

The Arab Spring in Tunisia - A semiotic perspective

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1. Introduction

Every political regime is supported by propaganda apparatus, seen not only as a simple information device but also as a device to homogenize opinion. The doctrine and the ideology of a political regime are inevitably related to the iconography that it produces. When a state suffers a sudden regime change, it is natural that the existing iconography is quickly replaced by a new visual lexicon. In the shift from a dictatorship to a democratic system, images become tools used by political parties, but also by other organizations and social movements to convey their ideas and messages. In Tunisia, the intense campaign of civil resistance that toppled the regime of Ben Ali opened the path for the first free elections of the new state in which hundreds of political parties and candidate participated. Which iconography transmits the profound change of a people that spent more than two decades living under a dictatorship and are now beginning to live in a democracy? This research analyses the graphic devices produced by the Tunisians during and after the 2011 revolution – posters, banners, graffiti, murals, slogans, printed and electronic media, political party logos – contextualised in what was once the imaginary of the fallen authoritarian regime.

The Tunisian protests are also referred to as the Jasmine Revolution, a designation included in the nomenclature of the Coloured Revolutions, consisting of peaceful protests, and given the names of colours and flowers. It's also referred to as the Spring of Revolutions for having inspired similar protests in other Arab states, triggering the Arab Spring. During the protests that toppled Ben Ali and that lasted for only 28 days, the Tunisian national flag was the most visible graphic symbol, having a patriotic rather than nationalistic meaning. Also "dégage" – the French word for "get out" or "go away" – became the most used slogan. The technological metaphor "game over" (in English) was also a widely used term, symptomatic of the fact that this revolution was catalysed by the electronic media. The use of the internet shaped the identity of the revolution, in which social networks played a big role. The existence of graphic interventions in foreign languages, besides Arabic, also denotes the awareness of the Tunisians that their audience was global – the revolution was, in fact, being televised. Due to the urgency of the messages, the materialization of the devices denoted a brilliant improvisation arising from a genuine do-it-yourself spirit. The common citizen occupied the public space with graphic devices that represented the catharsis of a people.

2. Preamble

Contextualizing its recent history, it should be noted that Tunisia was a

province of the Ottoman Empire for three centuries, until 1881. For 75 years, from 1881 until 1956, France made Tunisia a protectorate. On March 20, 1956 Tunisia finally won its independence. Tunisia's founder and first president was Habib Bourguiba, who initiated a series of reforms – social, political and economic. He continues to appear not only on the Tunisian currency – the dinar – but also in monuments everywhere. Bourguiba's successor was Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who perpetrated a coup in 1987 to overthrow him. He would go on to remain the head of the country until the revolution in 2011, beginning what became known as the Arab Spring.

This brief historical background is important in order to explain two key facts related to the symbols of the Tunisian revolution. Firstly, the ubiquitous national flag, of Ottoman heritage, in the protests in 2011 and, secondly, the predominance of French posters in the same protests, the heritage, of course, of France.

Regarding the national flag, the interpretations of its meaning vary but the consensus holds that red symbolizes the blood of martyrs (during the Turkish conquest in 1574); white symbolizes peace; the crescent and the five pointed star represent, respectively, the unity of all Arabs and Muslims. The tips of the star represent the five pillars of Islam (faith, prayer, fasting, giving, pilgrimage to Mecca). Despite the crescent and the star having religious origins, these symbols are now predominantly cultural. It should also be noted that the crescent and the five pointed star are graphics present in the national flags of many countries of the southern coast of the Mediterranean basin, countries which were once part of the Ottoman Empire.

As mentioned previously, the national flag was the most visible graphic symbol among the numerous protests that led to the fall of Ben Ali. Therefore, during the protests, the flag was not a nationalist symbol but rather a patriotic one. Regarding the national flag, the Tunisian revolution had, therefore, a different scenario from Libya, where the rebels hoisted an alternative to the national flag. Eventually, the national flag of Libya came to be replaced in 2011 along with the change in political regime. It was also from the Tunisian national flag that most of the existing political parties were inspired to create their symbols and logos, an issue that we'll discuss in the course of this text.

As for the French, this was the predominant language (other than Arabic) on the posters used in the demonstrations and in graffiti on the walls. "Dégage" – which means "out" or "go away" – became the most used slogan. The technological metaphor "Game over" (in English) was also a widely used term, symptomatic of the fact that this revolution was boosted by electronic media – the internet. We'll see this phrase "Game over" replicated on demonstration posters in the Arab revolutions that followed the Tunisian one. The existence of graphic interventions in foreign languages in addition to Arabic, also denotes the consciousness of Tunisian people that their audience was global – the revolution was, in fact, being televised.

3. Before

Politically, Bourguiba was a socialist; socially he was secular; and economically he was neoliberal. He "westernised" the country and he guaranteed equal rights for women (out of all Arab countries, Tunisia is the one where women have the most rights). He also considered Islam to be a force that did not allow the development of the country, and banned the hijab (headscarf) – which he called an "odious rag" – in schools and in public administration in 1981, more than twenty years before France passed the same legislation. He closed religious schools and abolished the Courts of Sharia (Islamic law). Resistance to reforms made itself felt especially in Kairouan, a sacred town for Muslims.

In 1981 Tunisia organised the first multiparty elections. However, the Islamic opposition were not allowed to run. In 1984 the situation worsened with the abolition of major bread subsidies. This explains the fact that many Tunisians participated in the demonstrations holding loaves of bread instead of posters, to emphasize the constant increases in the price of food and hence the increased cost of living. This act could be considered a performance, according to professor Ryme Allagui from the Institute of Fine Arts in Tunis. Others acts could also be described as performances: a group of students creating human typography with the slogan "Tunis hurra" (Free Tunisia); a truck destroying a large format picture of Ben Ali; a young man sewing his mouth shut in a critique of the lack of freedom of expression; amongst others.

On November 7, 1987, the then Prime Minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali led a coup, known as the "Jasmine Revolution," a name taken from what is considered the national flower. Ben Ali continued Bourguiba's policies – domestic policies continued to be secular and politically repressive and foreign policies continued to be moderate and pro-Western. In addition, Ben Ali banned the political opposition, set censorship in the press and on the internet, limited religious freedoms and intimidated and kept under surveillance intellectuals, journalists and political oppositionists.

Thereafter, the elections held in 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004 and 2009 served only to legitimize the regime. In the last elections (2009), the party of Ben Ali – Rassemblement Démocratique Constitutionnel (RCD) – won 89.6%, its lowest score ever. The symbol and logo of the RCD (which, in fact, was a single party) clearly conveys the essence of the political regime: authoritarian and of socialist nature.

In combination with this typically authoritarian iconography, there was an official color: purple. The prevailing theory is that this color was the favorite of Ben Ali. This color was ubiquitous in public buildings and bridges, in the doorways and windows of houses of political sympathizers, in garments worn by people with connections to the regime, decorating the celebration ceremonies of November 7, and on the logo of the state TV channel TV7. It

should be noted that the state TV channel was named TV7, not because there were seven TV channels, but because 7 was a reference to November 7, 1987, the date of the coup that brought Ben Ali to power.

4. During

On December 17, 2010, 26-year old Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit and vegetable street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, a small town in the countryside, saw his stall confiscated by the police. There is a widespread theory that a bribe was demanded for the return of his stall. What is certain is that it wasn't the first time his stall had been confiscated. Bouazizi was the sole breadwinner of a family of eight, and in an attitude of despair and without telling his family, he set himself on fire outside a government building, an hour after his stall was confiscated. Bouazizi's act acted as a catalyst for the protests that followed and, in the following days, spread across neighboring towns. It should be noted that Sidi Bouzid is located 300km from Tunis – a town of only 40 thousand people, deep in the countryside, far from the capital and little controlled by the police. The reasons for the protests included the high rate of unemployment, the rising price of food, high levels of corruption, lack of freedom of expression, lack of political freedom and poor living conditions.

The self-immolation of Bouazizi took place on December 17, 2010. The revolution took place on January 14, 2011, just 28 days later, with Ben Ali escaping to Saudi Arabia by plane, having abdicated the power that he held for 23 years. The revolution in Tunisia is dubbed the "Jasmine Revolution" which, ironically, is the same name that was given to the coup that led Ben Ali to power.

The term "Jasmine Revolution" is part of the nomenclature of the so-called "Colored Revolutions", consisting of peaceful protests, each one using colors and flowers for their designations. Examples are the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005), the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon (2005), the Blue revolution of Kuwait (2005), the Green Revolution in Iran (2009), and the Lotus Revolution in Egypt (2011).

The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia is also known as the Uprising of Sidi Bouzid, the town where it all began or as the Facebook Revolution, since most of the protests were fed on the internet and on social networks. Besides Facebook, other sites had an important role in the revolution, including Twitter, YouTube, DailyMotion, Wikileaks (who denounced the degree of corruption of the regime) and Tor (an application to surf the internet anonymously). The BBC, for its part, dubbed Tunisia the Arab "Gdansk", an analogy to Solidarność, the Polish movement that eventually led to the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. There were also many comparisons to the fall of Ceaucescu in Romania or the Carnation Revolution in Portugal.

Graphic manifestations during the revolution were mainly drawn up by common citizens. People occupied the main squares where government buildings were located and intervened directly on their walls. There was a burst of street art at this time. Cars vandalized during the revolution were intervention targets as well. Even today these cars are preserved as they were, as if monuments.

5. After

The first free elections in Tunisia took place on 23 October, 2011, ten months after the revolution. More than 70 parties competed. With the democratic regime, parties once banished from the political scene could compete, particularly those based on religious principles. As mentioned previously, most logos of political parties sought to utilize national elements, such as the symbols of the national flag. Other commonly used graphics are doves, scales, maps (including the Tunisian or the Maghreb). But obviously, the biggest trend was red, which is also a national symbol.

For the campaign, specific sites for political parties' posters were created. All over Tunisia, walls were painted with numbered rectangular areas. Each party was allocated two spaces (vertically) and given a number.

The big winner in the elections was the Ennahda Movement (considered a moderate Islamist party) whose logo is a blue dove shaped crescent. The Ennahda formed a coalition with the Congrès pour la République (CPR, center-left, secular and reformist) and with the Ettakatol (left). The CPR logo, which also features a dove, has a supplementary symbol – a pair of glasses – that serves not only to be easily recognized but also to match their slogan: "CPR – for a clearer vision."

Today it is not only the physical walls which are targets for intervention. Virtual walls are also filled with scathing criticism for or against certain political ideologies. The virtual "walls" on Facebook are filled with cartoon style images.

After the revolution, political prisoners were freed, including Salafists. The Salafists (Islamic conservatives, contrary to democratic principles, considered by many as a radical element) are now freely demonstrating with their black flag with verses from the Koran (Shahada – Islamic declaration of faith), a symbol associated with Islamic conservatism (this flag is very similar to the one of Saudi Arabia, although this has a green background). This flag, a deeply religious symbol, was once banned during the dictatorship because the regime was secular. Some Salafists replaced the Tunisian national flag for theirs in many public buildings – another act that may be dubbed as a performance – the war of symbols. For its part, without the repression of religion, the hijab (headscarf) has become more present in public space.

Meanwhile, Tunisian people continued their catharsis. The mansions of the family members of Ben Ali, like the Trabelsi Mansion, were looted and destroyed. In this case, the mansion and its gardens are now a place that people enjoy as a public space. Toponymy was also quickly replaced. All squares named "November 7, 1987", usually the main one of each town, were renamed "January 14, 2011".

Meanwhile, in Sidi Bouzid, the walls of the buildings that dominate the square where Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself were quite intervened. It is probably one of the sites with the highest concentration of graffiti and tags across Tunisia. In this same square a monument to the memory of Bouazizi was erected, portraying his stall. One of the buildings that dominates the square bears a giant portrait of him. In turn, the Tunisian Post Office issued a commemorative stamp in his memory. Bouazizi became not only a Tunisian symbol but also pan-Arab. However, the catharsis of the Tunisian people has not yet reached the bank notes. The 5 dinar note, the largest in circulation, still bears the design commemorating the Jasmine revolution, not the 2011 one.

6. The end?

In the aftermath of the elections that gave victory to an Islamist party, a widespread climate of disillusionment can be witnessed in Tunisia recently – the most commonly heard phrases are "the revolution was betrayed" or "it was not for this that we had a revolution". It's time to quote a poster that we saw recent at a rally: "Game not over."