

# Economic Inequality and Revolutions: A Survey of Socio-Economic Factors of the Arab Spring: Case of the Tunisian Revolution

Mohamed El Hacen Sidi

**Abstract**--The pro democracy revolution starting from Tunisia has swept many regional regimes since 2011. Because of the uprising, the status quo of political and economic structure of these states has been broken. In this study, the variables that fostered revolt in Tunisia are under the focal lens. Semi-structured interviews and content analysis have been adopted as tools to achieve the research objectives. Through analysis, it is found that though Tunisia has enjoyed good GDP and economic return over the years, yet the wealth remained in the hands of few and most of the people are left to face abject poverty and deprivation. Unemployment, corruption, human right violations and constrains on civil liberties have forced the people to rise against regime. Moreover information technology has played the role of facilitator, which was used by protestors to organize against government.

**Keywords:** Civil liberties, income disparity, abject poverty, Revolution, Tunisia.

## I. Introduction

The Arab Spring, an uprising for establishing democracy that is brushing through most of the Arab world since 2010, is regarded as a "contagion effect" or "cataclysmic revolutionary wave" which has overthrown many political regimes in its way (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014; Ogbonnaya, Ufiem, & Maurice, 2013). This movement has significant implications for the political and structural development in affected countries in particular and the wider world in general (Ogbonnaya, Ufiem, & Maurice, 2013). Though the underlying political, social and economic factors of this wave look similar in nature, yet their shades vary from country to country (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014).

One noteworthy aspect of these demonstrations was the absence of a preconceived philosophy which protestors wants to enforce; instead, it was just a bunch of people belonging to religious, social, economic and political divides that joined their hand against the despotic government (Agénor, Nabli, Yousef, & Jensen, 2007). So, what are those factors that led the common people to unite and stand against the regime in the context of Tunisia? This is the focal point of this paper.

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## II. Aims and Objectives

This paper is aimed at highlighting the socio-economic causes of 2011 revolt in Tunisia. The subsequent objectives are to study the economic factors like poverty, GDP, per capita income and unemployment etc and non-economic causes like human rights violations, information technology and social structure that triggered the people for uprising.

## III. Research Questions

The researcher has set three questions in order to achieve the above stated aims and objectives:

1. Why the protestors stand against the state in the absence of well defined philosophy in place?
2. What are the main economic instigators that motivated the common masses to organize and rebel against the regime?
3. What are the most important social causes that played their role for the pro-democracy revolution in Tunisia?

## IV. Methodology

Research method selected for current paper is the qualitative in nature where data, both primary and secondary, are collected through semi structured interviews conducted via phone (i.e. primary data collection instrument) and reviewing and exploiting the published literature on revolt (i.e. secondary data). As there is wide range of literature available on Tunisia, this paper, however, is limited to the few areas of revolt like the economic and non-economic causes of 2011 revolution with special emphasis on Tunisia. The strategy adopted to sample data was snowballing because it is useful to collect data from population which are, otherwise, difficult to approach or located far away and researcher has no direct way to access and extract information from them. Researcher has conducted a total of 35 interviews from Tunisian nationals from all walks of life. Details about interviewees could be seen at the end of this paper (See Annexure "A"). These respondents were interviewed at cities across China namely Beijing (10), Shanghai (10), Shenzhen (10) and Xiamen (05). The opinion about the causes of revolt was sought from

respondents mostly through open-ended questions. To handle the issue of biasness associated with snowballing, the author interpreted the obtained data in light of insight developed through literature review.

## v. Origins and context of the Tunisian Revolution

There is a consensus in literature on the Arab Spring that this revolutionary movement is caused by a series of long term factors which led the angry and disgruntled citizens to unite themselves in the absence of a leadership (Forum, 2011). In fact, the organizers of revolt were common people who suffered for long under the dictatorial rule (Forum, 2011). In Tunisia, the person who initiated the uprising was a common street salesman named Mohammad Bouazizi who set himself ablaze as a protest against the humiliation at the hands of police (Forum, 2011). Like what has happened with another Arab young man, the Egyptian Khaled Said, the man could not sustain injuries and passed away. Other people personified with him and a wave of first spontaneous and then increasingly youth-led and organized protests and demonstrations erupted and continued sweeping the entire country, calling for the fall of the dictatorial and corrupt regime of Zeine Elabidine Ben Ali. The audio and videos recordings of tyranny used by Police to disburse protestors were widely shared over the web on social media which further exacerbated the revolt. Consequently the protestors increased in number and gained momentum with every passing day which culminated at the dictator fleeing the country, leaving way to revolutionary-led transitional period.

### A. *The Economic and Social Reasons of Revolution*

Agénor et al (2007) mentioned that there are economic and socio-political causes like youth unemployment, food crisis etc that account for the revolt in Tunisia. The food protest which occurred in 2008 has disgruntled the people with the government which led them to protest (Agénor, Nabli, Yousef, & Jensen, 2007). Other related causes that impacted in widening the economic gaps between classes are poverty, imagined and real corruption and rising food prices (Kanbur, 2013). Kanbur (2013) reported that massive increase in the number of young people since 1980s' where 60% of population are less than 25 year of age has contributed in the revolt mainly triggered and led by young folks (Kanbur, 2013). Kanbur (2013) reported that the main causes of revolt in Tunisia are economic and socio-political.

### B. *Economic Causes of the Revolt*

Rising unemployment, increasing cost of living, class differences and poverty are factors that fuelled the masses to rise up against the state (Kanbur, 2013). The then existing political system utterly failed to address the economic issues

of people especially young ones who feel isolated from the main stream life (Kanbur, 2013).

## *The Industrial Mix of Tunisia*

The industrial mix of Tunisia is varying, ranging from services to manufacturing sectors but the most vital industry is Tourism (Kanbur, 2013). Most of the manufacturing sectors like cement, textile, cereals; transport machinery and food etc are less value added industries (Kanbur, 2013). Overall the totals export related to technical items just account for five percent of total volume of exports (Murphy, 1999). It is also reported that the protests in Tunisia were observed during the same period when there was hike in food prices (Murphy, E., 1999).

Behr & Aaltola (2011) reported that most of the people belonging to poor sections of society spend lion share of their earning on food. Any rise in the commodity prices hurt the budget of this class very badly which makes them hostile towarded the government (Behr & Aaltola, 2011). In addition, the unemployment rate is high in the youth leaving one third of the young population unemployed; and this makes them most vulnerable to the ever-rising food prices (Behr & Aaltola, 2011). Bibi & Nabli (2012) noted that the unemployment, unequal job distribution and incongruity between the job offering and qualifications etc frustrate the youth which express their anger at the state in 2011.

## vi. Socio-Political Causes of Revolt in Tunisia

Arab Social Media Report (2011) stated that nepotism and culture of kick backs fostered by the president Ben Ali and his acquaintances have encouraged the trend of corruption. This is considered as one of the main causes of resentment among the public against the regime (Arab Social Media Report, 2011). Anderson (2012) reported that the better half of Leila Trabelsi, the wife of the former head of state (Ben Ali), has emerged as most corrupt whose ostentation of black money and affluence in a country of rampant poverty and inflation has turned the people against establishment (Anderson, 2012).

According to Anderson (2012), the corruption can be judged from the fact that the president's family has been involved in illegal procurement of historical land which was later sold on higher rates to the public. Ben Ali has also established his party named Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) and internal security services to control and harshly crush the political participation by the masses, the religious activism and freedom of expression (Anderson, 2012). This action along with the state involvement in corruption and favouritism has greatly undermined the legitimacy of regime (Anderson, 2012).

The social media has also been reported to augment the demonstrations against the state (Behr & Aaltola, 2011). In fact, they act as a cohesive force that let the protestors to unite and communicate with each other (Behr & Aaltola, 2011). Plus, there is the widespread flow of information through

satellite television where stories are covered by the international news media like AL Jazeera etc (Behr & Aaltola, 2011). This immense coverage has shaped the public opinion against the government (Behr & Aaltola, 2011).

## VII. Discussions

### A. Economic Analysis of Revolt in Tunisia

The politicians of Tunisia are facing a quandary to improve the economy (Arieff & Humud, 2014). The international financial institutions like IMF, World Bank and local investors are advising to bring reforms to improve the overall economic growth and to create more jobs (Arieff & Humud, 2014). As these reforms require tight regulations, lifting of subsidies and stick labour laws, hence the implementations of these reforms can jeopardize the very political future of implementing government (Arieff & Humud, 2014). Tunisia is a country of middle-income people and economy was performing well as compared to non-performing oil exporting countries (Arieff & Humud, 2014). Though investment was coming to oil exploration sector, there are structural problems with economy (Arieff & Humud, 2014). First, wealth is concentrated in few coastal areas and capital city while most of interior regions are poor (Arieff & Humud, 2014). Second, there is large number of educated people but there are low-level jobs. Hence there is huge pool of young people who are unemployed (Arieff & Humud, 2014).

Historically, the economic landscape of Tunisia was weakened by the austere financial models suggested and adopted by International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (Aissa, 2012). This already dwindling economic situation is suffered more during the financial crisis of 2008 (Aissa, 2012). Though most of the economies of the region are based on revenue generated by oil, this is not the case with Tunisia where majority of revenue comes through tourism (Aissa, 2012). Tunisia has, however, managed to attain 5% GDP during the last decade which started declining in the wake of 2009 (Aissa, 2012). The per capita income of Tunisia is higher than its neighbouring countries as can be seen in figure 1 (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014).

GDP of Tunisia fell to three percent during financial crisis as most of the European economies got severely hurt by the crisis (see figure 1) (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014). The fall in economic activity in Europe has negatively impacted the domestic industry especially tourism sector of Tunisia as there are fewer numbers of visitors (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014). With the decline in number of international tourists, the investment in the inner part of Tunisia has declined immensely (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014). Coupled with decline in GDP, the higher unemployment has made the people dissatisfied with the regime (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014). Increasing number of young people with higher unemployment rate created

conducive environment for the revolution (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014).

GDP	2009	2010	2011	2012
Tunisia	3	3	-2	4
Egypt	5	5	2	2
Libya	2	0	0	0
GDP Per Capita	2009	2010	2011	2012
Tunisia	4177	4207	4350	4237
Egypt	2462	2804	2973	3256
Libya	10456	0	0	0

Figure 1: GDP growth per annum and GDP per capita (US\$) in Tunisia (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014)

Though the per capita income of Tunisia has been higher than many neighbouring Arab states, nevertheless the higher per capita income is eaten away by the rising inflation, which is hurting the already suffering consumer class (see figure 2) (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014).

Country	2009-2010	2011-2012	Difference
UAE	2.4	0.9	1.6
Bahrain	4.8	2.4	2.4
<b>Egypt</b>	23.1	17.2	5.9
Algeria	9.6	13.4	-3.8
Iran	23.6	48.0	-24.3
Iraq	9.8	5.8	3.9
Jordan	4.3	9.2	-4.8
Kuwait	9.1	7.7	1.4
<b>Libya</b>	5.3	21.6	-16.3
Oman	7.1	7.0	0.2
Saudi Arabia	10.4	8.7	1.7
<b>Tunisia</b>	<b>7.9</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>-1.2</b>
Turkey	14.8	15.4	-0.5
Yemen	16.6	33.7	-17.1
Arab World	6.9	9.5	-2.6

Figure 2: Inflation in Tunisia and neighbouring countries (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014)

Though unemployment is lower in Tunisia as compared to neighbouring countries, yet the high rate of unemployment in youth caused dissatisfaction among the educated but unemployed populace, which led them to rise

against the state (see figure 3) (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014).

Unemployment Rate to Total Population				
Country	2009	2010	2011	2012
Tunisia	40.7	41.0	41.2	41.4
Egypt	43.6	44.2	42.9	43.2
Libya	48.8	48.8	49.0	48.4
Middle East & North Africa	43.0	43.1	43.2	43.5

Figure 3: Unemployment in Tunisia and neighbouring countries (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014)

The labour market of Tunisia has been overcrowded during the past two decades (Tsai, 2011). Most of the unemployed young are university graduates as can be seen in the figure 4 (Tsai, 2011).

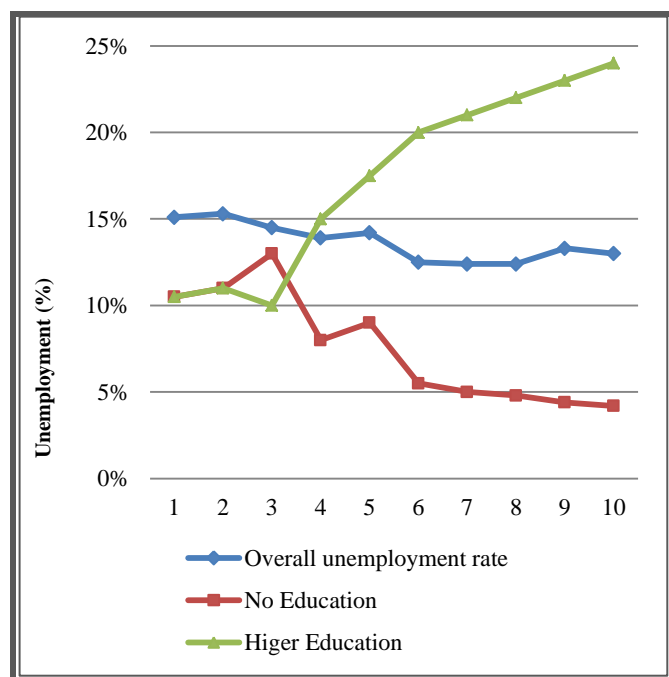


Figure 4: Unemployment by education level in Tunisia (Tsai, 2011)

Another noteworthy factor is that most of the unemployed people belong to the age category of 20 to 30 years with education level from secondary to post secondary as can be seen in figure 5 (Tsai, 2011).

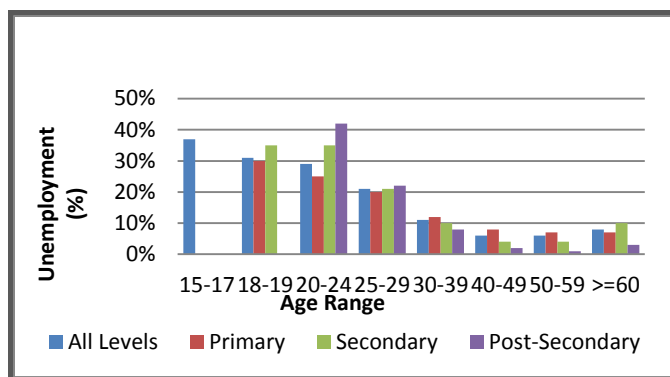


Figure 5: Unemployment rate with respect to age and education level (Tsai, 2011)

Because of slowdown in economic activity and absence of structural reforms, there has been low rate of job creation especially for graduates having economic and social science background (Tsai, 2011). It can be seen in the following figure 6 that even less than 10,000 jobs have been created from 2007 to 2010 (Tsai, 2011).

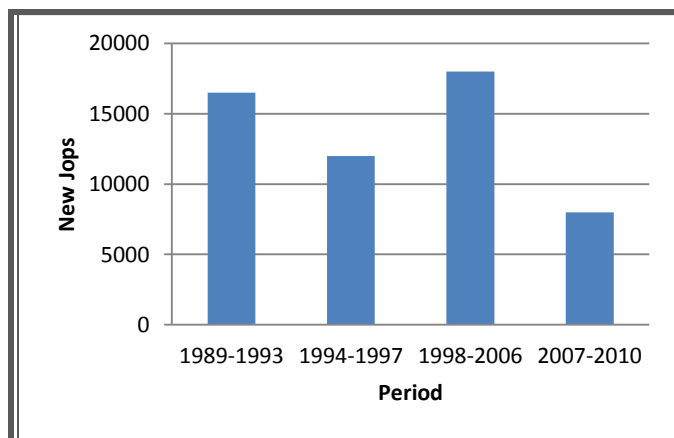


Figure 6: Average job created in public sector (Tsai, 2011)

During interviews, researcher came to know that the common people are most affected by poverty which got worse with unemployment. One respondent said; "life becomes unbearable for us. As I belong to the interior part of Tunisia, there are virtually no jobs for educated youth because nine out of ten jobs created belong to the coastal areas. Hence we are left with no option expect to participate in revolts and fight for our basic human rights".

## B. Non-Economic Factors

Corruption is the hall mark of centralized and autocratic government as it is evidenced from the actions of Ben Ali (Decker, 2011). The corruption by the first family has penetrated in all sections to the extent that whenever new investors want to start their business, the portion of first family has to be cut out first (Decker, 2011).



Next factor was the unabated use of force by the security forces to quench rebellion against regime, which further widened the distances between people and government (Decker, 2011). The off and on crackdown by Police force to disperse protestors and the brutal use of force like in case of Gafsa in 2008 has paved the way for revolution (Decker, 2011). The area of Gafsa is known for its phosphate industry where people were demonstrating to raise their wages and police brutally beat them to silence their voice (Decker, 2011). From the perspective of human rights violation, the figure 3 shows that the situation in Tunisia is appalling where torture of people is widespread (Decker, 2011).

	Tunisia	
1	Corruption in Govt. and Public Officials	49.09
2	Poverty (Welfare)	82.17
3	Human Rights Violations	20.45
4	National Security	92.61
5	Human Development	85.26
6	Rule of Law	51.52
7	Sustainable Economic Opportunity	65.56
8	Participation and Human Rights	38.70

Figure 7: Social factors of revolt in Tunisia

The prevalent use of information technology has provided an opportunity to integrate with each other and to share their grief and sorrows (Arab Social Media Report, 2011). Most of the young people have access to internet and mobile communication which enabled them to spread their message and share their stories online with their fellow beings (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014) (see figure 4).

Country	Facebook Users 4/5/2011	Active Twitter Users (Jan-Mar)	Mobile Subscriptions Per 100**	Internet Users Per 100**
Tunisia	2,356,520	35,746	95.38	34.07
Egypt	6,586,260	131,204	66.69	24.26
Libya	71,840	63,919	77.94	5.51

Figure 8: Internet and social media penetration in Arab Countries (Mackie, Dankwa, & Suwailem, 2014)

The role of social media to promote the cause of protestors and organize them against the regime was unprecedented (Amour, 2013). In the absence of internet, people of Tunisia rely on national news channels and news papers to seek information but the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICT) has provided them an opportunity to interact with each other in the virtual world and

share their ideas (Amour, 2013). The revolution of Tunisia is also unique in the sense that the social media sites like Facebook etc and videos sharing site like YouTube.com have been extensively used by the youth to connect with other protestors and spread their message across the globe (Arab Social Media Report, 2011).

Through the interviews conducted via telephone, most of respondents agreed that corruption, poverty, and violation of human rights have instigated them to take part in demonstrations. One respondent said; “we have been treated worse than animals by our security forces. Those in power have no care for our welfare. We are marginalized and left with no option expect to topple the corrupt regime.”

## VIII. Conclusion

Revolts occur in societies where and when the economic and political setup fails to address the minimum needs of majority of people. This is actually what happened with the Tunisian revolution of 2011. In addition, widening economic and social divide further undermined fabric of a society. The corruption of the ruling elite, the fading economic stability, the absence of new jobs and the spread of abject poverty etc are few causes identified in this paper in the context of revolt in Tunisia.

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## Annexure “A”

Interviewee Name	Nationality	Gender	Age	Occupation	Interview Place	Interview Time	Interview Date
Youssef Rajab	Tunisian	Male	28	PhD Student Beijinguniversity	Beijing	10:00-12:30	02.05.2014
Mohamed Farouk	Tunisian	Male	27	Master Student Beijing University	Beijing	15:45-17:40	02.05.2014
Mohamed Ben Ali	Tunisian	Male	26	Master Student Beijing University	Beijing	10:10-11:50	03.05.2014
Rajab Abou Ahmed	Tunisian	Male	29	PhD Student Beijing University	Beijing	10:00-11:00	04.05.2014
Sanee Snouni	Tunisian	Female	25	Master Student Beijing University	Beijing	09:35-10:50	05.05.2014
Mohamed Ben Yagoub	Tunisian	Male	41	Businessman	Beijing	10:20-11:45	07.05.2014
Ali Abou Ahmed	Tunisian	Male	36	Businessman	Beijing	15:30-16:45	07.05.2014
Zeini Ben Yahya	Tunisian	Male	33	Businessman	Beijing	10:10-12:05	08.05.2014
Ahmed Abou Zasir	Tunisian	Male	35	Businessman	Beijing	14:35-15:25	08.05.2014
Abou Mohamed	Tunisian	Male	37	Businessman	Beijing	10:20-11:55	09.05.2014
Yassin Ben Romdhan	Tunisian	Male	26	PhD Student Shanghai University	Shanghai	10:45-11:55	18.05.2014
Mohamed Abou Fares	Tunisian	Male	27	PhD Student Shanghai University	Shanghai	17:15-18:35	18.05.2014
Youssef Rajab	Tunisian	Male	25	Master Student Jiaotong University	Shanghai	10:00:11:40	19.05.2014

Beya Chahira	Tunisian	Female	25	Master Student Fudan University	Shanghai	10:15:11:45	20.05.2014
Aya Ahmed	Tunisian	Female	24	Master Student Fudan University	Shanghai	17:15-18:30	20.05.2014
Abou Fares	Tunisian	Male	43	Businessman	Shanghai	19:15-20:25	21.05.2014
Ahmed Ben Ali	Tunisian	Male	38	Businessman	Shanghai	10:10-11:45	22.05.2014
Omar Ben Youssif	Tunisian	Male	41	Businessman	Shanghai	20:15-21:45	22.05.2014
Romdhan Abou Mohamed	Tunisian	Male	40	Businessman	Shanghai	10:00-11:15	23.05.2014
Ahmed Abou Abudin	Tunisian	Male	39	Businessman	Shanghai	17:05-19:40	23.05.2014
Zaini Abou Ali	Tunisian	Male	31	PhD Student Shenzhen University	Shenzhen	10:30-11:35	03.07.2014
Ahmed Ben Raouf	Tunisian	Male	26	Master Student Shenzhen University	Shenzhen	18:30-20:15	03.07.2014
Mohamed Abou Ganoushi	Tunisian	Male	27	Master Student Shenzhen University	Shenzhen	10.10:11:20	04.07.2014
Noura Mohamed	Tunisian	Female	25	Master Student Shenzhen University	Shenzhen	17:30-18:45	04.07.2014
Zahra Beder	Tunisian	Female	24	Master Student Shenzhen University	Shenzhen	10:30-12:30	05.07.2014
Zeini Ben Ahemd	Tunisian	Male	32	Businessman	Shenzhen	10:15-11:30	06.07.2014
Boukhary Abou Yassine	Tunisian	Male	33	Businessman	Shenzhen	17:30-80:45	06.07.2014
Chamekh Ben Ebou	Tunisian	Male	35	Businessman	Shenzhen	10:30-11:50	07.07.2014
Zadhir Abou Youssef	Tunisian	Male	36	Businessman	Shenzhen	19:25-20:40	08.07.2014
El Mahdi Ben Haiba	Tunisian	Male	40	Businessman	Shenzhen	10:30:11:45	09.07.2014
Ameni Jebel	Tunisian	Female	26	PhD Student Xiamen University Political Science	Xiamen	19:30-21:30	18.09.2014
Raouia Boudaya	Tunisian	Female	27	PhD Student Xiamen University Plitical Science	Xiamen	19:30-21:25	19.09.2014
Saguer Abir	Tunisian	Female	28	PhD Student Xiamen University Plitical Science	Xiamen	18:30-20:45	20.09.2014
Yassine Ben Romdhan	Tunisian	Male	40	Businessman	Xiamen	15:30-18:20	25.09.2014
Mohamde Abou Fares	Tunisian	Male	38	Businessman	Xiamen	10:15-12:05	27.09.2014

## About the Author:



Unemployment, corruption, human right violations and constrains on civil liberties in Tunisia forced the people to rise against Ben Ali dictatorial and corrupt regime, in a revolt stirred by the audacious act of a frustrated young street salesman called Mohammad Bouazizi. Such protests were supported by a new facilitator (Information Technology) that not only reshaped Tunisian future but also introduced new elements to modern revolutions.