

Dear Friends,

After a hectic several weeks, I wanted to write to you and update you more fully on the situation in Tunis and here at CEMAT more specifically.

First, I want to assure you that the CEMAT building and personnel are fine and safe. As you may have read in the newspapers, foreign institutions were not targeted during the demonstrations that brought an end to President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's twenty-three years in power. CEMAT has resumed normal operations as of last week and we continue to advise and assist American and Tunisian scholars.



Women's Rights Demonstrations - Avenue Habib Bourguiba, Tunis - January 29, 2011(©CEMAT 2011)

What many analysts are now calling the “Jasmine Revolution” (mid-December to mid-January) certainly represents one of the most unique series of events that has occurred in the Arab world for the past several decades. The relatively peaceful demonstrations and strike actions that disrupted the economy of the country and drove out President Ben Ali and his family have brought about both exhilaration and fear. The protests increased in size and scope since the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bou Zid on December 17, 2010.

Mr. Bouazizi's difficulties with the local authorities in Sidi Bou Zid, which precluded him from making a living, resonated deeply with many people in that region. Although an accurate number of the dead and injured will not be known for some time, in my opinion, many if not most of the deaths probably occurred in the early period of the revolution which began in the interior of the country (Sidi Bou Zid, Kasserine, and other towns).



“Society=50% Women, Government= 10% women” -Women's Rights Organisation: Femmes Democratizes - Avenue Habib Bourguiba, Tunis January 29, 2011 (©CEMAT 2011)

I am not sure about the immediate role of Facebook and Twitter on the early stages of the revolution. There doesn't seem to be evidence that Bouazizi or those who initially protested his violent treatment at the hands of the authorities used Facebook or the internet to organize. It is clear, however, that as the Tunisian authorities proved unable (or in the case of the army, unwilling) to put down the disturbances in the interior of the country, a new group of internet-



*Protest outside Prime Minister's Office
Banner on Facebook coverage of protests
Casbah, tunis
January 23 – 28, 2011 (©CEMAT 2011)*

and the Trabelsis (the family of the president's wife, Leila ben Ali). Although this is conjecture on my part, I believe that the economic crisis that began in 2008 and the subsequent austerity measures enacted throughout Europe may have played a role in contributing to the sense of economic uncertainty in Tunisia. Remittances from Tunisians living abroad and tourism represent important sources of income for the Tunisian economy.

The departure of President Ben Ali to Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011 was an event that none of us here at CEMAT could have predicted. The power vacuum in the immediate aftermath of his flight was profound and deeply unsettling. It was unclear who was in control of the streets and the neighborhoods in the nights following Ben Ali's departure and rumors abounded of marauding gangs who sacked supermarkets, burned cars, and tried to force their way into private houses at knifepoint.



*"We call for the abolition of laws (prohibiting) the (Islamic) beard and (Islamic) dress. Islam is not a religion of terrorism"
Protest outside Prime Minister's office, Casbah, Tunis. January 23 – 28, 2011*

savvy Tunisians came to the fore to drive the protest movement in other regions of the country. As the demonstrations moved to the larger cities of the Sahel (coast of Tunisia) such as Sfax, Tunis and Sousse, it appears that the authorities became more circumspect about death and injury reports that could find their way into the international press and media.

The Ben Ali regime seemed unprepared for the combined outrage of an alienated rural

population squeezed by declining living standards and an urban elite that felt increasingly insecure in a business environment dominated by the heavy-handed tactics of the Ben Ali family



*"14 January Front...towards a constitutional convention" Avenue des Etats-Unis, Tunis
January 29, 2011 (©CEMAT 2011)*

Many blamed the security forces loyal to the Ben Ali regime, but here again, we will need time to get a fuller accounting of the situation. There were incidents throughout the greater Tunis area, including in the wealthy suburbs of Gammarth, La Marsa, and Carthage. In addition to physical damage to the supermarkets and villas, the train stations in both Tunis and Sousse were severely damaged by fire. Many middle- and upper-class Tunisians I spoke with seemed genuinely shocked that they lived so close to people who could resort

to acts of violence. While much has been written about Tunisia as a “homogeneous” society in regards to ethnic and religious demographics (unlike Iraq or Egypt), I do not think that one can ignore the differences in economic class in sparking some of the disturbances that followed the departure of Ben Ali.

In the medium- to long-term, many challenges continue to face Tunisia’s society and economy. Presidential elections to replace the current interim government are scheduled for six months from now. It is still too early to know which opposition figures and parties will have a reasonable chance of competing in these elections. Economically, Tunisia will have to deal with the decline of its tourism sector as foreigners cancel trips that had been previously planned. It is also unclear what steps the government will take to address the demands of demonstrators for jobs and other benefits.



Lawyers march to join protest outside of Prime Minister’s office, Casbah, Tunis. January 23 – 28, 2011(©CEMAT 2011)

Despite these wrenching changes, Tunisians have responded remarkably to the post-Ben Ali era. While there may not be much of a civil society at the level of organized political parties, there certainly was a grass-roots civil society that formed committees of protection in neighborhoods throughout the country. These committees, encouraged by the state media and the local mosques, proved pivotal in reducing the opportunity for further chaos in the weeks following Ben Ali’s departure. It is my view that as the neighborhoods policed themselves, the Tunisian army was able to patrol a wider perimeter and thus more capable of targeting armed groups that seemed intent on causing more damage and sowing panic.



Main entrance to Prime Minister’s office during protests, Casbah, Tunis January 23 -28, 2011(©CEMAT 2011)

Even more amazing in my view was the availability of basic services (electricity, water, internet) that continued uninterrupted throughout the crisis. This I think is the legacy of state building in Tunisia in which people’s loyalties to their jobs and to their fellow citizens continue to function even in a chaotic environment where law and order is in doubt. Despite their grievances, most Tunisians seem to hold out hope that the promises made after independence that the state could guarantee them education, health care and a decent standard of living can still be redeemed by a post-Ben Ali government. The resurgence of Habib Bourguiba’s image and legacy in the local press and media may reflect these hopes.

For AIMS members, we hope that you will use your expertise about North Africa to respond to questions or interviews about the situation in Tunisia with depth and nuance. I hope you can contribute to the intense media coverage of events here by providing a better context of the events to your colleagues, students, friends and family. Not all demonstrations degenerate into rioting or looting and not all situations can be reduced to simple dialectics (rich/poor, secular/Islamist).



We have included photos in this update to give you a better sense of the hopes and disruptions that the “Jasmine Revolution” has engendered. We would also welcome your advice and suggestions about CEMAT’s role going forward in this historic environment. We are in the process of establishing a Facebook page for CEMAT that will involve discussion boards centered around

academic topics. We also hope to resume our lecture series in the near future and to hold discussion groups about various elements of the “Jasmine Revolution”.

We are at a historic crossroads in our relationship with Tunisia and one which is filled with high expectations and hope. In the coming weeks, we intend to organize roundtable discussions open to both academics and students on topics related to the revolution. We will also initiate a weekly conference call to brief various AIMS board members on the continuing evolution of the political and economic situation in the country. We feel this is important so that those of you who are asked to comment on Tunisia in the American media will have updated and accurate information about what is happening on the ground here.

On behalf of the entire staff here at CEMAT, I thank you for the notes of concern and support that many of you have sent us over the past month.

Tom DeGeorges
Director, CEMAT