

# Economic Development and Corruption in the Post-Revolution Tunisia: Back to the Cycle of Ibn Khaldun\*

## *Tunus'ta Devrim Sonrası Ekonomik Gelişme ve Yolsuzluklar: İbn Haldun'un Politik Güç Değişimi Döngüsüne Geri Dönüş*

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**Abstract:** Since 14<sup>th</sup> January 2011, Tunisians managed to end the totalitarian regime settled 23 years ago by the General Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Tunisia entered a new democratic era, and started building its economy. But despite of the new social and economic model based on “clean society”, corruption is still affecting the society and refraining the economic development of the country. The research tries to reexamine the economic development and corruption in the post-revolution Tunisia at the light of the political cycle proposed by the historian Ibn Khaldun in 1377 in the Moqaddima. The theory of Ibn Khaldun, based on the observation of rises and falls of numerous dynasties, starts with the arrival to power of an individual, acting in the name of people, claiming more justice and democracy. In the end of the Ibn Khakdoun cycle, the dynasty is affected by corruption and breaks down, and the rupture of the equilibrium between the reigning dynasty and the rising protesting tribes lead to the emergence of a new king. Did the new Tunisian economic model follow the political cycle observed by Ibn Khaldun? To what extent things got worse? Can we expect a new economic cycle in the post-revolution Tunisia? These are some of the questions to which I will try to find answers in the study. The research is organized into two sections. The first one reminds briefly the circumstances of the Jasmine revolution and the building of a new economy. The second examines the political cycle of Ibn Khaldun, showing to what extent it effectively applies to corruption in the Tunisian case.

**Keywords:** Ibn Khaldun, Revolution, Tunisia, Cycle

**Öz:** *Tunus, General Zine El Abidine Ben Ali tarafından 23 yıl önce kurulan totaliteryan rejime 14 Ocak 2011 son vermeyi başarmıştır. Tunus yeni bir demokratik döneme girmiştir ve ekonomisini kurmaya başlamıştır. Fakat, yeni sosyal ve ekonomik “temiz toplum” modeline rağmen,*

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*yolsuzluklar halan toplumu etkilemekte ve ekonomik gelişmeyi engellemektedir. Bu araştırma, Tunus'taki devrim sonrası ekonomik gelişmeyi ve yolsuzlukları Tarihçi İbn Haldun'un 1377 yılında yazdığı Mukaddime kitabının ışığında yeniden gözden geçirmeyi ve incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. İbn Haldun'un pek çok hanedanlığın kurulması, yükselmesi ve çöküşlerini incelemesine göre geliştirdiği teorisine göre, bir birey halk adına daha çok adalet ve demokrasi istemesiyle iş başına gelmekte ve güç elde etmektedir. İbn Haldun'un teorisine göre bu döngü, hanedanlığın yolsuzluklara bulaşmasıyla kırılır, böylece yönetimde olanlar ve buna karşı ayaklananlar arasında bir eşitsizlik olur ve bunun sonunda da yeni bir yönetici- kral iş başına gelir. Tunus'un yeni ekonomik modeli, İbn Haldun'un önerdiği politik döngü modeline uymakta mıdır? İşler ne kadar kötüleşti? Tunus'ta devrim sonrası yeni bir ekonomik model bekleyebilir miyiz? Bu yazıda bu ve buna benzer sorulara cevaplar aranmaya çalışılmaktadır. Bu çalışma iki kısım şeklinde organize edilmiştir. Birinci kısımda Yasemin devriminin oluştuğu ve yeni ekonominin kurulduğu şartlar kısaca özetlenmiştir. İkinci kısımda İbn Haldun'un politik değişim döngüsü incelenmiş ve bunun ne dereceye kadar Tunus'taki gözlenen yolsuzluk durumuna uygulanabilirliği incelenmiştir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İbn Haldun, Devrim, Tunus, Döngü

## 1. Introduction

On 14<sup>th</sup> January 2011, Tunisians managed to end the totalitarian regime settled 23 years ago by the General Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, in what has been called the *Jasmine revolution*.

The research tries to reexamine the Jasmine revolution at the light of the political cycle proposed by the historian Ibn Khaldun in 1377 in the *Moqaddima*. His theory, based on the observation of rises and falls of numerous dynasties, starts with the arrival to power of an individual, acting in the name of people, claiming more justice and democracy. In the end of the Ibn Khaldun cycle, the dynasty is affected by corruption and breaks down, and the rupture of the equilibrium between the reigning dynasty and the rising protesting tribes lead to the emergence of a new king.

Did the Tunisian revolution follow the political cycle observed by Ibn Khaldun? To what extent was this revolution predictable? Can we expect that other Arab countries (Syria, Yemen,...) could follow the model of Ibn Khaldun? These are some of the questions to which I will try to find answers in the study.

The research is organized into two sections. The first one reminds briefly the circumstances of the Jasmine revolution. The second examines the political cycle of Ibn Khaldun, showing to what extent it effectively applies to the Tunisian case.

## 2. The Jasmine Revolution

This first part of the study reminds briefly the circumstances of the Jasmine revolution. In fact, it is difficult to determine precisely when all began. As in most popular uprising that took place in the world, the Tunisian revolution is the result of the accumulation of a multitude of micro-events, ending with a mass reaction.

The parabola of the water lily is a good example of what happened in Tunisia. In a pond, every day, the size of a water lily doubles, but nobody notices it. The day before the last, the water lily covers half the pond surface, but still nobody realizes the emergency of the situation. The last day, the water lily covers the whole surface of the pond, suffocating it and eliminating all trace of life, in what seemed to be a quite microenvironment. But now it is too late to do anything.

This is precisely what happened in Tunisia. Since 1987, when Ben Ali came to power, so many small events took place, creating then consolidating a sentiment frustration: racket, confiscation of land, unmerited promotions, abuse of power,... When a citizen expressed his frustration in a dramatic way, all turned suddenly upside down.

If the young Mohamed Bouazizi did not immolate with fire on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010, someone else would have, a day or another, committed a suicide, an attempt or a hostage-taking. Today, we use to say that all started in Sidi Bouzid<sup>1</sup>, but it could have began anywhere in Tunisia. What happened in the beginning 2011 could have taken place one year before, or two years later. It could have started during the popular turmoil that took place in 2008 in Gafsa (Centre of Tunisia), or in August 2010 in Ben Guerdane (extreme south of the country). The goal of this research is to show that the conditions behind the Jasmine revolution were existing since long.

Although it is difficult to determine the exact date of the beginning of the Jasmine revolution, we will suppose here that all started on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010, when a young man, unemployed although graduated from the university, was selling fruits in the street and has been confiscated his equipment by the police. Vexed, he splashed himself with fuel and set fire to himself in front of the governorate headquarter of Sidi Bouzid, provoking immediately a wave of popular protests, that will end on 14<sup>th</sup> January with a general strike and a riot grouping more than one million persons in front of the ministry of interior in the centre of Tunis.

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<sup>1</sup> Poor town situated in the Centre of Tunisia

### 3. The Political Cycle of Ibn Khaldun

I will try to show now to what extent the Jasmine revolution followed the political cycle proposed by the Arab historian Abderrahmen Ibn Khaldun<sup>2</sup> in *Al Muqaddima* (*Prolegomena of the Discourse on universal history*)<sup>3</sup>.

#### 3.1. The Political Cycle of Ibn Khaldun

During his observation of the rise and fall of the dynasties of the past, Ibn Khaldun determined a political cycle composed of five stages.

All begins with the arrival to power of an individual, acting in the name of people, claiming more justice and democracy. This first phase is violent, generating conflicts, civil war or guerilla, as the new king takes the power from the hands of the former one. The former king is killed, imprisoned or exiled. At this stage, the new leader is exemplar, he is acclaimed by the people, and his power is legitimated by the risks he took to overthrow the former regime. It is then in the name of the people and democracy that he is recognized as the new leader. He is at the service of the community, his power is alimanted by the *açabia*<sup>4</sup> (instinct of the group), and his victory is the victory of the people.

In a second stage, the new king monopolizes power and keeps his relatives in the background. But they will claim a part of power, in the name of the principle of *açabia*. To exercise his power, the new king needs to surround himself with a *hachia*, a court sufficiently well maintained to be faithful.

In the third stage of the cycle, the king starts forgetting his first democratic claims, focusing on two major worries: accumulate a personal treasure, which leads him to confuse the public funds with his own properties. He is also obsessed by the need to keep traces. For that reason, he starts building huge edifices: palaces, mosques, monuments, with a common characteristic: a disproportioned size comparing to the level of life of the nation. The goal is to impress the people, but above all the foreign visitors. The king gives gifts to the dignitaries of the regime and the ambassadors of friend countries, and looks after constituting elite troops, overpaid and well equipped. To cover these expenses, the leader increases the tax pressure on the people.

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<sup>2</sup> Born on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1332 in Tunis, died on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1406 in Cairo

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Khaldun Abderrahmen, *Al Muqaddima (Introduction to the Discourse on the universal history)*, 1377

<sup>4</sup> The concept of *açabia* is central in the theory of Ibn Khaldun, as it is used more than 500 times in the *Muqaddima*

In the fourth stage, satisfaction, luxury and idleness push the king in the way to passivity, laziness. This period is characterized by calm, immobility and rest.

In the fifth and last stage of the cycle, the king lapses into wasting, engaging huge expenses to satisfy his passions, but also the passions of his kinship. He surrounds himself with courtiers of bad reputation and gives to them political, diplomatic and economic missions far over their competences. He takes his distances with the leaders of his tribe, raising among them hate. Ibn Khaldun underlines here an important fact: the king destroys the foundations settled by his predecessors, pushing the people toward a sentiment of regret of the ancient regime.

The dynasty, affected by corruption, breaks down<sup>5</sup>. The rupture of the equilibrium between the reigning dynasty and the rising protesting tribes lead to the emergence of a new king.

At this level of the reflection, it would be interesting to check if the Jasmine revolution followed the model proposed by Ibn Khaldun.

### 3.2. The Tunisian Case

To see the similarities between the rise and fall of Ben Ali and the political cycle of Ibn Khaldun, let's review one by one the five stages of his model.

All starts on the morning of 7<sup>th</sup> November 1987, when the General Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, prime minister, replaces the President Habib Bourguiba, accusing him of senility. He bases his action on a medical report made by 7 physicians, and uses the article 57 of the Tunisian constitution stating that a president who has lost his intellectual capacities can be replaced by his prime minister.

As stated by Ibn Khaldun, Ben Ali, who was in the beginning the champion of justice and democracy, is admired and acclaimed by his people, and his power is legitimated by the risks undertaken to eliminate the former leader. The new president crystallizes the hopes of the whole nation, and his prestige is immense.

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<sup>5</sup> Bousquet G. H., *Les textes sociologiques et économiques de la Mouqaddima*, Editions Marcel Rivière et Cie, Paris, 1965 , p. 89

During a couple of years, Ben Ali worked exclusively for the interest of his people, his priorities being the internal security<sup>6</sup>, the repositioning in the international world and a good economic governance.

What happened next fits the model of Ibn Khaldun: Ben Ali monopolized the power and kept his relatives in the background, ignoring the principle of *açabia*. To reinforce his power, Ben Ali surrounded himself with faithful persons and constituted a militia. He started then constituting a treasure, the limits between his own properties and the public property becoming vague. In the late 1990's, Ben Ali forgot his democratic discourse and became obsessed by the need to keep traces: a big mosque in Carthage, a monument in the 7<sup>th</sup> November square,... He also started wasting the public budget to satisfy his own and his family passions: luxury cars, yachts, houses,...

In the end of the cycle, the people went so frustrated that the situation ended with a turmoil and a revolution.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Jasmine revolution started with the immolation of a young desperate. Similar events took place in other Arab countries, and have been considered as popular attempts to follow the Tunisian revolution and overthrow the existing regime.

In Algeria, on 12<sup>th</sup> January many persons tried to immolate in front of the prefecture of Borj Menaiel, in Egypt a young man immolated on 17<sup>th</sup> January in front of the Assembly of the people in Cairo, in the same day in Nouakchott, a man immolated himself in front of the senate. There are many other examples of attempts to follow the Tunisian revolution.

On 25<sup>th</sup> January, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians went down in the streets of Cairo and in Tahrir square to claim the departure of the President Mubarak. The scene has nothing new, but one detail: the protesters were brandishing notices mentioning “*Mubarak dégage*”, the same “*degage*” used two weeks before in Tunisia. It was peculiar to see Egyptians, who are Arabophone and Anglophone, but certainly not Francophone, use the French expression “degage” (go away). Could we conclude by saying that the Tunisian revolution is an exported model?

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<sup>6</sup> When he came to power, there were some troubles with the Islamists

At the end of this study, it is important to reflect on the prospects of the Jasmine revolution, focusing on its sociodemographic aspects: is the youth of the Tunisian population an asset to achieve properly its revolution? How could we make the rural society participate to and benefit from the revolution? What about the future of the Tunisian woman in the post-Ben Ali Tunisia? Is the high level of education a failure, in absence of full employment?

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