

## Essay

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# On Revolution and Rubbish

What has Changed in  
Tunisia since Spring  
2011

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**Timo Kaabi-Linke**

Spring is the season of change. But one year after the so-called 'Arab Spring', it seems that these changes have done little to attain the goals that brought people out into the streets at the start of these uprisings. The spring revolution in Tunisia ended with the first free elections that took place in autumn 2011. But as each spring is followed by the next fall, many aspirations and yearnings for change have quickly fallen back down to earth after the Ennahda Party took 40 per cent of the votes, thus becoming the leading member of the constitutional assembly. The result of this choice, which did not

Nadia Kaabi-Linke,  
*Don't Drop It*, 2009.  
Photo by Mohammed  
Mansour.



express the wish of the majority of Tunisians, is that women now have to fight again for equal rights and artists face a new form of censorship. And the post-electoral fall out is not over yet: It seems to have lasted longer than the spring of 2011. Now that the vernal enthusiasm of 2011 has already evaporated, it is worth reviewing.

But before going into detail about the new conditions for arts and culture in Tunisia, I would like to grapple with some theories behind the Internet-streamed uprising in Tunisia known as the 'Jasmine Revolution'.

### **The Technology of New Revolutions**

The events of spring 2011 were often described as a kind of Web 2.0-based socio-political movement. Indeed, the first pictures and news snippets covering the events in Tunisia were transmitted via do-it-yourself, citizen broadcasting on Youtube and Facebook. It took a while until international news agencies paid attention to the posts and tweets, and it was only after the first weeks of the uprising that the editorial departments of foreign media started to recognize that there was something going on in the Arab world. At this time, the protests in Tunisia reached national proportions and were followed by similar movements in Yemen, Bahrain and Egypt. It was the very dynamism of the posts and the sharing on social networks that rendered these activities visible to a worldwide public, transmitted by the medium of the Internet. For this reason, some were led to ascribe these social networks an important and supportive role in the uprisings during that period.

However, this notion of 'Facebook Revolution' or 'Twitter Revolution' quickly produced a mythical lens through which to comprehend the civil uprisings taking place in the Arab world. Journalists, reporters and bloggers immediately adopted the idea of a 'streamed' revolution, lavishing praise on the liberating forces of social networks. This made the observations of the Arab Spring much easier to theorise - but also a little too simplistic in terms of understanding what was really going on. What about the many different voices and ideas that were squeezed into one and the same interpretational frame? The whole movement started in small towns of the Tunisian hinterland, where it was the protester's physical presence that produced the image of what appeared as a battle for common interests.

Yet, if the Internet had not been considered the 'tool of change' for a mainly young and well-educated pro-democratic youth, it would have been more noticeable that the protesters in fact did not share a single interest, but many different interests. The use of technology in the revolution was given too much attention. In characterising the pro-democracy protesters through the social networks they used, rather than through the many different interests they were fighting for, the different dynamics within the social movement were not considered enough.

It was Evgeny Morozov, a young media theorist at Stanford University, who was the first to call the national uprising in Moldova

a 'Twitter Revolution' in 2009<sup>[1]</sup>. He was sure that people would one day think about these events not so much in terms of the protesters but rather in terms of the technologies they used. Despite its poor theoretical content, the term 'Twitter Revolution' triggered the myth that western technologies were capable of dispatching the very set of tacit values that instructed the design of these technical objects. This way of thinking just channelled the eighteenth century ideas of empowerment into glass fibre cables, computer networks, grids and clouds; and since ideologies were considered the agency of the civil revolution it once more became the agency of a civil movement in the twenty-first century, now embodied in gadgets and technical facilities.

Of course, theory is all about the reduction of complexity and sometimes it functions only as a method through which to recycle old ideas in order to understand new things. In the verve of the many different approaches inspired by social constructivism, many researchers were convinced that technologies invented and designed in certain societies with a given set of values would also carry specific moral codes that organize and develop a certain behaviour corresponding to ruling norms.<sup>[2]</sup> Professional hand tools are seldom made to fit in children's hands because most societies abandoned child labour; alarm clocks - for many the most disturbing invention ever made - is a perfect response to the desires of societies who understand working time as a merchandise. Similarly, computers, connected information and communication facilities are the perfect tools to increase productivity in the time of what some have called a third Industrial Revolution.

Although it makes sense to read sets of common values and ideologies in artefacts, these findings or ascriptions are rather based on theoretical understanding than observation of the media in practice. In other words, the evaluation of innovations is biased in terms of both social order and knowledge: the conclusion seems to be embedded in social and cultural contexts, where thinking is strongly affected by the newness and benefits assigned to 'useful things'.

However, these qualities can change. In 1976, Joseph Weizenbaum, a prominent figure in computer science, presented a more critical view of computerized civilisation. His question was whether the automatic response to increasing computer power and calculation would inevitably lead to a decrease of human reason.<sup>[3]</sup> A few years later, in the mid-1980s, these concerns preserved

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[1] Evgeny Mozorov, 'Moldova's Twitter Revolution', [neteffect.foreignpolicy.com](http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/07/moldovas_twitter_revolution), April 2009. <[http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/07/moldovas\\_twitter\\_revolution](http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/07/moldovas_twitter_revolution)>. [Accessed 7th October 2012].

[2] See: Andrew Feenberg, 'Subversive Rationalization: Technology, Power, and Democracy', *Inquiry*, Vol. 35, no. ¾, 1992; Langdon Winner, 'Citizen Virtues in a Technological Order', *Inquiry*, Vol. 35, no. ¾, 1992; Wiebe Bijker and John Law (ed.), 'Shaping Technology/Building Society', Cambridge, Ma., MIT Press, 1992.

[3] Joseph Weizenbaum, 'Computer Power and Human Reason', from *Judgement to Calculation*, San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976.

a certain validity, but the communicational success of new technologies replaced the critical and historical meaning with a more pragmatic assessment. Friedrich Kittler welcomed apparatuses and machines as new agencies of the historical subject,<sup>[4]</sup> changing the epistemology of media theory. It was a dramatic U-turn from basic anthropological principles expressed in Marshall McLuhan's media philosophy towards technological materialism. Finally, it became possible to explain forms of subjectivity that reflect in literature, arts and science without any concession to humanism and teleology. Rather than understanding media as extensions of the human body, humans were now understood to be adapting to new media and machines.<sup>[5]</sup>

At the same time, Andrew Feenberg brought this insight to a more sociological level and understood conflicting ideas such as François Lyotard's post-modernism, Habermas's communicative rationality, Foucault's microphysics of power and Derrida's deconstructivism in reference to both social movements and community building, with specific focus on how new technologies were facilitating such phenomena. Here, the machine became a reference for critical understanding: presented as a medium that could change social practices and reflections of society in social theories. By way of example, the French videotex MINITEL, designed as a telematic information system with some interactive functions, took only five years to become a communication network<sup>[6]</sup> where people could find everything they were willing to pay for: gadgets, friends, sex and love. For Feenberg, MINITEL became a social system unto itself and thinkers like Lyotard and Derrida shaped their theories to supply the philosophical grasp to make sense out of it.<sup>[7]</sup>

But though new technologies may change society they cannot realise the utopia of a global community. Ten years after Feenberg's short history of MINITEL, a big budget study conducted by the Carnegie Mellon University at Pittsburgh investigated the community building properties of the Internet. At that time, the Net was already considered a 'Social Technology', but researchers found a sad and lonely world in cyberspace.<sup>[8]</sup> To sum up the results, 'a greater use of the Internet was associated with declines in participant communication with family members in the household, declines in

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[4] Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999.

[5] Stuart Jeffries, Friedrich Kittler Orbital. Philosopher and media theorist known as the 'Derrida of the digital age', *The Guardian*, October 2011. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/21/friedrich-kittler>>. [Accessed 6th January 2013].

[6] See: Andrew Feenberg, 'From Information to Communication: The French Experience with Videotex', in: Feenberg, 'Alternative Modernity: The Technical Turn' in *Philosophy and Social Theory*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1995.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Amy Harmon, 'Sad, Lonely World Discovered in Cyberspace'. *The NY-Times.com*, August 1998. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/30/us/sad-lonely-world-discovered-in-cyberspace.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>>. [Accessed 7th October 2012].

the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness.<sup>[9]</sup> The quality of real friendships seemed to be replaced by the quantity of wired relationships that were weaker but easier to cultivate.

Now the meaning of the Internet has turned again in a new direction. After a Web 2.0 facelift with new interactivity features and social networks, the Internet is now considered as the agency for international civil rights movements that responds to local needs. It started in many countries of the so-called 'Arab world', moving on to Israel and China where it mobilized the civil criticism of repressive politics and economy before its purported political and social agency became a global phenomenon in shape of the Occupy movement.

But, if one looks at the different meanings given to the Internet during the last thirty years, without ignoring the conclusions of studies about the social cohesion of connected communities, the confidence in the social and political power of these facilities collapse. This leads to the question: are social networks really made to run and empower new revolutions? For example, after the 2009 uprisings in Moldova and the post-election protests in Tehran, electronic networks were praised for providing a political platform to the people. Yet although they were successfully used to organize people without any central form of organization, the reliance on and the impact of technologies on civil movements dropped.

Today, Evgeny Morozov is one of the leading critics against the role of the Internet during social and political transition. New technologies help to organise protests in new ways, but a protest is not possible without protesters on the streets. You cannot simply 'follow' a revolution on Facebook or Twitter without physically participating. The data highway is just a tool, not the propeller of the events, since it can be used by everyone and for any purpose. Of course, one could or perhaps should use the Internet as a way to keep an eye on different protesters and different interests: this makes it easier to understand where movements are going, but in no way acts as the driving force behind the movements themselves.

### **The Fall of Leaves**

People still don't know exactly what happened in January 2011. Was dictator Ben Ali (also known as Zaba) cast out through the power of a people's protest, or by a deliberately planned coup d'état? What was the intent behind his getaway - to rescue his family and himself, or was it the result of a misunderstanding between him and his staff? These questions are still being discussed, but whether much has changed in Tunisia since 2011, it must be pointed out that the Tunisians making money before the revolution have continued to make money in its aftermath.

Following the first free constitutional elections, the resolve to

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[9] Robert Kraut, Micheal Patterson, Vicki Lundmark, Sara Kiesler, Tridas Mukopadhyay & William Scherlis, 'Internet Paradox: A Social Technology That Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-Being?', *American Psychologist*, Vol. 53, no. 9, 1998, pp. 1017-31, see p. 1017.



shed light on the involvement of Tunisia's high society with the Zaba Regime has clearly weakened and one of the most shocking mysteries, the rooftop snipers shooting at pro-democracy protesters, remains unsolved. Although many people witnessed snipers in action, the government has since denied their existence up to now; hence the mystery becoming a cold case. Since many such questions like these have yet to be answered, there is reason to ask whether the 'Jasmine Revolution' was a turning point in Tunisian history or just the beginning of a new myth that functions as a way in which to brainwash public opinion.

With this in mind, it is important to note that at least two things have altered the Tunisian landscape remarkably since Spring 2011.

Bizerte, 2012. Photo © Stephan Vandenbruck.



For one, the first thing one now notices on arriving in Tunisia is the litter. Secondly, the increase in young men flying the flag of the Salafi movement or even the Al Qaeda flag on the streets and from houses has become more noticeable. These flags are either white on black or black on white and look like a photo negative of a disarmed Saudi flag. It carries a stitching of the *shahada*: the Muslim declaration of faith stating that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. It is also known as the 'Caliphate's Flag', the political symbol of a fledging Muslim nation that is now purchasable in selected souvenir and grocery shops in Tunisia.

Now, I have no idea if there are any connections between both phenomena - rubbish and post-revolutionary extremism - but I am quite certain that too much of both could threaten any country's civil society. Years ago, I read a book talking about how humans have been producing rubbish since the beginning of time and how one could call civilization the very state in which the processing of waste has been organized into a running system.<sup>[10]</sup>

[10] Volker Grassmuck and Christian Unverzagt, *Das Müll-System: Eine metarealistische Bestandsaufnahme*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1998.

In today's Tunisia, this system seems to be out of pace. Ruins that are thousands of years old are now overwhelmed by non-degradable plastic litter, while black smoke from burning polyethylene waste spreads out into the horizon. The new and the old come together, but without any systematic order behind such a union. You see waste everywhere, on the roadsides, in the streets, on fields and fallow grounds, in parks and gardens. Of course, there are also public dustbins in some streets, but they are hard to find. If one wants to throw garbage into a bin, one must cross a three to six metre trash belt; I even found a literal 'wall of trash' in the Medina of Tunis obstructing the way into and view of a courtyard.

In residential areas, people are living both with and within their domestic litter, but this is far from being solely a problem for residential areas. The beaches are still the most popular places to visit during summer, but now there is more litter than ever before: not a square metre that doesn't need to be cleaned up. People simply leave waste on the beach, as if there was no tomorrow, as if they were not planning on ever coming back. Consequently, even though the beach is a public place, there is no civil responsibility to keep the beaches clean. Of course, this might have something to do with the fact that people usually tend to look after their private estates more.

*Fallow Ground, 2012,*  
Bahr Lazreg, Tunis.  
Photo © Stephan  
Vandenbruck.



In autumn 2008, I followed the artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke into the suburbs of Tunis. At this time, rubbish was a barely significant social issue, but it was already becoming a problem to many people. We were collecting prints of graffiti that residents had written on the walls of their houses and gardens to prevent others dumping garbage outside their doors. There were many inscriptions, in different styles and expressions, sometimes in the same street. Depending on the politeness, piety or fury of each home's inhabitants, there were civil pleas to respect the neighbourhood and not throw garbage in front of the houses, and some clear warnings, too: 'No dumping here (concerning all kind of waste)!' and even threats: 'A broken arm and foot for every one who throws litter'. More striking to me was the use



of non-secular warnings and spells: 'Those who throw their garbage here will neither be blessed nor they will find graciousness', or a step further: 'God will not have any graciousness for the parents of those who throw their rubbish here'. To me, it was a mystery how religion related to trash, but I was then told that religion and superstition are an inveterate part of daily Tunisian life: it can be used for everything, even to keep the pavement clean.

Maybe there is a connection between litter and belief. Divine retribution in the face of littering can be seen as an indicator of the religiosity of Tunisian people. If home-owners use one's belief to stop garbage from being dumped in front of their houses, the motive points toward a common fear of God. But this cannot explain how outdoor litter has increased proportionally to the rise of religious extremism. And it also does not explain why religious extremism could grow into a political movement against any kind of cultural and sexual emancipation.

For example, in March 2012, half a dozen more or less bearded men climbed up the rusty clock tower at the entry of Habib Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis, a monument erected by Ben Ali and the flashpoint of the capital's revolutionary protests.<sup>[11]</sup> These men entertained themselves and other protesters by hanging the Salafi flag, which has become a symbol for a growing body of religious hard-liners and hooligans. A similar incident occurred three weeks earlier at the Manouba University, where a supporter of the Salafi movement climbed up on to the roof of the Humanities department in order to replace the national flag of the Tunisian Republic with the Salafi flag. These incidents might seem like loose events, but until now the Salafi movement has been pushing society towards a new kind of self-censorship, which has since changed the lives of many artists and people working in culture.

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[11] Mohamed El Dahshan, 'Of Flags and Salafis', *Foreign Policy*, April 2012. <[http://transitions.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/04/03/of\\_flags\\_and\\_salafis](http://transitions.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/04/03/of_flags_and_salafis)>. [Accessed 7th October 2012].



In former times, artists dealt with political censorship against clear stipulations: no criticism of the country, its leader and his family. However, artists could still sometimes explore how far they could push the boundaries of this no-go zone, lacing their works with criticism. Conversely, today there are new limits of artistic expression and the new form of censorship is disguised under the idea of the 'Sacred', a notion that is gaining ground in Tunisia's increasingly religious political landscape.

Here, it would be recommended to describe 'the Sacred', but unfortunately I cannot do this; perhaps nobody really can. While 'the Sacred' is mentioned and defended all the time, no one has ever come up with a useful definition or description that would explain what exactly should not be offended.

### **The Invisible Sword**

Compared to the old censorship, which was pretty clear in that it was a matter of one political leader, one party and one country you could not deride, the new censorship is blurrier and more difficult to avoid because it is the notion of holiness in question. In this, the dilemma is that there will never be a satisfactory definition of what is sacred, while any attempts that fail to present a fully-fledged or acceptable description risk the condemnation of blasphemy. After all, though for 'believers' the idea of 'the Sacred' may be viewed as an entity, logically it is nothing but a class of objects, words and meanings. If one makes use of these things, one can automatically and unknowingly come into conflict with religion itself, with all its incumbent politics. This leaves a Kafkaesque vacuum that makes any artistic undertaking akin to digging into the darkness of a no-go zone.

Nadia Kaabi-Linke,  
*Smell*, 2012, Chkoun  
Ahna. © Vipul Sangoi.



In May 2012, Lara Favaretto showed her work *As if a Ruin* (2012) in the National Museum of Carthage. The work was a site-specific adaptation of her confetti sculptures, consisting of about 800 pounds of confetti shaped to form a dark brown cube that referred to the ashes of Carthage the day after it was burned down by the army



of the Roman Empire. The work touched on the historical depth of the site: a 'momentary monument' that decomposed and degraded during the time of the exhibition. Yet, despite the Italian origin of the artist and the historical context of the place, many Tunisian visitors were convinced that the piece represented the *Kaaba*. In the exhibition, another piece represented the Salafi flag, the declaration of belief stitched with fading Jasmine flowers on black tissue. The organizers of the exhibition were worried about this artwork since the *shahada* was embodied in fading flowers and could therefore be taken as a comment on fading belief. Yet surprisingly, the work was popular and on the closing day of the exhibition, the artist offered it to a Salafi who sincerely promised that from now on, he would take care of the flowers - probably to keep the faith.

Sometimes, it is hard to anticipate whether a work of art will be understood in a spiritual sense or not. In view of this, the issue of 'the Sacred' recalls Walter Benjamin's conception of an artwork's auratic character, when something viewed from afar can appear close or something close can seem distant.<sup>[12]</sup> No artist - and no

[12] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Prism Key Press, 2010, p. 17.

curator or organizer as well - can be certain of the very position of his or her practice towards 'the Sacred'. Sometimes the notion might seem close even if it is in fact quite distant, while at other times, it can seem distant, even if the invisible line between what is sacred and what is not has already been crossed.

Lara Favaretto, *As if a Ruin*, 2012, Confetti Cube, 90 x 90 x 90 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galleria Franco Noero, Torino. Photo by Vipul Sangoi.



This can influence artistic practices like Cicero's anecdote of Damocles, who, rather than enjoying his life, could not keep his eyes off the sword hovering over his head. In quite a similar way, the artist must keep an eye on what others might understand as blasphemy instead of thinking freely about artistic and conceptual matters. This was made clear on the closing day of the *Printemps des Arts* exhibition in June 2012, when officials condemned artworks for insulting Islam and accused the artists of blasphemy by the government. It was not an isolated incident. Moez Mrabet - a Tunisian theatre director, actor and choreographer - recalls the same behaviour from the government and Mehdi Mabrouk, the Minister of Culture, when threats against artists and intellectuals began some months ago. In March 2012, a huge Salafi mob attacked a downtown theatre in Tunis and intellectuals have been repeatedly attacked during public conferences. In May 2012, Salafis made an attempt on a theatre professor's life and committed several severe physical aggressions in El Kef.<sup>[13]</sup> Mrabet remembers that all this happened openly and publicly, without police intervention and without any serious statement from the government condemning the attacks.

*Printemps des Arts* took place in the Abdelliya Palace in La Marsa and at other venues across Tunis from 1-10th June 2012. During these ten days, the exhibited artworks were publicised via the Internet and print media and images circulated on social networks. According to the chronological reports from the Union of Tunisian

[13] See: 'En toute impunité, des islamistes agressent un artiste au Kef', *Tunisie Focus*, May 2012. <<http://www.tunisiefocus.com/politique/5429-5429/>>. [Accessed 7th October 2012].

Artists - whose members I have been in contact with - everything was going smoothly until the last day of the exhibition when a bailiff commissioned by a Salafi association accompanied by a lawyer and two other men demanded the removal of two paintings in Abdelliya. At 5pm, representatives of several associations, deputies of the Tunisian parliament and political parties, got together at the Palace to defend the interest of artists and gallerists. At the same time, a group of men gathered outside the Palace. That evening, police kept control over the situation and the exhibition closed at 8pm. At 11pm, an angry Salafi mob gathered in front of the palace and residents left their houses to protect the building before the police arrived.

The next day, the Minister of Culture published a statement distancing himself from the art fair while accusing participating artists of provocative actions. He went so far as to announce the closing of the Abdelliya Palace as an off-space for cultural activities.<sup>[14]</sup> Later that evening, the Minister of Religious Affairs, Nouredine El Khademi, charged the artists with an assault on Islam and called everybody to defend the religion on local television channel Tunisia 1's eight o'clock evening news. In the same programme, the spokesman for the Minister of the Interior insinuated that the whole incident had been staged by the artist themselves, even questioning their credentials as artists. Soon after, violence broke out at several locations across the country and was followed by dusk-to-dawn curfews.<sup>[15]</sup> From that week onwards, artists and members of the Tunisian Artists Union have argued that the artworks in question did not assault 'the Sacred', and in doing so, have appeared to corroborate with the rule that an artwork should not touch or question any religious matters.

On Friday 15th June, Rached Ghannouchi - the leader of the Ennahda party - called on the Tunisian people across the whole country to demonstrate after prayer to protect 'the revolution and the Holy'. The same day, during his prayer, Houcine Laabidi, the Imam of the old Zitouna mosque in the Medina of Tunis, called for the murder of the artists in the exhibition.<sup>[16]</sup> Since then, many Tunisian artists - whether they participated in the exhibition or not - have been living with death threats.<sup>[17]</sup> Their names and those of their children, their addresses and mobile numbers have been published on Facebook, together with manipulated images.

Unfortunately, this is another way new technologies and social networks can be utilised and it has nothing to do with freedom and democracy. In the case of *Printemps des Arts*, these social networks

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[14] Hanène Zbiss, 'Attaques salafistes: la Tunisie en otage', *Réalités*, no. 1382, June 2012.

[15] See: 'Tunis declares curfew after 'Islamist' rioting'. BBC News, June 2012. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18416328>>. Accessed 7 October 2012.

[16] See: Houcine Laâbidi, imam de la Zitouna, appelle au meurtre des artistes «blasphémateurs», Business News.com.tn, June 2012. <[http://www.businessnews.com.tn/details\\_article.php?t=534&a=31711&temp=3](http://www.businessnews.com.tn/details_article.php?t=534&a=31711&temp=3)>. [Accessed 7th October 2012].

[17] See: Lilia Weslaty, '27 artistes tunisiens ont reçu des menaces de mort', *Nawaat*, June 2012. <<http://nawaat.org/portail/2012/06/18/27-artistes-tunisiens-ont-recu-des-menaces-de-mort/>>. [Accessed 7th October 2012].



have been used to discredit artists by spreading fake images of provocative artworks that were never on show in the Abdelliya Palace in the first place. This ambiguous use of technology in Tunisian society invokes Melvin Kranzberg's observation that 'Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.'<sup>[18]</sup>

### **The Emergency State of Art**

In August 2012, Tunisian actor and humorist Lotfi Abdelli experienced something similar to the anti-art riots caused by the *Printemps des Arts* with his one man show *Made in Tunisia, 100 per cent Halal*. On the day of the opening, hundreds of Salafi Muslims, who believed that the piece was offensive to Islam, occupied the open-air theatre and began to pray. The play was cancelled and Abdelli's life has since been threatened. On the experience, Abdelli told Reuters: 'I am not afraid of threats or assault, but I do really fear for our freedom of expression and creativity, which is the only thing that we got out of the revolution.'<sup>[19]</sup>

During this time, Minister of Culture Mehdi Mabrouk revealed that twelve artistic events were to be cancelled for security reasons.<sup>[20]</sup> Considering Mabrouk's accusations and discriminations against artists that participated in *Printemps des Arts* a few months ago, it seemed the Minister of Culture found himself again in a delicate situation. While ruling back and saying that he was 'afraid of Salafis dominating the cultural landscape'<sup>[21]</sup> Habib Kedher, a member of the Islamist Ennahda movement, claimed that all these protests were nothing but an unequivocal push to make insulting religion a crime.<sup>[22]</sup>

In September 2012, Human Rights Watch (HRW) informed Tunisia's National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) that some of its proposed articles directly contradicted universal rights. 'If passed with these articles intact', wrote Eric Goldstein, Deputy Director of HRW, 'the constitution will undermine freedom of expression in the name of protecting 'sacred values', provide a basis for chipping away at the country's proud record on women's rights and weaken, in other ways, Tunisia's commitment to respecting the international human rights treaties it has signed.'<sup>[23]</sup> His concerns were mainly about two articles: a) the freedom of belief in regard to Article 3, which, though it guarantees the freedom of belief and religious practice, does not protect the right to change one's religion or to choose no religion; and b) Article 22, stating the equality of all citizens in rights and freedoms before the law without discrimination of any kind, contradicting another article stating how only a male Muslim can

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[18] Melvin Kranzberg, 'Technology and History: 'Kranzberg's Laws'', *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 27, no. 3, July 1986.

[19] Tarek Amara, 'Tunisian artists cry for help against religious extremists', Reuters.com. September 2012. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/19/us-tunisia-salafi-art-idUSBRE88I0SM20120919>>. [Accessed 7th October 2012].

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] 'Tunisia: Fix Serious Flaws in Draft Constitution', Human Rights Watch.org, 13th September 2012. <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/09/13/tunisia-fix-serious-flaws-draft-constitution>>. [Accessed 7th October 2012].

become President of the Republic.<sup>[24]</sup>

The reaction of the NCA was as prompt as it was simple: the commission in charge of the constitution announced its abandonment of Tunisia's adherence to international human rights laws.<sup>[25]</sup> The sad irony is that this decision was made by a non-secular and 'secular' assembly; democratically elected after a 'revolution' that brought people out into the street to fight for their rights. Obviously, religious issues deserve more protection.

Supposing that democracy still is the common aspiration of the NCA and considering the view that democracy can only be based on equal rights, something has gone terribly wrong in Tunisia. Considering that the fundamental rights constitutive of any democracy are often confined, restricted or erased in an emergency, it is legitimate to address the contemporary situation in Tunisia as a state of emergency. Instead of protecting freedom of expression, the government is trying to use religion to censor and normalise the arts in respect to the demands of avowedly anti-democratic and hostile groups. And when religion is used to prevent other people from dumping rubbish in front of their front doors, politicians may then adopt it to respond to people's demands.

Today there is more trash in the country than ever, but the real problem seems to be the political mobilisation around religious matters. Yet, if another spring arrives to replace the fall, the importance of religion in public life must be addressed if change is still kept in view. Such cultural workers as artists, writers, actors, choreographers and film makers must find subversive ways to undermine governmental restrictions and extra-governmental repressions. Many wrong decisions have affected policies in Tunisia, which have led to an increased awareness of how civil society is changing in ways that are as troubling as they are problematic. So long as the people in Tunisia are still having fun at the beaches and stockpiling beer and wine in the run-up to Ramadan, ascetic restrictions are still worth resisting.

*The views and opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Ibraaz.*

### **About the author**

**Timo Kaabi-Linke** was the curator of the exhibition *Chkoun Ahna - On the Track of History* in the National Museum of Carthage from 15 May until 15 June 2012 and co-founded the platform Carthage Contemporary.

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[24] Ibid.

[25] See: 'Le référentiel « Droits de l'Homme universels » définitivement refusé dans la Constitution tunisienne', BusinessNews.com.tn, October 2012. <[http://www.businessnews.com.tn/details\\_article.php?t=520&a=33784&temp=3&lang](http://www.businessnews.com.tn/details_article.php?t=520&a=33784&temp=3&lang)>. [Accessed 7th October 2012].