

Fatima el Issawi

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Tunisian media and political polarization: glorifying the self, rejecting the other

Fatima el Issawi

Tunisian journalists benefited broadly from the political openness which followed the stepping down of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, securing unprecedented rights that empowered them to question the political sphere. After having been hostages of the most repressive media system for decades, Tunisian journalists gained essential rights as a result of a largely successful media reform that liberated them from the government dictate. However, the empowerment of the media community did not automatically lead to a new newsroom culture based on professional media practices. The complex and crucial issues at stake in the political transition and the tough political polarization left the media community in limbo. The media polarization is a result of the political divide but it is also in turn fuelling it. In this heightened environment, facts are blurred with rumour. The manipulation of news by journalists for the sake of their ideological agendas and allies friends is leading to confusion and the return of the old style media propaganda. If regulatory change is a difficult process, journalists' identity change remains the thorniest challenge.¹³

¹³ The article draws on the findings of the empirical research project "Arab Revolutions: Media Revolutions" hosted by the department of

Political polarization

Since the departure of Ben Ali in early 2011, the Tunisian transition has undergone a shaky process. Nonetheless, it succeeded in overcoming major obstacles, namely the ratification of the new constitution of the country (January 2014) and the resolution of an acute political impasse without duplicating the Egyptian scenario of a military takeover.³³

The deep political crisis that plunged the country into a severe impasse in the summer of 2013 was dealt with wisely by different parties. It led to a national road map and finally the adoption of the constitution and the appointment of a caretaker government. The Tunisian transition process proved again a successful model in ruling by compromise for the sake of safeguarding the political process. The lessons from Egypt proved positive although not to the extent of creating a genuine culture of consensus between the main two belligerent camps and their supporters: the Islamic led government and its secular opponents.

The experience of building a ruling Islamist-secular coalition in parliament was presented as the reflection of a national consensus on the critical importance of compromise. However, the coalition did not secure real support from its popular basis, often criticized as inefficient and failing to respond to people's expectations. Nevertheless, the interim National Constituent Assembly elected in 2011 remained the main and legitimate

Media and Communications at the London School of Economics (LSE), investigating traditional media practices and values post uprisings.

³³ *Al Jazeera*, January 2014.

arena for political participation.³⁴ This divide mainly portrayed as a secular-Islamic arm wrestle is deeply rooted in key aspects of the transition: the nature of the political system, the place of Islamic *sharia* and traditions in the constitution and in everyday life, gender equality and the role of women among other crucial matters.³⁵

If the consensual approach continues to prevail over the political stalemate, it has not yet succeeded in creating a new culture, both at political and social levels. A discourse of eliminating ‘the other’, ‘the opponent’, ‘the different’, is still triumphing over calls for unity and compromise. This discourse threatens to undo the achievements of this transition. The two biggest parties, the Islamic Ennahda (Renaissance) and Nidaa Tunes (Call of Tunis), the leading opposition party, are fuelling this culture of discord. The opposition’s politicians and supporters are calling the Islamist “rats” and those on the opposing side, the Islamic camp, retort by calling their opponents “snakes”. The message strongly disseminated by the two opponent camps is the following: “us or no one else”.³⁶

Both the two camps and their political representation have their internal dilemmas that also threaten to quash the transitional process.³⁷ Nidaa Tunes, which includes some of the figures of the old regime, is suspected of trying to revive the features of the autocratic regime. In the opposite camp, the possible alignment of the Ennahda party with radical Islamic trends would lead to

³⁴ Brookings, April 2012.

³⁵ Fakir, May 2014.

³⁶ Zelin, March 2013.

³⁷ El Issawi a, 2012.

the failure of its legitimacy and leadership. The governmental reaction to the growing Islamic extremist threat is largely viewed by its opponents as the main factor behind the deterioration of the security situation with political assassinations.³⁸

The government is viewed by the opposition as unable and even unwilling to quell the terrorist threat. For the secular opposition, the shallow response by the government to the extremist threat and the growing radicalization among the youth is the main reason for the degradation of the security situation and growing intimidations of civil liberties. Topics such as “hotels halal” and Islamic kindergartens are becoming favourite topics for the local and international press.³⁹

The failure to reform the security services is another major handicap with the Ministry of Interior divided between factions loyal to Ben Ali and to Ennahada government.⁴⁰ In the aftermath of the military take-over in Egypt, voices calling for a military solution in Tunisia were high, alongside with fears of a take-over by factions inside the Ministry of Interior loyal to the former regime who benefited from the growing despair and frustration among the population.

However, this political polarization that is often presented as a major struggle between secularists and islamists, is criticized as a naïve perception of the complex democratic transition which ignores the social fractures at the root of many of the current challenges. The excessive focus on issues such as the status of

³⁸ El Issawi a, 2012.

³⁹ Zbiss, December 2013.

⁴⁰ Zelin, March 2013.

Tunisian women and the problem of growing radicalization among Islamist youngsters and the security threats, overshadow the socio-economic tension at the heart of the 2010 demonstrations that led to the regime's overthrow. These demonstrations had their historical roots in the social movements that erupted in the rural regions and were severely repressed by the regime years before the Jasmine revolution.⁴¹ The consistent portrayal of the Tunisian transition as a struggle over the identity of the country is considered by some analysts as a distraction from more urgent matters, namely addressing economic development, unemployment and poverty.⁴²

The “minimal national consensus” described by Dekhli as “the alternations between ephemeral moments of revolutionary reconciliation and moments of divergence where everything seems out of control” is an accurate depiction of the state of the Tunisian transition as one continuously swinging between hope and despair. The transition is in its deepest sense “a process of complete rewriting, more so in the streets than in parliament” of the Tunisian story.⁴³

Media Regulatory Reform

The question of media power and the relation between media, especially the media elite, and the power sphere is not unique to Tunisia and the emerging media systems in the Arab Spring countries. The phone hack-

⁴¹ Dakhli, *Jadaliyya*.

⁴² Brookings, 2012.

⁴³ Dakhli, *Jadaliyya*.

ing scandal in the British press reveals the intricate link between media and politics in one of the most advanced media systems.⁴⁴ However, the excessive bias of Arab journalists in support of their political and ideological allies threatens to resurrect the old tools of propaganda which prevailed under the former autocratic regimes. For instance, the degradation of the Egyptian media into a tool of blunt praise of the new regime is impacting the media environment in neighbouring countries that face similar challenges. This extreme polarized media environment is threatening to re-impose the unilateral media narratives, thereby ending media pluralism, one of the major gains of Arab national media industries that resulted from the political change.

Tunisian journalists were one of the main communities to benefit from the gains of the Jasmin revolution. They shifted from an extremely closed media system where their role was restricted to reports on the ruling clan, to that of active providers of information empowered by essential rights such as the right to access to information.⁴⁵

The media reform was largely successful in dismantling most of the oppressive features of the former media system. A consultative body (the *National Authority for Reform of Information and Communications*, INRIC) conducted a revision of the regulatory system governing national media. Major achievements included a new press code (Decree 115-2011) replacing the old restrictive 1975 Press Code that ensures basic media rights, such as journalists' access to information, the confiden-

⁴⁴ Cammaerts, June 2014.

⁴⁵ El Issawi b, 2012.

tiality of sources, as well as freedom of publication without prior license for print outlets and transparency with respect to outlets' funding, ownership, editorial management, and anti-monopoly stipulations.⁴⁶ The decree 41–2011 provided journalists with an unprecedented access to governmental documents, which was previously taboo under the Ben Ali regime. The decree 116–2011 established an independent regulatory audiovisual body – the *High Independent Authority for Audiovisual Communication* or HAICA – tasked with regulating the industry with no interference from the government especially for state owned media broadcasters. However, the reluctance of the government to ratify these decrees and especially to approve the establishment of the HAICA limited the efficiency of this regulatory reform as well as the ambiguity of some of new legal texts.⁴⁷ The new regulatory body is yet to prove its ability to exercise its functions against interferences that aim to undermine its independence.⁴⁸

Another major handicap is the legal uncertainty resulting from the judiciary system which uses double standards in dealing with legal cases against journalists by applying both the new press code and the old repressive penal code. In addition, the frequent application of prison sentences for journalists and various intimidations for allegedly offending Islamic morals or acts of indecency is transforming the judiciary into the main tool to quell press freedom.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ El Issawi b, 2012.

⁴⁷ Freedom House, 2012.

⁴⁸ Article 19, 2014.

⁴⁹ Freedom House, 2013.

The adoption of the new constitution for the country (January 2014) represents a major step in protecting media independence and rights although this was only possible after concerted campaigns by Tunisian activities to guarantee its protection. These campaigns managed to quell attempts to include provisions that would have effectively reduced the powers of HAICA by giving it an advisory role rather than a regulatory one and by requiring its membership to be elected by the parliament, potentially leading to the politicization or marginalization of its mandate.⁵⁰

Tunisia media as a stage for political battles

If opening up the regulatory media system is crucial for opening the door to independent media practices, it is not on its own sufficient to achieve any progress. Building new patterns of professional and responsible journalism inside newsrooms is equally if not more important. A new culture of media production is the main safeguard against the return of old tools of censorship, self-censorship and media manipulation. If Tunisian journalists felt empowered as a result of the opening of the political and media spheres, this empowerment was mostly translated into a chaotic expression of views, unfounded accusations and libel. It was not surprising to see a call for killing a minister aired on a talk show on one of national tvs post uprising. This chaotic media environment was a result of the lack of newsrooms traditions of professional journalism but also the

⁵⁰ Freedom House, 2014.

sudden dismantling of main bodies that used to oversee national media, mainly the Ministry of Information, without the provision of professional alternatives for dealing with needs and challenges of the media sector in such a crucial phase of the history of the country.

With the opening of the private broadcast sector for political reporting, national tv stations quickly became the main spearhead of the political polarization with businessmen investing heavily in the war between “leftist tv channels” and “Islamist tv channels”. As an example, *Nessma tv*, owned by the influential businessman Nabil Karoui, and which was a broadcaster before the uprising, is considered to be one the main media platforms for the secular opposition. The channel was convicted for “disrupting public order and violating morals” for airing the Iranian film *Persepolis* considered by conservative Tunisians to be blasphemous. *Al-Himar* channel, close to Nidaa Tunes opposition political party, is strongly critical to the government accused by Ennahda supporters of calling for a coup. In the opposite camp, pro-government tv channels such as *Al-Mutawaset* and *Zitouna*, are heavily engaged in defending the government policies and discrediting its opponents.⁵¹

It is evident that Tunisian media, previously extremely monotone, developed into a pluralistic sectoring the post uprising phase, thus ending the era of the unilateral official storytelling. However, the excessive polarization is seriously threatening this recent pluralism, a common challenge facing all post uprising Arab media systems.⁵² Furthermore, this extreme focus on

⁵¹ Ayoub, 2013.

⁵² El Issawi, 2013.

politics is fuelling audience scepticism towards Tunisian media which is accused of neglecting the essence of the uprising, that is the calls for social justice, by limiting its coverage of the daily concerns of citizens for the benefit of the political and ideological divide.⁵³

I will focus now on some of the main aspects of this media polarization and its impact on the success of the media reform in the long term:

- the process of freeing the Tunisian public media sector from the control of the government was to a large extent successful. The attempt of the government to appoint editors-in-chief and managing directors of public broadcasters was decried as a return to the governmental dictate over public media.⁵⁴ The operation of choosing the heads of public media by competition before independent panels was highly praised as recognition of the importance of a professional public service independent from the government. However, the independence demonstrated until now in the public media coverage of governmental policies as opposed to the submissive style prevailing under Ben Ali regime is perceived by the supporters of the government as an expression of the loyalty of the public media to the former regime and not of independent media practices.⁵⁵ It is very crucial to support the newfound independence of the public sector and to ensure that it is the expression of a cultural change inside these newsrooms and not

⁵³ Abrougui, 2013.

⁵⁴ Article 19, 2012.

⁵⁵ Tunisialive, 2013.

that of a political alignment. Changing the old habits of public media requires much more than changing the leadership. It also requires a long term process of professional training to empower and educate journalists. Furthermore, the new regulatory body tasked with overseeing public broadcasters has yet to prove its professionalism and transparency and its ability to act independently from pressures or any other form of political alignment.

- The poor professional skills of Tunisian journalists who have had to work for decades under the dictate of the regime is another major handicap that has increased media polarization. The weak editorial independence inside newsrooms, the link between the media ownership and the political sphere, the chaotic situation that followed the dismantling of the old media regime with the outbreak of dozens of new projects and pirate tv channels, most of them presenting an unprofessional media environment, all contributed to the exacerbation of media polarization and made it a serious threat to pluralistic storytelling. Furthermore, there is no consensus on the definition of professional journalism for Tunisian journalists, a large part of them advocate against neutral media narratives under the guise of having to take a political stance during the transition process.⁵⁶
- Media polarization is fuelled by the repressive role played by the judiciary which has become the main tool of intimidation for journalists through its use

⁵⁶ Abrougui, 2014.

of the old penal code to punish them. This situation is leading to further divides inside the media community and is threatening to resuscitate the old habits of self-censorship among journalists due to the fear of being prosecuted. The threat of being prosecuted and ultimately jailed for defaming public officials, or under other alibis such as insulting morals or Islam makes investigative journalism a difficult task. These restrictions are not only leading to a blackout on information but are also fuelling the political and media divide as the judiciary decisions are largely perceived as politically motivated acts.⁵⁷

- Tunisian journalists have not been able to unite around professional concerns and shared interests that make them a distinct community from that of their political and ideological allies. The plans by the National Union for Journalists to create a new self-regulatory body for the press would be an important step towards ensuring freedom of expression is protected by journalists themselves and dilemmas related to the exercise of the profession are dealt with at the professional level and within the professions specialized bodies free from the influence of politics.⁵⁸

Conclusions

Tunisian journalists are major winners from the political openness that resulted from the fall of the former

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch, 2013.

⁵⁸ Article 19, 2013.

autocratic regime. As one of Tunisian journalists I interviewed in my field research rightly commented, the post uprising is witnessing the spring of journalism and the winter of politics. That was in the first months that followed the fall of the regime. The reality today is different. It could be accurate to say that the media polarization and bias for the service of political camps could transform this spring into a severe winter.

The empowerment of journalists as a result of the revolution's gains should be used to construct a new culture within newsrooms that breaks with the traditions of the past, a process which should be considered a major priority for a sector that was undermined for decades. However, this doesn't seem a major preoccupation for journalists who advocate for the duty to take sides in the heightened post-uprising political environment. This could be understood by the limitation of journalists' role to that of the reporters of the clan for decades. An enthusiasm brilliantly expressed by a young journalist I met in the aftermath of the uprising and who described his new role of a political reporter as a "dream", that of being finally able to work "like (the French) *Le Monde*' journalists". For this young journalist who experienced for the first time political reporting, this was a development of unimaginable significance.

The development of advocacy journalism in the aftermath of the uprisings in the Arab Spring countries is a natural consequence of the shift in the role of journalists from a mouthpiece of the regime to having active say on the content of media messages. It is also explained by the impact of social media narratives in influencing traditional journalists, in their attempt to

copy the style of bloggers who were celebrated for their leading role in telling the story of the uprisings while traditional institutional national media denied their outbreak.

However, this advocate journalistic role which became one of the main features of the post-uprising media systems has shifted from lobbying for the defence of rights and freedoms to embellishing the face of political and ideological allies, even if serving political allies requires the dissemination of rumours and media manipulation. The recent fall of Egyptian media into the old habits of propaganda for the regime and the exclusion of dissenting voices best expresses the dangers of this blurred identity of a journalist advocate. For Tunisian journalists and their colleagues in the Arab Spring countries, as well as that of the unions and professional bodies representing them it is time to make the debate about journalistic professionalism a priority.

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