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Revolution in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine: The Deterioration of the Terms of Exchange in a Skewed Political Market

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Abstract

In the media, in the discourse of the Tunisian political elite and also in a part of socio-political literature, the Tunisian revolution is conceived as an urban revolution, led by civil society, spearheaded by young people and the unemployed. We consider this approach as very problematic and even questionable in relation to the complex history of this revolution because it expresses an imbalance in the analysis of the power distribution between different actors. On the basis of a field survey conducted in the regions of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine in 2011 and 2012, the paper aims, using the concept of political market after having adapted it sociologically to the context, to point out two ideas: the first is that the collapse of the Ben Ali regime is due to the deterioration of the exchange's terms of Tunisian political market; the second concerns the rural hidden engine of the Tunisian revolution

Keywords: Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, political marketplace, Tunisian revolution, RCD

Methodological Introduction: the *Political Marketplace*

For decades exchanges based on supply and demand have invisibly governed the history of political phenomena in the Tunisian region of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine. These relationships however had fraudulent implications. The revolution's flashpoint marked the collapse of the whole edifice of this governing *marketplace*, propelling everything forward on a new trajectory that would entail the re-invention and re-ordering of the contents, principles, standards and social repercussions of local political relations.

The Tunisian republic's founding Parti Socialiste Destourien (Destour Socialist Party) name was changed in 1987 to become the Constitutional Democratic Rally party (CDR,

generally referred to by its French initials RDC) on the occasion of the removal from office of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali Bourguiba. The testimony of an elderly ex-member of the defunct Destour party demonstrates that the well-known 17 December 2010 Sidi Bouzid incident constituted the defining moment in the region's recent political history. This retired school principal witnessed the huge demonstration that took place in Sidi Bouzid on Saturday morning after the self-immolation of Bou Azizi. As he describes it: "you know... Sidi Bouzid's youth, the students in the institutes, they are always ready to demonstrate. They rise up at every opportunity (and they've always done so). But this time, it was the older people who went out on the streets protesting - adults ... the whole citizenry, folks from the countryside who assembled themselves in front of the wilaya. This is the thing about the revolution in Sidi Bouzid - it wasn't 'a handful of kids,' as it always was before. No! We're not talking about 'a bunch of children'! The folks who demonstrated on Saturday were the people of Sidi Bouzid, and they turned up wearing their traditional attire - their Lahfahs, Birnous', and Jubbas'[1]. These are seasoned, down-to-earth, sane, ordinary people who have never before marched in public places to protest anything. They're grown-ups, adults - some of them were Hajji[2], who just stood in silence in front of the provincial headquarters!"[3]

The above testimony referring to what happened locally in Sidi Bouzid (where, in 2004, sixty per cent of the population lived in rural areas compared to the national average of around 34 per cent),[4] strikingly ties into questions that subsequent field research proved to be true on a vast national scale, namely that a profound historical development had unfolded within the local political sphere: the type of historical relationship that had arisen between the region's elites and residents, on the one hand, and new and fledgling, unseasoned political elites, on the other hand, had definitively broken down.[5] The relationship had become so blighted that persons who were versed in thriving under its constraints (having come of age shaded by it) in the heat of the moment could only voice publicly their profound disenchantment - albeit honourably, with near majestic serenity. It was as if Bouazizi himself had ripped into shreds the curtain that had long veiled the truth of the blight.

Before we explore protest slogans arising amid demonstrations throughout the region in the wake of the Bouazizi incident, or sparked by other injustices demanding remedy, an important methodological question must be addressed: can we point to a direct causal relationship between, on the one hand, the various social indicators in the region that paint a picture of significant development disparities and inequities (such as rates and measures of unemployment and poverty, or the expanding numbers of marginalized residents in poorly-served city districts) and, on the other hand, the eruption of demonstrations and rallies that subsequently overran the entire nation, leading to the collapse of the regime?

If we surmise that there is no conclusive evidence of a direct connection between

disparities and demonstrations - or one that can be proven via a methodology of positivist causality - then what might be the nature and content of linkages here between the two, i.e., between the situations and/or the phenomena we are considering? Such information could enable us to translate the region's negative or poor development indicators into policies and practices informing pragmatic opposition to the existing regime (and the wider political system), thereby instilling a certain measure of (and prospect for) accountability for the situation. Is it possible to get a handle on these links and synapses - so to speak - to better fathom matters in the record, in cognitive terms?

To plunge into the myriad complexities involved in attempting to fathom the paradox of the eruption of revolution in Sidi Bouzid-Kasserine irrespective of ubiquitous RCD cells throughout the same areas, I opted to focus my attention on clearly predominant local frameworks of recounting the prevailing political situation: of concepts associated with marketing, auction, brokerage, logistics, supply and demand, hoarding and saving. It transpires that fieldwork has demonstrated that people throughout the region describe the political situation in surprisingly similar terms - be they civilians or politicians, RCD party cadre and adversaries, trade union members or people without such affiliation.

For their part, the social sciences place numerous epistemological caveats on the concept of "political marketplace" and its true beneficiaries (Blerald 1991: 235-263; Monmarquete 1988: 336-360; Macpherson 1961: 490-497; Fligstein 1996: 656-673)[6], relating to three main issues: firstly, the difficulty of applying market rationales or rationality to political action; secondly, the awkward and unwieldly idea, when assessing political acts, of purely private and personal interests dedicated to self-realization constituting the sole and exclusive driver of market exchanges - contrary to what are normally assumed collective interests and benefits; and, thirdly, the strain involved in conceptualizing political action as entailing the unfettered freedom of individuals to invest in the political marketplace based upon their own specific cultural affiliations and ties (Caillé 1994: 3-16). All these issues above have a bearing on how we might define this concept of marketplace, at both the general and local levels.

To start with, the market concept used to study political phenomenon in democratic administrations (or systems) assumes that - ideologically - democratic systems offer an equal playing field to citizens, by means of the equal value of their votes in the electoral market. This mitigates somewhat the damages people might incur in engaging with economic markets that are not based on this principle. Clearly, however, this approach may not be useful for studying the same phenomenon in societies where political tyranny prevails.

Secondly, things like bids, resources, goals, initiatives and ideas that typically shape the *political market* may come to be impacted and transformed not only by rising

and falling quantifiable material values of things and services exchanged, but also by varying estimations on the part of active marketplace participants, of the symbolic value placed on their exchanges and reciprocal services. At the same time, individual initiatives and complex collective action mechanisms may render these symbolic and intangible values susceptible to conversion into significant material value.[7]

Thus, the *local political market* implicit in this concept encompasses the sum of reciprocally exchanged benefits and services (both material and symbolic) accruing from managing the local public interest and the totality of competing political acts undertaken by those engaged in the marketplace - merging one with the other and deploying private or collective resources according to their specific circumstances and goals. Generally, these are aimed at obtaining distinctive socio-political positions to best continue (and expand) receipt of such benefits, milking and profiting from them to the fullest possible extent. Needless to say, all of this takes place in spite of everything being carried out in the name of delivering the public's interest._

From a procedural point of view, *distinctive socio-political positions* (vantage points/stations/callings) provide access to government and administrative offices and responsibilities allowing their incumbents/proprietors to extend their influence over others, enabling them to obtain and manage ample information on the total available public affairs resources required for allocation to government budgets, administrative entities, projects *to be completed* in the regions, official activities as well as any side benefits these resources may spawn with the creation of new entities, laws, and procedures. In short, at play here is the total number of social and legal positions that help their incumbents/office-holders to gain moral influence over others, affording them as a result the highest priority in terms of accessing specified quantities and qualities of the desired *deliverables* as well as the opportunity to accumulate (and on occasion hoard) them. Such activities and their inherent public/private goals necessitate collaboration of a political character amongst all involved. Yet it is the principle (ethos) of competitive contention that governs relations between the contending players, creating a conflictual and unequal framework for the exchange and extension of benefits.

Two additional points on how the local *political market* operates: the first relates to characteristics of the local community; the second to the latter and the central authority. With regard to the first, the local community of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine is one with a Bedouin cultural history which is of continuing referential value in managing social relations within the local kinship groups, allowing preservation of relations of direct and daily exchange between their members. This all had an important impact on local political relations.

As for the local groups' relations with central authority, these also involve characteristics shared with much of Tunisia's interior: firstly, they were typically - until the onset of independence - based on traditional local notables' monopoly power of social

and moral influence over the population at large. Secondly, functions and postings obtained through the political marketplace of these regions, endowed as they are with a rural cultural morphology, rapidly become valued social-material assets that play an unmediated role at the local level in their winning over the kin and patron-client loyalties of the local context. Thirdly, political activists occupying prominent positions within a broader political marketplace and not belonging to the local community prove themselves able to directly penetrate the marketplace - assisted in this by their elevated responsibilities and offices within the decades - long ruling RCD party's organizational hierarchy.

On the foundation of the foregoing prefatory remarks, this research proceeded with the following hypothesis: the explosive political conflagration detonated by Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid and swiftly engulfing Kasserine was an expression of an extreme example of the chimerical and fanciful satiation of a local political market of inter-related calculations and mechanisms that have been entrenched - viscerally, mentally, and practically - at least since independence.

Given the corroded peasant-pastoral (Bedouin) culture dominant in the province, this acute manifestation of the phenomenon of a fundamentally illusive meeting of the demands of the market gradually led, on the one hand, to a wrenching away of the last remnant of trust in (and legitimacy of) the local political activists who were working in support of the RCD regime, and additionally to dramatically accentuating the purely utilitarian profitability of their work. In the particular context of Bouazizi's horrific self-immolation, it was the latter dimension that the outraged demonstrators viewed as the source of tyrannical vested interests, nepotism, and violation of individual human dignity - eroding the values of justice, equality and freedom.

Revolution's Eve, Sidi Bouzid, and Kasserine Political Community

Consistent with our research hypothesis outlined above, we would begin here with our analysis focusing on the role enjoyed by the RCD in the local *political marketplace*, with its plethora of activities co-opting and encompassing the vast majority of political actors in these regions. Following this we turn to examine both openly public and covert opposition to the RCD.

According to accounts of individuals who turned out in person in front of the Sidi Bouzid provincial headquarters as soon news of the Mohamed Bouazizi incident spread (as it did, like wildfire), the slogans ringing out in the heat of the initial manifestation of outrage and protest were not rising up in an orderly fashion, evidencing any degree of collective organisation. Rather, the individuals and groups who began chanting slogans denouncing the ruling (state's) injustice, oppression, and undisguised contempt for its own citizenry were simply members of Bouazizi's extended family, along with a sprinkling of other attendees. Otherwise, the essentially spontaneous turn-out was a disorderly hubbub that bespoke the hounding and humiliation every poor person

encountered trying to make a living - just to survive - and the violations of people's dignity that left them the sole option of suicide.

The following morning matters were different during a huge demonstration in the city. Its numbers were swollen additionally by throngs of people from all parts of Sidi Bouzid's surrounding countryside and further afield, people who had come for trading purposes or to attend the weekly market day that was taking place concurrently. On this occasion a number of more organised chants rang out: "With Souls and Blood, We Redeem you, Mu-ham-mad [al-Bouazizi]!" and "work is a right you gang of thieves!". Other demonstrators tried out other rhythmic slogans here and there, such as "no to tyranny, no to insult, yes to dignity".

These slogans were not composed by common folk in the Tunisian interior; they were rather the product of the intellectual exertion of a new cultural-political-syndicalist elite that was, willy-nilly, ushering in profound transformations in the rural society of Sidi Bouzid (and elsewhere in the country where the zealous roll-out of education impacted life after independence). Taking into consideration the gamut of economic, social, urban and demographic transformations that we describe in subsequent chapters of this study - while yet keeping an eye upon the topic we are observing presently - we can hazard that the transformations at the cultural and political levels were perhaps the most important.

One such transformation was on the cultural level: the emergence of a new footing, among Bedouin families, of sole responsibility for bearing the burden of their own positions in the local social hierarchy; a development that had arisen from the social-cultural trajectory set off by the historical liberation of the Bedouin family from the kinship unit's collective domination and control of basic life conditions and means of production (pastures, cultivable terrain, water points and security).

At a subsequent stage, the ubiquitous advent of schooling served to *liberate* children of these families from the constrictive circumstances of rural settlement and agricultural labour, offering in the form of a school diploma a distinctly new type of resource that opened up the option of working in incipient urban centres to pursue an essentially individualistic lifestyle, even if in some contexts maintaining kinship values and references in interactions with their families of origin. At the same time, the complex process of social differentiation then underway afforded greater opportunities for the individual and family *I* to proclaim independence of the collective *we* of the kinship group - with each new such *I* unevenly bestowing dignity to (or wreaking humiliation upon) families and individuals - without the decisive prospect of any compensation from the kinship group in terms of morale, as was the case in the past when affiliation with a dynasty or a sovereign would assure resources, protection and a modicum of dignity when needed, come what may. The following table shows the outcome of Bedouin real estate ownership of the lands in which they were dispersed, over more than a century of colonial and national settlement policies.[8]

Tab. 1: Landholding peasant farmers, Sidi Bouzid & Kasserine 2004-2005 (percentage)

Peasant holdings grouped by number	Sisi Bouzid	Kasserine	Entire Country
(No land holdings (0	0.3	0.3	1.9
hectares 0-5	40.3	36.5	52.3
5-10	23.6	26.5	21.2
10-20	19.5	19.7	13.8
20-50	13.3	13.6	8
50-100	2.3	2.8	2
100+	0.7	0.6	0.8

Source: Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture, 2006[9]

With the economic transformations in full swing in this period in the sectors of agriculture, trade and services (and to a lesser extent industry), new labour relations were created. These were richer than past relations that were typically centred around pasture contracts and the sale of animals, wool and leather in the markets. These new relations created opportunities for communication and exchange much broader and more intensive than those yielded by *zardah*[10] parties, harvest and mowing festivals[11], wedding celebrations and seasonal markets. However, they also altered the direction and purpose of people's movement and displacements through geographical space - reflecting and giving rise to increased unemployment, unprecedently chaotic living conditions in residential neighbourhoods, and formerly rare jobbing in feeble and unstructured economic sectors. Local political activity also witnessed changes over the past two decades with increasingly profound constriction of the scope and horizons of political initiative owing to the rise of political authoritarianism.

Without reviewing here the history of how eminent rural families in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine started forming the cells and attached them to the Liberal Constitutional Party (LCP), or how they subsequently mobilised the rural population to join the Party, we can specify that this founding elite soon took up the leadership of peasants and underprivileged people of all classes. We can also state that to some degree this elite gained its position from the high status and societal pedigree (as seen from a grassroots perspective) enjoyed by its prominent leaders (including the more educated individuals in their ranks).

Amongst these last were persons who early on launched themselves into the process of settling down, with a focus on cultivating the land. As they were relatively successful in this endeavour, they were soon able to increase their socio-economic agency. Equally these cells' members incorporated those who had involved themselves in the national movement's armed resistance against colonialism, who also became *personnages*

importants. In sociological terms the cells of the party replaced the main ancient political structure of Bedouin society, especially the *mi'aad* (the tribal council). The constituents of these embryonic organizational cells directly linked up with the country's rural interior region and a more inclusive and encompassing political vocabulary - Tunisia, Homeland, Citizen, People, State, Nation, Development.

The product of schools being built throughout the interior regions including Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, these pioneering elites pursued their various roles to their advantage for a relatively sustained period (by-passing the 1960's crisis in socialist policies aimed at promoting solidarity) until the mid-1980s when their advancing ages gradually led to their elimination by new leadership elites from the arenas of political activity, giving rise to a political crisis in the country's centre that ultimately grew to depose the country's *symbolic leader* (Habib Bourguiba) in 1987 - with whom the entire vocabulary and syntax of the country's political space with its limitations and potentials was long associated. The crisis further dampened the elderly freedom fighting elite's ability to influence and mobilise rural people as the radiance, vitality and impact of their message began to fade. Thus, when the RCD gathered upon the rubble of Bourguiba's Socialist Constitutional Party, the traditional leadership was in the process of gradually ceding place to the rising younger generation.

Enjoying kinship with established politically active families, the newcomers were not necessarily anthropologically distinct from their predecessors, but they did have new and important features: firstly, most were born after independence and studied in the new nation state's modern educational institutions (rather than the *zawiya* religious schools or schooling-focused branches of the Zaytuna mosque (abolished by the independence state); secondly, they generally entered into political action in the 1980s (Tab. 2 and 3); and thirdly, more than 66% belonged to the categories of craftsmen, merchants, junior employees, teachers, professors and retirees (Tab. 4), and quite distinct from the Bedouins of old who converted to agriculture in the 1930s and 1940s.

Tab. 2: Educational Level and Party Status of RCD Members (percentage), Sidi Bouzid & Kasserine, 2010

Educational level	Percentage of total participants	A leader in the local party cell, at a regional or national level (percentage of the total category)
Illiterate	39.1	2.6
Basic first stage (primary old system)	37.6	4
(Primary second stage (or secondary	16.9	17
High education	6.4	100

Source: fieldwork data

Tab. 3: RCD Affiliation by age group, Sidi Bouzid & Kasserine, 2010

Party (RCD)	Age Group	Percentage
	18-29	11.4
	30-49	44.7
	50-59	23.8
	60 and over	20.1
	Total	100

Source: fieldwork data

Tab. 4: Affiliation to the RCD as per professional status

Categories by occupational Status	Percentage of the total of those over 18 years old	The percentage in the RCD
Employed	27	35.8
Unemployed	19.3	14.9
Retired	4	12.6
Helping family in craft, agricultural, or commerce	9.3	10.6
Housekeeping (Women)	25.9	15.8
Pupil or student	8	0.5
Unable to work	6.5	9.8
Total	100	100

Source: fieldwork data

Which positions within the *political marketplace* did this nascent leadership and their party associates take up for themselves? Let us here offer three general observations towards defining some features of this marketplace.

First, we must note the remarkable historical development of this market. In the immediate aftermath of independence, only a few dozen Liberal Constitutional Party cells - the only political force in the countryside at that time - existed. However, this would soon multiply several times over in the wake of independence and especially with the emergence of the RCD in 1988. Henceforth, virtually all population groups in both rural and urban areas began to be involved - in one way or another - with increasingly intensive exchanges inside broad-based political networks of groups that were individually seeing their membership expand exponentially: in 1987 there were 187 RCD cells in the Kasserine Governorate; their number in Sidi Bouzid was likewise no more than 190. But by 2010, these figures had skyrocketed to 536 and 620 cells, respectively.

Secondly, 76.7 per cent of those who affiliated with the RCD network in 2010 were functionally illiterate, having no more than a primary level of education. An important third observation is that more than 50 per cent of these RCD affiliated cadres were either unemployed or working heads of households engaged in fields of agriculture, commerce, and small services, if they were not in fact unemployed, disabled, or in the case of women, homemakers.

The above observations allow us to specify that the RCD's social fabric was composed, in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, of a broad rural base of illiterate and semi-illiterates. These are the people who led in staking out an RCD monopoly on organising activity within the political *marketplace* - right up until the eve of the revolution. They were often spread throughout the countryside, due to the low rate of urbanisation in these areas. They are mixed into distinct social groups characterised by poverty and precarious fragility of their livelihoods - including housewives, school children and secondary or college students, the unemployed, family helpers, and the disabled (Bourdieu and Sayed 1964). Similar groups of people living in precarity were also to be found in new urban centres brimming with the streams of new arrivals coming in from the neighbouring countryside to eke out a living. At the same time, the former landlords (after their sedentarisation) of the centres of new towns cultivated a typical interest in political and municipal affairs that could lead to affiliating with the RCD. In the countryside they were distributed among old Bedouin kinship groups, with whom they could merge in settlements. Amongst all these sub-groupings and societal components, lineage and neighbourliness continued to activate a variety of transactional exchange relations - although nearly a century of preference for independent cultivation, in their own fields and farms, and for controlling their own family destinies, certainly undermined any potential for a collective approach to living off the land.

The local leaders are woven into this fabric's warp - each located in their place within a hierarchy of political responsibilities. Most were descendants of artisans, petty merchants, teachers, professors and public employees, with some from the upper echelons of free traders and remarkably too, from among retirees.

Tab. 5: RCD local leaders by professional group

Category	Percentage on the total of the local leaders of RCD
Farmer	7
A worker in industry or trade	0
Craftsman, Freelancer or Small Trader	9
User, junior employee, or teacher	11.2
General education Instructor	11

Higher education Instructor	7.5
Employer/Investor in industry/commercial services	4.9
family helpers	6.2
Unemployed	0
Retired	35
Housekeeping (Women)	0
Pupil or Student	8.2
Disabled (unable to work)	0
Total	100

Source: fieldwork data

What were/are the objects and characteristic features of transactions in this political marketplace, and how are they initiated? How are their fruits distributed to stakeholders? The answer to these questions requires taking into account several important issues. Firstly, the symbolic dimensions of exchange and of myriad transactions, whose significance sometimes exceeds their physical or material dimensions; these open up space to all, even those who are not directly concerned with political affairs. Secondly, the importance of state institutions in providing this market with the required material resources and social and cultural considerations. Thirdly, the highly centralised political control of the marketplace's operations regulated by an authoritarian regime that controls the entire course of the country's political affairs.

Between the advent of the French colonial period and through two decades of emerging independent state, political action's primordial *marketplace* witnessed a transformation of its dynamics, frameworks, and tools. Prior to independence and during the two decades that followed, embryonic political engagement in party cells firmly bound a kinship group's lineages and positions of power not only to a political party but also to the bureaucratic and technical apparatus of the state. At this point, the scope of any speculative gamble on grassroots political engagement transcended achieving the local social prestige required for mediation with the outside world.[12] It was now expanding far beyond this: to encompass the potential rewards of political action at the national level within the framework of the administrative apparatus and modernizing policy of a single party state devoted to addressing the hierarchy of power and public responsibilities across the local-national spectrum of the body politic, and under its central authority. In the context of re-configuring the modern Tunisian state, this transformation in political marketplace(s) began in the state bureaucratic institutions (*wilaya* - governorate, *mu'tamadiya* - delegation, *baladiya* - municipality, *i'mada* - elders commission/deanship, regional council) and service administrations

(health, welfare, aid, banks, and agriculture). In consequence, the general public's greatest hope of *winning the lottery* lay in these institutions - something they could literally bet on. The central state and its party took on a god-like power to bestow and withhold its grace in life and death matters, upon which all who aspired to agency and distinction would become henceforth dependent.

In the absence of a political rival, what does the state and its party inject into this market? In short: all the resources required for the development process, and all emblematic social networking benefits that the state accords to everyone immersed in the market at the local level who contributes successfully to building and continually restoring the state's legitimacy. Political activists can benefit from the material and symbolic largess offered by the single party state to this marketplace - if they are well-positioned within the bureaucratic frameworks pumping state resources into the arteries of regional economic life and if they are (or claim to be) sufficiently active in mediating the networks that bind local groups to central political authority.

For example, heads and active deputies of even the smaller RCD cells are accorded the honour and attendant privileges of speaking on behalf of the local groups they ostensibly "represent", while yet advancing their own more ego-centric concerns. Sometimes their active role in cells could help chiefs revive or sustain bygone glory days of their family honour, generally most often accumulated through past chairing of events on the local court calendar or overseeing traditional community hearings and deliberations. Attracting the party's attention can promise tangible rewards such as obtaining possession or use of state lands, or licenses to undertake various activities. In addition, an RCD cell enables its head and immediate assistants, sometimes along with the mayor, to obtain advance and reliable information on pipeline development projects and social subsidies proposed for the locality and its needy population: employment and income-generating programs, subsidies for social support and agricultural inputs, provision of work and building permits and licenses to open commercial ventures and stores, etc. In keeping with the requirements of productive economic and social activity, the local RCD chief plays the role of *indispensable mediator* between service seekers and the local political authorities controlling the distribution of those services.

For their part, RCD-affiliated "regional coordination committees" and off-shooting "federations" placed their leading people into direct contact with the regional political and police/security authorities. Hence, each local leader in this framework was able to construct a web of relationships facilitating exchanges beyond the immediate local level - *radiating* influence and promising connection horizontally, if selectively, to relatives, friends, and neighbours and anyone seeking to preserve or advance an interest, and who might therefore require access to some kind of political clout. In the multiple and shifting confluences of these exchanges - rendered ambiguous by varying primacy of relationships - a measure of space for region/area-based political activity is invariably eked out, generating a certain *esprit de corps*. These spaces are nearly congruent with

the jurisdictional boundaries of party cells, federations, or coordinating committee - which in themselves, at the end - share the same geographical or cadastral coordinates of the governorate.

In a similar way, vertically, party cells' heads, federations' officials, and coordinating committee clerks found themselves functioning in a capacity of intermediary between, on the one hand, the party's central administration and the regional bureaucratic and security apparatus and, on the other, the local groups represented by the people involved in the various party cells.

Naturally enough, intertwined clientelist relationships developed between three parties: the local political activists; the bureaucratic and security political apparatuses supervising the redistribution of public resources, the implementation of development plans and imposition of tight security controls over the opposition; and the central political elites. These relations garnered benefits at the regional level for individuals or families touched by each of the three parties (dependent on local standards and the specific activities, ambitions, and socio-economic factors). They also ensured contestants vying for the highest posts within the party's central organs would have access to indispensable regional electoral funds.

During the last twenty years, this political marketplace witnessed profound changes that provoked real and profound crisis, disabled its internal working mechanisms from within, and injected unprecedented turbulence into relationships with the grassroots elites that, following independence, had been securely anchored and nourished - first by the National Movement and subsequently by the state's central ruling elite.

The first element of transformation in this political marketplace - which began to surface in the early 1980s - manifested itself in the new elites who were steadily signing on to the RCD, and little by little taking their place locally as its leaders. Quite simply, these people did not derive their legitimacy from the historic struggle of the national movement, nor for the latter's ethos of valuing public interest before private - notwithstanding the absence of any ideological inhibition on pursuit of family or personal advantage. The outcome of this was that people's relationship with them was reduced to dimensions that were purely utilitarian, morale-boosting and material.

A second dimension presented itself almost simultaneously: just when the rolling out of schools throughout the interior regions had begun to produce fresh graduates seeking public service employment, the state's vigorous program to buttress itself with bureaucracies had begun to fizzle out: gone were the days when it was possible for a *State Labour Market* to smoothly absorb successive waves of graduating classes of job seekers. To make matters even more acute, the impact of education itself contributed to the intensifying demand for improved living conditions in an interior countryside witnessing the erosion of traditional agricultural economic structures - this at a time of nearly viral rural popularisation of urban consumer culture.

A third twist of the political marketplace kaleidoscope occurred after 1987 as the new

party leadership and the *crème de la crème* of state officials had begun to espouse a technocratic vision in which political frameworks (and marketplaces) were purely practical techniques and instruments for political officials to reach project or program objectives. This would allow them to formally meet all stipulated legal specifications and contract obligations, regardless of the public's interest or the educational, moral and developmental contents and purposes of the program in question. Driving this transformation home was the enactment of state security policies targeting - lethally - all voices of opposition without exception, and effectively closing in upon itself.

Finally, we must consider that the sheer number of ruling party cells brimming with recently educated memberships increased significantly with their own efforts to spawn ever-newer cells in the party's name. In this they were driven, as it were, *from below* to feed their leadership ambitions and the associated need to be on the receiving end of state-distributed largess of material and symbol-laden benefits channelled via the cells of the state's administrative and security institutions. After all, these new cells needed also to meet the demands of other local groups in their jurisdiction for the comforts and conveniences of modern life (such as drinking water, electricity, paved roads, medical services, schools, institutes, programs to help the poor, programs for distributing subsidised fodder and other agricultural inputs, etc.). To secure a dominant and largely uncontested position within the national RCD hierarchy, the local RCD cells needed, as a priority, to win over these new votes during the election season, and thereby prevent newly reached people from being co-opted by the political opposition (however fledgling it may have been). Lastly, access to a steady flow of state resources was critical to take part in the regime's newly expanded intelligence networks, particularly in border areas.

The political situation in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine at the brink of the revolution betrays a deceptive satiation of the local political marketplace. The great contraction, discussed above, of the labour market in the state-run public sector, led to a mushrooming of thousands of unemployed university graduates and holders of higher degrees. As a result, throughout the interior, ordinary people beheld a dulling of the shine and *glitter* once radiating from their leading local chief, *representative of the people*, local and regional staff members of RCD coordinating committees - and saw a marked decline in prestige of all who had not built up their credibility and legitimacy through a post-1987 working immersion in the national movement as their starring and vigorous predecessors had done. The independence *Johnny-come-lately* brokers in the political market were forced to rely on the assistance of relatives, friends, neighbours, and customers to find an advantageous spot in the market and this did not help them to burnish their image - particularly in the wake of being only able to offer their people the comparatively meagre scraps of practical, material, or moral assistance that they were able to procure from a markedly less influential access to decision makers and to resources.

Parallel economy activities as informal services, trading, and smuggling networks responded to the local population's desperate search for livelihoods that were clearly not available to them through the standard *official* investment channels and employment sites. At the same time, expanding areas of irrigated agriculture - especially in Sidi Bouzid *wilaya* - amplified the urgency felt among farmers for intensive investments of agricultural resources and inputs (loans, fodder, fertilizers, water, etc.). This called upon them to (precipitously) expand their previously manageably limited reciprocal networking with proximate neighbours and relatives, in order to enable them to rise to the daunting task of *scaling up* to wheel and deal with a mixed bag of unseasoned and untested prospective commercial partners - not to mention negotiating mazes of new administrative intermediaries. Predictably enough, navigating such unfamiliar territory resulted in them scrambling up flimsy new hierarchical edifices of patron-client relations to seek insurance protections against inevitable penalties and claims in the event of legal violations, absence of permits and licenses, delinquent payments of taxes, fees, and duties, or illegal acquisition and/or usage of subsidised materials or non-compliance with the specified procedures in place to do this or that.

The upshot of the interlinked and tumultuous transformations outlined above is that the local political marketplace in these areas underwent a profound and severe organizational crisis with the following problematic features.

On the one hand, numbers of people *buying into* a political party - the *Rally* (RCD) in this case - increased, even if the goods on offer, in terms of political clout and expected benefits, had shrunk - given that the size of the state's labour market was undergoing dramatic reduction. The numbers of participants were forcefully (and therefore somewhat artificially) driven up through self-interested exertions on the part of party leaders and their close colleagues to mobilise ever greater masses of people engaging with the cells under their *command*, to secure their personal triumph in the election of Federations as members, and thence taking control of coordination committees - ultimately to enhance their prestige and political sway from the region. The vast majority of RCD recruits thus conscripted were from social groupings in the lower echelons of society, lured to participate in the local political market (dominated by the RCD) venture on the transactional basis of loyalty-in-exchange-for-material-and-financial-benefits, with at least 50 per cent of these numbers being unemployed workers, family members, housewives/homemakers, and people with disabilities. Bouazizi's mother featured prominently among the ranks of these groupings above.

On the other hand, the *shine* of activists in the marketplace of services and *benefits exchange* (as we might call it) declined in comparison to the glitter that attached to administration and security personnel and to first-time investors (including at times non-local, new investors) pulling the strings of the parallel economy and the smuggling networks. These latter groupings did not join up as party members with the marketplace of services and benefits exchange - even for those among them who had integrated

themselves in the party. Rather, they did so often as senior personnel weaning some influence over matters of administration and security. Their provision of services in these domains was chiefly geared to considerations of personal biases and favouritism, favour procurement (often duplicitous), bribery and back-scratching. As we will see, this resulted in the erosion of the RCD leadership's political legitimacy at local and regional levels, and the growth of feelings of frustration and political demands of a weighty social and moral nature zeroing in on targets of injustice and tyranny.
When the protests and demonstrations erupted strongly in the areas of Sidi Bouzid and then in Kasserine, the overwhelming majority of the masses that ignited them were operating outside all opposition party frameworks, and the size of the members of these political parties combined did not exceed 8.2% of all those affiliated in the region (whether recognized or secret parties). The vast majority leading the protests were the unemployed, students, casual laborers, minor state officials, teachers, housewives, and finally workers in trades and the industrial sector.

Tab. 6: Participation (at least one gathering) in the demonstrations by occupation

Professional category	Percentage of demonstrating members per category	Percentage of category on the total of the demonstrators
Farmworker	28.9	7
Manufacturing or Commercial Sector Workforce	61.8	8.5
Artisan, Independent Contractor, Small Merchant	28.3	3.6
Junior White-Collar Personnel, Casual Day Laborers, Teachers	46.5	9.1
Mid-Level Cadre, Professors	64.1	1.6
High-Level White-Collar Personnel, Entrepreneurs	17.8	0.1
Industry, Commerce or Services Owners or Investors	40.9	0.5
Unemployed	63.4	34.4
Retired	9.4	0.7
Informally supporting family via crafts, garden kitchens, small trades and services	30.1	7.4
Housekeeping and maintenance (women)	11.9	8.7
Pupils or Students	74.7	17.4
Unable to Work, Disabled	6.9	1

Source: fieldwork data

The connection between the basic attributes of these protestors and the themes of their slogans and chants in the demonstrations becomes clear if we examine the various social strata and professional categories taking part in them. Thus, we can see immediately from the above table that the highest degree of participation in public protest within single category is to be found among pupils and students - successively followed by the ranks of mid-level cadre, professors, the unemployed, the manufacturing & commercial sector's workforce, junior white-collar personnel, casual day laborers, and teachers. Their participation contrasts with the lower participation rates found among the disabled, the retired, and the women working in the domestic context, the senior executives, the self-employed, craftsmen and small-scale traders, and finally peasant workers.

Thus, as we can see, Bouazizi's act triggered the outrage and vocal protest of the most educated cohorts of people who - above all others - flooded the streets with chants and banners decrying the prevailing regime. Not only had the vanguard 44.1 per cent of demonstrators completed a secondary or higher level of education with 57.1 per cent of unemployed protesters enjoying a similar educational level, a full 23 per cent of them were enrolled in programs of higher education. These percentages were matched by women: of the 22.4 per cent of women who participated in the demonstrations, 54.9 per cent of them were at secondary education levels of cohorts 1 or 2 compared to 53.7 per cent for men.

Beyond youth's engagement in the uprising, 32.7 per cent of those who took part in it from the start were over forty years old, with 4 per cent of those over sixty. "They came out and stood in silent vigil in front of the governorate building" reliable eyewitness reported.

What prompted all of these people to protest in the streets, beyond the immediate, outward spark of Bouazizi's self-immolation? The above-referenced crisis besetting the political marketplace brought on a plummet in status and problem-solving sway of novice cadres in the (RCD) - traditionally the *go-to* channel for distribution of the majority of state job market of offers, services and social benefits. For a whopping 97.5 per cent of participants in demonstrations, the inability of the state's job market to alleviate or remedy unemployment figured on top of the list of underlying causes of the uprising and opening of the revolution's floodgates. Their perception is credible because the largest number of participants in the protests were in fact the unemployed. In field survey after field survey, respondents among the demonstrators overwhelmingly identified the prime suspects implicated in the collapse of the job market and its societal repercussions as being government administrations. In their opinion these were rife with misconduct and corruption, wherein bribery and nepotism mechanisms had become essential to access job opportunities and other essentials. Ranking second place after unemployment, 96.2 per cent of respondents identified corruption in government administration as the key factor in the outbreak of protests.

Significantly, a statistical 20.2 per cent of respondents among the demonstrators worked extra hours, with 61.9 per cent of them taking up unlicensed gigs outside their day jobs in handicrafts, petty trading, and services - such as those in which Mohamed Bouazizi had been engaged. Taken together, these all constituted a labyrinthine *underground* economy. This was an essential and highly active sector that ran parallel to the mainstream local economy. In public the government decried and claimed to be combating it. However, the administration found it expedient to discretely tolerate its existence - along with the increased opportunities it presented civil servants for bribery, favouritism and extortion. Some influential individuals in the central authority even went on record to encourage and engage themselves in it. Although the leading factors underlying the outbreak of the protests are multifaceted and interwoven, it is worth noting that the percentage of physically participating demonstrators with livelihoods in this shadow economy tops (albeit slightly) the percentage of those who were not working therein: 40.2 per cent and 37.8 per cent, respectively.

Leaving the issue of licensing of work in the shadow economy aside, this component's research focus highlighted - predictably perhaps - that the percentage of interviewed protesters who were working in the shadow economy (whether overtime, on the side, or full time) and placed the lion's share of blame for the country's plight upon corrupt government reached a nearly unanimous 99 per cent. But possibly more important than this perception that corruption was the leading cause of the outbreak of revolution, there is a point that emerges here having more to do with the actual events of the revolution as such: of the various categories of working/employed protesters affiliated as members with the RCD, 53.6 per cent were engaged in shadow economy enterprises without a legal license. This would suggest that they either had received a green light from party and government security forces, who could be counted on to *look the other way* - this permission being their rightful entitlement as participants in the RCD corner of the political marketplace - or suffered from the administration's corruption as much as any fellow demonstrators who might have marched with them, but were RCD-unaffiliated souls - and on that basis were excluded from the marketplace.

What were the party affiliations of the demonstrators? Supporters of opposition parties, whether legally authorised or officially prohibited, were few in number throughout the Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine areas prior to the uprising of 14 January, so the statistical findings here are indicative only of the extent of their involvement in the demonstrations once they had erupted there.

The first thing to note here is that approximately seventy per cent of all those aged over 18 who were involved in either legal or clandestine opposition parties took active part in the demonstrations, while among the rest of the participants only 37 per cent did so. Second, the highest participation rate chalked up in the protests was that of the group of individuals who were members of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) and recorded as un-affiliated with any party: 94 per cent of this cohort's total.

But perhaps the biggest surprise we encountered is that some 25 per cent of those persons participating in the protest included virtually all genders, ages, and social groupings within the two single most important social categories among protesters: the unemployed and family members working informally and without a salary within the extended families themselves. Important too is that the participation percentage of *RCD-people* in the demonstrations went up to 33 per cent in Kasserine, as contrasted with only 18 per cent in Sidi Bouzid. If these percentages indicate on the one hand a dissolution of party discipline within this political entity - suffering as it had been on revolution's eve from severe imbalances in the equity and fairness of its political marketplace - they also suggest that the upsurge of events from Sidi Bouzid to Kasserine over time forcefully destabilized the party's foundations, unleashing a repressive old guard reaction against novice cadres and their relatives, neighbours, and friends. The mounting pressures they endured may have led them towards disavowing their party memberships and what were its increasingly paltry entitlements.

The previous analysis enables us to draw some conclusions. To begin with, on the eve of the revolution, the regime's elaborate political machine for its multi-level organization and management of local political marketplaces - the RCD - had all but broken down. This was due to a perfect storm of factors including: the metamorphosis in the state's command of the political marketplace and its mechanisms; the rise of the underground/shadow economy; and the frustrated impetus of the educated for building connection and agency in the wider world - young people who were open to what was happening all around them and keen to be a part of it, but feeling very much that they had no future.

A second conclusion concerns the regime's political opposition. Investigations on the ground revealed the weak influence the opposition had on people's daily life - not surprisingly, given that the predominating party hierarchy and command structures were primitive and insular as well as discriminatory. Access to the marketplace enclosure and its benefits was above all restricted to males and contingent on primary relations; social groups without great economic or demographic weight had no substantive place in it (groups with a pronounced orientation towards political Islam constituted an exception to this). Significant here also was the organizational and ideological weakness of the non-Islamic opposition groupings on the one hand and the delay on the part of the Islamicists in deciding to take part in the demonstrations. These two factors were at the heart of the organisational turbulence that beset the members of UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union) - the country's foremost trade union - amid the various blocs of protesters.

A final point can be made pertaining to the community of protest itself: an assemblage of the young and educated in the society, it was independent and unbound by any particular political party. Feeling politically alienated in lives of desperation and privation, they felt that the ruling party was nothing more than a machine serving

private interests at both the local and central levels. For them and others in the lower reaches of the country's social structure, belonging to the RCD no longer offered any tangible benefit.

Protest Dynamics

As stated in the introductory remarks to this study, it is difficult to establish a direct causal connection between economic and social indicators on the one hand, and the political events erupting in Sidi Bouzid and spreading throughout the country on the other hand - it is after all possible to use one and the same methodology to prove something quite the opposite.[13] In the past, Tunisia had known social and economic crises in these same and other regions, some of them even more profound, without leading to similar results. Nonetheless, even should we prove that the unprecedented presence of educated yet unemployed and marginalized youth in the 2010 demonstrations was a new and significantly impactful social force in the daily lives of Tunisian families - and that these young people led the concerted spontaneous effort by the majority of Tunisian citizens to push through government action addressing the urgent local-national socio-economic issues confronting masses of Tunisian people - this is not sufficient in itself to affirm a causal, material connection between these issues and the uprising. To do that, we need - as always - to examine and provide interpretation for societal perceptions and references: subjective, contextual, and laden with value judgments as those may be.

Proceeding with our analysis along these lines, we return briefly to the slogans voiced by the protesters at the outset of events, and to the issues they flag, among others. Background details pertaining to the outbreak of the Sidi Bouzid bring to light generally unknown aspects of Mohamed Bouazizi's character that appear to have been largely overlooked by the media and various political analysts, despite their distinct importance. In Sidi Bouzid, this inland, backwoods *rurban* city, where in most circles a culture prevailed in which everyone knows everyone else, many were those who said that Mohamed Bouazizi was poor, unsteady and demeaned in his work, sometimes unhinged in his behaviour - and particularly in his relationships with his mother and sisters. Less known about this young man was that he had been an orphan who dropped out of school to work on reclaiming and overhauling fallow land that his maternal uncle had acquired by means of a bank loan. From its start, the land reclamation project did not generate sufficient funds to complete timely loan repayments to the bank as required. Unbeknownst to the borrowing uncle tending *his* land - or to anyone else - an investor in the project from the city of Sfax was able to *take care of the issue* with the local bank branch involved. This he did by flying in the face of the bank regulations in force on the loan; buying off the land, he ran circles around Mohamed's clueless but ostensibly landowning uncle. For long months, uncle and nephew tried to get their land back through the courts, without being able to do so. As a result, Bouazizi could not

continue his work on the farm and settled back in the city, at the benevolent mercy of *charitable souls* who intermittently assisted the struggling family - including the head of the RCD, who issued them both with RCD membership cards; Bouazizi found himself unable to overcome the humiliation he felt in roaming around the city as an itinerant peddler of fruits and vegetables, hounded by the local municipal police force - which was, to make matters worse, headed by a female officer.

Many people accompanied Bouazizi in undergoing socio-economic degradations and injustices similar to those that were inflicted on him - in no way could he be considered to have suffered these alone. Figuring prominently among his fellow-aggrieved, each to varying degrees in accordance with their own occupations, contexts, and perceptions of the transgressions they suffered, were the unemployed with higher degrees; students without the financial means to complete their studies; small farmers lacking resources needed to make ends meet or fully exploit the potential of their land holdings; microentrepreneurs in the underground economy harassed by government inspectors and moneylenders; the indigent, obliged by the ruling party to demonstrate loyalty in exchange for handouts, Mohamed Bouazizi's mother among them; junior public servants, minor investors and members of the public who constitute the clients-constituents of public servants marginalised by nepotism and milked for bribes; and opposition politicians persecuted by security operatives and leaders and RCD bosses, and blocked from access to the political marketplace and prestige from name-recognition.

All such people had origins in the Bedouin-agrarian society, wherein an individual or family's social status is given expression in a saying that is famously widespread throughout all of the country's rural circles: "[s]ame as everyone/anyone, better than everyone/anyone, less than everyone/anyone".

The saying encapsulates an individual or family's vaunting their elevated standing, or accommodating and accepting a humbly modest status - or perhaps degrading or diminishing it to a relatively abased one. Critical to the phrase's discourse or intent are the key conversational elements of speaker/messenger and target audience/message recipient(s), spatial, temporal and relational context, specific concern or agenda, and indicator criteria. Thus, for example, the expression may emphasize an affiliation with so-and-so's children; or perhaps placing family assets at the forefront of social considerations; or wealth and prestige as the sole criterion useful to define an individual's place and role among people, above and beyond assertion of the importance of ethnic and sectarian origins; or recalling the family's history of triumph over opponents or competitor.

We must also bear in mind that all these various factors and referential points are closely bound up with local histories, circles of belonging or affiliation in relation to available resources and means of accessing and possessing them, as well as to an individual's or group's political influence. They all equally are central in the production of the values, perceptions and feelings embodied and vocalised by the key words incorporated in the

protesters' initial slogans and chants: injustice, contempt, dignity, justice and freedom. Essentially, an indigent Mohamed Bouazizi, the *Man* (in the sense of *pillar*) of the family - that is, a human being of male gender - offered the wider Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine community the spectacular drama of igniting his own petrol-soaked body in destitute desperation to protest against the humiliation and trauma meted out to him by a woman state security officer who did all she could to deny him the pursuit of even a minimally respectable livelihood. This could not but constitute a social detonator that, in a blinding, searing flash, blew the cover off the heap of traditional norms and values that had been long cast aside - to incontrovertibly expose their state of advanced putrefaction. Inklings of social and political injustice had already surfaced as a range of developments in society and local politics had had the effect of *freeing* the vibrancy of youth from the constraining authority of traditional collective controls. For example, young women increasingly had taken themselves off to attend college at a good remove from the traditional family-appointed *in-charge* tasked with overseeing their safety, good behaviour, and movements outside family circles. Such women often found themselves as a result unemployed (74 per cent), single (eighty per cent), and left to their own devices to face the state and rough-and-tumble socio-economic and political marketplaces.

Whether they were outraged or merely inquisitive rubbernecking compatriots, the crowds rushing in from the town's outer reaches to bear witness at the scene of Bouazizi's body's incineration, one and all were vociferous in demanding dignity as their right and denouncing injustice as their humiliation. They declaimed their right to work and inveighed against the government *gang of thieves*. The following day, the elders - the peasant society's *retirees* and last representatives of Bedouin culture - stood silently staring at the haunted lingering elements of *the world's end* as they saw it. It had been a world in which they had lived with their old and familiar affiliations and associations, shielded and hidden.

What made it the end of that world? The old criteria and traditional standards quite simply no longer provided individuals and families with psychic mechanisms adequate for representing their social status appropriately within their contexts and affiliations, their *circles of belonging*. Superseded as they were by the new order, they had lost the authority and agency to drape the old cloak of kinship over the lowliness of the society's impoverished and marginalised. Getting down to the fundamentally decisive matter of providing access to services and dispensations, the usual *social honour* considerations of venerable lineages or authentic religious roots had become largely irrelevant.

At the same time, in the context of the increasingly non-negotiable role of monetary exchange within all social transactions, people were having to come to terms with a bewildering expansion of all manner of working relationships. This in itself produced a new and unwieldy social hierarchy that could not be neatly sheltered under a tent branded in the name of a tribe,[14] or cushioned by the solidarity of one-time neighbours

in order to squat along the roadside. In this *brave new world* an individual or family's ultimate insult and humiliation had become purely economic and political. In the microaggressions and infuriating minutia of daily social life for the unemployed packed into cafés; for patients huddling in front of closed hospital doors; for students without airfare to travel to distant cities to enrol in a university - dignity had become lost, and seemingly irretrievably. At least, in the absence of private agricultural and commercial resources, decent wages and personal bank accounts. Meanwhile, oppression and injustice were now associated not with the violation of customary law or legal rights, but rather with the formal application of the law; that very same law through which Bouazizi lost the plot of land he had been cultivating as his own, and through which the courts could not be brought to restore his rights.

In the lead-up to the uprising, amidst crumbling foundations in the marketplace for reckoning the risks and prospects of political loyalties, all bets were off. Weighing up the opportunities and threats attendant to possible gambits had become a dire necessity in virtually all domains and types of exchange - all the more so as a real backlash of increasing absolutist rule was stifling expression of dissent, and blocking off public protests against the inhumanity and brutality of this new national order.

The protests surprised virtually all observers of the political scene in Tunisia when the flames of protest rapidly engulfed many of the small conurbations surrounding Sidi Bouzid, before going on to consume others in the Kasserine *wilaya* (governorate). For local politicos and observers in the thick of things, this conflagration vividly brought to mind famous 19th century uprisings in the country's interior, most notably the 1864 eruption contesting the rule of the Bey in Tunis (Lahmar 2011: 328). Many questions have arisen here: would the Bouazizi incident have so successfully rallied people far and wide around his burnt remains in Sidi Bouzid, had it not been for his close relatives raising the alarm and marshalling the fervour of the extended family's remotest kinship circles? Or, did the secret of the mushrooming of epicentres of vocal protest lie in the convergence and collaboration of the major tribes of the interior to move against the state? Had historical ties between the Al-Hamamah, Al-Frashish and Majer tribes been revived, thereby enabling the Sidi Bouzid demonstrations to move on to Kasserine so quickly?

Our research suggests strongly that the affective solidarity galvanised by the Bouazizi incident served to bind together Tunisians at the grassroots in a spirit of solidarity. As such, the furore of their response had little to do with the Bouazizi family's roots, stock, and lineage. By the same token, in no way should one think that any stereotypical Bedouin or peasant villager bloodlust/quest for vengeance had overcome and motivated the protesters. After all, Mohamed Bouazizi's *murderer* was not a particular individual linked to or allied with any particular social group or lineage, race, tribe, or village. No amount of political-anthropological excavation will enable us to identify a singular weave in his social fabric that ties in with his tragic history. The killer was the

socio-political system at large that had lost the ability to respond effectively to the bewildering transmogrifications underway at the local level, or to equitably, ethically and transparently manage the public realm for all citizens.

Critically, the flaming social fabric of emergent villages and small towns on the peripheries of the cities of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine did *not* incinerate the mental scaffolding that had been erected from Tunisian state archives by colonial administrators and traditional North African research scholars and anthropologists - these last had firmly incorporated the notions of tribe and chiefdom (replete with mental images of throne and sceptre) into pre-colonial official archive classifications and the traditional schools of Maghreb anthropology, as well as into the political culture of senior officials in local administrations. On the contrary, the spreading flames ignited rural patches of brush and highly flammable kindling matter - rural tracts of comparable classes of human tinder characterised above all by their reciprocal communal relations and mutual knowledge. The key components they shared - the secret of their dynamism and volatility - were unemployment, poverty, marginalisation, a sense of injustice and humiliation. Making up this tangled thatch of interconnection were educated young men and women, an open-minded cultural elite receptive to the world, students, professors, teachers, middle-level employees, security-hounded political activists of different ideological persuasions, members of the Tunisian General Labour Union, and public or clandestine opposition parties. These were the social groupings in whose eyes the regime had lost its political legitimacy and with whom the RCD had lost contact within the local *political marketplace*. The latter, as a party attached at the hip to the state (the main wholesale supplier of material and symbolic commodities in this market), had ceased being able to guarantee that it could be the rewarding moral or material commodity exchange for its newly engaged members.

A further point to consider is that the newbie RCD local leaders, motivated primarily in the pursuit of their own private interests, were cut off from the history and moral potency of the national movement. Their estrangement and/or disassociation was a product of their younger age and, in their higher leadership ranks a negative - if not contemptuous - attitude towards the personal legacy of Tunisia's nationalist leader and first president, Habib Bourguiba.

An example of this can be demonstrated in the miserable debacle of Mohamed El Gharyani, the young last director of the RCD and then Sidi Bouzid governor, when he personally went to the region a few days subsequent to the outbreak of protests, attempting local mediation to mollify the demonstrators. By the time he arrived in the city most of the regional leaders of his party proved unwilling to go and meet him. Setting out to track down old guard constitutionalist veterans, he discovered that they were all deceased, geriatric, or dispossessed of whatever material and moral sway they may have once enjoyed in the eyes of their relatives and neighbours, and even their grandchildren; some of the latter were on the streets with protesters and chanting "the people demand the fall of the regime".

The world of the burgeoning youth described above was no longer one built on kinship plus entitlements transcending those family boundaries garnered through marketplace connections. Rather theirs was immersed in socio-professional associations and enterprises within emerging sectors whose fate was tied up with the country's overall political scene and economy generally - but specifically with the career skills and aptitudes that the concerned individuals and their professional peers themselves had built up over the course of their education and through seizing opportunities they were presented with during hopeful years in times when family solidarity could cushion them against the dangers posed by the risk inherent in venturing beyond the home space into the wide world.

These young new-arrivals on the scene were not subject or vulnerable to intensive political-ideological onboarding campaigns from any of the contending opposition parties of communists, Islamists or nationalists. Neither were they enamoured of - or cowed by - the spent and depleted ideology of the ruling RCD party - hence one young person's comparison of the RCD leadership with auctioneers in the marketplace. In statistical terms the proportion of communist party members participating in the region's protest demonstrations prior to 14 January 2011 barely reached one per cent of the total, and the mosques played no significant role in organizing the protests - contrary to what is often assumed to have been the case: only about two per cent of the demonstrators set out marching from the mosques. As for the RCD about 18 per cent of the protesters in Sidi Bouzid and about 33 per cent in Kasserine were actually party members excoriating the regime - most of them younger affiliates.

On top of all this, the social instincts of this rising young strata were now quite simply to disregard entirely the guidance of their elders, be they relatives or neighbours, as regards public affairs: quite simply this cohort no longer looked to them for news - or for perspectives on their own situation and lives. Significantly here, despite the generally feeble interest of Tunisian society in reading, the community of protesters in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine proved to be respectable readers of newspapers and magazines. And notwithstanding their living in predominantly rural and economically and culturally marginalized areas they registered remarkable usage of the internet. Among the demonstrators, 54.1 per cent of them had secondary and higher levels of education.

However, this cultural dynamic did not bring protesters to begin (or greatly increase) using the Internet as a means of communication amongst themselves to organise and sustain the demonstrations; the percentage of those who relied on the Internet for this purpose did not exceed 3.2 per cent. People tended to exchange news for these purposes orally, making intensive use of the whole gamut of telephone networks - but most of all they did so by daily meetings in all conceivable venues where they could share information: cafes, markets, public squares, neighbourhoods, education and social-cultural institutes and workplaces.

The society that gave rise to the demonstrations was incontrovertibly a modern society, an eloquent expression of our present-day zeitgeist. This society was far from being the stereotypically *traditional* male society, and there was no segregation of women and men during the protests. Of the total number of the region's women over the age of 18, 22.4 per cent participated in the protests. More revealing still is our finding that this percentage among employed women reached 25.9 per cent and between unemployed women 35.7 per cent. The total participation among male and female students combined was 70.2 per cent.

Insofar as these figures reflect the overall popular approbation of the demonstrations and the eruption of contempt and outrage in all segments of society with regard to the despised regime, they represent the totality of the transformations that the local community's society underwent, in terms of social division of labour, benchmark values and cultural touchstones. This allowed local rural society - in all its segmentation - to give vivid expression to shared demands in words and phrases that would be readily understood and resonant equally within the gamut of the society's legal assistance and trade union organizations, as well as throughout civil society associations defending human rights and political freedoms. Consequently, it can be no coincidence that more than 85 per cent of field research respondents considered the absence of political freedom to be a factor that was either very important or somewhat important in explaining how and why the uprising erupted. This notably contrasted with the 58.1 per cent of total respondents with regard to the assumed role of Islam, or to according religion insufficient respect.

As a result, when national parties, associations and trade unions began to endorse the demands of the demonstrators in the interior regions, adopting them as their own, they found it easy to communicate with them and then relay the gist of those hinterland demands to the urban fabric of the major coastal cities - and at the end of the day, to the world at large. This was a significant development that in its content, form and outcomes, constituted a real paradigm shift and/or historical break in the patterns that were woven throughout these areas during the Ali bin Ghadhahem-led 1864 Tunisian Revolt.

Conclusion

More than simply the demise of a political party, the disappearance of the RCD signified the expiration of a corrupt and perverted relationship of a modern state with political parties. The former strived to channel its depersonalised bureaucracy, multifarious public functions, and myriad purposes into an ambiguous relationship with the latter's untested leadership in organising distinctively moral collective action and investment in politics - while yet aspiring to profit-making enterprise for private enrichment. In Tunisia's experience the state has ever been the wealthiest of the wealthy and preeminent purveyor of blessings, perks, and social recompense while the

party organization - which had taken the lead in the arduous process of establishing the state - found itself discombobulated and by-passed by the very institutions it built, which developed autonomously and from within to advance political tendencies monopolising the state's largess of opportunities and resources, by ways and means despotic and corrupt.

From this standpoint, pulling off a revolution in order to establish new and different bases of political action, for Tunisian and Arab society in general, must be seen to be the great historical event that it is: a milestone in the history of the relationship between political groups and the state.

In its precipitousness, violence, and audacity it stood only to confound the muted expectations of *citizens* long accustomed to a state *calling the shots* and *owning* the political marketplace by means of its domineering political parties and loyal groups of clientele and kinship: *who* could be marketplace manager, representative, escort, fixer and guide in the new hypermarket that is taking shape? What commodities could be on offer in this new souk? Whether these new goods available to people will be tangible, material, and physical or symbolic, moral and spiritual - how and from where will they be sourced?

It would be improvident, as well, were people to not ask: if the state loses its position as the largest purveyor of job opportunities, and should its hands be relieved of the tools and instruments needed to fashion cultural distinction and social prestige - what kind of goods will the parties display in the political marketplace? What if new guidelines and rules governing political action and initiative preclude state resources being used by private or factional hands?

The enormous socio-political explosion that profoundly shook Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine really reverberated in the deepest reaches of this problem, as the demonstrators expressed clearly when they denounced the "Party of Gang-Robbers" they claimed had taken over the state.

These events raised profoundly significant issues. Some analysts have questioned whether these events represent *true* revolutionary action given that they are unaccompanied by a distinct new ideology, and this even after the protests had turned into the massive national demonstrations that actually brought down a long-standing dictatorship.

However, regardless of whether or not there is a necessary link in the modern era between collective revolutionary action and *authentic and distinctive* ideology (this is an issue that will undoubtedly continue to generate discussion for a long time to come), no researcher can be blind to the manifestations of the deep social revolution that took place in the regions that we have been examining. The first early protests in the regions we have been examining escaped notice of the authoritarian regime, which tried doggedly if uselessly to be able to understand and represent what was taking place all around them, relying on the outdated, obsolete and corroded cognitive tools that were utterly inadequate to the task of understanding and analysing the new

situation, or of taking any constructive steps forward in its regard.
None of this uniquely pertains to the Tunisian revolution; it is characteristic of the history of all modern revolutions. No less radiant an example can be seen in the French revolution, which as Alexis de Tocqueville noted, actually took place long before 1789. When we look at the Tunisian revolution as a long-term political path, aimed at re-arranging political life, its standards and concepts, we can only emphasise that a real social revolution has actually occurred in the country, as well as within us and right under our eyes. We ourselves were lacking the tools we needed to consciously engage in communication with it, or on the basis of it, let alone to practice it ourselves.
This *tongue-tied* Tunisian revolution is still, twelve years later, unable to give expression to its inner unresolved traumas and turbulence; it remains disoriented and distracted from the urgent task of re-assessing, re-formulating and re-organising the distinct Tunisian and shared universal contents of revolutionary symbols, values, new priorities, and considerations. Members of Tunisia's Constituent Assembly today remain entangled in disagreements over many of the unresolved constitutional issues that lay dormant in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine in 2017, and erupted within their most famous citizen, Mohamed Bouazizi. Those same still unresolved issues are likely to form the basis for perhaps more potent and constructive revolutionary expression in the coming years, and possibly decades, in Tunisia. Indeed, expressions and voicings akin to those of Mohamed Bouazizi, released from inner depths of long, harsh, and hopeless repression may well interact with Tunisians' strongly held fundamental values of justice (dignity), democracy (governance), individual freedom (human and civil rights), and identity (historic culture) to infuse an alchemy of change - once again - in the country, region, and world.

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Notes:

1 - The *lahfah*, the *birnous*, and the *jubba* are 3 basic traditional items of clothing among the region's people.
2 - The word Hujaj (plural of Hajji - pilgrim) does not necessarily mean that the elderly demonstrators had actually made the pilgrimage to Mecca; it is just to say they are respectable.
3 - Anonymous testimony with the author, Sidi Bouzid (December 2011).
4 - Tunis, Institut National de la Statistique, Tunisia Population and Housing Census 2004.
5 - Findings presented in this article draws on field research conducted in 2011 and 2012 through multiple visits to the region of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine and are part of a longer term research on rural communities in the center and north of Tunisia. Research has included interviews to key informants and questionnaires, direct observation and data analysis.
6 - Brett, T., "Political market theory and the crisis of public authority", *LSE*, 2019 https://bit.ly/3sgQzjn (last accessed on 21 October 2022).
7 - Recalling Ibn Khaldun's (1981:379) famous saying "prestige is wealth", and Bourdieu's (1979: 146, 331) views on transformations of capital.
8 - Regarding the settlement of the Bedouins and the expansion of private ownership of the land, see the works of Despois (1940), Poncet (1962), Habib (1977). See how the Bedouin roundabout was disintegrated into peasant hamlets in Lahmar (1994), Zghal (1967).
9 - Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture, (2006), Farm Structure Survey, 2004-2005.
10 - The *zardah* is a religious and secular festival which is held each year near the sanctuary of a marabout venerated by a tribal or village groups.
11 - Regarding Sidi Ali Ben Aoun in the Wilayat of Sidi Bouzid, see Al-Ghabri (2000). For the work of women in agriculture, see Ferchiou (1985).
12 - See, for example, the following key anthropological works on local groups: Malika (1963), Redfield (1969), Mendras (1976).
13 - In his book *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (1992:49) was prudent, and he used: "correlations".
14 - Jacques Berque (1953: 261-271) defined the tribe in North Africa as merely "un emblème onomastique". For his part, Eickelman (1989: 130-150) tried to expand the concept of kinship to encompass all social relations.

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