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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

CASE ANALYSIS

# The Tunisian Revolution: wither the sovereignty of the Arabic language?

Mahmoud Al Thawidi | Jul 2011

The Tunisian Revolution: wither the sovereignty of the Arabic language?

Series: Case analysis

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## The revolution of semiotics

The Tunisian Revolution of 2011 called for a complete break with the previous policies of both the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes, which were marked by lacks of democracy and freedom of expression, and by iniquitous policies of development across the country's different regions. This revolution was, to my mind, a revolution within the world of semiotics: it was about values and ideas and self-perception, and a way of envisioning (and codifying) the past, present and future of Tunisian society. What further inflamed Tunisian sentiment was the iron-clad grip of Ben Ali's security forces and the rampant corruption within his inner circle, and in particular his wife (dubbed "the Queen of Carthage") and her relatives in the Trabelsi family, whose decadence was on such a large scale it expanded outwards from Tunisian society. Those in the vanguard of the revolutionary struggle have the support of the majority of Tunisians to set the stage for a new culture which values democracy and freedom of expression, and real justice in every aspect of the country, putting an end to the political tyranny of the more than 50 years of Bourguiba and Ben Ali rule.

One of the paradoxical aspects of this revolution, from a cultural viewpoint, is that most Tunisians remain in near-total silence when it comes to the question of the cultural legacy of the colonial past, which both Bourguiba and Ben Ali worked to consolidate within their own governments and Tunisian society at large, and even went on to project it as part of their own image. These efforts have been successful to the extent that most Tunisians boast of this legacy of imperialism, cherish it and call for its protection. This silence on the cultural question is best evidenced in the way that Ben Ali and Bourguiba had nothing to say about establishing an indigenous linguistic culture as an alternative to the language foisted onto them by the French occupiers<sup>1</sup>. That silence bears witness to the ignorance of Bourguiba and Ben Ali of the true meaning of patriotism, and their short-sightedness with regards to these matters.

The Tunisian Constitution states, in its opening clauses, that Arabic is the national language of the free people of Tunisia. This raises the question: how exactly did Bourguiba and Ben Ali, together with their own groups of social elites, come to be classed as patriots when they worked towards the marginalization of the language and culture of their own country<sup>2</sup>?

## The absence of the other sovereignty

There is a deep connection, as far as the Tunisian political lexicon is concerned, between the concept of national sovereignty and the ability of the state to defend the borders of the homeland and maintain internal peace while guarding the independence of its foreign policies. It is for this

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<sup>1</sup> Mahmoud Al Thawidi, *The Other Backwardness: The Globalization of the Identity Crisis in the Arab Homeland and the Third World*, (Arabic), Atlantic Press, Tunis, 2002;

<sup>2</sup> Mahmoud Al Thawidi, *The Other Face of Tunisian Society*, (Arabic), Tabr Az Zaman Press, 2006;

reason that the ministries responsible for defense, internal security (the police and so on) and foreign affairs are referred to as “sovereign ministries”. At the same time, there is a noticeable and worrying lack of concern among average Tunisians for what I would like to call “linguistic sovereignty”; there is no protection of the Arabic language – the country’s national language – like those accorded to other symbols of the nation-state, such as flags and so on. Industrialized, “advanced” nations do take on this notion, and to them linguistic sovereignty is a sacred charge. This can be evidenced within the European Union, an institution made up of member-states of various sizes, but which enshrines the language of the smallest of these states – such as Malta – alongside to those of the largest states – such as Germany – as a hallowed symbol of a nation’s independence<sup>3</sup>.

## Indicators of linguistic sovereignty in developed societies

A number of different characteristic markers emerge from the study of politically developed societies and how they deal with the issue of linguistic sovereignty, and examining these characteristics can be instructive when looking at the Tunisian example. These markers include:

- 1) The national language is used in both written and spoken communication, and at all levels of official communication.
- 2) There is a feeling of national respect, pride and protectiveness when it comes to the national language.
- 3) An unofficial, yet widely popular, refusal to use foreign languages on the part of a nation’s citizenry.
- 4) A grassroots effort among the populace of these countries to use only words and phrases native to their country in their everyday speech.
- 5) Self-censorship among the Tunisian citizens to avoid the usage of foreign terms and expressions, with permanent national policies adopted by the authorities aiming at translating new foreign terms and words to national language.
- 6) The widespread use of the national language as an identity-defining aspect of an individual’s collective identity.

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<sup>3</sup> P. Kraus, *A Union of Diversity: Language, Identity and Polity-Building in Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

## The situation as it stands in Tunisia

Measuring Tunisian cultural practice against the foregoing indicators, we find that it has failed on all possible fronts. On the question of everyday verbal speech, the Tunisian dialect of spoken Arabic is now regarded as a Franco-Arab patois: one in ten of the words spoken by a typical Tunisian to another Tunisian is a French word. This sort of linguistic mixing has become a kind of sociological status indicator; those who speak a fully Arabic version of the spoken Tunisian dialect, free of French words, are regarded as being somewhat deviant. People who insist on doing so are treated with some level of scorn and even sarcasm. This is particularly true when it comes to television, with the Nasma Channel being perhaps the biggest culprit in this, with its chaotic, demeaning Franco-Arab programming.

The written form of the Arabic language, on the other hand, is limited to a few spheres; most Tunisians write and sign their bank checks in Latin letters. Written Arabic is also totally absent from many formal institutions, including educational institutions starting at secondary school onwards, where French has become the medium of instruction and knowledge. French has also succeeded in becoming the medium used for all the transactions of Tunisian banks. In a similar vein, two newly produced magazines were launched by members of Ben Ali's inner family circle and were printed exclusive in French: The family-oriented *Nos Enfants* ("Our Children") and *L'Etudiant*, ("The Student") which was aimed at students. In fact, the situation in the non-governmental sector is even worse than in state institutions, with the spoken Franco-Arabic of Tunisia becoming, here, a written language. It is as if Tunisia has completely overthrown its own national language, and completely contradicts the precepts of linguistic sovereignty.

Numerous field studies and surveys have indicated that these behaviors are more pronounced among educated Tunisians, the vast majority of whom seem to be completely, if peacefully, apathetic about their relationship with their putative national language. This is met with an equally apathetic absence of any type of public campaign which could be at work not only in the public sphere but also in domestic settings. In fact, most of these educated Tunisians describe having only a tentative, fleeting connection with the Arabic language<sup>4</sup>. All of this is noticeably different from the pattern adopted in Tunisia's near neighbor and sister-state of Algeria.

In Tunisia's larger, next-door neighbor, the national language is officially recognized as such throughout state institutions. In Tunisia, however, while many banks and government-owned firms are openly classed as being "National", scant attention is paid to protecting the status of the

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<sup>4</sup> Mahmoud Al Thawidi, *The Other Backwardness*, (Arabic), *ibid.*

language. The lack of an official protected status for the Arabic language has cost this its rightful place in the hearts and minds of the Tunisian people. To the minds of most Tunisian people today, it is as if the Arabic language were not one of the vital components of Tunisian nationhood.

The very tenuous nature of the relationship between educated Tunisians and the Arabic language suggests that the generations who grew up in a Francophone atmosphere have produced a section of the population who lack any feeling or pride in their language. While this is mostly a spiritless, apathetic attitude, some Tunisians within this societal sector are openly hostile to Arabic, pointing to an implicit lack of linguistic sovereignty among them<sup>5</sup>. Educated Tunisians un-self-consciously speak to each other in French, and doing so is a point of pride for them. It is a manifestation of a deep-seated inferiority complex, completely unlike the attitudes one finds in advanced countries. Educated Tunisians simply feel no pressure to adopt Arabic as a living language to be used throughout all facets of life, and this has been the case over the past 50 years of independence. Among both the youth and the elderly, Tunisians today pay scant attention to their linguistic sovereignty.

While the Germans, the Italians and the French, for example, have an effortless, subconscious bond with their national identities through their national languages<sup>6</sup>, the duality inherent in Tunisians' cultural and linguistic identities prevent them from being able to tie their national identity to the Arabic language; the youth of Tunisia are no exception to the rule on this matter. None of this inspires confidence in the ability of Tunisian society to regain mastery of its linguistic destiny in the foreseeable future.

## The roots of the problem

A look back at all of the previously discussed faults compels us to look for the historical roots of this situation, which date back to the post-independence period and the reigns of both Bourguiba and Ben Ali. The Tunisian Constitution makes clear that “Tunisia is a free, independent and fully sovereign state, with Islam as its religion, with Arabic as its language and a Republican form of government.” All of which suggests that the Arabic language is a cornerstone of Tunisian independence, but that the Tunisians have thus far been unable to fully realize this linguistic sovereignty as demonstrated above.

The primary reason behind this is what I like to call “linguistic duality”. It is evidenced among Tunisians who were educated in French-medium schools and began with the graduates of the

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<sup>5</sup> F. Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, (Paris : Editions La Découverte, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> P. Krauss, *A Union of Diversity*, op. cit.



Sadeqi School (Tunisia's first modern secondary school, established 1875), and continued in the general state-sponsored education system after independence. This duality allows those whose native language is putatively Arabic to have the luxury of not defending it, and not worrying too much about using it if they don't have to. Arabic then becomes for them a second or even third language. This sort of behavior runs completely contrary to the aim of achieving linguistic sovereignty in a state which nominally enjoys full sovereignty.

## The Sadeqi School and its failure to bring about linguistic sovereignty

There is a widespread belief among the Tunisian people that the Sadeqi School provided the ideal system for the education of citizens, producing as it did graduates who were bilingual in French and Arabic and also had mastered both the French and Arabic cultures. In this regard, graduates of the Sadeqi School were open to Western culture, and French culture in particular, while being proud of their Arab heritage and protective of its language. This is related to the opinion of most Tunisians, who believed, during both the pre- and post-independence eras, that being bilingual was an undiluted good for all those who could master two languages. Yet psychological studies can dispute this one-sided view of bilingual students<sup>7</sup>. To be clearer, there are a number of drawbacks to any system of linguistic duality; these drawbacks ought to be mitigated by a number of conditions/stipulations to minimize the damage done to students studying in educational systems displaying such a duality.

In this way, it becomes clear that the deep-seated belief among Tunisians in the categorical good of being bilingual or trilingual is not based on any clear understanding of the reality of any situation, but rather on an ignorance of the facts. Looking forward, we simply have no objective reason to view the multilingual nature of Sadeqi School graduates as an unmitigated good, or to predict that it will have no impact on the future of Arabic culture and language and Tunisia's connection to Arab-Islamic civilization.

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<sup>7</sup> C. Fitouri, *Biculturalisme, bilinguisme et éducation*, (Paris, Delachaux et Niestlé; pp 132-136 and Abdelilah -Bauer.B, *Le défi des enfants bilingues* ; (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2008), pp 50-54

## The products of the Sadeqi School: the primacy of French language and culture

An analysis of the situation surrounding multilingual instruction during the period of French colonization indicates that French would become the primary language among the graduates of the Sadeqi School, among whom Arabic would have only secondary significance, reflecting its relative importance in their school curricula<sup>8</sup>. The negative impacts of this type of relative ranking of the languages, one being the putative native language and the other a foreign language, are clear for all to see. French has taken the natural place of Arabic in the intellectual composition of these people. This role reversal between the two languages has several factors at its root:

- 1) **The hegemony of French Language and culture in Sadeqi education:** The primacy of French in Sadeqi education meant that there was a greater cultural affinity, and a greater sense of solidarity, with French culture among the majority of the graduates of this school. In contrast, the products of the alternative Zeitounia School have a stronger affinity to the Arabic language and culture; this is also true of the “A” batch of Sadeqi graduates who were taught an Arabized curriculum at the onset of independence. It is thus clear that the relative extent of the use of either French or Arabic in instruction has a direct relation to the level of cultural and linguistic affinity displayed by the student to any particular language and culture. To speak like a sociologist, it can be said that the love and respect which is shown to French culture and language by the Sadeqi graduates are a result of the relatively high amounts of time spent focusing on this language in the early childhood development of these students.
- 2) French was taught to students in Tunisia’s Sadeqi School at the hands of a large number of French teachers – in other words, the Sadeqi School students had learned French in the context of a very clear power relationship between colonizer and colonized. That context acts to ensure that the language of Moliere – whether consciously or otherwise – has pride of place in the hearts and minds of Sadeqi School graduates<sup>9</sup>.
- 3) The Sadeqi School was established by Tunisian reformer Kheireddine Pasha in 1875. It was the first school in the country to bring together the teaching of the humanities, the mathematical sciences and foreign languages, with French at the forefront. Kheireddine was not the only person worried about bringing Tunisia into the modern world; it was also a priority for

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<sup>8</sup> Abdelsalam, A, *The Sadeqi School and its Graduates*, (Arabic), Tunis, Beit al Hikma Press, 1994;

<sup>9</sup> Fanon, F, *The Wretched of the Earth*, op. cit., and Memi, A, *Portrait du Colonisé et du Colonisateur*, (Paris : Editions Gallimard, 1985) and Memmi A., *Portrait du Colonisé et du Colonisateur*, (Paris : Editions Gallimard, 1985).

many religious figures, such as Mahmoud Qabido, Salim Bou Hajeb, Mohammed Al Senoussi and others. What these people had in common is that they were also products of the Zeitounia School; their common goal in the establishment of the Sadeqi School was the placement of Tunisia on the path to modernity. This led to the acceptance of the idea among most Tunisians that acquiring the language and culture of France was a necessary pre-condition for entry to the world of modernity. It is certainly this close identification of French language and culture with modernity which explains why Sadeqi School graduates cherish their Francophonia so much.

Looking at it from the point of view of social psychology, the aforementioned factors, taken together, bring about a positive group stance with respect to French language and culture among Sadeqi School graduates, at the expense of their concern for Arabic language and culture. The Sadeqi School simply does not get full marks for its educational policies, as a result of its neglect of Tunisia's national culture and language, which were Arab. The school might otherwise have been the best in the country, if only they had been able to prefer the Arabic language, and instill respect for Arabic in their graduates.

The system of instruction of the "A" Batch, which had an Arabized curriculum during the first days following colonization, deserves to be credited as Tunisia's finest schooling program, which allowed Tunisia to truly realize linguistic sovereignty. Yet this attempt was aborted by the then-minister of education, thereby costing Tunisia the chance to see generations of its citizens placing Arabic in the prime position of their daily interactions, and in their hearts and minds. This quashing of attempts to "naturalize" the Arabic language and its culture in the Tunisian psyche has meant that the remnants of linguistic-cultural colonization are alive and kicking in that psyche, five decades after political independence. Nor does it seem that change is on the horizon any time soon; the graduates of the Sadeqi School and of French-medium "mission" schools (albeit some of them secular) dominate the government ranks, from top to bottom.

Neither psychologists nor sociologists could possibly contend that the Sadeqi School system could be presented as a Tunisian ideal, as Arabic remains in second place in the considerations of Sadeqi graduates. Yet these social scientists remain silent on the question of the real deviance of Arabic being a second-rate language among such important people in Tunisia. This, as previously discussed, is completely at odds with the prevailing wisdom in advanced countries. It is this near-total silence on the issue of linguistic and cultural sovereignty which explains the inaction of the political and societal elites, who were educated at the Sadeqi School and other French-medium institutions, towards freeing themselves totally of French cultural and linguistic domination<sup>10</sup>. As

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<sup>10</sup>Al Thawidi, M, "On the Sociological Reasons Behind the Success and Failure of the Arabization of the Algerian,

discussed above, the Sadeqi system does not provide its graduates with the educational background necessary to make the Arabic language and culture first place in their way of thought; none of these people will raise a finger to fight French cultural and linguistic control of Tunisia, and thus there has been a lack of cultural and linguistic sovereignty since the beginning of Tunisian autonomy.

In fact, the majority of Tunisians who are bilingual have been partially responsible for this crime against their native tongue since the fall of colonialism – whether as accessories or direct culprits – in line with the concept of “the Captive Mind”, as penned by Malaysian sociologist Sayed Hussein Alatas<sup>11</sup>. The situation as it stands is seemingly hopeless, at least as far as the foreseeable future. It is not only a question of revolution to topple the political regime this time, but rather a societal revolution and change of worldview, which would see a revolutionary change in the society’s cultural and intellectual norms, freeing the minds of people from the imprisonment imposed on those minds by the colonizer. This is needed in order for us to make peace with ourselves anew, and to reclaim our own language and culture.

Yet apparently, movements in Tunisia are running completely contrary to what Alatas would recommend. Politicians and public figures make no secret of their desire to change Article 1 of the Tunisian Constitution, which includes the stipulation that Arabic is the national language. This question is not even given the attention it deserves as part of Tunisia’s effort for overall sovereignty. While many Tunisian television stations will run after the chance to cover a tiny protest in support of secularism, there is little coverage of the issue of linguistic sovereignty.

On another level, those responsible at the Ministry of Education had put in place plans for trilingual education (in Arabic, English and French) in Tunisian primary schools, as part of a series of steps which were meant to be unrolled in the 2011-2012 academic year. The idea is that this trilingualism will expand to cover all of Tunisian society, in a manner similar to the French-Arabic bilingualism of Tunisia immediately before independence and right after it. Objective reasoning suggests, however, that these plans will again fail, and that the failure to reclaim linguistic sovereignty will lead to frustration and disappointment of the youth of the Tunisian interior, in places like Sidi Bouzeid and Qasrain.

As the Japanese know full well, a people without a language are destined to be ruled by others; and the Japanese have certainly won their own modernist revolution, and have secured their future.

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Tunisian and Kabaki Societies”, *The Arab Future*, Issue 142, pp. 40-56;

<sup>11</sup> Alatas, S.H. "The Captive Mind in Development Studies", *International Social Science Journal*, Volume 34, 1972, Edition 1, pp 9-25;

It will be impossible for the revolution presently under way to truly succeed without the Tunisian people coming to peace with their own national language: Arabic. Is this not enough reason to make the Ministry of Culture a sovereign ministry? If culture and the national language are not given pride of place in a society's consciousness, that society will be missing one of the most important elements of its identity and will have failed to win one of the vital elements of true modernity.

## The traditional Tunisian approach to Arabization

In a bid to win the battle of linguistic sovereignty and to truly succeed in the task of fighting colonialism, we need to re-examine the question of Arabization. Generally speaking, the question of Arabization is associated in the minds of most Tunisians, whether as individuals or as institutions, as a matter of writing all official correspondences, street signs and school curricula in Arabic as opposed to French. In other words, they used these means in a bid to end the sense of alienation between the Tunisian people and their national language: it was an approach based on the popular Tunisian conception of Arabization during and around the era of independence, where it was limited to the Arabization of written communications as a means of spreading the Arabic language among Tunisians.

While this type of Arabization is indeed a necessary step, it is not sufficient for the attainment of true, authentic Arabization in this society; such a fully fledged Arabization will only be achieved through Arabization of the mind, which will be explained here. In my opinion, Arabization of the mind means the presence of a deep-seated, intimate relationship between the Tunisian people and the Arabic language: it would suggest a proper normalization between the society and its national language. It would mean that the national language would take its natural place in all of the interactions of the typical Tunisian citizen, who would be proud of his or her language. Such a citizen would never allow Arabic to occupy only a secondary, or lower, position in the society surrounding him. When and if these situations became firmly established, any Tunisian would strenuously refuse any efforts by either officials or the public to use any language other than Arabic. Such a person would exert efforts to alert other people to the importance of the Tunisian people having a healthy relationship with their national language, along the same lines as what exists in developed countries like South Korea, Japan, Italy, France and Germany. A brief examination of the policies of successive post-independence governments shows that the concept of Arabization of the Mind is entirely missing from government planning. It would have been possible for the authorities to carry out a public awareness campaign – along the same lines of the family planning campaigns which were carried in the media – to help persuade the citizenry of the importance of using their national language. Scholarship in the social sciences and common sense

together suggest that if there had been an effort to promote Arabization of the Mind in the period following independence, there would not have been such dismissive attitudes towards both the written and spoken forms of Arabic in Tunisia today.

This new call to bring about a popular, grassroots campaign could be the backbone of a strategic plan for the ultimate victory of efforts to Arabize the culture of Tunisia and achieve linguistic sovereignty. It would be an interpretation of the popular Tunisian figure of speech “To kill a snake you must cut off the head”; what we need is shock therapy. Social science researchers might well ask: why have the authorities of Tunisia neglected to promote popular campaigns which would seek to implement Arabization of the Mind in the country?

### **Several factors which explain this absence:**

- 1) The existing weakness of the connection to the Arab language among the graduates of the Sadeqi School, which is even more pronounced among those who studied at French mission schools. It was the graduates of these schools who, as mentioned earlier, dominated governmental positions in the country.
- 2) A second factor for this is the stormy relationship between the Bourguiba leadership and the heads of state of the Arab Levant countries. It does seem that the friction between the Tunisian government and the leaderships of other Arab states proved to be a decisive factor in making the spread of the Arabic language less popular even among the popular base of the Tunisian people. Thus, Arabization became a highly politicized, problematic issue. The Bourguiba clique, which was never very enthusiastic about the idea to start with, found in its tortured relations with the other Arab states another excuse to set up an obstacle to Arabization.
- 3) Yet a further factor [and a matter of speculation] is the likely exercising by France of pressure on the leaders of Tunisia since independence in 1956 to keep the protected status of the French language and culture in Tunisia.

## **The collusion of the intellectual with the prince**

The Tunisian educational system in both the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras can be described as a sort of conspiracy on the part of the intellectuals, together with the political elite, against the Arabic language and its culture. The culprits in this case were the graduates of Francophone schools and the Sadeqi School.

As I have described above, the majority of the graduates of such schools since the days of

independence, up to and including the present, do not speak Arabic with fluency and ease. In this regard, Tunisia can be seen as something of a gold mine for sociological researchers looking to understand the longstanding influence of bilingual practices in such a country among both the old and the young, and in particular the political and intellectual elites, these being both those who were in power before and after independence. We could go into further detail and examine the above more closely by looking at two high-profile Tunisian personages who display the foregoing and demonstrate that bilingualism in Tunisia comes at the expense of Arabic:

- 1) Former President Bourguiba, who was known for his apathy about the task of full cultural freedom, and who openly chastised one of his cabinet ministers, Mohammed Mazali, for trying to lead the official Arabization plan over several years.
- 2) Politician and sometime-Minister Mohammed Masaadi, another bilingual Tunisian leader, who was responsible for putting an end to the “A Batch” of Tunisian education. The idea behind the “A Batch” was to gradually introduce Arabization of the curriculum in a piecemeal way, with students at Tunisian schools divided into three groupings: “A”, which was to be totally Arabic-medium; “B”, which was to be bilingual; and “C”, which was to remain taught in French.

According to the plan, the non-Arabic-medium schooling would be phased out eventually, with only the “A Batch” being left as a model for Tunisia’s education; instead, “B Batch”, with its bilingual teaching methods, became the model for both intermediate and secondary school teaching in Tunisia in the period following freedom from the colonizer.

The positions of these two men, Bourguiba and Masaadi, allow us to conclude that they had ulterior motives for championing bilingual teaching, and so disregard for Arabic. Bourguiba was only the tip of the iceberg when it came to lack of regard for the Arabization of Tunisia. Most of his advisers and ministers shared his point of view. This is all due to the centrality of French in modern Tunisian teaching, which becomes the dominant language of instruction starting with secondary education. The products of this educational system then become more inclined to the French language and culture than to the Arabic.

Looking back to what was previously discussed, the writings of the sociologist Sayed Hussein Alatas have shown how the writers, university-educated thinkers and intellectuals of the Third World are captive to the ways of thinking of the West, thus making them incapable of adding anything new or being innovative. Psychology and sociology indicate that this type of linguistic and cultural duality will breed internal strife and disturbances within a society and its identity, on

both the individual and collective levels<sup>12</sup>. The disregard for the Arabic language and its culture found among these people is palpable. Any observer can quickly see how these groups of French-educated Tunisian elites look on the Arabic language disparagingly and with contempt. In this way, the products of such an educational system welcome the presence of cultural colonialism.

In contrast to the other types of education mentioned above, the graduates of the Zeitounia system, which was the natural heir to the “A Batch”, were educated in an environment in which Arabic held sway. Among this group, those who are bilingual are bilingual in a way which is self-consciously shy and they are filled with self-blame, as they blame other Tunisians for using French in their day-to-day communications. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the cultural remnants of the French occupation can be found not only in the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes, but also in the middle and upper classes and intelligentsia of Tunisia.

An example of this is how the Zeitounia graduates were marginalized, not only by successive Tunisian administrations, but also by their colleagues in Tunisian universities, thereby forcing the Zeitounia graduates to study in foreign universities. With all the power of the country concentrated in the hands of those educated bilingually, there was nothing to stop complete French cultural hegemony from ruling over the entire country; nothing short of outright subordination to the West and, in particular, France, would be accepted; this would remain in force until further notice. It is the fruit of the collusion between the intellectuals of Tunisia and its political leaders against the people of Tunisia and their language and customs, to the point that most Tunisians now accept this deracinated bilingualism as a hallmark of “sophistication”.

The silence found in Tunisia today around the question of emancipation from this subordination to the language of the occupier brings little reason for optimism for the future; there is little hope in the true, real victory of the success of the Tunisian youth revolution on a cultural level. Yet these youth from the Tunisian interior will not sit idly by as their country continues to be occupied by the foreigner. Should the youth of the revolution remain silent on this matter, there will be no reason to be optimistic over the fate of what must also be a cultural revolution; of their power to finally throw off the yoke of foreign rule and establish the second stage of independence. The revolution will otherwise remain incomplete, or perhaps even take the country backwards. Is it not now a truism among social scientists that a people without control of their own language will have their future shaped by others?

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<sup>12</sup> Abdelilah- Bauer.B, *Le défi des enfants bilingues...*, op.cit., pp 50.54.



## Bringing down the educational system: the missing revolution

Of one thing we can be certain: the period of foreign occupation and the following era after independence were at least successful in obscuring the relationship between the majority of Tunisians and their national language, Arabic. Such a grave situation would not go un-remedied in societies which enjoy undiluted sovereignty, such as those which make up the European Union, or Japan or South Korea. What is expected is that the revolution in Tunisia be continued to encompass the educational establishment, which has been ruled by a regime of misled multilingualism. In my opinion, the “Batch A” model, which was jettisoned during the Bourguiba years, provides the best model for us to move forward.

As explained previously, the products of the “Batch A” system of teaching remain bilingual, but it is a self-conscious bilingualism, and they also have an entrenched, robust sense of Arabic self-identity; such an identity would make it possible for future generations of Tunisians to have a natural relationship with their supposed mother tongue, as exists in developed societies. Adoption of this system is the most urgent task facing the revolution (in the cultural realm), because a country without control over its linguistic identity cannot secure its long-term future.

This does not mean that Tunisians should not learn foreign languages – in particular English, which is the language of modern science – rather, learning at least one foreign language should be one of the expected outcomes of an education in Tunisian schools in the post-revolutionary era. This should not, however, come at the expense of the Tunisian people’s ability to master their own national language. The mistakes which were made in the education in the present generation of the educated Tunisians should not be repeated.

Tunisian women would be some of the biggest beneficiaries of such a change in Tunisia’s school system. Observers in Tunisia can see quite clearly that Tunisian women seldom if ever use the Tunisian dialect of spoken Arabic when discussing colors, sizes, days of the week or quantities. The author and many other men who accompany their wives on shopping trips for clothes never hear an Arabic word from their wives when they speak of the color or size of clothes: this is as true for the customers as it is for the vendors. This constant, widespread use of French in these spheres has led to the emergence of a common conception among many women that Arabic cannot be used to describe fashion. What this means is that Tunisian women still bear the imprint of

foreign occupation, and will become mothers who do not have Arabic as a first language<sup>13</sup>. This does not bode well for the children and youth of Tunisia and their relationship to the national language of their country. Others have also noted this complete acceptance by Tunisian society of this particular use of French by Tunisian women<sup>14</sup>. In fact, there seems to be a trend among many Tunisians to celebrate this use of French by Tunisian women, whereas what is needed is a feminine revolution to put a stop to the alienation which now threatens the identity of Tunisian women and will threaten the identity of future generations of Tunisians. If Tunisian women find it hard to speak in Arabic when they buy their clothes, then both male and female Tunisians find it embarrassing to write their checks in Arabic.

The next challenge is to have a complete, paradigm-shifting overthrow of the educational system which has been in place since the era of foreign rule; what is needed is to form a new educational system which gives priority to the national language. I cannot over-emphasize one of the central tenets of this article: that language is the premier symbol of all cultural markers. It is impossible for us to so much as imagine certain pillars of culture, such as religion, cultural knowledge and thought without the presence of language. Given the centrality of language to culture, it is not at all a misapprehension to claim that humans are animals with the power of speech; spoken words are indeed what distinguishes humans from the rest. Humans have gone beyond being merely speaking animals to become cultural beings. This is the point of view of cultural sociology.

Language is thus the cornerstone without which humans would not have control of their cultures, and thus lose their capacity to reign over other animals; only spoken and written language stands between humans and other animals. To borrow from a Cartesian phrase: I use language, therefore I am a human.

It is through our understanding of the message of much of social scholarship and its view of the significance of language to the composition of human identity that we can understand the justification and wisdom which stand behind this article. Herein lies the importance of a new, redeveloped Tunisian educational system, in which the Arabic language will have pride of place, beginning in primary education and continuing on throughout university. The idea is that the mistakes of the past are not to be repeated in Tunisia. If humanity is distinguished from the rest of creation by its mastery of language, then it should be true that in truly independent countries, the national language is the language of instruction in all educational institutions, as it is the case in developed countries, a sign of true citizenship. Is the fulfillment of this not a pressing need, an

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<sup>13</sup>Mahmoud Al Thawidi, *The Other Face of Tunisian Society*, (Arabic), Tabr Az Zaman Press, 2006;

<sup>14</sup>Mahmoud Al Thawidi, *L'Univers des symboles humains: l'Autre sous-développement au Maghreb et au Tiers-Monde* (Tunis : ed. l'Or du Temps, 2010), pp 117-160.

urgent matter which awaits all Tunisians before they can complete their revolution and take it to their educational institutions and instill the true meaning of citizenship in their country?

It is in this way that the Tunisian people will reclaim their lost linguistic sovereignty which, if it remains incomplete, will mean that the revolution itself has thus far been incomplete. The revolution will not, otherwise, be able to prepare the people of Tunisia to pave the way for their future; they will not have won the spoils of their revolutionary victory. They will not be able to take forward this nation which led the Arabs into a massive rebellion at the beginning of 2011.