

Country Report Tunisia

*****The Mining Region Movement between “Cultural Product” and “Political Product”*****

There is no doubt that the most important movement in the beginnings of the twenty-first century in North Africa and the Arab world has been the Mining Region Movement which broke out on January 2008 and had continued for a period exceeding three years, should we take into consideration its multiple stages which had ended in toppling Ben Ali's regime on 14 January 2011 and opening horizons for other peoples in the East, West and Egypt to upraise against tyrannical dictatorial regimes for dignity, social justice and laying foundations for democracy.

In many occasions has this movement been dealt with journalistically or as an abstract historical narrative with a lot of systematic mistakes and intellectual deficiencies that are biased to this party or that, without dealing with the impact of this movement in the collective consciousness of the Tunisian people culturally and politically, and they have not given it due justice.

Before going through these pivotal matters in the history of social movements in Tunisia, many questions that necessarily arise in face of any discerning reader or researcher must be answered, including:

- Why did the movement break out in 2008, neither before nor after that, although Tunisia had witnessed stressful moments in January 1978 and January 1984?
- Why did the movement get confined within the Mining Region in the governorate of Gafsa, having not expanded into the Tunisian territory?
- Is the Revolution of 2011 an expected extension and reproduction of 2008 movement or are they in a rupture with each other?
- What role has been played by the Mining Region Movement in the cultural and political product, especially provided that it has been linked with the social and economic action that it has emerged in, what are its reasons and motives, what are the effects of its outcomes on the social movement in all its aspects, and to what extent has it interacted with the components of civil society?

****Mediterranean Cities: Mining Region Cities****

Origins and Social Composition

Following the discovery of phosphates in the southern western region of Tunisia in 1885 by the French engineer Philippe Thomas and the foundation of the Compagnie des

Phosphates de Gafsa (Gafsa Phosphate Company), CPG in 1897, features of emergence of the new Mining Region Cities had begun to appear, and there had been a rupture with the nomadic, pastoral and agricultural lifestyle. New features had taken shape based on working in phosphate mines with a distinct social composition (Metlaoui, Mdhilla, Moulares, Redeyef).

A working class from diverse ethnic and cultural origins had taken shape, whose relationship with CPG had been the sale of their labor force. All of that had been at the expense of the old production modes of agriculture and livestock.

In 1920, the number of CPG workers had reached 9850 workers distributed as follows:

Europeans:

French: 111 workers.

Italians: 1046 workers.

Other Nationalities: Russian, Bulgarians, etc ...: 63 workers

Their total number had been around 1220, or 12.4 %

Africans:

Tunisians: 4507 workers, or 45.8 %.

Algerians: 2373 workers, or 24.1 %.

Moroccans: 305 workers, or 3.1 %.

Libyans: 1332 workers, or 13.5 %.

Sudanese: 30 workers, or 0.3 %.

Note: Tunisian workers had represented 45.8% that had been a melting pot of people from different regions of Tunisian territory, basically the tribes that had been living in south Tunisia.

To ensure the stability of this company's workers, it had built lodges to house the expatriates, and there had been in each city of the Mining Region: a neighborhood for the French – neighborhood of Italians – neighborhood of Algerians – neighborhood of Tripoli (Libyans) – neighborhood of Moroccans; as for Tunisians, it had continued to be up to them to whether settle or keep relocating until they permanently resided in the suburbs of those cities.

This labor and demographic diversity might make the cities of the Mining Region be of a unique particularity in Africa and the Arab World. Being typically Mediterranean cities, they had brought together diverse cultures from North and South Mediterranean, cities in which labor trade unionist and political cultures had exchanged and interacted. The Bolshevik Revolution and the international communist movement had marked them with their own characters, and had been affected by the outcomes of World War I and II, and the subsequent developments of the working class movement in Europe, Asia and Latin America. In addition to all of that, there had been the revolutionary revival of liberation and anti-colonial movements. The cities of the Mining Region had witnessed all of these events and got involved in them whether directly or indirectly and got affected by the political and trade unionist conflicts that had been managed in the European capital cities.

From the beginning of the century until the end of the colonial era, the activism of the Communist Trade Unionist (CGT) had been of a remarkable presence and had been related to the European community; however, its failure in winning over Tunisian workers had been due to the disregard of the patriotic issue and the liberation cause.

****Patriotic Trade Unionist Movement****

In the beginning of the previous century, independently of French trade unions, trade unionist leaders had founded trade union experiences, chief among their concerns in addition to the defense of workers' professional interests had been the focus on national liberation, most important of these experiences had been:

- **19 January 1925:** Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens, CGTT (General Confederation of Tunisian Workers) (Mohammad Ali Hammi) its leaders were arrested 16 days after the declaration, its leader Hammi passed away in 1928.
- **10 December 1936:** foundation of the General Confederation of Employees.
- **27 June 1937:** the First Constituent Congress of the General Confederation of Tunisian Workers was held, with Belgacem Gnaoui as Secretary General.
- **1944:** Independent trade unions in the south (Ahmed Tlili)
- **20 January 1946:** foundation of Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT (Tunisian General Labor Union) (Hachad, Tlili)
- **6 October 1946:** the emergence of Union Syndicale des Travailleurs de Tunisie, USTT (Syndical Union of Tunisia's Workers) following the decision of opening a branch of French trade union confederation CGT and the organizational separation from the French CGT. It was dissolved in 1956 and called upon its members and also its properties to join the UGTT (Hassan Saadaoui)

This cultural diversity and trade unionist variety had been source for enriching the life in Mining Region Cities not enjoyed otherwise in different Tunisian regions. In addition, the

CPG had given great importance to the social and cultural sides of its workers' life styles especially those Europeans among them, thus it had built for them luxurious houses, it constructed sports fields (football, tennis, Pétanque, etc ...), workers' clubs, trading spaces where the finest types of commodities and goods had been provided, cinemas where the latest movies that had been exhibited in European capital cities had been showed, it established hospitals, it also afforded for them free transport in trains, free consumption of water, electricity and means of heating, and it encouraged its workers' children with scholarships outside the Mining region. Some had considered the level of living in Mining Region Cities in the forties of the previous century higher than that in Tunis.

****The Role played by Mining Region Population in the Fight for Independence****

The workers and population of the Mining Region had contributed in resisting French Colonization, carried out strikes and sit-ins, marched in demonstrations that the Colonization had faced with bullet shooting, sacrificed with martyrs, and taken up arms in mountains and cities.

- 2 March 1937: the start of a strike in the mines of Metlaoui – Mdhilla – Moulares – Redeyef that had continued for 40 days.
- 4 March 1937: strikers were shot in Metlaoui (19 martyrs and a lot of wounded) and Mdhilla (3 martyrs and two wounded)

Among the most prominent leaders that had led the armed resistance in Tunisia and in the Mining Region was the trade unionist leader and the founding father of UGTT – Ahmed Tlili – who had also a great favor in supporting the Algerian Revolution.

The failure to build the social democratic republic despite the sacrifices offered by the Tunisian people had led to the emergence of a dictatorial authority which had monopolized the political life, manipulated the trade unionist movement and entered in an open conflict with its intellectual elite, which had ended in a direct clash with the people and their democratic forces several times.

The trade unionist leader Ahmed Tlili had since the beginning of deviation warned about that in his famous letter to Bourguiba, but to no avail.

Most bloody Events:

- 26 January 1978
- 3 January 1984
- 5 January 2008: which had lasted until 2011 and ended when the regime's head fled the country and the system of corruption and dictatorship was toppled.

****Mining Region Movement: A Turning Point in Tunisia's Modern History****

This movement is of an importance in the beginning of the twenty-first century in the history of trade union and social struggle that qualifies it to be the most important social protest movement in North Africa and the Arab world in terms of sustainability, in terms

of the diversity of struggle ways and multiplicity of social strata joining it, as well as in terms of the outcomes that it has led to.

After dealing with the social and historical circumstances in which this movement has emerged, it is necessary to go over explicit and implicit reasons behind its outbreak.

Economic Alternatives (IMF and WB Diktats) Neo-Liberalism

After the experience of co-operatives (Ahmed Ben Salah's socialism) and the reorientation of Tunisia towards market economy and after the short-lived recovery in the seventies of the previous century that had not sustained long, the country had found itself hostage to international finance circles (IMF and WB) implementing their diktat according to the division of roles and the global market needs: plundering resources, consumption-oriented production and its orientation towards export, and opening the country to foreign capital.

The CPG had been covered by the procedures of privatization, increase of production and improvement of productivity, hence it had let a lot of services go to the private sector, the way of phosphate extraction had been altered from underground to surface mining, the production had redoubled several times, and the quarries had multiplied; However, despite all of that the number of workers had decreased to less than one third due to the mandatory retirement at an age of 50 years.

These options reached a climax in 2007 when the number of workers had become not exceeding 5000 compared to 16000 in 1985, production had increased to 8 million tons per year and the company's income and profits had grown.

In contrast, there had been an employment deadlock and unemployment rate had risen, knowing the Company had been the only employer in the region. Living utilities had been absent, and cancers and manifestations of bribery and corruption had been widespread, namely in compensating 20% of the laid off workers; all of this in addition to the absence of liberty margin which had led to a charged and explosive situation. And following the manipulation of results of a competition for recruiting employees in the company, the Mining Region movement broke out in 5 January 2008.

It had been under the leadership of trade unionists who had been able to mobilize the inhabitants of the region and found the missing link that had along the history impeded working class and trade union movement to coalesce into marginalized popular strata; it had been thus a civil movement with distinction bringing together all the strata of different ages (women, youth, adults, trade unionists, workers, unemployed graduates, university students high school pupils, etc ...) and had been a real epic in Tunisian people history.

Although the leaders of the movement had in the beginnings been in clash with the regional and national leadership of UGTT, it had yet received all moral and material

support from the democratic movement and components of civil society (lawyers –Tunisian League of Human Rights, LTDH – Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, ATFD – militant journalism: Attariq Al Jadid- meaning “the new path”, Al Mawkif- meaning the attitude newspapers... - UGTT as well as to several independent public figures.) which had been an incentive for the militants and their families to endure during and following unfair trials, in the prisons and after being released from them. The Committee for Supporting the Mining Region Inhabitants had played a crucial role domestically and abroad to boost the morale the militants and their families’ morale.

The movement had continued for a period of 6 months before it was repressed by Ben Ali’s police in June 2008 in despair to contain it and fearing the scope of protests would broaden and been out of control, thus the only remaining alternative had been the security alternative. 4 people had died as martyrs and more than 1000 citizens had been brought before courts. It had been thus the beginning of Ben Ali’s regime fall.

Forms of Protests

The protest had been peaceful and multifaceted:

- Written communiqué
- Exhibitions and photo shows
- Cultural shows with a labor character
- Sector strikes and general strikes
- Sit-ins
- Hunger strikes
- Setting up tents in production spots and in public spaces
- Meetings in public spaces
- Peaceful demonstrations and marches
- Filming and broadcasting documentaries
- Contacting TV stations (basically El-Hiwar El-Tounsi TV station)
- Sunday loudspeaker speech

Movement Slogans

- Jobs, Liberty, Patriotic Dignity!
- Bread, Liberty, Patriotic Dignity!
- We Are Entitled to Get Employment, O Gang of Thieves!

- People's Money in Palaces, People's Sons in Prisons!
- Liberties, Liberties, No Presidency Life-long!

The movement began in January 2008 and had undergone several stages that reached their climax in January 2011 when Ben Ali's Regime toppled and the Tunisian People got liberated from dictatorship. This saying may not go down well with many actors in the political field, as had been expressed by the majority of the Constituent Assembly members in setting the revolution dates of start and end (17 December 2008 – 14 January 2011) in order to exclude the martyrs and casualties of 2008 Mining Region events off the list of revolution martyrs and casualties due to the fact that the majority within the Constituent Assembly had neither contributed nor support them.

Yet, we reaffirm that the 2011 Revolution is not but a replication of the Mining Region movement in terms of its slogans, forms and continuity with a minor difference in terms of the extent of foreign interference impact on the movement and the role had been played by social networks in accelerating transfer of information and their influence on youth.

****The Movement's Cultural and Political Output****

Thus, we, and not only us, postulate that the 2011 uprising is a replication of the Mining Region movement in form and content, with a slight difference, and that it is a persistence and continuation of it, acknowledging that the historical process may witness meanders and recession, but it finally secures the consequence achieving.

The culture of refusal, resistance, protest and self sacrifice that had secured sustainability for the movement even after repressing it and putting its leaders in prison had motivated social strata, sectors and segments to join the movement of 2010-2011, seeking penance by realizing the revolution, whose accomplishment would have been possible in 2008 had they believed in it and broken the siege on it.

The attitude of UGTT and some political parties supporting and assisting the movement of 2010-2011 had contributed in broadening it and accomplishing its tasks unlike what happened in 2008.

Should we consider that the decisive moments in peoples' history are the moments of cultural production if it is linked to social action, then the 2008 Mining Region movement is perfectly a moment of cultural production – culture of refusal – culture of resistance – culture of bravery - culture of sacrifice - culture of audacity - culture of martyrdom- culture of democratic collective action.

The widespread of this culture among a huge number of Tunisian people segments, especially the youth, had led to the moment of revolution; it had therefore been an innovated revolution, untraditional revolution, twenty-first century revolution like had been the Paris Commune in 19th century (1871) and the Bolshevik Revolution in the beginning of the twentieth century (1917).

****Conclusion: keeping the persistence of revolution until achieving its goals****

The model of Tunisian revolution that had sooner widespread all over the Arab region has become distorted in many countries, threatened by deviation and apostasy, unable to shore up the foundations of a social democratic republic that would guarantee dignity, liberty and employment for the citizen. It lacks a thought to enlighten it that ensures the persistence of revolution and immunizes it against deviation and recoil from achieving its goals, a thought that breaks with imitation, replication and dogmatism, a free thought not restricted by any positivist, religious or ethnic dogmatic affiliation. As had the revolution produced since the beginning of 2008 until 2011 its free unique culture and achieved its political goal with the toppling of dictatorship head, its sons and youth have to immunize it through a new cultural product that would protect it from deviation and attempt for containment. Only untraditional revolutionaries produce untraditional thought.