a Tunisian researcher and journalist. Her research focuses on citizenship, social movements, civil society organisations, and feminism. Prior to working at the Arab Reform Initiative, she was a journalist at Nawaat and a research assistant at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. She holds a master's degree in Political Theory from Sciences Po Paris.

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