Of Waste and Revolutions

ENVIRONMENTAL LEGACIES OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN TUNISIA

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Abstract: The Tunisian revolution unveiled an environmental catastrophe that had been festering under the country’s dictatorship for decades. Hidden behind a facade of environmentalism, vast amounts of waste were dumped into the environment, and the legacies of authoritarianism still prevent a clear image of Tunisia’s environmental health from emerging.

Keywords: waste, pollution, authoritarianism, inequality, revolution, Tunisia

REVOLUTIONS LEND EXPRESSION TO PUBLIC secrets, and sometimes they do so in the most visceral of ways. Weeks after the Tunisian revolution of 2011, piles of rotting garbage filled the streets, sewage was running in the rivers, and toxic waste was being pumped into the Mediterranean in unprecedented amounts. The uprising unveiled, and in part created, an environmental health crisis—one that had been festering under dictatorships for decades. During the reign of Zine Abedin Ben Ali (1987–2011), the Bretton Woods Institutions (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) hailed Tunisia as North Africa’s poster child of economic development—and, like elsewhere in the world, this growth was fueled by the creation of waste. In the heyday of structural adjustment, industrial parks burgeoned; plastic bags and packaging appeared, enveloping an ever-increasing amount of consumer products; but the nascent waste-management system could not keep up. The situation was similar across the African continent, of course; however, in Tunisia this reality was hidden by a facade of democratization and environmentalism kept in place through censorship of the media, tight state control over research, and torture and imprisonment of activists. From the early 1990s a “Boulevard de l’Environnement” was designated in each village, and a desert fox wearing a blue unitard—Labib, Tunisia’s environmental mascot—
populated public squares and roundabouts throughout the country. Meanwhile, over 75 percent of Tunisia’s industrial waste was being dumped into the natural habitat with near impunity, according to World Bank estimates. This facade of environmentalism makes the underlying health impacts of the waste crisis on humans and ecology today only vaguely apparent. However, what can be ascertained is that Tunisia’s poor are disproportionally affected as the distribution of waste is shaped by deep-seated social, economic, and geographical inequalities throughout the world.

Waste—disposable matter—is the underbelly of modern consumer lifestyles. Dangerous for environmental health or not, it pollutes physically, aesthetically, and morally, dividing people, cities, regions, and countries into the clean and the unclean. Waste therefore both underlines and creates economic disparities locally, regionally, and globally, with the richest consuming the most and the poorest often receiving the majority of the waste. At least since the times of colonization, Africa has served as a sink for European economic activity. Colonial entrepreneurs extracted natural resources in their race to create new commodities for Western markets, but the waste associated with that extraction remained. Tunisia’s phosphate industry, established by the French in 1885 and today the most polluting in the country, is a case in point. The acceleration of economic globalization increased this unequal trend exponentially in Africa, where multinational companies sought out cheap labor, tax reductions, and arguably laxer environmental regulations. While this so-called race to the bottom, or pollution haven theory, is disputed, the very international financial system, with its single-mined focus on economic growth, has pushed governments across Africa into unsustainable economic practices. In order to attract foreign investment and to borrow and repay international debts, governments relax or turn a blind eye to the environmental crimes of national and international corporations. This is particularly true in the context of authoritarian political systems, like the one in Tunisia before the revolution, in which those most affected by waste have little or no power to address the issue. In the postrevolutionary hierarchy of needs, calls for a clean and healthy environment have been marginal on the national agenda. Locally, however, the issue has rekindled a myriad of environmental conflicts that are now starting to surface, and in the immediate aftermath of the revolution waste has been pushed into the public imagination.

Few public-service strikes impact the lives of citizens like those in waste management. Quite suddenly, the revolution allowed Tunisians to make
their grievances heard publicly, and among the first groups to exercise this right with a general strike were municipal garbage workers. Now all workers demanded civil-service contracts, along with better pay and working conditions, which had been intolerable under the former regime. Rumors surfaced that the deposed authorities actively disrupted public services in order to stem the tide of the revolution, as was the case in Egypt; but the grievances were real. Within days, the streets of all major cities were flooded with loosely sealed red, black, and blue garbage bags. Like a leaky display of household consumption, broken eggshells, empty plastic bottles, tuna and beer cans, cigarette buds, fish carcasses, stale baguettes, coffee grounds, and a Farrago of fruits and vegetables spilled into the public arena, where they decomposed in the heat of the North African spring. Here and there images of the former dictator were visible among the refuse. A sweet, rotten odor took hold of the country as illegal dumps sprang up wherever they couldn’t be prevented, and waste distribution stations, often located centrally in residential areas, turned into the final resting places for consumed goods. As the philosopher Greg Kennedy explains, garbage denotes finitude, violence, and chaos—chaos that is intrinsic to revolutions through the refashioning of the social order. But this unexpected extension of public disorder now displayed the cost of transition too blatantly. What was dubbed the Jasmine Revolution by outsiders started to rattle in Tunisia, and the phrase balad al-zibleh (“country of rubbish”) was employed in discussions about corruption, traffic, and the seemingly slow pace of political transition. Garbage became a metaphor for everything that was wrong with Tunisia, and it threatened to pollute revolutionary promises. Worried and disgusted, Tunisians started to react. A series of graffiti appeared in every neighborhood that read: “God will not have mercy on the parents of those that dump garbage here.” On Facebook, first the garbage selfie and then the garbage-bucket challenge, mirroring the global meme of the ice-bucket challenge, expressed citizens’ outrages. Tunisians quickly created organizations to address the issue.

Although in large parts of Tunisia municipal garbage collection has always been poor, especially on the periphery of urban centers and in the country’s interior, the strike brought waste to the heart of the cities, even the most affluent areas, and thereby into the consciousness of the elites. Morched, a tall, brisk environmental engineer with degrees from Canada, founded one of Tunisia’s first postrevolutionary environmental NGOs to get to the bottom of the problem. “It was with the garbage crisis that we realized that the whole system was rotten and corrupt. . . . We thought we were Sweden when
it comes to waste management, and now after the revolution, we find we work more like Somalia," he said. What he and his colleagues discovered were completely inadequate and sometimes dangerous waste-management systems, with landfills at their terminus that threatened local communities and habitats.

Tunisia’s largest landfill, Jbel Borj Chakir, is surrounded by barbed-wire barricades that rise from wheat fields, vegetable gardens, and olive and almond groves in the hinterlands fourteen kilometers west of Tunis. Trucks and tractor-drawn carriages that wind their way up through working-class neighborhoods and clog the streets deliver about three thousand tons of waste each day. Ordinarily, landfills are designed to lock refuse away impermeably. They are "dry graves" whose geographical location depends on solid bedrock underneath to prevent groundwater pollution by leachate—a garbage juice that ranges from mildly toxic to biohazardous depending on its composition. Morched and his NGO, SOS BIAA (Save the Environment), however, have proven that Borj Chakir and many other landfills in the northeast either are permeable or deliberately dump leachate into waterways. They contaminate drinking water and the wells of farmers with organic compounds—the only pollutants the organization has tested for so far due to financial constraints—but the fact that these compounds are present suggests that there is worse to be discovered. SOS BIAA also uncovered evidence that hospital and industrial hard wastes have made their way into municipal garbage dumps (at least after the revolution), which makes the leachate of these landfills potentially very dangerous. These allegations have been confirmed by local officials. Thus, like garbage itself, landfills have become contentious across the country, not only because of their potential danger for human health and the environment, but also because of the dictatorial force by which they were imposed on local populations.

Often, if not always, landfills and other waste-management stations are located in poorer areas where people have limited means to resist their creation and are intimidated by authorities, and to which they are lured with jobs. Tunisia’s poor, the zawaali, eat meat only on holidays, as a popular proverb proclaims. They can’t afford bottled water, which is seen as part of a healthy lifestyle, and therefore rely on the quality of the water beneath their feet. Their sons and daughters are likely to be out of work, despite having university diplomas. Sometimes they can escape their neighborhoods and villages to bring the whole family for a long picnic to one of the public beaches, avoiding the waste and pollution that so often mar their everyday
experience. The revolution was initially a revolt of the zaoualis, not of the 
urban middle classes. It was their cry for freedom and dignity, as the slogan 
of the revolution proclaimed. Locally, a clean and healthy environment free 
of waste and pollution has in many parts of the country become integral to 
that dignity and has led to the convergence of environmentalism and social 
struggles across Tunisia.

The island of Djerba, one of Tunisia’s prime tourist destinations, was the 
backdrop to another waste crisis that hit the media in 2014–15. The island’s 
only landfill was located in the smallest and poorest of its three municipali-
ties, Gelalla. While the two larger municipalities on the island received the 
taxes from many hundreds of high-end tourist resorts, Gelalla received only 
their waste. After the revolution this inequality converged with residents’ 
worries about garbage burning, smoke, stench, and the effects on the local 
water table, which is already overexploited. When the company that man-
aged the landfill wasn’t responsive to their grievances, like in the old days, 
residents took matters into their own hands. They stormed the barricades 
of the landfill, burned down offices, infrastructure, and equipment, and shut 
the landfill down by civil force. In the aftermath of this closure, the tourist 
paradise was gripped by a garbage crisis, which, because of its high-profile 
location, couldn’t be ignored and has now been temporarily resolved. While 
this was one of hundreds of local expressions of the waste-management crisis, 
at its heart lies a structural conflict within the body that governs waste and 
pollution: the Ministry of the Environment.

“The main problem with environmental pollution in Tunisia is struc-
tural,” explains Wahed Ferchichi, a professor of law at the University of 
Tunis specializing in the environment. The Ministry of the Environment, 
established in 1991, actually delivers public services rather than serving only 
as an adviser and watchdog. Waste management, sanitation, and even the 
treatment of hazardous waste is essentially the responsibility of the ministry, 
presented through its various agencies. Paradoxically, this in turn makes the 
Ministry of the Environment one of the major polluters in the country. For 
example, Tunisia’s wastewater agency, ONAS, is plagued by underfunding, 
iefficiencies, mismanagement, and corruption and has been implicated in 
several environmental disasters. In 2012, a report of the Court of Auditors, a 
Tunisian oversight body, found that “75.8 million cubic meters of untreated 
sewage are released into the Tunisian environment each year.” Water-borne 
diseases, such as hepatitis A and C, have made their return to Tunisia—or 
their discovery is now being publicized. Even a strain of cholera was found in
the summer of 2015 in the country’s second-largest river, the Meliane, which is little more than a stream of sewage where it reaches the sea just south of the capital. The term “water-borne” is of course misleading, as these diseases are really borne in sewage and are transmitted through the mixing of waste and drinking water.

In the summer of 2015, more dead fish than usual washed up on the Bay of Monastir near the town of Ksibet Mediouni. The bay was the site of a major toxic spill from nearby factories in 2006, which flooded the waters with untreated sewage from two ONAS wastewater plants. On Wednesday, September 18, the entire town went on a general strike to protest decades of environmental marginalization. Roads were blocked by boulders, administrations were sometimes forcefully closed, and inhabitants demonstrated in front of one of the plants with banners that read “Marginalization, Exclusion, Unemployment and Now Ruin through Environmental Pollution.”

Protesters and a local representative of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), a renowned and well-respected Tunisian NGO, made the links between the town’s social, economic, and environmental marginalization explicit. More important, as the ONAS stations discharged sewage and industrial wastewater, locals came to recognize the link between their marginalization and Tunisia’s position in the global economy. Mounir Hassine, a professor of geography and the head of FTDES in Monastir, explains: “With the structural-adjustment programs of the 1980s, we encouraged investors to come to Tunisia who had no consideration for the environment, which resulted in major environmental catastrophes in the region. In this period, the textile industry was established here—an industry that was cast out of Western countries because of its detrimental effects on the ecology.” In early 1990s, to attract foreign investment, Tunisia created free economic zones in which industries manufactured exclusively for an overseas market. Thus again, while Tunisians built car parts, textiles, and agricultural products supplied to global and particularly European markets, the “byproducts,” or industrial pollution, of that production remained behind. Pollution in Tunisia is therefore part of an uneven environmental, social, and economic cost of industries and global markets, but it is also enmeshed in the corrupt practices of the former regime.

There are over 5,000 industrial units in Tunisia, and as of 2013 over 3,000 of those were European owned or partnerships with European companies. Only about 600 factories use any type of hazardous-waste treatment; another 180 were signed up with the country’s only hazardous-waste treatment sta-
tion, but that facility operated only between 2009 and 2011, having been closed after the revolution because of popular protest. The environmental and health effects of an emerging industrial economy discarding nearly all its hazardous waste into local landfills and waterways are completely unpredictable and understudied. And while this broad-scale dumping of industrial waste has not attracted much attention in the media, pollution by larger public companies is increasingly being addressed.

In the city of Gabes—particularly on the northern side of town, where the Tunisian Chemical Group has its headquarters—coffee-colored waves rhythmically hit the beaches, where they leave thick black sludge behind. Chimneys that emit bright yellow smoke—not white, not gray, not black, but bright yellow—seem to rise from the sea at the end of the bay. The Gulf of Gabes, in southern Tunisia, is one of the most polluted stretches of the Mediterranean. Fishermen from the nearby port protest in front of the chemical plant continuously, as their livelihoods have been poisoned and their hope for a job outside of the industry destroyed. Every day, seventy-five thousand tons of phosphogypsum, a lightly radioactive and potentially cancerous by-product of fertilizer manufacturing, are dumped into the sea. Mountain ranges of the yellow dust pile up around its processing stations in the country’s interior, close to the cities of Gafsà and Medhilla.

Since the revolution a few studies have traced the environmental effects of such dumping, and they are damning, but so far no study has systematically looked at the health implications of phosphate manufacturing for local populations. Anecdotally, however, people complain about respiratory diseases, allergies, heart defects, cancer, and issues with their teeth and bone density. Inhabitants of the Gafsà mining basin are clearly distinguished by their yellow, decayed teeth, apparently brought about by excessive amounts of fluoride that leach into the groundwater during an industrial washing process. Comparative data from phosphate plants in the United States lend some support to the link between some of those diseases and phosphogypsum, but the composition of the original resource here is slightly different. Similar situations of broad-scale dumping of industrial waste by public companies can be observed in the Kasserine paper mill and the Beja sugar factory, both part of industries established in the 1960s to bring much-needed employment to the underdeveloped regions of Tunisia. But with jobs they also brought waste. How all this waste and pollution was hidden in plain sight is one of the most bewildering aspects of the former political order. And
the regime’s simultaneous projection of environmental concern delivers much insight in the workings of the Ben Ali regime.

A report by the German development corporation GIZ that looked at the environmental management of Tunisia from independence to the revolution concluded: “The development of environmental policy in Tunisia may in many respects be regarded as exemplary for a Southern country.” Policies and practice here are clearly divergent, and what the report is referring to is the overall image the international community had of Tunisia. NGOs existed, but they were hardly independent, having to be funded by the state, and were relegated to cosmetic forms of environmental work, like the cleaning of beaches and planting of trees. This, and the near total control of the press, allowed the government to project its own form of state environmentalism relatively free from critique. When arriving at the airport of Tunis-Carthage, foreigners were greeted by the environmental mascot Labib. They would drive past wind turbines and solar panels that were carefully displayed at the Tunis International Center for Environmental Technologies (CITET).

The ANPE, Tunisia’s environmental-protection agency tasked with enforcing international environmental standards, was understaffed and underpaid, and was blocked from effectuating any real reform by the country’s notoriously corrupt courts. In 2004, the ANPE, which has about thirty staff members to monitor factories all over Tunisia, handed out over 600 environmental fines. Of these, 150 were actually enforced; however, the actual fines, which the ANPE only suggests, were often reduced by judges to the nominal amount of 50 dinars (US$50). In the absence of any independent organizations, the state was the only check on the environmental crimes of public and private companies, and the Ben Ali regime had a vested interest in not only ignoring but also actively hiding them to bolster foreign investment. Any critiques that surfaced were suppressed with brute force.

In the fall of 2009, Zouheir Makh louf was beaten, intimidated, and imprisoned for posting videos on Facebook that showed the dumping of hazardous waste by several industrial zones in his hometown of Nabeul. Now one of the country’s most prominent human rights activists, he looks like a man who has fought all his life, with small, wet eyes that emit empathy, passion, and pain in equal measures. He explains that environmental activism was particularly dangerous before the revolution: “Criticizing Ben Ali’s politics and human rights record wasn’t so much of a problem; there was room for that. But if you threatened his development plan and economic policy, you were in real trouble because he was hailed as an economic champion all
over the world.” Environmental activism threatened the dictatorship since it highlighted the cost of the very economic miracle that sheltered Ben Ali’s authoritarianism from international critique.

Several recent observers of Tunisia have established that Ben Ali’s rule depended crucially on the governing myths of the economic miracle, democratic gradualism, and secularism, which prevented a clearer understanding of the political and socioeconomic situation of Tunisia to emerge. Similarly, a myth of environmentalism enabled the government to present an image of ecological concern while simultaneously hiding the harmful effects of its economic model—the broad-scale dumping of waste—behind it. Like the facades of democratic gradualism and state feminism, this projection of environmental concern wasn’t completely empty. In fact, much environmental administration was established, and useful legislation was passed, but what it primarily did was allow the regime to silence any critique while breaking the very same rights it was ostensibly upholding. These myths then do much harm to the revolutionary project, since postrevolutionary realities always lag behind the authoritarian mirage, not only because a new social and economic order has to be established, but also because citizens have to be disabused of a reality that never actually existed. Ask any Tunisian, and they will tell you that the country was cleaner before the revolution. While again partly true, primarily this assumption inspires a sense of nostalgia for the former regime and frames the revolution as a period that was “unclean” and somewhat a failure. The international community, of course, needs such champions as Ben Ali, and positive examples like Tunisia that seem to thrive under their development plans, to lend legitimacy to the very same. In that way, international organizations were complicit in the environmental crimes of the regime, as they uncritically bought or even helped perpetuate a reality that hardly matched that of ordinary Tunisians. While a recent study found no hard evidence that Tunisia was a pollution haven for European companies, many companies did profit from the lax environmental regulations in its immediate neighborhood. As new trade talks between the EU and Tunisia are on the horizon, accountability by these companies will have to be addressed, but once again the underlying economic model of neoliberalism and the shortsighted politics of growth are not going to be challenged.

The revolution has radically transformed the political landscape in Tunisia. It has rewritten the very principles of government with an inspiring new constitution that guarantees all citizens a “healthy and balanced environment.” But what revolutionaries throughout the ages have learned is that
governance exists beyond political systems and legal documents, that it is engrained in an unequal international order and its local manifestations. The specters of authoritarianism in Tunisia still haunt people’s minds, but they also dwell in their bodies and landscapes in real, tangible ways through the scars of torture, hunger, poverty, illness, and the impacts of waste and pollution. Environmental NGOs are therefore not merely concerned with the ecology; they do the work of truth finding in Tunisia. And slowly, as environmental crimes are uncovered, the call for a clean and healthy environment is being heard.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**


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