Blogging Bouazizi: The Role of Tunisian Cyberactivists Before and After the Jasmine Revolution

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This article examines the changing role of cyberactivists before and after the Jasmine Revolution through case studies of three prominent figures: Houssem Aoudi (Cogite, Wasaibi), Sami Ben Gharbia (Nawaat.org), and Haythem el Mekki (MosaiqueFM, Attessia TV). The main argument presented here is that the attainment of freedom of the Internet and the success of the revolt created new opportunities for formal political involvement for the cyberactivists as they transited from dissidents under the Ben Ali regime to citizen-participants of a nascent democratic order. A subsidiary argument is that a new generation of Tunisian leadership came to the fore of Tunisia's private and public spheres to advance the stated aims of the revolution, including *inter alia* combating unemployment, securing civil liberties, stemming corruption, and the ever deepening of pro-democracy reforms.

Keywords: Tunisia; Democracy; Revolution; Activism; Social Movement Theory; Bouazizi

Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution was brought about through the conjuncture of two social movements. Cyberactivists, bloggers, and journalists—many of whom were active in the freedom of the Internet movement—disseminated news of protest cycles in the interior regions of the country to national and international actors ultimately leading to mass protests that resulted in the ouster of long-time dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Years on, many of these cyberactivists occupy positions of leadership in Tunisia's changing social, political, and economic milieu. This article builds upon a growing literature on the importance of the freedom of the Internet movement in Tunisia by examining the changing role of cyberactivists before and after the Jasmine Revolution through case studies of three of its prominent figures: Houssem Aoudi (Cogite, Wasaibi), Sami Ben Gharbia (Nawaat.org), and Haythem el Mekki (MosaiqueFM, Attessia TV).

The main argument presented here is that attaining freedom of the Internet following the Jasmine Revolution created new opportunities for success, as well as new obstacles, for the attainment of many of the goals of the revolution. While, prior to the Jasmine Revolution, activists united against the regime and for freedom of the Internet, the ouster of Ben Ali led to the disaggregation of this movement. Both

structural and agentive factors are responsible for keeping the movement entrepreneurs from reconstituting themselves against the current Tunisian government, a coalition between old-guard secular and Islamist factions that appears to prioritize "stability" over "democracy" as a trope to re-consolidate power among the political and business elites in what some analysts call a "rotten compromise" (Marzouki) or "neoliberal consensus" (Mulling and Roubaha).

From the Blogosphere, to Bouazizi, and Beyond Ben Ali

Five years after the "Arab Spring" revolts, only Tunisia appears to be embarking upon procedural democratic governance.[1] Despite the contentious episodes and "social non-movements" (Bayat) that preceded it, the Jasmine Revolution appeared "spontaneous" or "surprising" (Kraiem 219; Lynch 7) in part because Tunisia was a "least likely" case for the mobilization of protests, with high social and economic indicators and the provision of "tactical concessions" granted to its population in order to suppress growing social unrest throughout the 1980s (Cammett, et al. 5; Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar 766). The Ben Ali regime was one of the most oppressive throughout the region, with strict controls on freedoms of speech and assembly (Wagner 2).

Social movement theorists have long noted that the Internet vastly expands the repertoire of collective action available to social movements (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly). In 2010, 36.8% of the Tunisian population used the Internet (World Bank); and one-fifth of the youth demographic subscribed to Facebook (Shacker et al.). In the lead up to the uprising, the Internet and Internet activists were significant in a number of ways. First, the Internet was used as a platform for visual images of regime brutality (Breuer, Todman, and Farquhar; Lim). This, in turn, united cross sections of the population through what Breuer, Todman, and Farquhar call "emotional mobilization," or, in Lim's words, successful "frame alignment." Social media also facilitated collective action by bringing together disparate geographic, social, and economic forces (Breuer, Todman, and Farquhar; Lim; Valeriani). A "digital elite" (Breuer, Todman, and Farquhar) thus acted as "brokers" (Valeriani) of these diverse networks, bringing to the fore a new youth leadership class in the wake of the ouster of Ben Ali.

Tunisian cyberactivism began from as early on as 1998, when "Fetus" and "Waterman" founded Takriz ("The Anger")—a "cyber think and street resistance network" (Breuer, Landman, and Faquhar 771-2). Blocked in August 2000, other dissident sites followed suit to pepper Tunisian social media in what amounted to a cat-and-mouse game between the regime and the cyberactivists. In November 2005, Ben Ali hosted the UN World Summit on Information Society (WSIS). In response, Nawaat launched a *Yezzi Fock* ("Enough") protest, calling for pro-democracy reforms on 3 October (Hachicha, Yezzi). A one-month hunger strike which began on 18 October brought together disparate leaderships among the Tunisian political elite, closing the divide between Islamists and secularists over freedom of association, freedom of the press, and a release of political prisoners (Hachicha, Tunisia). The hunger strike culminated in a series of talks inscribed in the "October 18 Committee for Rights and Freedoms" (Jourchi 361-4), drawing the attention of major international media outlets, and leading to a further tightening of Internet freedoms (Zuckerman).

Following the 2009 Presidential elections in which Ben Ali secured nearly 90% of the vote, police arrested Fatma Riahi (Fatma Arabica) for believing that she was, or was connected to, "-z-" (debatunisie.com), a cyberactivist renowned for satirical commentaries about the regime. Bloggers and cyberactivists rallied around her cause,

informing traditional media outlets of the arrest and engaging in wide debate over Internet freedoms in Tunisia (Lutz). Online mobilization and exposure rapidly intensified: a petition to gather 10,000 signatures for Internet freedom far exceeded its target; a Google Documents form was made public to list blocked websites, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter accounts; cyberactivist sites like Nawaat published circumvention tools, and mainstream Tunisian artists, TV (Nessma), and Radio stations (MosaiqueFM) began speaking publicly, whether directly or indirectly, about censorship and activism (Ben Gharbia, Anti-Censorship).

The Facebook page *Sayeb Salah* ("leave me in peace") capitalised on the already popular "Ammar404" slogan loosely depicting an "imaginary person invented by Tunisia as a metaphor for the invisible censor blocking their access to many websites" (Ben Gharbia, Anti-Censorship). Created in May of 2010, by April *Salah* amassed 20,000 members and thousands of pictures (Gana 151). On 17 May 2010, Slim Amamou and Yassin Ayari created the Facebook page *Nhar Ala Ammar* ("Day Against Ammar"). The page drew 5,000 supporters in the lead-up to a nonviolent anti-censorship protest on 22 May dubbed *Tunisie en Blanc* ("Tunisia in White"), or "The White Tee Shirt Protest," calling for two actions: a protest by the Ministry of Technology, and dressing in white while having a coffee on the main avenue in down town Tunis. The Tunisian diaspora also joined the movement from Paris, Montreal, Bonn, and New York (Chomiak, Revolution 73).

News of the event went public: "Only seven months later, Tunisie en Blanc activists were able to help propel the Jasmine Revolution by encouraging similar debates on the thousands of Facebook pages of Tunisians involved in the January 2011 protests" (Chomiak, Revolution 74). Over the course of the summer, Houssem Aoudi organized the first TedxTalk—a set of global conferences raising important issues on social, political and economic issues—in September 2010. Both the protest and TedxCartage pushed many beyond "the traditional circle of activists online that [were] not politically engaged against Ben Ali. So there was a kind of opening." (Ben Gharbia).

Following Bouazizi's self-immolation, a wave of protests swept the interior. Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) locals began organizing contrary to the directives from the central bureau to remain loyal to the regime, and a loose coalition of protesters emerged to call for greater economic opportunities, an end to corruption, and basic political and social rights. Despite regime efforts to stymie the free flow of information, images of Ben Ali's brutal repression percolated through government filters. A "bitter cyberwar" broke out (Ryan), but journalists and bloggers were ultimately successful in disseminating videos and blogs to international news outlets through the Internet and smuggled USB keys.

As knowledge of the protests spread across the country, Tunisians in the coastal regions flooded the streets en masse and refused to disperse until Ben Ali heeded their calls to *Degage!* ("Get Out!"). After ad hoc attempts to address and quell the protesters, and in the face of unrelenting demonstrations, Ben Ali sought refuge in Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011.

The Disaggregation of a Decentralized Movement: From Freedom of the Internet to Democratic Freedoms in the Post Ben-Ali Period

Through a largely youth-led contingent that drew upon the Internet as a medium by which individuals made their grievances known—among them anti-corruption, youth empowerment, media objectivity, freedom of speech, civil liberties and democratic participation—a social movement emerged to confront one of the most censorship-heavy regimes in the Arab world. Bloggers, journalists, and

cyberactivists thus drew upon the Internet as form of social capital; the Internet as a "social glue that produces cohesion" through a "set of cognitive aptitudes and predispositions." (Stiglitz, Institutions 60). Houssem Aoudi describes the transition from the pre- to post-Ben Ali epochs in the following terms:

> We all had a common enemy even if we had different fights. We were fighting different battles and it happened that all these battles were part of the same war with a common enemy. Right now that enemy went but the battles stayed the same: freedom of expression, civil society… And those battles stayed, and each one of us focused on the battles that were closest to his heart. (Interview. 18 Mar.).

Examining the use of web 2.0 by "tech-savvies" during the Jasmine Revolution, Valeriani posits that "if the decentralized and networked structure of movements implies segmentation in the functions of leadership, developing and cultivating the network is possibly the most important among such functions" (2). Upon attaining their goal of freedom of the Internet the movement—its participants and its leadership—disbanded. However, so-called movement entrepreneurs maintained their networks and drew upon them to advance the issues that each actor pursued through single-issue NGOs, private organizations and associations.

Houssem Aoudi (TedX, Cogite, Wasabi)

Houssem Aoudi was one of the organizers of the White Tee Shirt Protests as well as the founder of TedxCarthage prior to the onset of the Jasmine Revolution. Through TedX, Aoudi provided a platform for activists and analysts to publicly address the subject of political and economic reform towards the end of Ben Ali's reign. Following the uprising, Aoudi brought the TedxTalks nation-wide, and there have been more than sixty talks held to date. The latest TedX talks, slotted for 1,000 live viewers, were held in April 2015. The event took just over thirty seconds to sell out, with over 56,000 applicants attempting to register for seats (Interview. 22 Sept.). In 2013, Aoudi founded Cogite: the first Tunisian co-working space that doubles as a facility providing workshops on entrepreneurship, social innovation, and civil society building. He founded Wasabi, a social business and production company that *inter alia* promotes youth empowerment, democratic citizenship, and human rights in partnership with organizations across MENA, Europe, and the US, including USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the World Bank, among others, was founded in the same year. In 2014, Aoudi became Director of the Media Center for the Independent High Authority for Elections, and he is the current President of Tunisian American Young Professionals.

Cogite offers Tunisians two co-working spaces in the greater Tunis area that house both individual members as well as organizations, with plans for three additional spaces in Karouain, Gafsa, and Djerba. The "Founders Forward" in Cogite's 2014 annual report reads: "At Cogite, we believe that the government cannot do it alone, and that everyone should pick up a brush and start painting a better collective future." Cogite targets youth in particular, offering "a home, and a community where they can make a difference through entrepreneurship, creative expression, and civil society engagement."

Under the Ben Ali regime, the barriers to becoming an entrepreneur were extremely high. Small to medium enterprises comprised over 97% of Tunisian businesses, consisting mostly of small shops and local services (Hibou 29). Transitioning to a large company ran the risk of co-optation, leaving Tunisians today with relatively little knowledge of business development and social innovation in the face of a competitive global marketplace.

Aoudi regards entrepreneurship as "a glitch in the matrix… I think about entrepreneurship and civil society as entry points into the matrix. Two Trojan Horses" (Interview. 22 Sept.).

Wasabi was founded to provide services and training in areas where the government has been slow or altogether negligent to advance substantive forms of democratic participation: to

> work in parallel with the government in ways that we would never have worked together before. With 3000 dinars I'm doing things that the government should have done 5, 10 years ago… It's not my job to do it. It's the government's job. (Interview. 22 Sept.).

Kevin Coyne, one of Wasabi's project managers states likewise, that: "pretty much everything we do is to acknowledge that the government should do it but we're doing it instead." (Interview. 8 Sept.)

Perhaps Wasabi's most successful project thus far was the 14 April 2015 pilot program called *Afkar* ("ideas"), which centered on "Sustainable Civil Society: Towards Effective Local Governance." Initially remarking on the impressive strides undertaken by Tunisian civil society as a whole, *Afkar's* First Edition Report continues: "However, the evolution [of civil society] has suffered from a general lack of coordination among different actors due to a lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders." The pilot project studies civil society through two "prisms:" the development and role of civil society since the Jasmine Revolution, as well as upcoming targets, including the government's decentralization plan, local elections, and issues of accountability.

Among the panelists were Mondher Bousnina (President of the Government's Office), Rafik Halouani (Mourakiboun), Chafik Sarsar of ISIE (Instance Supérieure Indépendante des Elections), Salsabil Klibi and Chawki Gueddass (Association Tunisienne de Droit Constitutionnel), Amine Ghali (Kawakibi Center) and Mokhtar Hammami (Ministry of the Interior). Around sixty participants took part in the round tables, including members of the government and major Tunisian and international civil society organizations. The report, written by all participants, concludes that Tunisian civil society needs to retain its independence and partisan neutrality in the face of government and factional interventions; the need to focus more on including women, youth, and marginalized communities; and the threat to civil society in the ways in which the government attempts to combat terrorism. While these are indeed critical issues, and are frequently discussed among Tunisian and international stakeholders, whether or not the government agencies represented in the round table will exert pressure on the current leadership to follow through with their commitments remains to be seen. Nonetheless, Aoudi regards the talks as successful inasmuch as it was a conversation-starter between the government and civil society that represents, in itself, democratic procedural mechanisms:

> Getting 60 people around that table was an achievement. That table was indicative in and of itself. It was only used twice before: once for the Arab League and once for the African Union. So only dictators sat around that table…. You had the government, some ministries, some MP's, HAICA, the professional civil society and some international donors and NGOs sitting around the same table, speaking their minds completely freely and bouncing ideas to each other and coming up with a paper at the end of the day…. So if I had to describe democracy, I would say this is the picture of democracy, around that table. (Interview. 18 Mar.).

While Aoudi's Afkar project brought together a number of formal partnerships in conjunction with Wasabi, coordination across organizations and government agencies is the exception. For Aoudi, "it's

difficult to coordinate all the factions, especially when you don't have a common enemy. It's easier to rally against a common enemy than to rally against a common cause." The coordination problems, he continues, involve not only organizational constraints: "When we sit around with other people and there are formalities about making decisions… it makes it difficult." As a movement, "[w]e are not coordinated any more. We became citizens. And we are playing our role as citizens of civil society." Rather, Aoudi regards his organizations as ideally placed to be "part of the conversation with the government" as it stands. (Interview. 18 Mar.).

Sami Ben Gharbia (Nawaat.org)

Sami Ben Gharbia, an avowed "info-activist," spent thirteen years in exile before returning to Tunisia in 2011 to continue his work as Director of Nawaat.org, now a registered NGO in Tunisia. He was given the *Yahoo! Person of the Year* award in 2010; named one of Foreign Policy's *Top 100 Global Thinkers* in 2011; and was the recipient of the Price Claus Award in 2012, for Nawaat's work covering anti-censorship, freedom of information, and its role in mobilizing and informing activists, journalists, and bloggers during the Jasmine Revolution. Nawaat maintains its position as a central platform for political analysis and public opinion on Tunisian politics following the Tunisian revolts, for which it, too, has received multiple accolades. Through Nawaat, Ben Gharbia aims to "influence laws and the process of access to information and Internet, the right to publish information, defend citizenship, participatory democracy, and building strong citizen media" (Interview. 22 Sept.). Ben Gharbia's dissidence vis-à-vis Tunisia's post-authoritarian government is equally hardened, but he places equal if not greater onus on the public to hold the state and mainstream media accountable:

> The state by nature has a police mentality around the world, to control everything and shape public opinion to push for certain laws and positions and strategies. So the state by nature is a body that wants to control everything. Even if it goes to censor the information or threaten journalists, the threat is the public opinion and devolution of public opinion. How far can public opinion tolerate the state and how much can the state convince public opinion to give up liberty? The space that guarantees our moves is public opinion. And this is the work of propaganda and discourse and mainstream media to make public opinion give up certain freedoms. (Ibid.).

This position regarding state and citizen participation is evident in Nawaat's platform: a fluid and inclusive digital space for open criticism and commentary on the state of Tunisian politics and governance. Vanessa Szakal, one of Nawaat's resident researchers, views Nawaat's role as supplanting, in many ways, Tunisia's traditional media in "press[ing] individuals and entities to improve communication with the media and the public" through "securing interviews and entering into dialogue with representatives of government and State institutions" (Interview. 2 Oct.). Nawaat thus acts as a parallel news source to perform the function of independent journalists and spawn public debate, since "it became clear that the mainstream media in both private and public sectors don't have an interest in being a watchdog for what the government is doing." By doing so, "Nawaat tries to fill that gap by uncovering stories, 'giving voices to the voiceless'" (Sami Ben Gharbia. Interview. 22 Sept. 2015).

Ben Gharbia measures Nawaat's impact in a number of ways. His first metric is to assess whether the content that Nawaat publishes leads to coverage in the mainstream media, as was the case with the anti-reconciliation bill seeking to provide near amnesty for former regime figures and businesspeople complicit in embez-

zlement and corruption during the Ben Ali era:

> the anti- reconciliation bill [debate] started on Nawaat. We were the main media outlet to follow that from the beginning until the end…. And when the TV channels start to talk about the issue they were late compared to us. So they didn't have any video footage of the demonstrations and they used the footage of Nawaat. (Ibid.).

Ben Gharbia's second metric is to be in a position to reform the legal framework through videos and publications. He credits Nawaat with being influential during the drafting of the constitution over two issues in particular. The first is Article 13, which states that natural resources are the property of the Tunisian people, and that all contracts dealing with oil and gas should be transparent and taken up through parliament. The second is access to the Internet as a human right in Tunisia. "That's part of our mandate. Many debates in parliament were opened through Nawaat. Many MP's referenced Nawaat as the source where they found out" (Interview. 23 Feb.).

Presently, Ben Gharbia (and Nawaat) work informally with the Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights (FTDES) over the anti-reconciliation plan. Through this "ad hoc" consultation, the FTDES provides Nawaat with analysis to deconstruct some of the legal arguments that demonstrate that the bill will benefit only the economic elite so that Nawaat is in a better position to counter the bill "through the legal framework": "We didn't really work with them. We stood on the same platform. We both oppose the bill and followed the sit-ins and demonstrations." With the exception of Nawaat's partnership with The National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists, with whom Nawaat collaborates to publish a monthly video on their monitoring of media outlets and newspapers, Ben Gharbia notes that formal partnerships are rare:

> We did it in the past but we always find out that consumes energy, finances and resources. And since our resources are very limited we don't want to get into any partnerships with any organizations that will maybe deviate us from the projects we are doing. So we come up with organizations to work on document s or data and then turn that data into an investigation or documentary and things go on but we don't have close partners. (Interview. 23 Feb.).

Haythem El Mekki (MosaiqueFM, Attessia TV)

Like Aoudi, Haythem El Mekki also self-identifies as a "witness" to the early phases of Tunisian cyberactivism, but it was not until the Gafsa mining protests in 2008 (wherein the Ben Ali regime is alleged to have handed out work appointments to individuals close to the regime) that El Mekki became more involved in the freedom of the Internet campaign. Just prior to the Jasmine Revolution, El Mekki was among a coterie of individuals who met in person to discuss the state of Internet and information freedoms in Tunisia, which led to El Mekki's role as an administrator of the online "Sayeb Saleh" campaign. At the time he was also a well-known blogger (@ByLasko), and an associate editor for Tunivsions, a print and online magazine (Tunivisions.net) "of the Tunisian people." Aoudi and El Mekki worked together at Tunivisions.net under the leadership of Nizar Chaari, a former RCD member, who encouraged Aoudi and El Mekki to publish the dissident el-General's song "Rais Lebled" that was critical of the Ben Ali regime. The publication of that song led to the censorship of Tunivisions.net and forced El Mekki briefly into hiding. In February 2011 he moved to Nessma TV. Disagreements over his outspoken position on the direction of the revolts led El Mekki

to take positions as a radio host at MosaiqueFM, Tunisia's first private radio station, and at Attessia TV, as an analyst, satirist, and polemicist. El Mekki is an outspoken public figure popular for his incisive and scathing commentaries on the state of Tunisian politics and society.

Like Ben Gharbia, El Mekki maintains an overtly oppositional stance to the direction of the post-Ben Ali Tunisian transition. Unlike Ben Gharbia, however, who views Nawaat as a countervailing force to a deficient mainstream media, El Mekki works purposively through mainstream media. The decision was a strategic one inasmuch as it allows him to position himself alongside what he views as an uncritical traditional media apparatus:

> Now things have changed. Now demonstrations are covered by major TV journalist at 8 p.m., so what could we bring to people if we do the same thing? So we had to change our operating ways and our vocation and our way of participating in the public scene. For me for example it was clear. I was recruited as a chronicler, so I continued covering in the field and publishing videos but for a very short time. After that I understood that that's not what the country needs from me. So I started working as a journalist in the mainstream media. I was in a dilemma: shall I join the classic media and risk being swallowed or contained by the system or to stay between the rebels and the dissidents? But I was thinking that things have changed again and if we don't integrate the traditional media it will be only a few months before they go back to their old habits. (Interview. 14 Sept.).

For El Mekki, attempts at formal and coordinated campaigns to confront the current Tunisian government face a number of organizational and ideological problems.

> We do not agree with each other in every case. Some are sectarian and they don't want to work with everyone. I'm refusing these initiatives because I'll be better doing my job [alone] than being part of some coalition. I think that you can't be a journalist and a political militant at the same time. Each has his independence. I will be much more effective if I help from continuing my work independently. (Interview. 7 Mar.).

Despite prior attempts to establish such coalitions, El Mekki cites a lack of discipline and structure: "With the Economic Reconciliation, there is no civic coalition that is set up." Internal conflicts between leaderships of various organizations and movements are also an obstacle to collective mobilization:

> We have big egos to try to understand each other. There were many attempts to unify… there is a problem of internal conflicts between activists who don't want to work with each other who want to take profit from the cause. (Interview. 1 Mar.).

Conclusion: From Social Movement Entrepreneurs to Citizens of a Nascent Democratic Polity

The three case studies examined above take up the roles and achievements of the movement entrepreneurs of the freedom of the Internet campaign throughout and following the success of the respective campaigns. By unifying against Ben Ali and for freedom of the Internet, a decentralized movement was born. Upon the dissolution of the movement, many within its leadership individually pursued the aims and goals of the Jasmine Revolution. Aoudi, El Mekki, and Ben Gharbia each continued in large part to work for and within organizations and industries with which they were involved prior to the Jasmine Revolution. This kind of "path dependence" has, one the one hand, enabled each of these entrepreneurs to achieve notable strides forward in their civil society and pro-democracy work. Despite initial

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attempts to mobilize with other organizations, however, individual pursuits are regarded by these leading figures as more efficacious than collective action in the post-Ben Ali period.

Notes

[1] It appeared for some time as if Egypt was making similar strides. Following the democratic elections of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), however, the Egyptian army stepped in as a response to "Tamarod," a mass movement calling for the FJP to step down. Headed by General Fatah El Sissi, the military used this opportunity to enact a military coup to 'save the revolution.' El Sissi won the Presidency in the following round of unfree and unfair elections, thus returning the country to authoritarian rule. In terms of the Tunisian case, it is important to note that despite Tunisia's successive rounds of free and fair elections, the achievement of substantive democratic rights and practices is by no means a foregone conclusion. Indeed, as discussed later in the article, the Tunisian government's denial of human rights and civil liberties in the name of "stability" following terrorist activity and legitimate and illegitimate forms of protest in response to unemployment and lack of opportunities constitute a direct threat to the advancement of substantive forms of democratic practice.

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