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Abstract

It all seemed so promising. Tunisia rid itself of the shackles that had choked it for 23 years under the oppressive rule of Zine El Abdine Ben Ali and the media started breathing easier when journalists, bloggers and activists of all stripes made up for lost time with a vengeance. But since that unforgettable December 2010 when Mohammad Bouazizi set himself ablaze to protest being roughed up by a policewoman and died of his burns, it's been a bumpy ride for Tunisian media and there was still no light at the end of the tunnel at press-time.

Tunisian Media Aren't Quite Free Yet

By Magda Abu-Fadil | magda.abufadil@gmail.com

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Tunisia rid itself of the shackles that had choked it for 23 years under the oppressive rule of Zine El Abdine Ben Ali and the media started breathing easier when journalists, bloggers and activists of all stripes made up for lost time with a vengeance.

But since that unforgettable December 2010 when Mohammad Bouazizi set himself ablaze to protest being roughed up by a policewoman and died of his burns, it's been a bumpy ride for Tunisian media and there was still no light at the end of the tunnel at press-time.

It was encouraging to see first-time, post-revolution satirical newspapers like *Al Qatoos* [The Cat] (<http://www.daralhayat.com/print/309966>) emerge on the scene, since publisher Salim Boukhazir had made a career of being anti-ancien regime.

He told Agence France-Presse in September 2011 that "This type of journalism is the most potent weapon against fear and is the closest to readers," noting that comedy was a remedy for people who had grown tired of desperation and hardship.

Boukhazir likened himself to "the cat" who may not have been able to topple the old regime with his companions, but who had managed to make enough of a racket by publishing satirical articles in more than one vehicle to prevent Ben Ali from sleeping.

He was arrested in November 2007 and jailed for eight months on charges of attacking a security officer, refusing to identify himself, and assaulting high morals, which various sources considered a cover for retribution against the journalist who dared to uncover corruption and abuse of power by the regime and its cronies, the pan-Arab daily *Al Hayat* reported.

Many seemed heartened when in March 2011 *The Economist* magazine published a piece entitled "It could be normal, Tunisia is getting back on track" (<http://www.economist.com/node/18491692/print>).

It said Bouazizi's picture adorned the main street of his hometown Sidi Bouzid, banners promised to keep his memory alive, and graffiti across its walls exhorted the population to stand up for their rights and fight for their freedom.

It referred to the Islamist Annahda party that has since won legislative and presidential elections as promising all manner of reforms. "Its leaders say it wants to be part of a modern democracy with a separation of powers, independent courts and a free press," the article said.

Ironically, Ben Ali had visited Bouazizi in hospital after his self-immolation and in a TV address on December 28, 2010, the Tunisian president placed the blame for unrest in his country squarely at the door of foreign media, which he said had exaggerated the extent of the revolt and were egged on by certain political parties aiming to harm their country.

Tunisia's National Journalists Syndicate blasted the state-run media's censorship of events at the outset of the revolution that eventually toppled Ben Ali, saying the lack of clear information had led to countless rumors and interpretations.

As the International Freedom of Expression Exchange Tunisia Monitoring Group (IFEX-TMG) reported about a weeklong mission it undertook a month later, old habits die hard, and leave a foul after-taste.

"Scars left by the former regime remain apparent in the media industry, while the legislative framework left behind fails to adequately respond to the requirements of the emerging media stakeholders," it said, adding that freedom of expression groups were vying for a place in discussions that would define the new society. (<http://ifex.org/tunisia/tmg>)

According to IFEX-TMG, support for the independent press and broadcast sectors, plus promotion of professional journalism practices and thorough revision of the media legal framework were crucial criteria for the transitional period through which Tunisia was passing ahead of its Constituent Assembly elections in October 2011.

The Islamists won a majority and set the ball rolling for liberal and secular journalists who feared their newly won freedom would be overturned by Annahda party members who had been jailed, were in exile, and, would be intolerant of criticism or accountability.

Female journalist/blogger Wajd Bouedbellah (www.wajdblog.wordpress.com) identified by the Twitter handle "Tounsia Hourra" (a free Tunisian) @tounsiahourra tweeted a message to her country's cabinet minister for religious affairs with a variation on Gebran Khalil Gebran's famous line, "You have your Lebanon, and I have mine."

Her version in a tweet to the minister was "You have your religion, and I have mine. You've turned [the Prophet] Mohammad's religion into one of killing and making it acceptable to shed people's blood and covering up instigation to murder. Shame!" Her outrage reflects other Tunisians' dismay at the turn of events involving not just Annahda partisans but hardline Islamic Salafists who harass journalists, beat them up, go after various media figures, and target artists and performers with claims of blasphemy against their religion.

Lebanese journalist and "Future TV" program director Diana Moukalled wrote in a column entitled "A Knife in the Face of a Painting" that Salafist groups had exercised extreme violence in reaction to a painting they said was immoral.

"These are the same groups that 'railed' more than once against films, exhibitions and photos as well as unveiled women students and gatherings related to expression and creativity, but the Salafists' latest outburst caused widespread security agitation across Tunisia that translated into the carrying of knives, Molotov cocktails and assaults on police," she said. (<http://www.aawsat.com//print.asp?did=682905&issueno=12259>)

The sense of bitterness is widespread among Tunisian youth and cultural circles, Moukalled reported in the pan-Arab daily *Asharq Al-Awsat*, as the new authorities had jailed an editor for publishing a picture they deemed x-rated.

She added that authorities treated the revolution's wounded who demanded their rights harshly, whilst it dealt leniently with those who attacked universities, faculty members, and were accused of beating up journalists and debasing the Tunisian flag to replace it with a religious [Islamic] banner.

"The Tunisian revolution called for liberty and dignity, not the establishment of a theocracy or a particular way of life," Moukalled said, adding that freedom of belief, freedom of women, freedom of the arts and the body were the basic tenets for the battle of democracy in the Arab world.

The debate over pro- and anti-secular values has been raging on Tunisian TV talk shows, with supporters of the former warning against the spread of intellectual fanaticism, while the latter charge their opponents with provoking people's feelings and values.

"Where did all these Salafists come from?" was the headline of a feature in the pan-Arab daily *Al Hayat's* youth supplement on June 4, 2012. The Salafists' "emergence onto the political scene constitutes a new element that may turn intellectual conflicts in the country into bloody confrontations in light of the state's negative position," wrote Samira Alsafdi of the spreading religious trend.

Also in June, The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) blasted authorities for resorting to a Ben-Ali era anti-terrorism law to prosecute a Tunisian activist who had criticized police brutality on his Facebook page and charged him with burning down a police station. (<http://www.anhri.net/?p=55500&print=1>)

Activist Imad Deghij was being punished for his activities and defense of the rights of the revolution's martyrs and injured, a dangerous throwback to deposed president Ben Ali's police tactics, the Cairo-based ANHRI said. "ANHRI joins other Tunisian rights organizations in demanding that Tunisian authorities put an immediate halt to the implementation of the anti-terrorism law and turn that page forever."

The Nawat portal couldn't have been more expressive with its poster of a brain (<http://nawaat.org/portail/3mai12>) sprouting out of a tree trunk and the words "comedy, culture, creativity, thought, press, ijtihad [diligence], cinema and freedom of expression" surrounding the design.

On June 21 the site published a manifesto issued by assorted activists insisting: "Our revolution is not a rumor." (<http://nawaat.org/portail/2012/06/21/manifeste-notre-revolution-nest-pas-une-rumeur>)

In their opening statement, the signatories said that more than ever, their aim was to topple the regime. "Our slogan remains: work, liberty, national dignity." That slogan was the clarion call of Tunisian journalists demanding press freedom during the Ben Ali era and has been revived following the current post-revolution government's adoption of measures deemed suppressive of those short-lived liberties.

One of the problems the secularists and activists (with their respective members in the media) face, as in other countries undergoing transitions in the Arab region, is their disunity,

Fluid opposition coalitions seem in a state of disarray, which is reflected in their organizations, alliances and staying power, wrote Marina Ottaway, senior associate in the Middle East program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Her commentary (<http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/19/tunisian-political-spectrum-still-unbalanced/c088>) entitled “The Tunisian Political Spectrum: Still Unbalanced” sheds light on the opposition’s fragmentation, which, in turn, is reflected in the media’s output and tug-of-war between liberals and conservatives over what can and cannot be published, disseminated, and broadcast.

The sore point of media censorship, long a thorn in Tunisians’ side, is back at the forefront of conversations, analyses, blogposts and other forms of communication. Under Ben Ali, the Internet was heavily censored, and this writer had to meet secretly with journalists in the capital Tunis to discuss press freedom issues. Several of them were under heavy surveillance and those who dared to speak out or write (in print or online) anything critical of the regime faced uncertain futures, or worse.

On that first pre-revolution visit, it was almost impossible to check one’s innocuous business email, much less send out subversive content. One journalist/activist is Kamel Labidi, who lived in self-exile for several years after being dismissed from media jobs and being harassed for his activism. He returned to head a national commission set up by the first post-revolution cabinet to reform and update the country’s media laws ahead of legislative and presidential elections.

But he was up against tremendous odds and younger journalists dismissed his efforts as too little too late, given the Islamists’ aversion to criticism and a free press. Labidi and his commission resigned in early July, charging the government with “censorship and misleading the public.”

After the revolution, access to the Internet was easier and this writer could actually send emails, tweet and blog during an international conference in Tunis. But, the new authorities may be reverting to Ben Ali type by clamping down on dissidents.

Jillian York, director for international freedom of expression at the San Francisco-based Electronic Frontier Foundation believes Tunisia could set an example for the region by standing against Internet censorship. (<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/02/201222381652993947.html>)

In an opinion piece on the Aljazeera English website in February 2012, York acknowledged the progress made in opening up the media’s scope of freedom but cautioned against crackdowns that would be a throwback to the Ben Ali days.

“That openness, however, was not without challenge: in May [2011], a military tribunal ordered the blocking of several Facebook pages, a move quickly followed by a civilian lawsuit demanding the blocking of pornography,” she said.

The Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) surprisingly stood its ground and appealed the decision on the pornography issue, she added.

But, she argued, installing a system of censorship “like the one previously used by the Ben Ali government (which was, incidentally, built by American company McAfee, owned by Intel) would leave the ATI vulnerable to further government demands.”

Interestingly, the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) held its 5th Arab Press Freedom Forum in Tunis in January 2012 to “celebrate the major advances and underline the critical challenges still ahead for freedom of expression and the Arab media.”

That same month, Afef Abrougui expressed her concern (<http://wp.me/p16NIR-2QV>) about the army becoming a censor after it had helped topple Ben Ali. Her blogpost “Freedom of expression in post-revolution Tunisia: ‘moral’ and ‘legal’ new basis for censorship” on the Nawat portal referred to the censorship of five Facebook pages that sharply criticized the army.

Ironically, even the ATI had to backpedal on the decision, she wrote: “The Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) an eternal scapegoat for censorship in Tunisia, took in charge the filtering of these pages listed on the website: (<http://filtrage.ati.tn>). After putting into practice the decision of the tribunal, the ATI decided to finally lift censorship on these pages due to a breakdown in global filters, as it is indicated by the following message available on the filtering website: For technical constraints, the equipment at the disposal of the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) can no longer ensure a web filtering service in accordance with the requisitions (issued by the tribunal).”

While censorship was more political in nature pre-revolution, there’s been a drift towards religious and moral censorship, she reported, with Islamists acting as social pressure groups and Salafists calling for an Islamic state as well as the right of female university students to wear the niqab [full-facial veil].

It’s a race against time between Annahda partisans and Salafists on the one hand, and liberals on the other, who worry that media freedom may once again become an elusive dream. “‘J’accuse,’ you Islamists who are trying to unravel the state,” wrote Rajaa Ben Slama in a take on French author Emile Zola’s famous line from the open letter he wrote to President Félix Faure in 1898 in the newspaper *L’Aurore* accusing the government of anti-Semitism for jailing a Jewish army general, Alfred Dreyfus, on charges of espionage.

In Ben Slama’s discourse in the Lebanese daily *Al Akhbar*, the accusatory finger is pointed at Islamists and Salafists who she claimed had hijacked the revolution, used violence to snuff out liberal dissent, and tightened the noose around the media’s neck, all in the name of religion. (<http://www.al-akhbar.com/print/96049>)

She slammed the ministers of religious affairs and of culture for provoking fanatics and instigating to violence against liberal manifestations of media, art and culture.

“And I condemn Mr. Rached Al Ghannouchi [head of the ruling Annahda Party] because on the night of June 13, while a curfew was in place across the country, and our hearts were quivering, we saw him on state-run TV calling for demonstrations on Friday in support of what he deemed protecting what is holy,” she said.

The article was illustrated by a caricature in French of a bearded Salafist holding a club telling his fully veiled wife he was going to see an exhibition, under the headline “Tunisian cultural life” and the suggestion he planned to destroy the exhibits on display.

Although faulted for many misdeeds during his long tenure, Tunisia’s first post-independence president, Habib Bourguiba, was considered a trailblazer in the Arab world for granting women social rights and supporting secularism when other countries in the region stuck to their non-emancipation guns.

To Abrougui, the sensationalism currently pervading Tunisian media is very dangerous and may lead to the justification of a return to censorship, or self-censorship, that characterized the Ben Ali era. “So, making Tunisian media aware about their responsibility to disseminate verified and unbiased information is crucial in protecting freedom of speech,” she argued. “It is also crucial to reform laws that were used to silence protesting voices, and which today represent a danger to the fundamental freedoms of citizens.”

Four months later, the Paris-based UNESCO held its “World Press Freedom Day” in Tunis, which journalist Sana Sboui found highly symbolic. “The event boosted Tunisia’s fledgling democracy, and reinforced the idea that a free press is essential to the country and to others looking to it as a model,” she wrote. (<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=177407&mode=print>)

UNESCO’s concept paper for the event *New Voices: Media Freedom Helping to Transform Societies* underlined the radical changes on the media landscape and new ways to communicate, share information and knowledge, and for people to widen their sense of participation, identity and belonging. “Yet, media freedom is fragile, and it is also not yet within the reach of everyone,” was the clear admission.

The concept paper also said that Tunisia had demonstrated the transformative power that could be brought forth by the convergence of social media, mobile connections, satellite TV and an earnest desire to fundamentally change socio-economic-political conditions, noting that the Bouazizi affair had started a domino effect that went on to reach Tahrir Square in Egypt, Benghazi in Libya, and other parts of the region. “The actions of young people have been crucial during the movement, and amongst their tools has been social media,” it added.

But, Rome wasn’t built in a day. Tunisian reformers, activists, bloggers, journalists and others who suffered under Ben Ali are eager to see radical changes in record time, which may not be realistic, as the dust has yet to settle on their country’s revolution. Their impatience is understandable after more than two decades of oppression.

However, the systems needed to ensure the freedoms for which they clamor are not fully in place, and many Tunisians working in the media have to learn how to become journalists. Foreign funders have been quick to jump on the reform, teaching, and training bandwagon, as most do when regimes change.

Their efforts will only bear fruit when they provide sustainable financial and technical support, not the usual one-off or short-term remedies that are captives of donor government budget cycles and expedient cliché-ridden programs that recycle the money to their cronies back home who provide the much-needed coaching and mentoring.